

India's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at India's foreign policy narrative, that underpins the notion of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment strategy in an emerging multipolar world order. India's role as a major power — II With the transformation of the international system from unipolarity dominated by the United States to one of multipolarity taking shape, India has positioned itself well as a key player while holding onto its freedom from traditional blocs. Using qualitative analysis, the research analyses India's cooperation with multilateral institutions including BRICS, QUAD, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and bilateral engagements, to reveal how India utilizes strategic autonomy to maximize domestic national interests and provide significant inputs to reforming global governance. The paper contends that India's foreign policy under the Modi government is a demonstration of a new form of assertive multilateralism that is defined by selective engagement, institutional balance of power, and calculated hedging. With empirically rigorous examination of India's diplomatic engagements in terms of bilateral relations with major powers and participation in evolving institutional frameworks, this study illustrates how India's engagement with great power rivalry process is devoid of entrapment in a suffocating alliance system. The results indicate that India's practices present a workable exemplar for a rising power in multipolar transitions by proving that strategic autonomy and multi-alignment is indeed capable of enhancing global influence without compromising on its decision-making autonomy. The study both enriches theoretical understanding of multipolarity and has policy relevance for international relations studies.

Keywords: India, Foreign Policy, Multipolarity, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-alignment, BRICS, QUAD

1. INTRODUCTION

The current global system is in transition from unipolarity of the United States in the post-Cold War to the emergence of multicentrism with new centres of power (Cooper & Ffemes, 2013). China, Russia, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and other countries are projecting power overseas, changing the structure of international relations that has held since the 1990s. It is not just a redistribution of power, but a qualitative shift in the way global governance is carried out, international institutions perform, and states pursue their national interests (Kukreja, 2020). The unipolar moment, the period of American hegemony and Western institutional dominance, is transitioning towards a more complex world where there are several power centers that compete, cooperate and coexist within overlapping spheres of influence (Miller, 2017). India has become a significant player in this shifting landscape, its foreign policy decisions bearing heavily upon the new world order (Miller, 2017). As the world's most populous nation, fastest growing great power, and increasingly potent military force, India is an instructive example of how a rising power adapts to the era of multipolarity. The rising status of India and what it implies speaks to foreign policy having become more important to domestic politics and foreign policy successes becoming indicators of a national pride and political legitimacy (Plagemann & Destradi, 2018).

Foreign policy of the Modi government assumes significant significance, particularly in the backdrop of its focus on strategic autonomy and multi-alignment (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024). Jaishankar said India has a stake

in a multi-polar world, which implies that multiple power centres suit New Delhi's strategic orientation. This perspective reflects a deliberate bid to adopt multipolarity as an analytical framework as well as a policy goal, setting India apart from other emerging powers that regard the rise of multipolarity with ambiguous or anxious eyes. Indian response to multipolarity has theoretical relevance, as it contradicts the conventional international relations theories, which highlight alignment or balance of power (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024). India, instead, has established what the scholars identify as "strategic autonomy": a policy that enables the nation to simultaneously interact with different powers and have decisions that are able to stand on its own (Bhadauria, 2024). This is a progression of the non-aligned policy followed by India during the days of the Cold War but in tune with new multipolar circumstances. India's multipolar strategy in practice extends beyond the bilateral relationship through participation in a variety of institutional arrangements, old and new, Western and non-Western, from conventional multilateral systems such as the United Nations to nascent groupings such as BRICS and QUAD (Jamali & Liu, 2024). This diversification on the institutional front mirrors India's efforts to influence global governance and to prevent getting locked into rigid alliance systems that could limit its freedom of manoeuvre.

This paper explores India's foreign policy in the new multipolar order, focusing on the way in which New Delhi manages great power rivalry and strategic autonomy. The main research question is: How has Indian foreign policy adapted to multipolarity; what are the implications for global governance and for India as a rising power? The study adds to theoretical understanding of multipolar transitions and policy-relevant implications for others grappling with similar challenges. Through the lens of India's case and experience, this article demonstrates how middle powers navigate or might navigate multipolarity to increase their capacities and also to positively contribute to a more inclusive global governance order.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the evolution and conceptualization of strategic autonomy as the cornerstone of India's contemporary foreign policy and its adaptation from traditional non-alignment principles.
2. To examine India's multi-alignment strategy and its effectiveness in managing relationships with multiple power centers while maintaining decision-making independence.
3. To evaluate India's institutional engagement across diverse multilateral frameworks including BRICS, QUAD, and other regional organizations as tools for advancing national interests.
4. To assess the implications of India's multipolar strategy for global governance, international order, and the broader dynamics of emerging power diplomacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

