

# India's Foreign Policy Transformation in the 21st Century: Continuity and Change

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a dynamic interplay between enduring traditions and adaptive transformations shaped by globalization, technological shifts, and evolving power structures. Rooted in the foundational principles of strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, and multilateral engagement, India's external outlook continues to emphasize sovereignty, status, and developmental priorities. Yet, the 21st century has compelled New Delhi to recalibrate its diplomatic strategies to address the realities of a multipolar world, the rise of China, regional instability, and new forms of economic and security interdependence. This research article examines how India's foreign policy has evolved through both continuity and change, analysing key dimensions such as its engagement with major powers, neighbourhood diplomacy, economic statecraft, and global governance.

The study identifies three major trends shaping India's foreign policy transformation: the diversification of partnerships beyond traditional alignments, the growing centrality of economic diplomacy and technological cooperation, and the increasing personalization and symbolism of leadership-driven diplomacy, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While the core objective of preserving decision-making autonomy endures, India has simultaneously embraced new diplomatic tools—such as public diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and regional connectivity—to project itself as a responsible global actor and an emerging power. By employing a continuity-and-change framework, the article demonstrates that India's foreign policy has not undergone a radical departure from its post-independence principles, but rather a pragmatic adaptation to contemporary global challenges. India's strategic behavior today reveals a hybrid approach—balancing traditional non-alignment with issue-based alignments, maintaining ties with both Western and non-Western powers, and pursuing national interests through flexible multilateralism. Thus, India's 21st-century foreign policy exemplifies a nuanced evolution where enduring ideals coexist with innovative practices, reaffirming its role as a pivotal actor in shaping the emerging global order.

**Key Words:** India's Foreign Policy; Strategic Autonomy; Continuity and Change; Global Governance; Economic Diplomacy; Act East Policy; Multilateralism; Great Power Relations; Non-Alignment; Narendra Modi; Personal Diplomacy; Regional Cooperation; India-China Relations; Emerging Powers; Global South; Strategic Partnerships; National Interest; International Relations of India.

## Introduction

India's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution since its independence in 1947, reflecting a balance between moral principles, pragmatic strategies, and changing global realities. In the 21st century, this transformation has become more pronounced as India seeks to redefine its role in an increasingly complex and multipolar world. The post-Cold War era marked a decisive shift from the rigid ideological frameworks of non-

alignment towards a more flexible, interest-driven, and multidimensional foreign policy approach. However, even amid new imperatives and global transformations, India's external engagement continues to draw upon the foundational ethos of strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, and pursuit of global justice. Thus, the story of India's foreign policy in the new millennium is not one of rupture, but of adaptation—a synthesis of continuity and change.

Historically, India's foreign policy under leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized moral universalism, non-alignment, and the promotion of a just international order. These principles emerged from India's colonial experience and its desire to preserve sovereignty and independence in global affairs. Over time, however, geopolitical constraints, economic challenges, and security threats necessitated recalibration. The end of the Cold War, the onset of globalization, and India's economic liberalization in the 1990s ushered in new priorities—economic integration, technological advancement, and strategic partnerships. The 21st century further intensified these imperatives, compelling India to reposition itself as both a regional stabilizer and a responsible global actor.

The dawn of the new millennium coincided with a redefinition of India's strategic environment. The rise of China, the United States' pivot to Asia, the emergence of new global institutions, and the diffusion of power towards Asia collectively shaped New Delhi's external behavior. India's foreign policy thus evolved from a predominantly reactive stance to a more proactive and multi-vector approach. Initiatives such as the "Look East" (later "Act East") Policy, "Neighbourhood First," and participation in groupings like BRICS, QUAD, and G20 reflected India's expanding diplomatic outreach and ambition to influence global governance. At the same time, India's approach towards major powers—balancing closer strategic cooperation with the United States while retaining traditional ties with Russia and cautiously managing competition with China—illustrates a complex interplay between continuity and pragmatism.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy has acquired greater visibility and assertiveness. Modi's leadership style—marked by personalized diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and emphasis on economic statecraft—has transformed the optics and execution of external relations. His government's focus on projecting India as a civilizational power and as a "Vishwa Mitra" (friend to the world) signifies an ideological and symbolic shift, even as the fundamental pursuit of autonomy and development remains intact. The emphasis on connectivity, climate diplomacy, and technology partnerships demonstrates India's recognition that power in the 21st century extends beyond traditional military and political domains.

