

Research Title:

"Strategic Autonomy or Silent Alignment? Decoding
India's Foreign Policy in a Fragmented World.

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India's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World	2
Abstract	2
I. Introduction	3
RESEARCH QUESTIONS:	3
II. Theoretical Perspective: Neoclassical Realism and the Logic of India's Strategic Behavior.....	4
III. Literature Review.....	5
IV. Research Gap	6
V. Internal and External Drivers of Indian Foreign Policy through a Neoclassical Realist Lens.....	7
VI. Challenges in Achieving India's Foreign Policy Objectives.....	9
VII. Balancing Major Powers: India's Dual Strategy and Global Acceptance	10
VIII. Why Do Major Powers Accept This Balancing Act?	10
References (APA 7th Edition).....	11

India's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World

Abstract

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation from its roots in Cold War-era non-alignment to a more dynamic and pragmatic strategy of multi-alignment in the contemporary multipolar world. This paper explores how India navigates a complex international landscape shaped by rising powers, shifting alliances, and growing strategic uncertainty, while aiming to preserve its strategic autonomy and assert itself as a global power. Anchored in the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, the study examines how both systemic pressures and domestic variables—such as political leadership, historical identity, and economic aspirations—influence India's foreign policy behavior.

I. Introduction

India has maintained a delicate balancing act throughout the 20th century. India was a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement, trying to avoid entanglement in the ideological conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite its neutral stance, India remained close with the Soviet Union. After the collapse of Soviet Union, and the end of cold war, India needed to reshape its foreign policy to navigate through the new world order of unipolarity with US as a Hegemone. India's policy of non-alignment transformed into more pragmatic multi alignment policy with strategic autonomy as its core objective. Indian foreign policy has evolved in response to changing world order from non-alignment during cold war to Multi alignment in contemporary world. India seeks to project itself as a leading power with strong international footprint by actively participating in forums like G20, Quad, BRICS, and SCO. The transformation of Indian foreign policy from non-alignment to multi alignment and strategic autonomy is the product of complex interplay of international factors and domestic factors such as political leadership, historical identity and economic goals. Main objectives of Indian foreign policy are; asserting itself as rising power, maintaining strategic autonomy, and navigating the multipolar world through multi alignment abandoning the non-alignment or the balancing act. India's diplomatic behavior has been influenced by the rise of China, change in U.S geopolitics, the unraveling of multilateral institutions and global economic volatility. Simultaneously, the domestic political headwinds (particularly under the premiership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi) have levelled a more assertive, nationalist India on the world stage. The central argument of the paper is that India's foreign policy is best understood as a realist pursuit of power and autonomy under the cover of moral rhetoric and institutional engagement. Beneath its calls for multilateralism and South-South solidarity lies a calculated effort to secure strategic leverage, avoid dependence, and emerge as a pole in its own right—neither subordinate to the West nor dominated by China. And in this paper, we will find answers to the following key questions to understand it better:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What are the core objectives that India aims to achieve through its foreign policy?
2. What internal and external factors are shaping India's foreign policy today?
3. What are the major challenges and constraints that hinder its foreign policy ambitions?
4. How is India balancing its relations with other major powers simultaneously without aligning with anyone completely?

The paper adopts Neoclassical realism as theoretical framework to answer these questions. This framework allows us to analyze the complex interaction of systematic factors and domestic pressures and how they shape the foreign policies of countries. The study also uses qualitative data/ relevant literature to place Indian contemporary foreign policy in historical context and analyze the recent shifts in the policy.

II. Theoretical Perspective: Neoclassical Realism and the Logic of India's Strategic Behavior

Foreign policy of India cannot be explained or analyzed through single theoretical lens completely. In classical realism, policies and strategy are often explained by focusing on power, survival and the competition between states. Being mainly centered on international organizations and cooperation, liberal theories cannot explain why India doubts or refuses to be involved in certain international groupings and governance bodies. The theory explains aspects of India's culture and identity, together with its policies, even though it does not address the reasons for India's arms race or conflicts with China on their shared border. To sum up, India is acting as a realist power even as it talks about leading the way through morality. To understand this double nature, neoclassical realism gives the most effective way to analyze it. Although the policies of states are guided by the system of international politics, but their domestic politics, perceptions among the elite, history and identity also play important roles. Because foreign policy in India is influenced by international factors as well as by what goes on inside the country, this theoretical approach is especially useful here.

