

The Changing Nature of Indian Foreign Policy: Soft Power, Strategic Autonomy, and Global Engagement in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Indian foreign policy has undergone significant transformation in the 21st century, marked by new global ambitions, evolving geopolitical dynamics, and the reassertion of India's strategic autonomy. As India positions itself as an emerging power, its foreign policy has expanded beyond traditional security concerns to incorporate economic diplomacy, soft power, regional integration, and global governance engagement. This paper examines the evolving nature of India's foreign policy with specific focus on three major dimensions: the assertion of soft power, the reconfiguration of strategic autonomy, and India's expanded global engagement. Drawing upon international relations theory, diplomatic practices, and evolving global trends, the study argues that Indian foreign policy today reflects a hybrid approach balancing great-power pragmatism with normative aspirations rooted in civilizational heritage and democratic identity. The paper concludes that while India has strengthened its global presence, sustaining this transformation requires institutional capacity, economic strength, and consistent diplomatic vision.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, soft power, strategic autonomy, diplomacy, emerging powers, global engagement

1. Introduction

India's foreign policy in the 21st century has undergone a profound reorientation driven by changes in global power structures, economic transformation, and evolving regional dynamics. As India seeks a greater role in global affairs, its foreign policy framework has expanded beyond traditional concerns of territorial security and bilateral diplomacy to include economic integration, multilateral engagement, and soft power projection. The shift reflects India's growing ambitions as an emerging power and its desire to shape, rather than merely adapt to, the international order.

The transformation of Indian foreign policy is rooted in both external imperatives and domestic priorities. Externally, the rise of China, shifting global power balances, and evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics have encouraged India to strengthen strategic partnerships. Domestically, economic globalization and developmental priorities have driven the need for foreign investment, trade

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integration, energy security, and technological cooperation.

This paper critically analyses the changing nature of Indian foreign policy with a focus on its three core components: soft power, strategic autonomy, and global engagement.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the transformation of India's foreign policy in the 21st century.
2. To examine the role of soft power in India's diplomatic strategy.
3. To evaluate how India has adapted the doctrine of strategic autonomy to contemporary geopolitical realities.
4. To study India's expanding engagement with global and regional institutions.

3. Review of Literature

Scholars of Indian foreign policy highlight that structural changes in global politics have necessitated a shift in India's diplomatic posture. Early writings emphasize India's adherence to non-alignment, rooted in postcolonial aspirations for autonomy and moral leadership. As global multipolarity emerged, literature describes India's shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy—an adaptive doctrine that permits flexible partnerships without compromising independent decision-making.

Research on soft power highlights India's civilizational heritage, democratic values, diaspora networks, and cultural influence as essential components of its global appeal. Scholars note the global popularity of Indian cinema, yoga, and cultural diplomacy initiatives as instruments for enhancing international influence.

Literature on global engagement emphasizes India's increasing involvement in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, G20, BRICS, and SAARC. Analysts argue that India's proactive participation in global governance reflects its desire to shape international norms on climate change, trade, terrorism, and development.

Studies also highlight persistent challenges, including capacity constraints, inconsistent policy implementation, border tensions, and limited economic leverage. Yet the overall literature underscores that Indian foreign policy today is more assertive, diversified, and multidimensional.

4. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on secondary sources, including academic texts, journal articles, diplomatic statements, policy analyses, and international relations theory. A thematic approach is used to examine the evolution of soft power, strategic autonomy, and global engagement in Indian foreign policy. No primary data collection was conducted.

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Dr. Deepak Sharma

5. Soft Power as a Pillar of India's Foreign Policy

Soft power has become increasingly important in India's diplomatic outreach. Unlike hard power tools such as military and economic coercion, soft power relies on cultural attraction, values, and political ideals. India's civilizational heritage, spiritual traditions, linguistic diversity, and democratic credentials offer unique sources of soft power.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives—such as the International Day of Yoga, cultural festivals, academic exchanges, and diplomatic use of Bollywood—illustrate India's strategy of using culture to build international goodwill. The Indian diaspora, one of the world's largest, serves as a major conduit of cultural influence and economic engagement. Many diaspora communities occupy influential political and economic positions abroad, strengthening India's global networks.

India's democratic identity provides another dimension of soft power. As one of the world's largest democracies, India projects its political system as an alternative model in regions marked by authoritarianism or instability. Its development cooperation programmes, especially in South Asia and Africa, integrate technical assistance with normative messaging rooted in diversity, tolerance, and democratic participation.

However, soft power faces limitations. Domestic political contestation, social tensions, or policy inconsistencies sometimes undermine India's international image. Thus, while soft power strengthens India's diplomatic appeal, it requires coherence between external messaging and internal governance.

6. Strategic Autonomy in a Changing Geopolitical Order

Strategic autonomy has been central to Indian foreign policy since independence. Initially conceptualized through the doctrine of non-alignment, strategic autonomy aimed to preserve decision-making independence amid Cold War polarization. In the 21st century, India has reinterpreted this doctrine to align with new realities of multipolarity, economic interdependence, and regional tensions.

India now pursues flexible partnerships with major powers—such as the United States, Russia, the European Union, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries—based on issue-specific coordination. This pragmatic approach avoids exclusive alliances while enabling India to balance competing geopolitical interests. For example, India deepens defense cooperation with the United States while maintaining long-standing ties with Russia.

Strategic autonomy also manifests in India's regional strategy. Facing assertive regional competitors and evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics, India has strengthened partnerships with countries such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members. At the same time, India maintains diplomatic engagement with adversarial neighbours to prevent escalation and preserve regional stability.

The contemporary interpretation of strategic autonomy thus blends traditional non-alignment with modern strategic pragmatism, enabling India to pursue national interests in a complex global environment.

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Dr. Deepak Sharma

7. India's Expanding Global Engagement

India's growing global engagement reflects its aspiration to influence international norms and institutions. Economic liberalization accelerated India's integration into global markets, while its rising economic profile enhanced its credibility in multilateral forums. India's participation in the G20, BRICS, and other economic platforms highlights its role in shaping global economic governance.

In matters of global security, India advocates multipolarity, counterterrorism cooperation, maritime security, and the reform of international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council. India's contributions to UN Peacekeeping missions further demonstrate its commitment to international stability.

Regionally, India has sought to revitalize SAARC, promote connectivity in South Asia, engage with BIMSTEC, and enhance cooperation in the Indian Ocean Rim. These initiatives reflect India's desire to serve as a regional leader while balancing complex geopolitical realities.

India's development diplomacy emphasizes capacity building, technological assistance, and infrastructure support to partner countries, especially in Africa and South Asia. These initiatives enhance India's influence through mutually beneficial partnerships rather than conditional aid.

8. Conclusion

The transformation of Indian foreign policy in the 21st century reflects the country's evolving aspirations, growing economic capabilities, and changing global context. Soft power, strategic autonomy, and global engagement have emerged as the defining pillars of contemporary foreign policy. By leveraging its cultural heritage, democratic values, and economic partnerships, India has strengthened its international profile. Strategic autonomy remains a guiding principle, adapted to new geopolitical realities through flexible partnerships and pragmatic diplomacy.

However, realizing India's global ambitions depends on sustained economic growth, domestic political stability, and institutional capacity. India must continue refining its diplomatic strategies, strengthening regional partnerships, and projecting consistent policy messages. The future trajectory of Indian foreign policy will depend on how effectively it navigates global uncertainty while preserving national interests and contributing to global governance.

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The Changing Nature of Indian Foreign Policy: Soft Power, Strategic Autonomy and Global Engagement in the 21st Century

Dr. Deepak Sharma

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