SCENARIO MAKING Academic writings on India's foreign policy in a multipolar world deal with few major themes. Traditional literature pins on India's journey of Cold War non-alignment to post-Cold War multi-alignment (Ranjan, 2022). After independence in 1947, Indian foreign policy makers had to deliberate upon an ideological schism and the Non-Aligned Movement came into being as a reflection of the developing world's voice (Ganapathi 2019). The concept of strategic autonomy is increasingly being seen as the hallmark of India's foreign policy in the contemporary context (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024). Strategic autonomy is the foreign policy chase which is pursued in accordance to the interests of the nation without any intervention from outside (Bhadauria, 2024). It has been particularly popular under the Modi regime with the scholars discussing the continuation versus change in Indian foreign policy traditions (Plagemann & Destradi, 2018). There are various

views in literature on multipolarity. A few scholars posit that India appears to be most determined to a multipolar world order, projecting itself as a leader of the developing world (Panda, 2023). Some doubt the existence of a genuine multipolarity, pointing out to persisting asymmetrical power distributions (Schenoni & Malamud, 2022). Recent research focuses on India's institutional tactics, in particular multiple multilateral framework involvement (Jamali & Liu, 2024). India's foreign policy is all about a search for institutional balancing and not about a rising power dilemma—and that constitutes skilled international relationship management (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach using case study methodology to examine India's foreign policy adaptation in the multipolar world order. The research utilizes document analysis as the primary data collection method, examining official government statements, policy documents, and diplomatic communications from 2014 to 2024, corresponding with the Modi government's tenure. Primary sources include speeches by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and official Ministry of External Affairs documents, while secondary sources encompass academic literature and policy reports from established international relations journals. The analytical framework applies institutional analysis to examine India's engagement with multilateral organizations including BRICS, QUAD, and SCO, alongside thematic analysis to identify patterns in diplomatic behavior across three dimensions: bilateral relationship management, multilateral institutional engagement, and strategic autonomy operationalization. The study incorporates comparative analysis to understand how India navigates different institutional arrangements while maintaining decision-making independence in the multipolar context.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The foreign policy ideology in India had dramatically evolved since independence (Ranjan, 2022). Nehruvian Non-alignment also came up as a response to Cold War bipolarity and it kept superpower equidistance with emphasis on national development and global decolonization (Ganapathi, 2019). India was also the founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) along with newly independent nations in 1961. This had been outmoded by the end of the Cold War and required a basic recalibration. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic liberalizations of the 1990s nudged India toward a more realistic foreign policy (Miller 2017). It was a shift from non-alignment to 'multi-alignment' (Cooper & Ffemes, 2013). Political regime change and foreign policy paradigm shift in 2014 (Sujith, 2023). the Modi government, assertive multilateralism and strategic autonomy (PDF) is prominent factor, transcending the usual limits of (PDF) diplomatic behavior and independence in decision-making (Plagemann & Destradi, 2018). In its current foreign policy India consciously adopts multipolarity for analysis and action (Kukreja, 2020). Past prime ministers were advocates of "polytonality" — international order forged by various voices. 8 Modi govt's baby steps toward a new, multipolarity-based global order with India as one of its principal poles (Panda, 2023).

5. CONCEPTUALIZING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Strategic autonomy became the linchpin of current Indian Foreign Policy, which is the continuation of spirit of non-alignment and adaption to the nuances of multipolar words (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024). Key Determinants of Indian Foreign Policy Sovereignty and strategic autonomy are vital determinants of Indian foreign policy that allow the latter to make decisions on foreign relations independently without being subjected to

external pressure (Bhadauria, 2024). Three critical dimensions are integral to strategic autonomy (Ayдын-Düzgit et al., 2025). First, they sustained independent decisions while working within various power centers. India still adheres to such policy of pursuing its national interests while dealing with a number of state and non-state actors on certain issues (Vinodan& Kurian, 2024). Second, strategic autonomy allows one to exploit its distinctive position in geography and civilization as a node between blocs and regions (Panda, 2023). India uses its peninsular position in South Asia, acting as an “East-West bridge” and a “center of the Indian Ocean”. Third, strategic autonomy provides issue-based coalitions in place of full-fledged alliances providing the flexibility to address challenges (Singh, 2021). It is well known that India's strategic autonomy derives its legitimacy from the pages of history and places the country in a very unique position in the emerging multipolar global environment typified by a dispersal of power (Muraviev et al., 2021). The multipolar setting reinforces the spirit of strategic autonomy as there are multiple options for partnership and engagement (Kukreja, 2020). Stressing on the importance of strategic autonomy, Jaishankar said the multilateral world order provides the opportunity to address global challenges and build stronger partnerships.

6. INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY: INSTITUTIONAL BALANCING AND SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

India's policy of multi-alignment is the refined management of multipolar relations (Jamali & Liu, 2024). By contrast to traditional alliance systems that bound their members to exclusive and limited commitments, a multi-alignment system isn't a system 'but a situation where states would not give a blank cheque to, or pander to, any single [power]' (Cooper and Flesmes 2013: 17). The institutional multi-alignment dimension is particularly distinctive (Weiss and Ramesh, 2019). India gives an input in its “minilateral” organizations like BRICS, SCO, I2U2, QUAD, G20 and its multilateral organizations like the UN, WTO, IMF, WHO, World Bank, Commonwealth. This institutional deep engagement allows them the space to shape global governance, without being caught in a rigid alliance system trap (Bhadauria, 2024). India's institutions balancing entails membership in overlapping and at time counter-intuitive organizations (Singh, 2021). Claiming contradiction in India's presence in QUAD, G20, SCO and BRICS. This seeming paradox, however, captures the logic of diversified engagement strategy, affording uncertainty hedging while trying to maximize cooperative opportunities (Kanduri, 2021). Proof of strategy success is found in India's politics of balancing in the geopolitical spectrum (Twining & Fontaine, 2024). Modi government struck the right note of engagement with Western and Russian countries, positively addressing the world players' Interests in India, particularly post Ukraine conflict beginning in February 2022.

7. CASE STUDY 1: INDIA AND BRICS - EMERGING POWER COOPERATION

India's participation in BRICS demonstrates its commitment to cooperation South-South and to 'alternative' models of global governance (Cooper & Flesmes, 2013). The BRICS entrenched to undermine Western hegemonic order by global governance reform, establishing parallel minilateral institutions, challenging dollar position and weakening U.S. leverage in international economic affairs. For India, BRICS symbolizes opportunity between global governance with emerging powers and strategic autonomy (Kanduri, 2021). BRICS optimizes power and responsibility, improves cooperation among emerging economies, and provides alternatives to Western dominated institutions (Bhadauria, 2024). But India's participation in BRICS points to the intricate web of

multipolar cooperative relationships (Schenoni & Malamud, 2022). China and India, each with 1.4 billion people, are bitter geopolitical rivals in Asia and rivals for global power. This shows the operation of emerging power cooperation under conditions of bilateral tension and clashing national interests (Muraviev et al., 2021). While some challenges persist, India still sees BRICS as an important platform to promote the global governance agenda (Sujith, 2023). BRICS enlargement shows the rising attractiveness of alternative institutional arrangement in a multipolar world, adding to consensus formation dilemmas and coordination problems.

8. CASE STUDY 2: THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE (QUAD) - STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

INQUAD of India with the USA, Japan and Australia is the dimension of multi-alignment strategy (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024). QUAD was resurrected by the Trumpian America as the strategy for China containment: the race of China begins. The QUAD that will never set 117' ma comes by starts half that morning the. QUAD engagement reciprocates India's strategic congruence with the likeminded democracies on the Indo-Pacific security, and an independent pursuit on other fronts (Singh, 2021). India converged strategically with countries viewing common interest in the handling of increasing and assertive strategic implications of China (Muraviev et al., 2021). India's QUAD stand contrasts that of its QUAD partners, underscoring the commitment of strategic autonomy (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024). India is still hesitant to fully commit to QUAD and to not portray group as counter to China (Kanduri 2021). This cautious strategy serves well on the one hand to reap security cooperation gains and on the other to avoid falling into the trap of an anti-China containment strategy. As India seeks to expand its Indo-Pacific influence, PAF, RAH and SAPC practice flexibility and traction will be India's primary north star (Singh 2021). This is a case study of India's use of strategic autonomy to manage complicated partnerships while ensuring autonomy in decision-making.

