

India in the Age of Flux: Navigating Great Power Rivalries, Leading Global South Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

Emerging nations face a crucial moment in the modern international system, which is marked by increased great power competition and the breakdown of the liberal order. This study looks at India's unique handling of this geopolitical flux or turmoil and makes the case that it uses a complex multi-alignment strategy to maintain its strategic independence while also claiming leadership in the Global South. Instead of forging formal alliances, India uses issue-based partnerships to interact with competing nations like the US, Russia, and China, drawing on its historical history of non-alignment and the civilizational ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. At the same time, it uses its G20 presidency and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance to support the Global South's reformist and developmental agenda. In addition to safeguarding its national interests, the article concludes that India's ability to strike a balance between realpolitik and its duty as a normative voice for the underprivileged puts it as an essential architect of an inclusive multipolarity.

Keywords: *Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, Global South, Multipolarity, India Foreign Policy, Great Power Rivalry, Vishwamitra*

We live in what many scholars and observers now call an age of flux. The phrase is not accidental. The world feels unsettled, perhaps more so than at any point since the end of the Cold War. Old alliances are weakening, new ones are forming in sometimes surprising ways, and the certainties that guided international politics for decades are clearly fading. After all, who could have imagined only a few years ago that Europe would once again be consumed by a war of such scale as the one in Ukraine, or that the United States and China would stand on the brink of a long, drawn-out strategic rivalry touching almost every sphere of global life-trade, technology, security, even ideology?

Naturally, India cannot afford to take a backseat. These changes have influenced its own path from a regional power with little clout to a significant global player. The fact that India aims to advance by carefully balancing autonomy with engagement rather than by following the lead of any one of the major powers is, in fact, what makes its case so intriguing. Undoubtedly, it's a challenging act that represents India's more recent experiences with what could be referred to as multi-alignment as well as its longstanding legacy of non-alignment.

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The erosion of the so-called liberal international order, which once promised stability under U.S. leadership, has opened up new uncertainties but also fresh opportunities. Multipolarity is no longer a theoretical aspiration; it is fast becoming a lived reality.

According to the Munich Security Report 2025, "multipolarity" is no longer merely a theory but has actually materialized, with a growing number of global stakeholders having the ability to impact world affairs. This is demonstrated by the expanding involvement of countries like Brazil, China, and India as well as other regional powers aiming to gain greater authority on the international scene (Trends Research and Advisory, 2025).

In such a setting, India finds space to advance its interests and, perhaps more importantly, to articulate the concerns of those often left behind in global debates-the countries of the Global South. Notably, India's leadership during the G20 presidency or the hosting of the Global South Summit shows that this aspiration is not mere rhetoric.

In recent years, the phrase "Global South" has gained popularity again, moving from a generic term for the "Third World" to a geohistorical notion that refers to developing powers and low- and middle-income nations. Its meaning is still up for contention, despite its increasing relevance in international policy discussions (Bull & Banik, 2025).

The purpose of this paper, then, is straightforward. It aims to analyze how India manages the rivalries of great powers while simultaneously projecting itself as a voice of the developing world. The argument here is that India does so by drawing upon its civilizational values, its foreign policy doctrines of strategic autonomy and inclusive growth, and a very practical style of diplomacy that combines idealism with realpolitik.

One could say, after all, that India's story is as much about ideas as it is about power. Its civilizational belief in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family) still finds echoes in its policy framing today. At the same time, India is keenly aware that ideals alone do not sustain influence. Material strength, defense capabilities, economic resilience, and technological innovation matter just as much. This duality, or rather this synthesis, is what makes India's role in the age of flux worth examining.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is crucial to begin with the North-South dichotomy in order to comprehend the historical, diplomatic, and theoretical foundations of the Global South. Italian social theory, particularly Antonio Gramsci's essay "The Southern Question," which detailed the Italian context of the North's capitalists exploiting Southern labor, is where the South-North divide first emerged (Mazzega et al., 2025).

The phrase "Global South" was initially used in 1969 by Carl Oglesby. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, it gained pace, signaling the departure of the "Second World." It is to be noted that formerly, Alfred Sauvy's coined term, "Third World," (in 1952) was widely used to describe developing countries.

With the need for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s, the idea that the Global South is synonymous with the Third World started to gain popularity. However, the Brandt report from 1980 was the catalyst for its true rise to prominence. The historic document, which was drafted by an international commission headed by former chancellor of West Germany Willy Brandt, made a distinction between poorer and more affluent nations. The

former were primarily found in the Northern Hemisphere and had comparatively greater GDP per capita. Most of the latter group located south of what was later referred to as the Brandt line, an imaginary border that spanned the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the enormous stretches of Central Asia, the Pacific Ocean, and the Rio Grande towards the Gulf of Mexico (Patrick & Huggins, 2023).

Shared claims are becoming more common, and nations that identify as part of the Global South are becoming more assertive in global governance. Instead of being merely a geographical idea, the term "Global South" has grown to represent the goals, difficulties, and vibrancy of developing powers as well as low- and middle-income nations. Meanwhile, its usage in scholarly writing is on the rise (Haug et al., 2021).

