

India's Foreign Policy in the Changing Global Order: Emerging Challenges and Strategic Priorities

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Abstract

India's foreign policy is being tested by the slow shift from a United States-led order to a more contested, multipolar system. This paper examines how India has adapted its external conduct, from Nehruvian non-alignment to what scholars now call multi-alignment and strategic autonomy. Using a qualitative, analytical method based on scholarly literature, official statements and international datasets published between 2014 and 2021, it assesses the features of the emerging order, the main challenges India faces, and the soft-power resources it can mobilise. The challenges include strategic competition with China, a hostile western frontier, energy dependence, climate and technology risks, and terrorism. The findings suggest that great-power rivalry has widened India's room for manoeuvre by giving it many willing partners, yet its capacity to use that room is limited by a smaller economic and military base than China's, unsettled borders and uneven institutional capacity. The paper argues that India's priorities should be to stabilise its continental frontier, deepen Indo-Pacific partnerships without formal alliance, secure energy and technology supply chains, and invest in global-governance reform and soft power.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy; strategic autonomy; multipolarity; Indo-Pacific; Global South; soft power

1.1 Introduction

In today's global scenario, the role of India's foreign policy is becoming more crucial to define India's international position, strategic interests, and role in global governance. The current international order is undergoing significant upheaval as a result of geopolitical rivalry, economic insecurity, technological innovation, regional tensions, and the rise of new power centres. Issues of growing competition between the United States and China, Russia-Ukraine dispute, West Asian instability and the evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics have made Indian diplomacy complex. India is one of the world's new emerging powers, which wants to preserve its strategic autonomy, and improve relations with both developed and developing states. It bases its foreign policy on national security, economic development, territorial integrity, energy security and on the promotion of international peace and stability. Under the policy of multi-alignment India has been able to reach out to various countries around the world through various fora including: United Nations, G20, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). This is a way to pursue Indian interests in the world while remaining not too beholden to any single global power. In addition, India's rising economic weight, technological strength, military modernization, and its diplomatic efforts have boosted its significance in international affairs. Yet the nation is still grappling with a host of issues such as cross-border terrorism, maritime security, competition for advanced

technologies and vital resources, climate change, global trade uncertainty and tensions with neighbouring countries. A foreign policy that is flexible, pragmatic and visionary that will take bilateral relations and multilateral commitments into account is required to tackle these challenges. India has to build up regional cooperation, deepen economy cooperation, encourage indigenous technological advancement, and play an active role in reforming international institutions in line with the new geopolitical fact and reality. It is, therefore, crucial to study India's foreign policy in the new global order in order to grasp the new challenges and priorities of the Indian foreign policy. The background of the present study is therefore major developments in India's external relations, challenges before Indian diplomatic efforts and strategic measures needed to be taken to protect the national interest and increase India's role as a responsible and influential global power. (Mohan, 2015).

1.2 Changing Nature of the Global Order

The international order that India now confronts differs sharply from the one it inherited. Power is diffusing from the West toward Asia, the institutions built after 1945 are under strain, and rival states increasingly use trade, technology and finance as instruments of coercion. Acharya (2017) describes the result as a “multiplex” world, one with many actors and no single hegemon, in which regional orders and global institutions coexist. China's economic and military growth, a more assertive Russia, the uncertainty surrounding United States leadership and the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic have all deepened this trend. For a country with India's ambitions, such a system offers opportunity and danger in equal measure.

1.3 Significance of India's Foreign Policy

India's choices matter well beyond its borders. It is a nuclear-armed state with more than a billion people, one of the world's largest economies, and a central position on the Indian Ocean sea lanes that carry much of the world's energy and trade (Brewster, 2014). Its foreign policy therefore shapes the balance of power in Asia, the prospects of the developing world in global negotiations, and the stability of the Indo-Pacific. How India reconciles autonomy with partnership will influence whether the emerging order is cooperative or confrontational.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To trace the evolution of India's foreign policy from non-alignment to strategic autonomy.
- To analyse the main features of the changing global order and India's place in it.
- To identify the principal challenges to India's foreign policy, traditional and non-traditional.