This article explores India's foreign policy transformation in the 21st century through the twin lenses of continuity and change. It argues that while the modalities of engagement have diversified and intensified, the underlying objectives—security, economic development, and global recognition—remain consistent. India's external behaviour today reflects not a rejection of its past, but its pragmatic modernization to meet contemporary challenges and opportunities in a rapidly evolving world order.

### **Need for the Study**

India's foreign policy in the 21st century has become increasingly complex due to shifting global power dynamics, regional conflicts, economic interdependence, and technological advancements. While India has long adhered to principles of strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and multilateral engagement, the contemporary international environment demands a nuanced understanding of how these traditional objectives interact with new instruments of diplomacy, economic statecraft, and security partnerships. Analysing India's foreign policy transformation is essential for comprehending the country's evolving role as a regional and global actor, particularly in light of challenges such as China's rise, U.S.-China strategic competition, terrorism, climate change, and regional instability in South Asia.

The study is necessary to identify patterns of continuity and change, highlighting how India balances longstanding principles with emerging priorities. It provides insights into the effectiveness of initiatives such as "Act East," "Neighbourhood First," and major-power engagement, while assessing the influence of domestic politics, leadership styles, and economic imperatives on foreign policy decisions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and international observers seeking to evaluate India's strategic behaviour, predict future trends, and enhance regional and global cooperation. This research, therefore, contributes to both academic literature and practical policy discourse on India's external engagements.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study of India's foreign policy transformation in the 21st century encompasses an analysis of the country's diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagements at regional and global levels. It focuses on understanding the interplay between continuity and change in India's foreign policy objectives, priorities, and instruments. The research examines India's relationships with major powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, as well as its engagement with regional neighbours under initiatives such as "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East." It also considers India's participation in multilateral forums like the United Nations, G20, BRICS, and QUAD, highlighting how these platforms reflect both India's enduring principles and adaptive strategies. Furthermore, the study explores the impact of domestic politics, leadership styles, and economic imperatives

on the formulation and execution of foreign policy, with special attention to the Modi government's emphasis on personalized diplomacy, economic statecraft, and public diplomacy. The scope includes analysis of security, economic, technological, and soft-power dimensions of India's external engagements, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping India's strategic behavior in the contemporary global order. By doing so, the study offers insights relevant to policymakers, scholars, and international observers interested in India's evolving role on the world stage.

### Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyse the continuity and change in India's foreign policy in the 21st century, examining how traditional principles like strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and multilateral engagement are maintained or adapted in response to new global challenges.
2. To examine India's relationships with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, focusing on how India balances cooperation, competition, and strategic autonomy in its bilateral and multilateral engagements.
3. To evaluate India's regional policies, including initiatives like "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East," and assess their effectiveness in strengthening India's influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia.
4. To explore the impact of domestic politics and leadership styles on foreign policy formulation and execution.
5. To identify emerging trends and challenges in India's foreign policy that may shape its role as a regional and global actor in the coming decades.

### Methodology

The study on India's foreign policy transformation in the 21st century adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on descriptive and analytical methods to understand the dynamics of continuity and change. The research primarily relies on secondary sources, including official government documents, policy statements from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), speeches by key political leaders, and white papers on foreign policy. Scholarly articles, books, think-tank reports, and reputable media sources provide additional insights into India's diplomatic strategies, economic engagements, and security policies.

