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## India's Foreign Policy In The 21st Century: Strategic Shifts, Emerging Partnerships, And Global Ambitions

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### Abstract

India's foreign policy has undergone significant transformation in the 21st century. Moving from a traditionally non-aligned stance, India has increasingly adopted a pragmatic and multi-aligned approach. With rising economic and military capabilities, India seeks to play a greater role on the global stage. This paper analyzes the transformation of India's external engagements from the Vajpayee era to the Modi administration, focusing on emerging partnerships, regional strategies, and India's ambitions in global governance. Drawing on a mix of qualitative analysis and case studies, the study explores India's evolving bilateral and multilateral relations, its positioning in the Indo-Pacific, and its approach to forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the UN. The research identifies key drivers behind India's strategic recalibration and highlights underexplored areas such as digital diplomacy, Africa outreach, and maritime security. Ultimately, the study evaluates whether India's foreign policy is coherent, future-oriented, and capable of supporting its global leadership aspirations.

### 1. Introduction

India's foreign policy has significantly transformed in the 21st century, reflecting the country's desire to secure its strategic interests and assert its influence globally. Historically guided by non-alignment, India now pursues a multi-alignment strategy, engaging diverse partners like the United States, Russia, European Union, ASEAN, and Gulf countries, while preserving strategic autonomy.

India's growing participation in key global and regional platforms such as the Quad, BRICS, G20, SCO, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) demonstrates its ambition to shape a rules-based international order. This research aims to explore India's evolving foreign policy in response to emerging geopolitical opportunities and challenges.

### Literature Review: India's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

The following section reviews key contributions from leading scholars to establish a framework for understanding these shifts and identifying gaps in the existing literature.

### C. Raja Mohan's *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence*.

C. Raja Mohan, one of India's most influential strategic thinkers, presents a collection of essays in *Modi's World* that critically analyze the foreign policy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the early years of his administration (beginning 2014). The work reflects on how Modi has redefined India's external engagement through assertive diplomacy, deeper regional involvement, and global ambition. The book captures the shift from a traditionally passive foreign policy to a more confident and strategically proactive global outreach.

### C. Raja Mohan (2003) – *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*

In this earlier work, Mohan identifies the 1998 nuclear tests as a critical juncture in India's foreign policy, initiating a shift from Nehruvian idealism to strategic pragmatism. He explains India's need to reposition itself in a post-Cold War world increasingly dominated by power politics and global market integration.

### Shashi Tharoor (2012) – *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*

Shashi Tharoor's *Pax Indica* (2012) presents a comprehensive view of India's evolving foreign policy in the 21st century. He emphasizes a shift from non-alignment to a multi-aligned, pragmatic approach that preserves strategic autonomy. Tharoor explores India's regional challenges, global diaspora, and cultural soft power, arguing for their effective use in diplomacy. Drawing on his UN background, he critiques multilateral inefficiencies and strongly supports India's bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat.

Dr. Jalis Ahmad's article explores how India's 21st-century foreign policy blends **continuity with transformation**. Rooted in **Nehruvian non-alignment and strategic autonomy**, India continues to prioritize **sovereignty and principled multilateralism**. However, the post-globalization era has driven a **more proactive, globally integrated approach**.

The study highlights major shifts, including the **"Act East" policy**, stronger **economic diplomacy**, and responses to **new security threats** like terrorism and cyber challenges. It also discusses India's **diversified strategic partnerships**—from traditional allies to regions like Africa and Latin America and its **aspirations for global leadership** through active roles in multilateral platforms like the **G20 and UN**.

Ahmad presents a balanced view of how India maintains its foundational foreign policy principles while **strategically adapting to a multipolar, interconnected world**.

### The Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004): Nuclear Assertion and Strategic Realignment

#### Nuclear Tests and Strategic Assertion

In May 1998, India conducted a series of underground nuclear tests at Pokhran, Rajasthan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Known as Pokhran-II, these tests marked a watershed moment in India's strategic and security framework, redefining its place in global geopolitics.

#### Assertion of Sovereignty

The decision to go nuclear was a bold declaration of India's sovereign right to ensure its national security. In an international environment where nuclear capability was increasingly tied to strategic power and deterrence, the tests served as an assertion of India's independent foreign policy and defense strategies.”.

