



India As The Vishwa Guru: Realizing Modi's Vision Through Strategic Relations With Asia

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Abstract:

India's pursuit of becoming a "Vishwa Guru" (world leader or global teacher) has been a cornerstone of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision in the realm of Indian foreign policy. Rooted in India's ancient civilization and its values of peace, diplomacy, and non-violence, Modi's dream of establishing India as a moral and strategic leader globally has gained significant momentum, especially in the context of relations with Asian countries. Over the past decade, Modi's diplomatic strategies, such as "Act East Policy" and the promotion of regional economic, security, and cultural cooperation, have helped India enhance its influence. India has strengthened ties with key Asian nations like Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN members, while balancing relationships with powers like China and Russia. This rise in diplomatic clout, coupled with India's global stance on issues like climate change, digital transformation, and global peacekeeping, indicates that India is closer to achieving the status of a "Vishwa Guru." However, challenges remain, such as regional conflicts, geopolitical rivalries, and the necessity for domestic reforms to sustain its growth and leadership in Asia.

Introduction

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is on the cusp of seeking a third term in office, with the parliamentary elections just around the corner. As his tenure stretches into a decade, Modi's electoral campaign has increasingly spotlighted the many ways in which he has transformed India. Among the numerous changes ushered in during his time in power, one of the most notable has been in the realm of foreign policy. Historically, foreign policy has not played a significant role in India's electoral discourse, with most voters focusing on domestic concerns like employment, development, and social welfare. Modi, however, has changed this trend. Foreign policy under his administration has become not only a tool for international diplomacy but also a point of pride and electoral rhetoric at home.

Central to Modi's foreign policy agenda is his vision of positioning India as a "Vishwa Guru" or world leader. This vision is deeply rooted in India's ancient civilizational ideals and represents a fusion of soft power and strategic diplomacy aimed at asserting India's global leadership. The term "Vishwa Guru" gained prominent attention during India's hosting of the G20 Summit in 2023. At that time, Modi's face was plastered across imposing banners, symbolizing the nation's growing global influence. By emphasizing this narrative, Modi has taken foreign policy beyond the typically elite spaces of New Delhi's corridors of power, bringing it into the realm of everyday discourse. His efforts to popularize foreign policy have been unique and have shifted India's external engagements into a larger framework of national identity, religious pride, and cultural heritage. This also reflects a broader shift in how India

projects itself to the world, moving away from its historical identity as a secular democracy and evolving toward a more Hindu civilizational state under Modi's leadership.

Modi's Reimagining of India's Global Role

Narendra Modi's foreign policy vision has been defined by his energetic promotion of India as a rising global power. Under his leadership, India has sought to reimagine its place in the world, moving beyond the non-aligned stance of previous decades. Modi has focused on engaging strategically with global powers like the United States, Japan, Russia, and the European Union while also nurturing relationships with developing countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. In doing so, he has framed India as a bridge between the global North and South, a leader of developing nations while simultaneously playing a crucial role in the geopolitics of great power competition.

At the heart of Modi's "Vishwa Guru" vision is India's ancient heritage and its philosophical and cultural contributions to the world. Modi has frequently invoked India's spiritual and intellectual traditions as sources of inspiration for global governance and leadership. His government has promoted initiatives to spread India's cultural influence abroad, from Yoga diplomacy (celebrating International Yoga Day worldwide) to the global promotion of Ayurveda and traditional Indian practices. This emphasis on India's soft power is paired with an assertive foreign policy that seeks to expand India's influence in global institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, where India has taken strong stands on issues such as climate change, global trade, and multilateralism.

The rise of India under Modi's leadership is not merely about gaining a seat at the table with global powers. It is also about providing a distinct, Indian approach to solving some of the world's most pressing problems. Modi has presented India as a voice of reason and balance in a world facing rising tensions, whether in the form of trade wars, geopolitical rivalries, or global health challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. India's leadership in providing vaccines to countries in need during the pandemic earned it considerable goodwill, further cementing its role as a global partner in times of crisis.

