



ANALYZING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY EVOLUTION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Md Nurul Hasan Sk

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

State Aided College Teacher-1,
Department of Political Science,
Jalangi Mahavidyalaya, Jalangi,
Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Md Nurul Hasan Sk

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402085>

Abstract

India's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution since gaining independence in 1947. This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the historical trajectory of India's foreign policy, highlighting key shifts, drivers, and outcomes. Through a multidimensional approach encompassing political, economic, strategic, and cultural dimensions, this study examines the interplay of domestic and international factors in shaping India's external relations. Beginning with the post-independence era marked by non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, the paper explores how India navigated the complexities of the Cold War and its aftermath. It delves into the factors that led to the recalibration of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, including economic liberalization, globalization, and changing geopolitical dynamics. Special attention is paid to India's engagement with major powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and regional actors like Pakistan and its neighbours. The analysis also considers India's participation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and its role in shaping global governance. Furthermore, this paper evaluates the impact of domestic political developments, including changes in leadership and ideological shifts, on India's foreign policy orientation. It investigates how issues such as national security, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and climate change have influenced India's diplomatic priorities and engagements on the international stage.

Keywords: *Non-alignment, Globalization, Geopolitics, Multilateralism, National security, Diplomacy, Terrorism*

Introduction

India's foreign policy has traversed a complex and dynamic path since gaining independence from colonial rule in 1947. Shaped by historical legacies, domestic imperatives, and evolving global realities, India's approach to the world has undergone significant evolution over the decades. From the idealism of non-alignment and the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru to the pragmatic recalibration in the post-Cold War era, India's foreign policy trajectory reflects a continuous quest for strategic autonomy, regional stability, and global relevance.

This research paper embarks on a journey to analyze India's foreign policy evolution through a historical lens, aiming to unravel the intricate interplay of internal and external factors that have shaped India's engagement with the world. By examining key turning points, policy shifts, and strategic imperatives, this study seeks to elucidate the underlying principles, drivers, and outcomes of India's foreign policy choices.

The post-independence era was characterized by India's commitment to non-alignment, championed by Nehru, which sought to steer clear of Cold War rivalries and uphold principles of sovereignty, independence, and solidarity among developing nations. This period witnessed India's active participation in global forums, its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and its role as a vocal advocate for decolonization and disarmament.

However, the end of the Cold War heralded a new era of geopolitical realignment and economic liberalization, prompting India to reassess its foreign policy priorities. The collapse of the bipolar world order, coupled with the imperatives of globalization, compelled India to engage more proactively with the international community, forge strategic partnerships, and adapt to the emerging power dynamics.

Moreover, domestic political developments, including changes in leadership and ideological orientations, have exerted significant influence on India's foreign policy trajectory. The rise of new political dispensations, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its emphasis on 'India First' diplomacy, has led to recalibrations in India's foreign policy priorities, with a greater focus on national security, economic diplomacy, and assertive regional engagement.

Against this backdrop, this research paper seeks to explore India's evolving role in regional and global affairs, examining its engagements with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, as well as its relations with neighbouring countries and regional blocs. By analyzing the interplay of political, economic, strategic, and cultural factors, this study aims to provide insights into the continuities, discontinuities, and future trajectories of India's foreign policy in the 21st century.

In doing so, this research endeavours to contribute to a deeper understanding of India's place in the world and its aspirations for regional leadership, global influence, and a more secure and prosperous future.

Objectives

- To trace the historical trajectory of India's foreign policy evolution since independence.
- To identify key turning points, policy shifts, and drivers shaping India's engagement with the world.
- To analyze the role of historical legacies, including non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, in shaping India's foreign policy orientation.
- To examine the impact of changing global dynamics, including the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization, on India's foreign policy priorities.

Methodology

This research paper has been employ a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to analyze India's foreign policy evolution from a historical perspective. The methodology involves a combination of qualitative research methods, including archival analysis, literature review, and case studies. Archival analysis entails the examination of primary source documents, such as government records, diplomatic correspondence, and policy statements, to trace the historical trajectory of India's foreign policy and identify key turning points and policy shifts. Additionally, a thorough literature review of scholarly works, academic articles, and books on Indian foreign policy provides context, theoretical frameworks, and comparative perspectives to enrich the analysis. Case studies are utilized to delve deeper into specific events, policies, or diplomatic engagements, offering nuanced insights into the drivers, motivations, and outcomes of India's foreign policy decisions. By triangulating multiple sources of data and employing a rigorous analytical framework, this research methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's foreign policy evolution over time.

