



Research Paper

Strategic Autonomy in a Transforming Global Order: India's Foreign Policy Recalibration in the Era of Multipolarity, Indo-Pacific Competition, and Global South Leadership

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Abstract

The transformation of the international system from post-Cold War unipolarity toward an evolving multipolar order has significantly reshaped the strategic behavior of emerging powers. This study examines India's foreign policy recalibration in the era of multipolarity, focusing on its transition from classical non-alignment to contemporary multi-alignment, its management of the China challenge, its enduring strategic partnership with Russia, its deepening engagement with the United States, and its expanding maritime and Indo-Pacific strategy. The research situates India's external engagement within major theoretical frameworks of international relations, including structural realism, balance-of-threat theory, liberal institutionalism, and constructivist interpretations of normative leadership. It argues that India's foreign policy demonstrates a consistent commitment to strategic autonomy, operationalized through diversified partnerships, institutional pluralism, and calibrated balancing. Furthermore, the study highlights India's growing role as a representative voice of the Global South and a proponent of reform in global governance institutions. Economic diplomacy, technological statecraft, and maritime capability are identified as foundational pillars underpinning India's global ambitions. The analysis concludes that India's foreign policy in the era of multipolarity is characterized not by alignment rigidity but by adaptive pragmatism, allowing it to navigate great power rivalry while enhancing its status as an independent pole in global politics. Through a synthesis of power balancing and normative engagement, India seeks to shape rather than merely respond to the emerging international order.

Keywords: Multipolarity, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Global South Leadership, Economic Diplomacy, Great Power Competition

I. Introduction:

The twenty-first century international system is increasingly characterized by the gradual transition from a unipolar order dominated by the United States to a more complex and fluid multipolar structure. The diffusion of power across multiple centers—most notably the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the strategic assertiveness of middle powers, and the economic emergence of the Global South—has reshaped global governance, security architectures, and economic interdependence (Acharya, 2014; Haass, 2008). In this evolving geopolitical environment, India has emerged as a pivotal actor whose foreign policy reflects both continuity with its historical strategic traditions and adaptation to contemporary global transformations. India's foreign policy has historically been guided by the principles articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru, emphasizing non-alignment, strategic autonomy, anti-colonial solidarity, and peaceful coexistence (Nehru, 1946; Ganguly, 2010). During the Cold War, India adopted a policy of non-alignment, seeking to avoid entanglement in bipolar superpower rivalry while preserving sovereignty and independent decision-making. However, the post-Cold War period and particularly the rise of multipolarity have required significant recalibration of India's diplomatic, economic, and security strategies (Mohan, 2013).

Global Power Transition and India's Strategic Moment

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation. The post-Cold War unipolar moment dominated by the United States is gradually giving way to a more diffused and complex multipolar order marked by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the growing influence of middle powers, and the increasing agency of the Global South (Acharya, 2014; Haass, 2008). This redistribution of

material capabilities, institutional influence, and normative authority has reshaped global politics, compelling states to recalibrate their foreign policy strategies. In this shifting environment, India occupies a pivotal position. As the world's largest democracy, a nuclear power, a rapidly growing economy, and an emerging technological hub, India is increasingly perceived as a potential great power (Malone, 2011). Its diplomatic posture reflects both continuity with historical principles and adaptation to new geopolitical realities. The era of multipolarity has therefore provided India not merely with challenges but with unprecedented opportunities to shape regional and global governance structures.

