

Indian Foreign Policy over the Years – A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy is shaped by its historical legacy, strategic interests, and evolving global dynamics. Rooted in the principles of non-alignment, peace, and cooperation, India's foreign policy has adapted to the changing international landscape. As a rising global power, India seeks to balance its relationships with major powers, engage in multilateral forums, and promote regional stability in South Asia. India's foreign policy emphasizes economic diplomacy, defense partnerships, and active participation in global governance, aiming to enhance its influence and contribute to addressing global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and regional conflicts. With a focus on national security and economic growth, India continues to pursue a pragmatic approach to maintain strategic autonomy while fostering mutually beneficial ties with nations across the world. In recent years, India's foreign policy has been characterized by a more assertive and pragmatic approach, reflecting its growing global stature and strategic priorities. India has strengthened its ties with major powers, particularly the United States, Japan, and Australia, through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to counter China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Simultaneously, India has maintained a balanced relationship with Russia, particularly in defense and energy sectors. Additionally, economic diplomacy has been a key driver, with India pursuing trade agreements, attracting foreign investment, and promoting its interests in global supply chains. This paper traces the growth of India's foreign policy over the years and illustrates how India continues to prioritize national security, economic development, and strategic autonomy while adapting to the complex geopolitical environment.

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, Economic ties, Military alignment, Geopolitical Environment.*

INTRODUCTION

India's foreign policy is driven by the principles of non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and a commitment to maintaining peaceful relations with neighbouring countries. Historically, India adopted non-alignment as a cornerstone of its foreign policy during the Cold War, seeking to avoid alliances with either the United States or the Soviet Union. Over time, this policy evolved into a focus on regional stability and global cooperation, emphasizing peaceful dispute resolution and a multi-polar world order. India has consistently championed the importance of multilateral organizations like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to address global challenges, such as climate change, economic inequality, and terrorism. India's foreign policy also underscores the need for strong economic and cultural ties with countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

In recent years, India has shifted towards a more proactive and assertive foreign policy, balancing its traditional focus on strategic autonomy with closer ties to major powers, particularly the United States. This is reflected in India's growing participation in initiatives like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, which focuses on promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region. India has also pursued stronger defence and economic partnerships with countries like Japan, France, and Israel, while deepening its relationships with neighbours in South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Despite these partnerships, India has sought to maintain a cautious stance in its relations with China, balancing competition and cooperation, especially in light of border tensions and trade relations. India's foreign policy continues to prioritize national security, economic growth, and diplomatic engagement to enhance its global influence while maintaining sovereignty and strategic flexibility.

When we discuss the foreign policy of India, it can be broadly divided into six phases. India played a pivotal role in international relations from the time it was a bipolar world dominated by two super powers to the present days of multipolar world where multiple countries with economic and military power are trying to influence the world affairs, sometimes to their selfish advantage.

First phase: Non-alignment movement (1947-62)

India started showing its influence in world affairs even before it got its independence in 1947. India has always played a proactive role in establishing good relationships with other countries in the world. After the end of World War II in 1945, the world got divided into two opposing forces under the two super powers, America and Russia thus making it a bipolar world. Non-Alignment Movement is more relevant even today's global relations with uni-polar world is replaced by multi-polar world. On one side America and its allies forming the NATO and on the other side Soviet Union and its allies forming the Warsaw treaty. At this point of history, even though India had close ties with Russia, it remained neutral and didn't join any of the groups. It chose to have an independent foreign policy thus showcasing the "non-alignment movement" to the other countries in the world.

India was also the first country to break the bondage of colonial rule. Soon after becoming independent, India strongly voiced its support for the independence of the countries. Indian freedom movement has set the precedence for many more countries to take inspiration.

During the Cold War, India has maintained strong strategic ties with the USSR in military, economic and diplomatic fields. This legacy with Russia continues till today, long after the collapse of USSR. Cooperation between India and Russia is evident mainly in areas like international politics, defense sector, nuclear energy, mutual cooperation in antiterrorist activities and space technology.

