

Deciding Factors of India's Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

India's foreign policy has evolved continuously since independence in response to the interaction of domestic priorities, strategic interests, and changes in the international system. This paper examines the major factors that shape India's foreign policy and influence its engagement with regional and global actors. It highlights geography and historical experience as enduring determinants, while national security, economic interests, energy requirements, technological advancement, domestic politics, political leadership, and public opinion constitute important dynamic influences. Particular attention is given to India's relations with neighbouring countries, major powers, and multilateral organisations, as well as its growing engagement with the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. The paper also discusses the significance of maritime security, terrorism, nuclear policy, the Indian diaspora, climate change, and global economic interdependence in contemporary foreign-policy formulation. It argues that strategic autonomy remains a central characteristic of India's external relations, enabling the country to maintain diverse partnerships without becoming permanently aligned with any single power bloc. The study concludes that India's foreign policy represents a continuing effort to balance national security, economic development, international cooperation, and strategic flexibility in an increasingly complex global order.

Keywords: Indian Foreign Policy; Strategic Autonomy; National Security; Economic Diplomacy; Geopolitics; International Relations; Multilateralism

Introduction

Foreign policy is the way a country deals with other countries and international organizations. It includes decisions about friendship, cooperation, trade, security, war and peace, international agreements, diplomacy, and the protection of national interests. For a country like India, foreign policy is especially important because India is one of the world's

largest countries in terms of population and geographical area, has a long coastline, shares land borders with several countries, and occupies an important position in Asia. India's relations with countries such as China, Pakistan, Russia, the United States, Japan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have a direct or indirect effect on its security, economy and development.

India's foreign policy has changed considerably since independence in 1947. At the time of independence, India was a newly independent country facing poverty, underdevelopment, partition, communal violence and serious security challenges. The leadership of independent India therefore wanted a foreign policy that would protect India's independence while giving the country enough space to concentrate on economic and social development. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, India adopted principles such as peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, respect for sovereignty and opposition to racial discrimination. The Non-Aligned Movement became one of the important features of India's foreign policy during the Cold War.

However, India's foreign policy has never been completely fixed. It has changed according to international and domestic circumstances. The end of the Cold War, India's economic reforms in 1991, the rise of China, India's nuclear tests in 1998, the growing importance of the United States, terrorism, globalisation, climate change, energy security and the emergence of new economic powers have all influenced Indian foreign policy. In the twenty-first century, India follows a practical and multi-dimensional foreign policy. India maintains strategic relations with the United States while also maintaining a long-standing relationship with Russia. It participates in the Quad with the United States, Japan and Australia, while remaining active in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. India has deepened relations with countries in Southeast Asia through its Act East policy and has strengthened ties with countries in West Asia because of energy, trade and the Indian diaspora. At the same time, relations with neighbouring countries remain an important part of Indian diplomacy. The decisions taken by India in foreign affairs are not based on one single factor. They are influenced by geography, national security, economic interests, domestic politics, leadership, historical experiences, public opinion, global developments and India's desire for strategic autonomy. This paper examines these major factors and explains how they influence India's foreign policy.

Geographical and Historical Factors

Geography is one of the most permanent factors affecting India's foreign policy. Unlike governments or political parties, geography does not change easily. India's geographical position connects South Asia with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean region. This location gives India strategic importance but also creates several security responsibilities. India shares land borders with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It also has maritime boundaries and close geographical relationships with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The Himalayan region is particularly important because it forms a major part of India's northern security environment. India's relations with China and Pakistan have therefore remained closely connected with border security. The India-

China relationship demonstrates the importance of geography in foreign policy. The two countries share a long and disputed border. The unresolved boundary question has periodically produced tensions and military confrontations. At the same time, China is one of India's largest trading partners and an important global power. Therefore, India has to manage both competition and cooperation with China. Border infrastructure, military preparedness, trade, technology, diplomacy and regional influence all become part of India's China policy. Pakistan is another major example. The partition of British India in 1947 created two independent countries and was followed by conflict over Jammu and Kashmir. India and Pakistan have fought several wars and have experienced repeated periods of tension. Issues related to terrorism, the Line of Control, cross-border violence and the Kashmir question have influenced India's foreign policy towards Pakistan. Because of the geographical closeness of the two countries, developments in Pakistan can have direct consequences for India's national security. India's location in the Indian Ocean is equally important. The Indian Ocean connects the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. A large part of international trade and energy transportation passes through the region. India has a long coastline and occupies a central geographical position in the northern Indian Ocean. As a result, maritime security, protection of sea lanes, relations with island countries and naval capabilities have become important parts of Indian foreign policy.

