

Daily Editorial Analysis 22 September 2025

September 22, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com

Breaking the Academic Paywall

Context

- India today stands as the **fourth-largest producer of PhD graduates** globally, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Yet, **this achievement is shadowed by a paradox**: many of these scholars come from regions where universities lack the resources to subscribe to essential academic journals.
- Completing doctoral research requires reading hundreds of papers, **but students, already constrained by limited stipends of ₹20,000-35,000, are forced to pay anywhere between \$20 and \$3,000 (₹17,000-2.64 lakh)** for access to a single article.
- Such barriers effectively block access to knowledge for those who most need it.

The High Cost of Knowledge

- The **issue became particularly visible when the Delhi High Court, in August, ordered the blocking of Sci-Hub and LibGen**, two popular free-access platforms.
- The case, **filed by three of the world's largest academic publishers** that control 40% of the global market, rested on copyright infringement claims.
- This **decision sparked widespread debate** on the ethics of restricting access to scientific knowledge, especially for researchers in the Global South.
- **Academic publishing operates on a business model** that extracts immense profits from the unpaid labour of researchers, whose work is funded through taxpayers or student fees.
- **Publishers neither create content nor review its quality**, yet they exert ownership over knowledge and charge exorbitant fees for access.
- **A 2021 study in the Journal of Scientometric Research revealed that India accounted for 8.7% of all Sci-Hub downloads** in 2017, over 13 million requests, with nearly one-fifth related to medical and health sciences.
- Clearly, **students and professionals rely heavily on such platforms to access information** vital for local research and problem-solving.

Health, Innovation, and the Cost of Exclusion

- The **consequences of paywalled science are most dire in healthcare.**

- As organisations like Doctors Without Borders (MSF) note, **medicine is never static**; it evolves in response to climate change, disease patterns, and shifting social realities.
- **Yet in the Global South**, where two-thirds of tuberculosis cases occur and where antimicrobial-resistant HIV is an urgent challenge, **doctors struggle to develop effective treatment plans without access to the latest research**.
- **Tailored healthcare solutions, sensitive to geography**, malnutrition, age, and co-morbidities, require constant innovation grounded in updated knowledge.
- **Denying access becomes not just an academic concern but a moral question** of equity and justice.

Knowledge as a Commodity

- The **problem extends beyond healthcare**; today, knowledge is treated as a luxury commodity.
- **Universities increasingly favour researchers who publish in high-profile journals** rather than those whose work addresses urgent social needs.
- **Corporate interests dominate research priorities**, with patents and intellectual property rights reinforcing the privatisation of human knowledge.
- This **narrow view sidelines grassroots expertise**, particularly in the Global South, where communities often serve as mere field sites for Global North researchers.
- **Local researchers are underrepresented in authorship**, relegated to assistant roles while conceptual framing remains rooted in Northern perspectives.
- This **imbalance not only perpetuates inequity but also distorts the framing of Southern challenges** through foreign lenses.

Towards Collective Action and Open Science

- The **Global South faces overlapping crises**, climate disasters, displacement, drug resistance, systemic inequities, that demand collective knowledge-sharing.
- Recognising this, **193 member states of UNESCO, including India, adopted the first international framework on open science in 2021**.
- This **initiative sought to make scientific knowledge transparent, accessible**, and collaborative.
- Yet, just a few years later, **powerful publishers continue to enforce paywalls**, creating an artificial scarcity around what is inherently abundant: knowledge.
- **Science is already a collective exercise**, built upon the contributions of countless individuals across borders.
- However, **even communities who participate in research often cannot access the findings that emerge from their involvement**.
- This exclusion undermines the very spirit of inquiry and solidarity that science is meant to embody.

Conclusion

- If humanity is to confront the complex challenges of the 21st century, from pandemics to climate change and systemic inequities, **knowledge must be recognised as commons rather than a commodity**.

- The **continued stranglehold of corporate publishers denies millions the opportunity to learn, innovate, and adapt.**
- **It is imperative that governments, institutions, and civil society pressure publishing giants to dismantle paywalls** and democratise access.
- **Only then can knowledge serve its true purpose:** empowering people everywhere to build healthier, more just, and more resilient societies.

Breaking the Academic Paywall FAQs

Q1. Why do many PhD students in India struggle to access research papers?

Ans. They struggle because journals are expensive, while students receive only modest stipends and lack institutional subscriptions.

Q2. What sparked debate on access to knowledge in India recently?

Ans. The Delhi High Court's decision to block Sci-Hub and LibGen triggered debate over students' rights to access research.

Q3. How does restricted access to journals affect healthcare in the Global South?

Ans. It prevents doctors and researchers from developing updated, tailored treatment plans for diseases like TB and HIV.

Q4. What problem arises from Global North dominance in publishing?

Ans. Researchers from the Global South are often underrepresented, with their issues framed through Northern perspectives.

Q5. What solution is needed to overcome the artificial scarcity of knowledge?

Ans. Dismantling paywalls and treating knowledge as a commons to ensure open and equitable access.

