



Research Article

India and the Global South in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

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The emergence of a multipolar world order has significantly transformed the dynamics of international politics, creating new opportunities and challenges for both established and emerging powers. Within this evolving geopolitical environment, India has increasingly positioned itself as a leading voice of the Global South while simultaneously pursuing a foreign policy framework based on strategic autonomy. This study examines the evolution of India's role in the Global South from the era of Non-Alignment during the Cold War to the contemporary doctrine of strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century. The paper argues that although the international context has changed substantially since independence, the fundamental objective of preserving policy independence and promoting a more equitable international order has remained central to Indian foreign policy. The research employs a qualitative and historical approach based on the analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, and contemporary diplomatic initiatives. It explores the ideological foundations of non-Alignment, the transformation of India's external engagements after the Cold War, and the emergence of strategic autonomy as the guiding principle of contemporary diplomacy. The study further analyzes India's participation in institutions such as BRICS, the G20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Quad, highlighting how India balances relations with competing powers while maintaining independent decision-making. Particular attention is given to India's efforts to strengthen South-South cooperation through initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit and advocacy for reforms in global governance institutions. The findings suggest that strategic autonomy represents not a departure from non-Alignment but its adaptation to the realities of a multipolar international system. The paper concludes that India's growing influence within the Global South and its capacity to engage multiple centers of power position it as a significant actor in shaping a more inclusive and representative global order.

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Introduction

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation characterized by the gradual shift from a predominantly unipolar order toward an increasingly multipolar distribution of power. The rise of emerging economies, the resurgence of regional powers, growing challenges to Western dominance, and demands for reform of international institutions have collectively reshaped global politics. Within this evolving environment, countries of the Global South are seeking greater representation and influence in international decision-making processes. India has emerged as a significant actor in this transformation due to its expanding economic capabilities, geopolitical influence, and growing diplomatic activism in global governance forums (Pant & Super, 2015; Zajączkowski & Pulami, 2025). The concept of the Global

South broadly refers to developing countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Oceania that share historical experiences of colonialism, economic dependency, and political marginalization. Although these states differ in their political systems and developmental trajectories, they often converge on issues such as equitable economic development, climate justice, reform of international institutions, and the democratization of global governance. In recent years, the Global South has re-emerged as an important political category as developing nations increasingly challenge the asymmetries embedded within the existing international order (Ranjan, 2026).

India's engagement with the Global South is deeply rooted in its anti-colonial struggle and post-independence foreign policy orientation. Following independence in 1947, India adopted a diplomatic approach that emphasized sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation among newly independent states.

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Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India became one of the principal architects of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to provide an alternative to the bipolar rivalry of the Cold War. Non-alignment was not merely a policy of neutrality; rather, it represented an effort to preserve strategic independence while supporting decolonization and collective development among postcolonial nations (Ranjan, 2026).

During the Cold War, non-alignment served as the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy. Through participation in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, India positioned itself as a leading advocate of South-South cooperation and the interests of developing nations. This policy enabled India to maintain diplomatic flexibility while simultaneously supporting anti-colonial movements and advocating a more equitable international economic order (Pant & Super, 2015).

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the international environment in which Indian foreign policy operated. The collapse of the Soviet Union, economic globalization, and the emergence of new security and economic challenges reduced the relevance of traditional non-alignment. Simultaneously, India's economic liberalization in 1991 accelerated its integration into the global economy and encouraged a reassessment of foreign policy priorities. Consequently, India gradually shifted from the doctrine of non-alignment toward the concept of strategic autonomy, which emphasizes independent decision-making while permitting engagement with multiple global actors according to national interests (Pant & Super, 2015; Merdjanova & Pant, 2017).

Strategic autonomy has emerged as the defining principle of contemporary Indian foreign policy. Unlike classical non-alignment, it does not require equidistance from competing powers but instead emphasizes flexibility, issue-based cooperation, and the preservation of policy independence. This approach allows India to engage simultaneously with the United States, Russia, the European Union, Japan, and China while safeguarding its strategic interests. Scholars argue that strategic autonomy represents the contemporary adaptation of non-alignment to the realities of a multipolar international system (Zajackowski & Pulami, 2025; Kumar, 2025).

India's participation in diverse multilateral frameworks further illustrates this transformation. The country is an active member of BRICS, the G20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Quad, reflecting its commitment to multidirectional engagement rather than exclusive alignment. Such participation demonstrates India's effort to maximize diplomatic flexibility while contributing to the emergence of a more balanced global order (Zomuanthanga & Shekhawat, 2026).

In recent years, India has intensified its efforts to position itself as a representative voice of the Global South. Initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit, support for the African Union's inclusion in the G20, and advocacy for reforms in international institutions highlight India's commitment to creating a more inclusive and representative system of global governance. These initiatives reflect both historical continuity with India's postcolonial foreign policy traditions and contemporary aspirations associated with its rise as a major power (Ranjan, 2026; CFR, 2026).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines India's evolving role within the Global South in the context of an emerging multipolar world order. It explores the transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy, analyzes the continuity and transformation of India's foreign policy principles, and evaluates India's contemporary efforts to shape global governance. The study argues that while the language and mechanisms of Indian foreign policy have evolved considerably since the Cold War, the underlying objective of preserving

strategic independence and promoting a more equitable international order remains central to India's global engagement (Pant & Super, 2015; Zajackowski & Pulami, 2025).

Review of Literature

The study of India's role in the Global South and its transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy has generated substantial scholarly interest. Existing literature examines the ideological foundations of India's foreign policy, the evolution of non-alignment, the emergence of strategic autonomy, and India's contemporary efforts to position itself as a leading actor within an increasingly multipolar international order. Although scholars generally agree that India's foreign policy has undergone significant transformation since the end of the Cold War, there remains considerable debate regarding the extent to which contemporary strategic autonomy represents continuity or departure from the principles of non-alignment.

