

# From Non-Alignment to Proactivity: India's Transforming Foreign Policy

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Indian foreign policy has endorsed exceptional and striking changes since independence in 1947. India believed in non-alignment and was a founding member of the non-alignment movement. It has also kept itself separate from the primary power blocks, the USA and the former USSR, especially during the Cold War era. Indian foreign policy has witnessed significant changes since its inception. The foreign policy of India is a culmination of different factors. It has sustained the ups and downs of internal and external factors and has navigated several changes. This paper explores and explains the continuing changes and the new directions India's foreign policy is taking with the change in time and governments. It has moved from non-alignment to aligning itself with multiple blocks and various power poles which have become a significant turning point in the diplomatic view. India has formidable links with different power poles and numerous power blocks and at the same time maintains its autonomy strategically. This change is in a direction that promotes India's aspirations, goals, and the need to protect its interests in a changing and complex environment of the globe and the shifting politics of the international environment. This paper also works on the opportunities and challenges India can face with its stand on multi-alignment.

**Keywords:** Indian Foreign Policy, Multi-Alignment, Power blocks

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The Foreign Policy of a nation gives the magnitude to the state as a Sovereign nation. Foreign policy reflects the nation's view of the world in its synergy with the global nations by maintaining integrity and sovereignty and improving the well-being of its citizens economically, socially and politically. It gives a wider picture of the aspirations, goals and set agendas of the nation. With this, it gives a broad picture of the governance of the nation, the internal affairs, the government and the participation of the people in the process of planning and designing.

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation from its non-alignment stance to a more proactive and assertive approach in recent years. Historically, India followed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a policy of neutrality during the Cold War, avoiding formal alliances with either the United States or the Soviet Union. This was rooted in the desire to maintain independence in decision-making and ensure security while promoting peace and cooperation globally.

However, as the international geopolitical landscape evolved and India itself experienced rapid economic growth, the country's foreign policy began to shift. The traditional non-alignment doctrine has gradually given way to a more dynamic and proactive strategy that emphasizes strategic partnerships, global engagement, and a readiness to assert India's interests on the world stage. This shift is evident in India's

increased involvement in multilateral organizations, regional cooperation, and its growing alignment with key global powers such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, while simultaneously maintaining ties with Russia and other nations.

India's transformation from non-alignment to proactivity is not just about diplomacy but also reflects its aspirations to enhance its role in global governance, address security challenges, and leverage economic opportunities. This shift signals a new phase in India's foreign policy, one that is marked by a greater willingness to take leadership positions and shape the global order in line with its strategic, economic, and security interests.

### EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY:

The subject matter of this article focuses on the evolution of India's foreign policy from its historical stance of non-alignment to a more active and assertive approach in the 21st century. This transformation is analysed in the context of India's changing strategic priorities, its growing economic influence, and its desire to strengthen its global position. The key aspects of this subject matter include:

**Historical Context of Non-Alignment:** The origins of India's non-alignment policy, were established in the Cold War era, and its foundational principles of remaining independent of the major global power blocs, prioritizing sovereignty, peace, and international cooperation (Gogoi, Yuvaraj, 2024).

The historical context of Non-Alignment in India's foreign policy is rooted in the post-independence period, shaped by the vision of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In the aftermath of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, the world was divided into two major ideological blocs—the capitalist West, led by the United States, and the socialist East, led by the Soviet Union. India, newly independent and keen on maintaining its sovereignty and independence in international affairs, found itself in a unique position, where aligning with either of these superpowers could undermine its autonomy.

**Foundations of Non-Alignment:** India's non-alignment policy was formally articulated in 1947 when Nehru advocated for a foreign policy based on independence, peace, and disarmament. This policy was deeply influenced by India's colonial past and the desire to avoid entangling alliances that could drag the country into global conflicts. Nehru believed that India could not afford to align with either the United States or the Soviet Union, as this could limit its room for manoeuvre and infringe upon its sovereignty. (Alam, M. B., 1977).

**The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** In 1961, Nehru, along with leaders like Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, helped found the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an international group of countries that aimed to avoid formal alliances with either the Western or Eastern blocs (Luthi, L. M., 2016). The NAM sought to promote the ideals of peace, cooperation, and independence while rejecting the influence and pressures of both superpowers. India became a leading voice within the NAM, advocating for issues such as decolonization, economic justice, and peace in the global south.

