

India and Security Norms in the Liberal International Order

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Introduction

The security norms of the liberal international order (LIO)—which underpin alliance formation, integration into security communities, the management of security crises, and nuclear restraint, among other policies—are the ultimate arbiter of order when other norms of cooperation fail. In general, those norms emphasize rule-bound cooperation, restraint in the use of force—self-defense or UN authorization—multilateral coordination, and, in some cases, shared political identity among participating states. They also prioritize diplomacy and de-escalation in crises and embed nuclear behavior within a hierarchical but rules-based system grounded in nonproliferation and responsible stewardship. Those norms distinguish the LIO from earlier orders (and indeed the present moment) in that they foresee the management rather than the exploitation of force, hierarchy that is rule-bound rather than unconstrained, and power that must be legitimized rather than simply exercised.

India's engagement with LIO security norms combines participation with strategic autonomy, even as that order is increasingly strained. Over the past two decades, India has gradually deepened security cooperation with the United States and, more recently, with select European and Indo-Pacific partners. But it has stopped short of forming binding alliances. Similarly, India has endorsed rules-based conduct and signaled concern about shared regional challenges—such as China's growing influence—without consistently or explicitly identifying adversaries or the implications of its partnerships. India contributes to the management of security crises where Indian interests are at stake while preserving independent decision-making. And it aligns with nuclear restraint norms but remains an outsider to the nonproliferation regime.

This pattern of engagement has allowed India to build material capacity and legitimacy as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific while resisting formalized security commitments that would constrain its autonomy or compromise its strategic priorities. But this approach carries costs. India's strategy of selective engagement has at times strained relations with the United States, which has pressed for clearer alignment. At the same time, India has had to manage its ties with Russia, a longstanding partner whose relationship with the United States and Europe has become increasingly adversarial. Addressing those dynamics has required sustained diplomatic investment—signaling strategic proximity without foreclosing options and engaging selectively in multilateral forums.

Security Norms in the Liberal International Order

Security norms in the LIO emerged from the post-World War II settlement among Western industrial states and became embedded in a wider web of institutions—including NATO, U.S.-led alliance structures, and the United Nations—organized around collective defense, multilateralism, democratic solidarity, open markets, and the peaceful management of interstate rivalry.¹ Initially, those institutions depended almost entirely on the power and commitment of a single country: the United States.² But through NATO, Washington and its European allies anchored security cooperation in reciprocal commitments, restraint, shared decision-making, and collective defense. Those shared commitments shaped the terms on which other states could be incorporated into the order. Beyond Europe, they diffused unevenly.³ In the Asia-Pacific, the United States pursued bilateral hub-and-spokes alliances rather than NATO-style multilateral integration, and full incorporation into the liberal security core remained selective and alliance-based.⁴

Many postcolonial states, including India, resisted integration into U.S.-led security arrangements, emphasizing instead foundational principles such as sovereignty, nonaggression, and multilateral diplomacy.⁵ As a result, while the LIO's norms diffused globally, their institutionalization remained concentrated among U.S.-aligned democracies. More recently, rising powers have been loosely incorporated through burden-sharing expectations, contributing to maintaining order but without full institutional integration.⁶

For India, the security norms of the LIO were both enabling and constraining. They resonated with India's emphasis on sovereign equality and anti-colonial self-determination as those principles became embedded in the post-1945 order. They served as a framework that India actively used and at times sought to shape in pursuit of its own vision of international security. But they also created hierarchies India found exclusionary. This was especially true in nuclear governance and in bodies such as the UN Security Council. During the Cold War, India supported UN-centered multilateralism and peaceful coexistence but rejected alliance-based collective defense as an extension of great-power rivalry. Its nonalignment was not neutrality but an aspiration to reduce tensions, promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and preserve an independent foreign and security policy. After the Cold War, India recalibrated. Its 1998 nuclear tests challenged the existing nuclear order, yet India increasingly framed its posture in terms of responsible stewardship and restraint. India committed to eschewing further nuclear testing and the proliferation of nuclear technology to non-nuclear states; aligned its domestic legislation with international standards on nuclear exports, security and safety; and maintained a relatively small nuclear arsenal alongside a declared no-first-use posture.⁷ Subsequently, the 2005–08 civil nuclear agreement with the United States marked India's partial accommodation with the global nuclear order and paved the way for growing strategic convergence with the United States. India has since deepened security cooperation with the United States and other partners while continuing to resist binding alliances.

Today, India's approach to four security issue areas—alliances, security communities, the management of security crises, and nuclear governance—reflects this ongoing navigation between participation and autonomy.