The historical trajectory of India's foreign policy evolution since independence

India's foreign policy evolution since independence in 1947 has been shaped by a multitude of factors including historical legacies, domestic imperatives, changing global dynamics, and regional aspirations. Here's a chronological overview:

❖ Non-Alignment and Nehruvian Idealism (1947-1964)

- India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, articulated a foreign policy of non-alignment, aiming to maintain independence from both superpower blocs during the Cold War.
- Nehru's idealistic vision emphasized principles such as anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and support for decolonization movements across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- India played a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to promote cooperation among developing countries while staying aloof from the power struggles of the Cold War.

❖ Post-Nehru Era and Indo-Soviet Alignment (1964-1991)

- Following Nehru's death in 1964, India's foreign policy underwent a period of transition, marked by increasing alignment with the Soviet Union.
- The 1971 Indo-Pak War and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh further strengthened India's ties with the Soviet Union, which provided crucial diplomatic and military support.
- India's strategic partnership with the Soviet Union was characterized by defense cooperation, economic assistance, and alignment in global forums such as the United Nations.

❖ Post-Cold War Era and Economic Liberalization (1991-2000s)

- The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union necessitated a recalibration of India's foreign policy.
- Economic liberalization, initiated in 1991, led to greater integration with the global economy and a shift towards pragmatic engagement with major powers, including the United States.
- India's "Look East" policy aimed to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian countries and enhance economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

❖ Nuclear Tests and Strategic Autonomy (Late 1990s-Early 2000s)

- India's nuclear tests in 1998 marked a significant milestone in its foreign policy, asserting its status as a nuclear power and challenging global non-proliferation norms.
- Despite international condemnation and sanctions, India pursued a policy of strategic autonomy, maintaining its independent stance on nuclear issues and security matters.

❖ Emergence of Strategic Partnerships (2000s-Present)

- The early 2000s witnessed a strengthening of India's strategic partnerships with major powers, including the United States, through initiatives such as the India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement.

- India's "Act East" policy aimed to deepen economic and strategic ties with East Asian countries, particularly in the context of China's rising influence in the region.
 - India's engagement with multilateral forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the G20 reflects its aspirations for greater global influence and reform of international institutions.
- ❖ **Regional Dynamics and Neighbouring Relations**
- India's relations with neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, have been characterized by a mix of cooperation, competition, and occasional tensions.
 - Efforts to promote regional connectivity and economic integration, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have faced challenges due to bilateral disputes and geopolitical rivalries.
- ❖ **Current Trends and Future Trajectories**
- India's foreign policy in the 21st century continues to evolve in response to shifting global power dynamics, economic opportunities, and security challenges.
 - Key priorities include maintaining strategic autonomy, fostering economic growth and development, countering terrorism, addressing climate change, and enhancing India's role as a responsible global stakeholder.

Overall, India's foreign policy evolution since independence reflects a dynamic balancing act between historical principles of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, pragmatic engagement with global powers, regional aspirations, and the pursuit of national interests in an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world.

Key turning points, policy shifts, and drivers shaping India's engagement with the world

India's engagement with the world has been shaped by several key turning points, policy shifts, and drivers over the years. Here are some of the most significant:

- ❖ **Independence and non-alignment (1947)**
- *Key Turning Point:* India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947 marked a watershed moment in its engagement with the world.
 - *Policy Shift:* Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of non-alignment emerged as a response to the Cold War and aimed at maintaining India's independence from both superpower blocs.
 - *Drivers:* India's historical experience of colonialism, Nehruvian idealism, and the desire to champion principles of sovereignty, anti-colonialism, and global peace.
- ❖ **Indo-Soviet Alignment (1960s-1980s)**
- *Key Turning Point:* The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1971, amid the Indo-Pak War and the creation of Bangladesh, marked a significant shift in India's foreign policy alignment.
 - *Policy Shift:* India moved closer to the Soviet Union, seeking diplomatic and military support, particularly in its rivalry with Pakistan.
 - *Drivers:* Security imperatives, regional dynamics, and the need for military assistance and technology.
- ❖ **End of the Cold War (1991)**
- *Key Turning Point:* The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War reshaped the global geopolitical landscape and necessitated a reassessment of India's foreign policy.
 - *Policy Shift:* India embarked on a path of economic liberalization and greater engagement with the West, including the United States.
 - *Drivers:* Economic imperatives, changing global power dynamics, and the opportunity to diversify foreign relations beyond the constraints of the Cold War.
- ❖ **Nuclear Tests (1998):**
- *Key Turning Point:* India's nuclear tests in 1998 challenged global non-proliferation norms and signalled its emergence as a nuclear power.
 - *Policy Shift:* India asserted its strategic autonomy and pursued a policy of credible minimum deterrence.
 - *Drivers:* National security concerns, regional power dynamics, and the desire for global recognition as a major player in nuclear affairs.
- ❖ **Strategic Partnerships (2000s-Present)**
- *Key Turning Point:* The early 2000s witnessed a strengthening of India's strategic partnerships with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and Japan.
 - *Policy Shift:* India sought to deepen defines cooperation, enhance economic ties, and align its interests with those of key global players.
 - *Drivers:* Economic opportunities, security challenges, and the need for international support for India's rise as a global power.

❖ **Regional Dynamics and Neighbouring Relations**

- *Key Turning Points:* Various events, including conflicts with Pakistan (e.g., the Kargil War in 1999), natural disasters, and changes in government leadership, have shaped India's relations with its neighbours.
- *Policy Shifts:* India's approaches to regional integration, border disputes, and security cooperation have evolved over time, influenced by changing geopolitical realities and domestic priorities.
- *Drivers:* Border security concerns, economic interests, cultural ties, and the desire for regional stability and cooperation.

❖ **Global Challenges and Multilateral Engagement:**

- *Key Turning Points:* Events such as the 9/11 attacks, the rise of terrorism, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the interconnectedness of global challenges and the need for collective action.
- *Policy Shifts:* India has increasingly engaged in multilateral forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the G20, seeking to address global issues while safeguarding its national interests.
- *Drivers:* Shared global challenges, India's aspirations for global leadership, and the recognition of the importance of multilateralism in addressing complex global problems.

These key turning points, policy shifts, and drivers collectively illustrate the dynamic nature of India's engagement with the world and the multifaceted factors shaping its foreign policy decisions over time.

The role of historical legacies, including non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, in shaping India's foreign policy orientation

The role of historical legacies, particularly non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, has been instrumental in shaping India's foreign policy orientation since independence. Here's how:

❖ **Non-Alignment as a Core Principle**

- Non-alignment emerged as a cornerstone of India's foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.
- *Historical Legacy:* India's experience of colonialism and its struggle for independence fostered a deep commitment to sovereignty, independence, and non-interference in the affairs of other nations.
- *Shaping Foreign Policy:* Non-alignment provided India with the flexibility to pursue an independent course in international affairs, avoiding entanglement in the power struggles of the Cold War era.

❖ **Nehruvian Idealism and Moral Leadership**

- Nehru's idealistic vision emphasized principles of democracy, secularism, socialism, and peace, which shaped India's foreign policy outlook.
- *Historical Legacy:* Nehru's role as a leading figure in the anti-colonial movement and his advocacy for decolonization left a lasting imprint on India's approach to global affairs.
- *Shaping Foreign Policy:* Nehru's commitment to moral leadership and global solidarity guided India's support for anti-colonial movements, its advocacy for disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, and its role in promoting peace and cooperation among nations.

❖ **Promotion of Third World Solidarity**

- India, under Nehru's leadership, played a pivotal role in fostering solidarity among newly independent nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- *Historical Legacy:* India's own struggle for independence and its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) reflected its commitment to supporting the aspirations of other developing countries.
- *Shaping Foreign Policy:* India's advocacy for third world solidarity and South-South cooperation influenced its diplomatic engagements, including its support for decolonization, opposition to apartheid, and efforts to address global economic disparities.

