

The Historic Transformation of the Indian Foreign Policy Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to delineate the qualitative transformation of India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014–present) marks a decisive shift from the cautious, non aligned posture of the early post independence decades toward a more energetic, self confident, and commercially oriented global engagement. It highlights the fact that Indian foreign policy has been transformed in a very positive direction for the qualitative enhancement of India's developmental journey as well as her quest for comprehensive security. It outlines the main contours of Modi era foreign policy, highlights key doctrinal shifts, examines major regional and global partnerships, and reflects on the continuities and contradictions in India's contemporary role in world politics.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, Self confident, World politics, Global partnerships

INTRODUCTION

India's post 1947 foreign policy was anchored in Jawaharlal Nehru's non alignment, which sought strategic autonomy while avoiding formal military blocs. Under Modi, the emphasis has shifted from bare non alignment to 'strategic autonomy' combined with active multilateralism, alliance like partnerships, and a stronger security plus economic calculus. This transformation of Indian foreign policy is undergirded by continuing reverence to core principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and primacy of national interest.

Indian foreign policy in Modi era does not shy away from power balancing games and aggressive pursuit of border security exemplified by surgical strikes against Pakistan. The Operation Sindoor was the high watermark of India's strategic assertiveness against Pakistan's propensity of using terrorism as an evil instrument. It is committed to free trade and multilateral forums as exemplified by India's insistence on reforming the World

Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund (I.M.F) and the World Bank (W.B). It is committed to reviving India's ancient glory and does not shy away from using cultural diplomacy to advance its national interest. It energetically utilises soft power and cultural diplomacy. India is no longer content with being a moral power on world stage marked by primacy of power politics. Rather India is asserting itself on the world stage in multiple dimensions.

'Neighbourhood First' Policy and Critical Focus on the Indo Pacific:

A hallmark of Modi's foreign policy is the 'Neighbourhood First' policy, which prioritizes South Asia and seeks to deepen political, economic, and infrastructural integration with India's immediate neighbours. Initiatives such as the SAARC minus Pakistan summit diplomacy, enhanced connectivity projects with Bangladesh, and large scale development aid to Nepal and Sri Lanka exemplify this approach.

Despite challenges emerging from the internal political developments in Maldives and more recently in Bangladesh, India has now succeeded in recalibrating bilateral ties with these neighbours in a constructive direction. India is cautious about the challenges posed by the bonhomie between China and Pakistan. India has carried out surgical strikes against Pakistan in response to terror attacks. In order to counter Chinese challenge India has adopted a multi-pronged strategy which includes robust partnerships with the USA, Russia, Japan and Vietnam (Chandra, 2017).

India clearly stands for a free and open Indo-Pacific region bereft of Chinese hegemony. India's membership in the Quad with the United States, Japan, and Australia, increased naval deployments, and participation in Indo Pacific Dialogues signal a strategic tilt toward balancing China's maritime rise while avoiding formal military alliances (Miller and Estrada, 2017). This balancing act reflects India's desire to be a responsible regional power that is able to act as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean region without entanglement in formal Cold War style military blocs.

Relations with major powers: United States, Russia, and China

Modi's foreign policy has significantly upgraded India-U.S. relations, transforming them from a somewhat cautious partnership into a broad based strategic alignment (Malone, 2014). The two countries now coordinate on defence (including arms sales, exercises, and technology transfer talks), intelligence sharing, and supply chain resilience, while remaining careful about mutual dependencies and differing positions on global governance. For Washington, Modi's India is a crucial counter weight to China; for New Delhi, the U.S. partnership offers technology, capital, and diplomatic cover without formal treaty obligations.

India's traditional ties with Russia remain significant, especially in defence and energy, even as Russia's international isolation after the Ukraine war has complicated this relationship. Modi has sought to reduce over reliance on Russia by diversifying defence and energy suppliers (Hall, 2019). China looms large in Modi era foreign policy as both an economic partner and a principal security rival. The 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan clash along the Line of Actual Control have hardened India's border security posture and spurred rapid military modernisation. At the same time, India

continues to trade with China on a large scale. Even in this field India is trying to reduce its ever-magnifying trade deficit with China.

Utilising Soft Power Assets:

A distinctive feature of Modi's foreign policy is the extensive use of soft power. Large scale events such as the "Namaste Trump" and "Howdy Modi" rallies, the branding of yoga and Ayurveda, and the Digital India campaign have been used to project India as a mighty civilizational and technological power. The government has also institutionalised diaspora diplomacy, leveraging Non Resident Indians (NRIs) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) as stakeholders in India's global image and economic outreach.