Conceptualizing Multipolarity in International Relations

Multipolarity represents one of the most significant structural transformations in the contemporary international system. In theoretical terms, multipolarity refers to a distribution of power in which several states possess comparable levels of economic, military, and political influence, thereby shaping global outcomes collectively rather than hierarchically. Unlike unipolarity—where one dominant power sets the agenda—or bipolarity—where two superpowers define global competition—multipolarity diffuses authority across multiple centers of power, generating a more complex and less predictable international environment (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Structural realism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz, posits that the structure of the international system is determined by the distribution of capabilities among states. According to Waltz (1979), multipolar systems are inherently less stable than bipolar systems because they involve more actors, more shifting alliances, and greater uncertainty about intentions. In such a configuration, balancing behavior becomes intricate, miscalculations increase, and alliance commitments are often fluid. However, critics argue that multipolarity does not necessarily equate to instability; rather, its outcomes depend on the nature of interdependence and institutional arrangements (Kupchan, 2012). Offensive realist thinkers such as John Mearsheimer emphasize that in multipolar systems, great powers constantly seek to maximize relative gains and prevent rivals from achieving regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this view, contemporary geopolitical competition between the United States and China resembles structural rivalry within an emerging multipolar framework. Yet, unlike the Cold War, the presence of other influential actors—such as the European Union, India, Russia, and Japan—complicates straightforward bipolar comparisons. Moving beyond materialist interpretations, Amitav Acharya argues that multipolarity should also be understood in normative and institutional terms. In *The End of American World Order* (2014), Acharya contends that global power is not only diffusing materially but also ideationally, with emerging powers shaping norms of sovereignty, development, and governance. Institutions such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and regional trade arrangements reflect this pluralization of authority. Thus, multipolarity is characterized not merely by power distribution but by competing visions of world order.

Similarly, Richard Haass (2008) introduced the concept of “nonpolarity” to describe a world where power is distributed among numerous state and non-state actors. According to Haass, globalization, technological diffusion, and economic interdependence empower corporations, international organizations, and even subnational actors. This interpretation broadens traditional realist conceptions and highlights the multidimensional character of contemporary global politics. Liberal institutionalist scholars add another layer to the debate. They argue that multipolarity need not result in chaos if embedded within robust multilateral institutions (Ikenberry, 2011). From this perspective, international organizations mitigate anarchy by facilitating cooperation, transparency, and rule-based interactions. The resilience of institutions such as the G20 demonstrates how emerging powers participate in collective governance despite structural power shifts. Economically, multipolarity is evident in the redistribution of global GDP shares. The rise of China, India, Brazil, and other emerging economies challenges Western dominance (Narlikar, 2010). This economic pluralization influences global trade negotiations, development financing, and technological standards. Moreover, regional organizations such as ASEAN and the African Union increasingly shape geopolitical agendas.

Security dynamics in multipolar systems are also distinct. Alliances are often issue-based rather than permanent. For example, states may cooperate on maritime security while competing in technology or trade. This overlapping alignment pattern differs from rigid Cold War bloc politics. The Indo-Pacific region exemplifies such complexity, where economic interdependence coexists with strategic rivalry. For India, multipolarity presents both opportunity and constraint. As a rising power, India benefits from power diffusion because it reduces hierarchical constraints imposed by a single hegemon. At the same time, multipolarity intensifies competition among major actors, requiring diplomatic agility. India's strategy of “multi-alignment”—engaging with the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan, and Southeast Asia simultaneously—reflects adaptation to multipolar realities (Pant, 2016). In theoretical synthesis, multipolarity today combines realist balancing, liberal institutionalism, and constructivist norm contestation. It is neither purely conflictual nor entirely cooperative. Instead, it represents a hybrid order where competition and collaboration coexist. Understanding India's foreign policy requires situating it within this broader structural transformation.

II. Historical Foundations of India's Foreign Policy

The foundations of India's foreign policy were laid during the formative years of independence under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. Emerging from colonial rule in 1947, India confronted a polarized international environment dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. Nehru envisioned a foreign policy rooted in autonomy, anti-colonial solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and sovereign equality (Nehru, 1946). Central to this vision was the doctrine of non-alignment. Along with leaders such as Tito and Nasser, Nehru helped institutionalize the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to prevent newly independent states from becoming pawns in superpower rivalry (Ganguly, 2010). Non-alignment did not imply neutrality but rather independent judgment based on national interest. It allowed India to receive economic and military assistance from both blocs while avoiding formal alliance commitments. The Panchsheel principles—mutual respect for territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence—further articulated India's normative framework. These principles reflected both pragmatic realism and civilizational ethos. However, the 1962 Sino-Indian War exposed limitations in idealistic diplomacy, compelling India to reassess security preparedness.