Despite the Indo-Pak war in 1947-48, India tried to implement "Neighbor First Policy" in its foreign affairs. Although India could achieve some success with this policy in international affairs, the spirit of this policy was defeated with Indo-China war in 1962. This phase has ended in 1962.

Phase 2 (1962 and 1971)

Second phase in the history of Indian foreign policy could be called "The Decade of Realism and Recovery". And this phase spanned between 1962 and 1971. This phase started with the Indo-China war and ended with the Indo-Pakistan war. The Indo-China war started when the Chinese Army invaded the Ladakh region of India on the 20th of October, 1962 and crossed the McMahon Line (Pant,2020).

A few major events happened immediate aftermath of the 1962 Chinese war and Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 was one among them. The defeat in the 1962 China war turned out to be a stepping stone for India. India made a few realistic changes to its military and political strategies, which paved the way for a long-term transformation of its foreign policy. The first measure India took was to strengthen its military power.

Another major change was India's shift towards the US and UK for its arms procurement. The most important change that happened after the 1962 war was that India redefined its relations with China. India identified China as a serious security threat. This shift in India's perception of China continues to define its defense strategy even today.

The Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 resulted in a major shift in the geopolitics of the sub-continent. The US was an important material ally for India before the 1965 war. But as the US started supporting Pakistan and putting pressure on India regarding the Kashmir issue, India felt betrayed by the US and started tilting towards the Soviet Union. By this time China was already a key military partner for Pakistan and a military opponent of India, with whom it had already fought a brief war in 1962. At the time of the Indo-Pakistan war, China had openly supported Pakistan.

The Indo-Pakistan war ended with the Tashkent Declaration on 10th January, 1966 with the mediation of USSR. Despite having some important diplomatic success, the Tashkent Declaration failed to limit any possibility of a future skirmish between the two countries.

Phase3 (1971 to 1991)

The third phase could be called 'The Great Indian Regional Assertion'. This phase started in 1971 and ended in 1991, we could say this phase started with the Indo-Pakistan war and ended with a huge financial crisis. The financial crisis led Indian economic policy to take a turn towards liberalization starting from the year 1991, finally. This was an important phase in Indian history in terms of establishing itself as a strong regional power in South Asia and emerging as a nuclear power in the world.

Indo-Pakistan war

Learning from its bitter experience from the Indo-China war of 1962, India had greatly strengthened its military and improvised its war strategies and parallelly used tactful lobbying to gain support for its cause at the international level. Indo-Pak war saw a swift reaction from the Indian army, navy and air force divisions. This war was considered as modern India's finest hour in proving its military might. With this experience India signed a 'Peace and Friendship' treaty with Soviet Union on August 9th, 1971.

U.S.- CHINA- PAKISTAN AXIS

Pak-China relations

Another important development we could observe in this period was the collaboration among US, China and Pakistan. The relations between China and Pakistan played an important role in the geopolitical scenario of Asian continent. The formal relations between China and Pakistan were established in the year 1950. Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China, the government of Mainland China and stopped official diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan). From this point onwards the two countries have developed considerable bilateral relations and also had regular exchange of high-level visits and made remarkably important agreements.

China created a great economic hope for Pakistan and established itself as the most trusted military partner for Pakistan. From China's perspective, Pakistan lies at the heart of its geostrategic ambitions such as becoming a global naval power and in realising its grand plans through the 'One Belt and One Road' project by extending its market to Middle East, Europe and East Asia (Sumit and Shoup, 2016). Not only that, Pakistan was also the battleground for China to fight against Islamic militancy. Pakistan served as a channel for China to open up its borders to the West and Islamic world and in aiding this Pakistan had ceded disputed territory to China in the year 1963. In return, China has provided extensive economic aid, military and technical assistance and political support to Pakistan.

