







## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dr. M. D. Tarique Anwer <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Saroj Choudhary <sup>2</sup>, Dr. Dharmandra Kumar Neeraj <sup>3</sup>, Dr. Surendra Singh <sup>4</sup>, Dr. Chandra Prakash <sup>5</sup>, Dr. Shakil Ahmad <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Political Science, Department of Arts, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

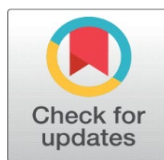
<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, ALS, Amity University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Political Science, Atma Ram Sanatan Dharma College, Dhaula Kuan, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

<sup>4</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Atma Ram Sanatan Dharma College, University of Delhi, Dhaula Kuan, New Delhi, India

<sup>5</sup> Assistant Professor, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

<sup>6</sup> Assistant Professor, Political Science, Department of Law, Aligarh Muslim University Centre Murshidabad, West Bengal, India



**Received** 26 March 2026

**Accepted** 28 April 2026

**Published** 18 May 2026

**Corresponding Author**

Dr. M. D. Tarique Anwer,  
[tarique.anwer@mangalayatan.edu.in](mailto:tarique.anwer@mangalayatan.edu.in)

**DOI**

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i7s.2026.8062](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i7s.2026.8062)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

### ABSTRACT

The dynamic interaction between continuity and change that characterizes India's foreign policy in the twenty-first century is influenced by shifting global power structures, changing economic objectives, and new security threats. There has been a discernible change in the tactics and approaches used, even though the fundamental ideas of its post-independence strategy—such as strategic autonomy, non-alignment (now reinterpreted), peaceful coexistence, and dedication to multilateralism—continue to direct its external engagements. Moving from classical non-alignment to a multi-alignment strategy, India has increasingly embraced a flexible and pragmatic approach, interacting concurrently with key global powers such as the United States, Russia, and regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific.

With increased trade ties and global economic integration bolstering India's international status, economic diplomacy has emerged as a key pillar. At the same time, a more forceful and proactive foreign policy posture has resulted from growing security concerns, especially those pertaining to regional instability and cross-border terrorism. This change is explained by theoretical stances like constructivism, liberalism, and realism, which emphasize the harmony of identity, cooperation, and power politics.

This study shows how India has successfully combined its traditional values with modern strategic needs, and it is backed by statistical measures such as trade growth, defence spending, and diplomatic outreach. In the end, India's foreign policy demonstrates a delicate balancing act to strengthen its position as an emerging global power—maintaining continuity while welcoming necessary change.

**Keywords:** Autonomy in Strategy, Global Power Dynamics, Economic Diplomacy, Assertive Foreign Policy, Multi-Alignment



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a dynamic and evolving instrument through which a nation interacts with the international system to safeguard its national interests, promote economic development, and ensure security. Since gaining independence in 1947, India's foreign policy has been shaped by a unique combination of historical experience, ideological orientation,

and geopolitical realities. Emerging from colonial rule, India initially adopted an approach rooted in idealism, emphasizing peace, cooperation, anti-colonial solidarity, and the principle of non-alignment. These guiding principles were closely associated with the vision of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, who sought to position India as a moral force in global politics.

However, the global environment in the 21st century has undergone profound transformation. The end of the Cold War, the acceleration of globalization, and the rise of new economic and military powers have reshaped international relations. In particular, the emergence of China as a major global competitor, the persistence of cross-border terrorism, and rapid technological advancements have created new challenges and opportunities for India. These developments have compelled India to recalibrate its foreign policy to better align with contemporary realities.

In this changing context, India's foreign policy has gradually transitioned from an idealist orientation to a more pragmatic and realist approach. While the earlier emphasis was on moral diplomacy and non-alignment, the present strategy reflects a focus on national interest, power balancing, and strategic partnerships. Yet, this shift does not imply a complete departure from earlier principles. Instead, there is a strong element of continuity in India's commitment to sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and the pursuit of independent decision-making in international matters.

One of the most significant developments in this regard is the transformation of the concept of non-alignment into what is now termed "strategic autonomy." Unlike the rigid non-alignment of the Cold War era, strategic autonomy allows India to engage flexibly with multiple global actors without being tied to any single alliance. This approach has enabled India to strengthen relations with diverse partners, including major powers and regional groupings, while maintaining its independence in foreign policy decisions. Decena (2026)

Furthermore, India's growing economic strength and global aspirations have led to a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy, regional cooperation, and participation in global governance institutions. Initiatives such as engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, neighbourhood diplomacy, and active involvement in multilateral forums illustrate India's expanding role on the world stage. At the same time, security concerns—particularly those related to border disputes and terrorism—have contributed to a more assertive foreign policy stance.

