



# STABILITY AND DYNAMISM IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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**Abstract :** India's foreign policy, like that of any sovereign state, is fundamentally oriented towards safeguarding and advancing its national interests within the global arena. Unlike domestic policies, foreign policy is generally characterized by continuity and stability, seldom undergoing revolutionary transformations. However, over the past seven decades, India's foreign policy has experienced notable and transformative shifts. To analyze these changes, it is essential to identify the critical "inflection points" in the global context—pivotal developments that have reshaped the international order. Following this identification, the shifts in India's foreign policy can be assessed concerning these geopolitical transformations. India has adjusted its foreign policy in response to both proactive initiatives and external compulsions, aimed at protecting its interests in a rapidly evolving global environment. Despite these adaptations, India's foreign policy remains rooted in enduring principles such as Non-Alignment and Asian solidarity. The foundational ideals of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and the Vedic aspirations of universal happiness and well-being (Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah and Sarve Santu Niramaya) continue to provide moral guidance for its policy framework. This study seeks to undertake a comparative analysis of the static and dynamic elements in India's foreign policy over the past seven decades. While continuity and change are not mutually exclusive in the foreign policies of most nations, the analysis identifies significant structural transformations in India's global engagement. These include a growing interplay between soft power and hard power strategies, the rise of para-diplomatic initiatives, and other evolving trends that have accelerated under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By examining the shifts and phases of India's foreign policy across successive leaderships, this paper aims to project the future trajectory of India's international engagement. It situates these developments within the broader context of international relations theories, while also substantiating the argument that the advent of the NDA government has marked a discernible shift in India's foreign policy orientation and execution.

**IndexTerms** - India, Foreign Policy, International relations, Continuity and Change

## INTRODUCTION

### Evolution of India's Foreign Policy: Key Phases and Transformations

India's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution since its independence in 1947, shaped by the challenges of navigating an ideologically polarized global order. At the time, the world was divided between the liberal-capitalist bloc, led by the United States, and the communist bloc, headed by the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Rather than aligning with either bloc, India, alongside other newly independent nations, spearheaded the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. NAM emerged as a platform representing the interests of developing countries in multilateral forums.

The geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, marking the end of the Cold War (1947–1991). This pivotal event prompted nations, including India, to reassess their foreign policy frameworks and adapt their economic strategies. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, India undertook diplomatic initiatives to strengthen its ties with the United States, Western Europe, and China. Concurrently, it introduced a new economic paradigm in 1991, characterized by liberalization, privatization, and globalization. Over the subsequent three decades, these policy shifts have unfolded against the backdrop of significant changes in global politics, underscoring the dynamic interplay between India's foreign and economic strategies. Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, outlined the evolution of India's foreign policy in six distinct phases during a lecture at the 4th Ramnath Goenka Memorial.

#### 1. *The Era of Optimistic Non-Alignment (1946–1962)*

Dr. Jaishankar described this phase as rooted in a bipolar world dominated by the United States and the USSR. India's foreign policy during this period prioritized resisting constraints on its sovereignty while focusing on economic reconstruction and territorial consolidation. Concurrently, as a leading nation among decolonized countries, India sought to champion a more equitable global order, particularly for Asia and Africa.

#### 2. *The Decade of Realism and Recovery (1962–1971)*

In this phase, India adopted pragmatic strategies to address security and political challenges, despite resource limitations. Dr. Jaishankar highlighted the 1964 defense arrangement with the United States as evidence of India's willingness to go beyond non-alignment to safeguard national security. He also noted heightened external pressures on Kashmir during this vulnerable period.

#### 3. *The Phase of Regional Assertion (1971–1991)*

India's foreign policy during this phase saw a significant regional focus, marked by the creation of Bangladesh and the intervention of the Indian Peacekeeping Force in Sri Lanka. However, Dr. Jaishankar pointed out that the emergence of the US-China-Pakistan alliance posed serious challenges to India's strategic position. This phase ended with the collapse of the USSR, India's key ally, and an economic crisis in 1991, necessitating a reevaluation of both domestic and foreign policy principles.

#### 4. *The Quest for Strategic Autonomy (1991–1998)*

The dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of a unipolar world under the United States led to a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. According to Dr. Jaishankar, this phase encouraged India to prioritize safeguarding its strategic autonomy and marked the beginning of a more intensive engagement with the US.

