



INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE QUEST FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP: REFLEXION ON AMBITION AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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Abstract:

This article describes the transition from India's idealist foreign policy under Nehru (the Nehruvian era) to its present-day pragmatism. We contend that this shift stems from India's global leadership claim, caught between lofty normative goals and material constraints. India's foreign policy reflects an interplay between global systemic pressures and domestic preferences, shaped by postcolonial anxieties and a distinct civilizational identity. New Delhi's diplomacy has moved from moral non-alignment to post-Cold War strategic multi-alignment, economic liberalization, and nuclear assertion. The article examines India's participation in multilateral forums of global governance (UN, WTO, BRICS, G20), where it promotes a fair and egalitarian global order through developmental diplomacy. It also highlights the distinctiveness of the Modi government's strategy, which deploys civilizational soft power and symbolism to integrate cultural heritage with strategic considerations. Several Structural constraints continue to limit India's influence. India's rise reflects a complex interaction of power, principles, history, and modernity.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, global leadership, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, civilizational identity, multilateralism, postcolonial constraints

Titulo en Español: *La política exterior de la India y la búsqueda del liderazgo mundial: reflexiones sobre su ambición y sus logros*

Resumen:

Este artículo describe la transición de la política exterior idealista de la India bajo Nehru (la era nehruviana) al pragmatismo actual. Sostenemos que este cambio se deriva de la pretensión de liderazgo mundial de la India, atrapada entre elevados objetivos normativos y limitaciones materiales. La política exterior de la India refleja una interacción entre las presiones sistémicas mundiales y las preferencias internas, moldeadas por las inquietudes poscoloniales y una identidad civilizatoria distintiva. La diplomacia de Nueva Delhi ha pasado de la no alineación moral a la alineación estratégica múltiple posterior a la Guerra Fría, la liberalización económica y la afirmación nuclear. El artículo examina la participación de la India en foros multilaterales de gobernanza global (ONU, OMC, BRICS, G20), donde promueve un orden global justo e igualitario a través de la diplomacia del desarrollo. También destaca la singularidad de la estrategia del Gobierno de Modi, que despliega el poder blando y el simbolismo de la civilización para integrar el patrimonio cultural con consideraciones estratégicas. Varias limitaciones estructurales siguen restringiendo la influencia de la India. El auge de la India refleja una compleja interacción entre el poder, los principios, la historia y la modernidad.

Palabras Clave: *Política exterior de India, liderazgo global, autonomía estratégica, alineación múltiple, identidad civilizacional, multilateralismo, limitaciones poscoloniales.*

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-250>



1. Introduction

The autobiography of India's foreign policy would read its journey through the tides of global politics by navigating internal and external complexities for decades, culminating in the current quest for prominent leadership in world affairs. Since independence, India has been compelled to undertake foreign policy decisions under constraints imposed by the global order, particularly the Cold War and its vision have been shaped by a postcolonial context which continues to affect its strategy. The unprecedented rivalry among ambitious great powers dictated political and economic pressures, creating a piquant dilemma in the garb of ideological choices. India responded to the quagmire displaying normative prioritization in its foreign policy architecture and initiated political campaigns with similarly disposed countries seeking to safeguard their legitimate interests and launched the non-aligned movement to establish the scope for democratic voices in a bipolar world.

A structure-agency perspective sees the systemic environment's signals as factors which conditioned India's foreign policy. Within the structure, foreign policy's actions are shaped by conceptual, political, and cultural considerations. When a state's capabilities increase or decrease, the foreign policy course also alters in its response. But there is always a gap between structural causation and agential response. Since the beginning of its journey as a sovereign state, India aspired to be a great power, notwithstanding the material weaknesses, lack strategic reach and depth, absence of international acknowledgment of its potential for acquiring great power status, and the material constraints created by the great powers which prevented India from rising in its ranks. In the post-Cold War years, Indian foreign policy shows a persistent effort to graduate India into a major power and to obviate the structural challenges issuing from the global system. But the claim to this kind of great power status and its recognition in the region has always been contested. Moreover, the claim to being a great power has been closely related to notions of legitimacy and authority and not about the possession of crude material power. Thus, the foreign policy of states is invariably structured by the complex interaction of systemic forces on one hand, and agential actions on the other.³ A state, no matter how powerful it is, cannot determine its policies in spite of or going completely against the global pattern of distribution of power. The purpose of this essay is to articulate a discourse that is based on the disjuncture between post-independence and post-Cold War foreign policy behavior in India, to identify the ideational templates, norms and principles and material capabilities corresponding and illustrating this shift, in order to underline the postcolonial features that condition, and in a way circumscribe, India's bold options in foreign policy choices. Indian foreign policy uses both power and normativity, and they connect in many ways. India's foreign policy aims to ensure sovereignty, democracy, and rights, to be a major global power. In a way, the confident facade of Narendra Modi's bold diplomacy clashes with its symbolic nature, given the absence of clear results from India's long-term foreign policy. This article builds on these foundations to track India's evolution in the post-Cold War international system, examining the interactions between systemic process and domestic agency on several key dimensions including the doctrines of post-independence diplomacy, its strategic reorientation in the aftermath of the Cold War, its engagements at multilateral and regional levels, its bilateral ties with the United States and China, and the continuities and departures under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This paper aims to understand how India seeks to lead with values while also increasing its power in a fragmented world.

³ For details, see Rose, Gideon: "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, Vol. 51, n° 1 (1998), pp. 144–172; Schweller, Randall L. (2006): *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, Princeton, Princeton University Press; Zakaria, Fareed (1998): *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role*, Princeton, Princeton University Press; Wohlforth, William Curti (1993): *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.



