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India's foreign policy from Panchsheel to Panchamrit: A new strategic ties with China

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Abstract

India's foreign policy has undergone a profound transformation from the normative idealism of Panchsheel to Panchamrit in the contemporary era. The Panchsheel Agreement between India and China, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, sought to institutionalize trust and mutual respect between two postcolonial Asian powers. The articulation of Panchamrit under Prime Minister Narendra Modi reflects a recalibrated doctrine emphasizing national security, economic growth, global responsibility, cultural pride, and strategic partnerships (SPMRF, 2022). The post-Cold War era, while economic engagement deepened and bilateral trade surged, strategic mistrust persisted, culminating in crises like the Doklam standoff and the Galwan Valley clashes (2020), which reshaped Indian perceptions of China (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2023). Against the backdrop of China's assertiveness and shifting global power structures, India's evolving policy reflects a hybrid of deterrence and diversification of alliances. This article is mostly based on historical analysis and uses secondary data and Government documents. It shows that India's trajectory from Panchsheel to Panchamrit demonstrates a pragmatic rebalancing of idealism and realism. It is a new strategic move of India towards the foreign policy to specially deal with China.

Keywords: India-China relations, border disputes, strategic autonomy, Panchsheel Panchamrit doctrine

Introduction

India's foreign policy has historically oscillated between normative idealism and pragmatic realism. Among the earliest formulations of post-independence diplomacy was the doctrine of Panchsheel the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence jointly articulated by India and China in the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with the Tibet Region of China (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 1954) ^[10]. Panchsheel soon became not only a bilateral framework with China but also a cornerstone of India's advocacy for non-alignment in the Cold War (Gupta, 2012) ^[13]. In recent years, Indian foreign policy has shifted toward a more multi-dimensional framework often described as PANCHAMRIT, a set of five guiding commitments articulated under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While Panchsheel emphasized coexistence and sovereignty, Panchamrit emphasizes samman, suraksha, samriddhi, sanskriti evam sabhyata, and samvad (SPMRF, 2022) ^[25]. China's rising assertiveness, particularly along the Himalayan frontiers and in the Indo-Pacific, has catalyzed this recalibration. The Galwan clashes of 2020, resulting in the first combat fatalities on the LAC in 45 years, profoundly altered Indian perceptions of China as a strategic partner (CFR, 2023) ^[5]. In response, India has tightened foreign direct investment (FDI) regulations on Chinese companies, strengthened border infrastructure, and expanded partnerships with like-minded powers through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Thus, the trajectory from Panchsheel to Panchamrit encapsulates India's evolving foreign policy posture toward China: a journey from normative principles to pragmatic strategic balancing. This article argues that while Panchsheel provided the ideological foundation of India's foreign policy, Panchamrit reflects its adaptive capacity to navigate 21st-century challenges managing rivalry with China while seeking to safeguard sovereignty, expand economic opportunities, and assert India's role as a rising power in the global order.

Historical Overview

India China relations were laid with the signing of the agreement on Trade and Intercourse Between the Tibet Region of China and India in April 1954. This accord articulated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence is called Panchsheel. Its respect for “sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence” (MEA, 1954) ^[10]. The principles were later endorsed at the 1955 Bandung Conference, gaining global recognition (Acharya, 2014). Despite the early spirit of friendship symbolized by the slogan “Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai”, Fault lines soon emerged over the disputed boundary. By the late 1950s, tensions escalated following the Chinese construction of a road through Aksai Chin and India’s asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959.

The 1962 India China War marked the collapse of the Panchsheel spirit. China’s swift military victory and occupation of Aksai Chin shattered the trust underpinning bilateral ties. India lost approximately 38,000 square kilometers of territory, and relations entered a prolonged freeze (Garver, 2001) ^[7]. The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control and the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field were landmark steps in stabilizing the frontier (MEA, 1996) ^[11]. These accords institutionalized restraint and communication, reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation. As China’s global influence expanded through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. India grew wary of strategic encirclement, particularly given the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Despite summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram that emphasized dialogue, tensions escalated along the LAC. In October 2024, a disengagement agreement between both militaries facilitated troop withdrawals in Eastern Ladakh, signaling a cautious de-escalation (Reuters, 2024) ^[22]. Against this backdrop, Indian foreign policy discourse has increasingly invoked Panchamrit a set of five priorities: samman, suraksh, samriddhi, sanskriti evam sabhyata, and samvad as guiding principles of India’s external engagement (SPMRF, 2022) ^[25].

