



India's foreign policy and the politics of global governance reform: A study of India's leadership in a multipolar world

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Abstract

The present international order is changing substantially as power is being redistributed among a greater number of important actors and is no longer centralised around one great power. The shifting balance of power has also generated pressure for greater reform of international governance institutions better to reflect current political, economic and military realities. In the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, for example, their outdated governance arrangements, which have yet to reflect current economic shifts (including in major emerging economies and the Global South), have continued to cause questions regarding their legitimacy, representation and efficacy.

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of academic literature, official policy documents, government statements, multilateral declarations, and reports of international organizations. It evaluates India's engagement with major multilateral platforms, including the G20, BRICS, the United Nations, the International Solar Alliance, and the Voice of the Global South initiative, to assess its contribution to institutional reform and international cooperation. The analysis argues that India's foreign policy has evolved beyond traditional strategic balancing to embrace coalition-building, development partnerships, climate diplomacy, and digital public infrastructure as key instruments of global engagement. The above measures have only led India to reinforce her credentials as a connecting country between the developed and developing world and pushed the agendas of the Global South. Nevertheless, India's leadership continues to face significant challenges arising from geopolitical rivalries, institutional resistance to reform, and the complexities of balancing strategic autonomy with expanding strategic partnerships. Therefore, India's diplomatic reach, economic prowess, and norm-based activism should provide it with an important role in constructing an open, inclusive, and adaptable model for the governance of the global order of the 21st century.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, global governance reform, multipolarity, strategic autonomy, Global South, multilateralism

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a significant transition from the post-Cold War unipolar order to an increasingly multipolar landscape. The rise of emerging economies, renewed great-power competition, and the growing influence of regional actors has reshaped global governance. Meanwhile, common challenges in areas like climate change, public health emergency, food security, energy security, digitalization, cybersecurity, geopolitical conflicts, and international peace and security call for reinforced cooperation ^[1]. These developments have exposed the limitations of existing global governance institutions, highlighting the need for more representative, inclusive, and effective multilateral frameworks capable of addressing contemporary global challenges.

Many of the principal institutions responsible for global governance, including the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), were established in the after the Second World War to reflect the political and economic realities of that period. However, the rapid redistribution of economic and strategic power over recent decades has generated increasing dissatisfaction with institutional arrangements that continue to underrepresent emerging economies and developing countries ^[2]. As a result, reforming global governance has become one of the central issues in contemporary international relations, with growing demands for decision-making structures that are more democratic, inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the interests of a wider range of states.

Within this changing international environment, India has emerged as an increasingly influential actor seeking to shape debates on global governance reform. Its sustained economic growth, demographic significance, expanding technological capabilities, and active diplomatic engagement have strengthened its position in international affairs. Rather than challenging the existing international order outright, India has consistently advocated reforms that would make multilateral institutions more representative while preserving their relevance and effectiveness ^[3]. This approach reflects India's broader aspiration to contribute to a stable international system in which both developed and developing countries participate more equitably in global decision-making.

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation since independence. During the Cold War, the doctrine of Non-Alignment emphasized strategic independence and resistance to bloc politics. After the Cold War era, however, changing geopolitical and economic conditions encouraged a more pragmatic and flexible foreign policy. Today, India's approach is commonly characterized by strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, enabling it to maintain constructive relations with diverse partners while safeguarding its national interests ^[4]. This evolution has allowed India to expand its engagement across multiple regional and global platforms and to assume a more proactive role in addressing issues such as sustainable development, climate governance, maritime security,

technology cooperation, and international institutional reform.

Not only was India's foreign policy no longer solely focused on its strategic and security goals, but it now increasingly included a strong developmental and normative dimension as well. India continued to play a constructive role in multiple multilateral engagements, including G20, BRICS, the UN, the International Solar Alliance (ISA), and Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure (CDRI), and the Voice of the Global South^[5]. These initiatives are part of efforts to bolster international collaboration and articulate national and global development priority issues of the Global South. For example, India played an important role during its 2023 G20 presidency in securing the African Union a permanent seat at the table, making global economic decision-making more inclusive.

The agenda India has advanced in areas like climate justice, digital public infrastructure, disaster-resilient infrastructure, and South-South cooperation has exemplified its active foreign policy for national gains as well as its role in promoting global public goods and an inclusive global order^[6].