1.5 Scope and Significance of the Study

The study is analytical and qualitative. It draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, books by practitioners and academics, and international datasets, with the evidence base limited to publications and figures from 2014 to 2021. Quantitative series, such as military expenditure, trade and remittances, are used to illustrate arguments rather than to test hypotheses. The study is significant because it links India's doctrinal evolution to concrete constraints and offers a compact set of priorities that policy-makers and students of international relations can examine and debate.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Meaning and Determinants of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is the set of goals, decisions and instruments through which a state pursues its interests in relation to other states and international institutions. Its determinants are both external and internal: geography, history, economic capacity, military strength, domestic politics, the beliefs of leaders and the structure of the international system (Basrur & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017). In India's case, a long land border with two nuclear-armed neighbours, a vast maritime frontier, a large developmental deficit and a plural society all press upon policy-makers at once (Jaishankar, 2020).

2.2 Theories of International Relations and Foreign Policy

There are three general ways of understanding Indian behaviour. Realism emphasises power, security and balancing and offers an understanding of India's nuclear arsenal, its military modernisation and its increasing ties with those who are concerned about China. Liberal institutionalism emphasises cooperation through rules and organisations, and makes sense of India's participation in the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and the G20.

Constructivism identifies identity and ideas as factors which shape what India considers legitimate and desirable, such as a postcolonial identity and civilisational claims. None of these alone is enough, and Indian foreign policy needs to be explained through a blend of structural pressure and domestic ideas, Pant (2019) writes.

The interests of the nation in the case of India have been the security, economic growth and recognition as a major power. These are accomplished by strategic autonomy, or the ability to make decisions according to one's own judgement on the matter, without having to rely on a bloc (Pant & Super, 2015). It's not neutrality. The modern-day version is more aptly defined as multi-alignment, with India developing partnerships based on issues with several states, including one another's rivals, without forming an alliance, suggests Hall (2016).

On the one hand, hard power is based on military and economic power, and, on the other, soft power is based on attraction—whether by a culture, values, or policies that others deem legitimate, as Nye (2019) puts it. In a way, India's hard power capability is still small compared to that of China, making its non-coercive instruments like democratic institutions, size of its diaspora, popular culture more valuable (Thussu, 2016). The two types of power complement each other: soft power tempers the resistance of the partners, and hard power enables soft power to be credible.

India's 'defensive scepticism' has now shifted to 'constructive selective engagement', which argues terms over what it would not do. Narlikar (2017) refers to this as a “modi-fication” of India's position in global governance, where it is more inclined towards taking an active part in the formulation of agendas in the areas of climate, trade facilitation and maritime security, while being cautious about any binding obligation that can affect its sovereignty. India is now a member of grouping of very different nature like the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), G20 and the Quad and each has a specific purpose.

3. Evolution of India's Foreign Policy

3.1 Foreign Policy During the Nehruvian Era

Between 1947 and 1964 Nehru gave Indian diplomacy its founding vocabulary. He championed Asian solidarity and decolonisation, signed the Panchsheel principles with China in 1954, and helped to launch the Non-Aligned Movement. The approach sought to keep India out of Cold War military blocs while securing aid and prestige from both sides (Ganguly, 2016). Its limits were exposed in the 1962 border war with China, which forced a more sober view of military preparedness.

3.2 Non-Alignment and the Cold War

In the following decades non-alignment became more pragmatic. India drew closer to the Soviet Union, signing the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in the run-up to the Bangladesh war, and conducted a nuclear test in 1974 to assert its security autonomy. Non-alignment thus served as a hedge, allowing India to extract arms and diplomatic support from Moscow while keeping its distance from Washington (Pant & Super, 2015).

3.3 Post-Cold War Foreign Policy Transformation

The collapse of the Soviet Union and a balance-of-payments crisis in 1991 forced a reorientation. Economic liberalisation, the Look East policy of 1992 and engagement with the United States reflected the belief that prosperity was the base of power (Malone, Mohan & Raghavan, 2015). The 1998 nuclear tests declared India a nuclear weapon state, and the civil nuclear agreement with the United States, concluded between 2005 and 2008, ended a long period of technology denial.

3.4 India's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century

Since 2014 the government has emphasised “Neighbourhood First”, upgraded Look East into Act East, and framed maritime policy through the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision announced in 2015 (Brewster, 2014; Mohan, 2015). The revival of the Quad, a dialogue among India, the United States, Japan and Australia, in 2017 marked a clearer willingness to coordinate with like-minded states on Indo-Pacific security.