Early scholarship on Indian foreign policy largely focused on the origins and significance of non-alignment. The Non-Aligned Movement emerged during the Cold War as a response to bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. India, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, played a central role in shaping the movement's intellectual and diplomatic foundations. Scholars have argued that non-alignment was not simply a policy of neutrality but rather a strategy designed to preserve sovereignty, promote anti-colonial solidarity, and ensure independent decision-making in international affairs (Pant & Super, 2015). The movement provided newly independent states with an alternative framework through which they could pursue national interests without becoming subordinate to competing superpower blocs.

Recent studies have revisited the ideological dimensions of non-alignment and its relationship with postcolonial identity. Ranjan (2026) argues that non-alignment served not only as a foreign policy instrument but also as a mechanism through which India constructed its international identity as a postcolonial state. According to this perspective, India's contemporary engagement with the Global South, including initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit, reflects a continuation of Nehruvian efforts to create solidarity among formerly colonized nations. This interpretation highlights the enduring influence of historical experiences and normative commitments in shaping India's contemporary foreign policy discourse.

Another major body of literature examines the transformation of Indian foreign policy following the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of globalization created new strategic realities that challenged traditional understandings of non-alignment. Scholars note that economic liberalization in 1991 significantly altered India's external orientation by increasing integration with global markets and expanding engagement with major powers. Within this context, the concept of strategic autonomy gradually replaced classical non-alignment as the guiding principle of Indian foreign policy. Strategic autonomy emphasizes flexibility, issue-based partnerships, and independent decision-making rather than equidistance from competing powers (Pant & Super, 2015).

A significant debate within the literature concerns whether strategic autonomy represents continuity or discontinuity with the principles of non-alignment. Pant and Super (2015) argue that strategic autonomy is fundamentally rooted in the historical quest for policy independence that characterized non-alignment from the beginning. Although the geopolitical context has changed, the desire to preserve decision-making freedom remains central to India's foreign policy behavior. From this perspective, strategic autonomy should be understood as an adaptation rather than a rejection of non-alignment.

Supporting this argument, Tikerpuu (2018) contends that contemporary strategic autonomy combines Nehruvian ideals with pragmatic considerations associated with modern international politics. The study emphasizes that India's participation in organizations such as BRICS and IBSA reflects a continued commitment to creating a more equitable international order while simultaneously advancing national interests. Strategic autonomy therefore represents a synthesis of normative aspirations and realist calculations rather than a complete ideological transformation.

Other scholars, however, suggest that India has moved significantly beyond the traditional framework of non-alignment. Mohan argues that contemporary foreign policy increasingly prioritizes strategic partnerships, economic interests, and geopolitical influence over ideological commitments. The rise of China, the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific, and expanding relations with the United States have encouraged India to pursue a more proactive and interest-driven foreign policy. From this perspective, strategic autonomy differs substantially from non-alignment because it permits deeper cooperation with major powers while maintaining formal policy independence.

The literature on multipolarity further contributes to understanding India's evolving international role. Scholars observe that the diffusion of global power has created opportunities for emerging powers to exercise greater influence in international affairs. India's expanding economic capabilities, demographic advantages, technological development, and diplomatic activism have enabled it to play a more prominent role in global governance debates. Multipolarity has therefore provided a favorable environment for India to pursue strategic autonomy while simultaneously strengthening its leadership aspirations within the Global South.

A growing body of scholarship examines India's participation in multilateral and minilateral institutions. BRICS has attracted particular attention because it serves as a platform through which emerging economies seek greater influence within global governance structures. Scholars argue that India's involvement in BRICS reflects both dissatisfaction with existing institutions and a desire to shape alternative mechanisms of international cooperation. At the same time, participation in forums such as the G20, Quad, and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation demonstrates India's ability to engage diverse partners across different geopolitical contexts. This multidirectional engagement is frequently cited as evidence of strategic autonomy in practice.

Recent studies also focus on India's efforts to position itself as a representative of the Global South. The concept of Global South leadership has gained renewed relevance amid debates concerning climate change, development financing, debt relief, food security, and reform of international institutions. Scholars note that India's advocacy for the inclusion of the African Union in the G20, support for South-South cooperation, and promotion of development partnerships across Africa and Asia have strengthened its credentials as a spokesperson for developing countries. These initiatives demonstrate how India seeks to combine its aspirations as a major power with its historical identity as a leader of the developing world.

The relationship between India and China within the Global South has also attracted increasing scholarly attention. Some researchers argue that the competition between New Delhi and Beijing for influence among developing countries represents an important feature of contemporary international politics. China's Belt and Road Initiative, expanding economic presence in Africa, and leadership ambitions have challenged India's traditional influence within the Global South. In response, India has intensified diplomatic outreach and promoted alternative development partnerships designed to strengthen its position

among developing nations. This competition highlights the strategic significance of the Global South within the emerging multipolar order.

Another important strand of literature examines India's balancing behavior among major powers. Scholars observe that India simultaneously participates in institutions associated with both Western and non-Western powers. For example, India maintains active involvement in BRICS while also engaging in initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Quad. This dual engagement demonstrates India's effort to maximize strategic flexibility while avoiding excessive dependence on any single power center. Researchers describe this approach as multi-alignment, an operational expression of strategic autonomy in contemporary international politics.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several gaps remain. Much of the literature examines non-alignment, strategic autonomy, or Global South diplomacy as separate themes. Relatively few studies systematically analyze the transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy within the broader context of India's evolving role in the Global South and the emergence of a multipolar world order. Furthermore, recent initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit and India's leadership during its G20 presidency have not yet been fully integrated into broader theoretical discussions regarding continuity and change in Indian foreign policy.

Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how India's historical commitment to non-alignment has evolved into a contemporary strategy of strategic autonomy and how this transformation shapes its engagement with the Global South in an emerging multipolar international system. Through this approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of both continuity and change in Indian foreign policy.

Research Gap

Existing studies have extensively examined India's non-alignment policy, strategic autonomy, and engagement with the Global South. However, limited research has analyzed these themes collectively within the framework of the emerging multipolar world order. Most studies focus either on the historical evolution of non-alignment or on contemporary strategic autonomy without adequately exploring the continuity between the two concepts. Furthermore, recent initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit, India's G20 leadership, and its efforts to shape global governance reforms have received limited scholarly attention. Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive study that critically examines India's transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and evaluates its implications for India's leadership role within the Global South in the contemporary multipolar international system.

Research Objectives

- To examine the historical foundations of India's engagement with the Global South and analyze the role of anti-colonialism, South-South cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement in shaping India's foreign policy orientation.
- To analyze the evolution of Indian foreign policy from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy in response to changing geopolitical and economic realities after the Cold War.
- To investigate India's role in the emerging multipolar world order through its participation in multilateral and minilateral institutions such as BRICS, G20, SCO, IBSA, and the Quad.
- To evaluate India's contemporary initiatives aimed at strengthening Global South cooperation, including development partnerships, climate diplomacy, the Voice of Global South Summit, and advocacy for global governance reforms.

- To assess the extent to which Strategic Autonomy represents continuity or transformation in India's traditional foreign policy principles.
- To examine the opportunities and challenges facing India's leadership aspirations within the Global South in the context of increasing geopolitical competition and shifting power structures.

Research Questions

- How did the principles of non-Alignment shape India's historical engagement with the Global South?
- What factors contributed to the transition from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy in Indian foreign policy?
- How does India utilize Strategic Autonomy to navigate the complexities of an emerging multipolar world order?
- What role does India play in promoting the interests and aspirations of the Global South through contemporary diplomatic initiatives?
- To what extent does Strategic Autonomy represent continuity with, or departure from, the principles of non-Alignment?
- What opportunities and constraints influence India's ability to emerge as a leading voice of the Global South in the twenty-first century?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on historical and analytical approaches to examine India's evolving role within the Global South and its transition from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy. Given the nature of the research problem, the study relies primarily on the interpretation of historical developments, foreign policy decisions, diplomatic initiatives, and scholarly debates rather than quantitative measurements. The research is based on secondary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, government reports, speeches of political leaders, official documents, and publications from international organizations. These sources provide the necessary historical and contemporary perspectives required to analyze the evolution of India's foreign policy and its engagement with the Global South.

Historical Foundations of India's Global South Diplomacy

India's contemporary engagement with the Global South cannot be fully understood without examining the historical foundations of its foreign policy. Since independence in 1947, India has sought to position itself as a representative of developing nations and an advocate of a more equitable international order. The roots of this orientation lie in the country's anti-colonial struggle, its commitment to political sovereignty, and its efforts to promote cooperation among newly independent states. These principles not only shaped India's foreign policy during the Cold War but also continue to influence its contemporary diplomatic engagement with the Global South. The experience of colonial rule played a decisive role in shaping India's worldview. Having emerged from nearly two centuries of British colonial domination, Indian leaders viewed imperialism, racial discrimination, and political subordination as major obstacles to international peace and development. Consequently, the leadership of independent India sought to establish a foreign policy that would protect national sovereignty while supporting the aspirations of other colonized peoples. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, emphasized that political freedom must be accompanied by economic independence and international cooperation among newly liberated nations (Nehru, 1946/2004). This perspective became a defining feature of India's engagement with the developing world.

The early years of independence coincided with the emergence of the Cold War and the intensification of rivalry

between the United States and the Soviet Union. Many newly independent countries feared that alignment with either bloc would compromise their sovereignty and expose them to external pressures. In response, India advocated a policy of non-alignment that sought to preserve independent decision-making in international affairs. Non-alignment was not intended as neutrality or political isolation; rather, it represented an effort to maintain strategic flexibility while promoting peaceful coexistence and international cooperation (Ganguly, 2010). The policy enabled India to engage with both superpowers without formally joining either alliance system.

A landmark moment in the development of Global South solidarity was the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia in 1955. The conference brought together leaders from twenty-nine Asian and African countries to discuss issues related to colonialism, economic development, racial discrimination, and international peace. India played a central role in organizing and shaping the conference agenda. Bandung represented the first major attempt by newly independent states to articulate a collective voice in international politics and challenge the dominance of established powers. The conference emphasized principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful coexistence, and mutual respect, many of which later became foundational principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (Acharya, 2014).

The significance of the Bandung Conference extended beyond its immediate diplomatic outcomes. It fostered a sense of political solidarity among countries that had experienced colonial domination and sought greater autonomy in international affairs. Bandung also contributed to the emergence of what would later be described as the Global South by creating a platform through which developing nations could articulate common concerns and aspirations. Scholars have argued that the conference marked the beginning of a new phase in international relations in which formerly colonized states sought to influence global governance structures and challenge existing hierarchies of power (Prashad, 2007).

The establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 represented the institutionalization of many ideas first articulated at Bandung. Led by figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Josip Broz Tito, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sukarno, NAM sought to provide newly independent states with an alternative framework for international engagement. The movement emphasized political independence, opposition to colonialism, support for national liberation movements, and the promotion of peace and development. India emerged as one of the most influential members of NAM and played a crucial role in shaping its objectives and diplomatic initiatives (Muni & Mishra, 2019).

