



## INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DURING NARENDRA MODI

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the change in India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi from 2014 to present, focusing on the movement from a passive, reactive, and uni-layered form of diplomacy to an assertive, proactive, and multi-layered form of diplomacy. Modi's shift in Indian foreign policy patterns indicates a renewed focus on strategic autonomy, personal diplomacy, and increased bilateral relationships with key influencers, including the United States, Russia, and other nations in Asia and the Middle East. Important initiatives like Act East and Neighborhood First, the International Solar Alliance, Vaccine Maitri, and Digital India build on India's aspirations to increase positions and prestige in the global arena via economic, technological, and climate diplomacy. India has also enhanced its involvement in multilateral forums including the United Nations, G20, BRICS, QUAD, and ASEAN despite continuing day-to-day challenges like border conflicts with China and Pakistan, trade disputes, and scrutinized global human rights practices. This study will critically examine how Modi's influence has advanced India's global reputation while preserving complex geopolitical realities within a changing multipolar world.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy, diplomacy, multilateralism, Modi, India's global standing, strategic autonomy.

### INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a strategy that a state employs to interact with other states, international organizations, and global issues. For a large state such as India—with its expanse of territory, historical footprint, and aspirations to achieve certain geopolitical goals—foreign policy is a means to pursue national interests, seeding economic development, and establishing the country in the global community. Foreign policy for India since 1947 has been a constant process of evolution in response to international systems and domestic situations.



The initial foreign policy of India under leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru reflected ideologies related to non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and strategic autonomy. This allowed India to be nonaligned in a bipolar world as the Cold War not only created rivalries within the international system, but also opened the way for countries to engage in decolonization of the world, and build relations under South-South solidarity. The direction of India's diplomacy has shifted over the decades, from ideological idealism to pragmatic engagement, as significant changes impacted the fundamental aspects of geopolitics, economic relations and human (personal) interactions. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Western expansion created new ecosystems of engagement, and the domestic liberalization of the economy in the 1990s further drove engagement with the world through greater integration with the global economy and institutions.

The election of Narendra Modi as PM in May 2014 marked a significant turning point in the trajectory of Indian foreign policy. Modi brought an original vision and integration of uniquely modern leadership, aggressive diplomacy, and active engagement. He ushered a new path away from reactive diplomacy to a new ambitious and active approach towards the world as he tried to mark a new image of India internationally and get India recognized as a great power. Methods like personal diplomacy, active foreign relations, and the promotion of India as a responsible authority in the world were all key features of Modi's approach.

This research analyzes the transition and transformation in India's foreign policy under Modi. The studies will include analysis of the broad philosophical approaches guiding Indian foreign policy, bilateral and regional interactions being redefined, and India's increase in multilateral presence. In addition, the study will consider the successes and critique of Modi's approach to foreign policy, and the impact of Modi's foreign policy on India's regional and international positioning in a multipolar world.

## **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

India's foreign policy has been shaped, since independence, by a combination of historical experience, ideological commitments, and strategic imperatives. The early years under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru were marked by the principles of non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and peaceful coexistence leading to India assuming leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This path enabled India to retain its strategic autonomy during the Cold War, as well as advocate for disarmament at the global level while identifying with other developing countries. Over the last 75 years, Indian prime ministers Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and P.V. Narasimha Rao have incorporated aspects of pragmatism and realpolitik into India's foreign policy in response to changing domestic and international and regional realities.

The post-Cold War period ushered in economic liberalization, which fundamentally reshaped India's foreign policy. The Vajpayee and Singh governments reoriented India towards strengthening economic partnerships, welcome foreign investment, and expand India's footprint to the global level. Strategic ties with the United States, improving ties with China and Russia, and engagement with multilateralism through BRICS, G20, and similar institutions characterized this period. However, in retrospect, border disputes with China, regional of instability and a relatively passive diplomatic posture inhibited India from exerting greater leadership during this period. By



2014, the increased necessity for India to project a more robust, visionary foreign policy manifested itself.

