



Understanding India's Foreign Policy: Objectives and Determinants

Pinku Khetrpal

Department of Political Science, the University of Burdwan, Centre for Distance & Online Education
(CDOE), Golapbagh, Purba Barddhaman, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy represents a complex interplay of historical experiences, strategic necessities, and evolving global realities. This paper examines the objectives and determinants shaping India's external relations from independence to the present day. It argues that India's foreign policy has consistently sought to balance normative ideals such as peace, non-alignment, and international cooperation with pragmatic concerns of national security, economic development, and global influence. The study highlights how colonial legacies and early leadership under Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation for India's commitment to strategic autonomy and multilateralism. Further, the paper identifies key determinants, including geography, domestic political structures, economic capacity, military strength, and leadership perceptions. India's geographical position in South Asia, its proximity to major powers, and its role in regional stability significantly influence its diplomatic behavior. Additionally, internal factors such as democratic governance, economic reforms, and public opinion shape foreign policy decisions. The paper also explores the impact of globalization, shifting power structures, and emerging alliances such as BRICS and the Quad. By analyzing both continuity and change, this study demonstrates that India's foreign policy has evolved from idealistic beginnings to a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional approach. Ultimately, India seeks to establish itself as a responsible global power while maintaining its



Introduction

India's foreign policy refers to the set of principles, strategies, and actions through which the country manages its relations with other nations and international organizations. It is important because it shapes India's security, economic growth, and global standing in an increasingly interconnected world. Since independence in 1947, India has sought to balance its national interests with broader global responsibilities, making foreign policy a crucial instrument of statecraft (Pant, 2016, p. 12).

In the contemporary global context, India operates in a post Cold War environment characterized by globalization, economic interdependence, and the emergence of a multipolar world order. The decline of bipolarity after the Cold War has allowed countries like India to pursue more flexible and diversified diplomatic strategies. At the same time, globalization has increased economic opportunities while also exposing India to new challenges such as trade competition and geopolitical tensions (Mohan, 2015, p. 34).

The evolution of India's foreign policy since independence reflects a gradual shift from idealism to pragmatism. In the early years, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India emphasized principles such as non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and anti-colonial solidarity. Over time, however, changing global dynamics and domestic priorities have led to a more practical and interest-driven approach (Ganguly, 2010, p. 58).

This study addresses the central research problem: whether India's foreign policy is primarily guided by idealistic values or pragmatic considerations. To explore this, the paper has three key objectives: first, to analyze the main objectives of India's foreign policy; second, to identify the major determinants influencing its formulation; and third, to understand the balance between continuity and change over time.

Accordingly, the study raises the following research questions: What are the core objectives of India's foreign policy? Which internal and external factors determine its direction? And how has India balanced its traditional ideals with emerging strategic needs?

The central argument of this paper is that India's foreign policy reflects a dynamic synthesis of idealism and pragmatism. While its foundational values remain rooted in principles like strategic autonomy and



international cooperation, its contemporary approach is increasingly shaped by practical concerns of national interest and global influence.

Literature Review

India's foreign policy has attracted significant scholarly attention over the years, with researchers offering diverse perspectives on its nature, objectives, and evolution. Much of the literature highlights that India's external relations are shaped by a blend of historical experiences, ideological commitments, and strategic necessities. Scholars generally agree that India's foreign policy cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens, as it reflects both continuity and adaptation in response to changing global conditions (Pant, 2016, p. 45).

One of the central debates in the literature revolves around the tension between idealism and realism. Early interpretations emphasize India's idealist orientation, particularly under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated principles such as non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and international cooperation. According to Kanti Bajpai, this phase reflected a moral vision of world politics, where India sought to promote global justice and resist power bloc politics (Bajpai, 2003, p. 22). However, later scholars argue that India's policy has always contained elements of realism, especially in matters related to national security and regional stability.