2. Section I: Foundational Principles and Nehruvian Legacy

When the Cold War began, India had gained freedom from the British after a protracted struggle against colonialism, imperialism and racism. Independent India came to be hailed as a champion of decolonization, people's rights and justice against arbitrary power in the global arena. The pioneering role played by the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru infused India's early foreign policy pronouncements with the ideals of nonalignment, disarmament, and anticolonialism. He advocated for a policy of non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, and ethical leadership in the world, in keeping with India's anticolonial past and domestic development needs. As a young post-colonial state, inspired by an ancient civilization, India was determined to fashion a foreign policy that resonated with the country's past and present. Prime Minister Nehru (who also served as the Minister of External Affairs), and his compatriots crafted an ideational foreign policy⁴ suited to the safeguarding of this reputation in an attempt to make the country's presence felt in the world.⁵ This explains Nehru's tendency to moralize and the Indian penchant for lecturing other powers.⁶ The ideas of stalwarts like C. Rajagopalachari, Ram Manohar Lohia, K.M Panikkar (in addition to Nehru), and civil servants, academicians, military academies (National Defence College, Indian Military Academy) and other civilian institutions (Indian Council of World Affairs, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses) also contributed to the shaping of the country's foreign policy.⁷ As J.N Dixit points out, the policy was a blend of norms including tolerance, non-aggression, a rational approach to the resolution of disputes, peace-building, and pragmatic concerns springing from the imperatives of ensuring the nation's survival as well as well-being in a complex, competitive world.⁸

Nehru never tired of reiterating India's demand for recognition in the face of opposition from the established powers.⁹ The need for such recognition also stemmed from Nehru's democratic insistence that newly independent countries be accorded a say in world affairs.¹⁰ The Nehruvian foreign policy establishment was convinced that India could mold the external environment to suit its national vision. Consequently, making India a major voice in global fora became one of its key objectives.¹¹ Thus, India's pursuit of power and development was couched in the idiom of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and a rejection of racialism; and the country's foreign policy cantered on nonalignment, peace and friendship, disarmament and steadfast support to the United Nations Organization (U.N).

Nehru's policy found its greatest articulation in the policy of non-alignment. It was a conscious, independent choice in global politics: New Delhi would not join either the US- or Soviet-led blocs in the Cold War that was tearing the world apart. To Nehru, India's liberation struggle was an anticolonial one that pitted a modern, powerful Western state against an ancient polity that was materially impoverished but commanded an exceptionally high moral ground. Hence, no power could turn India into a pawn in the game of high interstate politics. He viewed

⁴ Ganguly, Šumit (2010): *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p.1.

⁵ Guha, Ramachandra (2012): *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, London, Picador, pp.151-178.

⁶ Cohen, Stphen. P. (2001): *India: Emerging Power*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, pp. 65-66.

⁷ Bajpai, Kanti P. and Pant, Harsh V. (eds.) (2013): *India's Foreign Policy: A Reader*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 5.

⁸ Dixit, Jyotindra Nath (1998): *Across Borders: Fifty Years of India's Foreign Policy*, New Delhi, Picus Books, pp. 22.

⁹ For details see, Nehru, Jawaharlal (1961): *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches*, New Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India: also see, Brecher, Michael (1959): *Nehru: A Political Biography*, London, Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Abraham, Itty: "The Future of Indian Foreign Policy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, n° 20 (2007), pp. 4209.

¹¹ Koithara, Verghese (1999): *Society, State and Security: The Indian Experience*, New Delhi, Sage, pp. 59.



non-alignment not as passive neutrality, but as “active and positive,” a means for India to remain independent and contribute to world peace. Contrary to its seemingly negative nomenclature, the policy of non-alignment was not a doctrine of neutrality. As Nehru clarified, ‘we are unaligned and uncommitted to military blocs, but are committed to various policies, various urges, objectives, principles and very much so.’¹² The policy stemmed from a twofold democratic impulse of steering a self-determined diplomatic path free from superpower dominance, and a Gandhian opposition to the forces of colonization and apartheid.¹³

India’s Panchsheel Agreement with China in 1954 was one of the most prominent examples of Nehru’s policy of peaceful co-existence. The five principles proposed by the agreement are mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. The Bandung Conference of 1955 solidified this vision; Nehru and other post-colonial leaders rejected Cold War divisions and fostered unity among new nations.

Nehru was an idealist, but he also had a pragmatic side, particularly when it came to India’s security. He viewed the UN as a crucial instrument for keeping the peace, and India was a very active participant in (politics) and (diplomacy), and Director of (diplomacy) (peace). India also emerged as one of the most significant contributors to UN peacekeeping missions, deploying its forces in locations such as the Congo and Korea, thereby cementing the country’s image as a responsible international actor. This helped India campaign for for global peace and project itself as a strong advocate of complete disarmament. India played a vital role in several U.N peacekeeping operations. It vigorously pursued the decolonization agenda in the U.N General Assembly and joined Ireland in introducing the first standstill resolution (1954) at the U.N, seeking total cessation of nuclear testing.¹⁴ India strove to provide a sturdy foundation to global democratisation by actively participating in U.N deliberations meant to usher in a just international economic order. It also canvassed other worthy causes in the U.N, which included sustainable development and the safeguarding of human rights.

However, there was something wrong with Nehru’s approach. His emphasis was on development, not defense, and military spending was relatively low in the 1950s. This reliance on the power of diplomacy and economic development was an honorable one, but it left India ill-prepared to fight the 1962 border war with China. Such an underestimation of military strength was undoubtedly a significant error, and it fundamentally weakened the foundations of Nehruvian foreign policy. Nonetheless, Nehru’s orientation toward diplomacy and the construction of international institutions set the tone of Indian foreign policy for decades to come. As Atul Kohli has observed, Nehru was dedicated to the cause of state-led development and to positioning India as a moral force in world politics. It was this dual ambition —to stand on its own feet and defy domination, while simultaneously contributing to a fairer global order — that would become a template for several of India’s later leaders.¹⁵ During the Cold War, India’s association with the Non-Aligned Movement intensified, although it also heightened the challenge of reconciling its non-alignment with genuine security interests. Wars, economic hardship, and the realities of a divided world repeatedly challenged India’s moral standing.

A realist reading of Indian foreign policy during this period suggests that it was meant to serve the core goal of charting an independent course in the face of two constraints: a global

¹² For details, see Nehru, Jawaharlal: “Lok Sabha Debates” (22 November 1960), in *India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches*, New Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

¹³ Ganguly (2010), *op. cit.*, pp. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ For details, see Kohli, Atul (2004): *State-directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



scenario shaped by superpower dominance and bipolarity on the one hand, and domestic weaknesses including limited economic and military capabilities, and a fledgling democracy facing regional pressures on the other hand. A foreign policy centred on peace, non-violence and non-alignment was a rational response to such a double bind. Indeed, this was suggested by none other than Nehru who acknowledged the importance of self-interest as a cornerstone of Indian foreign policy.¹⁶ But he held that “self-interest may itself demand a policy of cooperation with other nations, goodwill for other nations” (Rana, 1967: 95). Srinath Raghavan argues that Nehru began by highlighting the pragmatic thrust of nonalignment and observed that it was “not a wise policy to put all our eggs in one basket ... purely from the point of view of opportunism ... an independent policy is the best.”¹⁷ However, eventually, moral rhetoric began to trump *realpolitik* in the conduct of Indian foreign policy, which enabled the country to capture the high ground in international politics; but left it without the economic and military wherewithal to cope with systemic compulsions and regional security challenges. In the 1960s, India had to depend on American food aid as well as World Bank loans¹⁸, and it could not prevent Chinese territorial incursion.

