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India as a Climate Swing State: Policy Choices and Global Engagement in the Post-Paris Climate Order

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ABSTRACT

India's climate diplomacy has undergone a major shift since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. India, once seen as defensive in global climate talks, now mediates between developed and developing nations. This paper tries to explore India's emergence as a climate swing state— a country whose position, choices, and diplomatic engagements have the potential to shape global climate outcomes. India in present context bridges between Western-led discourses of clean technology, green finance and Southern coalitions such as the BRICS and SCO articulating equity and developmental needs. India's climate initiatives, through mechanisms like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), India seeks to position itself as a norm-shaping actor in global climate governance. At the same time, it refuses flexibility at home. Based on official documents, policy statements, scholarly debates and academic discussions this paper argues that India by adopting issue-based alignments rather than fixed bloc loyalties, seeks to reconcile global climate responsibility with domestic priorities of growth and energy access.

Introduction

As the world's third-largest emitter (IEA, 2025), India's actions fundamentally determine if global climate goals can be met. In the 21st century, the global climate landscape has changed fundamentally. It

has moved from a system of top-down mandates to a more fragmented, bottom-up structure defined by the 2015 Paris Agreement. This change can also be seen in the shift from CBDR to NDCs. India's change has been one of the most important in this changing world (Dubash & Rajamani, 2018). Historically, India has been known for its "defensive realism" which means that it tries to protect its own development space and avoid making binding cuts to emissions. However, since the Paris Agreement, New Delhi has taken on a more active, leadership role. Scholars call this change "the shift towards progressive realism (Mohan, 2017).

A "swing state" in international relations is a country whose largescale impact and strategic flexibility allow it to decisively influence the direction of global governance. India's ability to "swing" comes from a unique demographic and economic paradox: it is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, but its per capita emissions are much lower than the global average. Because of this duality, India can keep a "twin orientation," which means it can connect the Western-led discussions about technology and finance with the Southern groups, like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which put equity and the right to development first.

India’s emergence as a climate leader is increasingly institutionalized through its "policy of initiatives." By spearheading the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), India has moved from a rule-taker to a rule-maker, creating platforms that sync its national interests with global public goods (Gupta, 2014). These initiatives demonstrate how India selectively align with different partners bases on the specific issue at stake, where India avoids fixed bloc loyalties in favor of pragmatic, strategic partnerships that advance its domestic goals of energy security and economic growth (Rajamani, 2016).

This article presents the nuanced dimension of India’s post-Paris environmental activism. It examines how India balances the demands of global responsibility with its internal imperatives of economic development and eradication of poverty (Dubash & Rajamani, 2018). Through analysing official policy repositioning, multilateral leadership and the co-benefits framing of climate action, this article contends that India has shifted to the hub of global climate diplomacy, leveraging its role as a swing state in moulding a more equitable and inclusive international environmental regime (Sengupta, 2021).

Objective of the Study

This study tries to explore India’s positioning as a climate swing state in the post-Paris climate framework and to assess its influence on global climate negotiations. It also seeks to inquire how India

balances international climate commitments with domestic developmental priorities and explains India's climate negotiation strategies in a fragmented global order.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach to analyse India's position as a climate swing state in the post-Paris climate order. The study largely relies on secondary sources such as official government documents, press releases, policy statements, submission to UNFCCC and outcomes of COP along with the reports published by international organisations and think thanks. A systematic review of relevant peer-reviewed academic literature on climate governance, climate diplomacy and Indian foreign policy is carried out.