**Key Principles of Non-Alignment:** The key principles of India's non-alignment included

- Independence in Decision-Making: India sought to remain free from the influence and coercion of major powers.
- Peaceful Coexistence: India promoted diplomacy, negotiation, and non-violent means of conflict resolution.
- Non-Interference: India opposed interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries and emphasized the importance of national sovereignty.

Challenges to Non-Alignment: Despite its idealistic principles, India's non-alignment policy faced challenges. The Cold War dynamics, with rising tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, often placed India in difficult positions. India's relationship with the Soviet Union, especially during the 1970s when both countries signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, led to criticisms that India was tilting toward one bloc. Similarly, its conflict with neighbouring Pakistan and its eventual nuclear tests in 1974 added complexity to its foreign policy stance.

Gradual Shift in the 1990s: By the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union signalled a shift in the global order. Economic liberalization within India, coupled with changing security dynamics and globalization, prompted a reevaluation of India's foreign policy. The non-alignment policy was increasingly viewed as inadequate for addressing new challenges, such as regional security threats, economic integration, and international terrorism. (Gogoi, Yuvaraj.,2024).

The historical context of non-alignment reveals India's commitment to maintaining sovereignty and independence in a bipolar world, balancing the influences of global superpowers while advocating for international peace and justice. However, as the world changed, India's foreign policy evolved, moving from non-alignment to a more proactive, multi-aligned approach that reflects the new geopolitical and economic realities of the 21st century (Gopal, B., 1991). The foundational principles of non-alignment still influence India's foreign policy but are increasingly being supplemented by strategic partnerships and assertive global engagement.

### **SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES:**

Shifting Geopolitical Realities like the impact of changing global dynamics, such as the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, the re-emergence of the U.S. as a global superpower, growing population, its diaspora and regional security challenges, have led India to rethink its foreign policy approach. These changes have emerged from the evolving global power structures, regional dynamics, and India's growing influence on the world stage.

#### **1. The End of the Cold War and the Unipolar World Order**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world order, in which India had maintained its non-alignment policy. (Luthi, L. M., 2016). The world transitioned into a unipolar system dominated by the United States. During this time, India faced the challenge of adjusting its foreign policy to navigate a world where the U.S. held significant global influence. In this new context, India had to reassess its stance and move away from strictly non-aligned principles to a more dynamic and flexible approach that could accommodate new global power structures.

#### **2. Rise of China**

The rise of China as an economic and military power has significantly impacted India's foreign policy. China's growing influence, particularly in Asia and the Indian Ocean region, poses both an opportunity and a challenge for India. As China develops stronger ties with neighbouring countries and extends its global presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rajagopalan, R., 2017), India has become increasingly proactive in countering China's influence, especially in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This has led to India forging stronger partnerships with countries like the U.S., Japan, and Australia, as part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

#### **3. Economic Liberalization and Globalization**

In the 1990s, India embraced economic reforms that integrated the country more deeply into the global

economy. As India's economy grew and its role in international trade and finance expanded, the government began reassessing its foreign policy priorities. Economic diplomacy became a key driver, with India seeking trade agreements, investment opportunities, and economic partnerships to bolster its growth. India's growing economic clout, including its role in forums like the G20, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), has prompted it to play a more active role in shaping global economic governance and policy.

#### **4. Multipolarity and Rising New Powers**

The emergence of multiple regional and global powers, such as the European Union, Russia, and Japan, and regional players like Iran and Turkey, has led to a multipolar world order. India's foreign policy has adapted by forming strategic partnerships with these countries, creating a web of alliances that reflect its diverse global interests. India's engagement with Russia remains strong, particularly in the defence and energy sectors, while its growing ties with Western countries, especially the U.S., reflect its efforts to diversify its foreign relations and align with nations that share common values on security, democracy, and economic growth.

#### **5. Terrorism and Regional Security Concerns**

India's regional security environment has changed dramatically due to ongoing tensions with neighbouring Pakistan, especially over the Kashmir issue, and the rise of terrorism in South Asia. The increasing threat of terrorism and cross-border insurgencies have pushed India to take a more proactive stance in its defence and security policy. In this context, India has sought greater cooperation with countries in the region and beyond on counterterrorism efforts. Its security relationships with the U.S. and other nations have deepened, as India increasingly participates in multinational counterterrorism initiatives and intelligence sharing.

