

## Idealistic and Realistic Perspectives in the Evolution of India's Foreign Policy

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### Abstract

India's foreign policy has witnessed an unprecedented transformation since independence as a result of change in structure of international politics, regional developments, domestic compulsions and ideologies of different leaders. This article is an attempt to discuss the foreign policy of India under different leadership to reach a conclusion whether it is based on idealistic principles or realistic attributes or it is the conjunction of both during cold war and post cold war era. In the concluding remarks observation has been made that India's foreign policy is constructed on both idealistic principles and realistic ideas but largely on the realistic assumptions.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, India, Idealism, Realism, post cold war

### Introduction

The political stature of India in international politics has seen a commensurate increase since India freed itself from the clutches of colonial powers. As the world's largest democracy, one of the fastest growing major economies, today India has the capacity and capability to contribute in global affairs and it is the foreign policy of India which has played an important role in making India a powerful nation. The foreign policy of a nation is designed and formulated by keeping the national interests in consideration. It is the reflection of country's traditional values and aspirations to be achieved in coming future and is influenced by various factors such as the global framework, regional circumstances, geopolitical position, internal factors, and notably the ideology of the country's leader. India's foreign policy has significantly evolved since its independence due to shifts in international politics, regional advancements, domestic obligations, and, of course, the vision of different leaders but always retaining its essential spirit. The foreign policy of India is looked at differently by the scholars in terms of realism and idealism. India's foreign policy framework swung between somewhat idealist posture of India's first prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru and a realistic approach adopted by his daughter Indira Gandhi during cold war era. New Delhi was forced to rethink about its foreign policy orientation in the post cold war international system. The present study is an attempt to discuss the foreign policy of India under different leadership to reach a conclusion whether it is based on idealistic principles or realistic attributes or it is the conjunction of both.

Before analysing India's foreign policy, it is pertinent to discuss the assumptions of both Realist and Idealist approaches to international politics.

Idealism is a philosophy that is grounded in specific moral or ethical principles, norms, and values, such as promoting peaceful coexistence, fostering harmony of interests, preventing war, preserving territorial integrity, and fostering deeper

economic connections. The notion that international institutions may foster harmonious collaboration among nations is a fundamental tenet of idealism.<sup>1</sup>

Realism, in contrast, prioritises certain assumptions such as power politics, the competitive nature of politics among nations, the pursuit of national interests, the divergence of political values from universal moral principles, the security dilemma, the establishment of a balance of power through balancing and bandwagoning, national security, statism, self-help and the survival of the state, hegemony, international anarchy, conflicts, rivalry, and war. Realism asserts that the primary objective of foreign policy is to safeguard and uphold the state's interests in global affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Now, the inquiry arises as to how we analyse India's foreign policy.

Is it primarily driven by ethical ideas, solely grounded in realistic assumptions, or a combination of idealistic and realistic principles?

India's foreign policy has traversed a considerable distance, spanning from Nehru to Modi. India's foreign policy has evolved from non-alignment to strategic autonomy to multi-alignment in response to the changing global order. This policy is shaped by India's traditional values and cultural heritage. India consistently adjusted its policy in response to both global and regional factors, without hesitation, based on pragmatic assumptions.

### **During Cold war**

#### **Nehru**

India has consistently strived to actively participate in international forums since gaining independence. In order to secure its position in a bipolar global landscape characterised by two dominant power blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union, India adopted a non-aligned policy rooted in the principles of panchsheel. The primary objective of this policy was to lead Asia and Africa in the pursuit of a fair global order, world peace, and the well-being of humanity. Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's inaugural prime minister, aspired to establish a multipolar and cooperative global system, in which major powers would collaborate harmoniously for the benefit of all nations. To achieve this goal, he advocated for non-alignment. As a result, India incorporated non-alignment into its foreign policy, aiming to uphold the principles of not joining military alliances, maintaining independence from powerful nations or blocs, promoting disarmament, fostering peaceful coexistence among all countries, and rejecting the use or threat of force in international relations. He possessed unwavering belief in international law and the United Nations Organisation. Nehru, the architect of India's foreign policy, is frequently characterised as an idealist. The reason for his behaviour might be attributed to his strong adherence to Gandhian values and his aversion to power politics. The principles of peaceful coexistence and peaceful relations among states of panchsheel were acknowledged by the UN, which was adopted on December 11, 1957.<sup>3</sup> India's adoption of a non-aligned stance in cold war politics facilitated its acquisition of enhanced international influence and authority. His idealistic nature is exemplified by his involvement in one of the events of the Indo-China war of 1962. Several experts have contended that his foreign policy is a synthesis of realism and idealism. According to Andrew Kennedy, Nehru's support for the UN was not solely driven by an idealistic aspiration to improve the world. He perceived the potential for a more robust United Nations to promote