#### 5. *The Era of Balancing Power (1998–2014)*

From 1998, India's foreign policy reflected a balance-of-power approach. This period saw the culmination of the India-US nuclear deal, improved relations with Western nations, and the strengthening of ties with Russia. Dr. Jaishankar also emphasized India's cooperation with China on trade and climate change during this time.

#### 6. *The Phase of Energetic Diplomacy (2014–Present)*

The sixth phase began in 2014, characterized by a proactive and dynamic approach to diplomacy. Dr. Jaishankar noted India's recognition of a world increasingly defined by convergences and issue-based partnerships. He also described the present as an early phase of significant global transition, with the contours of the near future still uncertain.

Despite adjustments necessitated by changing global circumstances, certain foundational principles of India's foreign policy remain intact. These include peaceful coexistence, non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution, non-alignment, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, multilateralism, pluralism, disarmament, and opposition to terrorism, extremism, and fundamentalism. These principles, modified as necessary, continue to guide India's foreign policy in securing its national interests within an evolving world order.

### **The Changing Dynamics of India's Foreign Policy**

The international system is undergoing significant realignment, raising critical questions about India's position within this shifting landscape. As global power dynamics evolve in an increasingly crowded arena, India aspires to achieve greater status, competing with established powers. Historically, such aspirations often encounter resistance from dominant global actors, suggesting that India's rise to the global high table will be fraught with challenges. While India has long been regarded as a middle-tier power, it is now anticipated that the nation may ascend to major power status in the foreseeable future. However, key questions persist: Is India truly emerging as a world power? What are the core strengths underpinning its global aspirations? What strategic priorities and challenges does it face?

The Indian policy discourse reflects a division regarding the trajectory of the nation's foreign policy. Some scholars argue that India is undergoing a profound transformation, while others maintain that its foreign policy remains largely consistent with its historical approach. The reality likely lies between these two extremes, characterized by both continuity and gradual change.

#### *Continuity in Indian Foreign Policy*

India's foreign policy has exhibited remarkable continuity over the past seven decades. Core objectives have consistently included fostering a peaceful, secure, and stable regional environment; attracting foreign investment; and expanding India's global influence. India remains committed to opposing arms races and advocating for disarmament. These enduring objectives are often summarized through the framework of the "3 S's": *Strategic Autonomy* – Preserving India's ability to make independent decisions in global affairs, *Stability* – Ensuring security both within India and in its immediate neighborhood, *Strength* – Leveraging economic, military, and soft power to protect and advance national interests. While these continuities have shaped India's foreign policy foundation, substantial shifts in its international relations are increasingly evident.

#### *Evolving Dimensions of Change*

Changes in India's foreign policy have not been abrupt but are instead unfolding gradually, reflecting an evolutionary approach. Three major shifts stand out as particularly significant:

##### ➤ From Asian Solidarity to Indo-Pacific Balancing

India's earlier emphasis on fostering solidarity within Asia has transitioned towards shaping a new balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

##### ➤ Deepening Security Partnerships with the West

While maintaining its traditional strategic relationship with Russia, India has cultivated growing security partnerships with Western nations, reflecting an increasingly multipolar strategic orientation.

##### ➤ Engagement with Diverse Institutions

India has shifted from focusing primarily on Third World leadership to actively participating in a wide range of international institutions, including those led by major global powers.

These shifts are poised to exert a more profound and long-term influence on India's foreign policy than the elements of continuity, signaling a dynamic interplay between tradition and transformation in India's engagement with the evolving global order.