3.5 From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

The movement from non-alignment to strategic autonomy is more a change of method than of purpose. Jaishankar (2020) argues that India must now engage all major powers, maximise options and take risks that its predecessors avoided. Table 1 summarises the five phases discussed above.

Table 1: Phases of India's foreign policy, 1947–2021

Phase	Period	Guiding idea	Key features
Idealist non-alignment	1947–1962	Panchsheel, anti-colonial solidarity	Support for decolonisation; UN-centred diplomacy; 1962 war with China exposes gaps
Pragmatic non-alignment	1962–1991	Autonomy with a Soviet tilt	Indo-Soviet treaty (1971); nuclear test (1974); regional primacy
Liberalisation and engagement	1991–2004	Economic diplomacy, Look East	Market reforms; ASEAN ties; nuclear tests (1998); dialogue with the United States

Rising-power diplomacy	2004–2014	Global role through groupings	Civil nuclear agreement; BRICS and G20 participation; naval expansion
Multi-alignment	2014–2021	Strategic autonomy, issue-based partnerships	Act East; Neighbourhood First; Indo-Pacific vision; revived Quad

Source: Compiled by the author from Ganguly (2016), Malone, Mohan & Raghavan (2015), Hall (2016) and Jaishankar (2020).

4. India and the Changing Global Order

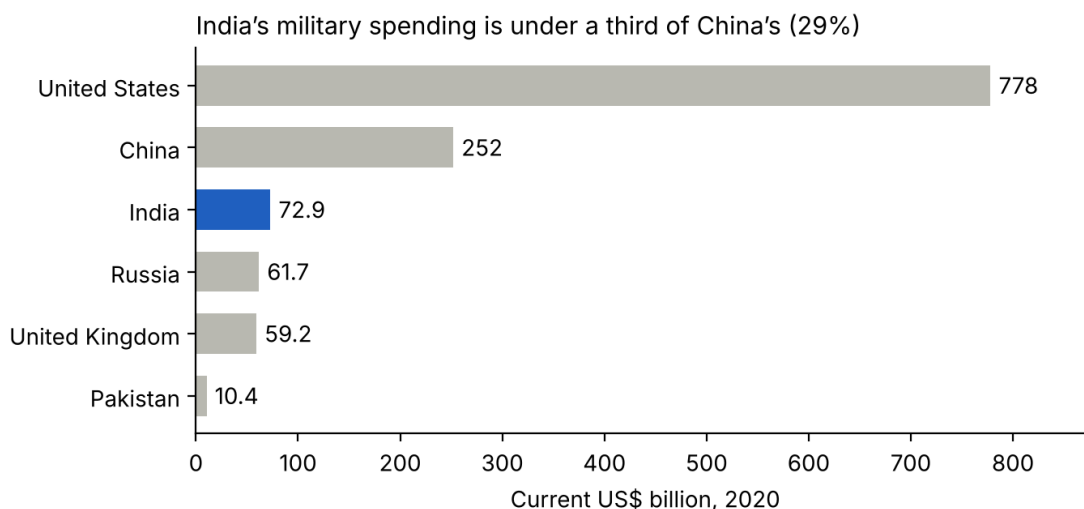
4.1 Rise of a Multipolar International System

The post-1991 “unipolar moment” has given way to a system with several centres of power, among them the United States, China, the European Union, Russia and, increasingly, India itself. In such a system no state can set the rules alone, alliances are more fluid and middle powers gain bargaining leverage (Acharya, 2017). India benefits because it can negotiate with several suitors, but it also faces pressure to choose sides on issues such as technology standards, sanctions and maritime disputes.

4.2 Changing Role of the United States and China

The United States remains the strongest military and technological power, yet its domestic divisions, its trade confrontation with China after 2018 and its calls for allies to bear more of the burden have changed expectations. For India, Washington has become a major defence and technology partner, as shown by the foundational agreements on logistics (2016), communications security (2018) and geospatial cooperation (2020). China, by contrast, is both India’s largest neighbour and its principal strategic competitor, a relationship Smith (2014) describes as a “cold peace” of rivalry without open war. Graph 1 shows the scale of the military gap.