Applying qualitative document and content analysis to map transitions in India's climate negotiation tactics pre- and post-Paris Agreement. Projects led by India, such as the International Solar Alliance, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and Mission LIFE are examined as indicative of India's norm-setting efforts while programmes such as the Global Biofuels Alliance and National Green Hydrogen Mission in comparison may reflect other dynamics. The analysis will make use of the ideas of strategic autonomy, issue-based alignment, and swing-state behaviour to conceptualize where India stands in a fragmented global climate regime.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study examines India's role in global climate governance in the post-Paris climate order, focusing on its emergence as a climate swing state. The analysis primarily covers the period after 2015, while briefly engaging with earlier phases of India's climate diplomacy for contextual clarity. The scope of the study deals with India's climate negotiation strategies and selected leadership initiatives—such as the International Solar Alliance, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, Mission LIFE, the Global Biofuels Alliance, and the National Green Hydrogen Mission—as illustrative cases of norm-shaping behaviour.

Moreover, the study is limited to a qualitative, policy-oriented analysis and does not incorporate quantitative analysis therefore the study is confined to interpretive insights based on secondary sources. it also lacks comparative analysis with other emerging powers. Instead, the scope remains focused on interpreting India's strategic standpoint and influence within a fragmented post-Paris climate order (Falkner, 2016).

India as a Climate Swing State

The concept of "swing state" comes from electoral and strategic political analysis, where it was used to describe actors who didn't have a set position and whose changing positions could have a big effect on the outcome. The idea is mostly found in US politics around elections. In the field of international relations, the idea was changed to the countries that aren't always part of powerful groups but have enough material importance and diplomatic flexibility to shape multilateral talks. In the realm of global climate governance, this concept has been expanded to delineate climate swing states—nations whose issue-driven alignments and policy decisions can impact global climate results without taking on the roles of either rule-makers or passive norm-followers, especially within the adaptable institutional framework of the post-Paris climate regime. (Atteridge & Strachan, 2017).

India qualifies as a climate swing state due to the strategic manner in which it navigates climate negotiations rather than solely because of its emissions profile or developmental needs. India neither consistently aligns with mitigation-oriented alliances constituted by developed countries nor remains limited to a rigid Global South negotiating posture. Instead, it gravitates towards issue-based coalitions—supporting cooperation on renewable energy, technology, and adaptation while resisting binding mitigation schedule and funding arrangements it considers unjust (Falkner, 2016). This behavioural flexibility enables India to influence negotiation dynamics without permanent bloc loyalty, allowing it to balance global climate responsibility with domestic developmental priorities. It is this capacity for strategic intermediation, rather than structural status alone, which justify India’s stance as climate swing state (Bodansky, 2016).

Evolution of India’s Climate Diplomacy

India’s climate policy has undergone a significant transformation in the last 20 years, moving from being a "protest voice on the fringes" of global climate politics to actively shaping international efforts to mitigate climate change. This transformation is best understood by seeing its climate policy as part of its larger foreign policy goals.

India's changing negotiating position shows how its foreign policy is changing to take on more responsibility for managing the global commons.

Phase 1: The Era of Protest and Autonomy (Pre-2007)

In the early years of global climate politics, following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, India's climate policy was driven by the narrative of the "Growth First Stonewallers" (Mohan,2020).

Key characteristics of this initial policy included:

- Growth of Socio-economic Development as a top priority: Indias policies followed the tradition of considering socio-economic development in conflict with environment protection.
- Historical Responsibility and Equity: India's stance was grounded on the premise that it had contributed little to the stock of GHG emissions in history (merely 5% share of cumulative emissions between 1850-2012). Indian negotiators embraced the concepts of Comm on But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) and Respective Capabilities (RC), arguing that developed countries of the North bore the bulk of responsibility (Gupta, 2014).
- Resistance to Commitments: Resistance to Obligations: India, speaking for the G77 bloc of developing countries, called on developed nations to shoulder obligations while contending that obligations for the developing world should be carried out through voluntary measures upon receiving finance and transfer of technology (Bodansky, 2016). During the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, they specifically rejected any mention of voluntary commitments.
- Foreign Policy Foundation: This conservative policy position was based on a broader foreign policy goal of strategic autonomy and non-alignment, seeking to protect national sovereignty and independence of choice from foreign oversight.

