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From Strategic Autonomy to Global Leadership: India's Evolving Role in the Emerging Multipolar World Order

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is undergoing significant changes characterised by the diffusion of economic influence, geopolitical competition and demands for more representative global governance. Within this evolving environment, India has pursued a foreign policy combining strategic autonomy, diversified partnerships and active participation in multilateral institutions. This article examines the evolution of India's international role and the relationship between its traditional commitment to independent decision-making and its growing engagement in global governance.

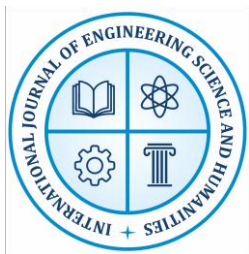
Employing historical, descriptive, comparative and analytical research methods, the study draws upon official diplomatic documents, international institutional reports and relevant scholarly literature. It investigates seven interconnected dimensions: the historical foundations of strategic autonomy, India's relations with major powers, its participation in multilateral institutions, its engagement with the Global South, economic and technological diplomacy, security cooperation and the structural limitations affecting its international influence.

The analysis identifies continuity between India's earlier foreign-policy principles and its contemporary practice of maintaining multiple international partnerships. Its G20 presidency, participation in BRICS and the Quad, development cooperation initiatives and advocacy of multilateral reform demonstrate an increasingly diversified diplomatic agenda. However, these activities do not establish that India has achieved comprehensive global leadership. Its influence remains conditioned by economic capabilities, regional security concerns, institutional constraints and differences among its international partners.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, Indian Foreign Policy, Multipolarity, Global Governance, BRICS, G20, Global South, Multi-alignment, Indo-Pacific, Multilateralism.

Introduction

The international order established after the Second World War has experienced substantial transformation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union initially strengthened American predominance, while the subsequent economic expansion of China and other emerging economies increased the geographical distribution of international economic power.



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Technological competition, climate change, geopolitical conflicts and disagreements concerning international institutions have further complicated contemporary global governance.

Within this changing environment, India has developed an increasingly diversified network of diplomatic, economic and security relationships. Its historical commitment to non-alignment has evolved into a contemporary approach that emphasises strategic autonomy while permitting cooperation with countries whose interests do not always coincide.

India's Ministry of External Affairs, in its 2022 annual report, “identified strategic autonomy, multilateral institutional reform, the priorities of developing countries and diversified international partnerships as important elements of its foreign-policy approach.”¹

India's activities during its 2023 G20 presidency and its subsequent participation in expanded BRICS arrangements illustrate the widening institutional scope of its international engagement. Nevertheless, greater participation does not necessarily imply a corresponding increase in the capacity to determine international outcomes.

The central research problem is therefore whether India's expanding diplomatic activities constitute a substantive transformation of its international role or primarily represent adaptations of its established foreign-policy principles.

This article examines that question through developments between India's economic liberalisation in 1991 and September 2023, with particular attention to its participation in international institutions, relations with major powers and engagement with developing countries.

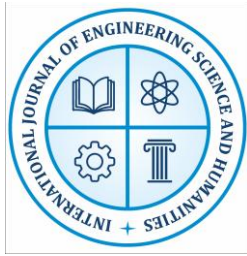
1. Historical Foundations: From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

India's contemporary foreign policy has historical foundations in its post-independence commitment to independent international decision-making. During the Cold War, non-alignment provided a framework for maintaining diplomatic relationships without formally joining either of the principal military blocs.

Non-alignment did not imply equal political distance from every international power. India's relationships changed according to regional circumstances, security requirements and economic interests. Its cooperation with the Soviet Union and simultaneous engagement with Western countries illustrate the flexibility that existed within this approach.

The end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalisation in 1991 altered its international priorities. Economic integration, foreign investment and technological cooperation assumed greater importance, while the transformation of the international system created opportunities for wider diplomatic engagement.

Scholars of Indian foreign policy distinguish contemporary strategic autonomy from traditional non-alignment by emphasising its broader application to economic, technological and security



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decisions. Strategic autonomy concerns a state's capacity to retain independent choices rather than its refusal to participate in international partnerships.

David Malone's historical examination of Indian foreign policy provides a “framework for understanding the interaction between India's international aspirations, regional priorities and material capabilities.”²²

This distinction is important because India's contemporary participation in multiple international arrangements represents neither complete alignment nor diplomatic isolation. It demonstrates how strategic autonomy can coexist with substantial cooperation across different international institutions.

2. Multi-Alignment and Relations with Major Powers

India's relationships with the United States, Russia, China, Japan and European countries illustrate the practical complexities of strategic autonomy.