Graph 1: Military expenditure of selected countries, 2020 (US\$ billion)



Source: SIPRI figures for 2020 (Tian et al., 2021); current US\$ billion.

India is the world's third-largest military spender, but the distance from China is wide, and Pakistan's smaller budget does not remove the burden of facing both neighbours at once (Tian et al., 2021).

4.3 Russia and the Changing Geopolitical Landscape

Russia remains India's oldest strategic partner and a major source of weapons, including the S-400 air-defence systems India agreed to buy in 2018. Moscow's deepening alignment with Beijing, however, complicates the relationship. India has responded by diversifying its arms purchases while keeping Russia engaged in forums such as the BRICS and the SCO (Jaishankar, 2020).

4.4 Emerging Role of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific has replaced the Asia-Pacific as the principal strategic frame, joining the Indian and Pacific oceans in a single theatre. India endorsed the concept formally in 2018 and stresses an open, rules-based and inclusive order centred on ASEAN (Medcalf, 2020). Its geography gives it a natural role in securing sea lanes and the Indian Ocean, a region in which Chinese naval and port activity has expanded (Brewster, 2014).

4.5 Global South and India's Leadership Role

India presents itself as a voice for developing countries on trade, climate finance and technology access. During the pandemic its "Vaccine Maitri" initiative from 2021 supplied vaccine doses to dozens of countries, reinforcing a self-image as a first responder. Such leadership is credible only if domestic delivery and economic performance sustain it (Narlikar, 2017).

4.6 Multilateral Institutions and Global Governance

India has long argued that the Security Council, the Bretton Woods bodies and other institutions reflect a 1945 distribution of power. It seeks a permanent Security Council seat, works with Brazil, Germany and Japan in the G4, and joined the Council as a non-permanent member for 2021–22. At the same time it uses groupings that cross ideological lines, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Major groupings in which India participates

Grouping	Origin	Character	India's purpose
BRICS	First summit 2009	Large emerging economies	Reform of global finance; voice for developing states; New Development Bank
SCO	2001; India a full member from 2017	Eurasian security and economic body	Counter-terrorism; access to Central Asia
G20	Leaders' level from 2008	Major economies	Shaping global economic governance
East Asia Summit	2005	ASEAN-centred forum	Anchor of Act East; Indo-Pacific dialogue
Quad	Informal 2007; revived 2017	Four-democracy dialogue	Maritime security; supply-chain and technology cooperation

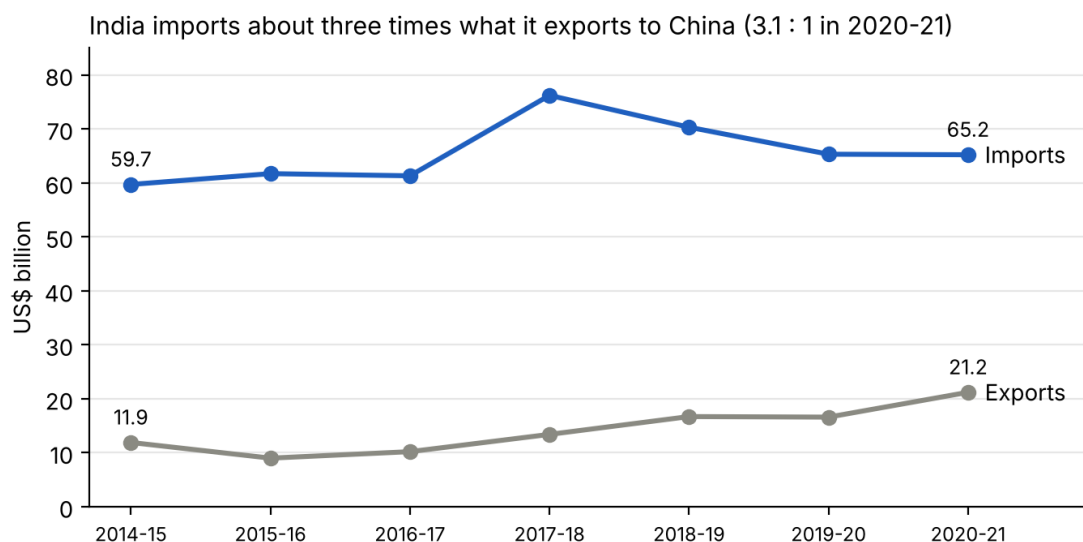
Source: Compiled by the author from Narlikar (2017), Medcalf (2020) and Jaishankar (2020).