During the Cold War, India maintained close defense cooperation with the Soviet Union, culminating in the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. Yet, India avoided full alignment, preserving strategic autonomy. According to Malone (2011), this balancing act demonstrated India's determination to maintain independent agency despite structural constraints. Economic considerations increasingly shaped foreign policy after the 1991 liberalization reforms. Faced with a balance-of-payments crisis, India adopted market-oriented reforms that integrated it into global economic systems (Narlikar, 2010). This transformation expanded diplomatic outreach, strengthened ties with Western economies, and repositioned India as an emerging market. The post-Cold War period marked a gradual shift from ideological non-alignment to pragmatic engagement. Scholars such as C. Raja Mohan argue that India began embracing "strategic partnerships" rather than ideological blocs (Mohan, 2013). The Look East Policy, later rebranded as Act East, signaled deeper engagement with Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, India normalized relations with Israel and improved ties with the United States.

Nuclear policy further shaped India's strategic identity. The 1998 nuclear tests declared India a de facto nuclear weapon state, asserting sovereign decision-making in security matters. While facing international sanctions initially, India gradually secured recognition through diplomatic negotiations, culminating in the 2005 India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement (Tellis, 2016).

Strategic autonomy remains the core principle linking past and present. Even in contemporary crises, India avoids binary alignments. Its balanced approach toward Russia and Western powers during recent conflicts exemplifies continuity with its historical preference for independent policy formulation. At the same time, India's foreign policy has evolved to reflect new priorities: economic growth, diaspora engagement, energy security, and technological advancement. Maritime strategy, climate diplomacy, and digital governance now complement traditional security concerns. Thus, the historical foundations of India's foreign policy reveal a consistent thread of autonomy, pragmatism, and adaptive engagement. While contexts have shifted—from bipolarity to multipolarity—the guiding ethos of independent strategic judgment endures. This continuity provides the intellectual and institutional basis for India's contemporary multi-alignment strategy.

III. From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

India's transition from classical non-alignment to contemporary multi-alignment represents one of the most significant evolutions in its foreign policy doctrine. While the foundational principle of strategic autonomy remains intact, the methods through which India pursues it have transformed in response to systemic changes in global power distribution. During the Cold War, non-alignment was conceived as a strategy to avoid entrapment in the ideological and military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India articulated non-alignment as both a moral stance and a pragmatic necessity. It sought to preserve sovereign decision-making, resist bloc politics, and champion decolonization (Ganguly, 2010). However, the end of bipolarity in 1991 fundamentally altered the structural environment within which India operated. The emergence of a unipolar order dominated by the United States initially appeared to reduce the relevance of non-alignment. Yet India did not abandon strategic autonomy. Instead, it recalibrated its external engagements. According to C. Raja Mohan (2013), the post-Cold War period compelled India to shift from ideological positioning to interest-based diplomacy. This shift accelerated in the twenty-first century as the international system moved toward multipolarity.

The concept of "multi-alignment" captures this transformation. Unlike non-alignment, which emphasized distance from competing blocs, multi-alignment involves active engagement with multiple major powers simultaneously. Harsh V. Pant (2016) argues that India's approach reflects pragmatic realism: rather than remaining equidistant from power centers, India seeks issue-based partnerships that maximize strategic flexibility. For example, India deepened defense and strategic cooperation with the United States while maintaining long-standing military ties with Russia. It strengthened economic and security collaboration with

Japan and Australia, particularly within the Quad framework, while also participating in BRICS alongside China and Russia. This seemingly paradoxical behavior is not incoherent; rather, it reflects India's attempt to operate effectively within a fluid multipolar structure. Multi-alignment rests on three core pillars:

1. Strategic Diversification: India avoids overdependence on any single partner. Defense procurement illustrates this principle: while Russia remains a major supplier, India increasingly sources equipment from the United States, France, and Israel. Diversification enhances bargaining power and reduces vulnerability.

2. Issue-Based Coalitions: India cooperates differently across sectors. It aligns with Western democracies on Indo-Pacific maritime security, collaborates with BRICS on financial reform, and works with developing countries on climate justice. This flexibility would have been structurally difficult during rigid bipolarity.