#### Strategic Clarity

Prior to 1998, India's nuclear policy had remained deliberately undefined. Pokhran-II ended this uncertainty by openly declaring India as a nuclear weapons state, thereby enhancing strategic clarity. The tests aimed to reshape India's image from a regional power to a global strategic actor.

#### Domestic Support and International Criticism

Domestically, the nuclear tests were met with widespread approval and nationalistic pride. However, the international reaction was swift and largely critical. Key countries—including the **United States, Japan**, and members of the **European Union** imposed economic sanctions on India. Despite this, the Vajpayee government stood firm, arguing that national security could not be compromised under external pressure.

### Diplomacy with Pakistan during the Vajpayee Era (1998–2004)

Under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India adopted a balanced approach to Pakistan—advocating for peace through diplomacy while maintaining a firm military posture to protect national interests. This period

was marked by both landmark peace initiatives and serious military confrontations, reflecting the complexity of Indo-Pak relations.

### **The Lahore Declaration (1999)**

Vajpayee's historic visit to Lahore led to the Lahore Declaration, where both nations pledged to resolve disputes peacefully and prevent nuclear conflict. The gesture of goodwill, including the launch of the Delhi–Lahore bus, was internationally praised.

However, hopes for peace were quickly undermined by the Kargil War, exposing Pakistan's breach of trust."

### **The Kargil War (1999)**

Pakistani troops infiltrated Indian positions in Kargil, which led to a high-altitude conflict India launched Operation Vijay and Operation Safed Sagar to reclaim lost ground. India launched Operation Vijay and Operation Safed Sagar to reclaim lost ground. Global support, especially from the United States, pressured Pakistan to withdraw. India's military success and diplomatic stance strengthened its global image.

### **The Agra Summit (2001)**

Despite setbacks, Vajpayee invited Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf for peace talks. The Agra Summit showed India's commitment to dialogue, though it ended without an agreement.

### **Parliament Attack and Operation Parakram (2001–2002)**

After a terrorist attack on India's Parliament, India launched Operation Parakram, deploying troops to the border.

Despite hostility, Vajpayee chose a peaceful approach over retaliation, using diplomacy and global pressure to isolate Pakistan. This marked a shift toward strategic development in crisis management.

His leadership showed that India could seek peace without compromising on security. This period laid the foundation for India's evolving role as a responsible regional power with global ambitions.

### **India's Strategic Engagement with the West under Vajpayee**

Following the May 1998 nuclear tests, India faced global sanctions and diplomatic backlash. However, instead of retreating, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee adopted a bold and pragmatic strategy to engage the West—particularly the United States to reshape India's global standing and align with emerging geopolitical realities.

#### **1. Talbott–Singh Dialogue (1998–2000)**

India initiated a critical diplomatic outreach through 18 rounds of talks between U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. The dialogue helped reduce post-test tensions, foster mutual understanding on nuclear issues, and allowed India to clarify its security concerns regarding China and Pakistan. India's commitment to responsible nuclear behavior, despite remaining outside the NPT, set the stage for future cooperation.

#### **2. Kargil War and U.S. Support (1999)**

During the Kargil War, the U.S. broke with tradition by openly supporting India. The Clinton administration condemned Pakistan's actions and pressured Islamabad to withdraw its forces. This marked a significant shift in U.S. policy and highlighted a growing strategic cooperation with India.

#### **3. Clinton's Historic Visit to India (2000)**

President Bill Clinton's landmark visit first by a sitting U.S. president in 22 years signaled a diplomatic reset. Welcomed with enthusiasm, Clinton's engagement focused on democratic values, economic reform, and collaboration in science and technology. The visit laid the groundwork for a stronger India U.S. strategic partnership.

#### 4. Removal of Sanctions and Post-9/11 Shift (2001)"

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. reviewed its global alliances. Sanctions on India were removed in October 2001, and President George W. Bush called India a “natural ally” in the global fight against terrorism. This catalyzed defense cooperation, technology-sharing discussions, and collaborations in space, defense, and high-tech sectors.

#### 5. Strategic and Technological Cooperation

Vajpayee’s tenure saw the beginning of defense dialogues, joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and naval coordination. Talks on dual-use technologies also began, laying the foundation for the India–U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005), later signed under his next leader.". These efforts marked India’s transformation from a pariah state to a trusted strategic partner.