The Global South was created, in part, to support cooperation among nations in the southern hemisphere on issues pertaining to politics, economy, society, environment, culture, and technology. As a major force in the world economy, the Global South is made up of emerging nations in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and certain areas of Oceania. Its share of the world's GDP increased from 19% (accounted in 1990) to 42% (in 2022), propelled by countries such as Brazil, India, and China. The Global South accounted for four of the top ten economies in the world by 2023, and this trend is predicted to continue. Additionally, 65% of all foreign direct investment inflows in 2023 came from this area (Pratap, 2025).

This economic strength is fueled more and more by internal cohesion and mutual reliance than it is by growth in comparison to the North. The Global South's historical reliance is being lessened by the growing economic linkages within the region, which are establishing a self-sustaining ecosystem of investment and trade.

The amount of trade between countries in the Global South has increased exponentially, rising from \$2.3 trillion in 2007 to \$5.6 trillion in 2023. In contrast to the Global South's historical reliance on Northern financial markets, this signifies a rising financial interdependence within the region. The fact that North-North trade is still declining while South-South trading now makes up 25% of global trade highlights the change in economic orientation towards emerging areas (Pratap, 2025).

The Global South now has more self-assurance and agency on the international scene thanks to its unified economic clout, which is evidenced by both its internal trade networks and its percentage of the world GDP. This bloc now actively develops and challenges the standards of the international order rather than being defined just by its demands.

Both Global North and South nations have reinterpreted international norms as a result of the Global South's ascent in world politics in recent decades, which adds another level of complexity to discussions over interpretations of internationally established standards (Hohne, 2025).

One country in particular stands out in this revolutionary development of the Global South, not only as a participant, but as a founding leader with a longstanding historical dedication to the bloc's fundamental goals. India has a long history of leadership that stretches back to the early days of the post-colonial era, which is firmly anchored in its current role as the leader of the Global South.

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India has an extensive background of leading the Global South. Since becoming an independent nation in 1947, India spearheaded the Non-Alignment Movement to promote third world unity and provide developing nations more options and flexibility so they could stay out of the big power politics of that period (Malhotra, 2024).

Mutual goals for growth and independence, as well as shared histories and hardships, are the foundation of India's relationship with the Global South. India's involvement with the Global South stems from both its own colonial history and the larger anti-colonial movement that characterized a large portion of the 20th century. Countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America developed a sense of solidarity as a result of their shared experience with colonialism (Arya, 2025).

As a result, the success of the Global South is closely tied to India's historical identity and current strategy. India's distinct position enables it to serve as a standard-bearer and a catalyst for the bloc's aspirations as it continues its upward trajectory.

The Global South's emergence, propelled by its increasing economic might and cohesive commitment to politics, signifies a revolutionary change in the dynamics of the world. India is a key player in advancing a more equitable and inclusive global order as this new bloc transforms global governance and economic systems. The Global South is set to reshape the world's political and economic environment in the next decades as it fortifies regional linkages, promotes good governance, and capitalizes on its population potential (Pratap, 2025).

Historical Context of India's Strategic Autonomy

When we speak of India's foreign policy today, it's tempting to think only of the latest headlines-summits, rivalries, border tensions. But if we step back, there is a much longer thread running through the story. That thread is strategic autonomy. It did not emerge overnight. Indeed, it was shaped through decades of choices, principles, and even contradictions.

Legacy of Non-Alignment Movement (NAM)

The Non-Alignment Movement was, after all, India's first bold attempt to carve out space for independence in a Cold War world dominated by two superpowers. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, with his characteristic clarity, insisted that India would not be a pawn in someone else's game. Some critics saw NAM as indecision, but perhaps they missed the point. For India, non-alignment was never about sitting on the fence. It was about standing on its own ground, resisting pressure to conform, and keeping open the ability to engage with both blocs when necessary. Notably, this position allowed India to build solidarity with newly decolonized nations, who themselves were searching for breathing space in a polarized world.

According to Mishra (2023), NAM was a practical yet moral strategy for navigating a world where power dynamics were polarizing. To a certain degree, India's fervent defense of strategic autonomy and its recent implementation of "multi-alignment" in its foreign policy to cope with an unpredictable world are remnants of non-alignment.

Civilizational State Identity

Yet strategic autonomy was not only a matter of Cold War tactics. It was rooted, more deeply, in India's own sense of civilizational identity. India has long carried the idea that the

world is not a zero-sum battlefield but a shared space. The ancient maxim of Mahaupanishad Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-is not just decorative philosophy. It informs a style of diplomacy that emphasizes dialogue over domination. Of course, this does not mean India has been naive about power politics. Rather, it shows that India's outlook has always blended realism with an ethical imagination. In this sense, India's autonomy is cultural as much as political. But Simon (2025) pointed out that India's claim to civilization puts it in a more vulnerable position in South Asia, particularly as the region changes. He goes on to say that the narrative of India's civilizational state is paradoxical since it simultaneously emphasizes modernization and pride in its past. By extending the "big brother concept" that India is criticized for by its South Asian counterparts, the civilizational paradigm places India at risk versus its neighbors (Simon, 2025).

Post-Cold War Transition

The end of the Cold War brought a dramatic shift. The collapse of the Soviet Union forced India to rethink, while the 1991 economic liberalization compelled it to open doors wider than ever before. After all, a closed economy could no longer sustain global ambitions. What followed was a transition in which India moved from rigid non-alignment to what many scholars now call multi-alignment. The United States, once viewed with suspicion, became a partner in technology and security. Russia remained a defense ally. At the same time, ties with Southeast Asia deepened under the "Look East" policy. Pragmatism began to sit alongside principle.

