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India's foreign policy: From Nehru to Modi: A journey of diplomacy and transformation

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Abstract

India's foreign policy has evolved significantly from Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of non-alignment to Narendra Modi's assertive and pragmatic diplomacy. This paper explores key phases of India's diplomatic journey, focusing on historical contexts, ideological shifts, and global challenges. The Nehruvian era emphasized sovereignty and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), advocating for global peace and decolonization. Indira Gandhi's leadership marked a shift towards pragmatism, highlighted by the Bangladesh Liberation War and strengthened ties with the Soviet Union. The Cold War period saw economic and geopolitical challenges, leading to India's 1991 economic liberalization under a coalition government. The post-1998 nuclear era and Vajpayee's leadership reinforced India's global strategic stature. Under Modi, India adopted a multi-alignment strategy, expanding economic diplomacy and strengthening defense ties with major powers like the U.S., Russia, and Japan. India's increasing role in multilateral institutions like the UN, BRICS, and G20 reflects its ambition to shape global governance. By integrating soft power through cultural diplomacy, climate initiatives, and economic reforms, India continues to position itself as a key global player in the 21st century.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, non-aligned movement, cold war diplomacy, economic reforms, multi-alignment strategy, global governance

Introduction

India's foreign policy has undergone significant transformations since gaining independence in 1947, evolving in response to global political shifts, economic changes, and security challenges (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. As a newly independent nation, India sought to define its place in the world, balancing its colonial past with aspirations for a sovereign, autonomous future. Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of non-alignment laid the foundation for India's diplomatic approach, emphasizing self-reliance, peaceful coexistence, and leadership among newly decolonized nations (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. Over the decades, India's foreign policy has adapted to regional conflicts, economic liberalization, nuclear deterrence, and the evolving dynamics of a multipolar world (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

The objective of this thesis is to examine the evolution of India's foreign policy from Nehru's era to the present, analyzing the strategic decisions that have shaped its global standing. The research explores key phases, including the Cold War period, economic liberalization, nuclear deterrence, and the transition to a multi-aligned foreign policy under Narendra Modi. By analyzing diplomatic trends, geopolitical shifts, and strategic imperatives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's diplomatic trajectory, identifying its core principles and the challenges it faces in an increasingly interconnected world (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

This research is structured into several key sections, each addressing critical developments in India's foreign policy. The first chapter examines Nehru's foundational policies, emphasizing non-alignment, decolonization, and regional stability. Subsequent chapters analyze India's pragmatic shift under Indira Gandhi, the impact of Cold War dynamics, and economic transformations following the 1991 liberalization. The thesis then explores India's emergence as a nuclear power, the significance of coalition governments in shaping diplomatic engagements, and the strategic recalibrations under Modi's leadership (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. The final section evaluates India's role in global governance, its engagement with multilateral institutions, and its future trajectory as an emerging power.

India's contemporary foreign policy reflects a strategic balance between traditional non-alignment principles and proactive global engagement (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. While historical commitments to sovereignty and regional stability remain, India has expanded its influence through strategic partnerships, economic diplomacy, and participation in global governance frameworks (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. This thesis argues that India's foreign policy evolution is a dynamic process, driven by both internal priorities and external pressures, positioning the country as a key player in the emerging world order (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Nehruvian Era

Nehru's Stature and Vision

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, played a defining role in shaping the nation's foreign policy. His vision was rooted in the principles of sovereignty, anti-colonialism, and peaceful coexistence, reflecting both India's historical struggles and its aspirations as a newly independent nation (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Nehru sought to establish India as a leader among post-colonial nations, positioning it as a voice for developing countries in global affairs. He believed that India's foreign policy should be an extension of its domestic values, emphasizing democracy, secularism, and economic self-reliance (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Nehru's worldview was influenced by his exposure to Western liberal thought and his deep understanding of global geopolitics. He advocated for a foreign policy that was independent of the major Cold War blocs, allowing India to navigate global tensions without compromising its sovereignty (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. His emphasis on self-reliance was evident in his economic policies, which promoted state-led industrialization while minimizing dependence on foreign powers (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Moreover, Nehru's leadership was instrumental in fostering India's relationships with newly decolonized nations in Asia and Africa. He championed causes such as disarmament, global peace, and decolonization, which earned India a respected position in international forums like the United Nations (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. Despite his idealistic approach, Nehru recognized the complexities of realpolitik and strategically engaged with both the United States and the Soviet Union when necessary. His tenure laid the groundwork for India's diplomatic ethos, which balanced moral leadership with pragmatic engagements.