For India, non-alignment served both ideological and strategic purposes. Ideologically, it reflected the country's commitment to anti-colonialism, peaceful coexistence, and international justice. Strategically, it enabled India to avoid entanglement in superpower rivalries while maintaining flexibility in its external relations. This combination of normative principles and pragmatic considerations contributed to the durability of non-alignment as a central pillar of Indian foreign policy throughout the Cold War period (Pant, 2016).

Beyond political issues, India also became an advocate of economic cooperation among developing countries. During the 1960s and 1970s, many countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America argued that political independence alone was insufficient without economic transformation. Existing international economic structures were widely perceived as favoring industrialized countries while perpetuating inequalities between developed and developing nations. India actively supported initiatives aimed at restructuring global economic relations and strengthening South-South cooperation. These

efforts culminated in demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which called for fairer trade practices, technology transfer, development assistance, and greater participation of developing countries in global economic decision-making (Prashad, 2007).

South-South cooperation became a central component of India's engagement with the developing world. Through technical assistance programs, educational exchanges, diplomatic support, and development partnerships, India sought to strengthen relationships with countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These initiatives reflected India's belief that cooperation among developing nations could reduce dependence on advanced industrial economies and contribute to more balanced patterns of global development. Such efforts also enhanced India's reputation as a leader among postcolonial states and reinforced its position within the broader Global South.

India's advocacy for decolonization further strengthened its leadership credentials. The country consistently supported independence movements in Africa and Asia and opposed racial segregation and apartheid in international forums. Indian diplomats frequently used platforms such as the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement to promote the rights of colonized peoples and challenge discriminatory political structures. These positions enhanced India's moral authority and helped establish its identity as a champion of developing countries (Ganguly, 2010).

By the late twentieth century, India had become widely recognized as one of the principal voices of the developing world. Its leadership within the Non-Aligned Movement, support for South-South cooperation, advocacy for economic justice, and commitment to anti-colonial solidarity collectively shaped its international identity. Although the end of the Cold War introduced new geopolitical realities and reduced the relevance of traditional non-alignment, the underlying principles of sovereignty, strategic independence, and cooperation among developing nations continued to influence India's foreign policy.

Therefore, the historical foundations of India's Global South diplomacy were built upon a combination of anti-colonial experiences, non-aligned principles, Bandung solidarity, and South-South cooperation. These foundations established the normative and strategic framework through which India engaged the developing world during the twentieth century. More importantly, they provided the intellectual and diplomatic basis for India's later transition toward strategic autonomy in the post-Cold War era. Understanding these historical foundations is essential for analyzing how India has adapted its foreign policy to the realities of an emerging multipolar world while continuing to project itself as a leading voice of the Global South.

From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

The end of the Cold War marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Indian foreign policy. For nearly four decades, non-alignment had served as the principal framework guiding India's international engagement. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the emergence of a unipolar international order dominated by the United States, and the acceleration of globalization created a fundamentally different strategic environment. These developments compelled Indian policymakers to reassess traditional foreign policy assumptions and adapt to changing geopolitical realities. As a result, the concept of strategic autonomy gradually emerged as the guiding principle of India's external relations, replacing classical non-alignment while preserving its core emphasis on independent decision-making (Pant & Super, 2015).

One of the most significant factors influencing this transition was the transformation of the international system itself. During the Cold War, non-alignment provided newly independent states with a mechanism for avoiding direct involvement in superpower rivalry. The bipolar structure of global politics enabled countries such as India to maintain strategic distance from both blocs while pursuing their own national interests. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered this environment. The disappearance of one of the two superpowers reduced the relevance of traditional non-alignment and created new challenges for states seeking to preserve diplomatic flexibility (Ganguly, 2010).

At the same time, India confronted a severe economic crisis in 1991 that necessitated comprehensive economic reforms. The adoption of liberalization, privatization, and globalization policies transformed the country's economic orientation and increased its integration into global markets. Economic growth became a central national priority, requiring greater engagement with international institutions, foreign investors, and major economic powers. Consequently, foreign policy increasingly incorporated economic considerations alongside traditional political and security concerns. Scholars argue that economic liberalization played a crucial role in reshaping India's external engagements and encouraged a more pragmatic approach to international relations (Mohan, 2003).

The emergence of strategic autonomy reflected India's effort to adapt to these changing circumstances. Unlike classical non-alignment, strategic autonomy does not require equal distance from competing powers. Instead, it emphasizes the capacity to make independent foreign policy decisions while engaging with multiple states and institutions according to national interests. Strategic autonomy therefore combines flexibility, pragmatism, and policy independence within a rapidly changing international environment. According to Pant and Super (2015), strategic autonomy represents the contemporary expression of India's long-standing desire to preserve sovereignty and avoid excessive dependence on external actors.

The transformation of India-United States relations illustrates this evolution particularly well. During much of the Cold War, relations between New Delhi and Washington were often characterized by mistrust and differing strategic priorities. However, the post-Cold War period witnessed a gradual improvement in bilateral ties. Shared concerns regarding regional security, economic cooperation, technological development, and the rise of China contributed to the expansion of strategic partnership between the two countries. Landmark agreements such as the India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008 demonstrated the growing depth of cooperation. Nevertheless, India avoided entering into a formal alliance with the United States, thereby preserving the principle of strategic autonomy (Mohan, 2022).

