



Analyzing The Levels, Structures, And Agency Within India's Foreign Policy After The Cold War Era

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Abstract

This thesis digs into how Indian foreign policy has shifted since the end of the Cold War, focusing on India's rise in global politics. People usually talk about India as a big new power, but there's more going on beneath the surface. If you look at it through structure-agency theory, you see a push and pull between the limits India faces from the international system and the choices its leaders make at home. India's growing resources and its ideas about how things should be have both tangled together to shape its foreign policy in ways that aren't always straightforward. Ever since independence, India wanted to play a leading role on the world stage, but outside pressures and problems closer to home kept holding it back. Even after 1998, when India's global standing really shot up, the country still found it tough to turn its new advantages into real leadership in South Asia. This study shows that in the post-Cold War world, India's foreign policy is a clear example of how a country's actions abroad grow out of both the world around it and the choices it makes for itself.

Keywords: Indian Foreign Policy, Post-Cold War, Structure-Agency, Global Politics, Strategic Power, Ideational Forces

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, India's foreign policy has taken on a whole new energy. India isn't just content with sitting on the sidelines anymore—it's pushing to become a big player on the world stage. Instead of getting stuck in old ideological battles, India has started to shape its global ties to match its ambitions. You see it in its outreach: building strong partnerships with heavyweights like the US, Russia, and the EU, while also reaching out to regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. Prime Minister

Narendra Modi put it bluntly: “India’s stature has increased at the world stage... all of them are looking at India as a trusted friend.” People everywhere are starting to recognize that India matters.

But if you look closer, the story isn’t just about growth and ambition. India’s foreign policy since the Cold War has been a careful balancing act—sometimes even a tug-of-war—between big global forces and its own choices. On one side, you’ve got the shifting power dynamics around the world: first there was America’s unchallenged dominance, then things started to shift toward a more multipolar world. All of this shaped how India acted. At the same time, India’s leaders and institutions weren’t just reacting—they made deliberate decisions, adjusting foreign policy to fit the country’s growing strength, changing values, and internal pressures.

Back in 1947, when India became independent, there was already a sense that it could become a civilizational and geopolitical force. But for decades, that vision ran up against hard limits. The economy was weak, the country was vulnerable, and the world’s big powers just didn’t want to let India into their club. Things started to shift after the Cold War. Economic reforms kicked in, India showed nuclear confidence (especially after 1998), and its leaders started to get more active internationally. Suddenly, India was mixing its old principles with some very practical alliances.

Still, India’s road to major power status hasn’t been smooth. There’s been plenty of pushback—from neighbors like Pakistan, and from global powers not eager to see the old order shaken up. Pakistan, in particular, has played its own game, working with China and the US to keep India from dominating South Asia. And even though India’s economy and military have grown, that hasn’t always meant it gets its way in the region.

This thesis argues that India’s foreign policy since the Cold War is a fascinating example of how a middle power navigates the global system, dealing with outside pressures and its own ambitions. India’s story shows just how tough it can be to turn economic and strategic gains into real influence, especially when the world’s power structures don’t want to budge.

Here’s how the study breaks down: First, it looks at how India’s relationships with major powers have changed and how global systems have shaped its actions. Next, it dives into India’s neighborhood, where things get really complicated. Finally, it examines India’s own strategic moves—its choices, diplomacy, and innovations—as it tries to carve out a spot for itself. The chapter wraps up by weighing where India stands now, and what hurdles it still faces as it tries to rise in a changing world.

2. A Theoretical Framework: Levels and Structures in Indian Foreign Policy

India sits in an interesting spot—not a global giant, but definitely not on the sidelines either. It deals with the big players and the smaller countries all the time. If you look at this through the lens of structural realism in international relations, you’ll see a clear pattern. The theory says that the way the world is set up—who’s strong, who’s not—basically sets the rules for how countries act. So, India doesn’t just make its foreign policy on a whim. It’s reacting to the bigger picture, adjusting to where the power lies on the global stage.