Non-Alignment Movement

One of Nehru's most significant contributions to global diplomacy was his role in founding the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). As the Cold War divided the world into two opposing blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union, Nehru believed that India should remain independent and resist aligning with either superpower (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. This vision was based on his commitment to national sovereignty, global peace, and economic self-sufficiency (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

The formalization of NAM occurred at the 1961 Belgrade Conference, where India, along with Yugoslavia, Egypt, Indonesia, and Ghana, laid out the principles of non-alignment (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The movement sought to create a third path for newly independent nations that refused to be drawn into Cold War rivalries. NAM's core principles included respect for territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful conflict resolution, and the

promotion of economic cooperation among developing nations (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

India played a crucial role in advancing NAM's agenda, particularly in advocating for disarmament and decolonization at the United Nations (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014). Nehru positioned India as a mediator in international conflicts, offering diplomatic solutions in crises such as the Korean War and the Suez Canal dispute. However, India's non-alignment was not absolute. While it publicly maintained neutrality, it leaned towards the Soviet Union on strategic matters, particularly in military and economic collaborations (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Critics argue that India's commitment to NAM was often more symbolic than substantive, as it continued to engage selectively with both superpowers (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. Nevertheless, NAM provided India with diplomatic leverage, allowing it to assert its independence while benefiting from economic and military assistance from both Cold War blocs. It also reinforced India's identity as a leader of the Global South, a role that continues to shape its foreign policy.

Challenges

Despite Nehru's diplomatic ambitions, his foreign policy faced several challenges. The most pressing issue was the Kashmir conflict, which emerged immediately after independence. The partition of India in 1947 led to territorial disputes with Pakistan, culminating in the first Indo-Pakistani War (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Nehru's decision to refer the Kashmir issue to the United Nations remains controversial, as it internationalized the dispute and left it unresolved (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Another major setback was the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Nehru's early approach to China was based on the belief that both nations, as post-colonial states, could maintain peaceful coexistence. However, border disputes in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh led to escalating tensions, culminating in a full-scale war in October 1962 (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The Chinese invasion exposed India's military vulnerabilities and dealt a severe blow to Nehru's credibility. The defeat led to widespread domestic criticism and forced India to reassess its defense policies (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Additionally, Nehru's economic policies, which emphasized self-reliance, faced difficulties in achieving rapid industrialization and technological advancement. India's focus on a mixed economy and state-led development limited foreign investments, slowing economic growth compared to other emerging economies (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. These challenges underscored the limitations of Nehru's idealistic approach and highlighted the need for a more pragmatic foreign policy in subsequent years.

Immediate After Nehru

Nehru's death in 1964 marked a turning point in Indian foreign policy. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, inherited a complex geopolitical landscape, characterized by tensions with Pakistan, border security concerns, and internal economic challenges (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. Unlike Nehru, Shastri adopted a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy, emphasizing national security and military preparedness.

One of Shastri's defining moments was the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, triggered by Pakistani incursions into Kashmir. Unlike Nehru's diplomatic handling of conflicts,

Shastri responded with decisive military action, reinforcing India's territorial integrity (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The war ended with the Tashkent Agreement, brokered by the Soviet Union, which aimed to de-escalate tensions but did not lead to a lasting resolution of the Kashmir issue (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

Shastri also worked towards strengthening India's agricultural sector through the Green Revolution, recognizing the need for self-sufficiency in food production (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. His tenure, however, was short-lived, as he passed away in 1966. His successor, Indira Gandhi, would further recalibrate India's foreign policy, shifting away from Nehru's idealism towards a more assertive, security-oriented approach (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. The post-Nehru period set the stage for a more pragmatic and strategically flexible Indian foreign policy, moving beyond the constraints of early non-alignment.

Indira Era

Contradicting Father: Indira Gandhi, India's first female Prime Minister, took office in 1966 and soon departed from the idealistic principles of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. While Nehru advocated for non-alignment and peaceful coexistence, Indira Gandhi embraced a more pragmatic and strategic approach to foreign policy, often prioritizing national security over ideological commitments (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. She recognized that Cold War realities required India to engage more tactically with global powers, even if it meant moving closer to the Soviet Union.

One of the most significant shifts in Indira's foreign policy was her increasing reliance on the Soviet Union as a counterbalance to threats from both China and Pakistan (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971 marked a pivotal moment, signaling a strategic alignment that diverged from Nehru's more balanced approach (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. Indira also strengthened India's nuclear program, seeing it as a necessary deterrent in an increasingly hostile regional environment (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Her leadership was marked by a strong sense of *realpolitik*. She was willing to engage in decisive military action when necessary, a stark contrast to Nehru's diplomatic conflict resolution strategies. This approach was evident in her handling of the Bangladesh Liberation War, which reinforced India's status as a dominant power in South Asia (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1].

