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## India's Foreign Policy in the Era of Multipolarity: Challenges and Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

The world order is undergoing a deep transformation, from a unipolar system dominated by the United States to a more complex and competitive multipolar system. This transformation is characterised by the emergence of new global powers, shifting geopolitical alliances, economic interdependence, technological competition and regional strategic rivalries. India is emerging as a key regional and global player in this evolving global landscape, looking to reorient its foreign policy goals in sync with its expanding economic might, strategic aspirations and civilisational identity. This study critically analyses the problems and opportunities that India is confronted with in the changing global order and examines the foreign policy of India in the age of multipolarity. The paper argues that globalisation, geopolitical rivalry, regional instability, energy security concerns, technological change and the emergence of new power centres such as China, the European Union, Russia and Indo-Pacific strategic partnerships have all deeply affected India's foreign policy. India, in its endeavour to sustain strategic autonomy and tradition of independent decision making inherited from the principles of non-alignment, is also seeking strategic partnerships with a variety of global actors, including the United States, Russia, Japan, Australia, France and the ASEAN countries. The study also discusses the increased engagement of India in institutions such as BRICS, G20, SCO, Quad and the United Nations while analysing the

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consequences of multipolarity for India's diplomatic, economic and security objectives. The paper argues that multipolarity offers India tremendous potential to grow its global influence, develop economic diplomacy, deepen its leadership in the region and emerge as a key voice of the Global South. But the changing international order also involves a multitude of complex problems, including border issues with China, regional instability in South Asia, strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, energy insecurity, technological dependence, terrorism and balancing relations among competing global powers. India's ability to steer the multipolar international order will depend on its abilities to balance strategic autonomy with pragmatic diplomacy, economic resilience, military modernisation and multilateral participation, the report says.

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## **Introduction**

Following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the post-Cold War international system saw the establishment of a unipolar world dominated by the United States. But the present global order is increasingly marked by the gradual erosion of unipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar structure, shaped by the rise of new economic and strategic powers like China, India, Russia, the European Union and regional groupings across Asia, Africa and Latin America. The reshaping of the international system has underscored geopolitical contest, economic interdependence, strategic realignments, technical rivalries, and diplomatic intricacies. In this shifting global context, India has become one of the most important players in global politics due to its population strength, economic growth, geopolitical location, military capability, technical advancement and growing diplomatic influence. The ideas of anti-colonialism, peaceful cohabitation, strategic autonomy, non-alignment and support for multilateralism have always underpinned India's foreign policy. In the cold war era, India adopted a non-alignment strategy under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership to retain independent decision-making and avoid official affiliation with competing military blocs. But the changing dynamics of the global order in the wake of economic liberalization in 1991 changed India's foreign policy priorities profoundly. Economic globalisation, regional security issues, energy needs, technical modernisation and strategic competitiveness pushed India to shift to a more pragmatic, multifaceted and interest-driven approach to foreign policy.



India wants to follow numerous strategic goals all at once in this current age of multipolarity. On the one hand, India wants to preserve its heritage of strategic autonomy and independent diplomacy; on the other, it is increasingly involved in strategic partnerships and issue-based alignments with key global powers. India's membership of institutions like BRICS, G20, Quad, SCO, BIMSTEC and United Nations is indicative of its increasing aim to shape global governance frameworks and position itself as a leading power of the Global South.

Simultaneously, India is facing a plethora of geopolitical and strategic difficulties in the emerging new multipolar system. India's foreign policy faces difficult diplomatic dilemmas include border conflicts with China, regional instability in South Asia, terrorism, maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific, energy insecurity, technical dependency, and balancing relations with the United States and Russia. Furthermore, the developing strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China has heightened geopolitical tensions throughout Asia, forcing India to balance carefully between collaboration and rivalry.

However, multipolarity also presents substantial prospects for India. India's worldwide diffusion of power allows it to step up its diplomatic engagement, deepen its economic alliances, enhance its strategic collaboration, diversify its trade relationships and grow its influence in international organisations. India's demographic dividend, economic promise, technological prowess, democratic polity and civilizational soft power augment its global status.

The study seeks to undertake a critical analysis of India's foreign policy in the age of multipolarity by examining the major opportunities and challenges before India in the changing world order. The study aims to assess the degree to which India has retained strategic autonomy while participating in the global context in response to the growing geopolitical changes of the 21st century.

### **Review of Literature**

The study of India's foreign policy occupies an important place in international relations scholarship especially with reference to non-alignment, strategic autonomy, regional security and global governance. The early Indian foreign policy literature was dominated by the ideological basis of non-alignment and anti-colonial diplomacy under Jawaharlal Nehru. Appadorai and V.P. Dutt, among others, pointed out that India's foreign policy was driven by its colonial past, a commitment to peaceful coexistence and a desire to retain independent decision-making in the international arena.