Despite these developments, India's ambition to play a greater leadership role in global governance is accompanied by significant constraints. Intensifying strategic rivalry among major powers, persistent regional security challenges, institutional resistance to reform, and divergent interests within multilateral organizations complicate efforts to achieve meaningful change. Moreover, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy requires balancing cooperation with competing global powers while maintaining credibility as a representative of the Global South^[7]. These competing priorities present both opportunities and limitations for India's diplomatic engagement and raise important questions regarding the scope and effectiveness of its leadership in an evolving international order.

Although India's growing international profile has generated extensive scholarly interest, much of the existing literature examines individual dimensions of its foreign policy, such as bilateral strategic partnerships, regional security, or participation in specific international institutions. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how these diverse diplomatic initiatives collectively constitute a broader strategy for advancing global governance reform in a multipolar world. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how India's foreign policy has evolved to promote institutional reform, strengthen inclusive multilateralism, and enhance the representation of developing countries within global governance frameworks.

Theoretical Framework: India and Global Governance

The complexity of contemporary international politics requires a theoretical framework that explains how states pursue influence within an evolving global governance system. The foreign policy of India reflects the interaction of strategic interests, multilateral engagement, and normative commitments, making a single theoretical perspective insufficient. Accordingly, this study adopts an integrated framework that combines Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Strategic Autonomy. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical basis for examining India's role in advancing

global governance reform in an increasingly multipolar international order.

Global Governance and Multipolarity

Several scholars, including James N. Rosenau, Thomas G. Weiss, and Robert O. Keohane, have developed the notion of global governance and propose that there need not be a world government for efficient international cooperation, which works through international institutions, norms, rules, consultative processes, and cooperation^[8]. This consists of formal organisations and informal arrangements through which states, international organisations, civil society, and other non-state actors work together to tackle cross-border issues, including international peace and security, global warming, global health security, financial system stability, and sustainable development. The slow shift towards a multipolar international system has intensified demands to restructure the institutions of global governance, and in light of the growing power of some of the developing countries to make a dent on issues related to economy, politics, security, etc. The arrangements for international cooperation fashioned in the aftermath of World War II are considered insufficient for the present world scenario. Consequently, there has been increased discussion of institutional reform to improve representation, accountability, legitimacy, and effectiveness^[9].

India and several other like-minded countries will continue to have ample space to shape this reform process of world governance in an attempt to bring about a more egalitarian and representative world order.

Strategic Autonomy and India's Foreign Policy

Strategic autonomy is the cornerstone of India's contemporary foreign policy. Emerging from the legacy of Non-Alignment, the concept has gradually adapted to changing geopolitical realities. Scholars such as C. Raja Mohan, Shivshankar Menon, and Happymon Jacob view strategic autonomy as India's ability to pursue independent foreign policy decisions while engaging with diverse international partners^[10]. This approach enables India to cooperate across different geopolitical groupings without entering permanent alliance commitments.

In the sphere of global governance, strategic autonomy guides India's engagement with multilateral institutions and international partnerships. It provides the flexibility to respond to shifting global circumstances while safeguarding national interests. Consequently, India advocates reform of existing international institutions to improve their inclusiveness, representativeness, and effectiveness, rather than replacing the current multilateral framework. This approach reflects India's commitment to a more balanced and rules-based international order.

Theoretical Perspectives

According to Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth N. Waltz, the Realist school of thought in international politics holds that, in an anarchic international system, states strive to attain security, power, and national interests. In that regard, India's desire for a permanent seat on the UNSC, diversification of strategic alliances, and active role in multilateral organisations like BRICS and G20 can be taken as measures aimed at augmenting India's geopolitical clout and security interests, and improving India's status among powers that are increasingly shifting globally^[11].

On the contrary, Liberal Institutionalism (Robert O. Keohane and other institutionalists) views international organisations and regimes as crucial to fostering inter-state cooperation by minimising conflict through norms, transparency, and the rules of the game, enabling states to resolve mutual concerns together ^[12]. By continuing its active role in global institutional forums, even amid increased geopolitical rivalry, India believes that institutions and regimes can work to the advantage of all states concerned. India's push to reform global governance structures is driven by the assumption that they need to be more inclusive and more accountable to remain effective.

Through the Constructivist lens of IR theory, formulated by Alexander Wendt, international politics is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by ideas, norms, values, and identities. The role of norms in shaping India's foreign policy is evident in the promotion of the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) world order, South-South Cooperation, Climate Justice and Sustainable Development, as well as in leading the way in digital public infrastructure ^[13]. By attempting to influence global governance with shared values, collaborative partnerships, and cooperative norms coupled with self-interests, the policy indicates that India aims to improve the global governance structure.