## Indian Foreign Policy Post-2014

The general elections of 2014 marked a turning point in India's political landscape, with Mr. Narendra Modi emerging as Prime Minister. Widely regarded as India's most influential leader since Indira Gandhi, Modi's ascent to power ushered in a transformative shift in the nation's foreign policy, reflecting its evolving role in the global order. Contemporary Indian foreign policy is guided by the principle of Enlightened National Interest, which can be described as "National Interest Plus." Rooted in Aristotle's concept of enlightened self-interest, this approach emphasizes that actions enhancing the collective good ultimately serve individual or national interests in the long term. It seeks to prioritize a shared vision for the future over narrowly defined national goals. This philosophy aligns with the Indian cultural ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—the world as one family. The Modi administration has recalibrated India's diplomatic strategies, embracing a soft power and Neighborhood First approach while reinterpreting the Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s. The traditional cautiousness of non-alignment has been replaced by a bold policy of multi-alignment, wherein India forges robust partnerships with major powers while safeguarding its strategic autonomy. Initial efforts to improve relations with Pakistan demonstrated a willingness for dialogue, but the nation's continued support for terrorism has led to a diplomatic impasse. Despite not being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, India, under Modi's leadership, commands significant global respect, with permanent members often seeking his views and consent on critical issues. This proactive foreign policy is effectively implemented by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, whose strategic acumen complements Modi's vision. Together, they have redefined India's global image, advancing the nation's diplomatic and political standing. The perception of India as a "soft state," a term coined by Gunnar Myrdal in his work "Asian Drama" to describe a nation that readily compromises its interests, has undergone a profound transformation under the Modi government. Today, India is recognized for its assertive and confident engagement on the international stage, marking a significant departure from its earlier image.

## *India's Evolving Policies and Strategic Outlook Toward the United States and China*

India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has undergone significant shifts, particularly in its strategic engagements with the United States and China. Modi's assertive stance was evident during the 2017 Doklam standoff, where a 73-day impasse resulted in China altering its position. Similarly, following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in the loss of 20 Indian soldiers, India has firmly held its ground, maintaining a prolonged standoff with China along the Ladakh frontier for over two years. While the disengagement process on the Ladakh border has begun, these incidents underscore India's resolve to safeguard its territorial integrity. China's expanding global influence and its growing alignment with Russia have heightened concerns within the US-led NATO alliance. Consequently, India has emerged as a pivotal player in countering Chinese ambitions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. This strategic imperative has catalyzed the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, aimed at addressing regional challenges posed by China. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has criticized the Quad as a "security risk," accusing it of fostering confrontation to uphold US hegemony (Jiangtao, 2020). India's pragmatic engagement with the United States further underscores its strategic flexibility. Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic outreach to Washington helped reset ties strained by differing perspectives on Kashmir and other issues. Even as India and the US diverged in their responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration strengthened bilateral ties, acknowledging India as an "indispensable ally" on the 75th anniversary of its independence. Economic cooperation has become a cornerstone of this partnership, with both nations seeking to resolve trade disputes to unlock the full potential of their commercial relationship. India's economic trajectory increasingly aligns with the United States and other democratic partners, reflecting a shift away from its historical reliance on Russia.

### ***India's Realist Foreign Policy and Multi-Alignment Strategy***

India's foreign policy has increasingly embraced a realist framework, prioritizing military strength as a cornerstone of national strategy. Realists view power—particularly hard power—as essential for ensuring survival and advancing national interests. India's military capabilities have solidified its role as a regional hegemon in South Asia and a key player in the evolving multipolar global order. Recognizing the volatility of its borders with China and Pakistan, India has made significant investments in border infrastructure and defense. India has also established robust bilateral defense partnerships with several nations, including the United States, Russia, Israel, and France, as evidenced by the recent acquisition of French Rafale fighter jets. This realist pragmatism extends to multilateral and regional forums, where India has championed initiatives such as the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, the International Solar Alliance, and the Quad. India has also leveraged platforms for disaster diplomacy, vaccine development, and medical aid, while actively supporting the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in pressuring Pakistan to curb terrorist activities. India's multi-alignment strategy is aimed at addressing its core challenges—developing political, economic, and military capabilities to establish itself as an emerging global power. Through rhetoric, diplomacy, market power, and strategic partnerships, India's foreign policy has been redefined by regional and global developments in the 21st century. This transformation positions India as a rising power adept at navigating a complex and dynamic international order.

#### **Key Features of Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi:**

The foreign policy initiatives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration have introduced significant shifts in India's diplomatic priorities and strategies. These policies reflect a nuanced approach aimed at bolstering India's regional and global influence, while addressing contemporary geopolitical challenges.

- **Neighbourhood First Policy**

A cornerstone of the Modi government's foreign policy is the renewed emphasis on fostering strong relationships with South Asian neighbors. Drawing inspiration from the Gujral Doctrine, this approach prioritizes regional connectivity and cooperation. Notable achievements include the finalization of the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh, initiatives to access the Chittagong Port, and improved energy connectivity. India's outreach is also expanding beyond its immediate vicinity, as demonstrated by projects like Chabahar in Iran and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar. High-profile engagements with South Asian leaders, such as the invitation of SAARC leaders to the 2014 swearing-in ceremony and BIMSTEC leaders in 2019, underscore this commitment.