Cooperation with the United States has expanded across technology, trade, maritime security and the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India has retained its long-standing relationship with Russia, particularly in defence, energy and scientific cooperation.

The joint statement following the December 2023 India–Russia annual summit reaffirmed cooperation across defence, energy, trade, nuclear technology and other sectors.”²³

India's relationship with China presents different considerations. Both countries participate in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, while also experiencing bilateral disagreements concerning their disputed boundary and regional security.

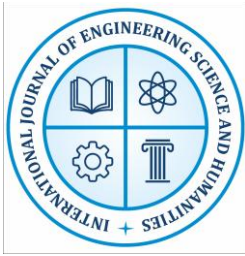
These relationships demonstrate that international partnerships do not necessarily require identical strategic interests. Cooperation may occur within particular institutional frameworks while disagreements persist elsewhere.

Multi-alignment provides diplomatic flexibility, but it also introduces potential tensions. Economic or security disagreements between India's partners can create competing expectations concerning its international conduct.

The concept should therefore be understood as a practical approach to managing diverse interests rather than evidence that India can always reconcile differences among major powers.

3. India's Participation in G20 and BRICS: Institutional Dimensions of Leadership

India's participation in the G20 and BRICS demonstrates how emerging economies can influence international discussions through institutional engagement. These organisations offer different opportunities: the G20 concentrates primarily on international economic cooperation, whereas BRICS encompasses political, financial and development-related coordination among participating emerging economies.



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During India's 2023 G20 presidency, the “New Delhi Leaders' Declaration was adopted by consensus despite substantial disagreements among participating governments concerning international conflicts. The African Union was also admitted as a permanent G20 member.”⁴

These developments provide concrete examples of India's participation in multilateral agenda-setting. However, institutional decisions reflect negotiations among multiple governments, making it inappropriate to attribute their outcomes exclusively to the country holding the presidency.

India's participation in BRICS offers another dimension of its international engagement. “The July 2023 Rio de Janeiro Declaration emphasised greater representation for developing economies, institutional reform and stronger South–South cooperation.”⁵

More recently, the September 2023 New Delhi BRICS Declaration reaffirmed support for “reforms to the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, while identifying innovation, resilience and sustainable development as areas of cooperation.”⁶

These initiatives demonstrate overlapping institutional interests. Nevertheless, the diversity of BRICS membership complicates collective action. Different economic structures, security priorities and bilateral disagreements influence its capacity to implement common commitments. India's institutional influence must therefore be examined through both its contribution to negotiated declarations and the subsequent implementation of agreed measures.

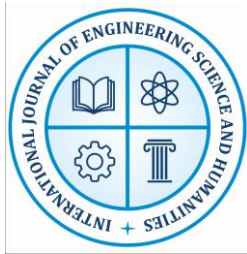
4. India's Engagement with the Global South and Development Diplomacy

India's engagement with developing countries constitutes an important component of its contemporary diplomatic agenda. Its development partnerships emphasise capacity-building, technical assistance, education and cooperation in areas such as healthcare and digital technology.

In January 2023, India organised its first Voice of Global South Summit, bringing together representatives from 125 countries. “The initiative provided a platform for discussing development finance, food security, energy security and other concerns affecting developing economies.”⁷

India subsequently organised additional summits, including the third meeting in August 2022. These initiatives sought to maintain dialogue on “development priorities and connect them with wider international institutional discussions.”⁸

The principal analytical distinction concerns representation. Hosting a diplomatic forum demonstrates a country's willingness to organise international cooperation, but participation does not necessarily indicate that every country endorses the host government's broader international positions.



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Developing countries differ considerably in their economic structures, political interests and security priorities. Consequently, the Global South cannot be treated as a politically homogeneous group.

India's development diplomacy provides opportunities for cooperation, particularly where participating countries identify common institutional or economic interests. Its longer-term influence depends on the implementation of development initiatives and the extent to which partner countries consider them responsive to their own priorities.

5. Economic Diplomacy, Digital Infrastructure and Development Cooperation

Economic capacity influences a country's ability to sustain international commitments. Trade, investment, financial stability and technological capabilities affect the resources available for diplomacy and development partnerships.

The International Monetary Fund reported that India's economy grew by 6.5% during financial year 2022–25 and expanded by 7.8% in the first quarter of 2023–26. “The institution nevertheless identified external economic uncertainties and structural reforms as relevant considerations for future growth.”⁹

India's international economic relationships include bilateral trade agreements and cooperation in infrastructure, technology and energy. “Its Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with the United Arab Emirates, which entered into force in May 2022, provides an example of its expanding commercial engagement with West Asia.”¹⁰

Digital public infrastructure constitutes another area of international cooperation. “During India's G20 presidency, participating governments reached agreement on a framework for digital public infrastructure, with technical contributions from the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme.”¹¹

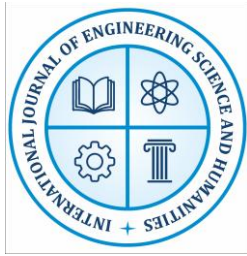
India's experience with large-scale digital systems has consequently become relevant to international discussions concerning financial inclusion and public-service delivery.