It has been argued that India pursued *true nonalignment* till 1962 by trying to maintain friendly relations with the three key powers; China, the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁹ In this phase, the leadership had a free hand in the conduct of foreign policy owing to the absence of effective parliamentary restraints on the Prime Minister; the ineffectualness of associational groups, and one-party dominance. However, Nehru's handling of relations with China during the 1950s drew widespread criticism²⁰, and true nonalignment was ‘shattered’ by the 1962 Chinese attack which exposed India’s military soft underbelly and isolation in world politics.²¹ Matters were made worse by the military stalemate with Pakistan over the sensitive Kashmir issue in 1965, which gave another jolt to India’s security architecture, and further dented the normative basis of its foreign policy. The efficacy of nonalignment had been predicated significantly on the assumption of good relations with neighbours, which proved to be untrue.²²

The period from 1962 to 1991 witnessed *tilted nonalignment* as India started looking to the Soviet Union to meet its security needs. In 1962, China's attack was a rude awakening, revealing India's military weaknesses and the risks of isolation. Nehru lost confidence in his belief that non-alignment was sufficient in itself to ensure good relations with neighbours. The occupation of Tibet, as well as territorial disputes, highlighted the constraints of this policy. Likewise, the 1965 war with Pakistan over Kashmir drove home for India the lesson that appeals to moral principles might not always manage regional hostility and great power politics. Nehru was distrustful of the military, which he had long believed was a relic of colonial rule or a potential coup waiting to happen, explaining his failure to invest in the military at the right time. Post-1962 India realised the imperative for a stronger military and foreign partners. As Washington shrank from South Asia in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, India was left to depend more and more on the Soviet Union for military and diplomatic support. By the late 1960s and 1970s, over 85% of India’s major weapons systems were either imported from or produced in collaboration with the Soviet Union. The pragmatic foreign policy of Prime Minister Indira

¹⁶ Nehru (1959), *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30, cited in Power, Paul F: “Indian Foreign Policy: The Age of Nehru”, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 26, n° 2 (April 1964), p. 270.

¹⁷ Nehru (1960), *op. cit.*, cited in Raghavan, Srinath (2010): *War and Peace in Modern India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, p. 20.

¹⁸ Koithara (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 61

¹⁹ Hagerty, Devin. T. (ed.) (2005): *South Asia in World Politics*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 11-48.

²⁰ Andersen, Walter. K.: “Recent Trends in Indian Foreign Policy”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, n° 5 (September–October 2001), p. 48.

²¹ Hagerty, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²² Calvocoressi, Peter. (2001): *World Politics 1945–2000*, New Delhi, Pearson Education, p. 513.



Gandhi led to the Bangladesh war, and the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971, followed by the country's first nuclear test in 1974. More than 85% of the major weapon systems acquired by the Indian armed forces were either imported from the Soviet Union or license-produced in India with Soviet assistance.²³

Under Indira Gandhi, realism became a more prominent factor in India's foreign policy. Firstly, with the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971 and India's decisive role in the Bangladesh Liberation War, there was a clear transition to a more realistic assessment of our national interests. This realism was reinforced by the 1974 nuclear test, as India's orientation towards a more strategic and self-reliant trajectory became evident. However, this tilt towards the Soviet Union was not to the exclusion of its brand-leading role in the Global South. Throughout the 1970s, New Delhi was a leading proponent of the New International Economic Order, which advocated for a fairer trading system, increased technology transfer, and greater access to natural resources for the developing world. Leaders such as Indira Gandhi refused to abandon non-alignment as a foreign policy, but also as a global movement against iniquity. However, these aspirations were at odds with India's growing reliance on the Soviets and its mounting economic difficulties.

Even India's nuclear programme had to be seen in terms of the struggle between its aspirations and its realities. Although it lambasted the discriminatory character of the NPT, the 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion" conducted at Pokhran demonstrated that India was ready to defy global norms when they stood in the way of its security. Moreover, this two-pronged rhetoric of norms and realist structures soon emerged as a signature. India maintained its support for anti-colonialism, economic equity, and the equality of developing countries at the international level. With the emergence of a large number of new independent states during the 1960s, India and its allies held a majority in the UN General Assembly. ABJ used it to clamour for a new international economic order and the greater self-determination of the Third World. Summits of the Non-Aligned Movement in capitals such as Lusaka and Algiers evidenced this commonality of objective.

As Atul Kohli has pointed out, however, Indian leadership was concerned more with constructing a stable state than with rapid economic development. India's moral authority was lacking, and its power potential remained untapped, due to inefficient investment and slow growth (averaging only about 3.5 percent per year between 1951 and 1981).²⁴ By the 1970s and 1980s, these contradictions were impossible to ignore. India received continued lip service from the Global South but ultimately came to depend on Soviet military and political backing. As academic Raja Mohan noted, the non-aligned sentiment was also less pervasive, becoming a process rather than a formidable instrument of policy. If the nuclear program and the Soviet sponsorship provided India with greater strategic weight, its regional wars and its economic problems kept it in check.²⁵

India was in a state of flux during the Cold War, and the country had to reconcile its aspirations with the harsh realities of international politics. Non-alignment, a moral principle in the beginning, acquired the colour of security imperatives. Thus, India learned that ideals were poor substitutes for real power. Nevertheless, India's realism was always ambivalent as it never abandoned its self-image as a leader of a fairer international order. It was this 'duality', the 'instrumentalist' pursuit of realist strategy alongside normative rhetoric at the outset of the post-Cold War extension of the debate, which would frame a dramatic reversal of policy. In the

²³ Koithara, *op. cit.*, pp. 66.

²⁴ For details, see Kohli, *op. cit.*

²⁵ For details, see Mohan, C. Raja (2003): *Crossing the Rubicon: The shaping of India's new foreign policy*, New Delhi, Viking.