significant Indian interests.<sup>4</sup>Nehru's endorsement of civilian nuclear energy showcased his recognition of India's imperative to possess the necessary nuclear power capacity as a precautionary measure against probable future developments.Nehru chose to take Goa by force against the objections of the colonial ruler, Portugal since Portugal was not willing to return its Indian possessions to Independent India.

### **Indira Gandhi**

Nehru's successors continued with his policy of peace and friendship towards all countries but for them India's security and territorial integrity was important. India's foreign policy underwent a small move towards realpolitik.<sup>5</sup> Under Indira Gandhi,India, on one hand still supported the cause of decolonization and continued to lead the effort on behalf of smaller states, on the other hand it also came to acknowledge the need of defense readiness. When Indira Gandhi assumed office, she declared that the values governing India's foreign policy were based on National interest, honour and dignity.<sup>6</sup> India conducted its inaugural nuclear test in 1974 during her leadership, showcasing its military capabilities and political influence. The reason for its nuclear test was the concurrent development of nuclear weapons programmes by its neighbouring countries, China and Pakistan. In 1971, upon witnessing the alignment of Beijing and Washington with Pakistan, Gandhi entered into a treaty of peace, friendship, and collaboration with the Soviet Union. Many see India's foreign policy under Indira Gandhi's overall guidance embodying realistic, rather than Nehru's idealistic, or liberal and normative, approaches to foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

### **Post Cold War**

#### **Narsimha Rao**

In the 1990s, following the dissolution of the USSR, the international structure transitioned from a bipolar to a unipolar system. Additionally, due to a crisis in the Indian economy, India was compelled to alter its foreign policy. As a result, India implemented the Look East policy under the leadership of Rao, which involved opening up its economy and strengthening its connections with Southeast Asian nations. He professed that India needed to look not just towards the developed countries of the west but also needed to learn from its eastern neighbours while deepening economic and security ties with them.Furthermore, India also enhanced its relations with the Arab countries of the Gulf.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Vajpayee**

Following the Cold War, India actively pursued its strategic autonomy while simultaneously seeking strong alliances with established major countries.The pursuit of strategic autonomy was primarily aimed at safeguarding its nuclear weapons capability.Vajpayee effectively upheld a harmonious equilibrium between Realism and constraint, as seen by his influence on three interconnected events. India's unequivocal declaration to become a nuclear-armed nation in 1998, the Kargil conflict in 1999, and subsequent diplomatic engagement with China.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Manmohan Singh**

During the 2000s, India benefited from the changing international system as the United States ceased to be the sole dominant power. This shift allowed for the

emergence of many regional organisations and countries that gained economic and military strength.

During this period, India reevaluated its foreign policy and emphasised the need for increased integration of its economy with the global economy. Manmohan Singh believed that India's foreign policy should give priority to economic concerns in order to enhance its relations with major powers. India reiterated its commitment to assisting other states in transitioning to open economic policies and democratic politics. He emphasised on India's economic interests, its economic relations with the other Asian economies, other developing and developed economies, in shaping Indian foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> India adopted a strategy of multi-alignment by actively participating in growing global and regional forums such as IBSA, SCO, ESA, BRICS, G20, etc. And furthermore, India got into strategic alliances arrangements with several countries. India not only strengthened its economic links with other nations, to balance off Chinese power it went into civil nuclear accord with US in 2005.

### **Modi**

Following the political transition in New Delhi in 2014, India's foreign policy saw a significant shift that aligned with India's longstanding traditions and culture. This shift aimed to safeguard India's global status and protect its interests.