❖ **Impact on Strategic Autonomy and Global Engagement**

- Non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism contributed to India's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its reluctance to align with any major power bloc during the Cold War.
- *Historical Legacy:* India's principled stance on non-alignment and its emphasis on sovereignty and independence laid the foundation for its assertion of autonomy in international relations.
- *Shaping Foreign Policy:* Non-alignment provided India with diplomatic manoeuvrability, enabling it to engage with a wide range of countries and pursue its national interests while safeguarding its sovereignty.

❖ **Continued Relevance and Adaptation**

- While the geopolitical landscape has evolved since Nehru's era, the principles of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism continue to shape India's foreign policy orientation.
- *Historical Legacy:* The enduring legacy of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism is evident in India's continued emphasis on independence, sovereignty, and global cooperation.

- *Shaping Foreign Policy:* India's foreign policy decisions, including its pursuit of strategic partnerships, multilateral engagement, and advocacy for a multipolar world order, are influenced by the values and principles inherited from its historical legacies.

In summary, the historical legacies of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism have played a pivotal role in shaping India's foreign policy orientation, guiding its pursuit of strategic autonomy, moral leadership, and global solidarity in an ever-changing international landscape.

The impact of changing global dynamics, including the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization, on India's foreign policy priorities

The impact of changing global dynamics, including the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization, has been profound on India's foreign policy priorities. Here's how these shifts have influenced India's approach to the world:

❖ **End of the Cold War**

- *Diversification of Partnerships:* With the dissolution of the bipolar world order, India's foreign policy shifted from a focus on non-alignment to a more diversified approach in engaging with multiple global players.
- *Opportunity for Engagement:* The end of the Cold War presented India with new opportunities to expand its diplomatic outreach and forge closer ties with countries beyond its traditional allies. India sought to capitalize on this shift by pursuing deeper engagements with both Western and non-Western powers.

❖ **Economic Liberalization**

- *Integration with Global Economy:* Economic liberalization policies initiated in 1991 opened up India's economy to the world, leading to increased trade, investment, and economic integration with the global economy.
- *Reorientation of Foreign Policy:* Economic considerations gained prominence in India's foreign policy calculus, leading to a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy, trade negotiations, and attracting foreign investment.
- *Strengthening of Strategic Partnerships:* Economic liberalization facilitated the deepening of strategic partnerships with major powers such as the United States, as economic interests became intertwined with strategic imperatives.

❖ **Impact on Foreign Policy Priorities**

- *Economic Diplomacy:* The end of the Cold War and economic liberalization prompted India to prioritize economic diplomacy as a key component of its foreign policy. India sought to leverage its growing economic prowess to advance its national interests and enhance its global influence.
- *Focus on Regional Integration:* Economic liberalization also encouraged India to pursue greater regional integration and cooperation, particularly in South Asia. Initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) gained importance as platforms for economic cooperation and regional connectivity.
- *Security Considerations:* While economic factors gained prominence, security considerations remained central to India's foreign policy priorities. India continued to focus on regional stability, counterterrorism efforts, and enhancing its defense capabilities to address emerging security challenges.

❖ **Globalization and Multilateralism**

- *Advocacy for Multilateralism:* India increasingly recognized the importance of multilateralism in addressing global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics. India actively participated in international forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the G20 to advance its interests and promote global cooperation.
- *Climate Change and Sustainable Development:* Globalization and the growing interconnectedness of economies underscored the importance of addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable development. India's foreign policy began to place greater emphasis on climate change mitigation, renewable energy, and environmental cooperation at the global level.

In summary, the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization fundamentally altered India's foreign policy priorities, leading to a greater focus on economic diplomacy, regional integration, and engagement with global institutions. While security concerns remained paramount, India's foreign policy evolved to reflect the changing dynamics of the global economy and the imperatives of globalization.

Findings

- *Non-Alignment and Nehruvian Idealism:* The research highlights the enduring influence of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism on India's foreign policy orientation, emphasizing principles of independence, sovereignty, and moral leadership.
- *Shifts in Global Dynamics:* The findings underscore the significant impact of changing global dynamics, including the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization, on India's foreign policy priorities. Economic considerations gained prominence, leading to a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy and regional integration.
- *Strategic Partnerships:* The analysis reveals the evolution of India's strategic partnerships with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and Japan. These partnerships have been characterized by deepening economic cooperation, enhanced economic ties, and alignment of interests on global issues.