Phase 2: Shifts Towards Pragmatism and Responsibility (2007–2011)

The rise of the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) due to strong economic growth led to increased international expectation for them to contribute to mitigation action. This external pressure and internal strategic adjustments led to notable shifts:

I. Acceptance of Voluntary Action (2007–2009):

- At COP 13 in Bali (2007), India surprisingly accepted that developing countries should participate in mitigation efforts on a voluntary basis, consistent with their capabilities.

- Ahead of COP 15 in Copenhagen (2009), India announced voluntary targets, pledging to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP by 20–25% against 2005 levels by 2020, a contradiction of its earlier refusal of voluntary commitments.

- The-then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh hinted towards an alteration in the Indian narrative towards "per capita plus".

II. Increase in Flexibility and Transparency (2010):

- At COP 16 in Cancún (2010), Ramesh broke with tradition by announcing that all countries ought to take on legally binding commitments (albeit with room for differentiation).

- India was instrumental, too, in facilitating compromises on transparency – an issue that had once been seen as a "red line" for countries fearful of infringing their sovereignty.

III. Underlying Foreign Policy Drivers: These changes were based on a re-orientation in India's foreign policy from rigid non-alignment towards pragmatism; the accentuation of its preference for national interest and material outsize (Divan & Rosencranz, 2022). India sought to contain the fallout from the issue in terms of its wider diplomatic goals including securing a permanent seat on the UNSC. India's flexibility also nurtured the belief that it was a responsible partner and "part of the solution" in world affairs.

Phase 3: India as an Agenda-Setter and Global Leader (Post-2014)

Following the election of the Modi government in 2014, India's foreign policy has taken an even sharper turn aiming for making global rules and agenda setting. This led to India being the most progressive in climate negotiations, as per the Progressive Internationalists story (Pal, 2025).

This shift was evidenced by India's role in the Paris Agreement (COP 21, 2015):

- Bottom-up Architecture: India was heavily invested in the transition to a bottom-up architecture of INDCs, which signaled the end of a top-down, differentiated architecture represented in the Kyoto Protocol.

- Ambitious Commitments: India submitted an NDC, calling it "fair and ambitious," committing to install 40% clean energy capacity by 2030, reduce carbon intensity by 33–35% by 2030 (compared to 2005 levels), and create new carbon sinks.
- Accepting the 1.5°C Goal: India indifferently accepted the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal for climate policy (UNFCCC, 2015).
- Leadership Role: India launched the global solar Alliance and quickly ratified the Paris Agreement.

The motivation behind this final shift was India's move towards taking on leadership and responsibility in managing the global commons. This focus on norm setting and leadership continues, as evidenced by India's stated willingness to increase the ambition of domestic climate action even after the US declared its intent to withdraw from the Agreement.

Institutional Leadership and Strategic Initiatives of India

India and ISA

India's leadership role in the global climate regime is significantly upheld in the establishment international solar alliance (ISA) in 2015 at the COP 21, Headquartered in India (Gurugram), it is an intergovernmental organization France and India With 120 Member and Signatory Countries, the ISA contributes to a powerful platform for global solar cooperation, fostering growth and sustainable development by promoting the abundant and clean power of the Sun. Originally conceived to cater to developing nations, the ISA's Framework Agreement was amended in 2020 for all UN Member countries to join, thereby expanding its global relevance (International Solar Alliance, 2023).

Through its 'Towards 1000' strategy, the ISA aims to mobilize USD 1 trillion in solar investments by 2030, provide energy access to one billion people, and facilitate the installation of 1,000 GW of solar capacity globally—potentially reducing around one billion tonnes of CO_2 emissions annually. India also reinforces this leadership through domestic initiatives such as PM-KUSUM, PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, and large-scale solar parks, while supporting solar projects in countries like Fiji, Comoros, Madagascar, and Seychelles (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023).