Modi prioritised cultivating personal ties as a strategic approach to engage in diplomatic relations and enhance India's international reputation. Modi adeptly navigates the intricate geopolitical landscape of our time, characterised by significant multipolarity, by employing personal diplomacy and leveraging India's rich cultural heritage as a source of soft power. Modi has effectively established yoga and ayurveda as integral components of India's soft power, solidifying their status as the most significant cultural exports from the country.<sup>11</sup> In his book "Modi Doctrine The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister," Sreeram Chaulia argues that the Modi doctrine has established a notion of Indian exceptionalism based on the country's remarkable civilization and its valuable cultural contributions to humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Another notable characteristic of his foreign policy is the employment of individuals from the Indian diaspora as cultural envoys. Modi has actively interacted with them through prominent events such as the 'Howdy Modi' gathering in Houston, the rally at Madison Square Garden in New York, and the reception at Wembley stadium in England.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while other countries focused on their own needs, India took the lead in serving humanity, as it aligns with India's guiding principle of foreign policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India implemented its vaccine Maitri campaign by exporting hundreds of thousands of domestically produced Covishield vaccines to neighbouring and other countries. India's vaccine diplomacy has greatly benefited the country's ambitions to establish itself as a prominent global power.

In his inaugural Independence Day speech as Prime Minister of India, Modi emphasised India's aspiration to become a global leader by working towards the betterment of humanity, aligning with the ancient Indian philosophy of vasudhaiv kutumbkam.<sup>13</sup> His slogans, such as sabkasaath, sabkavishwas, sabkavikas, panchamrit, one Earth, one family, one future, signify India's intention to actively participate in global affairs while remaining true to its own values and principles.

India aspires to establish itself as a prominent global force by employing soft power diplomacy and public diplomacy, rather than relying on hard power diplomacy. India, under the leadership of Modi, has actively participated in various international forums and engaged with major powers, Middle Eastern powers, Asian powers, neighbouring countries, and multilateral and mini-lateral forums.

Similar to Singh, Modi has demonstrated significant enthusiasm for participating in multilateral forums where India can now actively engage. He is comfortable collaborating with the US-led Quad (comprised of the US, India, Australia, and Japan) on one hand, and with the BRICS, the SCO and G20, which are predominantly influenced by Russia and China, on the other. During India's assumption of the G20 Presidency, Modi expressed the intention to showcase India's experiences, knowledge, and models as potential blueprints for other nations, especially those in the developing world.

Under the leadership of Modi, India employs soft power diplomacy to engage and collaborate with states worldwide, while also adopting a firm stance towards its neighbouring countries, Pakistan and China. India offered the befitting reply to Pakistan through Balakot airstrikes in retribution to the Pulwama assault that took place on February 26, 2019, and to China, during the Doklam crisis for the first time, Indian forces entered the disputed border and impeded the PLA's construction of a road.

In the current geopolitical shifts, India faces real security risks from a rising China both on its disputed border and in the Indo-pacific region. To curb Chinese expansionism in the Indian Ocean, it is fiercely implementing its Act East Policy in partnership with ASEAN states and also joined the group of four democratic countries QUAD.

### **Final observations**

My understanding is that the success of India's foreign policy is constructed on both idealistic principles and realistic ideas but largely on the realistic assumptions because internally we are strengthening our economy and military prowess, developing new strategies and externally we are aligning with the major powers, entering into partnerships, joining the various groups to balance the power of other nations. In the midst of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, India has refrained from openly expressing disapproval towards Russia, as India seeks to avoid strengthening Russia's ties with China. India has also been taking advantage of cheap oil supplies from Russia made available due to the conflict. Modi, nonetheless, has done a balancing act by telling Russian President Vladimir Putin that it is "not a time for war".

India has always sought to or in the process of becoming a global power or Vishwa guru which is a realistic aspiration not by the use of hard power but through its goodwill by adopting the ideals of panchsheel for peaceful existence or the use of soft diplomacy in the multipolar globe. Moral dimension of policy making has always been there in India's foreign policy whatever leader came at the head of affairs of the nation but it does not imply they transformed into pacifists. Whenever confronted with security issues, it took its own position based on the facts so as to ensure that Indian interests are taken care of.

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