#### India–China Relations under Vajpayee

Vajpayee’s 2003 visit to China was a diplomatic milestone, ending a decade-long gap in high-level engagement. India formally recognized Tibet as part of China, while China facilitated border trade through Nathu La in Sikkim—implicitly acknowledging India’s sovereignty over the region. The visit also established the Special Representatives Mechanism for resolving boundary disputes, introducing a framework for structured dialogue and economic cooperation. This marked a strategic shift from mutual suspicion to cautious engagement.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s foreign policy was visionary and transformative. By handling international sanctions wisely and dealing with major powers diplomatically, his government changed India’s role in the world. Under Vajpayee, India emerged as a credible regional force and a rising global player grounded in democracy, economic potential, and strategic clarity.

#### Manmohan Singh Era (2004–2014): Strategic Economic Diplomacy

The early 21st century marked a major change in India’s foreign policy direction. During this time, India shifted toward more global cooperation, strategic partnerships, and economic integration. Leading this transformation was Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), who helped move India from a cautious approach to a more active role in shaping world affairs.

#### Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal (2005–08)

The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal, finalized between 2005 and 2008, represents a defining moment in India’s 21st-century diplomacy and is widely regarded as a cornerstone of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s foreign policy legacy. This landmark agreement not only transformed India’s international nuclear status but also signaled a profound shift in Indo-US relations, transitioning from a transactional dynamic to a deeper, strategic partnership.

#### Multilateral Engagement: India's Rise on the Global Stage

India’s Rise in Global Forums

- **G20 Leadership:** Following the 2008 global financial crisis, India emerged as a leading country in the G20. Singh’s economic experience positioned him as a respected leader, advocating inclusive growth, global trade reform, and financial regulation.
- **BRICS Engagement:** India actively shaped the BRICS bloc, turning it into a platform for South-South cooperation. Singh supported the creation of a BRICS Development Bank to counter Western-dominated institutions.
- **India’s Role in Global Climate Talks:** During Manmohan Singh’s tenure, India actively participated in global climate negotiations. At the 2009 Copenhagen Summit and beyond, India supported the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” Singh carefully balanced India’s need for development with international climate commitments, strengthening India’s image as a responsible global player. Manmohan Singh’s tenure marked a strategic shift in India’s foreign policy,

### **India's Look West Policy under Manmohan Singh: Strategic Outreach to West Asia**

When Manmohan Singh was Prime Minister (2004–2014), India started the Look West Policy, along with the Look East Policy. The goal was to make better ties with countries in West Asia like the Arab Gulf, Iran, and Israel. These places are important for India's oil needs and Indian people living there.

### **Look East Policy under Manmohan Singh**

During Manmohan Singh's tenure, India improved the Look East Policy to boost ties with East and Southeast Asia. The goals were to counter China's influence, build stronger relations with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and promote free trade. It also focused on maritime security and regional projects like the India–Myanmar–Thailand Highway. The policy later evolved into a broader Indo-Pacific strategy, highlighting security, connectivity, and economic cooperation.

### **India–Japan Relations: Strategic and Economic Convergence**

Under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India–Japan relations deepened significantly, evolving into a Strategic and Global Partnership in 2006. The two democracies enhanced cooperation in defense, regional security, and global diplomacy, with regular military dialogues and early coordination in the G4, G20, and Quad.

Economically, the 2011 CEPA boosted trade, reduced tariffs, and strengthened investment ties, marking a new phase in bilateral engagement.

### **India–China Relations under Manmohan Singh**

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 2008 visit to China marked a significant step in managing complex India–China relations. Both sides issued a "Shared Vision for the 21st Century", committing to peaceful coexistence and deeper economic ties.

Talks focused on reducing trade imbalances, enhancing infrastructure and energy cooperation, and continuing border negotiations through Special Representatives. Singh also promoted cultural and educational exchanges, emphasizing soft diplomacy.

Under his leadership, India began to take its place on the global stage—using its democratic values, growing economy, and strategic position to build stronger ties with world powers, international organizations, and regional groups. "His efforts laid the foundation for a more confident and globally engaged Indian foreign policy in the 21st century."

### **"India's Foreign Policy Under Narendra Modi (2014–Present): Neighbourhood First and Act East"**

"In recent years, India has become more confident and active in its foreign policy. India's foreign policy in the 21st century has undergone a significant evolution—moving from passive engagement to proactive regional leadership and strategic global partnerships. Two key pillars of this transformation are the 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, both of which reflect India's desire to strengthen its regional foundations while actively participating in shaping the Indo-Pacific order."