3. Institutional Pluralism: India actively participates in multiple institutions without treating them as mutually exclusive. It is simultaneously a member of BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Quad, the G20, and other platforms. This overlapping engagement reflects what Acharya (2014) describes as a "multiplex world," where no single institution monopolizes authority.

Importantly, multi-alignment does not imply the abandonment of strategic autonomy. Rather, it represents its operationalization in a complex order. As Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2020) argues in *The India Way*, India's diplomacy must be guided by "realism rooted in national interest" rather than ideological conformity. The Russia-Ukraine conflict further demonstrated India's multi-alignment strategy. While strengthening defense and technological cooperation with the West, India maintained energy and defense ties with Russia, resisting pressure to adopt a rigid bloc position. This calibrated neutrality illustrates the continuity of autonomy under new structural conditions. Theoretical interpretations of multi-alignment combine realism and complex interdependence. From a realist perspective, India balances China's rise by strengthening ties with the United States and its allies. From a liberal perspective, India leverages institutions to amplify influence. From a constructivist lens, India projects itself as a civilizational state that seeks strategic independence rather than alliance dependency. Thus, the evolution from non-alignment to multi-alignment is not a rupture but an adaptation. The normative core—*independent judgment*—remains constant, while tactical engagement becomes more diversified. In an era of multipolarity, rigid neutrality is impractical, but flexible engagement enhances resilience. Multi-alignment, therefore, represents India's strategic innovation within a transforming global order.

IV. India-United States Relations in a Multipolar Context

Few bilateral relationships illustrate India's foreign policy transformation more clearly than its evolving partnership with the United States. Once characterized by suspicion and distance during the Cold War, India-U.S. relations have undergone a profound redefinition in the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, India's close ties with the Soviet Union and U.S. support for Pakistan limited cooperation. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's 1991 economic liberalization created new possibilities for engagement (Malone, 2011). Shared democratic values, expanding trade relations, and converging concerns about regional stability gradually narrowed strategic differences. The decisive turning point came with the 2005 India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement. Negotiated under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush, the agreement recognized India as a responsible nuclear power despite its non-signatory status to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to Ashley J. Tellis (2016), this deal symbolized U.S. willingness to integrate India into the global nuclear order and treat it as a rising strategic partner. Since then, bilateral cooperation has expanded across multiple domains:

1. Defense and Security Cooperation: India and the United States have signed foundational defense agreements, enhanced joint military exercises, and increased interoperability. Defense trade has grown substantially, reflecting deepening trust. However, India has avoided entering into a formal alliance, preserving its freedom of action.

2. Indo-Pacific Strategy: Both countries share concerns about China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The revival of the Quad (India, United States, Japan, Australia) underscores this convergence. Yet India frames its participation in terms of a "free and inclusive Indo-Pacific" rather than containment.

3. Technology and Economic Partnership: Cooperation extends to emerging technologies, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and supply chain resilience. India's growing digital economy complements U.S. technological capabilities. Bilateral trade has expanded significantly, reinforcing economic interdependence.

Despite this deepening partnership, India resists alliance entanglement. It has not entered into mutual defense commitments comparable to NATO arrangements. This reflects India's enduring commitment to strategic autonomy. As Stephen Walt (1987) suggests in alliance theory, states balance threats rather than automatically align with powerful actors. India cooperates with the United States primarily to balance China's rise, not to subordinate itself within a hierarchical alliance. Moreover, India maintains independent positions on global issues. During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India refrained from condemning Russia outright, despite Western pressure. This illustrates that India-U.S. relations are interest-based rather than alliance-driven.

From a theoretical standpoint, the relationship can be understood through soft balancing and strategic hedging. India hedges by engaging the United States for security cooperation while retaining ties with Russia and other

partners. This reduces dependency and preserves leverage. At the same time, the partnership is underpinned by shared democratic values and diaspora connections. The Indian diaspora in the United States strengthens socio-economic ties, contributing to mutual goodwill. In a multipolar context, India–U.S. relations are therefore neither transactional nor alliance-bound. They represent a strategic convergence shaped by overlapping interests, especially in maintaining regional stability and balancing China. Yet the relationship remains bounded by India's insistence on autonomy. Ultimately, India's engagement with the United States exemplifies its broader foreign policy doctrine: partnership without alignment, cooperation without dependency, and strategic convergence without formal alliance obligations. In a world defined by shifting power centers, this calibrated approach allows India to strengthen capabilities while preserving independent agency.