India is portrayed in the post-Nehruvian political discourse as an autonomous, multi-aligned actor that need to aim for a multidimensional order rather than as a direct participant in the Western-liberal global order (Wojczewski, 2019).

Continuity and Change

And yet, through all these phases-Cold War, post-Cold War, globalization-strategic autonomy has remained the golden thread. There were changes in style, yes. Sometimes India tilted toward Moscow, sometimes toward Washington, sometimes toward none. This is why, even today, India can maintain energy deals with Russia while expanding defense cooperation with the United States, and still claim leadership of the Global South. The continuity is remarkable, though the contexts keep shifting.

Following the conclusion of the Cold War in 1991, India entered its next phase of multilateralism. With the end of bipolar politics, NAM's continued significance was called into question. India joined a wide range of organizations during this time. It has joined four prominent organizations over the past 20 years namely Shanghai Co-operation Organization, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), G20, and the QUAD (Ranjan, 2022).

If one were to sum it up, India's foreign policy is not about rigid alignment or reckless independence. It's about flexibility, rooted in civilizational depth. Indeed, it is this blend of continuity and adaptation that explains how India has survived, and even thrived, through so many global upheavals.

The Current Geopolitical Flux

The world today feels unsettled, even restless. We no longer live in the age of American dominance that defined the 1990s and early 2000s. That moment has passed. What we see

instead is a system marked by rivalry, overlapping crises, and competing centers of power. Indeed, one could argue that the only constant is flux itself.

Decline of Unipolarity

American hegemony has not collapsed overnight, but it is clearly retreating. Washington still commands immense military and technological strength, of course, yet its ability to dictate global outcomes is weaker than before. The messy withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan signaled limits. China's rise has further chipped away at U.S. primacy, not only in Asia but globally. After all, when supply chains, 5G networks, or AI standards are contested, it shows power is no longer concentrated in one pole. For India, this decline of unipolarity creates both risks and opportunities. Risks, because instability follows. Opportunities, because a multipolar system naturally opens more space for countries like India to maneuver.

According to Roren (2024), there is still unipolarity in the world. The United States is still by far the most dominant state, although its share of capabilities among major countries has decreased in the later half of the century. It is feasible that the world is bipolar, but it is improbable that it is multipolar or non-polar. Bipolarity is likely to be the next system if China continues its rapid ascent, which is far from inevitable (Roren, 2024).

Russia-Ukraine War

Few events in recent years have shaken the global order as much as the war in Ukraine. It has not only redrawn security calculations in Europe but has also sent tremors through the world economy. Energy prices spiked, food security became fragile, and supply chains felt the strain. For India, the war has been a test of balancing diplomacy. On one hand, there is pressure from the West to isolate Russia. On the other, India relies on Russian energy and defense supplies. What stands out-perhaps notably-is how India has managed to expand its oil imports from Russia while simultaneously strengthening ties with the U.S. and Europe. This balancing act is no small feat. It reflects not neutrality, but a deliberate choice to act in line with its own interests.

However, critiques like Verma (2024) emphasize that although India maintains a firm stance on issues concerning its sovereignty but its neutral stance in Russia-Ukraine conflict goes against international law, UN Charter, and its fundamental foreign policy principles of Panchsheel. India has demonstrated flexibility in upholding its principles because the PM Modi led administration thinks that Russia can help India become a leading power due to their strategic alignment in opposing US hegemony and promoting a multipolar world order, with Moscow bolstering India's overall security (Verma, 2024).

Middle East & Indo-Pacific Flashpoints

The Middle East remains volatile, with conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and more recently, renewed tensions around Israel and Palestine. These crises directly affect energy markets, and by extension, India's economy. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the arena where future power balances will likely be decided. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, its pressure on Taiwan, and its naval reach have triggered responses from the U.S., Japan, Australia, and others. For India, this is both a challenge and a chance. Its Act East policy, naval presence, and role in the QUAD place it squarely in the thick of Indo-Pacific dynamics. Perhaps this is where India's diplomatic agility is most visible-engaging in security partnerships while keeping its doors open for dialogue with all sides.

Technology & Climate as New Arenas

Today's geopolitics extends beyond national boundaries and combat zones. Climate pledges, semiconductors, and algorithms are all equally important. The emerging battlefields where states strive for supremacy are digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. Additionally, climate change, once written off as a specialized issue has emerged as a key diplomatic concern. This dual domain is crucial for India. In the Global South, its advocacy for digital public goods like Aadhaar and UPI has already caused a stir. Its leadership in renewable energy, demonstrated by programs like the International Solar Alliance, demonstrates how climate diplomacy can be transformed into power. Indeed, power now encompasses more than simply tanks and missiles; it also includes energy, data, and the capacity to provide long-term solutions.

The Global South as a New Geopolitical Bloc

Perhaps the most interesting shift of all is the resurgence of the Global South as a collective force. Countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America are demanding a larger say in global governance. Debt relief, vaccine equity, climate financing-these are not side issues for them but existential ones. India has positioned itself as their natural spokesperson, most visibly during its G20 presidency. After all, who else combines democratic legitimacy, developmental experience, and global standing in the same way? It is not accidental that New Delhi convened the Voice of Global South Summit in 2023, bringing together over 120 countries. This was a signal to the West, to China, and to the wider world that the Global South is no longer a passive recipient of decisions made elsewhere. It is an active bloc in the making, and India is at the front of it.