A historical-comparative method is employed to trace the evolution of India's foreign policy from post-independence principles to contemporary practices, highlighting the persistence of strategic autonomy alongside the adoption of new instruments like economic statecraft, multilateral engagement, and personalized diplomacy. The study also analyses **case studies** of India's relations with major powers—United States, China, and Russia—as well as regional initiatives such as "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" to assess practical outcomes and strategic adaptations. By synthesizing information across multiple sources, the research identifies patterns of continuity and change, evaluates policy effectiveness, and draws conclusions regarding India's evolving role in the international system. This methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and practical dimensions of India's 21st-century foreign policy.

### *India's Foreign Policy Transformation*

India's foreign policy has historically been shaped by its colonial experience, geographical vulnerabilities, and moral vision of global justice. Post-independence, the principles of strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and multilateral engagement were central to its diplomatic identity. Strategic autonomy allowed India to navigate Cold War pressures without aligning fully with any bloc, non-alignment enabled moral leadership among developing nations, and multilateral engagement provided a platform to voice concerns about colonial legacies, poverty, and inequality.

In the 21st century, these foundational principles remain remarkably resilient but have been adapted to contemporary global realities. Strategic autonomy continues to guide decision-making; however, it is now exercised through pragmatic hedging and flexible alliances rather than strict ideological non-alignment. For instance, India's deepening engagement with the United States in defense, technology, and counter-terrorism initiatives demonstrates a nuanced approach: New Delhi seeks cooperative relationships without compromising its independent decision-making. Simultaneously, India continues to maintain strong ties with Russia, reflecting a layered approach to strategic autonomy.

Non-alignment as a philosophical posture has evolved into issue-based alignment: India collaborates with countries sharing common interests while preserving independence in contentious matters. Multilateralism, historically a moral imperative, has transformed into a strategic tool for status-seeking and influence. India's active participation in the G20, BRICS, and United Nations forums highlights its dual goal of promoting global governance reforms while advancing national interests. Through these adaptations, India demonstrates a continuity of principles alongside pragmatic evolution, ensuring relevance in a multipolar and interdependent world.

Managing relationships with major powers has been a central challenge and opportunity for India in the 21st century. The tripartite focus on the United States, China, and Russia illustrates the complex balancing act of

cooperation, competition, and autonomy. India–United States Relations: The U.S.–India relationship has transformed from estrangement in the early post-Cold War era to a strategic convergence today. Defense cooperation has intensified, including agreements on logistics sharing, intelligence collaboration, and high-technology transfers such as the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative. The elevation of the U.S.–India relationship into a “global strategic partnership” reflects convergence on security, counter-terrorism, and regional stability. Despite this, India maintains autonomy, resisting binding military alliances or unconditional alignment, demonstrating a continuation of its foundational foreign policy principles. Economic engagement has also increased, with India seeking technology transfers, investment, and market access while remaining cautious of dependency on the U.S.

India–China Relations: The rise of China presents both opportunities and challenges. Trade between the two countries has expanded dramatically, yet border disputes, competition in the Indian Ocean, and geopolitical rivalries have created tension. India’s response is a dual approach: pursuing economic engagement while enhancing defense preparedness and regional alliances. The Doklam standoff (2017) and Galwan Valley clashes (2020) underscored the limits of accommodation, leading India to strengthen ties with like-minded democracies, such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, through the Quad framework. This strategy exemplifies calibrated balancing, combining diplomacy, military readiness, and multilateral collaboration.

India–Russia Relations: India’s historical partnership with Russia, rooted in defense cooperation and geopolitical alignment during the Cold War, continues to provide strategic flexibility. Despite diversifying defense procurement from Western sources, India retains significant reliance on Russian platforms, technology, and energy collaboration. This relationship not only sustains strategic autonomy by offering alternatives to Western dependence but also allows India to hedge against regional uncertainties, particularly regarding China and Pakistan. Collectively, India’s major-power diplomacy in the 21st century reflects pragmatic adaptation: strategic autonomy is preserved not through isolation, but through carefully calibrated partnerships and hedging strategies.