India's relations with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles are partly influenced by this maritime geography. Stability in the Indian Ocean is important for India's trade and security. India has therefore developed cooperation with several Indian Ocean countries in areas such as maritime security, disaster relief, infrastructure, development assistance and capacity building. Historical experience also has a strong influence on India's foreign policy. India's experience of British colonial rule created a strong attachment to sovereignty, independence and anti-colonialism. Indian leaders were aware that political independence would have limited meaning if the country remained economically or strategically dependent on powerful foreign states. This historical experience contributed to India's early support for decolonisation and racial equality. India's support for newly independent Asian and African countries was closely connected with its own colonial experience. India became an important voice in international discussions on colonialism, apartheid and the rights of developing countries. The Non-Aligned Movement was also influenced by the desire of newly independent countries to avoid becoming permanent members of either the American or Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Historical relations also explain India's continuing relationship with Russia. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union became an important partner of India in defence, industrial development and diplomacy. Although the international environment has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many institutional and strategic connections have continued with Russia. India's defence cooperation with Russia remains an important example of how historical relationships can influence contemporary foreign policy. Thus, geography and history provide the basic framework within which Indian foreign policy operates. They do not determine every decision, but they create long-term opportunities, challenges and limitations.

National Security and Strategic Interests

National security is one of the most important factors behind India's foreign policy. Every country seeks to protect its territory, citizens, political independence and economic interests. For India, security has several dimensions, including land borders, maritime security, terrorism, nuclear weapons, cyber threats, space security and regional stability. India's security concerns are strongly influenced by its neighbourhood. The unresolved borders with China and Pakistan require continuous diplomatic and military attention. The 1962 India-China war had a deep impact on Indian strategic thinking. Later border tensions have reinforced the importance of military preparedness and border infrastructure. India also faces security concerns related to terrorism. Terrorist attacks originating from or linked to groups based in neighbouring countries have influenced India's approach to counter-terrorism and international diplomacy. India has consistently raised the issue of terrorism in international organisations and has sought greater international cooperation against terrorist financing, recruitment and cross-border terrorism.

The nuclear factor is another important element of Indian foreign policy. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974 and conducted further tests in 1998. India describes its nuclear doctrine in terms of deterrence and has officially maintained a commitment to credible minimum deterrence and a declared no-first-use policy, subject to the qualifications stated in its official nuclear doctrine. India's nuclear policy is closely related to its security environment, particularly the nuclear capabilities of China and Pakistan. India's defence partnerships have also changed with time. Russia has historically been a major supplier of defence equipment to India. At the same time, India has significantly increased defence cooperation with countries such as the United States, France and Israel. India also conducts military exercises with several countries. These relationships are not necessarily formal alliances. Instead, India generally attempts to maintain flexibility and preserve its ability to make independent decisions. This approach is often described as strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy means that India wants sufficient freedom to make decisions according to its national interests rather than automatically following another major power. The idea has roots in India's non-aligned tradition, although its practical meaning has changed over time.

India's participation in different international groupings illustrates this approach. India is a member of BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the G20 and other multilateral institutions. It also participates in the Quad with the United States, Japan and Australia. These organisations have different purposes, and India's participation in several of them allows it to engage with countries that may have competing interests. The rise of China has made strategic calculations even more important. China is India's neighbour, a major trading partner and a global power. India cooperates with China in some international institutions but also competes with it over borders, regional influence, trade and strategic space. India's relationships with Japan, Australia, the United States and Southeast Asian countries have gained greater importance partly because of changes in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indian Ocean is another major security concern. India's economic growth depends heavily on international trade and access to energy supplies. Any

serious disruption of important sea routes could affect the Indian economy. Therefore, India has increased its attention to maritime security, naval modernisation and cooperation with countries around the Indian Ocean. Energy security also has a strategic dimension. India imports a large share of its crude oil requirements. This makes relations with oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Qatar and Russia important. India's foreign policy therefore has to balance security concerns with the need to maintain stable energy supplies at affordable prices. India's large diaspora also has security and diplomatic importance. Millions of Indians and people of Indian origin live and work outside India. Their safety becomes a concern during wars, political instability or natural disasters. The evacuation of Indian citizens from conflict zones has therefore become an important part of Indian diplomacy. In short, India's security environment is complex. The country has to manage traditional military threats as well as terrorism, energy insecurity, cyber threats, maritime challenges and geopolitical competition. These factors strongly influence India's foreign policy decisions.