Navigating Great Power Rivalries: India's Strategic Approach

India today is not merely reacting to global turbulence; it is actively shaping its own pathways through the storm. The choices are rarely simple. Partnerships come with strings. Rivalries spill across borders, markets, and technologies. And yet, India has managed to carve a position of relative stability. Indeed, if there is a phrase that captures New Delhi's foreign policy instinct, it is this: cooperate without becoming captive.

India-US Relations

India's relationship with the United States has grown remarkably close in recent years, though one should resist calling it an alliance. The convergence is undeniable. Indo-Pacific cooperation, the Quad partnership with Japan and Australia, defense exercises like Malabar-these all point to a shared strategic horizon. Technology ties are another frontier, with semiconductor initiatives and collaborations on clean energy shaping the agenda.

But, of course, divergences remain. Trade disputes over tariffs, disagreements on agricultural subsidies, or digital taxation show that interests do not always align. Perhaps the sharpest fault line is India's Russia policy. Washington would prefer India to distance itself from Moscow. India, however, has refused to be dictated to. And here lies the crucial point: New Delhi values Washington's partnership, yes, but it will not mortgage its autonomy. There's a certain quiet confidence in this balancing act. After all, India knows the U.S. needs it just as much for countering China, for stabilizing the Indo-Pacific, and for anchoring a multipolar order.

The global order has become more volatile with Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2024 for his 2nd term, which has changed how India restructures its strategic alliances among a complicated web of actors and groups that are not aligned with one another. With

effect from August 7, 2025, President Trump has imposed a 25 percent tax on Indian exports, classifying India and the other BRICS nations as being subject to a "special penalty" for trade with Russia. Announcing the installation of an additional 25 percent duty on August 6, 2025, which went into effect on August 27, 2025, quickly followed this initial action, which followed a halt in US-India trade talks. This brought the total tariff on the majority of Indian goods sent to the US to 50 percent (Prathap & Mishra, 2025).

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India-China Contestation

The relationship between China and India has reached a significant turning point. The past eight months have seen a number of well-timed signs of thawing after more than four years of icy relations following the June 2020 Galwan armed conflict. These have occurred in both their bilateral encounters and at various multilateral venues, where the respective leaders have held bilateral meetings on the sidelines. In 2025, relations between China and India are neither completely recovered nor in free collapse. They are operating in management stage, which is a regulated engagement state influenced by changing global trends (Singh, 2025)

The India-China relationship is far less cooperative, and far more fraught. Border tensions since Galwan in 2020 have left scars that are not easily healed. Economic ties remain, yet they are increasingly colored by mistrust. China's Belt and Road Initiative, its encirclement strategies through ports and infrastructure in South Asia, and its push into the Indian Ocean are perceived in New Delhi as direct challenges.

India's counter-strategy has been layered. First, strengthening its eastern connections through the Act East policy. Second, embedding itself deeper into Indo-Pacific frameworks that check Chinese assertiveness. And third, building coalitions with like-minded partners-Japan, Australia, Vietnam-who share anxieties about Beijing. Of course, it would be simplistic to say India and China are pure adversaries. They do share platforms like BRICS and the SCO. Yet those are arenas where India insists on being treated as an equal, not a junior partner. The contest, after all, is not just about borders-it's about whose vision of Asia will prevail.

A. G. Singh (2025) highlights that India appears to be benefiting from both its own economic development and the continuous international backlash against China's trade policies. It may be too soon to say which side would concede first, but for the time being, it can be said that in terms of their bilateral relations, the more things evolve, the more they remain unchanged (A. G. Singh, 2025).

India-Russia Relations

Russia remains, for India, an old friend in a changing world. Defense cooperation is the backbone: from fighter jets to missile systems, Moscow has been a consistent supplier. Energy ties have deepened, especially since the Ukraine war pushed Russia to offer discounted oil. Notably, this economic pivot has been pragmatic rather than ideological.

Moscow and New Delhi have shown different ways of moving their strategic alliance forward. In order to maintain cordial relations with both Moscow and the West, New Delhi has shown an intelligent strategy to managing the Russia-Ukraine issue. Bilateral trade has significantly increased as a result of India's unprecedented imports of Russian products, including petroleum, often in violation of Western sanctions (Zakharov, 2024).

A common shared vision of a multipolar world and an ambition to broaden their engagement beyond the conventional military, nuclear, and space cooperation have made the India-

Russia collaboration one of the most stable in the modern era. The two-way trade has grown considerably over the last two years (Embassy of India, Moscow, 2025).

When it comes to India's strategic calculations about Russia, China is a significant factor. Fears that Moscow is become more and more dependent on Beijing after its invasion of Ukraine are one of the factors New Delhi is keen to keep up relations with Russia. As Russia grows more isolated, India seeks to give it strategic choices in order to prevent it from becoming a Chinese client state (Bajpayee & Toremark, 2024).