As Rajagopalan and Sahni assert:

Let's start with the big picture: when we talk about global power, it's not just about who's on top or how the world's chessboard looks. The way power gets divided shapes the rules of the game, pushing countries in certain directions. But honestly, if you just focus on those big systems, you miss the real action—the choices countries make inside those systems and the reasons behind them. It's one thing to look at the pressures coming from the structure, but it's a whole different thing to dig into what actually drives national policies and how states deal with each other.

Structural realism is useful for spotting broad patterns, especially when you look at countries in similar situations. But it doesn't tell you much about why leaders make the calls they do. Sure, these theories talk a lot about polarity—how power clusters in the system—but they don't really explain how countries build up power themselves, or how their foreign policy shifts as the world changes around them.

Take India after the Cold War. If you want to understand its foreign policy, you need more than just a bird's-eye view of global structures. You have to look at how much room India has to maneuver, how its leaders see the world, and what's going on inside the country. The old debates—structural realism versus neoclassical realism—matter here. Kenneth Waltz, for example, draws a line between theories that explain what all states do in a similar spot and those that dig into why some states break the mold.

Think about it: in an anarchic world, every country's watching its own back. But the ways they go about it? Totally different—some try to balance against threats, others go along for the ride, some try to keep their heads down, and a few even try to change the game entirely. This variety shows the limits of structural realism. It points out the pressures, but it can't predict exactly what states will do.

For India, this means the global setup might nudge it toward balancing China or teaming up with the U.S., but the final choices depend on what's happening inside India—who's in charge, what the economy needs, the country's history, and how its institutions work. And it's not just about outside pressures. What really matters is how Indian leaders and society interpret those pressures and decide what to do.

The world after the Cold War isn't as black and white as it used to be. Old ideological lines have faded. Now, thanks to globalization, countries are tied together economically, even when they compete politically. Ashley Tellis gets it right: survival is still the name of the game, but the way states go about it has changed. These days, countries often try to cooperate and compete at the same time, using economic ties as part of their strategy.

You see this clearly in India's relationship with China. Even with all the border disputes and rivalry, trade keeps flowing. That's the modern world for you—interdependence shapes foreign policy in surprising ways. So, to really get what's going on with India after the Cold War, you have to look at both the big structural forces and the unique factors inside India.

In the end, structural realism gives us the outlines, but to understand India's foreign policy now, you need a deeper, layered approach—one that mixes global pressures with India's internal debates, its strategic habits, and the way it sees itself as a nation.