## 2. STRATEGIC PHILOSOPHY UNDER MODI

Modi's foreign policy is driven by a blend of pragmatism, nationalism, and developmental diplomacy. It is underpinned by the following principles:

- **Strategic Autonomy:** Modi's approach to foreign policy ensures that India retains its independence in decision-making, even while developing close working relations with major powers (for example, the United States, Russia and China) flexibly to protect India's bargaining position and sovereignty.
- **Proactive Diplomacy:** Through the frequency of international travel and direct engagement with heads of state and government, personal diplomacy is essential to create a positive global perception of India and reinforce bilateral relationships.
- **Act East Policy:** Extends India's Look East policy to emphasize deeper economic, strategic and cultural integration with countries in East and Southeast Asia including ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Australia - particularly in terms of countering China's influence.
- **Neighborhood First Policy:** This initiative emphasizes historic connections with India's neighbors, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka; promoting regional stability, trade, connectivity, and non-traditional security partnerships.
- **Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy:** Modi's initiatives have solidified a cultural image for India around the world; through International Yoga Day which engages the Indian diaspora and highlights India's spiritual, democratic, and civilizational legacy.
- **Economic Diplomacy:** As a pillar, links India's development goals to foreign policy. (foreign investments, trade and commerce, energy security, flagship initiatives like Make in India and Digital India).

## 3. BILATERAL RELATIONS

- a) **Indo-U.S. Relations:** Under Narendra Modi, India-U.S. relations witnessed unparalleled growth into a global comprehensive strategic partnership whose most prominent aspect became defense cooperation through landmark agreements (e.g., the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement [LEMOA]) and the dilated scope of trilateral and bilateral military exercises, such as the Malabar naval exercises. India gained the designation of a Major Defense Partner of the U.S. that allowed India to more freely access advanced technologies. There was also expanded economic and technological cooperation composed of greater bilateral trade, energy cooperation (which particularly includes liquefied natural gas), and digital innovation. Modi established meaningful personal bonds with each U.S. president he interacted with (Obama, Trump, and Biden), reinforcing each country's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific (via the Quad) advocating for a free and open maritime order.
- b) **India–China relations:** India–China relations during Modi's tenure were characterized at the same time by both cooperation and conflict. China was one of India's top trading

partners over this period; however, the economic relationship was lopsided in favor of China, creating fears about trade deficits and lack of access to markets. Rhetoric about India and China cooperating on significant global issues led to high level Diplomatic summits like the Wuhan meeting in 2018, and the Mamallapuram meeting in 2019, which aimed to stabilize ties between the two countries. However, India–China relations had become so bad by the time of the military clashes in Galwan Valley in 2020 that the number of casualties both military and civilian caused an unprecedented downturn in relations between the countries. In response to this calamitous turn of events, India took measures to increase military readiness to defend India's territorial claims, and engaged in a reassessment of economic ties to China, including implementing measures to restrict Chinese investment in key sectors of its economy.

- c) **India–Russia Relations:** While India increasingly engages with the West, its relationship with Russia, particularly in defence and energy, remain foundational. Russia has remained India’s largest arms supplier, and they signed significant deals including the S-400 missile defence system. Modi and Putin have established a personal rapport through opportunities for regular bilateral summits. India and Russia's cooperation expanded to include nuclear energy, Arctic oil exploration, and pharmaceutical cooperation. India has managed this engagement quietly, balancing space with bilateral engagement with the West, but maintaining autonomy with Russia.
- d) **Middle East Engagement:** Modi fundamentally transformed India's policy for the Middle East emphasizing energy security, diaspora welfare, and cooperation in counterterrorism. Relations with UAE and Saudi Arabia were elevated above strategic levels through multiple high-level visits, investment agreements, and infrastructure projects. Modi's visit to Israel in 2017, the first by an Indian Prime Minister, was a historic moment that solidified the emergence of defense and technological cooperation with Israel, especially in agriculture, water management, and cybersecurity. India also cemented a strong partnership with Qatar and Oman ensuring consistent energy supplies and better legal protection for Indian expatriates.
- e) **Africa and Neighborhood Relations:** Africa has seen enhanced Indian engagement through increasing diplomatic presence, expanding trade ties, and economic development cooperation. Modi was the host of the India Africa Forum Summit (2015) and structured engagement across infrastructure projects, human resources (healthcare), digital technology (telecom cyber), and capacity building. In South Asia however the Neighborhood First policy was also steadfastly pursued with substantive improvements made with proximity partners such as Bangladesh and Bhutan, through connectivity projects, border agreements, and energy-trade agreements. India-Pakistan relations however were a much different situation following terrorist attacks in Uri (2016) and Pulwama (2019) which made some initial rapprochement with Pakistan difficult. India's response included surgical strikes across the LOC and then a Balakot airstrike, suggesting a more assertive foreign policy once Modi assumed office.