Although, the relationship between India-Russia is no longer what it once was credit to Russia's growing closeness to China which complicates the equation. Sanctions from the West make business harder. Yet India has resisted abandoning Moscow. Perhaps because walking away would be strategically unwise. Perhaps because history still carries weight. Either way, India's position is clear: it will maintain ties with Russia, even as it simultaneously courts the West. This is not fence-sitting-it is survival, and smart survival at that.

India-Europe Engagement

Europe often gets less attention in Indian debates, but the relationship is quietly significant. France, in particular, has emerged as a trusted partner. From Rafale jets to joint Indo-Pacific operations, Paris and New Delhi have built a synergy based on strategic trust. The broader European Union, too, is tilting toward the Indo-Pacific, recognizing that the region is where the future of power will be contested.

For India, Europe promises prospects in technology, green energy, and commercial diversification. Global governance reforms, whether they are implemented by the WTO or the UN Security Council, are another area of convergence. There are certain difficulties. In New Delhi, complaints of human rights from certain European group of nations are not always well welcomed. However, the general trend is one of increasing collaboration. Ultimately, both sides see the benefit of preventing the U.S. and China from controlling the Indo-Pacific region.

As a market for diversifying the economy and shifting supply chains, as well as a key component of worldwide climate solutions, a thriving India benefits Europe. It also serves as a balancer in the Indo-Pacific. By offering investment capacity, technical expertise, and assistance in the green transition, Europe can simultaneously help India's modernization, assimilation into international supply chains, and journey towards a sustainable Viksit Bharat (Malhotra, 2025).

India in Multilateral Platforms

India has long supported multilateralism, highlighting the value of international cooperation in tackling transnational issues. India has advocated for a multipolar global order in which no one country controls international affairs and distributive authority is shared by several centers (Baporikar, 2024).

If bilateral ties show India's balancing, multilateral forums reveal its leadership. The G20 Presidency was a case in point. India managed to keep the forum together despite sharp divisions over Ukraine. It prioritized debt relief, food security, and digital public goods-issues that resonated deeply with the Global South. The message was clear: India can host the great powers, but it will also amplify the voices of those usually ignored.

BRICS and the SCO provide another dimension. These platforms allow India to sit at the table with China and Russia, but on terms that reflect multipolarity rather than hierarchy. By engaging there, India signals that it will not surrender the stage to Beijing or Moscow. Instead, it will use such spaces to safeguard its interests and to project alternatives. Indeed, the genius of India's multilateral strategy lies in the duality of talking to everyone, but bending to no one.

To sum up this section in simple words, India's approach to great power rivalries is not about choosing sides-it is about choosing space. Space to maneuver, space to lead, and space to speak for those without a voice. After all, that is what strategic autonomy looks like when practiced in the twenty-first century.

India as Voice of the Global South

The term "Global South" may sound abstract, like a term created in academic settings. However, it is more than just theory for India. It is a lived history that is becoming more and more of a political endeavor. In fact, India has a long history and a new sense of urgency in its role as a voice for the developing world.

Historical Roots

The story goes back to the 1950s and 60s. The Bandung Conference of 1955, for example, was not only about diplomatic handshakes but about a shared hunger for dignity among decolonized nations. India stood there, not as a bystander, but as a voice demanding that global governance reflect equality rather than hierarchy. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) extended that spirit. After all, why should countries freshly freed from colonialism be forced to pick between Washington and Moscow?

This feeling of unity was important. It provided a platform and a psychological boost to smaller countries. It strengthened India's identity as a nation too big to be intimidated yet compassionate enough to stand up for others. Perhaps because India has experienced poverty, post-colonial recovery, and uneven development firsthand, it nevertheless has moral weight when it speaks for the South.

India's Recent Initiatives

Fast forward to the present, and the tradition is alive, though in new forms. The G20 presidency in 2023 is the clearest example. Instead of letting the forum sink into paralysis over the Ukraine war, India pushed the agenda toward issues that matter to the majority world-debt relief, food security, digital public goods. It was a reminder, not just to the West but also to the emerging powers, that global governance must serve more than a handful of capitals.

The Global South Summit, which New Delhi hosted in 2023, was equally important. In many respects, it was more telling than the G20, despite not being as grandiose. India created a forum where the concerns of the South could be discussed without being overshadowed by great power rivalry by uniting more than 120 nations. After all, not every country has the luxury of worrying about naval supremacy in the South China Sea; for many, access to technology, debt, inflation, and climate vulnerability are more urgent concerns.

And then, of course, there was Vaccine Maitri during the COVID-19 pandemic. India supplied millions of vaccines overseas during a period when developed economies

stockpiled doses all the while handling its own internal crises. Humane diplomacy was what this was, not charity. It might even qualify as moral statecraft.

India's Development Model as Soft Power

Beyond summits and speeches, India also projects influence through its own development model. Notably, digital public infrastructure has emerged as a flagship. Systems like UPI and Aadhaar are being studied and replicated across parts of Africa and Southeast Asia. They represent a form of inclusion-technology not as privilege, but as a basic service. For countries wrestling with financial exclusion, this is inspirational.

Through several national-level initiatives and continental-level projects like the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030), Africa has demonstrated a growing enthusiasm in the building of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in recent years (Mehta, 2025).