Subsequent scholarship has increasingly focused on the evolution of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. C. Raja Mohan contends that economic liberalisation and globalization have



transformed India's strategic orientation, forcing it to engage more with global markets, strategic relationships and regional diplomacy. Shashi Tharoor, in the same vein, points to India's growing diplomatic confidence and its ambition to become a significant global power capable of shaping international governance institutions.

Indicative of the strategic features of India's foreign policy are studies undertaken by scholars such as Sumit Ganguly and Stephen Cohen, especially as they relate to security concerns, military modernisation and regional competitiveness with China and Pakistan. Their studies point out that India's foreign policy is increasingly a combination of conventional strategic autonomy and pragmatic participation in the light of changing geopolitical conditions.

Contemporary multipolarity literature, on the other hand, underlines the reorganisation of the global order through the emergence of China, regional powers and issue-based coalitions. Amitav Acharya contends that the global order that is evolving is characterised by multipolarity, regionalism, and the spread of global power away from conventional Western supremacy. Research on the Indo-Pacific region also considers the increasing strategic significance of India in counterbalancing the rising might of China.

Further literature has looked at India's participation in institutions such as BRICS, G20, Quad and the United Nations. India is seeking to carve out a space for itself as a prominent voice of the Global South, experts say, while also deepening its strategic ties with major global powers. Yet, there is relatively less study available on India's strategic ascent that systematically evaluates the potential and constraints of multipolarity within a single analytical framework, despite the substantial scholarship on the same. The present paper attempts to fill this gap by critically assessing India's foreign policy responses to the emerging multipolar world order.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To study the change in India's foreign policy at the time of multipolarity
2. To study the principal geopolitical and strategic problems India faces in the developing global order.
3. To assess the potential for India's diplomatic, economic and strategic interests that have been created by multipolarity.
4. To examine India's position in existing international organisations and strategic partnerships.
5. Assess the significance of strategic autonomy in India's current foreign policy.
6. To appreciate India's role in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and the diplomacy of the Global South.



## **Research Methodology**

The present study is analytical and descriptive in character and is mostly based on secondary sources such books, academic journals, research papers, government documents, policy reports, speeches, newspapers and publications released by international organisations. The paper is interdisciplinary, drawing on international relations, geopolitics, strategic studies and global political economy. The study employs interpretative and comparative methodologies to study the development of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War and multipolar era. Special focus has been laid on India's ties with the main global powers, its engagement in international organizations, Indo-Pacific policy and Global South diplomacy.

## **India's Foreign Policy in the Multipolar World Order**

The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar international order has profoundly altered the strategic context in which India formulates and implements its foreign policy. Multipolarity is an international framework in which there are several centres of economic, military, technological and political strength instead of a superpower dominating the world. In such an atmosphere, states are likely to prefer flexible partnerships, issue-based alliances and strategic balancing rather than inflexible bloc politics.

India's foreign policy has elements of continuity and change in the multipolar world. India has continued to adhere to the concepts of strategic autonomy, sovereign equality, peaceful cohabitation and multilateralism yet at the same time has embraced a more pragmatic and interest driven diplomatic strategy. The economic liberalisation post 1991 drastically changed India's participation with the global economy and opened avenues for stronger diplomatic engagement with major powers and regional institutions.

Over the past two decades, the relationship between India and the United States has seen a tremendous shift. Cooperation between the two countries has developed in areas like as defense, technology, trade, energy security and Indo-Pacific policy. India's inclusion in the Quad with the United States, Japan and Australia signals shared worries about maritime security, regional stability and China's increasing strategic influence. India has also been wary of formal military alliances, in order to preserve strategic flexibility, but has strengthened ties with America.

At the same time, India has had historically strong links with Russia especially in defence cooperation, energy security and geopolitical coordination. Despite the shifting global alignments and the Russia-



Ukraine crisis, India has tried to maintain a balanced diplomatic posture by preserving its national interests without being over-dependent on any one state.

India's relationship with China is one of the most complicated aspects of its foreign policy. Both countries collaborate in groups like BRICS and SCO, but ongoing border conflicts, strategic rivalry and China's rising influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific continue to produce problems. The Galwan Valley clash and aggressive Chinese moves have deepened India's strategic worries and triggered military modernisation and strategic cooperation.

India is trying to increase its influence at the regional level with initiatives like "Neighbourhood First," "Act East Policy" and involvement in the Indo-Pacific. India sees the Indo-Pacific area as of increasing strategic importance, given the sea lanes of maritime trade, regional security issues and the rising Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. Hence, maritime diplomacy, naval cooperation and strategic partnerships have become crucial to India's foreign policy.