#### **6. Changing Dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region**

The Indian Ocean, strategically important for global trade, has become an area of intense geopolitical competition, particularly with China's growing presence in the region. China's investments in infrastructure in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the Maldives, as part of its maritime Silk Road initiative, have prompted India to increase its naval and diplomatic engagement in the region. India's focus on maritime security, partnerships with Southeast Asian countries, and strengthening regional organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) reflect its proactive approach to ensuring its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are protected.

#### **7. Shifting Power Relations in Global Institutions**

India's growing influence on the global stage has been accompanied by a desire to reform international institutions to better reflect the current geopolitical realities. India's push for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), its active role in organizations like BRICS, and its involvement in global governance initiatives like climate change negotiations and peacekeeping missions are part of its strategy to reshape the global order. India is increasingly positioning itself as a leader of the Global South, advocating for issues like development, climate justice, and decolonization, which are important to emerging economies and developing nations.

#### **8. Technological Advancements and Cybersecurity**

Technological advancements, especially in areas like space exploration, digital technology, and cybersecurity, have also influenced India's foreign policy. As a growing tech power, India has sought to secure its position in the global technological ecosystem by fostering partnerships with leading tech powers and ensuring access to emerging technologies. The growing concerns around cybersecurity, cyber

warfare, and technology-driven geopolitics have made India's engagement in these areas more proactive, both in terms of diplomacy and defence.

These shifting geopolitical realities—marked by the rise of new powers, changing regional dynamics, the evolution of the global economy, and new security threats—have significantly influenced India's transition from a policy of non-alignment to a more proactive, multi-aligned foreign policy. India now seeks to navigate a complex international landscape by forming strategic partnerships, playing a larger role in global governance, and asserting its interests in a more dynamic and interconnected world.

## **SHIFTING REALITIES INTERNALLY FOR INDIA:**

### **1. Economic Growth and Global Influence**

India's increasing economic strength has contributed to a shift in its foreign policy, allowing it to assert itself on the global stage. The country's growing influence in international trade, technology, and finance plays a significant role in this transformation. India's economy has grown, and it has become more integrated into the global economy, which has influenced its approach to foreign relations. As India became one of the world's fastest-growing economies, it prioritized economic diplomacy—using its growing economic influence to secure favourable trade agreements, foreign investment, and access to global markets. This led India to forge stronger ties with both developed and developing nations. India's economic rise has encouraged it to diversify its foreign policy alliances. Traditionally aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, India began to expand its relationships after the 1990s, building stronger connections with Western countries (like the United States, the EU, and Japan), as well as continuing its engagement with Russia and neighbours in Asia and Africa. Economic growth provided India with the resources to enhance its military and technological capabilities, which in turn influenced its foreign policy. For instance, India sought to bolster its defence relationships with countries like the U.S. and Israel, not just for security, but also as part of an effort to maintain its strategic autonomy in a changing global landscape. Economic growth also gave India the leverage to assert itself more actively in its region, particularly in South Asia. By providing economic assistance and investment to neighbouring countries, India aims to shape regional stability, counter China's growing influence, and ensure access to key maritime routes.

### **2. Strategic Partnerships and National Security Concerns:**

India's shift toward more proactive diplomacy is characterized by its deeper engagement with key global powers like the U.S., Russia, Japan, and European countries, as well as its involvement in multilateral forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the Indo-Pacific region. The evolving security concerns, including regional rivalries, terrorism, and military modernization, have shaped its foreign policy choices and defence strategies.

### **3. Global Governance and India's Leadership:**

India's growing aspiration to play a leadership role in global governance structures, such as in climate change, international trade, and conflict resolution, as well as its bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, have taken shape. As a growing economy, India has sought a larger role in global institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Economic growth has also made India a key player in global discussions on issues like climate change, sustainable development, and international trade. India's economic growth has significantly broadened its foreign policy scope, shifting from a focus on non-alignment to a more pragmatic, multi-aligned approach that balances economic interests with strategic goals.



### THE ROLE OF SOFT POWER:

The cultural and religious thought of India, Indian cinema and the cuisine of India have had their place on the international stage for ages. In the recent ages, they have become the assets of Indian foreign policy. Since the beginning of the 2000s, they have become the credentials for the soft power of India internationally. (Chandra, Vikash 2017 p 344; Suri cited in Mukherjee 2014, p 48). During the time of Atalji's governance, democracy was inducted into India's international relations. (Mohan, C. Raja. 2014). In the year 2000 for the first time in Indian History Atalji's government constituted a high-level committee on Indian Diaspora (Chandra, Vikash 2017, p 344). Dr Manmohan Singh's government has established the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs to be accessible to non-resident Indians (Hall 2015, p 250). His government emphasised participation in the democratic community to strengthen democratic promotion. India's efforts succeeded in 2007 (Chandra, Vikash, p 107) when UNO declared to observe Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, as the International Day of Non-Violence.