Managing the China Challenge

China's rise represents the single most consequential structural factor shaping India's contemporary foreign policy. The rapid expansion of China's economic, military, and technological power has altered the Asian balance of power and intensified geopolitical competition across the Indo-Pacific. For India, China is simultaneously a neighbor, a trading partner, a civilizational peer, and a strategic rival. This multidimensional relationship makes managing China the most complex foreign policy challenge facing New Delhi. From a structural realist perspective, the rise of China creates security dilemmas in Asia. As John Mearsheimer (2001) argues, great powers seek regional hegemony, and the rise of a new power inevitably generates balancing responses from neighboring states. China's military modernization, expanding naval presence, and assertiveness along disputed borders have heightened Indian threat perceptions.

The unresolved boundary dispute remains a persistent flashpoint. The 1962 Sino-Indian War left a legacy of mistrust, and periodic standoffs—most notably the 2017 Doklam crisis and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash in Ladakh—have reinforced strategic distrust. The violent confrontation in Galwan marked the most serious escalation in decades and fundamentally altered Indian perceptions of China as a reliable negotiating partner. As C. Raja Mohan (2013) observes, border instability has transformed China from a long-term competitor into an immediate security concern. Beyond territorial disputes, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expands Beijing's infrastructural and strategic footprint across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through disputed territory in Kashmir, are viewed by India as violations of sovereignty. Additionally, Chinese investments in ports such as Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) raise concerns about potential "dual-use" military capabilities. These developments intensify India's fears of strategic encirclement, often described as the "string of pearls" hypothesis. India's response to China's rise operates along three interconnected dimensions:

1. Military Deterrence and Strategic Balancing: India has significantly enhanced its border infrastructure, deployed additional troops in high-altitude regions, and accelerated military modernization. Naval expansion in the Indian Ocean reflects India's effort to maintain maritime dominance in its immediate neighborhood. According to Tellis (2016), India's growing strategic partnership with the United States and participation in the Quad represent forms of external balancing aimed at offsetting China's influence. However, India avoids framing its strategy as containment. Instead, it emphasizes maintaining a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific." This framing allows India to strengthen partnerships without formally declaring adversarial alignment.

2. Economic Caution and Technological Vigilance: Despite political tensions, China remains one of India's largest trading partners. However, the trade imbalance heavily favors China, raising economic security concerns. Following the 2020 border clashes, India imposed restrictions on Chinese technology firms and scrutinized foreign direct investment flows. This reflects a growing recognition that economic interdependence can generate strategic vulnerabilities. India's push for supply chain resilience initiatives with Japan, Australia, and the United States also reflects efforts to diversify economic dependencies. In a multipolar world, economic strategy becomes inseparable from geopolitical calculation.

3. Selective Multilateral Engagement: While competition defines bilateral relations, India continues to engage China in multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This dual-track approach underscores the complexity of multipolar geopolitics. As Amitav Acharya (2014) notes, multipolar systems are characterized by overlapping cooperation and rivalry.

Participation in BRICS allows India to collaborate with China on reforming global financial institutions, while the SCO provides a platform for regional security dialogue. Engagement in these institutions signals that competition does not preclude cooperation on shared interests such as counterterrorism and development financing. From a theoretical standpoint, India's China policy reflects strategic hedging—a combination of balancing and engagement. Hedging reduces the risks associated with both confrontation and accommodation. It preserves diplomatic space while enhancing deterrence capacity. Ultimately, managing China requires India to navigate a delicate balance between firmness and flexibility. Overconfrontation risks escalation; excessive accommodation risks strategic marginalization. In the era of multipolarity, India's calibrated approach—deterrence, diversification, and dialogue—represents a pragmatic adaptation to structural realities.