In contrast, realist interpretations stress the importance of power, national interest, and strategic calculation. C. Raja Mohan argues that India's foreign policy has increasingly shifted towards realism, particularly after the end of the Cold War. He suggests that economic reforms, security challenges, and the rise of new global powers have pushed India to adopt a more pragmatic and interest-driven approach (Mohan, 2015, p. 67). This shift does not imply a complete abandonment of idealism, but rather a rebalancing between values and interests.

Several key themes consistently emerge in the literature. First, the concept of non-alignment has been widely discussed as a defining feature of India's early foreign policy. Scholars view it not merely as neutrality, but as an effort to maintain independence in decision-making during the Cold War era. Second, the idea of strategic autonomy has gained prominence in recent years, reflecting India's desire to engage with multiple global actors without becoming dependent on any single power. Third, the aspiration for regional leadership in South Asia is often highlighted as a major objective, with India seeking to play a stabilizing and influential role in its neighborhood (Ganguly, 2010, p. 73).



Despite these rich contributions, there are notable gaps in the existing literature. Many studies focus heavily on historical and ideological aspects, but do not sufficiently address the implications of the changing global order, including the rise of multipolarity and new strategic alliances. Additionally, domestic determinants such as political institutions, public opinion, and economic conditions often receive limited attention, even though they play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Overall, the literature suggests that India's foreign policy is dynamic and multifaceted, yet further research is needed to fully understand its evolving nature in the context of both global transformations and internal developments.

Historical Evolution of India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy has evolved significantly over time, shaped by both internal priorities and external pressures. From the early years of independence to the present, it reflects a gradual shift from idealism to a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional approach. This evolution can be better understood by examining four major phases: the Nehruvian era, the Cold War period, the post-Cold War phase, and the contemporary phase.

i. Nehruvian Era (1947-1964)

In the initial years after independence, India's foreign policy was strongly influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru laid the foundation of India's external relations based on principles such as peace, cooperation, and independence in decision-making. One of the most important features of this period was the policy of non-alignment, which aimed to keep India away from the power blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Non-alignment was not simply a passive stance but an active effort to maintain strategic autonomy and promote global peace. India played a leading role in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, which brought together newly independent countries seeking to avoid alignment with major powers. Alongside this, the Panchsheel principles mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence became a guiding framework for India's diplomatic relations (Ganguly, 2010, p. 52).

During this period, India also actively participated in peace diplomacy, mediating in international conflicts and supporting decolonization movements. This reflected a strong commitment to moral values



and international cooperation. However, critics argue that excessive idealism sometimes limited India's ability to respond effectively to security challenges, as seen in the 1962 war with China (Pant, 2016, p. 61).

ii. Cold War Period

During the broader Cold War period, India continued to follow the principle of non-alignment but gradually adopted a more pragmatic approach. The global political environment was dominated by rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and India had to carefully balance its relations with both.

While officially maintaining neutrality, India developed closer ties with the Soviet Union, particularly in defense and economic cooperation. At the same time, it did not completely distance itself from the United States, keeping diplomatic channels open and engaging in limited cooperation. This strategy allowed India to safeguard its national interests while avoiding formal alliances (Mohan, 2015, p. 41).

This phase highlights India's ability to adapt its foreign policy to changing circumstances. Although the language of idealism remained, the actual practice increasingly reflected realist considerations, especially in matters of security and regional influence. Strategic neutrality thus became a practical tool rather than a purely ideological position.

iii. Post-Cold War Phase (1991 onwards)

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a turning point in India's foreign policy. With the disappearance of the bipolar world order, India had to redefine its global role. At the same time, the country faced a serious economic crisis, which led to the adoption of economic liberalization policies in 1991.

These economic reforms opened up India's economy to global markets and significantly influenced its foreign policy orientation. Economic diplomacy became a central focus, with India seeking trade partnerships, foreign investment, and technological cooperation. The shift from political idealism to economic pragmatism became more evident during this period (Pant, 2016, p. 88).

