



India's Foreign Policy in the Contemporary World Order

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19499622>

Introduction

In the history of world politics, the last decade of the twentieth century marked a fundamental and transformative shift, centered on the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This event not only signaled the end of a superpower but also completely restructured the framework of the international system. The long-standing bipolar world order—dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union—collapsed, giving rise to a new unipolar world order. In this system, the United States emerged as the dominant power in political, military, and economic spheres, exerting significant influence over global decision-making processes.

However, this unipolar dominance did not remain permanent. With the advent of the twenty-first century, new powers began to rise in global politics—most notably China's rapid economic growth, the institutional strength of the European Union, Russia's resurgence, and India's increasing global influence. As a result, the world has gradually moved toward a multipolar system, where international relations have become more complex, interdependent, and multidimensional, with shifting balances of power.

In this changing global order, the central focus of international politics is no longer limited to military strength alone. Economic capability, technological advancement, cyber power, energy security, and strategic partnerships have become equally significant. States are now adopting multidimensional strategies to consolidate their positions, where the integration of economic, diplomatic, and security policies has become essential.

In this context, India, as a large developing democratic state, has redefined its foreign policy. While India's foreign policy after independence was rooted in idealistic principles—such as non-violence, peaceful coexistence, and non-alignment—it has now evolved into a pragmatic, strategic, and



multidimensional approach. Through the strategy of “multi-alignment,” India maintains relations with multiple powers while prioritizing its national interests and preserving strategic autonomy. This approach allows India to strengthen ties with major powers while continuing to represent the interests of the developing world.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of India’s foreign policy can be effectively understood through major theories of international relations—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism.

Realism

Realism is one of the oldest and most influential theories in international relations. It views the international system as anarchic, meaning there is no central authority governing states. Therefore, each state must rely on its own power to ensure security.

India’s foreign policy reflects realism, particularly in areas of border security, military strengthening, and strategic partnerships. For example, ongoing border disputes with China and longstanding conflicts with Pakistan have significantly influenced India’s security policies. In response, India has enhanced its military capabilities and strengthened defense cooperation with countries like the United States, France, and Israel.

India’s active role in the Indo-Pacific region and its participation in strategic groupings like QUAD also demonstrate its realist orientation.

Liberalism

Liberalism emphasizes international cooperation, economic interdependence, and the role of international institutions in maintaining peace and stability.

India follows liberal principles by actively engaging with international organizations such as WTO, IMF, World Bank, and the United Nations.

In economic diplomacy, India promotes free trade, foreign investment, and regional cooperation. Initiatives like “Make in India” aim to attract foreign investment and accelerate economic development. Additionally, India’s economic engagement with South Asian and Southeast Asian countries reflects its liberal approach.



Constructivism

Constructivism highlights the importance of identity, culture, and values in shaping state behavior. It argues that state actions are influenced not only by power and interests but also by historical experiences, cultural identity, and social values.

India's foreign policy is deeply influenced by its commitment to democracy, secularism, non-violence, and humanitarian values. India aspires to be recognized as a "responsible global power," reflected in its participation in peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance, and development cooperation.

Evolution of India's Foreign Policy

Nehru Era: Idealism and Strategic Realism

After independence, India's foreign policy was shaped by Jawaharlal Nehru. Under his leadership, India adopted a moral and idealistic approach, emphasizing world peace, anti-colonialism, and international cooperation.

Nehru believed that morality and ideals could play an important role in international politics. As a result, India adopted the policy of non-alignment, maintaining independence from both the US and Soviet blocs.

However, this policy also had a strategic dimension. Non-alignment provided diplomatic flexibility and allowed India to receive economic and military assistance from both sides.

Panchsheel Principles

The Panchsheel principles represent a significant contribution of India to international relations. These principles emphasize mutual respect, non-aggression, and peaceful coexistence among states.

They aimed to establish a moral foundation for international relations and played a key role in strengthening ties with newly independent countries in Asia and Africa. However, critics argue that Panchsheel was overly idealistic and not always aligned with political realities.

Cold War Realities

During the Cold War, India operated in a complex global environment. Although officially non-aligned, India had to make strategic decisions that made its foreign policy more pragmatic.



Conflicts with China and Pakistan deeply influenced India's security policy. The 1962 Sino-Indian War, in particular, exposed the limitations of India's idealistic approach. Consequently, India began to focus more on strengthening its defense capabilities and forming strategic partnerships.

Indo-Pacific, QUAD, and Regional Strategy

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical center of global politics, combining trade, security, and geopolitical competition. India advocates for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Through QUAD (India, USA, Japan, Australia), India promotes regional stability, maritime security, and a rules-based international order. This platform also facilitates cooperation in technology, climate change, and infrastructure development.

Economic Diplomacy and Technological Advancement

Economic diplomacy has become a central pillar of India's foreign policy. Initiatives like "Make in India," "Digital India," and "Startup India" integrate India's economic growth with global systems.

Technological progress—particularly in information technology, space research, and the digital economy—has strengthened India's global position. India is now emerging not just as a market but also as a technological partner.

Soft Power and the Global South

India's soft power is a vital component of its foreign policy. Yoga, culture, Bollywood, and democratic values contribute to a positive global image.

India represents the "Global South" and plays a crucial role in advocating for developing countries. Its initiatives in humanitarian aid, vaccine diplomacy, and development cooperation have enhanced its global credibility.

Challenges

India's foreign policy faces several complex challenges. Border disputes with China and Pakistan remain persistent security concerns. International terrorism continues to threaten India's internal and external security.

Economic competition—especially with China—poses a major challenge to India's development strategy. Additionally, energy security and dependence on imports remain structural vulnerabilities.



Critical Evaluation

India's foreign policy has evolved into a balanced and multidimensional framework. Its strengths include strategic flexibility, diversified partnerships, and effective use of soft power. However, challenges such as border disputes, economic inequalities, and security threats remain significant weaknesses.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world order, India's foreign policy has become dynamic, multidimensional, and strategically structured, continuously adapting to changing global realities. In the post-Cold War era, India has skillfully redefined its diplomatic position and emerged as an independent and influential power.

India's "multi-alignment" strategy provides it with a balanced international position, enabling it to maintain relations with multiple powers while prioritizing national interests. Through economic diplomacy, technological advancement, military capability, and soft power, India has significantly enhanced its global influence.

At the same time, India plays a crucial role as a responsible global power in promoting international peace, stability, and cooperation. Its initiatives in climate change, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance have strengthened its global standing.

However, challenges such as border disputes with China and Pakistan, international terrorism, economic competition, and energy dependence persist. Addressing these challenges will require stronger strategic planning, economic reforms, and technological advancement.

In the future, India's foreign policy will play an even more significant role in global politics. In a multipolar world, India can act as a balancing power and establish itself as an active participant in global governance.

Overall, India's foreign policy serves as a powerful instrument for safeguarding national interests, enhancing international cooperation, and achieving global leadership.

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