Neighbourhood First, launched in 2014, prioritizes political, economic, and security cooperation with South Asian neighbours. Through initiatives like the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, Kaladan Transit Project, and energy integration with Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, India seeks to promote connectivity, development, and regional stability. "India's move to focus on BIMSTEC instead of SAARC, humanitarian aid during crises like the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and vaccine diplomacy further underline India's role as a benevolent power. However, challenges such as political instability in neighbours and China's expanding influence remain persistent obstacles."

The Act East Policy, launched in 2014, is a stronger and more active version of the earlier Look East policy. It focuses on building closer ties with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., and increasing India's role in the Indo-Pacific. India participates in the Quad, defense exercises like **Malabar**, and promotes digital and infrastructure cooperation. Together, these twin policies embody India's strategic ambition—to lead responsibly in its region while asserting itself as a key player in shaping the emerging Indo-Pacific order.

### **Diaspora Diplomacy: Using Global Indians for Soft Power and Influence**

In the 21st century, India's foreign policy has strongly focused on its diaspora — the millions of people of Indian origin (PIOs) living worldwide. With over 30 million Indians abroad, the diaspora is not only a cultural connection but also an important part of India's strategy to grow its influence around the world. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the role of the diaspora has become even more important in India's international relations.

### **Important Efforts and Outcomes**

#### **1. High-Profile Engagements**

Modi has actively reached out to Indians abroad through big events like the 2014 rally at Madison Square Garden in New York, Wembley Stadium in London, and the “Howdy Modi” event in Houston. These gatherings helped strengthen the emotional bond between the diaspora and India.

#### **2. Digital and Cultural Outreach**

The government uses social media and digital platforms to stay connected with Indians worldwide. It also promotes Indian culture, yoga, and language through embassies and cultural organizations.

### **Why Diaspora Diplomacy Matters**

- **Soft Power:** The Indian diaspora helps improve India's image and influence, especially in countries with large Indian communities like the US, UK, and Canada.
- **Economic and Technology Links:** Many Indians abroad are leaders in business and technology, helping bring investment and innovation to India.

The diaspora also influences policies in their countries that can benefit India's interests.

Today, diaspora diplomacy is a key part of India's foreign policy. By involving Indians worldwide as ambassadors of India, the country strengthens its global presence and works toward becoming a major world leader in the 21st century.

### **Modi's Vision for Global Engagement**

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy has embraced a bold, multi-aligned strategy, characterized by deepening strategic partnerships with major global powers. The Modi government has prioritized bilateral pragmatism—pursuing national interest through targeted defense agreements, economic engagement, and strategic dialogues without compromising strategic autonomy.

### **India–U.S. Relations: From Engagement to Strategic Partnership**

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India–U.S. relations have taken a major leap forward, evolving from basic cooperation into a **Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership**. This shift reflects stronger collaboration in defense, regional strategy, and advanced technologies.

### **Defense and Security Cooperation**

India and the United States have signed important defense agreements that allow their militaries to work more closely and share vital information:

#### **COMCASA (2018) – Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement:**

Allows secure and real-time communication between the militaries of both countries. This improves coordination during joint operations.

#### **BECA (2020) – Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement:**

Lets India access U.S. geospatial maps and satellite data. This helps with missile accuracy, border surveillance, and disaster response.

The two countries have also boosted military cooperation through regular **Malabar naval exercises**, which help improve coordination and readiness.

Modi elevated India's participation in the **Quad** (with the U.S., Japan, and Australia), transforming it into a robust strategic forum for ensuring a **free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific**.

### **India's Stable Friendship with Russia**

India's friendship with Russia remains steady and trusted, even amidst international disagreements. Under Prime Minister Modi, this long-standing partnership continues to evolve while preserving its core strength. Defense cooperation plays a crucial role in this relationship, with significant agreements such as the purchase of the S-400 air defense systems, leasing of submarines, and joint production of military equipment underscoring the depth of their strategic collaboration.

On the diplomatic front, India has maintained a neutral approach to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. This stance reflects Modi's emphasis on strategic autonomy, enabling India to uphold strong ties with Russia while navigating complex global dynamics.

### **Gulf Region: Economic and Strategic Realignment**

Modi's outreach to West Asia has reshaped India's relations with the Gulf, especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The partnership has expanded beyond oil and financial flows into a deeper strategic relationship. Multiple high-level visits have strengthened ties, resulting in the UAE–India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

The signing of the UAE–India CEPA in 2022 gave a major boost to bilateral trade, while large investments have flowed into infrastructure, renewable energy, and the digital economy. With over eight million Indians living in the Gulf, the government has focused on their welfare, labor rights, and emergency evacuations during crises like COVID-19 and Operation Kaveri.