1980s, Rajiv Gandhi's leadership signaled upcoming shifts through emerging openness, desires for modernization, and cautious relations with superpowers. Having suffered during the Cold War due to its dependence and vulnerability to the Soviet Union, India was ready for a new world after the collapse of the socialist superpower.

3. Section II: Post-Cold War Reorientation: Continuity and Change

The end of the Cold War and the eclipse of super-power rivalry dramatically altered the matrix of Indian foreign policy. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, its chief external support had vanished, and faced with an acute balance-of-payments crisis at home, India had no choice but to accept a fundamentally changed world of American unipolarity and economic globalization.²⁶ The pro-Soviet worldview of the Indian policy elite became obsolete and the India-backed government in Afghanistan withdrew destabilising the neighbourhood. In the emerging unipolar scenario, a major structural threat emanated from the United States and its allies. Upheavals in Europe, the Gulf Crisis, and efforts to defuse the Arab-Israel conflict led the great powers to scale down their engagement with South Asia where they placed non-proliferation concerns above those pertaining to democracy and human rights. They could punish India diplomatically (on Kashmir in the United Nations, for example), militarily (by denying it the requisite technology), and economically by blocking multilateral and private fund flows.²⁷ Not surprisingly, the combined force of systemic and unit level variables began to shape Indian policy responses in the post-Cold War era. This was the context in which key tenets of the Nehruvian paradigm were contested. India's rejection of its erstwhile socialist model and acceptance of neo-liberal economic policies was triggered by the international delegitimization of the planned economy, and the growing dependence of the national economy on international facilities in the wake of globalization. The elite consensus on economic reforms was also facilitated by the imperative of catching up with post-Mao China which had achieved exponential growth and become the second most significant global power by the turn of the twentieth century. Reforms initiated by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh in the early 1990s liberalized the once-closed Indian economy. They ushered in new imperatives for external involvement. India could no longer afford the insularity of previous decades; it was increasingly seeking to be part of the global economy through trade liberalisation, foreign investment, and multilateral institutions themselves.²⁸

As India's increasingly linked its international posture with economic diplomacy, a careful response was articulated to the logic of structural unipolarity through a curious mixture of bandwagoning (joining with a dominant power to ensure security) and balancing (resisting a dominant state/coalition) vis-à-vis the United States. Thus, India supported the US-led coalition during the Iraq war of 1991, it endorsed the US action in Afghanistan post-9/11, softened its opposition to the signing of CTBT and NPT after 2001, and voted against Iran on the nuclear issue. India's ties with the United States improved as they cooperated on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and trade.²⁹ However, India did not support the US war against Iraq in 2003, and there are persistent problems concerning its bid for a permanent seat in the U. N. Security Council, and over the scope of its nuclear programme. India hoped to become militarily strong enough to resist entanglements.³⁰ India also reoriented its foreign policy toward East Asia, and

²⁶ Ganguly (2010), *op. cit.*, pp. 44–47.

²⁷ Bajpai, Kanti: "India: Modified Structuralism", in Alagappa, Muthiah (ed.) (1998): *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 176.

²⁸ Mukherjee, Rohan and Malone, David M.: "From High Ground to High Table: The Evolution of Indian Multilateralism", in Malone, David M., Mohan, C. Raja. and Raghavan, Srinath (eds.) (2011): *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 34–37.

²⁹ Mohan (2003), pp. 112–114.

³⁰ Bajpai, *op. cit.*, p. 178.



other major world powers. India's Look East Policy, started in the 1990s, acknowledged the importance of connecting with Southeast and East Asia.³¹

India's nuclear tests in 1998 stood up to discriminatory global non-proliferation norms and an assertion of strategic autonomy. It led to heavy criticism and sanctions, but also eventually to a longer-term rapprochement with Washington. In 2005, with the U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement, the PRC ceased opposing the United States concerning India's non-NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) nuclear status and accepted that India had become a significant responsible nuclear power.³² This was undoubtedly a significant leap towards achieving great power status, alongside India's remarkable progress in space sciences, satellites, and information technology.

China's ascent also helped to mold India's post-Cold War trajectory. Trade ties grew significantly, and China became one of India's major trading partners; however, strategic competition continued, and the fraught border further distanced them. That the Asian giants would get into a relationship of cooperation and contestation was inevitable, given strategic divergences alongside competition for influence in South Asia and opposing perspectives within transnational governance structures.³³ The Sino-Indian power struggle must be waged in a world of multiple economic linkages, which makes zero-sums games unviable.

Thus, the reorientation following the end of the Cold War marked a decisive break from the Cold War's limiting realism, towards a pragmatic pursuit of possibilities in globalization and unipolarity. India's strategic search for autonomy involved power balancing, coalition politics, and economic integration—a combination that differentiates it from China's fascination with a long-term imperial system. Raja Mohan argues that India's foreign policy post-1991 was not a departure from Nehru, but an adaptation of its autonomy to the new global situation.³⁴

4. Section III: Post-Cold War Multilateralism and Global Engagement

India had previously invested most of its international standing in multilateral settings, such as the NAM, UNCTAD, and the UNGA. Since the end of the Cold War, however, India's multilateral diplomacy has expanded considerably. The espousal of liberal economic reforms in 1991 compelled India to become more entwined in global institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.³⁵ India, which had long suspected these institutions, used them as forums where countries such as Brazil, China, India, and others could advocate for reform to make the institutions more representative of contemporary global trends.³⁶ India has advocated for issues that aligned with its developmental imperatives and normative orientations. India's negotiating strategies are informed by a spirit of positive autonomy and suggest a desire to be rid of its traditional image as a country that 'can't say yes'.³⁷ While India benefits from multilateralism and interdependence,³⁸ it also faces the challenge of gaining sufficient autonomy under unipolarity which implies that the relevant norms are shaped by the hegemon and its allies. Hence it seeks to work in tandem with the

³¹ Hall, Ian (2019): *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, pp. 48–50.

³² Pant, Harsh V.: "A Rising India's Search for a Foreign Policy", *Orbis*, Vol. 52, n° 5 (2008), pp. 906–908.

³³ Malone, David. M. and Mukherjee, Rohan: "India and International Institutions: Participation and Contestation", *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, n° 5 (2010), pp. 137–39.