Foreign Policy as Electoral Strategy

In a significant departure from previous Indian governments, Modi's administration has incorporated foreign policy into its electoral strategy. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has repeatedly highlighted Modi's foreign policy achievements as a key success of his tenure, positioning him as a leader capable of enhancing India's stature on the world stage. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, Modi's foreign policy accomplishments, particularly his vision of India as a "Vishwa Guru," are being marketed to voters as a validation of his leadership.

Foreign policy under Modi has been domesticated, so to speak, with everyday Indians becoming more familiar with India's international relations than ever before. This popularization of foreign policy is a major shift, as prior to Modi, Indian diplomacy rarely extended into public consciousness. Under Modi, however, foreign relations have become more than just a technical subject handled by diplomats; they are now part of the nationalist narrative promoted by the BJP. His foreign trips, meetings with world leaders, and participation in global forums like the G20 are heavily covered in the Indian media and portrayed as victories for India's global standing.

However, the broader public involvement in foreign policy has also had unintended consequences. The public's engagement with foreign policy has not necessarily led to more informed debate, transparency, or accountability in how India manages its international relations. Instead, it has often resulted in heightened polarization, with social media amplifying nationalist sentiments and complicating diplomatic relations. For instance, India's relationship with its neighbors has, at times, been strained by the domestic reaction to external criticisms of Modi or his policies. One such example is India's ongoing dispute with the Maldives, where public outrage over derogatory comments by Maldivian ministers escalated into

widespread calls for an economic boycott of the island nation, leading to a notable decline in Indian tourist arrivals.

The Shift Toward a Hindu Civilizational Identity

A key element of Modi's foreign policy has been the projection of India not just as a global power but as a Hindu civilizational state. For decades, India had proudly showcased itself as a secular, pluralistic democracy, a model for managing diversity in a developing world often plagued by ethnic and religious strife. India's foreign policy reflected this identity, with its non-aligned movement being a symbol of its commitment to global peace and justice, and its internal multiculturalism serving as an example of how diverse societies could coexist.

Modi, however, has moved away from this narrative, instead promoting an image of India that is deeply intertwined with Hindu culture and identity. This shift can be seen in Modi's frequent invocations of India's ancient Hindu heritage in his speeches abroad, as well as in cultural initiatives aimed at promoting Hindu traditions globally. For instance, Modi has overseen the construction and inauguration of Hindu temples overseas, a move that not only strengthens ties with India's diaspora communities but also reinforces the idea of India as a Hindu civilizational leader.

This approach has had far-reaching implications for India's relations with other countries, particularly in the region. For example, the promotion of Hindu nationalist causes has complicated India's relationship with its Muslim-majority neighbors like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Modi's government has also been criticized for downplaying or erasing the contributions of Islamic art and history in India, further fueling communal tensions both domestically and abroad.

The Role of India's Diaspora in Shaping Foreign Policy

India's diaspora, the largest in the world, has historically played a crucial role in shaping the country's foreign policy. In the early 2000s, when India faced international sanctions for its nuclear tests, diaspora groups in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom lobbied to build global legitimacy for India as a responsible nuclear power. This ultimately led to the landmark U.S.-India nuclear deal in 2008, which marked a turning point in India's global standing. Under Modi, the role of the diaspora has evolved further. Diaspora communities have become key players in promoting Modi's vision of a resurgent, globally influential India. Modi has made it a point to engage with Indian communities abroad during his foreign visits, holding large public rallies and addressing the diaspora directly. These events serve not only as a means of building support for his government but also as a way of leveraging the influence of the diaspora in shaping perceptions of India abroad. However, the increasing politicization of the diaspora under Modi has also led to divisions within these communities. While many members of the diaspora have embraced Modi's vision of a Hindu civilizational India, others have expressed concerns about the growing majoritarianism and communal polarization in India. This has led to internal conflicts within diaspora communities, with some groups distancing themselves from Modi's nationalist agenda.

1. Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World:

Under Modi's leadership, India has adopted a nuanced approach to foreign relations, emphasizing "strategic autonomy." While aligning itself with powers like the United States and Japan on issues such as security in the Indo-Pacific, India has maintained cordial relations with Russia and China in areas of mutual interest, such as energy and defense. This balancing act, often referred to as multi-alignment, is central to India's ability to assert itself as a "Vishwa Guru" — a leader that can engage with multiple global power centers without being beholden to any single alliance.