Pakistan and USA relations

Pakistan managed to continue its relations with China on one hand and with USA on the other hand. The United States became one of the first countries to establish relations with Pakistan immediately after getting independence in 1947. In fact, Pakistan was a strategically important ally for the USA to extend its influence in South Asia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Pakistan had shown its affinity towards United States rather than Soviet Union from the time of its independence. Pakistan continued its relations with USA and China simultaneously. On one hand China was the largest importer and exporter for Pakistan and on the other hand the United States continues to be one of the largest sources for the largest export market. Pakistan immensely benefited in terms of financial aid from both the countries. In 1987 Pakistan became the second largest recipient of aid from USA after Israel (Amitav, 2014).

Pakistan played a key role for the USA to improve its bilateral relations with China. In 1972, Pakistan paved the way to Richard Nixon, the then president of USA, in visiting China, making him the first president of US to visit People's Republic of China while in office. USA supported Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pak war by supplying arms and providing military aid etc. The intention of US in doing so was to discourage India from penetrating further into Pakistani land.

India's Nuclear Programme & Pokhran nuclear tests -1 & 2

India successfully tested her first nuclear bomb on 18th May, 1974, which was coded as 'Operation Smiling Buddha'. The test was conducted at the Pokhran army base in Rajasthan. India's Pokhran test was of great importance, as it was the first confirmed nuclear weapons test by a country apart from the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The other important element in this operation was that India could successfully maintain the operation a total secret. No other country on the earth including American intelligence could get a hint of '**Operation Smiling Buddha**'. India maintained the same secrecy in the Pokhran- II test also which was conducted in 1998.

After 1974 Pokhran -I tests, India was denied nuclear technology by the Western countries. USA and its western allies imposed strict sanctions on India. India was one of the five countries which either did not sign or withdrew their signature from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The other countries in this list were South Sudan, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea. India always considered the NPT as discriminatory and thus refused to sign the treaty.

If we look into the history of the nuclear programme of India, it was actually started in 1944 when Homi Jehangir Bhabha founded the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Nuclear power for civil use had been a priority for India since independence. Immediately after emerging as an independent nation, India passed Atomic Energy Act in 1948. The Atomic energy Commission was also set up in the same year. The Department of Atomic Energy was created in 1954 with Homi J. Bhabha as its secretary with its headquarters in Mumbai, Maharashtra.

USSR collapse- Crisis in India

The collapse of the USSR resulted in a great economic crisis in India. To get out of that crisis India started rethinking its basic principles of foreign policy. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had an intense impact on India. It opened the way for India to reinvent itself in economic policy from a socialist economy to capitalist economy, and altering its foreign policy slowly tilting towards the USA.

Iraq War

The outbreak of the Gulf war intensified the economic crisis in India. The Gulf war issue furnished a major shift in Indian foreign policy in the Middle East. Support to the Palestinian cause and unconnected relations with Israel were the two important aspects to hold interests in the Arab world for India till early 1990s. Even during cold war, the Palestinian issue has been a significant feature in the Middle East policy of India, because it was an emotional issue for the Arab world. But the Gulf war and the weakening leadership of Palestine in the middle east region gave the Palestinian cause a less effective and irrelevant aspect for the diplomatic operations of India (Ganguly and Pardesi, 2009).

Phase 4 (1991 to 1998)

The fourth phase lasted from 1991 to 1998. This phase could be called 'Safeguarding Strategic Autonomy'. This was a crucial period for India in terms of economic, nuclear and foreign relations. During this phase India transformed from a socialist economy to liberal economy after the bitter economic crisis of 1991. India faced huge crisis in payments and foreign exchange. Inflation went up to a record high of 16.7 per cent in that year. Fiscal deficit went up to 8.4 per cent. Soviet Union, the long-term ally of India had just collapsed in 1991.

New innovations, technology and investments came from many countries like the US, UK, Europe, Japan, China, Korea etc. Another important development that occurred in this phase was that India conducted nuclear tests for the 2nd time in Pokhran, coded as 'Operation Shakti'. This operation established India as a nuclear power before the world.