Simultaneously, India maintained strong relations with Russia despite the dramatic changes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia remained a major supplier of defense equipment and an important strategic partner in areas such as energy cooperation and regional security. India's continued engagement with Russia reflects its commitment to maintaining diversified partnerships rather than relying exclusively on any single power. This balancing behavior has become one of the defining characteristics of strategic autonomy in practice (Muni & Mishra, 2019).

The rise of China further influenced the evolution of Indian foreign policy. China's rapid economic growth, military modernization, and expanding global influence significantly altered the balance of power in Asia. While economic relations between India and China expanded considerably, territorial disputes and strategic competition generated increasing tensions. In response, India pursued a multidimensional strategy

that combined engagement with balancing measures. Participation in initiatives such as the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia reflects India's efforts to address emerging security concerns while maintaining policy independence. Importantly, India continues to cooperate with China within frameworks such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, demonstrating its commitment to issue-based engagement rather than rigid bloc politics (Pant, 2019).

The concept of strategic autonomy became increasingly visible in India's approach to multilateral diplomacy. Rather than relying on a single institutional framework, India actively participates in a diverse range of organizations and partnerships. Membership in BRICS allows India to collaborate with emerging powers on issues related to global governance reform and economic cooperation. Participation in the G20 provides opportunities to influence international economic decision-making. Similarly, involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation enhances engagement with Eurasian partners, while the Quad contributes to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This diversified diplomatic strategy reflects India's effort to maximize strategic flexibility within an increasingly multipolar international system (Mohan, 2022).

Scholars have described this approach as "multi-alignment," emphasizing India's willingness to engage simultaneously with multiple power centers without becoming dependent on any one of them. Unlike alliance-based strategies that require clear commitments to particular blocs, multi-alignment enables India to pursue issue-specific cooperation across a wide range of partners. This strategy reflects the realities of contemporary international politics, where economic interdependence, technological cooperation, and transnational challenges require flexible forms of engagement. Strategic autonomy therefore functions not as isolation but as an active and adaptive approach to international relations (Pant & Super, 2015).

India's response to major international crises further demonstrates the practical application of strategic autonomy. In several instances, New Delhi has adopted positions that diverge from those of both Western and non-Western powers, emphasizing national interests and independent judgment. Such decisions illustrate India's determination to avoid external pressure while preserving diplomatic flexibility. This approach has enabled India to maintain constructive relations with diverse actors despite increasing geopolitical polarization (Pant, 2019).

The transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy has not, however, represented a complete break with the past. Many of the core principles that guided Indian foreign policy during the Cold War—sovereignty, strategic independence, and resistance to external domination—remain visible in contemporary diplomacy. What has changed is the manner in which these principles are pursued. Whereas non-alignment emerged within a bipolar international structure, strategic autonomy operates within a complex environment characterized by multiple centers of power, economic globalization, and interconnected security challenges. Thus, strategic autonomy can be understood as the adaptation of traditional foreign policy objectives to new geopolitical realities (Pant & Super, 2015).

In essence, the evolution from non-alignment to strategic autonomy reflects both continuity and change in Indian foreign policy. The underlying commitment to independent decision-making remains intact, but the methods employed to achieve this objective have become more flexible and pragmatic. Strategic autonomy has enabled India to navigate a rapidly changing international environment while preserving the core values that have historically shaped its external relations. As India seeks to expand its global influence and strengthen its leadership role within the Global South, strategic autonomy

provides the diplomatic framework through which these ambitions are pursued in the twenty-first century.

India's Leadership in the Global South

The emergence of a multipolar international order has created new opportunities for India to strengthen its leadership role within the Global South. As one of the world's fastest-growing major economies and a prominent actor in international diplomacy, India increasingly seeks to position itself as a bridge between developed and developing nations. While its historical association with the Global South was rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and the Non-Aligned Movement, contemporary leadership is increasingly expressed through economic cooperation, development partnerships, multilateral engagement, and advocacy for reforms in global governance institutions. In this context, India has sought to transform its historical legacy into an active diplomatic strategy aimed at representing the concerns and aspirations of developing countries within an evolving international order (Pant, 2019).

A defining feature of India's contemporary Global South diplomacy is its participation in multilateral platforms that seek to amplify the voices of emerging and developing economies. Among these, BRICS has become one of the most significant forums through which India engages with issues of global governance reform. Established initially as an association of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, BRICS reflects the growing influence of non-Western powers in international affairs. The grouping has consistently advocated reforms of international financial institutions, greater representation for developing countries, and the creation of alternative mechanisms of economic cooperation. India's active participation in BRICS demonstrates its commitment to reshaping aspects of the existing international order while simultaneously strengthening cooperation among major developing economies (Stuenkel, 2017).

The significance of BRICS extends beyond economic cooperation. The establishment of institutions such as the New Development Bank represents an effort to provide alternative sources of development financing and reduce dependence on traditional Western-dominated financial institutions. For India, BRICS serves as both a platform for advancing national interests and a mechanism for promoting the collective aspirations of the Global South. Through BRICS, India has consistently emphasized issues such as sustainable development, infrastructure investment, climate finance, and equitable economic growth, all of which remain central concerns for developing countries (Stuenkel, 2017).

India's engagement with the G20 has further strengthened its international profile and leadership credentials. Unlike the Non-Aligned Movement, which was primarily political in orientation, the G20 occupies a central position in global economic governance. India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 provided an important opportunity to advance issues relevant to developing nations. During its presidency, India emphasized inclusive growth, digital public infrastructure, sustainable development, climate action, food security, and multilateral reform. Significantly, India played a leading role in securing the admission of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20, a development widely regarded as an important step toward enhancing the representation of the Global South in global decision-making processes (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The inclusion of the African Union in the G20 illustrates India's broader commitment to democratizing global governance. Indian policymakers have frequently argued that existing international institutions fail to adequately reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. Structures established in the aftermath of the Second World War continue to privilege a

limited number of states despite significant shifts in global economic and political power. Consequently, India has consistently advocated reforms of the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Such reforms are viewed as essential for ensuring that developing countries receive greater representation and influence within international decision-making processes (Mohan, 2022).