³⁴ Mohan (2003), *op. cit.*, pp. 25–27.

³⁵ Ganguly (2010), *op. cit.*, pp. 51–53.

³⁶ Malone & Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–134.

³⁷ Cohen, Stephen Philips (2001): *India: Emerging Power*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, pp. 66–91.

³⁸ For an excellent discussion, see Mehta, Pratap. B.: "Still under Nehru's Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India", *India Review*, Vol. 8, n° 3 (2009), pp. 209–233.



United States where their vital interests converge, and explores feasible alternatives where they clash. Thus, institutions like the IMF and World Bank have now emerged as locations of contestation where India has joined other emerging economies like Brazil, China in seeking reform to align them closely with current economic realities. These efforts have led to the tweaking of rules for assigning quotas and votes to IMF member countries. Also, it has adopted an activist role in WTO negotiations, climate change discussions, and debates on UN reform, and became part of emerging coalitions such as BRICS, IBSA, and the ‘new’ G-20.³⁹ These engagements illustrated India’s double-handed approach of seeking material rewards while calling for a more egalitarian world order.

The World Trade Organization has become a notable arena for India’s multilateral activism. Throughout the Doha Round talks, India has consistently sought to protect the interests of its farmers and ensure food security for its population. By establishing issue-based coalitions, such as the Trade G-20 on agriculture and the G-33, India has emerged as a key voice for developing country interests the fight over stocking food exposed both India’s fragility and its negotiating prowess.⁴⁰ The US and other nations conceded because India resisted the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement in 2014 until they agreed on food security safeguards. Modi also contended that the Bali matter should be linked to the Doha plan, favored by developing nations.⁴¹

Outside trade, India has made substantial investments in South-South forums, such as BRICS and IBSA. The BRICS New Development Bank and Contingent Reserve Arrangement came into life in 2014, a key institutional innovation.⁴² For India, these were not tools of resisting the international order, but of supplementing it with alternative ways of financing and representation. Manmohan Singh at the 2nd BRIC Summit, April 15, 2010 emphasized, “We are four large countries with abundant resources, large populations and diverse societies. ... We aspire for rapid growth for ourselves and for an external environment that is conducive to our development goals.” (MEA 2010). Modi picked up the baton and, through the BRICS summits, has pushed for infrastructure financing and digital cooperation. “India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA) are transcending geographical, historical, and regional differences in order to promote their individual and collective interests at a time when the current economic hardship and declining U.S. hegemony mean greater opportunities for emerging countries in the global South.”⁴³

The G-20 gained importance after the 2008 global financial crisis. India was a leading advocate of the regulation of financial flows, reform of Bretton Woods institutions, and increased representation of emerging economies. Its actions in the G-20 have illustrated the tradeoffs between defending its developmental imperatives and telegraphing a sense of responsibility commensurate with a rising power.⁴⁴ Subsequently, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, India invoked the G-20 to demand equitable access to vaccines and debt relief for

³⁹ Narlikar, Amrita: “New Powers in the Club: India and the Global Trade Regime”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, n° 3 (2010), pp. 67–70.

⁴⁰ Narlikar, Amrita and Tussie, Diana: “The G20 at the Cancun Ministerial: Developing Countries and their Evolving Coalitions in the WTO”, *World Economy*, Vol. 27, n° 7 (2004), pp. 95–97.

⁴¹ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–51.

⁴² Stuenkel, Oliver (2015): *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order*, Lanham, Lexington Books, pp. 110–112.

⁴³ Sotero, Paulo: “Emerging Powers: India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) and the Future of South–South Cooperation”, Wilson Centre Special Report, August 2009, at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/emerging-powers-india-brazil-and-south-africa-ibsa-and-the-future-of-south-south-cooperation>, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Cooper, Andrew. F. and Thakur, Ramesh (2013): *The Group of Twenty (G20)*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 132–134.



the most vulnerable nations, thereby tying multilateral responsibility to its broader developmental ethic.⁴⁵

Building on its long-standing commitment to a rules-based international order, India remained engaged in managing conflicts and reforming the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. India sought a Security Council seat, citing its civilizational heritage, democratic status, and contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010, pp. 137–138). India has participated in 49 UN peacekeeping missions since 1948. Large numbers of Indian military and police have served in UN missions in predominantly hot conflict zones in Africa and Asia. These contributions have helped give India moral legitimacy, if not institutional reform.⁴⁶

Another key plank of India's multilateral engagement has been climate diplomacy. From negotiations leading to the Kyoto Protocol in the late 1990s to the Paris Agreement in 2015, India has consistently pressed for the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities ().⁴⁷ The Paris Climate Conference was a pivotal moment when India combined its traditional focus on equity with a pragmatic role as a bridge-builder. The concept of “climate justice” articulated by Modi, along with his establishment of the International Solar Alliance, demonstrated India's aspiration to connect its domestic development and leadership in renewable energy globally (5).⁴⁸ While critics had predicted that limits on coal use would hinder India's industrialization, the talks underscored India's ability to help shape the outcome in a consensual manner.

This balance between core national interests and investment in international legitimacy has been evident in several key issues. In trade diplomacy, in climate negotiations, in UN reform, and on finance governance, India has followed a twin strategy: protecting its rights as well as its pathways for development and presenting itself as a responsible actor willing to live up to fairer orders.⁴⁹ Public diplomacy has strengthened this. Furthermore, in 2006, India established the Public Diplomacy Division, which was significantly expanded under Modi, aiming to modernize and cultivate a civilizational identity through digital platforms, diaspora networks, and cultural diplomacy⁵⁰

In conclusion, India's post-Cold War multilateralism marked a significant departure from its past skepticism of global economic institutions. It demonstrated a realistic readiness to engage in discussions while not abandoning its work to help drive reforms that make global governance fairer and more inclusive. By hedging and balancing the pressure of immediate national interests with the demands of long-term normative commitments, India has sought to portray itself as a responsible rising power within and beyond the existing order.

5. Section IV: Modi's Diplomacy and Civilizational Assertions in Contemporary Policy

PM Modi's diplomacy in the past 11 years (and two election terms) has been a display of strategic resolve, material strength and moral assertions upholding and reshaping paths laid out since the post-Cold War era. In his foreign policy approach, he has attempted to blend pragmatism with civilizational assertions of India's identity, presenting the country as both an ancient civilization and a modern ascending power.⁵¹ While his symbolism is sometimes

⁴⁵ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–72

⁴⁶ For details, see United Nations Peacekeeping: *India and Peacekeeping*, 2019, New York.