Emergence of Bangladesh: One of Indira Gandhi's most defining foreign policy successes was India's role in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The crisis in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) erupted due to political and ethnic tensions, with West Pakistan's military regime launching a brutal crackdown on the Bengali population (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. Millions of refugees fled into India, creating economic and security concerns that demanded immediate action.

Indira Gandhi took a calculated approach, first engaging in diplomatic efforts to garner international support. She toured key Western capitals, highlighting Pakistan's human rights violations and seeking backing for India's intervention (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. However, the U.S. administration under President Nixon, due to its Cold War alignment with Pakistan and China, remained unsupportive of India's position (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

With diplomatic efforts yielding limited success, Indira Gandhi decided on military intervention. India provided support to the Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi freedom fighters), and in December 1971, launched a full-scale military operation against Pakistan (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. The war lasted only 13 days, resulting in Pakistan's surrender and the creation of Bangladesh, marking one of the swiftest and most decisive military victories in modern history (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

The Bangladesh War had far-reaching implications. It demonstrated India's ability to shape regional geopolitics, weakened Pakistan significantly, and solidified Indira's image as a strong and decisive leader. However, the war also strained India's relations with the United States, which had supported Pakistan, pushing India even closer to the Soviet Union (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Pragmatism

Indira Gandhi's foreign policy was defined by pragmatism, balancing diplomatic engagement with decisive military and economic strategies. She understood that Cold War geopolitics required India to be adaptable and responsive to shifting global power structures (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. Unlike Nehru's idealistic vision, Indira's approach was rooted in *realpolitik*, ensuring that India's national interests were always prioritized.

A key component of this pragmatism was India's strengthened ties with the Soviet Union. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 provided India with military and economic assistance, helping to modernize its defense capabilities (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. This alignment also served as a deterrent against both China and Pakistan, which had growing strategic ties with the United States (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Indira also took bold steps in India's nuclear policy. While Nehru had been cautious in developing nuclear capabilities, Indira saw it as a necessity for strategic deterrence. In 1974, India conducted its first nuclear test, codenamed "Smiling Buddha," marking a major shift in India's defense posture (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. This move, while drawing global criticism and sanctions, reinforced India's position as a formidable power in Asia (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

Her economic diplomacy also reflected pragmatism. She maintained a cautious approach to liberalization, focusing instead on self-reliance and domestic economic expansion, ensuring India remained independent in key sectors while leveraging global partnerships strategically (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Challenges

Despite her foreign policy successes, Indira Gandhi faced significant challenges. The most pressing was India's growing economic strain due to military expenditures and regional conflicts (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. The Bangladesh War, while a strategic victory, placed heavy financial burdens on India, exacerbating inflation and economic difficulties (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Another challenge was India's deteriorating relationship with the United States. The Nixon administration's support for Pakistan and India's alignment with the Soviet Union resulted in diplomatic tensions (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. While Indira successfully secured Soviet backing, it also meant that India was perceived as being part of the Soviet sphere, limiting its engagement with the Western bloc (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

Internal security threats also grew during her tenure. The rise of separatist movements, particularly in Punjab and the Northeast, created additional foreign policy concerns, as external actors, including Pakistan, sought to exploit these domestic vulnerabilities (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. Indira's response to these threats was often heavy-handed, which, while effective in the short term, fueled further unrest in the long run.

Janata Interval: Following Indira Gandhi's emergency rule, she lost power in 1977, leading to the rise of the Janata Party government. This period saw a temporary shift in India's foreign policy, with attempts to improve ties with the United States and reduce dependence on the Soviet Union (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. However, the coalition government lacked stability, leading to inconsistencies in diplomatic engagements (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

Despite efforts to recalibrate foreign relations, India's geopolitical realities remained unchanged. By 1980, Indira Gandhi returned to power, reasserting her strategic and pragmatic approach, further solidifying India's regional dominance and its position in global diplomacy (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Ascendance of Rajiv Gandhi: Rajiv Gandhi assumed office as India's Prime Minister in 1984 following the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi. His rise to power marked a shift in India's political landscape, as he sought to modernize India's economy, strengthen its foreign relations, and navigate complex regional security challenges (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Unlike his predecessors, Rajiv was relatively inexperienced in politics, but he quickly positioned himself as a reformist leader who aimed to integrate India into the global economy while maintaining its strategic autonomy (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