India’s regional diplomacy has become more proactive and strategic, with initiatives like “Neighbourhood First” and “Act East” reflecting both continuity and innovation. Neighbourhood First: This policy underscores India’s traditional role as a regional stabilizer and promoter of South Asian development. India has prioritized economic assistance, connectivity projects, and capacity-building initiatives with neighbors such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The approach aims to enhance India’s influence while countering China’s growing footprint in South Asia through infrastructure and trade initiatives. Challenges remain, including political sensitivities, border disputes, and competing influences, but the policy reflects India’s continued commitment to regional leadership and strategic autonomy.

Act East Policy: Building on the earlier “Look East” policy, “Act East” emphasizes deeper engagement with Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, highlighting India’s economic, strategic, and cultural outreach. Initiatives include enhanced trade, maritime cooperation, defense exercises, and infrastructure development, aimed at securing maritime interests and regional stability. India’s role in the East Asia Summit, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN dialogues exemplifies a forward-looking regional strategy, balancing traditional influence with modern economic and security imperatives. These regional strategies demonstrate India’s recognition that regional stability and connectivity are vital for national security, economic growth, and global positioning. They also reveal adaptive diplomacy: traditional leadership aspirations are now combined with pragmatic tools, including economic incentives, maritime presence, and multilateral engagement.

Domestic politics and leadership styles have increasingly shaped India’s foreign policy in the 21st century. The centralization of decision-making, personal diplomacy by the Prime Minister, and emphasis on national identity have influenced both the style and substance of India’s external engagements. Under Narendra Modi, foreign policy has become highly personalized. The Prime Minister’s frequent international visits, public diplomacy initiatives, and engagement with the Indian diaspora have transformed India’s global image. Symbolic acts—such as cultural outreach, historical references, and media-friendly diplomacy—complement traditional policy objectives, reinforcing both soft power and domestic legitimacy. Economic statecraft, including investment summits and bilateral business dialogues, reflects the integration of domestic economic priorities into foreign policy strategy. Moreover, domestic political ideologies have impacted messaging and priorities. Nationalism, development narratives, and civilizational identity have shaped how India frames international relations, signalling both to domestic audiences and foreign actors. While this enhances coherence and visibility, it also introduces complexities in negotiations, as symbolic gestures may influence substantive policy decisions.

### ***Emerging Trends and Challenges***

Several trends are shaping the trajectory of India’s foreign policy in the coming decades.

- **Multipolarity and Global Competition:** The rise of China and reassertion of the United States in Asia requires India to continuously adapt its balancing strategies.
- **Economic Diplomacy and Technology:** Securing critical technologies, supply chains, and investment remains a priority, reflecting the growing interdependence of economic and strategic considerations.

- **Maritime Security:** India's focus on the Indian Ocean, port partnerships, and naval modernization signals a shift towards maritime strategy as a core pillar.
- **Multilateralism and Global Governance:** Active participation in global forums is essential for promoting India's interests and influencing international norms, particularly in climate change, trade, and security.
- **Domestic Influences:** Leadership styles, domestic politics, and public expectations will continue to shape foreign policy narratives and priorities.

These trends highlight the continuity of core objectives—autonomy, security, and development—alongside adaptive strategies, ensuring India remains a key actor in regional and global affairs.