Renewable energy is another arena where India is quietly setting the pace. One illustration of India's cooperative and pragmatic approach to climate action is the creation of ISA in November 2015 (Oguntuase, 2023). The International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched in partnership with France but championed vigorously by India, signals that leadership in climate action need not come from the North alone. And unlike Western narratives that often feel prescriptive, India's framing has been different: solutions rooted in shared responsibility, with the South treated as an equal partner.

The human-centric story of globalization is what connects it all. India does not portray itself as the world's police force or the creator of inflexible blocs. Rather, it presents itself as a bridge-builder who is simultaneously realistic, sympathetic, and aspirational. In fact, India provides a gentler, more inclusive option at a time when many people believe globalization has let them down.

Strategic Doctrines and Policy Innovations

When we talk about India's rise on the global stage, it's not just about louder speeches or bigger summits. It's also about the doctrines and policies that quietly shape its choices. These strategies often blend principle with pragmatism. Sometimes they lean on history. At other times, they break with it. Either way, India's toolkit today looks far more flexible than in the past.

Strategic Autonomy 2.0

Non-alignment is no longer a suitable term. That was the language of the Cold War. What India does now may be referred to as Strategic Autonomy 2.0. The goal is to select partners on an issue-by-issue basis, not to remain distant. India is an important member of the QUAD, which promotes an Indo-Pacific free market. Also, it purchases oil from Russia in defiance of opposition from the West. In the end, autonomy nowadays entails handling contradictions rather than avoiding them.

This is not fence-sitting. It's flexible multi-alignment. A recognition that the world is too complex to choose one camp and live with it forever. Indeed, for India, the art is to keep doors open while still guarding its core interests.

Neighbourhood First Policy

Autonomy cannot equate to disregard for the neighborhood. The goal of India's Neighbourhood First approach has been to bring stability to the region. Complicating matters are Chinese incursions, whether via direct military postures or Belt and Road initiatives.

Still, New Delhi has made conscious efforts by investing in cross-border energy grids with Nepal and Bhutan, building digital and transport connectivity with Bangladesh, and offering quick disaster assistance to Sri Lanka and Maldives. Perhaps not every neighbor is comfortable with India's weight. But the message is clear-regional security and prosperity are intertwined, and India prefers partnership over rivalry.

The South Asian neighborhood has been given new importance in India's strategic and security calculations as a result of the Neighbourhood First policy (Pant & Mankikar, 2024).

For security, strategic, and prestige reasons, India has undoubtedly always had a significant influence in South Asia. Ethnic, historical, and civilizational links bind India and its neighbors in addition to their shared borders. It therefore worries about the security implications and spillover effects of any possible instability or the involvement of outside forces. Additionally, it maintains its sphere of influence and keeps up its resistance to other regional powers. In addition, it wants its neighbors to support its economic aspirations, guarantee its security objective, and fortify its standing as a major world power (Shivamurthy, 2025).

Act East & Indo-Pacific Vision

India's "Look East" policy, which was rebranded the "Act East" policy in 2014, celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2022. New Delhi's attempts to reestablish the significance of Southeast Asia and eventually East Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific, in India's foreign policy agenda gave rise to the policy in the wake of the Cold War (Bajpae, 2022).

If Neighbourhood First is about managing the close circle, Act East stretches India's influence deeper into Southeast Asia and, increasingly, the Pacific. This is not just about trade or culture. It's strategic geography. The Indo-Pacific narrative has put India firmly in conversations about sea lanes, maritime security, and the balance of power.

Notably, India's partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia show how far this outreach has expanded and of course, the QUAD provides a platform for India to signal that it is not merely a continental power boxed in by the Himalayas but also a maritime actor shaping the oceans.

Aatmanirbhar Bharat & Tech Diplomacy

Foreign policy is no longer separate from domestic economic strategy. The Aatmanirbhar Bharat vision, often translated as "self-reliant India," is about reducing vulnerabilities while boosting competitiveness. But here's the interesting part-it doubles as a diplomatic tool.

On the one side, Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan seeks to establish indigenous businesses in which it excels and market them as international names. However, India must also interact with the globe and the region as it welcomes foreign direct investment and promotes free trade as a WTO member (Keshava, 2023).

India is pitching itself as not just a market but also a hub of innovation. Semiconductor initiatives, digital public goods, green technology-these are not just industrial policies, they are foreign policy assets. After all, who would not want a reliable tech partner that is also the world's fastest-growing major economy?

Cultural Diplomacy

Finally, there is the less tangible but equally powerful instrument that is culture. India has long had soft power, but in recent years it has consciously sharpened it into cultural diplomacy.

Compared to earlier Indian leaders, who were more circumspect when expressing their religious identity and cultural heritage on the international scene, PM Modi's commitment to cultural diplomacy marks a significant shift. PM Modi, on the other hand, embraced Hinduism as an universal way of living and has used his international position to promote India's religious and cultural traditions (Kundra et al., 2025).

Yoga is now global, Ayurveda too is gaining traction, and Indian cinema continues to travel far beyond South Asia. But beyond these exports, India frames its civilizational values-pluralism, non-violence, harmony with nature-as contributions to world order. Perhaps it sounds idealistic. Yet in an era of climate anxiety and social divisions, this soft power is no small asset.

Since yoga gained popularity in the West years ago, it has perhaps become one of India's most widely exported cultural practices. Yoga's ability to adapt to a variety of cultural scenarios and provide a common language of wellness is what accounts for its widespread popularity. The designation of June 21 as the International Day of Yoga is arguably one of the most significant actions India has taken in order to formally establish yoga as a tool of soft power (Otto, 2025).