Another important development was the introduction of the "Look East Policy," which aimed to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian countries. This policy later evolved into the "Act East Policy," reflecting a more proactive approach to regional engagement. Through these initiatives, India sought to



expand its economic and strategic presence in Asia, while also balancing the influence of other major powers (Ganguly, 2010, p. 95).

iv. Contemporary Phase

In the contemporary period, India's foreign policy has become more dynamic and multi-layered. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India has adopted a strategy often described as "multi-alignment." Unlike the earlier policy of strict non-alignment, this approach involves building partnerships with multiple countries simultaneously, based on mutual interests.

India today engages with a wide range of global and regional actors, participating in various international groupings and initiatives. This reflects its aspiration to emerge as a major global power while maintaining its strategic autonomy. Issues such as economic growth, national security, energy needs, and technological advancement now play a central role in shaping foreign policy decisions (Mohan, 2015, p. 112).

At the same time, India continues to emphasize its traditional values of peace, cooperation, and respect for sovereignty. This combination of continuity and change highlights the flexible nature of its foreign policy. Overall, the contemporary phase demonstrates how India has successfully adapted to a rapidly changing international system while preserving its core principles.

Objectives of India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy, as discussed in the previous sections, has evolved through different historical phases while maintaining a balance between ideals and practical needs. In the contemporary context, its objectives reflect both continuity with earlier principles and adaptation to new global realities. These objectives are closely linked to India's national interests and its aspiration to play a more active role in global affairs.

i. National Security

One of the primary objectives of India's foreign policy is to ensure national security. Given its complex geopolitical environment, India faces several challenges related to border disputes, regional conflicts, and emerging security threats. Issues such as border tensions with neighboring countries and concerns over cross-border terrorism make security a top priority.



To address these challenges, India focuses on strengthening its defense capabilities and forming strategic partnerships with other countries. Diplomatic efforts are also used to manage conflicts and maintain stability in sensitive regions. As scholars point out, national security considerations have increasingly shaped India's external relations, especially in recent decades (Pant, 2016, p. 102). Thus, foreign policy plays a crucial role in protecting the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

ii. Economic Development

Another key objective of India's foreign policy is to promote economic development. Since the economic reforms of 1991, India has actively engaged with the global economy to enhance trade, attract foreign investment, and access new technologies. Globalization has made economic diplomacy an essential part of foreign policy.

India seeks to build strong trade relations with both developed and developing countries, aiming to boost exports and ensure sustainable growth. Participation in international economic institutions and regional trade agreements further supports this objective. According to Mohan (2015), economic interests have become central to India's foreign policy, influencing its engagement with major global powers (p. 89).

At the same time, India also works to ensure that globalization benefits its domestic economy. This includes protecting key industries and addressing challenges such as economic inequality and resource management.

iii. Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy remains one of the most important guiding principles of India's foreign policy. Rooted in the earlier policy of non-alignment, it emphasizes India's ability to make independent decisions without being influenced by external powers.

In today's multipolar world, strategic autonomy does not mean isolation. Instead, it involves engaging with multiple countries while avoiding dependence on any single power. This approach allows India to pursue its national interests more effectively and respond flexibly to changing global conditions (Ganguly, 2010, p. 118).

By maintaining strategic autonomy, India ensures that its foreign policy remains aligned with its own priorities rather than external pressures. This principle continues to shape its diplomatic choices and international partnerships.

*iv. Peace and Stability*

Promoting peace and stability, especially in the South Asian region, is another major objective of India's foreign policy. As a large and influential country in the region, India has a responsibility to contribute to regional cooperation and conflict resolution.

India actively participates in peace-building efforts and supports initiatives aimed at reducing tensions between neighboring countries. It also emphasizes dialogue and diplomacy as key tools for resolving disputes. Scholars argue that India's commitment to peace is rooted in its historical experiences and its desire to create a stable environment for development (Pant, 2016, p. 121).

At the global level, India has consistently supported international peacekeeping efforts and multilateral cooperation. Its involvement in global institutions highlights its commitment to maintaining international order.

