EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE SAFETY AND STABILITY (EJLSS)
ISSN2660-9630
www.ejlss.indexedresearch.org Volume 55, 2025 ||



Foreign Policy Determinants of India in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract: *India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has undergone a remarkable transformation, driven by a complex interplay of structural, domestic, and ideational forces. This paper examines the principal determinants of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War era (1991–present), focusing on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing unipolar moment, the imperatives of economic liberalization, strategic autonomy as a core doctrinal preference, regional security dynamics in South Asia, the rise of Hindutva nationalism as an ideological variable, energy security considerations, and the evolving global multipolar order. Drawing upon realist, constructivist, and liberal institutionalist frameworks, the paper argues that Indian foreign policy is shaped by a layered hierarchy of drivers in which geopolitical realism provides the outer shell, economic pragmatism furnishes the connective tissue, and civilizational identity increasingly supplies the normative core. The paper concludes that India's trajectory as a rising power will continue to be defined by its pursuit of strategic autonomy within a framework of selective multilateral engagement.*

Keywords: *Indian foreign policy, strategic autonomy, post-Cold War, South Asia, non-alignment, emerging powers, liberalization, Hindutva, multipolarity.*

Date of Submission: 20-09-2025 ***Date of Acceptance: 30-10-2025***

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 constituted a seismic rupture in the architecture of international relations, one that reverberated with particular intensity in New Delhi. India had long structured its foreign policy within the framework of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a doctrine that afforded it maneuverability between the two superpowers while preserving what Nehru famously termed "strategic autonomy." The abrupt disappearance of one superpower deprived India of its primary strategic patron and threw into sharp relief the inadequacies of its command economy. Simultaneously, the coincidence of a severe balance-of-payments crisis in 1991 forced upon the Indian state a wholesale restructuring of its economic model. From this double shock—strategic and economic—emerged a reconfigured foreign policy architecture that has evolved continuously over three decades yet retained certain axial continuities.

Scholarly debates on the determinants of Indian foreign policy have tended to cluster around competing theoretical lenses. Realists such as C. Raja Mohan emphasize material capabilities, the imperatives of the balance of power, and the primacy of national interest defined in terms of security and territorial integrity (Mohan 45–67). Constructivists like Itty Abraham and Kanti Bajpai foreground the role of identity, colonial memory, and Nehruvian idealism in shaping India's self-perception and its behavioral dispositions in the international arena (Bajpai 12–30; Abraham 88–

110). Liberal institutionalists point to the embedding of India within international regimes and its growing stake in a rule-based multilateral order (Pant 55–78). This paper advances a synthetic account, arguing that no single framework captures the full complexity of Indian foreign policy, which is best understood as the product of layered and sometimes contradictory imperatives operating simultaneously.

The paper is organized as follows. It begins with an examination of the structural transformation catalyzed by the end of the Cold War, followed by an analysis of economic liberalization as a foreign policy driver. It then turns to the persistence of strategic autonomy as doctrine, the dynamics of regional security in South Asia, the ideological variable of Hindutva nationalism, energy security imperatives, and the emerging multipolar context. The conclusion synthesizes the argument and reflects on India's trajectory as a rising power.

The Structural Shock of the Cold War's End

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered the structural context within which Indian foreign policy had been formulated since independence. For nearly four decades, New Delhi had leveraged the bipolar competition between Washington and Moscow to extract diplomatic capital, economic assistance, and military hardware from both camps while nominally remaining non-aligned. The Soviet Union had been India's most reliable strategic partner, providing advanced weaponry, supporting India in United Nations Security Council deliberations over Kashmir, and underwriting key infrastructure projects. The disappearance of this patron created what scholars have characterized as a "strategic vacuum" in Indian security planning (Pant 22).

India's initial response was disorientation. The foreign policy establishment, accustomed to Cold War coordinates, was ill-equipped for the unipolar moment. The early 1990s were characterized by a notable hesitancy and a search for new anchors. Under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, India began a cautious reorientation toward the United States—a process that was simultaneously accelerated and complicated by Washington's growing strategic interest in Pakistan as a counterterrorism partner following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The nuclear tests of 1998 under the Bharatiya Janata Party government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee represented in part a declaration that India would not be constrained by the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, signaling the limits of its accommodation with the post-Cold War order (Ganguly 134–156).