An example of this can be found in India's efforts to maintain a balance between the United States and Russia. Under pure structural realism, India and the U.S. would unite to face China as a shared enemy. Yet, maintaining a close defense deal with Russia and avoiding judgment on the Ukraine war reveals that India prizes its military and its background of wanting to remain independent over joining others. This change is explained in neoclassical realism through the factors described below: Because being caught in an alliance worries India's leaders more than the quick cons of isolation, they are ready to be flexible, accepting some sacrifices. As a shareholder in the anarchic competing world, India always considers its history, national sentiments and bureaucratic aspects before making foreign policy decisions. Neoclassical realism allows us to understand the

relationships between internal and external forces impacting foreign policy of India without making things overly simple. Furthermore, Narendra Modi's time in office has highlighted India using a unique style of diplomacy, showing how the party's principles and grand vision for India are reflected in its foreign policy. Explaining India's place in the world can be done through an analysis of its domestic politics which neoclassical realism reviews in more detail than the structural theories do.

III. Literature Review

India's foreign policy during the periods after both the Cold War and India's 2014 general election has undergone changes as well as maintained certain enduring characteristics. Indian foreign policy has been analyzed using a wide variety of approaches, including the concepts of strategic autonomy, increased regional influence, ideological changes and structural constraints. The literature discussed here examines analyses from within India, Pakistan and abroad to identify important themes and discussions shaping India's contemporary foreign policy.

Indian analyst Shivshankar Menon explains in his book *Choices* (2016). According to the author, India's foreign policy is influenced by a mix of historical events and beliefs among policy-makers. He reveals how intricate factors had a bearing on Indian policies including the 1974 nuclear tests and China's borders. India's foreign policy, according to Menon, frequently refuses to be simply characterized as realist or liberal. But India's foreign policy is based upon a flexible, situation-specific approach that adjusts to changes in leadership and events. Mohan argues that India's current strategic approach markedly differs from the legacy of Nehru's non-alignment and now emphasizes what he calls "multi-alignment." During the tenure of Modi, Mohan proposes that India is now willing to engage in power politics, building deeper alliances with countries comprising a diverse range of domestic ideologies. Mohan attributes the change to both external pressures and India's ambition to play a more active and diplomatic role on the global stage.

Pakistanis view India's bilateral approach in the region with intense skepticism, according to Rabia Akhtar (2020). Akhtar maintains that India is practicing an exclusionary form of regionalism by favoring partnerships outside South Asia while disengaging from Pakistan and the SAARC grouping. This shows to which Akhtar argues that the strategy reflects a notion of regional dominance based on isolation rather than regional harmony. Akhtar's work importantly reveals

how India's approach to regional diplomacy is seen by many nations in the region: Some view it as firm and competitive rather than fostering security. Scholars and experts outside India offer a more moderate assessment. Scholar and former U.S. official Alyssa Ayres points to the paradox between India's aspiration to become a world leader and its conservatism both in capability and approach. Ayres maintains that India's global influence is increasing yet remains limited by insufficient resources in its foreign policy institutions and a hesitance to assume major leadership initiatives in areas such as trade, security or climate change. Ayres sees India as seeking leadership in a measured, rather than disrupter way.

Ian Hall (2019) shows how Modi's leadership has influenced a reformulation of Indian foreign policy and enabled an emphasis on spectacle and ceremony in international relations. Hall argues that the approach India uses to achieve its foreign policy objectives has undergone substantial transformation since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. Hall shows that style and leadership messaging have become nearly as important as conventional policy tools in shaping India's diplomatic practices. A diverse group of authors brings different perspectives to explain how India shapes its diplomatic strategies. Indian writers examine how India responds to its environment and adjusts its approaches based on shifting circumstances, Pakistani scholars look at regional dynamics and ideological transformations and international experts analyze India's challenges and styles of governance.