5. Emerging Challenges to India's Foreign Policy

5.1 India–China Strategic Competition

The relationship with China is the most consequential test. Border stand-offs at Doklam in 2017 and the deadly clash in the Galwan valley in June 2020 ended any hope that boundary differences could be set aside while trade and diplomacy grew (Bajpai, Ho & Miller, 2020). Beyond the frontier, India worries about Chinese ports, loans and infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative, including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor that crosses disputed territory (Brewster, 2014). Economic interdependence is lopsided: as Graph 2 shows, India buys roughly three times as much from China as it sells, which leaves it dependent on Chinese electronics, machinery and pharmaceutical inputs even as it seeks to reduce exposure.

Graph 2: India's merchandise trade with China, 2014–15 to 2020–21 (US\$ billion)



Source: Approximate, rounded figures compiled from Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2021) trade data.

5.2 Regional Security and Border Challenges

India's neighbourhood is politically volatile and increasingly contested. Nepal's 2020 map dispute, shifting politics in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, Chinese lending in several neighbouring states and the changing situation in Afghanistan in 2021 all test the "Neighbourhood First" approach. India's advantages of size and proximity can breed resentment unless matched by credible connectivity, credit and disaster-relief offers (Mohan, 2015).

5.3 India–Pakistan Relations

Relations with Pakistan remain frozen by terrorism and the Kashmir dispute. India responded to the 2016 Uri attack with cross-border strikes and to the 2019 Pulwama attack with an air strike at Balakot, thereby lowering its threshold for military retaliation. Fair (2014) argues that the Pakistani army's strategic culture treats India as a permanent adversary and tolerates militant proxies as an instrument, which limits the usefulness of dialogue. A renewed ceasefire

understanding in February 2021 reduced violence on the Line of Control but did not resolve the underlying dispute.

5.4 Global Geopolitical Conflicts

It is directly affected by conflicts not in India. The rivalry between the United States and China forces India to make choices on technology and the South China Sea; the continuing conflict between the West and Russia poses a threat to millions of Indians living in the Gulf, as well as to the oil flowing from it; and the situation in West Asia is becoming dangerous for Indians as well as the countries in the region. Abstention and issue-based voting have been the traditional Indian response that preserves flexibility but invites criticism for being ambiguous (Hall, 2016).

India is dependent on crude oil imports of more than 80 per cent, and a significant proportion of gas supplies, and is thus exposed to crude oil price volatility and supply shortages (International Energy Agency, 2021). Hence, energy diplomacy is all about diversifying energy suppliers, building strategic petroleum reserves, foreign investment in oilfields and promoting renewables. Economic security is also related to supply chains, rare minerals and investment screening.

India is extremely vulnerable to climate change and also contributes substantially to climate change in absolute terms, but in relative terms it is not. It had pledged in 2015 to cut down the emission intensity of GDP by 33-35 per cent from 2005 level by 2030 and to increase the percentage of non-fossil sources in the installed power generation capacity to approximately 40 per cent (Government of India, 2015). It has emphasized on equity and common but differentiated responsibilities in diplomacy, and co-founded the International Solar Alliance with France in 2015.

Technology has grown into a key issue for foreign policy. In 2020, India banned many Chinese applications due to security of data and telecommunications security chains and dependence on foreign platforms, and tightened regulations on trusted equipment suppliers. India needs to use technology as a geopolitical tool, and must work with its partners in semiconductor, AI and DPGs while safeguarding its own data, Jaishankar (2020) writes.

5.8 Terrorism and Non-Traditional Security Threats

Cross-border terrorism remains the gravest non-traditional threat, joined by maritime piracy, pandemics, irregular migration and disinformation. India has sought counter-terrorism cooperation through bilateral agreements and forums such as the SCO and has pressed for a comprehensive international convention on terrorism (Fair, 2014). Table 3 summarises the main challenges and India's responses.