- *Regional Dynamics:* The research highlights the complexities of India's relations with neighbouring countries and regional blocs, shaped by a mix of cooperation, competition, and occasional tensions. Efforts to promote regional connectivity and economic integration have faced challenges due to bilateral disputes and geopolitical rivalries.
- *Multilateral Engagement:* India's active participation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the G20 reflects its aspirations for greater global influence and reform of international institutions. The research identifies areas of convergence and divergence with other major powers on global issues such as climate change, terrorism, and global governance.
- *Continuities and Adaptations:* Despite shifts in global dynamics and domestic priorities, the research highlights the continuities in India's foreign policy orientation, rooted in principles of non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and global cooperation. However, the findings also underscore the need for adaptation to emerging challenges and opportunities in the 21st century geopolitical landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper provides a comprehensive analysis of India's foreign policy evolution from a historical perspective, highlighting key drivers, shifts, and outcomes. Through an examination of the enduring legacies of non-alignment and Nehruvian idealism, coupled with the impact of changing global dynamics such as the end of the Cold War and economic liberalization, this study sheds light on India's evolving role in regional and global affairs. The findings underscore the complexities of India's diplomatic engagements, ranging from strategic partnerships with major powers to regional dynamics and multilateral engagement. Despite challenges and uncertainties, India's foreign policy trajectory reflects a consistent commitment to principles of independence, sovereignty, and global cooperation, while also demonstrating adaptability to emerging geopolitical realities. As India navigates the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century, understanding its historical evolution can provide valuable insights into its aspirations for regional leadership, global influence, and a more secure and prosperous future.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Md Nurul Hasan Sk: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Chandra, V. (2017). Modi government and changing patterns in Indian foreign policy. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 21(2), 98-117.
2. Chandramohan, B. (2016). Evolution of India's Grand Strategy by Addressing Security Concerns as a Part of its India's Foreign Policy and Defense Policy Objective. *JAIR Journal of International Relations*, 3(1).
3. Gupta, S., Mullen, R. D., Basrur, R., Hall, I., Blarel, N., Pardesi, M. S., & Ganguly, S. (2019). Indian foreign policy under Modi: A new brand or just repackaging?. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(1), 1-45.
4. Gojree, M. U. (2014). Foreign Policy of India towards China: Principles and Perspectives. *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(9), 50-58.
5. Juutinen, M. (2018). Kautilyan foreign policy analysis: Sino-Indian dynamics in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 14(2), 206-226.
6. Kumar, R. (2015). Explaining the origins and evolution of India's Korean policy. *International Area Studies Review*, 18(2), 182-198.
7. Kumar, A. (2023). Ambedkar's Approach to International Relations and India's Foreign Policy. *British Journal of Philosophy, Sociology and History*, 3(1), 17-31.
8. Khanna, V. N. (2018). *Foreign Policy Of India-7E*. Vikas Publishing House.
9. Mukherjee, R. (2014). Continuity and Change in India's Foreign Policy. In *Globalization, Development and Security in Asia: Foreign Policy and Security in an Asian Century: Threats, Strategies and Policy Choices* (pp. 75-93).
10. Patel, B. N. (2016). The state practice of India and the development of international law: dynamic interplay between foreign policy and jurisprudence (Vol. 4). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
11. Pethiyagoda, K. (2020). *Indian Foreign Policy and Cultural Values*. Springer Nature.
12. Patra, N. (2022). Historical Development of China's Foreign Policy in India. *NeuroQuantology*, 20(15), 1070.
13. Shujahi, F. K., & Hussain, N. (2016). Evaluating Modi's Foreign Policy: Continuity or Change. *Journal of Political Studies*, 23(2), 617-636.
14. Shukla, V. (2005). *India's Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: The Role of Power*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist.
15. Thakur, V. (2012). *Indian foreign policy. International Relations: Perspectives for the Global South*, Pearson Publishers, New Delhi.

16. Watson, A., Little, R., & Buzan, B. (2009). *The Evolution of International Society: a comparative historical analysis reissue with a new introduction by Barry Buzan and Richard Little*. Routledge.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>