IV. Research Gap

Although many studies focus on India and its global relations, there is a lack of research that links India's domestic politics to its foreign policy decisions. Most of the existing research highlights India's support for non-alignment or analyzes its relationships and disputes with neighbors. Scholars such as Menon (2016) and Mohan (2015) from India discuss the rise of strategic autonomy and the use of multiple alignments, but they usually analyze these issues from the government's viewpoint. This often ignores major ideological conflicts and right-wing restrictions, mainly during the administration of the BJP. In contrast, Pakistani scholars such as Akhtar (2020) and Ahmad (2017) frequently explain India's actions in the region in terms of South Asian rivalry and the desire to become regional leader. These views are generally accurate when talking about regional topics, but they often ignore India's goals in the rest of the world and how it acts abroad.

Many international studies have noted that while India's rise is slowing down, it continues to hold a modest role across the globe. Despite this, few have tried to include all these elements in one unifying theory that explains India's foreign policy decisions. There is still little research on how recent shifts in geopolitics, including those caused by the pandemic, ongoing U.S.-China disputes and India's increased global presence, have influenced international cooperation. To bridge this gap, this paper employs neoclassical realism to investigate the influence of India's internal matters and strategic decisions, as well as challenges from other countries, on its foreign policy in the current global setting.

V. Internal and External Drivers of Indian Foreign Policy through a Neoclassical Realist Lens

The evolution of India's foreign policy can be explained by neoclassical realism which takes into account the influence of both external forces in the international system and the country's unique political, ideological and institutional factors. Neoclassical realism considers the ways in which a state's domestic structure and society influence how it interacts with the international system. India's actions on the global arena highlight how neoclassical realism explains the country's foreign policy.

1. Ideological Assertiveness and Leadership Perception

The victory of the BJP in 2014 brought a new viewpoint onto India's approach to the world. Prime Minister Modi's government wants India to go beyond Nehruvian non-alignment and play a more assertive role on the world stage, guided by Hindu nationalism and efforts to revive traditional values. India's leaders see foreign policy as an expression of its national values and independence. Revoking Article 370 proved to be a significant step both at home and internationally, even if it came with the risk of damaging India's standing in the world. This revealed the extent to which Indian foreign policy is shaped by a desire to project strength and consolidation, even at the risk of international complications.

2. Institutional Constraints and Strategic Capacity

However, the slow pace of bureaucratic processes, resource constraints and a complex civil-military relation can impede effective accomplishment of India's aspirations. Neoclassical realism accounts for the discrepancy between India's strategic goals and the limits of its domestic structures and capabilities. These projects, designed to strengthen India's economic and digital sectors, can encounter setbacks because of complicated bureaucratic arrangements and a lack of coherent policy direction. These challenges limit India's capacity to act decisively and rapidly adapt to changes in the world.

3. Systemic Pressures: Balancing in a Multipolar World

India finds itself in a world where U.S.-China competition, the end of unipolar power and the growth of multipolarity shape the international landscape. India's decision to join the QUAD shows that it is pursuing efforts to counterbalance against Chinese expansionism and power. At the same time, India shows traditional security commitments and maintains its independence as a Founding Central Tenet of its Foreign Policy. India's relationships with both BRICS and the SCO demonstrate its efforts to avoid relying too heavily on any one major power grouping. Neoclassical realism helps us understand that this behavior is an astute attempt to deal with the unpredictability of the international environment.