V. Global Influence

Finally, India aims to enhance its global influence and establish itself as a responsible major power. This includes active participation in international organizations such as the United Nations, where India advocates for reforms and greater representation of developing countries.

India's growing economic strength, military capabilities, and diplomatic engagement have increased its importance in global governance. It seeks to play a constructive role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and sustainable development. According to Ganguly (2010), India's aspiration for global leadership reflects both its rising capabilities and its long-standing commitment to international cooperation (p. 134).

Overall, these objectives demonstrate that India's foreign policy is both comprehensive and forward-looking. It seeks to balance domestic priorities with global responsibilities, ensuring that India continues to grow as a stable, secure, and influential actor in the international system.

Determinants of India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy, as discussed in the earlier sections, is shaped not only by its objectives but also by a range of internal and external determinants. These factors influence how policies are formulated and



implemented in different contexts. Understanding these determinants helps explain why India's foreign policy often reflects a careful balance between continuity and change.

i. Geographical Factors

Geography plays a fundamental role in shaping India's foreign policy. Located in South Asia, India shares its borders with several countries, making its neighborhood a critical area of focus. Among these, relations with China and Pakistan are particularly significant due to historical conflicts and ongoing strategic concerns.

India's long and often disputed borders require constant diplomatic and military attention. For example, tensions along the India China border and issues related to Kashmir with Pakistan have influenced India's security policies and diplomatic priorities. Geography also places India in a strategically important position in the Indian Ocean region, which enhances its role in maritime security and global trade routes.

Scholars argue that India's location has compelled it to adopt a cautious and balanced approach in dealing with both regional and global powers (Pant, 2016, p. 135). Thus, geography remains a constant and powerful determinant of its foreign policy.

ii. Historical Factors

Historical experiences have deeply influenced India's foreign policy orientation. The legacy of colonial rule under the British shaped India's early commitment to anti-imperialism and support for newly independent nations. After gaining independence in 1947, India sought to distance itself from power politics and promote principles such as sovereignty and equality among nations.

The partition of India also had a lasting impact on its foreign relations, particularly with Pakistan. The division led to political tensions, territorial disputes, and periodic conflicts, all of which continue to affect India's diplomatic strategies. These historical experiences have made India more sensitive to issues of territorial integrity and national unity (Ganguly, 2010, p. 142).

In addition, India's involvement in global movements such as decolonization and non-alignment reflects its historical commitment to justice and independence. Therefore, history not only shaped the initial direction of India's foreign policy but continues to influence its present-day decisions.

iii. Political System



India's political system is another important determinant of its foreign policy. As the world's largest democracy, India's external relations are influenced by democratic values, institutional structures, and public opinion. The federal nature of the political system also means that state governments sometimes play a role in shaping foreign policy, especially in matters related to cross-border trade and cultural exchanges.

Public opinion and media also have an impact on foreign policy decisions. In a democratic setup, leaders must consider the views of citizens while formulating policies, particularly on sensitive issues such as national security and international agreements. This makes India's foreign policy more transparent but also more complex (Pant, 2016, p. 149).

Moreover, parliamentary debates and political party ideologies contribute to shaping foreign policy directions. While there is often broad consensus on major national interests, differences in political perspectives can influence specific policy choices.

iv. Economic Capacity

Economic strength is a key factor that determines a country's ability to influence global affairs, and India is no exception. Since the economic reforms of 1991, India has experienced significant growth, which has enhanced its international standing. A growing GDP, increased trade, and expanding markets have allowed India to engage more actively with the global economy.

Economic capacity also affects foreign policy priorities. For instance, India seeks to secure energy resources, attract foreign investment, and expand export markets through its diplomatic engagements. As Mohan (2015) notes, economic considerations have become central to India's foreign policy, shaping its relations with both developed and developing countries (p. 123).

However, challenges such as poverty, inequality, and infrastructure gaps continue to influence policy decisions. These domestic economic realities require India to balance international ambitions with internal development needs.

v. Military Strength

Military capability is another crucial determinant of India's foreign policy. A strong defense system enhances a country's ability to protect its interests and respond to external threats. India's armed forces play a vital role in ensuring national security and supporting its strategic objectives.