Russia and Strategic Continuity

While China represents India's primary strategic competitor, Russia remains one of its most enduring strategic partners. The India–Russia relationship is rooted in Cold War cooperation, particularly defense collaboration and diplomatic support during critical moments such as the 1971 Bangladesh War. Unlike many Cold War alignments, however, India's partnership with Moscow was framed within the doctrine of strategic autonomy rather than formal alliance. Russia continues to play a vital role in India's defense ecosystem. A substantial portion of India's military inventory originates from Russian platforms, including advanced missile systems, submarines, and fighter aircraft. Joint ventures such as the BrahMos missile project symbolize long-term technological collaboration. This defense interdependence creates structural continuity in bilateral relations.

Energy cooperation further strengthens ties. Russia is a significant supplier of crude oil and participates in India's nuclear energy sector. Civil nuclear cooperation agreements have facilitated reactor construction, enhancing India's energy diversification. The transformation of global politics since 2014—particularly Russia's deteriorating relations with the West—has placed India in a complex diplomatic position. As the United States deepened strategic cooperation with India, Russia simultaneously strengthened ties with China. This triangular dynamic created potential tensions in India's balancing strategy. India's response has been guided by strategic autonomy rather than bloc alignment. As Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2020) articulates, India must engage all major powers based on national interest rather than ideological alignment.

The Russia–Ukraine conflict tested this doctrine. While Western countries imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia, India adopted a cautious and neutral stance. It called for dialogue and diplomacy but refrained from direct condemnation. Simultaneously, India increased energy imports from Russia to stabilize domestic markets. From a realist perspective, India's behavior reflects classical balance-of-interest calculations. As Stephen Walt (1987) argues, states align against perceived threats rather than automatically following ideological preferences. For India, preserving access to Russian defense equipment and maintaining geopolitical flexibility outweighed pressure to conform to Western expectations. India's Russia policy also reflects historical trust and diplomatic capital accumulated over decades. Moscow has consistently supported India on issues such as Kashmir in multilateral forums. This legacy shapes contemporary decision-making.

At the same time, India gradually diversifies defense procurement and strengthens ties with Western suppliers, reducing overdependence on Russia. This gradual diversification illustrates continuity within adaptation—a hallmark of India's broader foreign policy approach. In a multipolar order marked by renewed great power rivalry, India's ability to maintain strong ties with Russia while deepening cooperation with the United States underscores its role as an independent pole. Rather than choosing sides, India seeks to maximize strategic space. This approach enhances its credibility as a potential mediator and reinforces its identity as a sovereign decision-maker. Thus, Russia represents both continuity and flexibility in India's foreign policy. The partnership reflects historical depth, strategic pragmatism, and resistance to bloc politics. In the era of multipolarity, India's engagement with Moscow demonstrates that autonomy remains not merely a rhetorical principle but an operational reality.

The Indo-Pacific and Maritime Strategy

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal geopolitical theatre of the twenty-first century. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, this vast maritime space encompasses the world's most dynamic economies, critical sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and intensifying great power competition. For India, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographical construct but a strategic reality that defines its security, economic prosperity, and global aspirations. Historically, India's strategic outlook was continental, shaped by land-based threats from Pakistan and China. However, the rise of China's naval capabilities and expanding presence in the Indian Ocean has reoriented India's strategic calculus toward maritime domains. According to C. Raja Mohan (2015), India's maritime turn reflects recognition that power in Asia increasingly depends on control over sea lanes and maritime chokepoints. The articulation of the "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) doctrine marked a conceptual milestone. SAGAR envisions a cooperative maritime order based on freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and inclusive development. Unlike zero-sum geopolitical frameworks, India frames the Indo-Pacific as a shared space rather than a bloc-based alliance system.

Maritime Significance for India

Approximately 90% of India's trade by volume and a substantial portion of its energy imports traverse maritime routes. Chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Bab el-Mandeb are vital for India's economic stability. Disruptions in these corridors would have severe strategic consequences. China's growing naval presence and infrastructure investments in ports across the Indian Ocean—often associated with the Belt and Road Initiative—have heightened Indian concerns about maritime encirclement. This has driven India to modernize its navy, enhance surveillance capabilities, and strengthen partnerships with like-minded states.