Economic, Domestic and Leadership Factors

Economic interests have become increasingly important in India's foreign policy. A country's foreign relations are closely connected with trade, investment, technology, energy, employment and economic growth. Since India began major economic reforms in 1991, its foreign policy has increasingly supported economic integration and international trade. The growth of India's economy has created greater demand for foreign investment, technology and international markets. India therefore seeks strong economic relations with major economies such as the United States, European countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia and countries in the Gulf region. Trade agreements, investment partnerships, technology cooperation and supply-chain arrangements have become important elements of diplomacy. Energy is another major economic factor. India is one of the world's major energy-consuming countries, and its demand continues to grow. Because domestic production cannot meet all its requirements, India depends significantly on imports. Relations with oil and gas-producing countries are therefore important. India's relations with the Gulf countries are influenced not only by energy but also by trade, investment, employment opportunities and the presence of a large Indian community. The Indian diaspora is a significant factor in foreign policy. Indians and people of Indian origin have a substantial presence in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and several Gulf states. The diaspora contributes to India's economy through remittances, investment, business connections and cultural links. At the same time, the Indian government has an interest in protecting the rights and safety of Indian citizens abroad. Technology has also become a major factor. Modern national power depends not only on military strength but also on digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, telecommunications, space technology and advanced manufacturing. India therefore seeks technology partnerships with countries that can support its economic and strategic objectives. Domestic politics can also influence foreign policy. Foreign policy is formally made by the central government, but domestic political conditions can affect the priorities of governments.

Political parties may have different views about relations with neighbouring countries, economic agreements, defence policy or international organisations. Public opinion can also influence the political space available to a government. India's federal structure is relevant in some foreign policy matters, particularly where neighbouring countries are involved. States bordering countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar can be directly affected by cross-border trade, migration, water issues and cultural relations. For example, relations with Bangladesh involve issues such as river waters, border management, migration, trade and connectivity. These issues can have domestic political implications in Indian states. Leadership is another important factor. Individual leaders can influence the style and priorities of foreign policy. Jawaharlal Nehru played a major role in developing India's early foreign policy ideas. Later leaders also introduced new approaches according to the circumstances of their time. Indira Gandhi's period saw a strong emphasis on security and India's regional position. The 1971 India-Pakistan war and the creation of Bangladesh were major events in India's strategic history. Rajiv Gandhi gave greater attention to technology and relations with neighbouring countries while also attempting to engage major powers. The governments of P. V. Narasimha Rao played an important role in adapting India's foreign policy to the post-Cold War world. Economic reforms, the beginning of the Look East policy and new engagement with major powers reflected the changing international environment.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government placed considerable emphasis on national security, nuclear policy and relations with major powers. India's 1998 nuclear tests significantly affected its international relations, but the following years also witnessed increasing engagement between India and the United States. More recently, India's foreign policy has emphasized connectivity, the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean, economic diplomacy, diaspora engagement and stronger relationships with major and middle powers. The terms "Neighborhood First", "Act East", "Think West", "SAGAR" and "Indo-Pacific" have been used to describe different aspects of India's diplomatic priorities.

However, leadership should not be seen as the only explanation for foreign policy. Leaders operate within institutions and circumstances that restrict their choices. Parliament, the Ministry of External Affairs, the armed forces, economic ministries, intelligence institutions, businesses, strategic experts and public opinion can all contribute to the foreign policy process. India's foreign policy is therefore the product of both individual leadership and broader national interests. A change in government can change the style or emphasis of diplomacy, but many long-term interests remain relatively stable.