Another important dimension of India's contemporary Global South diplomacy is the Voice of Global South Summit. Launched in 2023, the initiative was designed to create a platform through which developing countries could articulate their concerns and priorities regarding global challenges. The summit brought together a large number of countries from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific region and focused on issues such as development financing, debt sustainability, healthcare, food security, climate change, and technological cooperation. By creating a forum dedicated specifically to the perspectives of developing countries, India sought to reinforce its image as a representative and advocate of the Global South (Ranjan, 2026).

The Voice of Global South Summit also reflects the changing nature of leadership in international politics. Unlike the Cold War era, when leadership was often expressed through ideological alignment, contemporary influence increasingly depends on the ability to provide solutions to common challenges. India's emphasis on digital transformation, capacity-building programs, development partnerships, and technological cooperation demonstrates an effort to translate diplomatic leadership into tangible developmental outcomes. Through initiatives such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme and various development assistance projects across Africa and Asia, India has sought to strengthen long-term partnerships with developing countries (Mawdsley, 2018).

Climate diplomacy has emerged as another significant area through which India engages with the Global South. Developing countries have frequently argued that the burdens of climate change mitigation should be distributed according to principles of equity and historical responsibility. India has consistently advocated climate justice, emphasizing the developmental needs of poorer countries while supporting international efforts to address environmental challenges. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance demonstrate India's attempt to combine environmental leadership with South-South cooperation. By promoting renewable energy partnerships and sustainable development, India has sought to position itself as a responsible actor capable of addressing both developmental and environmental concerns (Dubash, 2022).

India's leadership aspirations, however, face several challenges. One of the most significant is the growing influence of China within the Global South. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China has expanded its economic presence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This has intensified competition for influence among developing countries and created alternative models of development cooperation. While India emphasizes partnership, capacity building, and respect for sovereignty, it often faces resource constraints that limit the scale of its initiatives compared to those undertaken by China. Consequently, India's leadership role within the Global South remains contested and subject to ongoing geopolitical competition (Mohan, 2022).

Another challenge arises from the diversity of interests within the Global South itself. Developing countries differ significantly in terms of economic structures, political systems, regional priorities, and strategic alignments. As a result, constructing a unified Global South agenda remains difficult. India must therefore balance competing interests while

attempting to build consensus on issues such as trade, development financing, climate policy, and institutional reform. This complexity requires diplomatic flexibility and highlights the limitations of any single state's ability to represent the entire Global South (Mawdsley, 2018).

Despite these challenges, India's growing economic capabilities, demographic strength, technological achievements, and diplomatic activism have significantly enhanced its international standing. Its ability to engage simultaneously with developed and developing countries provides a unique advantage in an increasingly fragmented international environment. By combining strategic autonomy with active support for Global South concerns, India has positioned itself as an important intermediary between different regions and power centers. This dual role strengthens its credibility and enhances its capacity to influence debates regarding the future of global governance.

In conclusion, India's contemporary leadership within the Global South reflects both continuity and transformation. While rooted in historical traditions of anti-colonial solidarity and South-South cooperation, contemporary leadership is increasingly expressed through multilateral diplomacy, development partnerships, climate action, and advocacy for institutional reform. Platforms such as BRICS, the G20, and the Voice of Global South Summit illustrate India's efforts to create a more inclusive international order and amplify the voices of developing nations. As multipolarity continues to reshape global politics, India's ability to combine strategic autonomy with effective Global South leadership will remain a critical determinant of its future international influence.

Opportunities and Challenges for India in the Emerging Multipolar World Order

The emergence of a multipolar world order has fundamentally altered the structure of international politics and created new opportunities for rising powers to expand their influence. For India, the transition from a largely unipolar system to a more dispersed distribution of power presents significant diplomatic, economic, and strategic possibilities. At the same time, the changing international environment generates complex challenges that require careful navigation. As India seeks to strengthen its position as a leading voice of the Global South while advancing its aspirations as a major global power, it must balance competing interests, manage geopolitical rivalries, and adapt to rapidly evolving global realities. Understanding these opportunities and challenges is essential for evaluating India's future role within the international system.

One of the most significant opportunities available to India arises from its growing economic capabilities. Over the past three decades, India has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, expanding its influence in global trade, technology, manufacturing, and services. Economic growth has enhanced India's international standing and provided the resources necessary to pursue a more active foreign policy. In a multipolar world where economic power increasingly shapes geopolitical influence, India's expanding market, youthful population, and technological innovation position it as a key actor in global economic governance (Mohan, 2022). The country's economic rise also strengthens its credibility among developing nations that view India as an example of successful postcolonial development.

A second opportunity lies in India's demographic advantages. With one of the largest populations in the world and a relatively young workforce, India possesses significant human capital that can contribute to long-term economic growth and technological advancement. Demographic strength not only enhances domestic development prospects but also increases India's attractiveness as a strategic and economic partner. In an

era characterized by aging populations in many advanced economies, India's demographic profile provides a comparative advantage that can support its broader international ambitions (Pant, 2019).

Technological development represents another important source of opportunity. India has emerged as a major center of innovation in information technology, digital governance, space research, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy. Initiatives such as Digital India and advances in digital public infrastructure have attracted international attention and generated opportunities for technological cooperation with developing countries. Through technology-sharing initiatives, capacity-building programs, and digital partnerships, India can strengthen its leadership role within the Global South while contributing to broader developmental objectives (Mawdsley, 2018).