India has also enhanced maritime cooperation and worked closely with Gulf nations on counterterrorism and combating extremism, marking a broader and more dynamic engagement with the region.

### **India–China Relations under Modi**

A pivotal moment came in 2017 during the Doklam standoff, when Indian and Chinese troops faced off on the Bhutanese plateau over Chinese road construction. The confrontation, which lasted over two months, underscored India's willingness to push back against possible strategic encroachments. Though resolved diplomatically, the standoff marked a decisive shift in India's approach—more assertive, cautious, and focused on securing regional interests.

This confidence grew in 2020 with the deadly Galwan Valley clash, which made relations worse and caused changes in the economy and military. The Modi government responded with a multi-faceted strategy, enhancing border infrastructure, tightening scrutiny on Chinese investments, and reinforcing ties with regional powers through platforms like the Quad.

Despite persistent tensions, diplomatic engagement has not been abandoned. India continues to balance deterrence with dialogue, striving to protect sovereignty while positioning itself as a key player in a multipolar Indo-Pacific order.

The path of India China relations under Modi reflects a broader shift in India's foreign policy, one that is strategic, self-assured, and globally aware.

In sum, Modi's China policy reflects a strategic shift from managing competition through diplomacy to actively containing Chinese influence through military readiness, economic self-reliance, and regional partnerships.

### **Enhanced Defense Strategy: Proactive Measures and Assertive Military Posture**

One of the most notable aspects of India's foreign policy under Modi has been its muscular security posture. Proactive defense measures, such as the surgical strikes of 2016 and the Balakot airstrike of 2019, have

demonstrated India's resolve to defend its sovereignty. These actions reflect a shift towards a more assertive military strategy, moving away from a reactive approach to a proactive one in safeguarding national interests.

### Indo-Pacific & Quad Strategy

India's foreign policy under Narendra Modi has embraced the Indo-Pacific as a key strategic focus, aiming to be a net security provider in the region, particularly in maritime security. This approach helps safeguard regional stability, freedom of navigation, and counter China's growing influence. Central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy is its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia. "The Quad, revived in 2017, promotes regional cooperation on security, maritime awareness, strong supply chains, critical technologies, and infrastructure development." India views the Quad as a flexible, values-based partnership that enhances its strategic autonomy while expanding its regional influence. Through joint naval exercises like *Exercise Malabar* and collaborative efforts on health and digital infrastructure, India solidifies its role as a responsible global stakeholder. This strategy not only strengthens India's position in the Indo-Pacific but also aligns with its goal of becoming a leading global power committed to a rules-based international order.

### G20 Presidency and Global South Leadership

India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 marked a defining moment in its 21st-century foreign policy, reinforcing its aspirations for global leadership and its commitment to representing the interests of the Global South.

India's G20 presidency in 2023 focused on promoting **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)**, using open-source platforms for financial inclusion, health services, and governance. This model was presented as an affordable, scalable solution for developing countries. India also advocated for transparent **debt restructuring**, more support for developing economies, and **climate finance**.

By organizing the **Voice of the Global South Summit**, India gave over 120 countries a platform to voice their concerns, making global governance more inclusive. This enhanced India's role as a proactive leader in shaping a fairer international order, no longer just a follower but a key agenda-setter in global discussions.

### Conclusion

India's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a strategic evolution from non-alignment to pragmatic multi-alignment. During three administrations—from Vajpayee's strategic assertion and nuclear diplomacy, through Manmohan Singh's economic multilateralism, to Modi's assertive global outreach—India has consistently expanded its international engagement.

Driven by economic growth, security imperatives, and global ambition, India has forged deeper partnerships with major powers like the U.S., Russia, and Israel, while asserting leadership in multilateral forums such as the G20, BRICS, and Quad. Its Indo-Pacific strategy, emphasis on digital diplomacy, and outreach to Africa and the Global South signal a more confident and proactive foreign policy.

While challenges remain particularly with China and regional volatility India's external engagements now exhibit greater coherence, strategic intent, and global vision. The country's ability to balance autonomy with alliance-building will be key to realizing its long-term aspiration of becoming a leading global power.

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