1. Naval Modernization and Strategic Partnerships

India has expanded its blue-water naval capabilities, commissioning advanced aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and long-range maritime patrol aircraft. Maritime domain awareness initiatives, joint exercises such as Malabar, and interoperability with Quad partners reflect India's strategic preparedness. The Quad—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—serves as a consultative platform rather than a formal military alliance. India consistently emphasizes that the Quad is not directed at any single country but seeks to uphold a rules-based maritime order. This rhetorical positioning underscores India's desire to balance deterrence with inclusivity. From a theoretical standpoint, India's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects soft balancing. Rather than confronting China directly, India strengthens networks of cooperation that indirectly constrain unilateral assertiveness. This aligns with Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory, where states respond to perceived threats through coalition-building without necessarily forming rigid alliances.

2. Inclusivity Over Containment

A defining feature of India's maritime strategy is its insistence on inclusivity. Unlike Cold War containment strategies, India does not advocate isolating China. Instead, it supports ASEAN centrality and emphasizes multilateral dialogue. This approach reflects what Amitav Acharya (2014) describes as a "multiplex world," where overlapping institutions coexist. India seeks to prevent polarization in the Indo-Pacific by encouraging cooperative security frameworks. Ultimately, India's Indo-Pacific strategy embodies calibrated realism—strengthening deterrence capabilities while promoting cooperative norms. Maritime power becomes not merely an instrument of defense but a platform for regional leadership in a multipolar era.

India and the Global South

India's foreign policy identity extends beyond power balancing; it encompasses normative aspirations rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and developmental equity. As one of the largest developing economies, India positions itself as a representative voice of the Global South in global governance debates. The intellectual roots of this orientation lie in India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement and its advocacy for a New International Economic Order during the 1970s. While the geopolitical context has changed, India continues to articulate concerns of developing nations regarding climate justice, debt sustainability, and equitable globalization.

1. Leadership in Multilateral Platforms

Hosting the G20 Summit marked a significant moment in India's diplomatic trajectory. By foregrounding the theme of "One Earth, One Family, One Future," India sought to bridge divides between developed and developing economies. According to Shivshankar Menon (2016), India's global engagement reflects a blend of realism and normative ambition. India has also spearheaded initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance, which promotes renewable energy cooperation among tropical countries. This initiative reinforces India's leadership in climate diplomacy and sustainable development.

2. Reforming Global Governance

India consistently advocates reform of the United Nations Security Council to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. It argues that the current structure underrepresents emerging powers and developing countries. India's claim to permanent membership rests on demographic weight, economic growth, democratic credentials, and contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. By championing institutional reform, India seeks to align global governance structures with multipolar realities.

3. Development Partnerships and South-South Cooperation

India's development diplomacy in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands emphasizes capacity-building, infrastructure development, and digital connectivity. Unlike some major powers, India frames its assistance as demand-driven and partnership-based rather than extractive. Theoretical interpretations of India's Global South leadership combine constructivism and soft power theory. India leverages civilizational heritage, democratic values, and developmental experience to project influence beyond material capabilities. In a multipolar world, normative legitimacy enhances strategic weight. By positioning itself as a bridge between developed and developing nations, India enhances its diplomatic credibility and strengthens its bid for global leadership.

Economic Diplomacy and Technological Power

Economic strength forms the backbone of India's foreign policy ambitions. In the contemporary era, economic diplomacy and technological innovation are inseparable from geopolitical influence. As global power becomes increasingly tied to supply chains, digital infrastructure, and advanced technologies, India's economic trajectory directly shapes its strategic leverage.

1. Trade and Supply Chain Resilience

India participates in trade negotiations and supply chain resilience initiatives aimed at reducing overdependence on single-country production networks. Collaboration with Japan, Australia, and the United States on critical minerals and semiconductor ecosystems illustrates this approach. Economic interdependence in multipolarity functions as both opportunity and vulnerability. While integration enhances growth, excessive dependency exposes states to coercive leverage. India's diversification efforts reflect awareness of this duality.