Nevertheless, “digital infrastructure also presents governance challenges. Researchers have identified privacy, accessibility and unequal access to technology as considerations that can determine whether digital systems produce inclusive development outcomes.”¹²

India's international economic influence thus depends not only on economic growth or technological innovation, but also on the capacity to translate domestic experience into internationally adaptable forms of cooperation.

6. Security Cooperation and India's Indo-Pacific Engagement

The Indo-Pacific has become an important geographical framework for India's maritime and security diplomacy. Its commercial dependence on international shipping makes maritime stability relevant to economic as well as national-security interests.



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India participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue alongside Australia, Japan and the United States. The Quad is a diplomatic partnership rather than a collective-defence treaty.

In July 2023, “the four countries’ foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation concerning maritime security, economic resilience and the maintenance of an open Indo-Pacific.”¹³

Participation in the Quad illustrates India’s willingness to develop issue-specific partnerships without abandoning other institutional relationships, including BRICS.

However, India’s Indo-Pacific engagement exists alongside its bilateral security concerns and disagreements with China. These different relationships demonstrate the interaction between regional competition and wider multilateral cooperation.

India’s security partnerships therefore represent one dimension of its diversified foreign policy rather than a complete replacement of strategic autonomy.

7. Structural Constraints and the Prospects for Global Leadership

India’s expanding diplomatic participation raises questions about the distinction between international visibility and sustained institutional influence.

The United Nations Security Council provides an important example. India has consistently advocated institutional reform and greater representation for developing countries. Nevertheless, changes to the Council’s composition require agreement through established United Nations procedures.

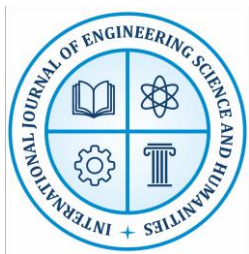
In April 2023, “the chair of the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform reported continuing discussions concerning more representative membership and institutional effectiveness.”¹⁴

India’s ability to influence these negotiations depends partly on the positions of other governments, including existing permanent members. A country’s economic size or diplomatic activity does not automatically produce institutional reform.

Additional constraints arise from regional security disputes, economic inequalities, technological dependencies and competing priorities among international partners.

The International Monetary Fund’s country assessment also demonstrates that “economic expansion exists alongside continuing requirements for structural reform and resilience against external economic shocks.”¹⁵

The distinction between diplomatic leadership and global leadership is therefore analytically significant. India has demonstrated the capacity to organise international initiatives, participate in institutional negotiations and contribute to development cooperation. Whether these activities produce sustained changes in international governance remains a separate empirical question.



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Conclusion

India's evolving international role reflects both continuity and change in its foreign-policy traditions. Strategic autonomy remains central to its approach, while diversified economic, diplomatic and security partnerships have expanded the geographical and institutional scope of its engagement. Participation in the G20, BRICS and the Quad illustrates the different ways in which India pursues cooperation amid changing geopolitical circumstances.

The study identifies three principal findings. First, strategic autonomy and international leadership are not mutually exclusive: independent decision-making can coexist with institutional participation and negotiated cooperation. Second, India's engagement with developing countries and its contribution to multilateral initiatives have expanded its opportunities to influence international agendas. Third, the translation of diplomatic initiatives into sustained influence remains dependent on economic capabilities, institutional arrangements and the interests of other countries.

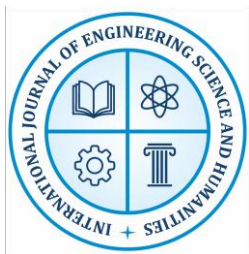
The study also identifies important limitations. Regional security challenges, technological dependencies, competing international partnerships and disagreements concerning institutional reform complicate India's diplomatic objectives. Moreover, hosting international summits or contributing to joint declarations does not independently establish sustained global leadership.

The emerging multipolar order therefore presents India with both opportunities for wider participation and challenges associated with increasingly complex international relationships. Its evolving role is best understood through the interaction of strategic autonomy, economic capabilities and selective institutional leadership.

Further research should examine the implementation of India's multilateral initiatives, their reception among participating countries and their measurable contribution to international governance.

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