### **Findings**

1. The study finds that India's foreign policy in the 21st century exhibits a strong combination of continuity and adaptation. Core principles such as strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and multilateral engagement remain central to India's diplomatic identity. Strategic autonomy continues to guide India's approach to major powers and alliances, while non-alignment has evolved into issue-based cooperation rather than strict ideological positioning. Multilateral engagement has expanded beyond moral advocacy to include pragmatic participation in global governance, exemplified by active roles in the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations. At the same time, India has adapted its instruments of diplomacy to include economic statecraft, digital diplomacy, and public engagement, reflecting responsiveness to globalization, regional security concerns, and technological shifts.
2. The research reveals that India maintains a balanced and nuanced relationship with major powers, successfully combining cooperation and competition while preserving strategic autonomy. With the United States, India has deepened defense, technology, and trade cooperation without entering a formal alliance. In the case of China, India has pursued both engagement and containment—trading extensively while enhancing border security and regional partnerships through frameworks like the Quad. Relations with Russia remain robust, particularly in defense and energy sectors, enabling India to hedge against uncertainties in the broader geopolitical landscape. This demonstrates that India's foreign policy is pragmatic, multi-vector, and strategically flexible.
3. The study finds that regional strategies have enhanced India's influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia, though outcomes are mixed. "Neighbourhood First" has strengthened bilateral ties through development assistance, infrastructure, and connectivity projects, but competing influences, particularly from China, pose challenges. The "Act East" policy has increased India's engagement in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific, improving trade, maritime cooperation, and security collaboration. Both initiatives illustrate India's ability to project leadership regionally while employing adaptive tools such as economic incentives, connectivity projects, and multilateral engagement.
4. Domestic political dynamics and leadership have significantly shaped India's foreign policy. The study highlights that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, foreign policy has become personalized, visible, and performance-oriented, emphasizing economic diplomacy, cultural outreach, and diaspora engagement. Leadership styles influence agenda-setting, priorities, and diplomatic messaging, demonstrating the link between domestic politics and external strategy. Symbolic diplomacy, such as public summits and media-friendly engagements, complements traditional policy goals while strengthening India's global image.
5. The research identifies several emerging trends shaping India's foreign policy trajectory. Multipolarity, technological interdependence, climate diplomacy, maritime security, and regional rivalries—especially with China—are reshaping strategic priorities. Economic diplomacy, public engagement, and multilateral activism are increasingly important. The study finds that India's foreign policy is adaptive yet principle-driven, positioning the country as a responsible regional and global actor capable of navigating complex challenges while preserving autonomy and national interests.

### **Conclusion**

The study of India's foreign policy in the 21st century reveals a nuanced interplay of continuity and change. Core principles such as strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and multilateral engagement continue to guide India's external relations, reflecting the enduring influence of post-independence diplomatic ethos. At the same time, India has adapted its strategies, tools, and priorities to address new global realities, including globalization, technological advancements, regional security challenges, and evolving major-power dynamics. This duality of preserving foundational principles while embracing innovative instruments illustrates India's pragmatic approach to international relations.

India's relationships with major powers demonstrate a multi-vector strategy that balances cooperation and competition. Deepening ties with the United States in defense, technology, and trade coexist with sustained engagement with Russia and cautious management of the strategic rivalry with China. These relationships reflect India's ability to exercise strategic autonomy while pursuing national interests, hedging against uncertainties, and maximizing opportunities in a multipolar world. Regionally, initiatives like "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" highlight India's proactive approach to strengthening influence in South Asia and

Southeast Asia. These policies combine traditional leadership aspirations with pragmatic instruments such as economic assistance, infrastructure development, maritime cooperation, and multilateral engagement. Their effectiveness underscores India's growing capacity to shape regional dynamics while navigating competing influences.

Domestic politics and leadership styles have emerged as significant determinants of foreign policy formulation and execution. Personalized diplomacy, public engagement, and economic statecraft under Prime Minister Narendra Modi have enhanced India's global visibility and reinforced its soft-power projection. At the same time, domestic political priorities continue to shape messaging, signalling, and decision-making. Looking ahead, India faces both opportunities and challenges: managing multipolarity, technological interdependence, regional rivalries, and global governance demand. The study concludes that India's foreign policy is characterized by principled adaptability, enabling it to maintain autonomy, protect national interests, and assert its role as a responsible regional and global actor in a rapidly evolving international system.

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