There was a perception change of the powerful nations like the US, China, Japan, etc. towards India after its emergence as a nuclear power. After India emerged as a nuclear power, a new strategic dimension had emerged in Asia, particularly in South Asia.

Relations with Israel, USA and ASEAN

Policy makers of India began to re-examine their conventional anti- Americanism and non-aligned oratory. During this period, India increased its relations with Israel, USA and ASEAN countries. India started its journey towards economic liberalization. The increasing engagement of India with ASEAN countries was an outcome of changing political and economic scenarios since the early 1990s.

ASEAN- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established on 8th August, 1967 in Bangkok (Thailand) by the founding member countries Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. At Present the total membership reached to ten with the joining of countries like Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia later on. The main objective to establish this regional organization was to promote political and social stability amid rising tensions among the Asia-Pacific's post-colonial states. This is reflected in its motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community".

The engagement of India with Israel is also another important change that happened during this time. In 1950, India recognized Israel as a nation for the first time ever. After that announcement the Jewish Agency established an immigration office in Bombay, which was subsequently converted into a Consulate. But it was in the year 1992, when full-fledged diplomatic relations were established between the two countries and embassies were also established in the two nations. Defense and agriculture were the two main sectors of bilateral engagement then. Currently India is the biggest buyer of military equipment from Israel and Israel is the second-largest supplier of military equipment to India after Russia.

Phase 5 (1998 to 2013)

Fifth phase started in the year 1998 and ended in 2013. This phase could be called as "India, a Balancing power". India was officially recognized as a nuclear power for the first time during this period. During this phase India emerged as a balancing power against the rise of China in the Asian continent. During this period India made a key deal, '123 Agreement' which is also called 'Indo-US nuclear deal', with the USA in the Atomic energy sector.

This phase can be discussed in the context of the rise of China and the concomitant military threat for India. In this context, India has started a closer alignment with the USA which is a stronger nation than China. During this phase India's foreign policy was fashioned to meet the challenges posed by the rise of China. Another noteworthy strategy India adopted during this period was to strengthen indigenous defense manufacturing. To balance China, especially in the Asian region, India started improving its relations with other Asian countries such as Japan, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia etc. India started giving emphasis to its Look East policy and Act East Policy.

India's role in the formation of BRICS

India not only played an important role in establishing BRICS, but also made its opinion heard whenever necessary on this platform. India has been an active member in BRICS from its formation. India speaks out against the decisions or proposals which may damage the interests of any member. For instance, India rejects China's proposal to give membership to Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Mexico in BRICS. On the other hand, the platform of the BRICS, paved a path for India in implementing its strategic balance between Russia and China. India even hosted the BRICS annual meeting in 2012. In this phase India also strengthened its ties with Russia as well as China on climate change and trade. This phase ended in 2013.

Phase 6 (2103 to date)

Sixth phase has started in 2013 and extends till date in Indian foreign policy strategy. The nature of current Indian policy can be understood with the categorical statement of External Affairs Minister of India, Dr. S. Jaishankar, that India will never be a part of an alliance system.

In this era, India transformed from non-alignment to multi-alignment. In fact, India in different time periods in the past also has adopted to the changing situations and power dynamics on the global platform by suitably changing its strategies.

Multi- Alignment definition: It is a series of parallel relationships which strengthen multilateral partnerships for common causes like economic equality, security, the eradication of external threats like terrorism etc. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the International North-South Transport Corridor, The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, BRICS are some examples to establish India's multi-alignment approach.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization- SCO

It is a regional organization with eight Eurasian countries India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These countries are the largest in the world in terms of land area and population covered. Actually, India and Pakistan were not the founding members of the SCO, when it was established in 2001. Both India and Pakistan became full members only in the year 2017.