This research paper aims to explore the complex interplay between continuity and change in India's foreign policy in the 21st century. It seeks to analyze how India has managed to preserve its foundational ethos while adapting to new geopolitical challenges and opportunities. By examining both theoretical perspectives and practical developments, the study highlights the evolving nature of India's engagement with the international system and its aspiration to emerge as a significant global power.

## 1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary goals of this research are:

- 1) To look at the fundamental components of India's foreign policy continuity.
- 2) To examine how India's foreign policy has changed significantly in the twenty-first century.
- 3) To comprehend the theoretical framework that explains India's foreign policy actions.
- 4) To use statistical indicators to evaluate India's expanding global role.
- 5) To assess how these modifications may affect India's standing abroad.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to examine continuity and change in India's foreign policy in the twenty-first century, this study uses a mixed-methods research methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative techniques. A thorough grasp of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical aspects of policy reform is ensured by this integrated approach.

### 1) Analysis of Qualitative Data

Interpreting the concepts, tenets, and strategic objectives that underpin India's foreign policy is the main objective of the qualitative component. It entails a thorough analysis of public policy papers, government declarations, legislative speeches, and scholarly works. To comprehend changes in regional and international participation, important strategic frameworks such the Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, and Indo-Pacific Strategy are examined. In addition to

spotting shifts in diplomatic goals and style, this approach aids in tracking continuity in fundamental principles like strategic autonomy and non-interference. The research is further enhanced by scholarly papers and professional opinions that provide critical viewpoints on India's changing global role.

## **2) Analysis of Quantitative Data**

The study's quantitative component uses statistical data to corroborate and validate qualitative conclusions. To find patterns across time, information on trade volumes, defence spending, diplomatic visits, and international agreements is gathered and examined. For example, increased defence spending shows growing security concerns, while rising trade figures suggest tighter economic integration. In a similar vein, India's proactive international involvement is demonstrated by the regularity of high-level diplomatic visits and strategic alliances. Measurable proof of both continuity and change in foreign policy procedures is provided by this data-driven method.

## **3) Conceptual Model**

In order to understand India's foreign policy actions, the study is guided by important theories of international relations. India's emphasis on national interest, security, and power balance—particularly in light of regional challenges—is explained by realism. Liberalism places a strong emphasis on collaboration, economic interdependence, and involvement in global organizations. Constructivism emphasizes how identity, values, and past experiences influence policy choices. When combined, these theories offer a multifaceted framework for comprehending policy change and continuity.

## **4) Information Sources**

To guarantee accuracy and dependability, the study depends on reliable and authoritative sources. These include official publications from the Ministry of External Affairs, defence and security data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and databases and studies from the World Bank. Peer-reviewed journals, economic surveys, and government reports provide more information.

All things considered, this approach allows for a methodical and fair examination of India's foreign policy by fusing empirical data with theoretical understanding.

# **3. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

## **3.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

India's foreign policy in the 21st century can be best understood through a multi-theoretical lens that incorporates realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Each of these perspectives highlights different dimensions of India's external behavior and together they provide a comprehensive explanation of both continuity and change.

### **1) Realism**

Realism emphasizes the primacy of national interest, power, and security in international relations. In the contemporary global order, India has increasingly adopted realist strategies to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The rise of China, regional instability, and persistent security threats have compelled India to strengthen its strategic and military capabilities.

One of the key manifestations of realism is India's growing defense preparedness, reflected in increased military expenditure, modernization of armed forces, and development of indigenous defense technologies. Additionally, India has pursued strategic partnerships with major global powers such as the United States, Russia, and France to enhance its security architecture. These partnerships are not alliance-based but are driven by pragmatic considerations of mutual benefit.

Another important aspect is India's effort to counterbalance China's growing influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Participation in strategic groupings like the Quad and strengthening maritime security cooperation illustrate India's realist approach to maintaining regional balance of power. Thus, realism explains India's shift toward a more assertive and security-oriented foreign policy.

### **2) Liberalism**

While realism explains the security dimension, liberalism highlights India's commitment to cooperation, economic interdependence, and institutional engagement. India has actively participated in global institutions such as the United

Nations, World Trade Organization, BRICS, and G20. These platforms allow India to engage in global governance and influence international decision-making processes.

Economic diplomacy has become a cornerstone of India's foreign policy. The expansion of trade relations, foreign investment, and participation in global value chains reflects India's integration into the global economy. Trade agreements and economic partnerships with various countries demonstrate the importance of interdependence in shaping foreign policy choices.