#### 4. MULTILATERALISM AND GLOBAL FORUMS

India strengthened its role in:

- **United Nations:** India remained active in the United Nations arena during Narendra Modi's leadership as Prime Minister. India continued to be one of the leading troop contributors to peacekeeping missions. Modi's government was strongly supportive of UN Security Council reforms, and made India's case for permanent membership by citing its population, democratic values, growing economy, and its lengthy record of contributing to global peace and stability. India used the strategic platform of the UN to highlight global concerns such as terrorism, climate change, and developmental justice, and it did so by aligning itself and interests with developing nations and the Global South.
- **BRICS and G20:** Under Modi, India's engagement with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) focused on strengthening South-South cooperation and reforming institutions of global finance like the IMF, World Bank. Democracy and development were best served by a New Development Bank (NDB), which India played an active part in law and appropriating, where it was also an aide to generating a greater deal of multipolarity in global governance. As for the G20, India's influence peaked in its 2023 presidency when Modi articulated agendas focused on inclusive development, the digital economy and innovation, climate sustainability, and global health resilience. Modi sought to position India as a voice of the Global South, advocating for an equitable post-COVID economic recovery with access to financial and technological resources of developing nations.
- **QUAD and Indo-Pacific Strategy:** In partnership with the US, Japan, and Australia, India strategically re-engaged with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to promote an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, and inclusive. The motivation for establishing QUAD was partly a response to China's rising assertiveness at sea, particularly in the South China Sea. India's vision for the Indo-Pacific prioritized freedom of navigation, a rule-based order within international waters, and regional connectivity. In this eventful climate, India advanced naval cooperation, conducted joint military exercises, conducted cybersecurity drills and military officer exchanges, and fostered greater disaster relief efforts. It operated within the broader strategic construct of the Act East Policy while positioning itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.
- **ASEAN and SAARC:** India made ASEAN a central part of its Act East Policy and connected via ASEAN through strengthened maritime security and digital connectivity with economic integration. India strengthened its ties with individual ASEAN States and actively engaged in various ASEAN-led forum on regional security. However, India's engagement in SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) in 2020 and into 2021 remained weakened due to continued tensions with Pakistan exemplified by the Pulwama attack in 2019. As a result, India is moving towards BIMSTEC and other groups and arrangements in order to avoid any delays for regional cooperation.



- **Climate Diplomacy and International Solar Alliance (ISA):** During Modi's tenure, India emerged as a leader in climate diplomacy globally by balancing development and environment. The co-launch of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) with France in 2015 to promote the use of solar energy in tropical countries was a major achievement. In UN Climate Change Conferences (COP) India consistently advocated for climate justice and called for technology transfer; and demanded developed countries to fulfil commitments made to facilitate Green Climate Funds. Through domestic initiatives like the National Solar Mission, this demonstrated India's commitment to clean energy and sustainment steps towards growth, thus enhancing India's credibility within international environmental governance.