The Meaning of Panchamrit in Foreign Policy

The concept of Panchamrit literally means the “five nectars” in Sanskrit has been repurposed in India’s foreign policy discourse to describe a framework of guiding commitments for external engagement in the 21st century. While Panchsheel (1954) symbolized the normative principles of peaceful coexistence in an idealist internationalist framework, Panchamrit represents a shift toward a more pragmatic, multidimensional, and assertive foreign policy approach. Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi first articulated the idea of Panchamrit in the context of India’s foreign engagement as a set of five commitments that underline India’s role in the global order (SPMRF, 2022) ^[25]. This framework includes as follows:

1. **Samman:** India seeks recognition as a responsible power that commands global respect. This reflects a shift from the postcolonial anxiety of securing legitimacy to asserting India’s civilizational identity and diplomatic weight in global forums (Saran, 2017).
2. **Suraksha:** National security, particularly in the context of China along the Himalayan frontiers and maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific, has become a central

pillar. India’s enhanced defense modernization, partnerships through the Quad, and assertive border management illustrate this dimension (Pant & Joshi, 2020) ^[19].

3. **Samriddhi:** Economic diplomacy and trade integration are emphasized as tools of national strength. Despite a growing trade deficit with China exceeding USD 100 billion in 2022-23 (Ministry of Commerce, 2023) ^[9] India has pursued diversification through partnerships with the US, EU, ASEAN, and AFRICA. Economic growth is increasingly seen as a core driver of India’s strategic influence.
4. **Sanskriti evam Sabhyata:** Indian foreign policy has integrated soft power tools such as yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, and the International Day of Yoga (recognized by the UN in 2015). This cultural diplomacy is used to position India as a civilizational state with global relevance (Nye, 2004; Thussu, 2013) ^[18, 26].
5. **Samvad:** India emphasizes dialogue not only with major powers but also within multilateral frameworks. This includes active participation in organizations like the G20, BRICS, SCO, and the UN, as well as South-South cooperation (MEA, 2023) ^[12]. The G20 presidency in 2023 was framed by New Delhi as an exercise in inclusive multilateralism under the theme “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (MEA, 2023) ^[12].

Continuity & Change: From Nehru’s Panchsheel to Modi’s Panchamrit

The terms Panchsheel and Panchamrit summon two very different moments in Indian foreign policy vocabulary. Panchsheel the five Principles of peaceful coexistence articulated publicly in 1954 became a moral-normative framework for newly independent states, emphasising mutual respect for territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. It was rooted in early-postcolonial idealism and an effort to craft a principled, multilateral posture for India in a bipolar world. By contrast, Panchamrit literally “five nectars” entered the lexicon as a series of concrete commitments announced by Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi at COP26 in Glasgow (November 2021) ^[28] and is most widely understood as five pragmatic climate-related pledges including net-zero emissions by 2070, reaching 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030 and others. Panchamrit is policy-specific, measurable, and oriented to global leadership in a specific policy arena. Where Panchsheel sought to define India’s role as a principled leader among decolonizing states and a promoter of non-alignment, later policy frameworks including Panchamrit continue to seek international status, strategic autonomy and the safeguarding of national interests, albeit through different tools (development goals, technology, finance and security partnerships). Where Panchsheel represents normative universalism and ambiguity Principles that are broad, moral and hard to operationalize, Panchamrit marks a shift toward instrumental, outcome-oriented diplomacy.

Implications for Indian foreign policy

The articulation and partial operationalization of Panchamrit has enhanced India’s visibility as a responsible global actor. By Committing to Net-Zero emissions by 2070, aiming for 500 GW of non-fossil energy capacity by 2030, India has

put forward concrete, measurable targets. These commitments have improved India's standing in several ways such as: India reports that it is on track to achieve its Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs among the G20 nations. This reinforces confidence among international partners that India is not just promising but acting. Soft power and global leadership: India is convening or co-founding multilateral climate-coalitions that amplify its role as a convener of action among both developed and developing countries. Strategic advantages: Aligning energy transition with infrastructure growth, renewables manufacturing, and technology investment reinforces India's case as a rising power with a sustainable growth model. This can attract foreign investment, boost trade relations, and increase leverage in global forums. The Panchamrit framework also helps India reassert a leadership role among developing countries. Articulating a differentiated pathway: India's insistence on "Common But Differentiated Responsibilities" and emphasizing that developing countries have different capacities reflects concerns typical in Global South discourse.

Critical Perspectives

While Panchamrit represents a bold step in India's foreign policy and climate diplomacy, several scholars and experts have raised concerns that temper optimism. These critiques focus on financing, grid and infrastructure constraints, the deep entrenchment of coal in India's energy mix, and political feasibility.

Financing Gaps: A recent bottom-up estimate focusing on four major sectors (power, steel, cement, and road transport) finds that India needs US\$467 billion in additional climate finance by 2030 (about US\$54 billion annually) to meet its mitigation goals beyond business-as-usual levels. Of this, the power sector alone requires US\$57 billion (US\$47 billion for switching from fossil to renewable, and US\$10 billion for storage solutions). These financing shortfalls mean that many Panchamrit targets, especially ambitious ones like Energy storage deployment, and renewable integration depend heavily on external capital, favorable interest rates, and regulatory certainty etc.

Grid & Infrastructure Challenges: The variability of solar and wind, together with limited storage, puts stress on India's grid. A parametric modelling study finds that demand growth, supply-side uncertainty, and insufficient storage make it difficult to balance real-time load under high renewable penetration. Renewables without adequate grid flexibility or storage could lead to frequent curtailment or wastage. Infrastructure projects intended to integrate renewables such as the Green Energy Corridors are delayed, and grid connectivity remains weak in many regions. These limitations reduce the ability to make full use of installed renewable capacity for India.