Modi's ability to keep India's foreign policy independent reflects the country's aspirations of becoming a major global player that can shape geopolitical outcomes without being a mere follower of any global

bloc. This stance strengthens India's global credibility, especially in the Global South, which sees India as a voice for developing nations.

2. "Act East" and "Neighborhood First" Policies:

Modi's foreign policy strategy includes two key initiatives: the "Act East" and "Neighborhood First" policies. The "Act East Policy," which evolved from India's earlier "Look East Policy," aims to deepen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asian countries and beyond. This has significantly strengthened India's relations with key nations such as Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia, enhancing India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region, which has become a focal point of global geopolitics. India's partnerships in the region involve trade, defense cooperation, and collaboration on infrastructure projects like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

The "Neighborhood First" policy focuses on improving relations with South Asian neighbors such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. Modi has emphasized infrastructure connectivity, energy cooperation, and people-to-people contacts as part of his approach to foster deeper regional integration. However, this policy has faced challenges, particularly due to border disputes with China, tensions with Pakistan, and political instability in some neighboring countries.

3. The Indo-Pacific and Quad Engagement:

One of Modi's major foreign policy achievements has been India's active participation in the strategic realignment in the Indo-Pacific region. India has emerged as a key player in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, Japan, and Australia. The Quad, which focuses on ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, has grown in importance as India and other countries seek to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness in the region.

India's role in the Indo-Pacific is crucial to Modi's vision of the country as a "Vishwa Guru," as it is positioned geographically and strategically to influence the region's stability, trade routes, and security architecture. India's involvement in joint naval exercises and infrastructure development initiatives across the Indo-Pacific are a testament to its growing leadership in regional affairs.

4. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power:

Cultural diplomacy has been a key aspect of Modi's foreign policy, complementing his vision of India as a "Vishwa Guru." Initiatives like the International Day of Yoga, celebrated globally with enthusiasm, reflect India's emphasis on promoting its cultural heritage as a tool for soft power. Modi's government has invested in promoting yoga, Ayurveda, and Indian traditional medicine as part of India's contribution to global well-being. Additionally, India's efforts to provide free or low-cost vaccines to various nations during the COVID-19 pandemic under the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative earned India significant diplomatic goodwill.

Modi has also harnessed the power of India's vast diaspora to further India's global influence. The government's outreach to Indian communities abroad, particularly in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Gulf nations, has strengthened India's image and cultural ties internationally. Diaspora engagement has not only enhanced India's diplomatic influence but also contributed to foreign investment, remittances, and economic collaboration.

5. Economic Diplomacy and Trade Relations:

Economic diplomacy has been a crucial component of Modi's foreign policy, as India seeks to increase its global trade footprint and attract foreign investment. Modi's foreign visits often focus on securing investments in sectors such as technology, manufacturing, infrastructure, and defense. Countries like Japan and South Korea have emerged as key economic partners, with both investing heavily in India's infrastructure projects, including high-speed rail networks and smart city initiatives.

India has also strengthened trade ties with Southeast Asian nations through agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), although India ultimately opted out of the agreement, citing concerns about its impact on domestic industries. Nevertheless, India has actively sought bilateral trade agreements to boost its exports and attract investment. Modi's government has placed a strong emphasis on initiatives like "Make in India" and "Digital India" to enhance India's global competitiveness and create a robust economic base for its global aspirations.

6. Climate Leadership and Global Sustainability:

Modi's foreign policy has also focused on positioning India as a global leader in sustainability and climate change mitigation. India's leadership in international climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, highlights the country's commitment to addressing global environmental challenges. The International Solar Alliance (ISA), co-founded by India, is a prime example of India taking the lead on promoting renewable energy and sustainable development.

Modi has consistently advocated for greater international cooperation on climate change, positioning India as a responsible global actor. This focus on sustainability aligns with India's ancient philosophy of living in harmony with nature, further reinforcing Modi's narrative of India as a civilizational leader with wisdom to offer the world on global challenges.