One of the most significant aspects of India's military strength is its nuclear capability. Since becoming a nuclear power, India has gained greater strategic importance in global politics. Its nuclear policy, based on credible minimum deterrence, reflects a balance between security needs and responsible behavior (Ganguly, 2010, p. 156).

Military strength also supports India's participation in international peacekeeping missions and regional security initiatives. This not only enhances its global image but also contributes to maintaining stability in different parts of the world.

vi. Leadership Perception

Finally, the role of leadership is a key determinant in shaping India's foreign policy. The vision, ideology, and decision-making style of political leaders often influence the direction and priorities of external relations. From the early leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru to contemporary leaders like Narendra Modi, individual perceptions have played a significant role in defining India's approach to global affairs.

Leaders interpret both domestic and international conditions differently, which can lead to variations in policy emphasis. For example, some leaders may prioritize ideological values, while others focus more on economic or security concerns. Leadership also affects how India responds to global challenges and opportunities.

According to Pant (2016), leadership perception acts as a connecting link between structural factors and policy outcomes, making it an essential component of foreign policy analysis (p. 162). Thus, while structural determinants provide the framework, leadership gives direction and momentum to India's foreign policy.

As discussed in the earlier sections, India's foreign policy has gradually evolved from a largely idealist orientation to a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional approach. In the present global context, several emerging trends are reshaping how India engages with the world. These trends reflect the combined impact of globalization, shifting power structures, and new global challenges.

vii. Globalization Impact

One of the most important trends influencing India's foreign policy is globalization. Increased economic interdependence has made it necessary for countries to cooperate more closely in areas such as trade,



investment, and technology. For India, globalization has opened up new opportunities for economic growth while also creating new challenges.

India's foreign policy now places strong emphasis on economic diplomacy, aiming to strengthen trade relations and attract foreign investment. The country actively participates in global economic institutions and seeks to integrate itself into international markets. As Pant (2016) notes, globalization has significantly expanded the scope of India's foreign policy beyond traditional political concerns (p. 175).

At the same time, economic interdependence means that India must carefully manage its relationships with major economies to ensure stability and growth. This has made foreign policy more complex and interconnected with domestic economic priorities.

viii. Strategic Alliances

Another major trend is the growing importance of strategic alliances and partnerships. Unlike the earlier policy of strict non-alignment, India today engages with multiple international groupings to advance its interests. Two important examples are BRICS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

BRICS, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, provides a platform for cooperation among emerging economies. Through this grouping, India seeks to promote economic collaboration and reform global financial institutions. On the other hand, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, focuses on security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

These alliances reflect India's strategy of "multi-alignment," where it builds relationships with different groups based on specific interests. According to Mohan (2015), such partnerships allow India to expand its influence while maintaining strategic autonomy (p. 146).

ix. Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific region has become a central focus of India's foreign policy in recent years. This strategy emphasizes maritime security, freedom of navigation, and the maintenance of a stable balance of power in the region. India's geographical location gives it a natural advantage in this area, particularly in the Indian Ocean.



Through its Indo-Pacific approach, India seeks to strengthen cooperation with regional and global partners while ensuring that no single power dominates the region. This reflects both strategic and economic interests, as the region is vital for global trade and energy routes. Scholars argue that India's growing involvement in the Indo-Pacific highlights its transition into a more proactive global actor (Ganguly, 2010, p. 168).

Digital and Climate Diplomacy

In addition to traditional areas, India's foreign policy is increasingly focusing on new domains such as digital and climate diplomacy. Climate change has become a major global concern, and India has taken an active role in promoting sustainable development and environmental protection. It seeks to balance economic growth with environmental responsibility, often advocating for the interests of developing countries.

Similarly, digital diplomacy and technology partnerships are gaining importance. India is engaging with other countries to enhance cooperation in areas such as information technology, cybersecurity, and innovation. These efforts reflect the growing role of technology in global politics and economic development (Pant, 2016, p. 182).