India's approach to soft power under the governance of Narendra Modi's leadership has been involved in fostering and widening its influence globally (Tandon, 2016, p 59). On the platform of religious, cultural and heritage, there is commendable participation from the government in last decade. The government's effort aimed at recognising Indian culture and values became a success in 2014 when 21<sup>st</sup> June was declared as International Yoga Day by the United Nations. The inclusion of diaspora and the emphasis on institutionalization has become the strategy for promoting soft power. There is an undergoing change in the international system as a result of the power changes and redistribution. In the emerging changes, concerning military power, the system at the global level is still unipolar but regarding the power of the economy, it has become multipolar (Nye Joseph S., 2015, 95–96). This is because of the rise of nations like China and India, the fulcrum of global politics is shifting to Asia-Pacific from Euro-Atlantic region. India's traditional strategy of balancing power is shifting towards taking stands in the interest of the nation. India's continuous engagement with United States and USA's extended hand of support to India's presence and membership in different multilateral organisations, their joint military exercises including Japan has created a belief that these nations are extending their help to India to balance China in the region of Asia. According to the external affairs minister Dr Jaishankar the foreign policy of India is "development-centric and people-centric" (The Indian Express, 18 Oct 2022)

### THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The future of India's foreign policy is likely to be shaped by several key factors, balancing historical principles with new global realities. Here are some potential directions for India's foreign policy moving forward:

1. **Strategic Autonomy and Flexibility:** While India is increasingly engaging in strategic partnerships, it will likely continue to uphold its principle of strategic autonomy, choosing alliances and collaborations based on national interests rather than ideological alignment. This will allow India to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape without being overly reliant on any single power, ensuring its independence in decision-making.
2. **Strengthening Regional Influence:** India will likely continue to focus on enhancing its influence in the South Asian region, while also playing an important role in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Indian Ocean, in particular, will remain a crucial area of strategic interest. India will seek to counterbalance China's growing influence in its neighbourhood and global institutions by increasing

regional connectivity, cooperation, and security arrangements with like-minded countries like Japan, Australia, and the U.S.

3. **Economic Diplomacy:** As India's economic power continues to grow, its foreign policy will be increasingly shaped by its economic interests. India will likely deepen trade relations, attract foreign investments, and expand its role in international economic governance. Multilateral trade forums such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and regional trade agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), will play an important role in shaping India's economic diplomacy.
4. **Security and Defence Partnerships:** Given its evolving security concerns, particularly about China and Pakistan, India will continue to focus on enhancing its defence capabilities. This includes strengthening strategic defence partnerships, notably with the United States, Japan, and Australia through frameworks like the Quad. India's participation in these arrangements will enhance its security posture and provide a platform for shaping regional security dynamics.
5. **Global Leadership and Multilateralism:** India is likely to continue its push for a greater role in global governance. This includes advocating for reforms in international organizations like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to secure a permanent seat, pushing for climate change action, and championing issues related to global health, such as its leadership in the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic. India's role in addressing global challenges will likely increase, as it positions itself as a bridge between the Global South and the developed world.
6. **Balancing Relations with Major Powers:** India's relationships with major powers like the U.S., Russia, and China will continue to be complex and multifaceted. India will likely seek to deepen ties with the U.S. while maintaining its traditional relationship with Russia, particularly in the defence and energy sectors. At the same time, India's relationship with China will remain a critical area of focus, characterized by both competition and cooperation, particularly on trade, infrastructure, and regional security.
7. **Addressing Global Challenges:** India's foreign policy will also be shaped by global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and migration. As one of the largest emerging economies, India will need to balance development goals with environmental sustainability. Additionally, India will continue to push for international cooperation in combating terrorism, focusing on both regional and global solutions.

The future of India's foreign policy will be marked by a proactive, multilateral, and pragmatic approach. India will seek to enhance its global influence, pursue strategic autonomy, and strengthen its role as a leader in both regional and global affairs. The interplay of security, economic growth, climate change, and international cooperation will guide India's evolving foreign policy trajectory.

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