The structural shift also elevated China to unprecedented salience in India's strategic calculus. China's rapid economic ascent and military modernization, combined with its longstanding boundary dispute with India and its deepening alliance with Pakistan, constituted a structural challenge that no Indian government could ignore. The post-Cold War era thus saw a progressive "Sinicization" of Indian security thinking, whereby China rather than Pakistan became the principal long-term strategic concern (Tellis 78–102). This structural reorientation continues to define the strategic landscape, most acutely evidenced by the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 and the subsequent deterioration of bilateral relations.

Economic Liberalization as a Foreign Policy Driver

The economic reforms initiated under Finance Minister Manmohan Singh in 1991 were not merely a domestic adjustment program; they constituted a foreign policy revolution by other means. The shift from import-substitution industrialization to export-led growth and the opening of the Indian economy to foreign direct investment necessitated a recalibration of external relations. Trade and investment flows became foreign policy instruments in their own right, and diplomatic relationships were increasingly evaluated through an economic prism (Saran 45–67).

The "Look East" policy, launched by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992 and subsequently deepened into the "Act East" policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, exemplifies the

economization of Indian foreign policy. Recognizing the dynamism of Southeast Asian economies and the strategic importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework, India systematically cultivated bilateral and multilateral trade and investment relationships across the region (Mohan 89–112). The policy was simultaneously strategic—serving to counterbalance China's dominance in Southeast Asia—and economic, linking India's northeastern hinterland to regional value chains.

The broader imperative of attracting foreign investment has shaped India's diplomatic priorities in significant ways. Relationships with major capital-exporting economies—the United States, Japan, Germany, the Gulf Cooperation Council states—have been assiduously cultivated. The diaspora has become a foreign policy asset, with the Non-Resident Indian community functioning as a bridge between India and host economies and as a source of remittances that consistently exceed official development assistance inflows. Under Modi, diaspora diplomacy was institutionalized through high-profile outreach events in Madison Square Garden and Wembley Stadium, blurring the line between state diplomacy and civilizational branding (Hall 234–258).

Economic interdependence has also created tensions within India's foreign policy posture. The dependence on Chinese manufactured goods, the reliance on Gulf remittances, and the integration with global financial markets all constrain the range of feasible foreign policy options. The paradox of India's economic liberalization is that it has simultaneously enhanced India's power resources and created new vulnerabilities, producing a more complex and sometimes contradictory foreign policy calculus.

Strategic Autonomy: Continuity Amid Change

Perhaps the most durable continuity in Indian foreign policy across the post-Cold War decades is the commitment to strategic autonomy—the determination to preserve the freedom of maneuver in international affairs and to resist incorporation into any alliance system that would constrain India's independent judgment. This doctrine has deep roots in the Nehruvian tradition and in the anti-colonial experience that made India viscerally suspicious of great power tutelage (Bajpai 15–28).

Strategic autonomy has found expression in a series of policy choices that sometimes puzzle Western analysts. India's refusal to join the Quad as a formal alliance, its abstention on United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its maintenance of defense procurement relationships with both Russia and the United States, and its simultaneous participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the U.S.-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative all reflect a deliberate hedging strategy (Miller 67–89). India has been characterized as a "swing state" whose alignment choices will shape the emerging international order, and Indian policymakers have been acutely conscious of and have deliberately cultivated this pivotal position.

The concept has evolved, however. Under Modi, strategic autonomy has been rebranded as "strategic partnership" diplomacy, with India cultivating a dense network of bilateral partnerships—comprehensive, strategic, or global—with virtually every major power. Critics argue that the proliferation of such partnerships dilutes their content and that the pursuit of strategic autonomy risks becoming a form of strategic ambiguity that leaves India without dependable allies in a crisis (Pant 99–122). Proponents counter that in an era of multipolarity and institutional flux, the flexibility afforded by strategic autonomy is a genuine asset.

Regional Security Dynamics in South Asia

South Asia remains the crucible within which Indian foreign policy is forged at its most elemental level. The relationship with Pakistan constitutes the oldest and most intractable of India's foreign policy challenges, rooted in the trauma of Partition, three full-scale wars, and an enduring competition for influence in Afghanistan and across the Indian Ocean littoral. The nuclearization of

the subcontinent following the 1998 tests by both India and Pakistan fundamentally altered the regional security dynamic, making large-scale conventional war less likely while simultaneously creating new risks of nuclear miscalculation (Ganguly 167–189).