In short, India's doctrines today combine old instincts with new experiments. They show a country that wants to remain independent, yes, but also relevant. Pragmatic enough to strike deals, principled enough to speak of values. and perhaps most importantly, confident enough to believe that strategy is not just about reacting to others but about shaping the agenda itself.

Challenges to India's Global Role

Every rising power faces roadblocks. India is no exception. For all the talk of leadership in the Global South and balancing big powers, the world throws up hurdles that complicate its path. Some are external, some are internal, and a few lie somewhere in between.

China's Assertiveness

China is more than just a neighbor; it is a rival with aspirations for the entire world. Border conflicts simmer, occasionally erupt, and persist. In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative is Beijing's ambitious connectivity project that passes through Africa and South Asia, oftentimes directly into areas where India wishes to exert influence.

This is when things become tough. Many developing nations view Chinese loans and infrastructure as short-term solutions to their development gaps, including the Global South, which India aspires to lead. India can't just spend more than China. Instead, it needs to outplay and outthink. This is not simple, but possibly more long-term viable.

US Expectations vs. Strategic Autonomy

The US is a pressure point as well as a partner. On the one hand, India is a key component of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. On the other hand, it occasionally demands too much agreement on trade regulations, technology standards, and Russia.

However, strategic autonomy is, in a sense, ingrained in Indian way of diplomacy. After all, New Delhi has never been one to join rigid coalitions. Therefore, persuading the US that cooperation does not necessitate subordination is the task. India-US relations will probably be defined for years to come by this cooperative dance without coercion.

Regional Instability

Nearer to home, India hardly ever gets a break from the neighborhood. Following the US withdrawal, Afghanistan is still unstable, and Pakistan's ongoing political and economic problems further compound the uncertainty. Political tensions in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have further escalated the instability. Conflicts in the Middle East also continue to attract India's attention because they may have an impact on its energy security and diaspora safety.

Having these fires close by might be exhausting for a nation that wants to be a world leader. In fact, they run the risk of entangling India in conflicts that demand a lot of diplomatic and material resources.

Global Governance Deficits

Finally, the systemic challenge. The very architecture of global governance often sidelines India. The UN Security Council is still stuck in the geopolitics of 1945, with permanent seats jealously guarded. Reform moves at a snail's pace. Resistance to India's inclusion remains strong, especially from powers wary of its growing clout.

Many people have criticized the UN for failing to reform its many institutions, especially the UN Security Council (UNSC). The G-4 countries namely Brazil, Japan, Germany, and India, have spearheaded the push to expedite the prolonged reform exercise (Kaura & Singh, 2021).

Notably, this isn't just about the UN. Bretton Woods institutions, too, often fail to reflect today's economic realities. For India, the frustration is real: how to play a leading role when the table itself is skewed?

In short, India's global role is ambitious, but ambition collides with friction. China's pushiness, US expectations, volatile neighbors, internal development gaps, and outdated global institutions—all these slow the pace. Yet perhaps challenges are not walls, but tests. And India, after all, has always thrived when the path ahead looked most complicated.

Opportunities for India in the Flux

As they say, if challenges slow you down, opportunities push you forward. The current age of flux—messy as it is—actually opens up space for India. Space to lead, to experiment, and to redefine what rising power behavior looks like.

Champion of Multipolarity

The world no longer wants one policeman. Nor does it trust two superpowers locked in endless rivalry. What many states want is multipolarity—a fairer distribution of power. Here, India has a natural opening.

Unlike China or the US, India does not come across as domineering. It speaks the language of balance and after all, multipolarity is not just strategy for India; it's survival. By championing it, New Delhi can win both credibility and influence. Indeed, when India says "a world where no single voice dominates," it sounds believable.

Technology Diplomacy

Technology today is as strategic as tanks or missiles. AI, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity etc. shape not just economies but sovereignty itself. For developing nations, many of whom distrust Western models and fear Chinese dominance, India's tech story looks appealing.

UPI or Aadhaar aren't just tools at home rather they are templates opted abroad. It is very much pragmatic to imagine dozens of countries adopting Indian-style digital payment systems, that's influence of a different kind which is soft, subtle, but very real. Perhaps India's greatest export in the coming decade won't be goods but digital frameworks.

Climate Leadership

Climate change is a stage where India can surprise many. Yes, it is still a developing economy with growth needs. But it is also a country that talks of lifestyle changes, not just carbon numbers. The International Solar Alliance is already a marker and more could follow.

Balancing growth with sustainability won't be easy. But if India can prove that a large democracy can develop while staying green, it will set the tone for much of the Global South. After all, millions of people elsewhere face the same dilemma: energy today or environment tomorrow? India can show it doesn't have to be a binary.

Defense & Security Role

Security is no longer confined to tanks on borders. It stretches into cyber, space, and oceans. The Indo-Pacific, in particular, is hungry for a stabilizing force. India doesn't need to dominate—just to reassure.

By expanding naval reach, building defense partnerships, and offering training to smaller states, India can shape the region's security architecture without pretending to be a superpower. Notably, this is one area where others actually want India to step up. It's less about pressure, more about invitation.