Together, the three aforementioned approaches provide a holistic understanding of India's contribution to the evolving world order and global governance structures. Whereas the Realist view offers a strategic, power-based perspective on India's interests in the global order, Liberal Institutionalism provides insight into India's pragmatic policy choices in engaging with global governance institutions and forums. Finally, constructivist analysis presents how norms and values, and identity, play an important role in shaping the policy decisions of a nation in question. Combining all three can yield a deeper, more complex interpretation of India's role in global governance reform.

Analytical Framework

Drawing upon the above theoretical perspectives, this study evaluates India's role in global governance reform through three interrelated analytical dimensions.

The strategic dimension examines how India employs diplomacy to protect national interests, expand international influence, and strengthen its position within an increasingly multipolar international system. The institutional dimension focuses on India's participation in multilateral organizations and its efforts to improve the representativeness, legitimacy, and effectiveness of global governance institutions. The normative dimension assesses India's contribution to international norm-building through initiatives related to climate action, sustainable development, digital public infrastructure, South-South cooperation, and the broader interests of the Global South.

Together, these dimensions provide the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent sections. They enable a comprehensive assessment of how India combines strategic autonomy, multilateral engagement, and normative leadership to influence the evolution of a more inclusive and

representative framework of global governance in the twenty-first century.

India's Evolving Vision of Global Governance

India's perspective on global governance has evolved in response to profound changes in the international political and economic landscape. While its foreign policy continues to be guided by the principles of sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and multilateral cooperation, India has moved beyond a largely defensive diplomatic posture to play a more active role in debates on international institutional reform ^[14]. This evolution reflects India's growing recognition that contemporary global challenges require governance structures that are more representative, inclusive, and responsive to the interests of both developed and developing countries.

In the decades following independence, India's external relations were shaped by the doctrine of Non-Alignment, which emphasized independent decision-making and resistance to bloc politics during the Cold War. As the global balance of power shifted after the Cold War, India gradually adopted a more flexible foreign policy centred on strategic autonomy. This approach enables India to strengthen relations with diverse partners while preserving the freedom to pursue its own national priorities ^[15]. Consequently, Indian diplomacy has become increasingly pragmatic, favouring issue-based cooperation over ideological alignment.

India's expanding economic influence and diplomatic engagement have reinforced its commitment to improving the existing system of global governance. Rather than advocating a complete restructuring of international institutions, India argues that they should better reflect present-day geopolitical and economic realities. Its long-standing support for reform of the United Nations Security Council, greater participation of developing countries in global decision-making, and stronger multilateral cooperation illustrates this approach. India's participation in G20, BRICS, ISA, and Voice of the Global South also proves that India is striving for more equitable and participatory world governance ^[16].

Another defining feature of India's evolving vision is the increasing importance of normative leadership. Through ideas such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("The World is One Family") ^[17], India advocates international cooperation based on shared responsibility, mutual respect, and sustainable development. Its emphasis on climate justice, digital public infrastructure, disaster resilience, and South-South cooperation reflects an effort to link national development priorities with broader global interests.

Finally, India's approach to global governance is characterised by a synthesis of strategic autonomy, pragmatic engagement with existing international institutions, and normative diplomacy. By promoting reform within international bodies, fostering multilateral collaboration on shared interests, and voicing the aspirations of the Global South, India endeavours to enhance the legitimacy and resilience of an evolving multipolar international system. With the gradual increase of India's global standing and influence, its effectiveness in achieving these objectives is a significant parameter of its leadership on the world stage ^[18].

India's Leadership in Reforming Global Governance Institutions

India is an assertive advocate of reform for global institutions so that they are better reflective of the present realities of geo politics and geo-economics. It argues that multilateral institutions should become more representative, transparent, and responsive to the interests of developing countries and emerging economies. Rather than challenging the existing international order, India supports institutional reforms that strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of global governance. However, Reforming the United Nations Security Council has been a central part of India's UN reforms. India argues that the existing UNSC reflects the changing balance of global power in an obsolete manner and thus advocates for expansion of both permanent and non-permanent seats. India, a member of the G4 group of countries, advocates reforming the UNSC to make it more representative so it can effectively meet new global challenges^[19].

India has also strengthened its role in global economic governance through active participation in the G20 and BRICS. It's G20 Presidency in 2023 emphasized sustainable development, digital transformation, climate action, and reform of multilateral development institutions. India's efforts to strengthen the voice of developing nations on global issues were also seen in the addition of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20^[20]. Its participation in the BRICS group also contributes to improved cooperation among emerging economies and to the overall global financial order.