The rise of multipolarity has also expanded India's diplomatic space. Unlike the Cold War period, contemporary international politics is characterized by multiple centers of power and more flexible forms of cooperation. This environment allows India to engage simultaneously with different actors without becoming dependent on any single alliance structure. Strategic autonomy enables India to maintain productive relations with the United States, Russia, the European Union, Japan, ASEAN countries, African states, and countries of the Global South. Such diplomatic flexibility enhances India's ability to pursue national interests while avoiding the constraints associated with rigid alliance commitments (Pant & Super, 2015).

Another significant opportunity emerges from India's growing role in global governance. International institutions established after the Second World War increasingly face criticism for failing to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. As demands for reform intensify, India is well positioned to advocate changes that enhance the representation of developing countries. Its support for United Nations Security Council reform, greater participation of developing countries in international financial institutions, and more equitable approaches to climate governance aligns closely with the aspirations of many Global South states. Consequently, India has the potential to become a leading voice in efforts to democratize global governance structures (Ranjan, 2026).

Despite these opportunities, India faces several significant challenges. Among the most important is the intensifying geopolitical competition between major powers. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has become one of the defining features of contemporary international politics. As tensions between these powers increase, maintaining strategic autonomy becomes increasingly difficult. India must carefully balance its security concerns regarding China with its desire to avoid excessive alignment with any particular bloc. This challenge requires sophisticated diplomacy and a constant reassessment of strategic priorities (Mohan, 2022).

China's expanding influence within the Global South constitutes another major challenge. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has significantly increased its economic and political presence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many developing countries view Chinese investment as an important source of infrastructure financing and economic development. As a result, India faces growing competition for influence among countries that have traditionally been receptive to its diplomatic outreach. Although India emphasizes partnership, capacity building, and sustainable development, matching China's scale of investment remains difficult (Mawdsley, 2018).

Regional security challenges also complicate India's strategic environment. Ongoing tensions along the India-China border, instability in parts of South Asia, cross-border terrorism, and

maritime security concerns in the Indian Ocean require substantial diplomatic and military attention. These challenges consume resources that might otherwise be directed toward broader global initiatives. Moreover, regional instability has the potential to undermine India's efforts to project itself as a stable and influential global actor (Pant, 2019).

Economic vulnerabilities represent another area of concern. Although India's economic performance has been impressive, challenges such as income inequality, unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and developmental disparities continue to affect domestic stability and growth. Sustaining economic expansion is essential for supporting India's international ambitions. Without continued economic progress, the resources required for diplomatic engagement, development partnerships, and military modernization may become constrained. Therefore, domestic development remains closely linked to India's capacity to exercise international leadership (Mohan, 2022).

Climate change constitutes an additional challenge with both domestic and international dimensions. As one of the countries most vulnerable to climate-related risks, India faces increasing pressures associated with environmental degradation, water scarcity, extreme weather events, and sustainable development. Simultaneously, it must balance developmental priorities with international expectations regarding climate mitigation. Managing these competing demands requires innovative policy approaches and effective international cooperation (Dubash, 2022).

Another challenge concerns the diversity of interests within the Global South itself. Although India frequently presents itself as a representative of developing countries, the Global South is far from homogeneous. Countries differ significantly in terms of economic structures, political systems, strategic priorities, and regional concerns. Consequently, building consensus on issues such as trade reform, climate policy, development financing, and institutional restructuring can be difficult. India's ability to exercise leadership therefore depends not only on its own capabilities but also on its capacity to accommodate diverse perspectives and interests (Ranjan, 2026).

The credibility of India's leadership aspirations is also shaped by perceptions of consistency between rhetoric and practice. While India advocates equitable development, democratic governance, and South-South cooperation, it must continuously demonstrate its commitment to these principles through tangible actions. Development assistance, technology partnerships, capacity-building programs, and support for multilateral initiatives play an important role in reinforcing India's reputation as a responsible and reliable partner. Effective leadership requires not only diplomatic influence but also the ability to deliver meaningful outcomes for partner countries (Mawdsley, 2018).

In conclusion, the emerging multipolar world order presents India with both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. Economic growth, demographic advantages, technological innovation, diplomatic flexibility, and growing influence within global governance institutions provide a strong foundation for India's rise as a major international actor. At the same time, geopolitical competition, regional security concerns, economic vulnerabilities, climate challenges, and competition for influence within the Global South complicate this trajectory. The success of India's foreign policy will depend on its ability to leverage opportunities while effectively managing these

challenges. Strategic autonomy remains a crucial instrument in this process, enabling India to navigate an increasingly complex international environment while preserving its independence and advancing its leadership aspirations within the Global South.

Discussion and Analysis

The analysis of India's engagement with the Global South demonstrates that the evolution of Indian foreign policy from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy reflects both continuity and adaptation. While the geopolitical context has changed substantially since independence, the central objective of preserving national autonomy and promoting a more equitable international order has remained a consistent feature of India's external engagement. The findings of this study suggest that contemporary strategic autonomy should not be interpreted as a complete departure from the principles of non-alignment; rather, it represents their transformation in response to the realities of a changing international system.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the enduring influence of historical experiences on India's foreign policy identity. The anti-colonial struggle and the post-independence commitment to sovereignty, self-determination, and international justice continue to shape India's diplomatic discourse. During the Cold War, these principles found expression through the Non-Aligned Movement and South-South cooperation. In the contemporary period, similar values are evident in India's advocacy for global governance reform, climate justice, equitable development, and enhanced representation of developing countries in international institutions. This continuity suggests that historical identity remains an important factor influencing India's foreign policy behavior despite changing geopolitical circumstances (Pant & Super, 2015).