⁴⁷ Dubash, Navroz K.: “The Politics of Climate Change in India: Narratives of Equity and Co-benefits”, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, Vol. 4, n° 4 (July-August 2013), pp. 25–27.

⁴⁸ For details, see Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–77.

⁴⁹ See Malone & Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 139–141

⁵⁰ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.



controversial, his emphasis on building hard power and supporting the idea of multi-alignment based on India's newfound strength has initiated a new phase of assertive foreign policy. However, most scholars of Indian foreign policy find more continuity than change in his approach to foreign policy.

Right at the onset of his term in office, Modi signalled a renewed focus on neighbourhood diplomacy. His invitation to virtually all leaders of the South Asian region for his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014 was seen as a statement of purpose to regain India's lost influence in its backyard.⁵² Significant visits to Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka supported this messaging. He visited Afghanistan, and he inaugurated the Salma Dam and Parliament, representing Indian backing.⁵³ These moves were in line with the government's promotion of the "Neighbourhood First" policy.⁵⁴ In facing the cross-border terrorist threat from Pakistan and adverse security dynamics, India resorted to limited and targeted military operations aimed at terror camps located deep within Pakistani territory. India and Pakistan recently fought a brief war over terrorist violence against Indian tourists in Pulwama in Kashmir that led to significant military losses for Islamabad. While India also suffered some casualties and destruction of military assets, the war showed that India was ready to call Islamabad's nuclear bluff and challenge a state primed on aggression and an offensive nuclear doctrine. However, Trump's mediation cut short India's war efforts, revealing once more how the international distribution of power constrains ascending powers.

Under Modi, India's Act East Policy, a rechristened version of the Look East Policy, had focused more on implementation rather than reimagining the idea of connectivity. India has strengthened its engagement with ASEAN through active participation in summits, trade talks, and strategic dialogues. Modi's commitment to the EAS, as well as his travels to Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, and his efforts to woo Australia and Japan, demonstrated his strategic will to make India an actor in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁵ Interpreting the Indo-Pacific in Indian diplomacy was part of a broader policy of seeing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single strategic military domain. India's participation in the Quad, which includes the United States, Japan, and Australia, also underscored this reorientation.⁵⁶ Admittedly, the Quad has waxed and waned in recent years, essentially due to American prevarications and Trump's recent transactional approach to international politics. While India considers the idea of a secure Indo-Pacific essential to its maritime interests and its resistance to Chinese hegemony, it has carefully maintained a distance from attempts to militarize the Quad, lest it unduly provoke China. Trepidations about the US and its traditional allies, combined with the geopolitical challenges inherent in China's rise, tie India's hands until it develops sufficient military and economic capabilities to redefine the parameters of its foreign policy.

Civilizational motifs have taken centre-stage in Modi's diplomatic narratives. Time and again, he has cited references from India's ancient history, including its Buddhist and yogic philosophical traditions, as well as its democratic values and promise of leadership, as examples of its soft power. In multilateral forums, such as the UN, BRICS, or G20, Modi articulated India's commitment to equity, sustainability, and development. The adoption of 21 June as International Day of Yoga by the UN General Assembly in 2014 was among its most visible

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 33–35.

⁵³ Pant, Harsh V. (2016): *India's Foreign Policy: An Overview*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 142–144

⁵⁴ Ganguly, Sumit (2017): *Deadly Impasse: India–Pakistan Relations at the Dawn of a New Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–60.

⁵⁶ Pant, Harsh V. and Joshi, Yogesh (2017): *The U.S. Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy: Asia's Evolving Balance of Power*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 42–44.



signs, celebrated around the world as a manifestation of India's soft power (United Nations, 2014). Modi, similarly, frequently connected ancient India's reverence for nature with modern calls for climate justice, thereby uniting cultural memory with environmental responsibility.⁵⁷

One of the significant innovations has been Modi's diaspora diplomacy. Mass rallies have witnessed the Indian diaspora become a carrier of soft power and economic connectivity in New York, Sydney, London, and Toronto. In this manner, Modi has been able to reach out to the overseas Indian community and present India as an inclusive and aspirational country, while also leveraging the financial and political capital of the diaspora.⁵⁸ This style of diplomacy, which combines symbolism with practical outreach, has made India more visible in Western societies, supplementing state-to-state engagements. Performativity and symbolism have emerged as crucial aspects of the power projection style of a populist Indian state.

Public diplomacy and digital diplomacy have also expanded during the Modi years. He relies heavily on social media for communicating with global audiences, which makes foreign policy look more open and people centric. The Public Diplomacy Division resorted to campaigns to showcase India's achievements in its space program, digital innovation, and renewable energy. These programs presented an image of India as technologically skilled and part of global flows.⁵⁹ Modi's diplomacy likewise stressed economic pragmatism. He consistently linked domestic programs, such as "Make in India," "Digital India," and "Smart Cities," to international cooperation. His trips back and forth often featured business forums, investment summits, and trade deals. For instance, his travels to the United States included not just strategic conversations but also networking with Silicon Valley leaders, emphasizing India's desire for a presence in the digital economy.⁶⁰ Japan-India relations, too, were elevated to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership," centered on high-speed rail, infrastructure, and defense.⁶¹

However, a closer look at the Modi Doctrine" reveals both continuity and change. Modi has pursued the same course as his predecessors, focusing on key principles like strategic autonomy, opposing external interference, and multi-alignment. What set him apart is visibility, symbolism, and the conscious projection of civilizational identity in foreign policy and diplomacy. Some see it as a fresh approach from the apocalyptic thinking by the RSS and VHP, with Modi's backing; a new direction while others view it as a gradual shift toward economic nationalism that requires an open trading order to flourish. Modi's diplomatic constraints are apparent. Despite the improved atmosphere, relations with Pakistan have deteriorated within months,⁶² leading to dialogue suspension following terrorist attacks. Its border tensions with China led to the Galwan clash in 2020. These crises showed that energetic diplomacy and civilizational posturing did not overcome deeply entrenched security dilemmas.⁶³ Most crucially, President Donald Trump's idiosyncratic transactionalism in the second term of his office (since 2025) has cast enormous strains on India's ties with the US, which continues to be the most crucial of its bilateral relations. Thus, upon critical scrutiny, it could be inferred that India's rise in the global order would significantly hinge on how New Delhi negotiates the challenges in its relations with Washington; a task that will prove exceedingly challenging in the foreseeable future. India's convenient fence-sitting in the ongoing wars and military

⁵⁷ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–73.