- **Act East Policy**

Replacing the earlier Look East Policy, the Act East initiative underscores India's aspiration to play a more proactive role in ASEAN and East Asia. The policy focuses on enhancing connectivity, strengthening commercial ties, and fostering cultural bonds with countries in the region.

- **Link West Policy**

Complementing the Act East Policy, the Link West initiative seeks to deepen India's strategic, economic, and cultural engagements with its western neighbors, particularly the Gulf countries. This approach aims to align India's regional strategies in a more holistic manner.

- **Global Leadership and Defense Diplomacy**

The Modi administration envisions a more prominent global role for India, transitioning from a balancing force to a leading power. This shift includes greater emphasis on military and defense diplomacy, with India emerging as an arms supplier while maintaining its position as a key buyer.

- **Indian Ocean Outreach and Project Mausam**

Recognizing the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India has expanded its outreach to maritime neighbors, focusing on enhanced economic and security cooperation. Project Mausam was launched to counterbalance China's Maritime Silk Road initiative and reinforce India's influence in the IOR.

- **Cooperation with Pacific Island Nations**

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Fiji following the restoration of democracy marked a significant step in fostering relations with Pacific Island nations, highlighting India's intent to engage with smaller but strategically important states.

- **Para-Diplomacy**  
The Modi administration has encouraged Indian states and cities to cultivate direct relationships with foreign countries, their federal states, or cities, thereby fostering localized diplomatic engagements.
- **SAGAR Policy**  
The Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) framework, announced during a visit to Mauritius in 2015, embodies India's integrated approach to regional cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain.
- **Vaccine Diplomacy**  
India's efforts in vaccine development and distribution have been instrumental in strengthening ties with neighboring and global nations. This initiative underscores India's role as a responsible global health partner while advancing its foreign policy objectives.
- **Connect Central Asia Policy**  
India's engagement with Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, seeks to foster stronger bilateral and multilateral ties. This policy aligns with the recommendation of foreign affairs expert Bhabani Sen Gupta, advocating for India to move beyond the confines of South Asia and establish robust relations with its extended neighborhood in Central Asia.

These initiatives collectively signify a transformative shift in India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, balancing traditional diplomatic principles with innovative strategies to address the complexities of the 21st-century geopolitical landscape.

The leadership and political direction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have significantly influenced Indian foreign policy, prompting some scholars to describe these changes as the emergence of a 'Modi Doctrine', and how Modi's foreign policy is different (Chaulia, 2016; Ganguly et al., 2016). Modi has "reinvigorated" India's approach to international relations (Mohan, 2015). Harsh V. Pant identifies a sense of new dynamism and pragmatism in the Modi administration's foreign policy initiatives. However, other perspectives suggest a degree of continuity. Ian Hall contends that while Modi has infused energy into India's diplomacy, his foreign policy objectives align with those of his predecessors, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Sumit Ganguly concurs, asserting that while Modi has introduced certain changes, the fundamental orientation of India's foreign policy remains intact. Harsh V. Pant has extensively analyzed the evolving Indian diplomatic style and substantive policy shifts under Modi's leadership, emphasizing their potential long-term implications for India's global role. "India is now perceived as a credible balancer in its neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific as China's maritime assertiveness has grown, creating space for Indian diplomacy. Modi has been able to give not only a new style to the conduct of Indian diplomacy but also a new sense of purpose to Indian foreign policy." (Pant, 2022)

## Conclusion

India's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution across three distinct historical phases, reflecting its response to both gradual and rapid transformations in global and regional dynamics over the past seventy years. As India marks 75 years of independence, the nation exudes confidence and determination in prioritizing its own interests on the international stage. India's foreign policy remains resolutely autonomous, impervious to external pressures, and guided by the principle of "India First." Representing nearly one-fifth of the global population, India asserts its right to make independent decisions and safeguard its national interests, mirroring the approach of other sovereign states. Grounded in its civilizational ethos and domestic realities, India has consistently placed national interests at the forefront of its foreign and security policies. This assured and pragmatic stance underscores India's emergence as a distinct voice in the global arena, steadfast in its pursuit of core objectives while contributing meaningfully to the evolving international order.

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