Overall, these emerging trends demonstrate that India's foreign policy is continuously adapting to new challenges and opportunities. While maintaining its core principles, India is expanding its engagement in diverse areas to strengthen its position in the global system.

Continuity vs Change in India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy, as explored in the previous sections, reflects a unique combination of continuity and change. While certain core principles have remained consistent since independence, the methods and strategies used to achieve national interests have evolved significantly in response to changing global and domestic conditions. This balance between tradition and adaptation is a defining feature of India's external relations.

One of the key elements of continuity in India's foreign policy is the emphasis on strategic autonomy. From the early years under Jawaharlal Nehru to the present, India has consistently aimed to preserve its independence in decision-making. Even as global power structures have shifted, India has avoided aligning itself too closely with any single major power. This continuity reflects a long-standing



commitment to safeguarding national interests while maintaining flexibility in international engagements (Pant, 2016, p. 195).

Another important aspect of continuity is the principle of peaceful coexistence. Rooted in the Panchsheel ideals, India has traditionally supported diplomacy, dialogue, and cooperation as means of resolving conflicts. It has actively participated in peacekeeping missions and promoted stability at both regional and global levels. This commitment to peace has remained a consistent theme despite changes in the global environment (Ganguly, 2010, p. 182).

At the same time, significant changes have taken place in India's foreign policy approach. One of the most notable shifts is the transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment. During the Cold War, India maintained a distance from major power blocs. However, in the contemporary period, it actively engages with multiple countries and international groupings based on specific interests. This shift reflects a more pragmatic and flexible strategy suited to a multipolar world (Mohan, 2015, p. 158).

Another major change is the growing importance of economic diplomacy. While earlier foreign policy focused more on political and ideological concerns, economic factors now play a central role. India actively seeks trade partnerships, foreign investment, and technological cooperation to support its development goals. This change highlights the increasing connection between domestic economic priorities and international relations (Pant, 2016, p. 201).

In conclusion, India's foreign policy demonstrates a careful balance between continuity and change. While foundational principles like strategic autonomy and peaceful coexistence remain intact, the country has adapted its strategies to meet new challenges and opportunities. This dynamic approach enables India to maintain its core values while strengthening its position in an evolving global system.

Conclusion

This study has examined India's foreign policy from multiple perspectives, including its objectives, determinants, historical evolution, and emerging trends. The analysis shows that India's foreign policy is neither completely idealistic nor purely pragmatic; rather, it represents a careful balance between values and national interests. From the early vision of Jawaharlal Nehru to the more dynamic approach seen in recent years, India's external relations have continuously adapted to changing global realities.



One of the key findings of this study is that certain core principles have remained consistent over time. Ideas such as strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, and support for international cooperation continue to guide India's foreign policy. At the same time, there has been a clear shift towards greater pragmatism, especially in areas like economic diplomacy, security partnerships, and global engagement. This balance between continuity and change allows India to respond effectively to new challenges while maintaining its foundational values.

Another important observation is India's evolving role in the global system. Today, India is no longer seen as a passive actor but as an emerging power with growing influence in international affairs. Its active participation in global institutions, regional initiatives, and strategic partnerships reflects its ambition to play a larger role in shaping global governance. At the same time, India continues to emphasize cooperation, dialogue, and respect for sovereignty, which enhances its credibility on the world stage.

Looking ahead, India's foreign policy is likely to be shaped by two major priorities. First, the ambition to become a major global power will drive India to expand its economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities. This includes strengthening its position in key regions such as the Indo-Pacific and increasing its participation in global decision-making processes. Second, India will continue to prioritize strategic independence, ensuring that it retains the ability to make its own choices without external pressure.

In conclusion, India's foreign policy is dynamic, flexible, and forward-looking. It reflects a continuous effort to balance tradition with transformation, ideals with interests, and national priorities with global responsibilities. As the international system continues to evolve, India is well-positioned to play a significant and constructive role in shaping the future of global politics.

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