Furthermore, India has taken an active role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, and public health. Its leadership in climate diplomacy, including commitments under international agreements, underscores a cooperative approach consistent with liberal principles. Thus, liberalism explains India's emphasis on collaboration and mutual benefit in international relations.

### 3) Constructivism

Constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, identity, values, and norms in shaping foreign policy. India's foreign policy is deeply influenced by its civilizational heritage, democratic values, and historical experiences. India projects itself as a responsible and peace-loving democracy, which enhances its global image and credibility.

Soft power plays a significant role in this context. India promotes its cultural heritage, including yoga, traditional practices, and a vibrant diaspora network, as tools of diplomacy. These elements contribute to building goodwill and strengthening international relationships beyond material power.

Moreover, India has consistently advocated for the interests of the Global South, positioning itself as a voice for developing countries. This identity-driven approach reflects constructivist principles, where norms and values shape foreign policy behavior. India's emphasis on inclusivity, equity, and reform in global governance institutions further reinforces this perspective.

## 3.2. CONTINUITY IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Despite significant transformations, several core elements of India's foreign policy have remained consistent over time. These continuities reflect the enduring principles that have guided India's external engagements since independence.

One of the most important aspects is **strategic autonomy**, which allows India to maintain independence in decision-making and avoid alignment with any single power bloc. This principle, rooted in the earlier policy of non-alignment, continues to shape India's interactions with global powers.

Another key element is the commitment to **peaceful coexistence**. India has traditionally emphasized diplomacy, dialogue, and negotiation as primary tools for conflict resolution. Even in situations of tension, India prefers peaceful means over military confrontation, reflecting continuity in its normative approach.

India also continues to support **multilateralism**, actively participating in international organizations and forums. Its engagement with global institutions demonstrates a commitment to collective problem-solving and international cooperation.

Finally, there is a sustained focus on **development-oriented foreign policy**. India's external relations are closely linked to its domestic economic goals, including trade expansion, investment, and technological advancement. This alignment between foreign policy and development priorities remains a constant feature.

## 3.3. CHANGE IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Alongside continuity, India's foreign policy has undergone significant changes in response to evolving global dynamics. One of the most notable shifts is the transition from traditional non-alignment to multi-alignment. Instead of maintaining distance from power blocs, India now engages with multiple partners simultaneously, maximizing its strategic options.

There has also been increased engagement with the United States and Indo-Pacific alliances, reflecting a shift toward strategic cooperation in response to regional challenges. This marks a departure from earlier hesitations about close alignment with major powers.

India has adopted a more assertive stance on security issues, particularly in dealing with cross-border terrorism and border disputes. This assertiveness indicates a stronger willingness to use power to protect national interests.

Another major change is the expansion of economic diplomacy. Trade agreements, investment partnerships, and participation in global markets have become central to India’s foreign policy. Economic considerations now play a more prominent role than in earlier decades.

Finally, India has assumed a more proactive role in regional and global leadership. Initiatives such as neighbourhood engagement, development partnerships, and humanitarian assistance highlight India’s growing influence and responsibility in international affairs.

Overall, India’s foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a complex synthesis of continuity and change. While foundational principles remain intact, evolving strategies and priorities demonstrate India’s adaptation to a rapidly changing global environment.

### 3.4. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

**Table 1**

Table 1 India’s Trade Growth (2000–2023)	
Year	Total Trade (USD Billion)
2000	95
2010	500
2020	800
2023	1200+

#### 1) Interpretation

India's trade growth signifies enhanced global connectivity and economic diplomacy, signifying a transition towards liberal economic involvement.

**Table 2**

Table 2 Defense Expenditure (2010–2023)	
Year	Defense Spending (USD Billion)
2010	36
2015	51
2020	72
2023	81

#### 2) Interpretation

Rising defense spending highlights India’s realist approach to security and regional power balancing.

**Table 3**

Table 3 Strategic Partnerships	
Country/Group	Nature of Partnership
USA	Strategic, Defense, Technology
Russia	Defense and Energy
Japan	Infrastructure, Indo-Pacific
ASEAN	Economic and Regional Cooperation
QUAD	Security and Strategic Dialogue

#### 3) Interpretation

India’s engagement with diverse partners reflects a multi-alignment strategy, moving beyond traditional non-alignment.

**Table 4**

<b>Table 4 Diplomatic Outreach (High-Level Visits)</b>	
<b>Period</b>	<b>Number of Visits</b>
2000–2010	Moderate
2010–2020	High
2020–2023	Very High

#### 4) Interpretation

Increased diplomatic activity indicates a proactive and globalized foreign policy approach.