Altogether, ISA prioritizes capacity building, technology cooperation and concessional finance, thereby infusing considerations of energy access and equity along with climate goals. Scholars contend that the ISA benefits India diplomatically, as it allows the country to bridge the normative gap between

developed countries' focus on transition to clean energy and developing nations' call for climate justice and policy space. moreover, by institutionalizing solar diplomacy and nurturing South–South as well as North–South cooperation, through ISA India upheld its position as a responsible and reasonable leader in climate regime. it also consolidates its image as a climate swing state capable of shaping global climate outcomes without compromising domestic developmental needs.

India and CDRI

India's leading role in climate governance is further strengthened through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), established in 2019 under the leadership of the Government of India with the support of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). The secretariat of CDRI situated in India (new Delhi). CDRI operates as a multi-stakeholder global partnership comprising national governments, UN organizations, multilateral development banks (MDBs), private sector and academic institutions working in unison to create an enabling environment to advance climate- and disaster-resilient infrastructure as an essential component of sustainable development. CDRI focuses on climate change adaptation and resilience the aspects that have historically been neglected in mitigation-focused global climate regimes: largely dominated by industrialized countries. By emphasizing climate-resilient infrastructure in risk-prone areas – disproportionately situated in the Global South – India reframes infrastructure development as a core site of climate governance. By 2050, the initiative will mobilize close to USD 10 trillion for infrastructure and generate beneficial end-products that support well-being for over three billion people globally (Mohan, 2020).

National Green Hydrogen Mission of India

India's leadership in the global climate regime is further reinforced through the National Green Hydrogen Mission (NGHM), launched in 2023 as a strategic pillar of its long-term energy transition. The Mission aims to position India as a global hub for green hydrogen by targeting the production of 5 million metric tonnes annually by 2030, supported by around 125 GW of dedicated renewable energy capacity (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023). By focusing on hard-to-abate sectors such as steel, fertilisers, refining, shipping, and mobility, the NGHM addresses critical mitigation gaps that conventional renewable pathways cannot easily resolve. With projected investments exceeding ₹8 lakh crore, significant reductions in fossil fuel imports, and the potential to avoid nearly 50 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually by 2030 (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023), the Mission links climate mitigation with energy security, industrial competitiveness, and self-reliance. This

integrated approach strengthens India's credibility as a pragmatic climate actor capable of aligning global decarbonisation goals with domestic developmental priorities

Mission life and India

Mission life is an India led normative global mass movement; life stands for lifestyle for environment introduced by the prime minister Narendra Modi at Cop 26. Mission LIFE seeks to reposition climate action by highlighting individual and community-level behavioural change as a critical complement to policy- and technology-driven mitigation strategies. Drawing upon India's centuries-old traditions of conservation and moderation, the programme advocates "mindful and deliberate consumption" in which sustainability becomes a societal value rather than just another set of regulations. Mainly it advocates reasonable consumption globally. India is also the first country to explicitly include LIFE in its Nationally Determined Contributions, marking a normative shift that integrates lifestyle-based climate action into the formal arrangement of global climate commitments (Pal, 2025).

Operationally, Mission LIFE aims to mobilise at least one billion individuals globally between 2022 and 2028 to adopt environment-friendly practices, it has three interlinked phases like change in demand, change in supply, and change in policy—the mission seeks to trigger long-term transformations in markets and governance by reshaping consumption patterns at scale. By emphasising ethics, culture, and collective responsibility (NITI Aayog, 2022).

Global Biofuels Alliance

In 2023 at the time of India's G20 Presidency, the formation of a Global Biofuels Alliance (GBA) is another key statement of India's leadership in the world climate regime. As a multilateral energy transition platform, the GBA advocates for biofuels as an affordable and sustainable climate mitigation solution attractive to agrarian and emerging economies (Government of India, 2023). In championing plural models of energy transition, instead of a universal pathway to clean energy, India challenges Eurocentric approach of decarbonization. scholars view the GBA as reinforcing energy diversification and opportunity for underdeveloped regions, linking climate action with rural development and livelihood security, and expanding policy space for developing countries (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2023).