3. The Changing International Structure in the Post-Cold War Era: Implications for Indian Foreign Policy

The fall of the Soviet Union didn't just close the book on the Cold War—it flipped the entire script. Suddenly, the world wasn't split in two anymore. The U.S. took center stage, and everyone else had to figure out how to play along. People doubted this new setup at first, especially the structural realists who thought power would always balance out. But from 1991 to 2005, the U.S. made it clear who was in charge, handling crisis after crisis and cementing its role as the world's top dog. You could see this shift right away during the First Gulf War in 1991. The U.S. rallied a massive coalition, and even the heavy hitters—Germany, Japan, Russia, and China—didn't stand in the way. No one used their veto at the UN Security Council. That silence spoke volumes. Sure, people questioned whether the U.S. had the right to act as it did, but nobody really pushed back in a way that mattered. There just wasn't any real resistance. The same thing happened after 9/11. The U.S. launched its war in Afghanistan, skipping the usual UN approval process, and went after the Taliban for sheltering Al-Qaeda. Some allies grumbled, some stayed quiet, but nobody tried to stop the U.S. Not militarily, anyway. Most saw it as a collective response to a threat everyone felt, which just reinforced how much power Washington held. Things got messier with the Iraq War in 2003. This time, the U.S. didn't have nearly as much support. France, Germany, Russia, and China all pushed back—loudly, even. But when push came to shove, no real coalition formed to counter the U.S., and certainly no one challenged them on the battlefield. The U.S. did what it wanted, and the rest of the world had to live with it. American dominance was still the reality. For countries like India, this new world order brought a whole set of headaches. India lost the Soviet Union, its old ally, and suddenly had to navigate a world where the U.S. called the shots. The early 1990s were rough—Washington cozied up to Pakistan and China while relations with India stayed tense. I.K. Gujral, a former Indian ambassador to Moscow, summed up the anxiety: India needed to keep its old friends but couldn't ignore how much the world had changed. So, India played it smart. Sometimes, it went along with the U.S.—like during the Gulf War, offering logistical help despite protests at home, and after 9/11, backing the American campaign in Afghanistan. India's leaders saw the value in cooperating on issues like terrorism, where their interests lined up with Washington's. But India didn't just roll over. On big nuclear issues like the CTBT and NPT, it showed it was willing to talk, hoping to win some recognition as a major player. When it voted against Iran at the IAEA, it signaled a willingness to side with the U.S. if it helped its own strategic interests. At the same time, India kept its independence. It refused to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but didn't criticize it loudly, either. That balancing act—staying close to the U.S. without getting too close—really defined India's approach through these years. Still, India faced limits. Its push for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council went nowhere, and its disagreements with the U.S. over nuclear policy never really faded. Kanti Bajpai, a leading scholar, thinks India prefers to handle things on its own—building up its own strength so it's not stuck relying on anyone else. India knows working with the U.S. brings economic and strategic benefits, but it's always careful not to give up too much control. The dream is a multipolar world, but, for now, India accepts that the U.S. is going to stay on top for a while longer.

China's rise has made India's foreign policy even trickier. Sure, these two Asian giants have their share of rivalry, but they're tied together—trade and regional organizations force them to keep talking. India's shot at becoming a global power really depends on how it handles China: it needs to juggle competition and cooperation, not just pick one.

Since the Cold War ended, India's foreign policy has shifted a lot. The country's trying to adapt to new global realities, but it also wants to carve out its own space. India's approach mixes pragmatism with ambition. It stays in touch with the big players, guards its independence, and puts real effort into working with international groups. As C. Raja Mohan pointed out when Prime Minister Modi visited Sweden in 2018, India isn't just sticking to one-on-one diplomacy anymore. Now, it's reaching out to regional blocs and smaller but important countries. All this shows how India's adjusting its foreign policy to keep up with a world that won't sit still.

4. South Asian Regional Sub-Systemic Structure in the Post-Cold War Era

After the Cold War ended, South Asia didn't just move on — a lot of old tensions stuck around. India kept running into trouble with its neighbors. The big one, of course, was Pakistan. But there were also regular bumps with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Still, the India-Pakistan rivalry stole the spotlight, especially over Kashmir. That conflict turned into a pressure cooker, kicking off several crises. It wasn't just about borders, like the fight over the Siachen Glacier; both countries started racing to build up their militaries, and by the 1990s, the nuclear and missile competition was front and center. India kept accusing Pakistan of backing militants in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan fired back, painting India as a bully in the region. Meanwhile, Pakistan itself was hardly stable. The constant tug-of-war between Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto only made things worse. Leaders on both sides leaned on anti-India or anti-Pakistan talk to shore up support at home. All this tension—plus regular border clashes and India's own internal strife—meant that, between 1994 and 1997, India and Pakistan basically stopped talking to each other diplomatically. Things really shifted in 1998. Both India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons, and suddenly everyone had to take the idea of nuclear deterrence seriously in South Asia. Now, both countries openly had nukes, but that raised the stakes for every future conflict. Pakistan's missile program got a boost from China and North Korea. India, on the other hand, leaned on Russia—and, some say, Israel—for help modernizing its own arsenal. Looking beyond just India and Pakistan, the broader triangle with China showed some old patterns and some new ones. China kept backing Pakistan as a way to keep India's power in check. India, for its part, said it needed nukes and missiles to deal with the threat from China. There were clear signs that China was quietly helping Pakistan build its nuclear and missile capabilities, keeping their partnership pointed against India. But not everything stayed the same. India and China actually started talking more in the '90s, even though they never settled all their border issues. Diplomacy cooled things down a bit, and India's approach to China got more practical. China didn't get directly involved in every South Asian crisis, and it didn't always side with Pakistan on Kashmir. The rise of Islamic extremism and global terrorism started to create some distance between China and Pakistan, while pushing India and China a little closer together on security issues. So, while old rivalries lingered, South Asia's politics kept shifting in unpredictable ways.