9. INDIA'S BILATERAL RELATIONSHIPS IN A MULTIPOLAR CONTEXT

Bilateral relationships of India: Source: The Hindu This indicates the mature great power competition management that India pursues as part of a national interest (Pressman 2018,56). The India-United States strategic partnership is an example of this approach by the two countries moving towards closer cooperation with a degree of autonomy intact (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024). The Indo-Russian relationship shows the classic complexity of old allies in a multipolar world (Twining & Fontaine, 2024). New Delhi and Moscow have defense and oil sector agreements, with India buying Russian S-400 systems and crude oil. This relationship continues even after western sanctions, demonstrating the commitment to strategic autonomy (Bhadauria, 2024). The India-China relationship is perhaps the most complicated in India's multipolar strategy (Muraviev et al., 2021). India – US-China political conflicts and Chinese South Asian assertiveness South Asian strategic stability is to a large extent influenced by political tensions between United States of America (US) and China and rising Chinese influence in the region Viswesh, Kunst and Cheema, 2016, Udaya, 2018, Ho, 2018, Kumar, 2022.(Ranjan, 2022) (Ranjan, 2022) Ranjan, S. (2022 (forthcoming)). This relationship needed a very calibrated balance between cooperation at multilateral forums and competition in bilateral and regional context (Panda 2023).

10. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INDIA'S MULTIPOLAR STRATEGY

India's pursuit of a multipolar world foreign policy confronts formidable challenges (Jamali & Liu, 2024). The principal challenge is balancing of cross-cutting relationships and preventing the great power rivalry trap (Muraviev et al., 2021). India's security dilemma increased by China's emergence, Russia's strategic China convergence and the US's unclear Indian-Pacific policy position. India's foreign policy options are constrained for economic reasons (Weiss & Ramesh, 2019). India's foreign policy suffers from severe lack of implementation capacity and institutional depth for policy execution. Such constraints impact on the ability of strategic position leverage and on the capacity to realize multipolar ambition (Browne, 2017). Nevertheless, multipolar shift offers India opportunities (Cooper & Flesmes, 2013). Multipolar world power competitions offer the opportunity to shift burden and avoid overextension for the U.S., and to earn spaces for influence and autonomy for middle powers (Kukreja, 2020). The domestic politics of foreign policy also have opportunities and risks (Plagemann & Destradi, 2018). Rising Foreign Policy Domestic Currency With the benefit of hindsight of more than a decade of active Indian foreign policy, that rising foreign policy domestic currency must be seen as a part of India's broader search of his own as a key player in an increasingly multipolar world, and with popular domestic support for assertive international engagement.

11. FUTURE PROSPECTS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

More generally, India's 'multipolar' world foreign policy is likely to emphasize strategic autonomy while accommodating changing global strategic realities (Abraham and Purushothaman, 2024). India's primary foreign policy challenges for the year 2025 will be managing relations with the United States, China, Russia, and its South Asian neighborhood (Twining & Fontaine, 2024). The success of India's multi-polar strategy depends on core adjacent strategic flexibility leveraging ambition-supporting sufficient capabilities (Weiss & Ramesh, 2019). India will rise beyond the middle power paradigm and bridge major power divide, but this transformation necessitates maintaining economic growth and institutionalization (Miller 2017). India's strategy has wider ramifications beyond bilateral ties and into issues regarding the international order and governance (Kukreja 2020). With the entrenchment of multipolarity, India's model of selective engagement and institutional balancing may have implications for other emerging powers and middle powers, which are navigating complex international orders (Cooper & Flesmes, 2013).

12. CONCLUSION

This article shows that India's multipolar world foreign policy is the advanced non-alignment principle adjustment to a changing world. By practicing strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, India managed to emerge as an important player in the global affairs while retaining independence and flexibility to make its choices. Key findings India's strategy is a possible emerging power model in a multipolar world. By engaging multiple power centres simultaneously, engaging in various institutional formats and by not closing its strategic options through flexibility, India increased its global weight without getting boxed in to an alliance structure. India's Foreign Policy in global governance is characterized by institutional innovation, representative multilateralism and cooperation across ideological and geopolitical divides. Indian experience indicates that multipolarity, far from leading to chaos or conflict, may actually generate opportunities for new, more just and more equal patterns of international order. But huge obstacles still lie ahead. Juggling competing relationships, constructing viable capabilities, and managing domestic political pressures all will continue to demand ongoing strategic cogency as well as

institutional development. The proof of the pudding will be if India's multi-polar strategy morphs into hard tangible national development and global influence gains. With the transformation of the international system is moving towards multipolarity, India's foreign policy experience is instructive to those who study and practice the contemporary dynamics of international relations. It also shows that strategic autonomy or multi-alignment is the rational path to take through a complicated strategy for global governance and international cooperation.

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