India's post-Cold War approach to Pakistan has oscillated between dialogue and coercive deterrence. The Lahore Declaration of 1999, brokered between Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif, represented the high-water mark of bilateral normalization, interrupted almost immediately by the Kargil incursion. Subsequent peace processes under Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh similarly foundered on the rocks of cross-border terrorism, culminating in the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, which effectively froze the composite dialogue process for years. Under Modi, India shifted toward a more explicitly coercive posture, launching surgical strikes after the 2016 Uri attack and air strikes in Balakot following the 2019 Pulwama attack, signaling a willingness to recalibrate the threshold of military response below the nuclear level (Saran 112–134).

India's relationship with China represents the second and increasingly dominant regional security challenge. The 1962 Sino-Indian War left deep psychological imprints on the Indian strategic community, and the subsequent failure to resolve the boundary dispute—despite decades of diplomatic engagement—has maintained a low-level but persistent tension along the Line of Actual Control. China's investments in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, its development of port facilities in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar under the rubric of the Maritime Silk Road, and its growing influence in Nepal and the Maldives have been perceived in New Delhi as a systematic encirclement strategy, prompting India to deepen its security relationships with the United States, Japan, and Australia (Tellis 112–134).

India's relationships with smaller neighbors—Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives—have been shaped by a combination of developmental largesse, security imperatives, and historical grievances. The post-Cold War period has seen a gradual Sinization of South Asian geopolitics as China has leveraged its economic weight to penetrate India's traditional sphere of influence, forcing New Delhi to compete through connectivity projects, concessional financing, and cultural diplomacy. The Neighborhood First policy enunciated by Modi in 2014 represented an attempt to reinvigorate India's engagement with its immediate periphery, though outcomes have been mixed (Hall 189–211).

Hindutva Nationalism and the Ideological Variable

The rise of Hindu nationalist ideology as a governing doctrine under the Bharatiya Janata Party governments of Vajpayee (1999–2004) and Modi (2014–present) has introduced a new ideological variable into Indian foreign policy analysis. Hindutva, as articulated by thinkers from V. D. Savarkar to M. S. Golwalkar, posits the Indian nation in civilizational terms, locating its authentic identity in a Hindu cultural matrix and viewing the partition of the subcontinent as an unnatural amputation to be spiritually if not politically reversed (Bajpai 78–99).

The foreign policy implications of Hindutva governance are multiple and contested. At the level of branding, Modi has consistently deployed civilizational motifs—yoga diplomacy, Buddhist circuit tourism, the invocation of India as Vishwaguru or world teacher—to project a distinctive civilizational identity on the global stage. This soft power strategy has been deployed most intensively in Southeast Asia, where Hindu and Buddhist cultural heritage provides a natural bridge, and among the global Indian diaspora, for whom Hindu cultural identity represents a powerful emotional bond (Hall 255–278).

At the level of policy substance, the ideological variable has manifested most acutely in India's relationship with the Muslim world. The revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 in 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and periodic communal tensions within

India have created strains in India's relationships with Gulf states, Turkey, Malaysia, and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, however, have largely prioritized economic and strategic interests over solidarity with Indian Muslims, investing heavily in India and conferring prestigious awards on Prime Minister Modi. The pragmatic response of Gulf states to Hindutva governance illustrates the general proposition that foreign policy determinants are invariably multiple and that ideological signaling is constrained by material interests (Saran 156–178).

Energy Security and Resource Diplomacy

India's rapid economic growth since the early 1990s has generated an insatiable appetite for energy, making energy security one of the most consequential determinants of its foreign policy. India is the third-largest oil consumer in the world and is critically dependent on imported hydrocarbons, the bulk of which originate in the Persian Gulf. This energy dependence has historically constrained India's capacity to act against Gulf state interests and explains some of the tension between India's commitment to human rights norms and its maintenance of close relationships with authoritarian energy exporters (Pant 134–156).

India's energy diplomacy in the post-Cold War era has been characterized by geographic diversification and by the deployment of state-owned enterprises as instruments of energy acquisition. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Limited has made equity investments in oil fields across Russia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. The pursuit of Iranian oil has periodically brought India into conflict with American sanctions policy, most acutely during the period of maximum pressure on Iran under the Trump administration when India was forced to significantly reduce its Iranian imports. The resolution of this tension through a sanctions waiver illustrates the degree to which energy imperatives can override other foreign policy considerations (Mohan 134–156).