Diaspora Leverage

Finally, the diaspora. Over 30 million Indians live abroad, not as scattered communities but as bridges. From Silicon Valley engineers to Gulf workers to African entrepreneurs, the Indian presence is everywhere.

This isn't just soft power in a cultural sense. It is economic, political, and emotional capital. When Indian-origin leaders govern in London or Washington, or when remittances fuel local economies back home, the diaspora isn't just symbolic—it's structural. And India, if it plays

its cards well, can mobilize this vast human network as a unique resource no rival can easily match.

To put it simply, the flux is not just turbulence. It is also an opening. India doesn't need to copy anyone's playbook. It can write its own-multipolar, tech-savvy, climate-conscious, security-relevant, and diaspora-driven rulebook. The real challenge may not be the absence of opportunities but the discipline to seize them consistently.

Policy Recommendations

If India wants to make the most of this age of flux, it needs more than big speeches. It needs clear steps. Some are external, others internal and perhaps the toughest ones are the ones at home. Still, policy is where ambition meets action. So what could India actually do?

Institutionalize Global South Dialogue Forums

Hosting one or a few summits is insufficient. India should make its involvement with the Global South permanent by setting up forums, holding frequent minister level meetings, and even setting up a small secretariat in New Delhi. After all, consistency is the foundation of credibility. Countries from Asia, Latin America, and Africa will continue to visit India if they understand they have a safe place there.

Deepen Strategic Partnerships, Guard Autonomy

India doesn't have to start from scratch in this regard. Balance is the key. Indeed, India has to strengthen relations with the US, Europe, Japan, and other countries. However, it must refrain from forming strict partnerships. India's strength has been its autonomy, and it must continue to be such. Alignment without being consumed might be the key phrase to keep in mind. India has demonstrated that it is capable of doing this challenging exercise.

Expand Capacity-Building Abroad

Developing countries need tools, not lectures. India can provide those digital systems, reasonably priced health models, and expertise in renewable energy. These might solidify India's position as a problem-solver if they are extended to Africa, Latin America, and portions of Asia. Interestingly, capacity-building is less expensive than hard infrastructure improvements, yet it frequently has a greater long-term impact.

Push for Global Governance Reform-Incrementally

Nobody is handing over a UN Security Council seat tomorrow. That's reality. Still, India should keep pushing for reforms at the UN and Bretton Woods institutions while also backing parallel platforms like BRICS banks and regional funds. After all, reform is a marathon, not a sprint. The key is to combine persistence with pragmatism: nudge change where possible, build alternatives where necessary.

Strengthen Domestic Foundations

Although it may seem apparent, this is really important. If a state fails at home, it cannot lead abroad. India must continue its ongoing mission to strengthen its economy, encourage innovation, and update its military capabilities. Not to be overlooked is social cohesion. A divided house, after all, finds it difficult to convey togetherness overseas. Naturally, a self-assured India at home radiates confidence elsewhere.

The policy recommendation essentially comes down to one idea which is act globally while remaining grounded. Institutions overseas, independent relationships, real-world capacity

building, consistent reform initiatives, and most importantly, local power. None of this is really extravagant. However, when combined, these actions would provide India with the resilience it requires in a world that frequently changes more quickly than anyone can foresee.

CONCLUSION

In one of his addresses prior to G-20 2023 event in India PM Modi asserted that Development is a major concern for the Global South. The disruption caused by the global Covid pandemic had already had a significant effect on the countries of the Global South, and the food, fuel, and fertilizer problems brought on by geopolitical tensions have dealt them yet another setback. Individual nations' choices in these situations have a significant impact on all of humanity (Modi, 2023).

As we reach the end of this study, one thing stands out clearly that India is playing a dual role in the contemporary world. On one hand, it is deftly navigating the shifting sands of great power rivalries, ensuring that its strategic autonomy is preserved. On the other, it is steadily asserting itself as the natural voice of the Global South-an advocate for equity, justice, and development that resonates with billions of people across continents.

India's distinctiveness is not a coincidence. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is more than just a slogan; it is a framework for conducting trade, diplomacy, and cultural outreach. It stems from a civilizational mindset that views the world as interrelated. That philosophy is strengthened by its technology advancements, inclusive growth narrative, and democratic approach. India does, in fact, show that a growing power can influence by setting an example rather than by imposing.

In many ways, India today embodies the role of a Vishwamitra-a global bridge-builder. Not in a symbolic sense alone, but in practical terms: linking nations through dialogue, shared development agendas, and multilateral frameworks. Its capacity to reconcile competing interests, to mediate without dominating, is becoming a defining feature of twenty-first-century geopolitics.

Looking ahead, the possibilities are immense. Perhaps India will shape a world order that is truly multipolar, inclusive, and just. Perhaps it will lead initiatives that balance growth with sustainability, innovation with equity, and power with principle. After all, history is rarely written by the timid. And India, with its blend of pragmatism, culture, and ambition, is anything but timid.

In summary, India's journey in this turbulent era is about transforming uncertainty into opportunity rather than merely surviving it. The goal is, in fact, quite clear: a world in which India serves as a catalyst for justice, inclusiveness, and multipolarity, creating bonds that go beyond disputes, rivalries, or short-lived partnerships. India is holding the pen, and it may leave its mark on the upcoming pages of world history.

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