Table 3: Emerging challenges and India's responses, 2014–2021

Challenge	Nature of the problem	India's response
China competition	Border stand-offs (2017, 2020); trade imbalance; Indian Ocean presence	Military build-up on the border; app bans and investment screening; Quad cooperation

Pakistan	Cross-border terrorism; Kashmir dispute	Cross-border strikes (2016, 2019); diplomatic pressure; ceasefire understanding (2021)
Neighbourhood	Chinese influence; political volatility	Neighbourhood First; lines of credit; connectivity projects
Energy security	Over 80% crude oil import dependence	Supplier diversification; strategic reserves; renewables; Solar Alliance
Climate change	High vulnerability; equity in burden-sharing	2015 national pledge; adaptation diplomacy; solar leadership
Technology and cyber	Supply-chain dependence; data security	Trusted-supplier rules; data protection; technology partnerships
Non-traditional threats	Terrorism, piracy, pandemics	Counter-terror cooperation; naval patrols; vaccine supplies

Source: Compiled by the author from Fair (2014), Bajpai, Ho & Miller (2020), Jaishankar (2020) and Government of India (2015).

6. India's Soft Power and Global Influence

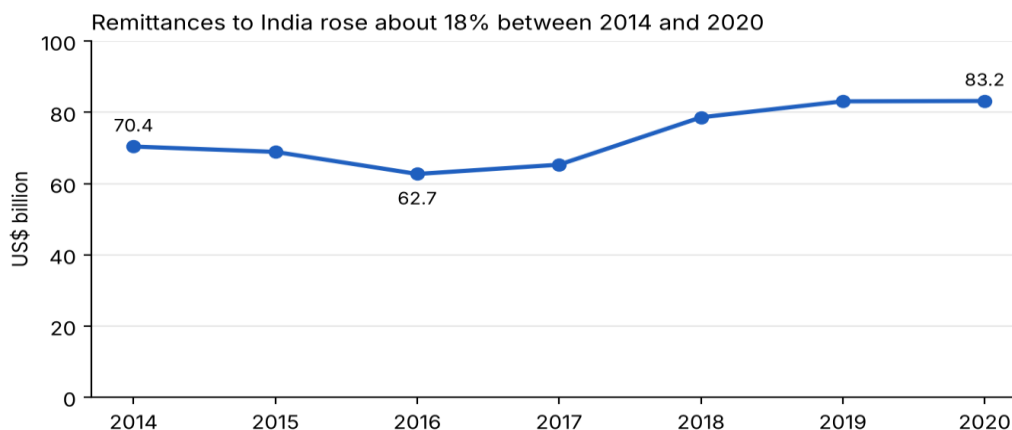
6.1 Cultural Diplomacy

India's cultural resources are wide-ranging: cinema, music, cuisine, spiritual traditions, festivals and literature. State institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations operate cultural centres abroad, while popular cinema has carried Indian images into Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East for decades (Thussu, 2016). Nye (2019) reminds us that such attraction works best when it is rooted in civil society and is not seen as propaganda.

6.2 Diaspora and People-to-People Relations

The Indian diaspora, among the largest in the world, is a bridge to host societies, a source of investment and a political constituency. It also sustains an economic lifeline: remittances were close to US\$83 billion in 2020, shown in Graph 3, and proved resilient even through the pandemic (World Bank, 2021). Diaspora ties help explain India's warm access to the Gulf, North America and the United Kingdom.

Graph 3: Remittance inflows to India, 2014–2020 (US\$ billion)



Source: World Bank (2021), Migration and Development Brief 34; 2020 estimated.

6.3 Development Partnerships and Humanitarian Assistance

India extends lines of credit, training and technical assistance to Africa, South Asia and the Indian Ocean states, usually on demand-driven terms that it contrasts with conditional aid. It has also acted as a first responder in natural disasters and, in 2021, supplied vaccines abroad. Such programmes build goodwill, although delays in project delivery have weakened the effect in some cases (Mohan, 2015).

6.4 Yoga, Education and Knowledge Diplomacy

The United Nations declared an International Day of Yoga in December 2014, first observed on 21 June 2015, a rare example of an Indian initiative adopted quickly and broadly. Scholarships and short courses offered to students from developing countries, together with a growing technology and start-up sector, give India a knowledge-based presence that complements its political outreach (Thussu, 2016).