India's active role in organisations like BRICS, G20, SCO and the United Nations is a reflection of its aspirations to shape global governance and voice the concerns of developing countries. India's G20 presidency and focus on climate justice, digital inclusion, sustainable development, and Global South cooperation highlight its growing diplomatic involvement in international politics.

### **Challenges Before India's Foreign Policy**

Despite India's expanding global status, the current multipolar environment presents several complicated problems to Indian foreign policy. The growing strategic competition between the United States and China is one of the most serious threats. India aims to deepen strategic ties with the United States and partners in the Indo-Pacific while avoiding direct conflict with China and maintaining its own independent foreign policy options.

The greatest security issues are ongoing border disputes and geopolitical rivalry with China. China's growing economic and strategic footprint in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and surrounding countries has escalated regional rivalry. Moreover, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative have strategic bearings on India's regional interests and territorial concerns.

India's foreign policy is also complicated by regional instability in South Asia. Security and diplomatic tensions arise from political instability in surrounding nations, cross-border terrorism, refugee crises and



economic issues. Terrorism, border tensions and political distrust continue to affect relations with Pakistan.

Energy security is another significant concern. India's economy is growing rapidly and is highly dependent on energy imports and vulnerable to geopolitical instability in West Asia and changes in global energy markets. Similarly, technological dependencies and cybersecurity issues are much more pressing in the age of digital geopolitics.

Global economic uncertainties, climate change, supply chain disruptions and protectionist economic policies further complicate India's strategic environment. Managing relations with rival global powers and preserving strategic autonomy needs smart diplomacy.

### **Opportunities for India in the Multipolar Era**

While multipolarity may bring with it a host of geopolitical challenges, it also offers a host of opportunities for India's global ascent. The diffusion of global power helps India to diversify diplomatic partnerships, broaden economic participation and boost its influence inside international institutions. With India's demographic advantage, technological prowess, fast-increasing digital economy and rising market potential, India has emerged as one of the world's top emerging economies. Economic diplomacy has grown to occupy an increasingly prominent space in India's foreign policy. Trade pacts, investment ties, technology collaborations and supply-chain diversifications offer chances for India to increase its economic stature worldwide.

Multipolarity also strengthens India's diplomatic advantages since it is able to engage numerous global powers at the same time, without being overly dependent on any single actor. The balanced approach to the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan, ASEAN and West Asian countries is an example of India's multifaceted foreign policy.

India's civilisational legacy, democratic polity, cultural impact and soft power further contribute to its global stature. Yoga diplomacy, cultural outreach, diaspora participation and digital diplomacy have raised India's profile and influence in the world.

Furthermore, India's leading role in the Global South gives great diplomatic potential. Many developing countries increasingly consider India as a voice for them on issues such as climate justice, equitable globalisation, development financing, digital inclusion, and reform of global governance institutions.



The Indo-Pacific area also provides strategic potential for India to enhance maritime cooperation, economic integration and regional relationships. India's rising naval capabilities and strategic collaborations are reinforcing its position as a significant security player in the Indian Ocean Region.

### **Conclusion**

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The contemporary international order is experiencing a profound transformation as the era of unipolarity is receding and an intricate multipolar system is emerging under the impact of shifting geopolitical alignments, technological rivalry, economic interdependence and regional strategic competitions. In this evolving environment, India has matured into a key regional and global player with the ambition of balancing strategic autonomy with increasing global engagement.

The study finds India's foreign policy in the multipolar age to be a mixture of continuity and transformation. India's reaction to changing global realities has been to adhere to the values of independent decision-making, multilateralism and peaceful cohabitation while also shifting towards a more pragmatic and multidimensional diplomatic approach. India's participation in bodies such as BRICS, G20, Quad and SCO is a reflection of its enhanced desire to influence global governance and increase its strategic clout.

Geopolitical and strategic challenges: India grapples with border conflicts with China, regional instability, energy insecurity, technological dependency, terrorism, and balancing relations between rival global powers. India's foreign policy environment is further complicated by the rising strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

But multipolarity also presents India with great potential to enhance its diplomatic clout, economic links, strategic capabilities and leadership role in the Global South. India's demographic dividend, economic prosperity, technology, political system of democracy and civilisational soft power strengthen its place in the emerging global order.

In the end, India's success in dealing with the multipolar international order would be decided by its capacity to combine strategic autonomy with pragmatic diplomacy, economic resilience, technical progress, military modernisation, and effective multilateral participation. With the shifting power dynamics around the world, India is poised to be a key player in determining the future course of global politics and governance.



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