### 3.5. KEY POLICY INITIATIVES

India's 21st-century foreign policy is exemplified by numerous significant efforts that illustrate its strategic aims and global aspirations.

The Act East Policy emphasizes the enhancement of economic, strategic, and cultural relations with Southeast Asian nations. It builds upon previous engagement strategies and underscores connectivity, trade expansion, and security collaboration with the ASEAN area, hence augmenting India's role within the broader Asia-Pacific framework.

The Neighbourhood First Policy underscores India's dedication to cultivating robust and collaborative partnerships with its neighbouring countries in South Asia. It emphasises regional stability, developmental collaborations, and humanitarian aid, with the objective of fostering trust and reciprocal advancement within the region.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy signifies India's reaction to changing regional dynamics, especially the ascendance of China. It underscores a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific area, advocating for marine security, freedom of navigation, and strategic alliances with like-minded nations.

Ultimately, Vaccine Diplomacy surfaced as a pivotal endeavour during the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein India sent vaccines and medical aid to many nations. This initiative bolstered India's reputation as a responsible global actor and enhanced its humanitarian and soft power credentials.

Collectively, these activities exemplify India's proactive, balanced, and comprehensive approach to foreign policy.

### 4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research encounters multiple limitations. Initially, data limitations arise from restricted access to secret diplomatic and defence material, thereby hindering thorough research. Secondly, the fluidity of foreign policy renders conclusions temporal, as governments adapt to shifting global circumstances. The study predominantly depends on secondary sources, potentially introducing interpretative biases or varying scholarly viewpoints. Ultimately, quantitative statistics, although beneficial for recognising trends, may inadequately include the qualitative subtleties of diplomatic interactions, negotiations, and strategic decision-making. These constraints must be acknowledged when interpreting the study's findings and conclusions.

### 5. CONCLUSION

India's foreign policy in the 21st century represents a nuanced blend of continuity and transformation, shaped by both enduring principles and emerging global realities. The persistence of foundational ideals such as strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, and commitment to multilateralism highlights the deep-rooted philosophical and historical influences that continue to guide India's external engagements. These principles, inherited from the post-independence era and associated with leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, remain central to India's diplomatic identity.

At the same time, significant changes in the international system have necessitated a shift in approach. India's transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment reflects a pragmatic adaptation to a multipolar world. By engaging simultaneously with diverse global actors, including major powers such as the United States and regional partners in the Indo-Pacific, India has enhanced its strategic flexibility and global influence. Increased economic engagement, expansion of trade relations, and active participation in global governance institutions further demonstrate this evolving outlook.

Moreover, India's more assertive stance on security issues, particularly in response to regional challenges and the rise of China, underscores the growing importance of realism in its foreign policy. At the same time, its continued emphasis on cooperation, development, and soft power reflects liberal and constructivist elements. This integration of multiple theoretical approaches has enabled India to maintain a balanced and adaptive foreign policy framework.

As India aspires to emerge as a leading global power, its foreign policy is likely to continue evolving in response to new challenges and opportunities. However, the enduring commitment to its core values, combined with increasing strategic innovation and flexibility, will remain the defining feature of India's engagement with the international system.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Baru, S. (2014). *Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation.
- Basrur, R. (2017). *India's Nuclear Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Decena, M. C. (2026). Bridging Policy and People: A Qualitative Study on Public Trust in Government Institutions., *ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies.*, 3(1), 7-11. <https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v3.i1.2026.64>
- Ganguly, S. (2010). *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, I. (2019). *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Malone, D. M. (2011). *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2023). *Annual Report 2022–23*. Government of India.
- Mohan, C. R. (2015). *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Muni, S. D. (2012). *India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pant, H. V. (Ed.). (2016). *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Saran, S. (2017). *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*. New Delhi: Juggernaut Books.
- Sikri, R. (2009). *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Singh, Y. P. (2009). Geoeffectiveness of magnetic cloud, shock/sheath, interaction region, high-speed stream and their combined occurrence. *Planetary and Space Science*, 57(3), 318-331.
- Singh, Y. P. (2017). Short-and mid-term oscillations of solar, geomagnetic activity and cosmic-ray intensity during the last two solar magnetic cycles. *Planetary and Space Science*, 138, 1-6.
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (2023). *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*. Stockholm: SIPRI.
- Sundaram, R., Sharma, D. R., & Shakya, D. A. (2020). Power of digital marketing in building brands: A review of social media advertisement. *International Journal of Management*, 11(4).
- Tellis, A. J. (2016). *India as a Leading Power*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Tharoor, S. (2012). *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- World Bank. (2023). *World Development Indicators*. Washington, DC: World Bank.