One of Rajiv Gandhi's significant contributions to India's foreign policy was his focus on technology and economic liberalization. Recognizing the limitations of India's state-controlled economic model, he sought to introduce market-friendly policies, encourage foreign investment, and foster technological advancements (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. He strengthened ties with Western nations, particularly the United States, to facilitate economic cooperation and technological exchange, signaling a departure from the strong Soviet alignment that had characterized his mother's tenure (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Rajiv Gandhi also pursued a more pragmatic approach to regional diplomacy. His administration focused on improving relations with China, culminating in his historic visit to Beijing in 1988, which helped ease tensions following the 1962 war (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. This diplomatic outreach laid the foundation for improved Sino-Indian economic and strategic ties in subsequent decades (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. Additionally, he sought to normalize relations with Pakistan, engaging in diplomatic efforts to reduce hostilities, though these efforts remained constrained by continued border conflicts and political instability in the region (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

However, Rajiv Gandhi's foreign policy was not without challenges. His decision to deploy the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987 to mediate the Tamil conflict backfired, as Indian troops became entangled in a prolonged and unpopular conflict (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The intervention strained India's relations with Sri Lanka and

fueled domestic opposition, ultimately contributing to his political decline (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

Despite setbacks, Rajiv Gandhi's tenure marked the beginning of India's gradual shift toward economic globalization and a more balanced foreign policy. His emphasis on modernization, technology, and strategic diplomacy shaped India's trajectory in the post-Cold War era, laying the groundwork for future economic reforms and global engagement (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Cold War, Economy, and Insurgency Watershed Moments

The Cold War era (1947-1991) significantly shaped India's foreign policy, compelling it to navigate complex geopolitical challenges while maintaining strategic autonomy. India's position as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) meant that it avoided formally aligning with either the United States or the Soviet Union, yet it remained engaged with both powers to secure economic and military assistance (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Despite its non-aligned stance, India increasingly leaned towards the Soviet Union, particularly after the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971, which reinforced bilateral cooperation in defense, trade, and strategic matters (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

One of the defining moments of this period was the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. India's decisive intervention, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, was not only a humanitarian response but also a strategic move to weaken Pakistan and assert regional dominance (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. The war, however, strained India's relations with the United States, which supported Pakistan due to its Cold War alliance with China. This diplomatic friction pushed India closer to the Soviet Union, further solidifying its reliance on Moscow for military supplies and diplomatic backing (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Another pivotal moment was India's first nuclear test in 1974, codenamed "Smiling Buddha." The test marked India's entry into the nuclear club and was intended as a strategic deterrent against both China and Pakistan (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. However, the test led to international sanctions and strained India's relations with Western nations, including the United States, which imposed technological and economic restrictions (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. Despite these challenges, India persisted in developing its nuclear program, believing it essential for maintaining regional security and strategic autonomy (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

The 1980s saw increasing economic distress, with India's state-led economic model failing to generate sufficient growth. Mounting fiscal deficits and limited foreign investment led to an economic crisis by the early 1990s, ultimately necessitating structural reforms (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. Simultaneously, internal security threats escalated, with rising insurgencies in Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast posing significant challenges. These insurgencies, often fueled by external actors such as Pakistan, required a recalibrated domestic and foreign policy approach, compelling India to strengthen its counterinsurgency measures and diplomatic engagements (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

India's Response: India's response to Cold War pressures, economic instability, and insurgencies was characterized by strategic pragmatism. While maintaining its commitment to non-alignment, India adapted its policies to secure its

national interests. The Indo-Soviet partnership deepened during the late 1970s and 1980s, ensuring military and economic support at a time when Western assistance was limited (Malone, 2011) [3]. The Soviet Union supplied India with advanced weaponry and defense technology, strengthening India's position against Pakistan and China (Pant, 2019) [4]. This alliance also played a critical role in insulating India from U.S.-led diplomatic isolation following its nuclear ambitions (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) [1].

On the economic front, India's response to stagnation involved gradual liberalization efforts, though significant reforms were delayed until the 1991 crisis. Under Rajiv Gandhi's leadership, initial steps toward modernization were taken, focusing on technological advancement, telecommunications, and limited foreign investment (Tellis, 2016) [5]. However, these reforms were insufficient to prevent an impending economic crisis. By 1991, India faced a balance-of-payments crisis, forcing it to undertake sweeping economic liberalization under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. These reforms marked India's shift towards globalization, privatization, and increased integration with international markets (Malone, 2011) [3].

Regarding insurgencies, India adopted a dual approach—military countermeasures alongside diplomatic engagement. In Punjab, where the Khalistan movement sought an independent Sikh state, the government launched Operation Blue Star in 1984, a controversial military action that suppressed the armed separatist movement but also led to widespread unrest (Pant, 2019) [4]. In Jammu and Kashmir, growing militancy and Pakistan-backed cross-border terrorism led to intensified military operations and political interventions to restore stability (Tellis, 2016) [5]. The Northeast also saw increased insurgency activity, prompting both security crackdowns and political accords to address grievances (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) [1].