Political Feasibility & Socioeconomic Factors: Coal mining and coal power plants are major employment sources in many states; any rapid phase-out without provisions for "just transition" risks political pushback. The review by Debnath *et al.* notes social disruption from the transition could be large if jobs or livelihoods are not protected. Energy access remains uneven; per capita electricity consumption in India is much lower than global

averages. Maintaining reliability, affordability, and expansion of electricity access especially in rural and remote regions limits how fast India can shift away from coal without risking energy shortages or high costs.

Global Perception: Public opinion surveys reveal strong domestic confidence. an IPSOS Global Survey (2023) found that 70% of Indians believe their country is a world leader in climate action, more than respondents in many advanced and Middle-income countries. The announcement of the Panchamrit commitments at COP26 (Glasgow, 2021) ^[28] was widely hailed as a landmark in India's climate diplomacy. On the positive side, global climate leaders such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Though later than developed countries, it was significant because it came from the third-largest carbon emitter (UNFCCC, 2021) ^[28]. The emphasis on renewable capacity expansion to 500 GW by 2030 was considered both ambitious and aligned with global climate justice debates, reinforcing India's moral argument that it is contributing despite historical inequities (Ghosh, 2022) ^[8]. However, critical perceptions also emerged. International media and climate analysts noted that India's heavy reliance on coal, still generating around 70% of its electricity in 2023 (IEA, 2023) ^[14] created doubts about the feasibility of the Panchamrit goals. Some scholars termed it a case of "climate dualism" where India is simultaneously seen as a climate leader in renewable energy scaling and as a coal-dependent economy reluctant to commit to early decarbonization (Jakob & Steckel, 2022) ^[15]. In addition countries in the Global South largely welcomed Panchamrit, seeing it as a template that balances development imperatives with sustainability goals (Sengupta, 2023) ^[24].

Future Outlooks of Panchamrit: The Panchamrit framework marks a decisive step in India's climate diplomacy, but its long-term trajectory will depend on how effectively pledges are translated into policy and action. Looking ahead, several key outlooks can be identified as described below.

i) Energy Transition Pathways: India's target to achieve 500 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030 requires rapid expansion of solar, wind, hydro, and nuclear power. Projections by the IEA (IEA, 2023) ^[14] suggest that India must add around 35-40 GW of renewable capacity annually, a pace nearly double the current average. Future success hinges on addressing challenges such as grid integration, storage technologies, and transmission infrastructure.

ii) Financing Green Growth: The Panchamrit agenda cannot be realized without substantial international climate finance. Estimates by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW, 2022) ^[14] place India's financing needs at \$170 billion annually through 2030 to stay on track. The G20 New Delhi Declaration (2023) emphasized India's role in shaping a global consensus on financing mechanisms, but uncertainty remains about actual fund flows, especially from developed nations that have yet to meet the \$100 billion annual commitment under the Paris Agreement.

iii) Balancing Development and Decarbonization: India's future outlook is shaped by the development-decarbonization dilemma. With nearly 240 million people

still lacking access to clean cooking fuel (UNEP, 2022) ^[27], India must ensure that climate action does not compromise poverty alleviation and energy access. The “Just Energy Transition” approach balancing growth with equity will likely dominate future debates on Panchamrit.

iv) Geopolitical and Global South Leadership: India’s Panchamrit commitments also project particularly in articulating the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. In the coming years, India is expected to leverage forums like BRICS, G20, and the ISA to champion climate justice and South-South cooperation. Analysts argue that India’s ability to build coalitions among developing nations will determine whether Panchamrit evolves into a global model of sustainable development (Sengupta, 2023) ^[24].

Conclusion

India’s foreign policy has moved from the idealism of Panchsheel to the pragmatism of Panchamrit. It’s reflecting how national interests adapt to changing global realities. Panchsheel, framed in partnership with China, promoted non-interference and peaceful coexistence, but its limits were exposed by the 1962 border war. In contrast, Panchamrit places India at the center of today’s debates on climate action, energy security, and global governance, marking a more assertive role in world affairs. For India-China relations, this shift is significant. While Panchsheel sought harmony through shared principles, Panchamrit acknowledges a landscape of competition and cooperation. This reflects a dual-track strategy: cooperating where interests align, while hedging against rivalry. The Panchamrit vision also elevates India’s position as a climate leader in the Global South, contrasting with China’s role as the world’s largest emitter. Yet, challenges remain financing gaps, coal dependency, and the need for technology transfer. These factors will shape whether Panchamrit becomes a transformative blueprint or remains aspirational. India’s shift from Panchsheel to Panchamrit shows the continuity of values with adaptive change. Panchsheel gave India diplomatic recognition Panchamrit seeks to secure global leadership. The future of this approach, especially in relation to China, will determine India’s place in a multipolar world.

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