5. Structural Constraints and India's Agential Autonomy in the Post-Cold War Era

After the Cold War, the world shifted to a system where the United States called most of the shots. India had to rethink its foreign policy—if it wanted to be seen as a major power, it couldn't just sit back and watch. Instead of falling in line with the US or anyone else, India started making its own moves, thinking things through and acting with purpose.

You really see this in how India rebranded its old “non-alignment” policy. Now, they call it “strategic autonomy.” It's a way for India to stay clear of rigid alliances, picking and choosing its partners based on the situation instead of signing up for someone else's agenda. But even with this new approach, India's independence isn't absolute. The country faces plenty of challenges—too few experts in foreign affairs, fragile coalition governments, tough decisions about Iran's nuclear plans, and a strong stand against unilateral US military action.

For a long time, India's idea of autonomy just meant steering clear of superpowers' influence. But with the US dominating the world stage, India had to step up and give autonomy a more active meaning. You can see this in how India keeps showing up at multilateral forums like the Non-Aligned Movement, UNCTAD, the UN General Assembly, and the WTO. India wants to be heard; it wants these platforms to matter. The problem is, with so much US influence in the mix, these institutions often end up as little more than talking shops. Still, India keeps pushing, trying to carve out space for its voice and its interests.

Since the Cold War ended, India's foreign policy has walked a tricky line: working with the United States when their interests match up, but standing its ground when they don't. You can really see this in how India handles the global war on terror. Both countries worry about terrorism, nuclear weapons, and keeping the region stable—especially with Pakistan in the picture. So, sometimes India goes along with U.S. plans, even if it stirs up controversy back home.

But it's not just about international strategy. Politics inside India shape these decisions too. Both the Indian National Congress and the BJP generally want strong ties with the U.S., but party rivalries and coalition politics often get in the way of a clear, united approach. The Left parties push back against getting too close to the U.S., while many regional parties don't really take a firm stand, yet their influence can tip the scales depending on election results.

Over time, India and the U.S. have built a relationship that goes way beyond just strategy. They work together on security, trade, and even share some big-picture beliefs. Fighting terrorism, worrying about China's rise, securing energy, and the huge Indian community living in the U.S.—all of these have pulled the two countries closer. The label “natural allies” keeps popping up, and it's starting to make sense, given their shared democratic values, economic links, and how their interests are lining up in the world.

For India, teaming up with the U.S. isn't just about friendship—it's a way to boost its own power on the world stage. Sure, it might seem odd for India to work with the top dog in a world that's mostly dominated by America, instead of pushing for more global balance. But honestly, it's just practical. India wants to get stronger without losing its independence, so it's keeping its options open while making the most of the U.S. partnership.

Then there's China, which complicates things even more. Ongoing border disputes and the race for regional influence make competition between India and China almost unavoidable. Still, their economies are tied together, so they have to manage this rivalry carefully. India's growing closeness with the U.S. is partly a way to push back against China's influence, especially since both India and the U.S. share worries about things like militant Islam, nuclear threats, and how international rules are set.