Source: [The Hindu](#)

India's Foreign Policy Dilemma - Strategic and Multi-Dependence

Context:

- The Prime Minister (PM) of India recently highlighted **India's overdependence on foreign countries** as a **major strategic risk**.
- Despite aspirations of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, India faces the reality of strategic and multi-dependence on **China, Russia, and the US**.
- This dependence is distributed **across critical sectors** like manufacturing, defence, energy, and markets, and **constrains New Delhi's foreign policy manoeuvrability**.

India's Dependence on Major Powers:

- **Dependence on China:**

- **Manufacturing and consumer goods:** Heavy reliance on Chinese white goods, mobile phone components, and computers.
- **Pharmaceuticals:** Active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and precursor chemicals critical for India's pharma sector.
- **Energy and commodities:** Import of rare earths, polysilicon, wafers, and solar cells.
- **Infrastructure inputs:** Fertilisers and tunnel-boring machines.
- **Semiconductors:** Large-scale imports from China.

- **Dependence on Russia:**

- **Defence:** 60–70% dependence on platforms and systems across Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- **Energy:** Oil imports from Russia rose from 4% (2022) to nearly 40% in recent times.
- **Legacy factor:** While India has tried to diversify to France, Israel, and the US, dependence on Russia goes back to the **1970s**, and it is **hard for the armed forces to wean themselves off Russian equipment**.

- **Dependence on the United States:**

- **Economic and human capital links:**
 - The US is **India's largest export destination**.
 - Indians in recent years have **topped the list of H1-B visa recipients**, up to 70% of those issued.
 - **Indian students** in the US rival Chinese students in terms of numbers, and the US is the top destination for the Indian students going abroad.
- **Defence and technology:**
 - American arms and military technology are seen as **vital for India's defence modernisation**.
 - **Key military armaments and components** include GE engines for India's indigenous fighter aircraft – the Tejas, assault rifles, helicopters, missiles, unmanned aerial systems, etc.
- **Geopolitical:** Counterbalancing against China's power in the Indo-Pacific.

Foreign Policy Tightrope:

- **China:** New Delhi cannot afford to offend China over the border without risking economic fallout.
- **Russia:** Oil and defence links limit criticism of Russia over the Ukraine war, its arms sales to China, and its burgeoning relationship with Pakistan.
- **United States:** Due to trade and technology dependence, India cannot offend the Americans over tariffs and India's relations with China and Russia as well as Iran beyond a point.
- **Overall:** India's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy is severely restricted.

Historical Parallel:

- Current dependence mirrors the **post-Cold War crisis of 1989-91**, when the Soviet collapse exposed India's vulnerabilities.
- Today, **disruptions in global geopolitics** (Trump's tariffs, Ukraine war, US-China rivalry) highlight **India's fragile dependence**.

Challenges Ahead for India:

- **Manufacturing stagnation:** Despite 7% GDP growth since the 1990s, the sector remains weak.
- **Commodity deficit:** India desperately needs various commodities including energy, rare earths, and APIs.
- **Limited export diversification:** Large dependence on the US market.
- **Private and public sector response:** Lack of sufficient competitiveness and "animal spirits" in Indian industry.

Way Forward:

- **Manufacturing revolution:** Strengthen Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiatives.
- **Diversify imports and commodities:** Expand sourcing of APIs, rare earths, energy, and semiconductors from multiple countries.
- **Export diversification:** Reduce dependence on the US by tapping into **African, ASEAN, and Latin American markets**.
- **Defence indigenisation:** Accelerate indigenous R&D, promote joint ventures, and reduce reliance on Russia and US.
- **Policy push:** Galvanise private sector innovation, investment, and competitiveness.

Conclusion:

- **India's strategic autonomy** is undermined by its economic and defence dependencies on China, Russia, and the US.
- Just as the 1991 crisis spurred economic reforms, today's challenge should be seen as an **opportunity** to unleash a manufacturing and self-reliance revolution.
- Achieving true **Atmanirbharta** across **critical** sectors is essential **for safeguarding India's foreign policy independence and national security**.

India's Foreign Policy Dilemma FAQs

Q1. How does India's dependence on China impact its strategic autonomy?

Ans. Dependence on Chinese consumer goods, APIs, semiconductors, and rare earths constrains India's ability to take a firm stance against Beijing.

Q2. Why is Russia considered indispensable to India's defence and energy security?

Ans. Around 60-70% of India's defence platforms and a surge in crude oil imports (up to 40%) come from Russia, making diversification difficult.

Q3. Examine the nature of India's dependence on the United States.

Ans. India relies on the US for export markets, H-1B/student visas, defence technology (e.g., GE engines), and strategic counterbalance to China.

Q4. What historical parallels can be drawn from India's current foreign policy challenges?

Ans. Just as the Soviet collapse exposed India's economic vulnerability in 1991, current multi-dependence on China, Russia, and the US exposes strategic vulnerabilities.

Q5. What measures are necessary for India to reduce multi-dependence and strengthen strategic autonomy?

Ans. A manufacturing revolution, diversification of imports/exports, defence indigenisation, and galvanising private sector competitiveness are essential.

Source: IE

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-22-september-2025/>

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