India's NDC Performance and Compliance Trajectory

India's stand to fight against climate change is further reinforced by the achievement of two key Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) targets well before expected timeline. On a press release dated 18 DEC 2023 ministry of environment, forest and climate change, gov of India announces that it has already reduced the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33 percent between 2005 and 2019 and increased the share of non-fossil fuel–based installed electricity capacity to 43.81 percent by October 2023, surpassing its original 2030 targets of 33–35 percent and 40 percent respectively. Building on this progress, India updated its NDC in 2022 by enhancing its targets to a 45 percent reduction in emissions intensity and 50 percent non-fossil electricity capacity by 2030 (MOEFCC, 2023). This early achievement and upward revision of commitments demonstrate India's compliance-oriented yet development-sensitive approach to climate action, strengthening its position as a responsible climate actor and reinforcing its role as a climate swing state in the evolving global climate regime (MOEFCC, 2023).

Phase down vs phase out debate

India's evolving climate diplomacy is clearly reflected in its position on the "phase down" versus "phase out" debate on coal. As the world's third-largest emitter, India's climate choices are globally consequential, yet remain shaped by concerns of energy security and development. Accordingly, at COP26 India supported a "phase down of unabated coal" rather than an immediate phase-out, emphasizing equity and differentiated responsibilities. This stance highlights India's pragmatic approach to climate action, balancing mitigation ambition with developmental realism in the post-Paris climate regime.

Conclusion

This study has examined India's evolving role in global climate governance through the analytical lens of a climate swing state. It highlights how shifts in India's climate diplomacy are closely intertwined with broader transformations in its foreign policy orientation. initially 'protest and self-reliant' posture which was underpinned by developmental defensiveness as well as strategic non-alignment, India is increasingly adjusted its climate engagement towards pragmatism, responsibility, and leadership in the post-Paris climate order (Atteridge & Strachan, 2017). This shift demonstrates not a straightforward adoption of climate ambition, but a fraught balancing act between global duty and domestic developmental imperatives.

India's swing-state status is reflected in its capacity to engage actively with both developed and developing country coalitions, mediate between different normative regimes, and influence outcomes in an increasingly fragmented climate regime. With leadership initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, Mission LiFE, Global Biofuels Alliance and National Green Hydrogen Mission, India has transitioned from rule taking to norm shaping by providing alternative pathways for climate action grounded in considerations of equity, resilience, behavioural change and energy transitions. These initiatives support India's preference for issue-based alignments over rigid bloc politics, reinforcing its strategic autonomy within climate negotiations.

At the same time, India's stance on contentious issues—such as the "phase down" of coal, the timing of net-zero emissions by 2070, and its engagement with the Global Stocktake process—illustrates a calibrated approach that aligns long-term climate ambition with short- and medium-term developmental realities (UNFCCC, 2023).

Amid growing geopolitical rivalry, divergent capabilities of actors, and competing climate norms, India's trajectory as a climate swing state has far-reaching implications for the effectiveness and legitimacy of the global climate regime. India's decisions are shaping the course of global mitigation politics, what counts as equity and justice, and what it means to secure an inclusive transition for the Global South. As the climate governance processes move beyond the Paris framework, India's capacity to balance ambition and equity will remain critical in determining a more balanced, cooperative, and sustainable international climate order.

India objected the proposed NCQG (New Collective Quantified Goal) at COP-29, Baku and claimed the fund is too distant and optical illusion which further illustrates its evolving agenda-setting role in global climate governance s (Pal, 2025; UNFCCC, 2024). Rather than opposing climate finance per se, India objected to what it perceived as an inadequate, donor-driven framework that failed to reflect the scale of developing countries' needs and historical responsibility of advanced economies. This stance reinforced India's continued emphasis on equity, adequacy, and grant-based finance, while positioning it as a key voice of the Global South. The episode demonstrates that India's leadership is not confined to mitigation ambition alone but extends to shaping the normative and distributive areas of the global climate regime.

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