⁵⁸ For a detailed study, see Pradhan Ramakrushna & Mohapatra Atanu: "India's diaspora policy: evidence of soft power diplomacy under Modi", *South Asian Diaspora*, Vol 12, n° 2 (2020), pp. 145–161, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2020.1712792>

⁵⁹ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–82.

⁶⁰ Pant (2016), *op. cit.*, pp. 145–147.

⁶¹ Mohan (2015), *op. cit.*, pp.101–104.

⁶² Ganguly (2017), *op. cit.*, pp. 106–108.

⁶³ Pant & Joshi, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–12



conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia may be in sync with the needs of multi-alignment and a balanced approach towards both the US and Russia, the latter being a time-tested and reliable ally. But it undeniably creates trust deficits with the great powers involved affecting bilateral ties and questions the credibility of India's commitments to a liberal and rule-based international order.

Modi's foreign policy has certainly restored India's salience on the world stage, framing pragmatic engagement and strategic autonomy rooted in a civilizational story of identity. His policies reflect India's aspirations to serve as a global actor; but to realize the ambition, deep structural and regional constraints remain which are yet to be negotiated. The ledger balance of the actual triumphs scored through astute diplomatic executions during the Modi period will be a crucial testament of tangible changes in the trajectory of India's foreign policy as it seeks to be project itself as a responsible stakeholder with unique civilizational moorings, blending tradition and modernity.

6. Section V: How post-colonial anxieties linger in India's Foreign Policy

Despite early setbacks, including economic collapse, political instability, and global isolation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, India required a foreign policy overhaul to engage strategically with major powers. But the normative registers continue to underline India's foreign policy vision. India's colonial experiences and residual memories of bipolar structural constraints on the one hand, and postcolonial tasks of nation-building on the other have implicitly bequeathed value and attitudinal references that continue to direct its foreign policy orientations. Such legacies also condition India's role in undertaking global initiatives and bolster its aspirations to world leadership.⁶⁴

The first moment of post-colonial anxiety continues to be India's unwillingness to promote democracy abroad. India, a strong postcolonial democracy, has shown noted skepticism of democracy promotion. Freedom House has scored India moderately high in terms of political freedoms, but its external conduct has been circumspect. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh observed before the United Nations General Assembly in 2011 that "societies cannot be reordered from outside through military force. People from all nations have the freedom to determine their future."⁶⁵ Academic consensus attributes this hesitation to India's anti-colonial identity, the flaws in its democratic trajectory, and the realities of a neighbourhood in which authoritarian states surround India.⁶⁶ S. D. Muni has also noted that India was well-positioned to lead democratic struggles in Asia; however, the demands of security during the Cold War and China's emergence as a communist power compelled Indian leaders to prioritize stability over ideological modernization. India prioritized its security interests over democracy promotion. Whenever democracy dovetailed with its security imperatives — as in Bangladesh in 1971, Nepal in 1989, or Afghanistan after 2001 — it supported it. In other instances, it avoided risks connected to ideologically driven positions.⁶⁷ In organizations ranging from the UN Democracy Fund to the Community of Democracies, India has played at most a marginal role, contributing, where it has, money more than leadership.⁶⁸

A similar hesitancy typifies India's position on human rights and humanitarian intervention. India has rejected intervention plans in Libya and Syria, maintaining its unease with the concept

⁶⁴ Malone & Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-123

⁶⁵ For details, see United Nations (2011): *Statement by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the 66th Session of the UN General Assembly*, New York.

⁶⁶ Muni, Sukh Deo (2009): *India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 30-34.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-34.

⁶⁸ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.



of *Responsibility to Protect*. Whilst, on the one hand, Indian diplomats acknowledge their responsibility to prevent mass atrocities, on the other, policymakers stress the importance of peaceful resolution and sanctions, whose purpose is to counter any precedent that might legitimize intervention in its internal struggles.⁶⁹ This apparent paradox is less surprising in a historical context: India is one of the most significant contributors to the United Nations' peacekeeping operations, deploying its troops in distant trouble spots such as South Sudan, Lebanon, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is happy to police the international order on behalf of the UN but wary of becoming doctrinally committed to ideas such as R2P, which may justify unilateral interventions.⁷⁰

India's vulnerabilities also shape its concerns regarding the promotion of human rights. Lingering insurgencies in Kashmir, the Northeast, and Maoist-stricken areas, and incidents of communal violence, have left India open to charges of rights abuse. Indian authorities have securitized these challenges, concerned about foreign interference. India's abstention from voting on a war crimes investigation in Sri Lanka in 2014 is an example.⁷¹ Liberals are distressed by India's avoidance of the inhumanity in places like Myanmar, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Syria, while others commend this pragmatism as realism.⁷² India's voting stance at the UN Human Rights Council, alike, reveals this hesitation: generally, India supports developing states, voting with few exceptions, tends to reject country-specific resolutions, and overrides coercive instruments to focus instead on dialogue and capacity building.⁷³

This position applies to more general questions which pit external interference with sovereignty of nations. India stands by the principle of non-intervention, in part because of its historical experience as a colonised nation and as a postcolonial nation-state-builder. Its cautious involvement in the West Asia conflict and the war between Russia and Ukraine over the past few years have been justified as de-hyphenation (delinking rival countries and chartering independent ties with each) and depoliticisation (circumventing politically sensitive questions by infusing fresh impetus to cooperation) policies based on the principle of non-interference.⁷⁴ Therefore, even as India invests in multilateralism and reform of global governance institutions, it also engages in what Malone and Mukherjee refer to as "unprincipled moderation," displaying few principles beyond noninterference and tempering its commitments with pragmatism.⁷⁵ The obsession with sovereignty still dominates India's sensitivity to comment on Kashmir or the nation's internal communal rifts, even as India increasingly demands a larger voice in global governance. Recently, India supported the right of Philippines to uphold its national sovereignty as China made maritime incursions violating boundaries, even as China called India a 'third country' which should not interfere.⁷⁶

Aid diplomacy serves as another example of India's postcolonial anxieties. India has become more aggressive in offering lines of credit and grants to nearby states and African countries,

⁶⁹ Malone & Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-136.