4. Neighbors and Regional Rivalries Have Shaped India's Policy

Emerging threats from China and Pakistan impact India's regional foreign policy significantly. Zhou Enlai addressed India's most important relations and key historical developments. The Neighborhood First Policy reflects a goal to strengthen Indian relations with South Asian nations while also countering China in its expanding projects like Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. However, success has been mixed. The Indian government has at times struggled to maintain positive ties with Nepal and Sri Lanka due to mistakes in diplomacy and insufficient long-term economic commitment. The setbacks with Nepal and Sri Lanka highlight how both domestic constraints and policy decisions can influence India's ability to project itself in South Asia despite external challenges. India's foreign policy is guided by a mix of factors that include both external threats and the ideologies and values held within the country. It emerges from the interaction of several factors including how security challenges from abroad are viewed and translated internally through ideological, institutional and perceptual filters. Neoclassical realism provides insight

into why India sometimes talks big but acts in a less decisive or cohesive manner. India's combination of drive and caution distinguishes its journey in the global arena.

VI. Challenges in Achieving India's Foreign Policy Objectives

Despite its growing global ambitions, India faces several **internal and external challenges** that complicate the realization of its foreign policy goals. These hurdles limit India's ability to project consistent power and influence, both regionally and globally.

1. Strategic Overstretch and Resource Constraints

India hopes to be a major player on the world stage, though it lacks the necessary means to do so at present. Updating the military, investing in new technologies and developing infrastructure are not uniform and are regularly hindered by paperwork and lack of funds. Because India cannot consider every foreign challenge simultaneously, it often focuses on domestic issues and reacts to events in the global arena.

2. Regional Instability and Persistent Rivalries

The region that surrounds India is still unstable. India faces difficulties in the region because of tensions and conflicts with Pakistan and China, mainly after the 2020 fight in the Galwan Valley. At the same time, China's investment in Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives in South Asia is making India's position there less secure.

3. Domestic Political Polarization

Communal disputes, debates about identity and the backward movement of democracy inside India have been criticized by Western countries. People's belief that India is adopting more authoritarian measures and crushing dissent can harm its image as a democracy for many people in liberal countries worldwide.

4. Lack of Institutional Coherence

The foreign policy of India is negatively influenced by unclear jurisdictions, departments that fail to share information and slow procedures. So, companies struggle to make long-term decisions and respond quickly to sudden changes in world trends. The struggles mentioned above highlight neoclassical realism's main idea: the potential for success with international openings depends on what happens within a nation and who is in charge. To be successful, India's foreign policy depends on cooperation from foreign allies and improvement within the country.

VII. Balancing Major Powers: India's Dual Strategy and Global Acceptance

One important feature of India's current foreign policy is that it can manage relationships with leading global powers, often simultaneously connecting with countries from different spheres. India has strong ties in both trade and defense with Russia on one side and with the United States and its partners on the other. It also continues to form important and detailed economic relationships with China, despite problems along the border. India's approach of cultivating close bonds with multiple countries is not by chance but reflects the nation's desire for independence and is guided by non-alignment and now multi-alignment. To give an example, India is part of the QUAD which works to secure an open and free Indo-Pacific, despite being a part of both the BRICS and SCO, where it deals with China and Russia. Although it signed agreements for defense with the US (LEMOA, COMCASA), it has ignored the US by agreeing to buy S-400 missiles from Russia.

VIII. Why Do Major Powers Accept This Balancing Act?

What determines this is India's location, its economy and its stable government. For the world's strongest nations, India is important as a big market as well as an alternative to China. As the United States places importance on India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific, it tolerates India's close relationship with Russia. The partnership between Russia and India on defense has value for Russia, since it balances its increasing reliance on China. Additionally, India is seen as attractive by the West because it follows democratic principles, includes many members in its migrant community and, despite its contradictions, agrees with liberal global values in its policies. Due to India's flexible stance, no major nation sees it as joining one side or the other, so choosing which issues to cooperate on does not create winners or losers. Because India does not follow ideology,

it can respond flexibly to different situations and not sign binding pacts. Because of its flexibility, India can avoid picking sides and act as a link between the main powers, something few countries are able to do. Essentially, it's accepted that India using a balancing strategy is part of adapting to the realities of a world where states must be flexible. India's influence comes from adopting a realistic approach as it faces added pressure from juggling many different factors at once.

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