India's participation in multilateral institutions—such as the United Nations, G20, BRICS, and the SCO—has been accompanied by a focus on reform and representation, articulated through slogans like "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" ("the world is one family") and calls for a more multipolar world order. These narratives blend moral idealism with realist demands for greater voting power in global institutions, especially in the context of India's push for permanent membership in a reformed and expanded UN Security Council. India also stands for reformed and democratic W.T.O for fair and smooth trade globally (Narlikar, 2021).

Indian foreign policy seeks to project India as a rising power with a distinct civilizational and cultural profile, while remaining inherently cautious about alliance commitments and open ended burdens. The emphasis on strategic autonomy, economic diplomacy, and soft power, combined with an assertive style of leadership, has enhanced India's global visibility and influence (de Estrada and Kate, 2020). However, its capacity to shape structural change in global governance remains constrained by geopolitical realities.

Comparison of Modi era Indian foreign policy to previous governments:

India's foreign policy under Narendra Modi (2014–present) differs from earlier governments in style, prioritization, and nationalist framing while retaining many core practices such as non alignment and strategic autonomy. Overall, Modi's period is marked by greater visibility, robust regional posture, tighter alignment with the United States, and a more assertive cultural diplomacy under a multi-aligned posture. Earlier India lacked the

visionary leadership to utilise its vast soft power strength. Cultural Diplomacy was an under-utilised tool in the pre-Modi era.

Earlier foreign policy was shaped by Nehruvian non alignment, anti colonial solidarity, and a cautious avoidance of potential alliance blocs in the Cold war era (Menon 2016). Even after the Nehruvian era various governments gradually liberalised engagement with the West and intensified economic diplomacy, yet they remained relatively low key and bureaucratic in execution.

Modi has replaced ‘non alignment’ with a more assertive ‘strategic autonomy’ narrative, while still refusing to join formal military alliances (Jaishankar, 2020). India now positions itself as a ‘vishwaguru’ and multipolar balancing power, using high profile summits, G20 presidency, and personal diplomacy to project India as a global leader.

Earlier foreign policy was largely technocratic and insulated from mass politics; leaders did not campaign on international relations, and public discourse around external affairs was highly limited. Even when leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee or Manmohan Singh engaged energetically with the U.S. or neighbours, the tone remained restrained.

Modi has injected popularity into foreign policy turning summit meetings, state visits, and diaspora events into mass audience events (e.g., “Howdy Modi,” “Namaste Trump”). This personalisation and popularity gives India greater visibility abroad.

The ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy in Modi era places South Asia at the centre of India’s foreign policy calculus. India has invested more in connectivity, digital integration, and infrastructure with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, while also using aid and pressure as leverage (Duran and Yusra, 2022). At the same time, confrontations with Pakistan and, at times, the Maldives show a sharper willingness to link domestic narratives to foreign policy outcomes.

Soft power is now channelled more through Hindu civilizational themes (yoga, temples abroad, ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ branding), reshaping India’s self image to a culturally-conscious civilisational state. This has mobilised segments of the overseas Indian community for Modi’s domestic cum foreign policy agenda. This has also led to significant inward economic investments in India’s economy by Indian diaspora.

Still India under Modi values neutrality, avoids formal alliances, pursues multiple partnerships (e.g., Quad plus

SCO), and frames itself as an independent pole in an emerging multipolar world (Menon, 2016). Modi has made Indian foreign policy more extraverted, personalised, and domestically politicised, with a stronger emphasis on India’s power status, Hindu nationalist imagery, and proactive regional leadership (Zeeshan, 2024).

Conclusion:

During the Modi era India has emerged as an energetic and action-oriented actor on the global stage with its power magnifying rapidly. It has dealt with a polarised geopolitical landscape with diplomatic acumen and a pragmatic foreign policy based on multi-alignment. Now India refused to be a simple moral power on the world stage. Rather it wanted to be a confident country on the global stage that wanted to pursue its strategic interests without any psychological and ideological barrier.

The policy of assertive strategic autonomy proved to be a game-changer for India both in terms of its economic diplomacy and geopolitical strategy meant to navigate the polarised and fragmented landscape of great power equations of contemporary global politics. This unique strategy proved the tremendous resilience of India as a formidable power in its own right. India has been able to secure its vital security interests, propel its economic growth and diversify its strategic partnerships. The major global powers have sought India’s friendship as indispensable to their own geo-political and geo-strategic calculations.

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