At the international level, India's diplomatic engagement with key regional and global players was instrumental in managing Cold War pressures. While Indo-U.S. relations remained strained during much of the Cold War, backchannel negotiations and economic cooperation efforts laid the groundwork for future rapprochement (Malone, 2011) [3]. India also engaged with emerging economic powers in East Asia, setting the stage for its future "Look East" policy (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. By the end of the Cold War, India had successfully navigated complex geopolitical realities, emerging with a stronger defense infrastructure, a nuclear deterrent, and a more globally integrated economic outlook (Pant, 2019) [4].

Coalition Era

Advent of First Stable Coalition Government

The 1990s marked a turning point in India's political and economic landscape, with the decline of single-party dominance and the emergence of coalition governments. The fragmentation of the political system led to multiple short-lived governments before stability was restored under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1999 (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. Despite initial political instability, coalition governments played a critical role in shaping India's foreign policy, particularly in the post-Cold War era.

The economic reforms initiated in 1991 under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister

Manmohan Singh laid the foundation for India's transition into a market-driven economy (Malone, 2011) [3]. Subsequent coalition governments continued this trajectory, prioritizing economic liberalization, foreign direct investment, and global trade engagement (Pant, 2019) [4]. The rise of globalization prompted India to enhance its relationships with the West, particularly the United States, Japan, and the European Union, while maintaining strategic partnerships with Russia (Tellis, 2016) [5].

During the late 1990s, India faced multiple security challenges, including tensions with Pakistan and China. The 1998 nuclear tests conducted by the Vajpayee government marked a significant moment in India's defense policy, asserting its strategic autonomy (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) [1]. While the tests led to temporary sanctions from Western nations, they also established India's deterrence capabilities and opened avenues for diplomatic negotiations with major global powers (Malone, 2011) [3].

The 1999 Kargil conflict with Pakistan further tested India's security apparatus. The conflict, initiated by Pakistani military incursions in Kashmir, reinforced the need for stronger defense preparedness and diplomatic engagement (Pant, 2019) [4]. The Vajpayee government's response demonstrated India's ability to manage crises while strengthening its international standing. Despite hostilities, Vajpayee initiated peace talks with Pakistan, exemplified by the Agra Summit in 2001 (Tellis, 2016) [5]. These efforts underscored India's commitment to balancing military strength with diplomatic dialogue.

India's foreign policy during the coalition era was defined by pragmatism, economic expansion, and strategic defense initiatives. The focus on multilateral diplomacy, regional stability, and economic integration laid the groundwork for India's emergence as a global power in the 21st century (Ganguly, 2017) [2].

Manmohan Period

Dr. Manmohan Singh's tenure as Prime Minister (2004-2014) marked a significant phase in India's foreign policy, characterized by economic diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and deepening engagement with global institutions. His administration focused on consolidating India's economic gains and expanding its influence in global governance (Malone, 2011) [3].

One of the most notable foreign policy achievements under Singh was the signing of the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008. The agreement, which ended India's nuclear isolation, allowed it to access nuclear technology and fuel from the international market despite not being a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (Tellis, 2016) [5]. This deal marked a shift in India's relationship with the United States, transforming it from a transactional engagement to a strategic partnership (Pant, 2019) [4]. While the agreement faced domestic political opposition, it reinforced India's position as a responsible nuclear power and facilitated its integration into global nuclear commerce (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) [1].

Singh's foreign policy also emphasized India's role in multilateral institutions. His government actively engaged with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), G20, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to advocate for the interests of developing economies (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. India's leadership in global climate

negotiations further underscored its commitment to sustainable development and international cooperation (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Economic diplomacy played a central role in Singh's foreign policy. His administration pursued free trade agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN, Japan, and South Korea, enhancing India's economic footprint in the Asia-Pacific region (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The "Look East" policy, initiated in the 1990s, gained further momentum under Singh, with India strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations through trade, security partnerships, and infrastructure initiatives (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Despite these achievements, Singh's tenure faced challenges, particularly in managing relations with Pakistan and China. The 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, orchestrated by Pakistan-based militants, severely strained bilateral ties, leading to diplomatic disengagement (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. Relations with China remained complex, with border tensions persisting despite increased economic cooperation (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Singh's government sought to balance engagement and deterrence, promoting dialogue while maintaining a strong defense posture (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Overall, Manmohan Singh's foreign policy legacy is defined by economic expansion, global integration, and strategic diplomacy. His administration's efforts in fostering international partnerships and strengthening India's global standing laid the foundation for the country's continued rise in world affairs (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Revival of Single Party Dominance

Entry of Narendra Modi: The 2014 general elections marked a significant shift in Indian politics, leading to the revival of single-party dominance under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had previously been part of coalition governments, secured a decisive victory, allowing Modi to pursue a bold and proactive foreign policy agenda (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Unlike his predecessors, Modi sought to establish India as a global power through assertive diplomacy, economic expansion, and strategic partnerships (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