2. Digital Public Infrastructure and Technological Leadership

India's digital transformation has attracted global attention. Initiatives in digital identity, financial inclusion, and payment systems demonstrate scalable governance models. According to Jaishankar (2020), technological capability is now central to national power. India's expanding role in information technology services, pharmaceutical manufacturing, and space research enhances its global standing. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has achieved cost-effective satellite launches, reinforcing India's reputation as a technological innovator.

3. Semiconductor and Emerging Technology Cooperation

India has prioritized semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence research, and cybersecurity partnerships. These sectors are critical in shaping twenty-first-century geopolitics, where technological standards influence global influence. From a theoretical lens, economic diplomacy aligns with liberal interdependence theory while incorporating realist caution. States seek mutual gains through trade but remain vigilant against asymmetric dependencies.

4. Strategic Autonomy Through Economic Growth

Sustained economic growth enables military modernization, diplomatic outreach, and development assistance. Without economic strength, strategic autonomy becomes rhetorical rather than operational. India's demographic dividend, expanding middle class, and technological entrepreneurship provide structural advantages. However, challenges such as inequality, infrastructure gaps, and global economic volatility remain constraints. In the era of multipolarity, economic diplomacy and technological power are not peripheral tools—they are central pillars of statecraft. India's ability to integrate growth with strategic foresight will determine its long-term role as a leading power in the emerging global order.

V. Conclusion

The evolution of India's foreign policy in the era of multipolarity reflects both continuity and transformation. While the structural environment of international politics has shifted dramatically—from Cold War bipolarity to post-Cold War unipolarity and now toward multipolar diffusion—the foundational principle guiding India's external engagement has remained strategic autonomy. What has changed is not the objective but the method through which it is pursued. India's transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment illustrates this adaptive continuity. During the Cold War, non-alignment protected sovereignty amid superpower rivalry. In the contemporary era, multi-alignment enables India to engage simultaneously with competing power centers without succumbing to bloc politics. This recalibration reflects an acute awareness of the complexities of multipolar geopolitics, where rigid alliances may constrain rather than enhance national interest. Managing the China challenge has emerged as the central strategic imperative. Border tensions, maritime competition, and economic asymmetries have intensified rivalry, compelling India to enhance deterrence capabilities and strengthen partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Yet India continues to maintain channels of engagement with China through multilateral forums, demonstrating that competition and cooperation coexist in a multiplex global order.

Simultaneously, India's enduring ties with Russia underscore its resistance to binary geopolitical choices. Even amid global polarization, India has preserved defense, energy, and diplomatic engagement with Moscow while expanding cooperation with Western democracies. This balancing act reinforces India's identity as an autonomous actor rather than a subordinate ally. The Indo-Pacific strategy further illustrates India's evolving global role. By promoting a free, open, and inclusive maritime order under the SAGAR doctrine, India positions itself as both a security provider and a normative advocate of rule-based conduct. Its participation in the Quad reflects strategic convergence, yet its emphasis on inclusivity signals a deliberate avoidance of containment frameworks. Beyond security considerations, India's foreign policy increasingly integrates economic diplomacy and technological power. Trade diversification, supply chain resilience, semiconductor collaboration, digital public infrastructure, and space innovation collectively enhance India's global leverage. In a world where technological capability is inseparable from geopolitical influence, economic strength becomes the bedrock of strategic ambition.

Equally significant is India's aspiration to represent the Global South. By advocating climate justice, institutional reform, and equitable development, India seeks to bridge divides between advanced economies and

developing nations. This normative leadership complements material power accumulation and strengthens its claim to greater representation in global governance structures such as the United Nations Security Council. In sum, India's foreign policy in the era of multipolarity is characterized by calibrated pragmatism. It blends realism with normative ambition, balancing with engagement, and autonomy with partnership. Rather than choosing sides in great power rivalry, India seeks to shape the emerging order through diversified engagement and institutional participation. Whether India ultimately consolidates its position as a leading global power will depend on sustained economic growth, internal stability, and diplomatic agility. However, its current trajectory demonstrates a sophisticated and adaptive strategy suited to the uncertainties of a transforming global order.

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