6.5 India's Global Image and Diplomatic Outreach

India's image rests on its democratic system, its economic potential and its pluralist traditions, and it has been actively promoted through high-level visits and large diaspora events (Hall, 2019). Image is also vulnerable. Domestic controversies, the quality of public services and international criticism of particular policies can erode the credibility of the claim to be a responsible and inclusive power, and soft power therefore needs continuing domestic investment.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Summary of Findings

Five findings emerge from the analysis. First, India's foreign policy shows continuity of purpose, namely autonomy, and change of method, since non-alignment has given way to issue-based multi-alignment (Hall, 2016; Pant & Super, 2015). Second, multipolarity increases India's options but also the cost of misjudgement. Third, China is the dominant structural challenge: the military gap in Graph 1 and the trade dependence in Graph 2 show that India must compete with a stronger state on which it also relies. Fourth, the diaspora and remittances in Graph 3 and cultural reach give India influence that its material power alone would not. Fifth, non-traditional threats such as terrorism, climate risk and cyber vulnerability now demand as much attention as border security.

7.2 India's Foreign Policy Opportunities and Constraints

The same features of the international system supply both openings and limits. Rivalry among great powers makes India a sought-after partner, yet its economy is still much smaller than China's, its defence industry depends on imports and its diplomatic service is relatively small for a country of its size (Jaishankar, 2020). Table 4 sets out this balance.

Table 4: Opportunities and constraints in India's foreign policy

Dimension	Opportunities	Constraints
Security	Defence partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia and France; Indian Ocean position	Pressure on two fronts; defence spending far below China's; reliance on arms imports

Economy and technology	Large market; supply-chain diversification; digital capacity	Trade deficit with China; modest manufacturing base; oil dependence
Diplomacy	Many partners; membership of rival groupings; Security Council seat 2021–22	Stalled Security Council reform; perceived ambiguity in positions
Soft power	Diaspora; yoga; cinema; development partnerships	Domestic image concerns; slow project delivery
Global governance	Voice for the Global South; climate and solar leadership	Equity disputes; limited financing capacity

Source: Author's synthesis based on Jaishankar (2020), Narlikar (2017), Medcalf (2020) and Tian et al. (2021).

7.3 Strategic Priorities in the Emerging Global Order

Four priorities follow from the analysis. The first is to stabilise the continental frontier through a mixture of deterrence, infrastructure and negotiation, so that attention can turn to the maritime domain. The second is to build comprehensive national power, since economic growth and technological capacity are the foundations of autonomy (Basrur & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017). The third is to deepen Indo-Pacific partnerships in flexible coalitions rather than treaty alliances. The fourth is to secure energy, supply chains and data, which are now strategic assets.

7.4 Implications for India's Global Position

If these priorities are pursued, India can move from being a balancing power in Asia to a net provider of security and public goods in the Indian Ocean and the developing world, a trajectory that Medcalf (2020) associates with the emergence of a genuinely multipolar Indo-Pacific. If they are neglected, India risks drifting between blocs without the capacity to bargain with any of them. The outcome depends as much on domestic performance as on external diplomacy.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions

India's foreign policy has adapted to a changing world by retaining its commitment to autonomy while widening its partnerships. The shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment has served the country well so far, yet the emerging order is less forgiving. China's power, instability on the western frontier, dependence on imported energy and technology, and transnational threats limit what diplomacy alone can achieve. At the same time India has real assets: a large market, a skilled diaspora, a strategic location and a reputation for democratic pluralism and development cooperation.

The analysis supports the following suggestions:

1. Combine deterrence and dialogue with China, improving border infrastructure and maintaining diplomatic channels to prevent escalation.
2. Strengthen the economic and technological base through manufacturing, research and defence production, which underpin every other foreign-policy goal.
3. Pursue issue-based Indo-Pacific coalitions, including the Quad, ASEAN-centred forums and European partners, without formal alliance obligations.

4. Secure energy and supply chains by diversifying suppliers, expanding strategic reserves and accelerating renewables.
5. Make neighbourhood diplomacy credible by delivering connectivity and credit projects on time.
6. Invest in soft power and in diplomatic capacity, including a larger and more specialised foreign service and sustained support for diaspora engagement.
7. Press for reform of global institutions while building coalitions with other developing countries on climate, trade and technology.

Future research could test these priorities against detailed case studies of particular bilateral relationships and update the quantitative evidence presented here as new data become available.

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