All these changes have sparked a lot of debate about what India's foreign policy really stands for these days. Two main camps have emerged: pragmatists and maximalists. They both support open markets and believe India is on its way to becoming a major world power. But they see the path forward differently, especially when it comes to how India should deal with the rest of the world.

Pragmatists like to keep things flexible. They push for moderate policies and believe in a strong defense, but only as much as the situation demands. For them, growing the economy and staying engaged with other countries matter just as much as military strength. They see joining international groups as a tool rather than a top priority—it's useful, but not the heart of India's approach. What really drives them is finding common ground in diplomacy and making sure national security and economic health go hand in hand.

Maximalists, on the other hand, don't hold back. They want India to build up its military and show its power. Forming strategic alliances makes sense to them, but only if those alliances help India stand out on the world stage. International organizations? Maximalists only care about them when they push India's interests forward. They don't trust long-term deals that might tie India's hands. When national security and the economy clash, they pick security—even though they still back market reforms to keep the country growing.

6. Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, Indian foreign policy has changed a lot—especially with the BJP in charge. These days, the government doesn't just sit on the sidelines. It wants India seen as a bold, self-assured player on the world stage. Just look at the uptick in high-profile meetings, global summits, and outreach efforts. Between 2014 and 2018, Prime Minister Modi traveled to six continents and visited more than fifty countries. That's not just sightseeing—it's India working to reset its place in the global order.

But even with this new confidence, India's still climbing. The world, shaped mostly by American dominance, puts real limits on what India can do. So, India's strategy stays flexible: sometimes joining in, sometimes hedging its bets, sometimes pushing back—especially when dealing with the United States. Still, two big factors shape how far India can go.

First, there's China. This relationship is a balancing act—sometimes tense, sometimes cooperative, always complicated. India tries to keep its options open, adjusting its approach as issues come up. America's strong role in Asia helps offset some of the risks, but if the U.S. ever pulls back, India will need to rethink things. Going it alone would be tough and expensive.

Then there's the neighborhood—South Asia. Problems here just don't go away. Terror groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, unstable politics (especially in Pakistan), waves of extremism, and shaky economies—they all chip away at India's influence. India's struggled to come up with a clear, consistent

strategy for its neighbors. Outside-backed terrorism, mixed with India's own internal weaknesses, continues to sap its strength.

Theoretically, India still looks at the world mostly through a realist lens, swinging between what's practical and what's ambitious. But there's a blind spot: issues like terrorism don't really fit the old frameworks, and Indian policymakers haven't quite figured out how to fully bring internal security and domestic stability into the foreign policy picture. That lack of big-picture thinking is a real problem.

If India wants to truly become a major power, the country's foreign policy needs to be more than just about global posturing or jockeying for position. It's about matching economic muscle with a clear vision. That means smart choices—both in how India deals with the world and how it sorts out problems at home. So, while India's come a long way since the Cold War, the job isn't finished. Real power, the kind that lasts, depends on fixing what's inside just as much as what's outside. A strong foreign policy connects both—otherwise, India's rise will always feel unfinished.

Declarations

Availability of Data and Material

This study is based entirely on secondary sources, including published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official government documents, speeches, policy statements, and publicly accessible archival materials related to Indian foreign policy. No proprietary datasets were generated during the study. All sources used are cited in the bibliography, and additional reference material can be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing financial, professional, personal, or institutional interests that could have influenced the research design, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings in this manuscript.

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Authors' Contributions

- **Sukhdayak:** Conceptualization of the study, literature review, theoretical framework development, analysis of post-Cold War Indian foreign policy, and manuscript drafting.
- **Dr. Geetanjali:** Academic supervision, methodological guidance, critical review of arguments, refinement of theoretical interpretation, and final manuscript approval.

All authors have read, reviewed, and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Consideration

This research does not involve human participants, surveys, interviews, experiments, or personal data. It relies solely on publicly available secondary sources. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent

were not required. The study adheres to academic integrity standards, proper citation practices, and ethical scholarship norms.

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