One of Modi's early foreign policy initiatives was his emphasis on regional diplomacy. His first diplomatic outreach involved inviting leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in ceremony, signaling a renewed focus on India's neighborhood-first policy (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. He also prioritized strengthening relations with key global powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, recognizing the importance of a multi-alignment strategy in an increasingly multipolar world (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Under Modi, India adopted a more robust approach to national security and defense modernization. His administration's handling of border tensions with China and Pakistan, particularly after incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Balakot airstrikes in 2019, reinforced India's assertive defense posture (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. By positioning India as a key player in global security and economic governance, Modi's leadership redefined the country's foreign policy trajectory.

Multi-Alignment: A defining feature of Modi's foreign policy has been his commitment to a multi-alignment strategy, allowing India to engage with multiple global powers while maintaining strategic autonomy. This

approach differs from the traditional non-alignment strategy, as it seeks active engagement rather than passive neutrality (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

India's relations with the United States have strengthened under Modi, with both countries enhancing defense cooperation, economic ties, and diplomatic coordination (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. The signing of key agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) has deepened military cooperation, positioning India as a crucial partner in the Indo-Pacific (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Simultaneously, India has maintained strong ties with Russia, particularly in defense procurement and energy security (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. The continued purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems despite U.S. sanctions reflects India's independent strategic calculations (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. Relations with China, however, have been more complex, with economic interdependence coexisting alongside border tensions, as seen during the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

India's engagement with multilateral organizations such as the G20, BRICS, and the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) underscores its commitment to shaping global governance structures. By balancing relationships with competing powers, Modi's multi-alignment strategy has enabled India to enhance its global influence while safeguarding its strategic interests (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Domestic Factors: Domestic factors have played a crucial role in shaping Modi's foreign policy approach. His emphasis on economic growth, self-reliance, and infrastructure development has influenced India's global engagements (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. Initiatives such as "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India) reflect a strategic push to reduce dependency on foreign imports while enhancing India's manufacturing and export capabilities (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Economic diplomacy has been a key component of Modi's foreign policy. India has actively sought foreign direct investment (FDI), strengthened trade partnerships, and expanded its role in global supply chains (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. Bilateral agreements with Japan, the European Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have reinforced India's economic ambitions (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

The domestic political landscape, marked by nationalist rhetoric and a focus on security, has also shaped India's international positioning. Modi's government has taken a firm stance on issues such as cross-border terrorism, revoking Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and implementing stricter border controls (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. These policies have influenced India's relations with neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and China, leading to periods of heightened diplomatic tensions (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

India's technological advancements and digital transformation have further contributed to its global standing. The rapid expansion of digital infrastructure, fintech innovations, and space exploration have positioned India as a leader in emerging technologies, strengthening its soft power appeal (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. These domestic factors have collectively reinforced India's foreign policy objectives, ensuring a strong alignment between internal priorities and international engagements.

Soft Power and Normative Agenda

India's foreign policy under Modi has placed significant emphasis on soft power diplomacy, leveraging cultural influence, historical ties, and developmental assistance to strengthen global partnerships (Malone, 2011) [3]. The promotion of yoga, Ayurveda, and Indian cultural heritage has played a crucial role in enhancing India's global image (Pant, 2019) [4]. The United Nations' recognition of International Yoga Day, championed by India, reflects the success of this soft power approach (Tellis, 2016) [5].

India has also expanded its role in humanitarian and development assistance, particularly in Africa and South Asia. The provision of medical aid, vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, and disaster relief efforts have reinforced India's image as a responsible global actor (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and collaborations on climate change mitigation further highlight India's commitment to sustainable development and global governance (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) [1].

India's engagement in diaspora diplomacy has been another key element of its normative agenda. Modi's outreach to the Indian diaspora, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East, has strengthened economic and cultural ties (Pant, 2019) [4]. Events such as "Howdy Modi" in the U.S. and similar engagements in the U.K. and Australia have bolstered India's soft power influence (Malone, 2011) [3].

By integrating cultural diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and technological collaboration into its foreign policy, Modi's government has reinforced India's normative influence on the global stage. This soft power approach, combined with strategic multi-alignment, has positioned India as a key player in international affairs (Tellis, 2016) [5].