## 5. KEY INITIATIVES AND OUTCOMES

- **International Solar Alliance (ISA):** Initiated at the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in 2015, the ISA is one of Modi's most ambitious and strategic international initiatives. The ISA aims overall to bring together countries with a significant solar resource, between 10 degrees latitude north and south, to take advantage of solar energy for sustainable development. The ISA is not only indicative of India as a proactive leader on climate change but is also an attempt to mobilize finance, technology, and know-how away from a dependency on fossil fuels and towards solar energy. Additionally, it demonstrates the capabilities of India as a clean energy innovator, as well as champion of climate justice for the Global South.
- **Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Diplomacy):** During COVID-19, India as a global actor demonstrated global solidarity through its Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative in which India exported vaccine doses to over 90 countries, including neighboring countries, a number of countries in Africa and Latin America, and small island states. Vaccine Maitri was India's demonstration of its capacity as the "pharmacy of the world," and its commitment to equitable health services access, while creating diplomatic goodwill and strengthening bilateral relations. Vaccine Maitri was India's assertion as a responsible global actor, and particularly humanitarian at a time when many countries were experiencing vaccine nationalism.
- **Blue Economy and Maritime Diplomacy:** Acknowledging the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a strategic priority site for action, Modi's foreign policy incorporated the Blue Economy as an area of regional cooperation and economic development. India has broadened naval partnerships, capacity building, and ocean-based economic initiatives with states across Africa, ASEAN, and the Indo-Pacific. Emphasis was placed on maritime security, fighting piracy, and ensuring freedom of navigation, with a strengthened emphasis on working with QUAD nations to achieve these aims. Overall, these practices were trying to situate India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific and promote sustainable use of marine resources.
- **Technology and Digital Diplomacy:** As a part of initiatives such as Digital India, the Modi government has linked foreign policy with technology, specifically technological

advancement. India, primarily by creating strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, Israel, and South Korea, and in the domains of cybersecurity, fintech, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital infrastructure, hoped to leverage foreign relationships to boost domestic innovation, allow India to inhabit a key space in the flourish of the global digital economy, promote technology transfer, establish a startup ecosystem, and create a secure digital environment. All the while, these interactions raised India's diplomatic stature as an emerging player in the dynamics of 21st-century tech governance.

## 6. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

Despite achievements, challenges persist:

- **Border Tensions with China:** Ongoing border tensions with China, particularly the violent Galwan Valley clash in 2020, led to military stand-offs and complications in the relationship. Rounds of negotiations failed to resolve the issues made worse by mutual mistrust and troop deployments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- **Unresolved Tensions with Pakistan:** India's relations with Pakistan remain tenuous and a continual source of worry for the government because of the ongoing threat of cross-border terrorism, incidents such as the Uri attack in 2016 and the Pulwama bombing in 2019, and ambiguous diplomatic channels. After an initial attempt by Modi to reach out to Pakistan, repeated provocations led to a hardened position toward them as well as their isolation from diplomatic engagement in regional fora.
- **Trade Tensions with the US and EU:** Cochran developments in India's strategic relationship notwithstanding, India has faced trade tensions with the US concerning tariffs, and regulatory issues led to troubles with the European Union. Worries raised by the international community include limited access to the Indian market, intellectual property rights, and the cancellation of India's GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) treatment by the US in 2019.
- **Human Rights and Global Image Challenges:** India has been criticized by Western countries and human rights organizations concerning internal issues like Kashmir, CAA-NRC policy, and civil liberties restrictions. These issues could at times adversely affect relations with significant democratic partners and challenge India's narrative of a liberal democracy.
- **Managing Rival Powers Without Compromising Autonomy:** Managing international relations with rival global powers such as the US, Russia, and China while technically and philosophically retaining your strategic autonomy is a constant challenge. While India attempts to be non-aligned but fully engaged, it must be careful since many of its competitors actively engage in international power rivalries particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian realms.



## CONCLUSION

Modi's foreign policy represents a significant shift in India's approach to the world characterized by assertive diplomacy, strategic autonomy, and broadening Indian engagement globally. In Modi's initial term India took a pro-active, productive and multidimensional approach to international relations - enhancing ties with major powers like the US and Russia, navigating complicated relationships with China and Pakistan and embracing regional initiatives like Act East, and the Neighborhood First policy. India's leadership of multilateral forums like the G20, BRICS, QUAD, and the launching the International Solar Alliance confirm India's growing stature. Initiatives like Vaccine Maitri and Digital India positively enhanced India's soft power, and maritime diplomacy and climate leadership further portrayed India as a mature responsible global actor. The foreign policy landscape is still complicated; serious challenges remain associated with border conflicts, trade disputes, and balancing the rivalries without compromising sovereignty. Modi's approach may have repositioned India on the world stage, but maintaining harmony with strategic relations in a changing global order, continues to be a strategic requirement.

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