The Formation of Alliances

Alliances are among the core security institutions of the LIO, structured around binding defense commitments among states that guarantee collective defense. NATO is the classic LIO security institution: a treaty-based arrangement centered on Article 5 commitments, supported by integrated command structures, standardized planning, and extensive operational coordination among its members to enable coordinated military action.⁸ U.S.-led bilateral alliance relationships—such as those with Australia, Japan, and South Korea—similarly center on mutual

defense commitments and forward military presence, often involving close operational coordination and deterrence guarantees.⁹

India consistently avoids joining such treaty-based collective defense arrangements, instead prioritizing strategic autonomy. That makes India unique within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, where the other three members—the United States, Australia, and Japan—are connected through formal alliance treaties and longstanding defense integration. Unlike them, India treats the Quad as a flexible platform for coordination on technology, capacity-building, and regional security, rather than a collective defense arrangement.¹⁰ This reflects India's preference for cooperation without formal defense obligations, the maintenance of diversified partnerships, and a longstanding reliance on multiple arms suppliers.¹¹

But, as China's growing influence and strategic reach have reshaped the Indo-Pacific, India has also significantly deepened its cooperation with the United States through new institutional mechanisms, agreements, and dialogues. In 2016, India became a "Major Defense Partner" of the United States. That designation and the conclusion of foundational agreements have facilitated logistics sharing, secure communications, geospatial cooperation, and defense-industrial collaboration.¹² Expanded joint exercises and defense technology initiatives have also increased operational coordination and interoperability between the two countries. However, India is manifestly not an ally of the United States, and their expanded security cooperation remains institutionally distinct from the kind of formal alliance arrangements seen in other U.S. treaty relationships in the Indo-Pacific region.

India has also preserved diversified strategic partnerships, including enduring defense ties with Russia while developing significant defense cooperation with European partners, especially France.¹³ Those ties are also transactional, and capability driven rather than embedded in alliances and defense obligations. A similar pattern is evident in India's defense relationship with Israel, which is extensive—particularly in defense technology, intelligence, and counterterrorism—but likewise operates outside formal alliance structures.

Integration into Security Communities

Unlike alliances, which are formal institutions, security communities are groups of states that share identity, trust, and common threat perceptions. This makes the use of force among

community members unthinkable.¹⁴ In contrast to alliances, security communities are formed through sustained interaction and socialization that lead to internalized norms of peaceful change and mutual restraint.¹⁵ The transatlantic community has, for example, been a security community in the LIO, with institutional ties reinforced by shared political identity, dense patterns of consultation, and convergent threat perceptions.¹⁶

That depth of trust and mutual identification is not evident in India's security engagement in the LIO, even with the United States. History shapes India's posture here: the 1971 deployment of the USS *Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal during the closing stages of the war with Pakistan deepened New Delhi's mistrust of Washington and reinforced Indo-Soviet ties, resulting in India-U.S. estrangement until the Cold War's end.¹⁷ The incident is still remembered as coercive in New Delhi: as one Indian politician put it in 2021, following India's objection to a U.S. freedom of navigation operation within its exclusive economic zone, "American perfidy at that critical moment [in 1971] is indelibly imprinted in the collective Indian psyche."¹⁸

And though India agrees with the United States and its European and Indo-Pacific partners on the China challenge, its foreign policy discourse signals this abstractly, without ever explicitly naming China as an adversary or challenger, specifying the implications of security cooperation, or adopting partners' strategic logic. This ambiguity is intentional: it avoids provoking Beijing while preserving New Delhi's autonomy to set its own tone in that relationship.¹⁹

India has shown similar restraint in relation to Russia. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India declined to adopt the United States' and Europe's adversarial framing, abstaining on UN resolutions while maintaining defense and energy ties with Russia.²⁰ Asked about India's stance on the Ukraine war in 2022, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar characterized the conflict as a European priority: "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems."²¹ Jaishankar has also pointed out that India's partners have limited shared threat perceptions on Pakistan. During the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, for example, the United States prioritized de-escalation and restraint rather than explicitly backing India.

India's lack of integration into in any security community still appears to extend even to Israel, which affirmed India's right to self-defense during the May 2025 crisis. When the United States and Israel went to war with Iran in 2026, India again emphasized restraint and avoided explicit

alignment, underscoring its continued commitment to strategic autonomy—even if such caution could be interpreted by some as implicit support for U.S.-Israeli actions.

The Management of Security Crises

Security crisis management reflects the norm that security challenges should be managed through multilateral coordination (such as UN mechanisms and peacekeeping) and countries should adhere to international law and calibrate their responses, including via sanctions and diplomatic de-escalation, rather than use unilateral force.

India broadly aligns with the liberal preference for cooperative crisis management and the provision of security as a public good. However, rather than embedding itself in alliance-driven enforcement mechanisms, India approaches security governance as a sovereign contributor to stability, supporting de-escalation and systemic order while preserving strategic autonomy in how it engages.