Natural gas is an emerging dimension of India's energy diplomacy. India's ambition to expand the share of natural gas in its energy mix requires the development of transnational pipeline infrastructure—a geopolitically fraught endeavor in a region characterized by territorial disputes and political instability. Proposed pipeline projects from Iran, Turkmenistan, and Myanmar have made limited progress, underscoring the structural impediments to India's energy connectivity ambitions. The alternative—importing liquefied natural gas from Australia, Qatar, and the United States—is commercially viable but lacks the strategic dimension of pipeline interdependence that has bound European states to their gas suppliers.

The Emerging Multipolar Order and India's Strategic Positioning

The progressive erosion of American unipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar international order has created both opportunities and challenges for Indian foreign policy. The rise of China as a peer competitor of the United States, the resurgence of Russian assertiveness, the growing weight of middle powers in global governance institutions, and the fragmentation of the liberal international order have all created a more fluid strategic environment in which India's choices carry increased systemic significance (Miller 134–156).

India's response to multipolarity has been characteristically ambivalent. On one hand, Indian policymakers have welcomed the erosion of unipolarity as vindicating their long-standing preference for a multipolar world in which no single power can dictate the terms of international order. Prime Ministers from Vajpayee through Modi have consistently articulated the vision of a multipolar world as congruent with Indian interests. On the other hand, the specific form that multipolarity is taking—with China as the principal challenger to American primacy—is deeply problematic for India given the Sino-Indian strategic competition. India faces the dilemma of

welcoming multipolarity in principle while opposing the particular multipolar transition that is actually occurring (Tellis 156–178).

The Indo-Pacific construct, championed by Japan and the United States and embraced by India, represents an attempt to build a balance of power in the maritime domain that would constrain Chinese expansion without requiring formal alliance commitments. India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia reflects the calculation that informal security partnerships can provide strategic reassurance without the entanglement costs of formal alliances. The evolution of the Quad from a post-tsunami humanitarian coordination mechanism to a geopolitical grouping addressing Chinese assertiveness illustrates the adaptability of Indian foreign policy to changing strategic circumstances (Saran 189–212).

India has simultaneously sought to prevent multipolarity from generating a rigid bipolar confrontation between the United States and China that would force a binary choice. India's continued participation in the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, alongside its deepening strategic partnership with the United States, reflects a determination to preserve optionality across the emerging multipolar landscape. The success of this strategy depends on India's ability to maintain sufficient strategic weight and sufficient economic dynamism to be courted by all parties simultaneously.

Conclusion

Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been shaped by a complex and evolving constellation of determinants that resist monocausal explanation. The structural transformation occasioned by the Cold War's end forced a reorientation from Soviet dependence toward a more diversified engagement with the international system. Economic liberalization created both new opportunities and new vulnerabilities, redefining the relationship between domestic economic policy and external strategy. The doctrine of strategic autonomy provided a durable organizing principle that has been adapted to successive strategic contexts without abandoning its core commitment to independent judgment. Regional security imperatives—above all the relationships with Pakistan and China—have consistently demanded priority attention and have shaped institutional choices and resource allocation across the entire spectrum of state capacity. The ideological variable of Hindutva nationalism has introduced a civilizational dimension into India's international identity projection, with consequences that are still being worked out. Energy security has generated a distinctive set of diplomatic imperatives that crosscut other policy commitments. And the emerging multipolar order presents India simultaneously with its greatest strategic opportunity and its most difficult navigation challenge.

What emerges from this analysis is that Indian foreign policy cannot be reduced to any single determinant or explained by any single theoretical framework. It is simultaneously shaped by material power calculations, ideational commitments, domestic political pressures, and historical memories. The persistence of strategic autonomy as a meta-preference provides a kind of unity beneath the surface diversity of policy outputs, but the content of autonomy is continuously renegotiated as India's power and the structure of the international system evolve. The fundamental question facing Indian foreign policymakers in the coming decades is whether India can translate its growing material capabilities into effective influence in a rapidly changing international order while managing the deep contradictions embedded within its own foreign policy tradition.

India stands at an inflection point. With the world's largest population, the fifth-largest economy, and a military with demonstrated nuclear deterrence, India possesses the material prerequisites of major power status. The question is whether it possesses the strategic clarity, institutional capacity,

and political will to convert potential into influence. The answer to that question will be among the most consequential in international relations for the remainder of the twenty-first century.

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