Soft Power, Smart Power, and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power has become an essential tool in India's diplomatic strategy, allowing it to strengthen global ties through cultural, historical, and intellectual appeal. Unlike hard power, which relies on military and economic coercion, soft power influences through attraction and persuasion (Nye, 2004) [6]. India's deep-rooted cultural heritage, spanning millennia, has positioned it uniquely in the global diplomatic landscape. The promotion of traditions such as yoga, Ayurveda, classical arts, and cuisine has played a significant role in enhancing India's global image. A landmark achievement was the adoption of International Yoga Day by the United Nations in 2015, an initiative led by India that gained overwhelming international support (Pant, 2019) [4].

The Indian film and entertainment industry, particularly Bollywood, has been another major driver of soft power. Indian movies enjoy widespread popularity in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and even parts of Europe and North America, fostering cultural connections and reinforcing India's influence (Malone, 2011) [3]. Similarly, Indian television serials and music have gained substantial audiences beyond national borders, helping shape global perceptions of Indian culture.

The Indian diaspora has also played a crucial role in soft power diplomacy. With over 30 million people of Indian origin living in different parts of the world, India's diaspora contributes to economic, cultural, and political linkages with host nations (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. Governments worldwide

have acknowledged the contributions of the Indian diaspora, strengthening India's diplomatic leverage in regions like the United States, the United Kingdom, the Gulf nations, and Africa (Tellis, 2016) [5].

While soft power is a significant diplomatic tool, India has increasingly integrated smart power—a combination of soft and hard power—to advance its strategic interests (Nye, 2011) [7]. India's growing role in humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and disaster relief operations has strengthened its global standing. Notably, India's Vaccine Maitri initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic saw it providing millions of vaccine doses to developing countries, reinforcing its role as a responsible global player (Tellis, 2016) [5].

India's humanitarian assistance extends beyond health diplomacy. It has been actively involved in disaster relief missions, such as its swift response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake and humanitarian aid efforts in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) [1]. India's development assistance through initiatives like the Lines of Credit (LoC) program has funded infrastructure, education, and healthcare projects in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (Pant, 2019) [4].

India has also strengthened its defense diplomacy, strategically integrating military cooperation with soft power outreach. Its increasing defense collaborations with ASEAN nations, along with strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, highlight this approach (Malone, 2011) [3]. Programs like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) provide training and skill development opportunities for professionals from developing countries, reinforcing India's leadership in capacity-building efforts (Ganguly, 2017) [2].

By adopting a smart power approach—blending economic assistance, technological collaboration, and cultural diplomacy—India is positioning itself as a leader in global governance. Its active participation in multilateral organizations such as BRICS, G20, and the International Solar Alliance (ISA) underscores its commitment to influencing global policymaking while promoting sustainable development (Pant, 2019) [4].

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a key instrument in India's foreign policy, strengthening its international influence through educational exchanges, spiritual outreach, and heritage promotion. India has leveraged its ancient traditions and civilizational wisdom to enhance global goodwill. The expansion of Indian cultural centers, operated by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), has facilitated deeper cultural interactions across Asia, Europe, and the Americas (Malone, 2011) [3].

Education and academic collaboration have also played a vital role in cultural diplomacy. India hosts thousands of international students through scholarship programs, particularly from developing nations in Africa and South Asia (Ganguly, 2017) [2]. Universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Banaras Hindu University (BHU) have become centers for international academic cooperation, fostering intellectual engagement between India and the world (Tellis, 2016) [5].

Religious and spiritual diplomacy is another crucial element. India's efforts to restore Buddhist heritage sites, particularly in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, have strengthened cultural ties with nations that share Buddhist traditions (Pant, 2019) [4]. The promotion of Hindu and

Buddhist spiritual tourism, including the Buddhist Circuit and Ramayana Circuit, has further deepened India's engagement with these countries.

India has also utilized its technology-driven diplomacy to enhance cultural outreach. The Digital India initiative has allowed for the online expansion of Indian cultural content, enabling greater access to traditional knowledge and practices (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. The growing use of social media by Indian diplomatic missions worldwide has further enhanced the country's cultural influence.

By integrating cultural diplomacy with economic and political engagement, India continues to project itself as a civilizational power with a modern global outlook. Its ability to leverage cultural strengths while engaging in strategic partnerships underscores the multidimensional nature of its foreign policy (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

India and the Multilateral Order

India's active engagement with multilateral institutions underscores its ambition to influence global governance. As a founding member of the United Nations, India has consistently advocated for reforms in the UN Security Council (UNSC), arguing for permanent membership to reflect contemporary global realities (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. While progress has been slow, India's growing influence in global governance bodies such as the G20 and BRICS has reinforced its strategic importance (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

India's participation in climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), demonstrates its commitment to sustainable development and global environmental leadership (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. Additionally, its active role in the World Trade Organization (WTO) highlights India's advocacy for the interests of developing economies, particularly in areas of trade liberalization and agricultural subsidies (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