⁷⁰ For details, see United Nations Peacekeeping, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ "Resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka (A/HRC/25/L.1/Rev.1)", 9 April 2014, United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, at file:///C:/Users/amarq/Downloads/A_HRC_RES_25_1-EN.pdf.

⁷² Ganguly Sumit (2016): *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 55-60.

⁷³ Malone & Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁷⁴ Rana, Chetan.: "From Solidarity to Pseud: India's Shift on Palestine", *The Hindu*, 9 October 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/from-solidarity-to-pseud-indias-shift-on-palestine/article68733612.ece>.

⁷⁵ Malone and Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-125.

⁷⁶ Haidar, Suhasini: "India Supports Philippines' Sovereignty, Says Jaishankar, Sparking Response from China", *The Hindu*, 26 March 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-supports-philippines-in-upholding-its-national-sovereignty-eam-jaishankar/article67993485.ece>.



which it has often described in terms of South-South cooperation. In 2014, India offered a one-billion-dollar line of credit to Nepal's infrastructure. Similar support was given to Mongolia, Afghanistan, and African allies. However, the results remain uncertain. Aid has increased India's visibility, but distrust among neighbors persists, reflecting the challenge of transforming material assistance into regional legitimacy.⁷⁷ In Africa, India has hosted three India–Africa Forum Summits since 2008, committed billions in concessional credit and scholarships. Although such summits highlighted India's focus on its engagement with Africa, Chinese economic penetration has outstripped Indian efforts, and the strategic fallout is indeterminate.⁷⁸ Likewise, India's development diplomacy is exemplified by regional connectivity projects, such as the BBIN and the Iranian Chabahar Port, although these have faced delays and political issues.⁷⁹

India's external actions continue to be tempered by its postcolonial fears, despite its quest for a global role. India's reluctance to push democracy, its unqualified commitment to the principle of sovereignty, caution on making pronouncements of human rights, and skepticism of humanitarian intervention are rooted both in Nehruvian philosophy as well as strategic calculation of walking the proverbial diplomatic tightrope. India's contemporary global power status is not merely a matter of luck or good fortune. Instead, it is a journey carved through the indelible impact of its history. At the same time, India's postcolonial anxieties also underscore India's principled non-interventionist philosophy: Unlike Western great powers, it does not wish to export its values or reconfigure the world order through hegemonic assertions. Instead, it seeks to reform it from within. This gradualist, cautious approach has afforded flexibility to India's foreign policy, but it has perhaps also limited its ability to grab the mantle of leadership.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper makes three specific, inter-linked observations on India's foreign policy and the possibility of its realization of the quest for global leadership. First, India's foreign policy has evolved significantly from its moral high ground, unmatched by material prowess, to its current ambitions of achieving great-power status based on both hard and soft power. Economic liberalization, nuclear assertion, and a more expansive multilateral role have all raised India's bid in global power politics.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, structural limits, ongoing regional issues, and post-colonial insecurities have curbed this growth.

Secondly, India's foreign policy, like other states, involves both continuity and change. Strategic autonomy, initially thought of as non-alignment, has persisted as a doctrine, despite India forging stronger relationships with the United States, Russia, the European Union, and Japan.⁸¹ India has also used multilateral institutions, including the WTO, BRICS, and (to some extent) the G-20, as venues to protect its development interests while also seeking to position itself as a responsible stakeholder.⁸² Nehru articulated the broad contours of Indian foreign policy and envisioned India's rise as a moral post-colonial power, standing for global justice and transformation. Indira Gandhi made India militarily confident, defiant, and more willing to take risks. Narsimha Rao quietly shifted toward a practical strategy, acknowledging India's economic needs and opening to the West and Southeast Asia. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's distinct achievement involved combining strategic courage with diplomatic caution, as seen in his government's 1998 nuclear tests, the subsequent "no first use" pledge, and successful

⁷⁷ Pradhan Ramakrushna & Mohapatra Atanu, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Sinha, Aseema and Dube, M.: "India's Development Diplomacy with Africa: A New Strategic Partnership", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, n° 4 (2016), pp. 14–16.

⁷⁹ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–44.

⁸⁰ Ganguly (2010), *op. cit.*, pp. 44–47.

⁸¹ Mohan (2003), *op. cit.*, pp. 25–27.

⁸² Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–72.



diplomacy that avoided India's isolation, culminating in a new strategic partnership with the U.S. His idealism and pragmatism were apparent in his peace efforts with Pakistan and his decision to remove Pakistani intruders from the Kargil Hills. Modi's diplomacy has added yet another layer of enhanced visibility and symbolism, tapping into the theme of civilizational glory, its diaspora networks, and public diplomacy, all of which raise India's profile on the global stage.⁸³

Third, India's ascent in the global order comes with caveats. Relations with Pakistan remain conflictual, and China's assertiveness has been on the rise, particularly following the Galwan Valley confrontations in 2020 (Pant & Joshi, 2020), with no immediate respite in sight. Most alarmingly, relations with the United States have soured during Trump's second term, making India strategically vulnerable since it cannot rely on Chinese benevolence. While Moscow's goodwill is guaranteed, it adds limited strategic depth. Within the country, inter-religious tensions, combined with disparities in economic development and weaknesses in certain institutions, persist and continue to affect India's external credibility. Post-colonial fears of sovereignty, human rights, and democracy promotion likewise constrain India's aspirations of wider global leadership.⁸⁴

Thus, in the future, India's ambitions as a great power are likely to navigate between power and norms. Its success depends on the degree to which it integrates strategic realism and its inherited norms. Cohen's comments are as relevant today as they were at the turn of the century.⁸⁵ India's task is not just to assume the status of a great power, but to establish the economic, military, and institutional capabilities necessary to maintain that status. Raja Mohan also reminds us that India's aspirations require pragmatism and the acceptance of global obligations.⁸⁶ Therefore, India's rise appears as a complex interaction, not a straightforward climb, a complex interplay of structure and agency, power and norms, history and the modern world. However, the true essence of India's foreign policy lies in this negotiation: it is careful, aspiring, practical, and ethical.

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⁸³ Pradhan Ramakrushna & Mohapatra Atanu, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Muni, *op. cit.*, pp. 30–34.

⁸⁵ Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

⁸⁶ Mohan (2003), *op. cit.*, pp. 112–114.



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