SCO is an important platform for India diplomatically as it shares this platform with its neighboring countries like Pakistan and China with whom it has long standing border disputes. At the same time the presence of Russia, India's long-term friend, has helped India diplomatically on important issues (Alafnan, 2020). This platform provided an opportunity for the member countries to discuss their disputes or differences across the table and helped in preventing the escalation of their disputes. Crucial talks between the foreign ministers of India and China on the tensions erupted in the Ladakh region in the year 2020, was one of the examples for it. Due to these talks both the countries could come to an agreement on a plan for the disengagement of their troops from the Line of Actual Control- LAC.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

Another group in which India is an important player is 'The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - QSD'. It is a strategic security alliance between the four countries India, Australia, USA and Japan. Furthering this initiative India and Japan have extended their co-operation with other Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar to improve regional connectivity and infrastructure in the region. Thus, this strategy gave an alternative platform to the massive Belt and Road Initiative of China.

International North-South Transport Corridor- INSTC

India was a founding member of this project INSTC along with Russia and Iran. These three countries signed an agreement on 16th May, 2002. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan are the other important member states in INSTC. Through this platform India gets an opportunity to collaborate with Central Asian countries, Iran and Russia to promote a free trade area in Eurasia.

This multi - mode transport corridor stretches from Saint Petersburg in Russia to Mumbai in India stretching across 7,200 kilometers. This transport corridor combines three transport modes, road, rail and maritime routes. The main purpose of this multi-mode corridor, INSTC, was to reduce the freight cost and the journey time as well. If this corridor is fully operational, it is expected to reduce freight costs by 30 percent and the journey time by 40 percent compared to the existing sea route via the Suez Canal.

Security and Growth for All in the Region- SAGAR

This initiative was born from the vision of India to establish a geopolitical framework of maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. India's Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi, had taken reference to the SAGAR initiative for the first time in his address in Mauritius in March, 2015. In this meeting the prime minister reveals India's vision for the Indian Ocean region.

As part of this policy, India has worked to build bonds with Australia, Japan, Europe, Russia and USA. Simultaneously, India tried to establish linkages with China, developing nations, and expand its ties with its neighborhood countries. Hence, we could conclude that India's participation in a series of summits such as QUAD, SCO, BRICS, G7, Commonwealth Summit etc. exhibits India's current foreign policy of Multi Alignment (Subrata and Jivanta, 2007).

Act East Policy

The main objective of India's Act East Policy was to promote economic cooperation, develop strategic relationships and cultural ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. And within India also connecting the North Eastern states with neighboring countries has been a priority. This policy focused on cooperation with ASEAN countries.

Through these policies India would gain land access to Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan. Right now, India has to travel all the way around Pakistan, to reach Afghanistan through Iran. This policy would enhance regional economic integration in the subcontinent (Tharoor, 2012). And also increase regional cooperation between countries in Central Asia, South Asia and the Gulf. The construction of pipelines across the territory of Pakistan may make it easy to construct highways linking Iran and Afghanistan to India.

Growth of Indian Economy

Another important development happened in this phase was that India has become the fifth largest economy in the world. In a span of around 10 years India's GDP grew from 7th place in the world to the 5th place. The four nations larger than India are United States of America, China, Japan and Germany. India's economy overtook the economy of the United Kingdom according to the International Monetary Fund. Further the IMF forecasted that Indian GDP will grow and become the fourth largest economy by 2027.

The Way Forward

We could conclude that there was a revolutionary transformation in the foreign policy of India from its independence in 1947 to till date. From being an underdeveloped, newly independent country in 1947, India transformed into a fastest growing economy, a nuclear power and global power to reckon with. To suit the changing times and changing global scenarios, India changed its foreign policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment. But still there is a long way to go. India should take courageous steps to enhance ties with its neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. 'Vaccine diplomacy' of India during covid-19 was one of the good examples. It was important for India to expand its foreign policy agenda beyond its geopolitical boundaries.

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