India prioritizes multilateral coordination by continuing to be a leading contributor to UN peacekeeping while consistently advocating for dialogue and diplomacy in UN forums as the primary means of resolving conflicts.²² It frames its positions in legal terms, invoking the UN Charter, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, but avoids alignment with coercive enforcement measures.²³ Recently, however, norms of multilateral coordination and collective crisis response have been a lesser priority than the avoidance of actions that target partner states. India's response to the Russia-Ukraine war illustrates this mix: abstaining on UN resolutions, declining to impose sanctions, and maintaining ties with Russia while emphasizing dialogue and negotiated settlement.²⁴

Within the domain of security governance and crisis management, India contributes to the provision of regional public goods, particularly in the maritime domain, through sustained counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean since 2008. More recently, India expanded its naval presence amid threats to Red Sea and Arabian Sea shipping, acting to stabilize sea lines of communication critical to global trade. At the same time, India exercises this role on its own terms: its naval activities have operated in parallel with U.S.-led initiatives such as Operation Prosperity Guardian to reopen shipping in the Red Sea but not

through formal participation in coalition task forces, preferring autonomous deployments and flexible coordination.²⁵

Nuclear Governance

Security norms in the LIO emphasize that nuclear weapons must be embedded in a regulated, hierarchical, and restraint-based framework. Those encompass the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) rules of nuclear legitimacy, nonproliferation obligations, and expectations of responsible crisis behavior.

India only partially converges with nuclear governance norms. It remains outside the NPT as a recognized nuclear-weapon state. Since articulating its draft nuclear doctrine in 1999 and formalizing it in 2003, India has maintained a declared (though increasingly unclear) no-first-use posture and framed its arsenal and delivery systems as political deterrents rather than as warfighting instruments.²⁶ But India has also sought entry into export-control regimes and negotiated access to civil nuclear trade, reinforcing claims of responsible nuclear stewardship and signaling a desire for status within the nuclear order.

During crises with Pakistan such as Kargil in 1999, the 2001–02 standoff, and the Pulwama-Balakot confrontation in 2019, India avoided overt nuclear signaling and instead relied on calibrated, though increasingly risky, conventional responses and diplomatic messaging. To this extent, India conformed to prevailing nuclear norms that deterrence should be stabilized through signaling discipline, clear doctrinal thresholds, and the avoidance of brinkmanship. However, the May 2025 crisis put elements of this approach under strain. New Delhi again avoided explicit nuclear signaling, but the crisis shifted toward brinkmanship shaped by competitive risk-taking, miscalculation, and a limited ability to control escalation.²⁷ If such dynamics recur—particularly if India and Pakistan develop diverging perceptions of escalation dominance—the mechanisms that prevented escalation could prove insufficient, underscoring the need for renewed efforts to ensure responsible nuclear governance in South Asia.

India's position in the global nuclear hierarchy also shapes its engagement. As a non-NPT nuclear state and an institutional outsider to the global nuclear order in a high-risk nuclear regional environment, India's nuclear crises have attracted international scrutiny and external

diplomatic intervention, with the United States playing a central de-escalatory role.²⁸ Although this structural reality has incentivized caution, transparency, and escalation control, the United States' response to India-Pakistan crises has become less consistent over time. In 2019, Washington engaged early but from behind the scenes, signaling support for India's right to respond to terrorism and urging Pakistan to exercise restraint.²⁹ In 2025, the U.S. response was slower, more reactive, and emphasized restraint rather than taking a clear position.³⁰ Reliance on consistent third-party intervention cannot be assumed in the future.³¹

Conclusions

Across security issue areas in the LIO—alliances, security communities, the management of security crises, and nuclear governance—India combines expanding security cooperation with deliberate limits that reflect its strategic interests, embodying the persistent tension between participation and autonomy that has shaped India's role in the contemporary order.

At the same time, the LIO is itself under strain. The Trump administration's questioning of NATO commitments, alongside unilateral military action against Iran in early 2026, has raised questions about the durability of core principles such as collective defense, multilateral crisis governance, and shared restraint. Those shifts complicate the willingness of India and traditional U.S. allies alike to align with geopolitical rules that are actively evolving.

Against this backdrop, U.S.-India relations exhibit both convergence and divergence across all four issue areas. Cooperation has deepened in defense technology, maritime security, and Indo-Pacific coordination, reflecting the United States' and India's overlapping interests, particularly regarding China. Yet India remains outside alliance structures, is not integrated into security communities, adopts calibrated and often neutral security crisis responses, and emphasizes restraint in nuclear governance.

At the same time, India's approach reflects a broader logic of international behavior.³² India derives important reputational and strategic benefits from being perceived as a rule-abiding actor, not least in contrast to China. Understanding this clarifies both the potential and limits of U.S.-India security cooperation: it is likely to deepen functionally, and India will signal qualified strategic convergence, but it will remain constrained by India's resistance to binding commitments—particularly those that are hierarchical in form and limit its strategic autonomy.

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