7. Security and Counter-Terrorism Diplomacy:

Modi's foreign policy has also prioritized security and counter-terrorism as central components of India's engagement with the world, especially in the wake of ongoing threats from cross-border terrorism. Modi has built strong diplomatic relationships with countries like the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states to bolster intelligence-sharing and cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts. India has been an active participant in international forums focused on combating terrorism, pushing for global action against state-sponsored terrorism, particularly in the context of its strained relationship with Pakistan.

India's role in global counter-terrorism efforts has also strengthened its relations with key Asian and Middle Eastern nations, enhancing its security and defense partnerships. This aspect of foreign policy reinforces Modi's image of India as a strong, assertive nation that is not only capable of protecting its own security but also contributing to global peace and stability.

8. India's Soft Balancing Against China:

Modi's government has been deeply engaged in a strategic balancing act with China, which represents one of the biggest challenges to India's foreign policy. While both nations have substantial economic ties, particularly through trade, their geopolitical rivalry has grown due to border disputes and China's expanding influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

To counter China's influence, India has ramped up its engagements with regional partners like Japan, Australia, and ASEAN nations, emphasizing strategic partnerships and infrastructure development to offer alternatives to China's BRI. India's participation in the Quad and other multilateral forums serves as a way to soft-balance against China's growing regional dominance. However, managing this complex relationship remains one of the biggest foreign policy challenges for Modi's administration.

9. India's Role in Global Multilateralism:

Modi's foreign policy vision extends to India's active participation in multilateral institutions like the United Nations, World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organization (WTO), and international financial institutions. India has consistently pushed for reforms in these global institutions to better reflect the changing geopolitical landscape and accommodate the aspirations of developing nations.

India's call for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is part of Modi's broader ambition to elevate India's role in global governance. By championing the voices of developing countries and advocating for more equitable representation in global institutions, Modi is pushing India's claim to be recognized as a major global player with a unique role to play in shaping the future of global governance.

Challenges and Opportunities

While Modi's foreign policy has succeeded in raising India's global profile, it has not been without challenges. India's relationships with its immediate neighbors remain fraught with tension. The longstanding rivalry with Pakistan has shown few signs of improvement, and relations with China have been severely strained following border clashes in recent years. India's position as a rising power in Asia has also placed it in a delicate balancing act between competing global powers, such as the United States, Russia, and China.

Despite these challenges, India's relations with key Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have strengthened under Modi's leadership. India's "Act East Policy," which focuses on deepening economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region, has been a central pillar of Modi's foreign policy. As India continues to rise in prominence on the global stage, its ability to navigate these complex relationships will be critical to the realization of Modi's vision of India as a "Vishwa Guru."

Modi's foreign policy has been transformative in many ways, bringing India's international engagements into the public discourse and reshaping its identity on the world stage. His vision of India as a "Vishwa Guru" reflects both the aspirations of a rising power and the deep cultural and civilizational roots that Modi seeks to emphasize. However, the road to achieving this vision is fraught with challenges, including regional conflicts, domestic polarization, and the need for continued economic and social reforms. As India heads into its next election, Modi's foreign policy achievements will likely be a key selling point for his campaign, but the ultimate test of his "Vishwa Guru" vision will be how effectively India can sustain its leadership in an increasingly multipolar world.

Conclusion:

Prime Minister Modi's vision of India becoming a "Vishwa Guru" is making substantial headway, particularly through the enhancement of ties with Asian nations. By promoting India's civilizational heritage alongside strategic economic and security interests, Modi has positioned India as a key player in regional and global forums. Strengthened relationships with Japan, Southeast Asia, and South Korea have been instrumental in India's rise as a leader in Asia. Despite ongoing challenges, such as managing relations with China and internal economic and social reforms, India's growing diplomatic and economic influence across Asia reflects Modi's progress towards his goal of transforming India into a "Vishwa Guru." Yet, the full realization of this dream requires continued efforts to maintain regional stability and deepen cooperation across sectors like trade, technology, and climate change.

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