The study also reveals that the transition from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy was largely driven by structural changes in the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union, economic globalization, and the emergence of new centers of power reduced the effectiveness of traditional non-alignment as a foreign policy framework. In response, India adopted a more flexible strategy that enabled engagement with multiple actors while preserving policy independence. Strategic autonomy therefore emerged not as a rejection of earlier principles but as a pragmatic adaptation to a more complex and interconnected international environment (Ganguly, 2010).

Another important finding concerns India's growing role in the Global South. Historically, India's leadership among developing countries was primarily associated with anti-colonial solidarity and political cooperation. In the twenty-first century, however, leadership increasingly depends upon economic influence, technological capabilities, development partnerships, and institutional engagement. India's initiatives in areas such as digital public infrastructure, capacity building, renewable energy cooperation, and development assistance indicate an effort to redefine Global South leadership in practical and developmental terms. This shift reflects broader changes in international politics where influence is increasingly linked to the ability to provide solutions to shared challenges rather than merely articulate ideological positions (Mawdsley, 2018).

India's participation in institutions such as BRICS, the G20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Quad further illustrates the operational dimensions of strategic autonomy. These engagements demonstrate India's ability to cooperate simultaneously with diverse and sometimes competing actors. Rather than aligning exclusively with any particular bloc, India pursues issue-based partnerships that maximize diplomatic flexibility. Such behavior reflects the realities of multipolarity, where states increasingly seek diversified relationships to protect

national interests and reduce strategic vulnerabilities. The study therefore supports scholarly arguments that strategic autonomy has become the defining characteristic of contemporary Indian foreign policy (Pant, 2019).

The findings additionally highlight the importance of India's recent efforts to strengthen its relationship with the Global South. Initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit and support for the African Union's inclusion in the G20 demonstrate India's attempt to create platforms through which developing countries can influence global governance. These initiatives reflect a recognition that the legitimacy of international institutions increasingly depends on their ability to accommodate the interests and perspectives of a wider range of actors. India's advocacy for institutional reform thus serves both normative and strategic objectives, reinforcing its identity as a representative of developing nations while simultaneously enhancing its own international influence (Ranjan, 2026).

However, the analysis also reveals significant limitations and challenges. One of the most important is the growing competition for influence within the Global South. China's expanding economic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative and its increasing engagement with developing countries have altered the strategic landscape in which India operates. While India continues to enjoy considerable goodwill among many developing nations, it faces increasing competition from other emerging powers seeking leadership roles within the Global South. This reality complicates India's efforts to establish itself as the principal representative of developing countries (Mohan, 2022).

Furthermore, the diversity of interests within the Global South limits the possibility of unified political action. Developing countries differ significantly in terms of economic structures, political systems, security concerns, and foreign policy priorities. As a result, India's ability to represent the Global South is often constrained by competing regional and national interests. Leadership in such a heterogeneous environment requires continuous negotiation, consensus-building, and diplomatic flexibility. Consequently, India's role is perhaps better understood as that of a facilitator and coordinator rather than an unquestioned leader of the Global South (Mawdsley, 2018).

The study also suggests that India's growing engagement with major powers creates both opportunities and tensions. Strategic partnerships with the United States, participation in the Quad, and expanding economic ties with Western economies enhance India's international influence and contribute to its rise as a major power. At the same time, these relationships occasionally generate concerns among some developing countries regarding India's commitment to traditional Global South priorities. Balancing major-power engagement with Global South leadership therefore remains one of the central challenges of contemporary Indian foreign policy (Pant & Super, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the relevance of Constructivist and Postcolonial approaches in understanding Indian foreign policy. Constructivism highlights the enduring importance of identity, norms, and historical experiences, while Postcolonial perspectives emphasize the continuing influence of anti-colonial narratives and South-South solidarity. At the same time, realist considerations such as security concerns, economic interests, and geopolitical competition remain highly influential. The interaction of these factors demonstrates that Indian foreign policy cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical framework. Instead, it reflects a complex combination of normative commitments and strategic calculations (Wendt, 1999).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that India's evolving role within the Global South is closely linked to broader transformations in the international system. The shift from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy reflects adaptation to changing geopolitical realities while preserving the fundamental objective of strategic independence. Through multilateral engagement, development partnerships, and advocacy for global governance reform, India seeks to position itself as both a leading voice of the Global South and a major power within an emerging multipolar world order. The success of this strategy will depend on India's ability to balance competing interests, manage geopolitical challenges, and translate diplomatic aspirations into concrete outcomes for developing countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India occupies a unique position within the emerging multipolar world order. It is simultaneously a rising major power, a representative of developing nations, and an advocate of global governance reform. The transition from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy reflects India's capacity to adapt to changing international circumstances while preserving core principles of sovereignty and independent decision-making. Through multilateral engagement, development partnerships, and diplomatic activism, India has sought to strengthen its role within the Global South and contribute to the construction of a more inclusive international order. As global power continues to diffuse and demands for institutional reform intensify, India's importance in international politics is likely to increase further. The country's future influence, however, will depend on its ability to translate diplomatic aspirations into tangible outcomes for developing nations, manage geopolitical competition, sustain economic growth, and maintain credibility as a champion of Global South interests. If successful, India may play a decisive role in shaping the norms, institutions, and power structures of the emerging multipolar world. Its experience demonstrates that the pursuit of strategic autonomy and Global South leadership are not mutually exclusive objectives but complementary dimensions of a broader vision for a more balanced and representative international order.

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