Global Environment, International Organisations and Conclusion

India's foreign policy is also shaped by the changing international system. The world has moved through different phases since India's independence. During the Cold War, global politics was dominated by competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the United States became the dominant global power. In recent years, international politics has become more complex, with the rise of China, the increasing

importance of middle powers, conflicts in Europe and West Asia, and growing competition over technology and supply chains. India has responded to these changes by maintaining relations with several major powers rather than depending entirely on one. This approach is visible in India's relationships with the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan, Australia and other countries. The relationship between India and the United States has expanded significantly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Cooperation now covers defence, trade, technology, education, space, energy and the Indo-Pacific. The India-US civil nuclear agreement was an important development in the relationship. However, India has continued to maintain independent positions on several international issues. India's relationship with Russia has historical depth, especially in defence cooperation and diplomatic support during earlier periods. Russia remains an important source of defence equipment and a partner in areas such as energy and nuclear cooperation. At the same time, Russia's growing relationship with China and its war in Ukraine have created new complexities for Indian diplomacy. Europe is another important part of India's foreign policy. India has sought closer economic and strategic ties with the European Union and individual European states. Issues such as trade, climate change, technology, clean energy, education and maritime security have increased the importance of European partnerships. India also pays increasing attention to Southeast Asia. The Act East policy has sought to strengthen political, economic and strategic relations with ASEAN countries. India's historical and cultural links with Southeast Asia provide a foundation, while connectivity and maritime interests provide contemporary reasons for greater engagement. West Asia has become equally important. India's relations with countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel involve energy, trade, investment, defence, technology and the Indian diaspora. India's foreign policy in the region often requires careful balancing because the countries of West Asia have their own rivalries and conflicts. International organisations are another important factor. India is a founding participant in several international institutions and has traditionally supported multilateralism. The United Nations remains important to India, particularly on questions of international peace, development and global governance. India has also supported reform of the UN Security Council and seeks a greater role in international decision-making. India's involvement in the G20 became particularly important when India hosted the G20 summit in 2023. The G20 provides India with an opportunity to discuss economic growth, development, climate change, digital technology, food security and other global issues. India also uses organisations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to engage with countries outside Western alliances. Climate change has become another important foreign policy issue. India is among the world's major greenhouse gas emitters in absolute terms, although its historical per capita emissions remain much lower than those of many developed countries. India has therefore argued for climate action while also emphasising development needs, energy access and the principle of equity. India's International Solar Alliance is one example of its effort to shape international cooperation on renewable energy. Food security, public health and global supply chains have also become foreign policy concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated

that international crises can directly affect domestic life. India's vaccine diplomacy and its efforts to maintain supply chains showed how health and foreign policy can become connected. Overall, India's foreign policy is influenced by a combination of permanent and changing factors. Geography creates long-term security concerns. History shapes India's ideas about sovereignty, independence and international cooperation. National security determines many strategic decisions. Economic interests encourage India to develop partnerships for trade, investment, technology and energy. Domestic politics and leadership influence priorities and diplomatic style. The international environment determines the opportunities and constraints within which India operates.

The most important feature of India's foreign policy is therefore its attempt to protect national interests while maintaining strategic flexibility. India does not fit easily into a single international camp. It cooperates with different countries in different areas depending on the issue. This flexibility has become increasingly important in a world where major powers themselves have complex and sometimes competing relationships. India's foreign policy is also closely connected with the country's larger development goals. A secure India needs economic growth, access to energy and technology, stable borders and peaceful international relations. At the same time, economic growth itself requires a stable international environment. Foreign policy and domestic development are therefore closely connected.

In conclusion, there is no single factor that decides India's foreign policy. It is the result of interaction between geography, history, national security, economic interests, domestic conditions, political leadership and changes in the global system. Some factors remain relatively stable, while others change quickly. The ability of Indian foreign policy to adjust to these changes while protecting long-term national interests is one of its central characteristics. Understanding these deciding factors is important for understanding India's role in world politics. As India's economic and strategic importance continues to grow, its foreign policy will increasingly influence not only South Asia but also the wider Indo-Pacific and global political order. The future direction of Indian foreign policy will depend on how successfully India balances security with development, national interests with international cooperation, and strategic autonomy with partnerships in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Dr Baijnath Pal

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