India's foreign policy has evolved from non-alignment to strategic multi-alignment, positioning it as a balancing force in global politics. Its engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, reflects its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. Simultaneously, India maintains strong partnerships with Russia and the Global South, demonstrating its ability to engage with diverse political blocs while prioritizing national interests (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

Through initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and its leadership in South-South cooperation, India continues to expand its regional and global influence (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. While challenges remain, particularly regarding tensions with China and Pakistan, India's proactive multilateral engagements underscore its ambition to shape the emerging world order (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Conclusion

India's foreign policy has undergone a remarkable transformation from its post-independence years to its current status as an emerging global power. Jawaharlal Nehru's era was characterized by idealism, non-alignment, and a focus on decolonization and sovereignty (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. India's commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) allowed it to maintain strategic autonomy during the Cold War, even as it leaned towards

the Soviet Union for defense and economic support (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. However, challenges such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War demonstrated the need for a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Under Indira Gandhi, India adopted a more assertive and security-focused foreign policy, aligning closely with the Soviet Union while also strengthening its regional influence (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The Pokhran-I nuclear test in 1974 marked a decisive shift towards self-reliance in defense (Bajpai, Basit, & Krishnappa, 2014) ^[1]. The economic turmoil of the 1980s, coupled with internal insurgencies, set the stage for significant shifts in the post-Cold War period.

The 1991 economic liberalization under P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh opened India's economy to global markets, marking a shift from protectionism to integration into the world economy (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. This period saw India move towards a multi-aligned foreign policy, balancing relations with the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. The 1998 nuclear tests under the Vajpayee government further solidified India's strategic position, leading to increased diplomatic engagement with Western powers (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

The coalition era of the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a consolidation of India's economic diplomacy, with an emphasis on trade agreements, regional partnerships, and strategic alliances (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008, signed during Manmohan Singh's tenure, marked a major milestone in Indo-U.S. relations and ended India's nuclear isolation (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

Since Narendra Modi's ascent to power in 2014, India has pursued a more assertive and ambitious global strategy. The government has embraced multi-alignment, strengthening defense and economic partnerships with the United States, Russia, Japan, and European nations, while also deepening ties with the Global South (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. The Act East Policy, infrastructure-led diplomacy, and the Indo-Pacific strategy have positioned India as a key player in regional and global security frameworks (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. Furthermore, initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Vaccine Maitri showcase India's leadership in climate action and humanitarian aid (Tellis, 2016) ^[5].

Today, India stands at a pivotal moment in its global ascent, balancing its economic ambitions with its geopolitical responsibilities. As the fifth-largest economy, India is increasingly shaping international trade, technology, and climate policies (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. It has positioned itself as a defender of multilateralism, advocating for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reforms, global trade justice, and greater representation for developing nations in global governance bodies (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2].

India's role in multilateral organizations has expanded significantly, with leadership roles in G20, BRICS, the Quad, and BIMSTEC (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. The G20 presidency in 2023 allowed India to highlight its digital economy, renewable energy efforts, and post-pandemic recovery strategies (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. However, India still faces challenges in securing a permanent seat on the UNSC, given geopolitical resistance from existing permanent members (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

Security remains a critical concern, particularly with ongoing tensions along the India-China border and

persistent cross-border conflicts with Pakistan (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. The Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 underscored the volatility of India-China relations, prompting India to strengthen defense collaborations with the United States, France, and Israel (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. At the same time, India has sought to balance its historical ties with Russia, navigating complexities arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict while avoiding direct entanglement in Western-led sanctions (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

In economic diplomacy, India is focusing on supply chain resilience, regional trade agreements, and digital infrastructure development (Ganguly, 2017) ^[2]. The Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiatives aim to bolster domestic manufacturing and reduce dependence on foreign imports, aligning economic policies with global trade strategies (Pant, 2019) ^[4]. The push for fintech leadership and digital transformation-particularly in digital payments, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity-further strengthens India's position as an economic powerhouse (Malone, 2011) ^[3].

Looking ahead, India's foreign policy will likely focus on three key areas: strengthening strategic autonomy, expanding leadership in multilateral institutions, and leveraging technology for global development (Tellis, 2016) ^[5]. The country's active role in climate change negotiations, digital diplomacy, and South-South cooperation will define its influence in global affairs (Bajpai *et al.*, 2014) ^[1].

Despite challenges, India's rising economic power, demographic advantages, and strategic positioning make it an indispensable player in the evolving global order. Its ability to balance regional security concerns, economic ambitions, and multilateral engagements will determine its trajectory in the coming decades (Malone, 2011) ^[3]. If India continues its current trajectory of pragmatic and proactive diplomacy, it is well-positioned to emerge as a leading force in global governance (Pant, 2019) ^[4].

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