However, it has also backed concrete steps that help global governance. These include a climate diplomacy coalition in the form of the International Solar Alliance, efforts to build resilience to climate and natural hazards through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, support for South-South cooperation, and an initiative of Voice of the Global South. India also boosted digital diplomacy through sharing its experience with Digital Public Infrastructure and helping to establish technology alliances among developing countries^[21]. Although progress on institutional reform remains constrained by geopolitical rivalries and resistance from established powers, India's sustained commitment to multilateral diplomacy, coalition-building, and development cooperation has enhanced its influence in global governance. By combining strategic autonomy with inclusive multilateral engagement, India continues to play an increasingly important role in promoting a more representative and resilient international order.

India's Normative and Developmental Leadership in a Multipolar World

India's growing international influence is increasingly reflected in its ability to shape global governance through normative leadership and development cooperation. Rather than relying primarily on military or economic power, India projects influence by promoting principles of equity, inclusiveness, and shared development. This approach complements its broader foreign policy objective of strengthening multilateralism while addressing the concerns of developing countries.

A distinctive feature of India's international engagement is its emphasis on development partnerships. Through concessional financing, capacity-building programmes, technical assistance, and infrastructure projects, India has

supported socio-economic development across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. Unlike traditional donor-recipient models, India's development cooperation is based on mutual benefit, demand-driven assistance, and respect for national ownership, making it an important instrument of South-South cooperation^[22].

India has also expanded its contribution to global public goods through humanitarian assistance and disaster response. Under its policy of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), India has provided emergency relief, medical supplies, evacuation support, and post-disaster reconstruction assistance to countries affected by natural disasters and humanitarian crises^[23]. These efforts have strengthened India's reputation as a reliable first responder in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond.

Another important dimension of India's leadership is digital governance. Drawing on its experience with Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), India has promoted affordable and inclusive digital solutions in areas such as digital identity, electronic payments, and public service delivery. By encouraging knowledge sharing and technological cooperation, India seeks to reduce the digital divide and support sustainable development in partner countries^[24].

India has further strengthened its global profile through contributions to international peace and human security. As one of the largest contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations, India has played a significant role in conflict stabilization, civilian protection, and post-conflict peace building. Its growing engagement in global health cooperation, including vaccine assistance, pharmaceutical supply chains, and medical capacity building, has also reinforced its commitment to international solidarity during periods of global crisis^[25].

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that India's leadership extends beyond institutional reform to encompass development cooperation, humanitarian diplomacy, digital innovation, and global public goods. By combining practical assistance with principles of partnership and inclusivity, India is expanding its influence as a constructive stakeholder in an increasingly multipolar international order.

Challenges to India's Leadership

Despite its growing international stature, India's aspiration to play a leading role in global governance is accompanied by several structural, geopolitical, and domestic challenges. These constraints influence the country's ability to promote institutional reform, strengthen multilateral cooperation, and sustain long-term international leadership.

1. The changing geopolitical context, as the global power competition intensifies. The triangular balance among the USA, Russia, and China shapes many regional geopolitical dynamics. It challenges the "balancing act" that India is expected to navigate while preserving its strategic autonomy and maintaining productive relationships with both rival poles.
2. Progress towards reforming global governance institutions remains slow. Although India has consistently advocated greater representation for emerging economies and developing countries, proposals to reform institutions such as the United Nations Security Council have encountered political disagreements, procedural barriers, and limited consensus among member states.

3. Persistent regional security concerns continue to influence India's foreign policy priorities. Border tensions, cross-border terrorism, maritime security in the Indian Ocean and instability in neighbouring regions require sustained diplomatic engagement and security preparedness, often diverting attention from broader global initiatives.
 4. The fragmentation of the international system has made multilateral cooperation increasingly difficult. Divergent national interests, geopolitical polarization, and competing strategic agendas frequently hinder consensus on global issues, limiting the effectiveness of collective decision-making and slowing institutional reform.
 5. Domestic development remains an equally important priority. Continued investment in infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment generation, energy security, and technological advancement is essential for sustaining economic growth. Balancing these internal requirements with expanding international responsibilities remains an ongoing policy challenge.
 6. Effective global leadership also depends on adequate diplomatic, financial, and institutional capacity. Expanding development partnerships, humanitarian assistance, peace building initiatives, and international cooperation requires sustained investment in foreign policy institutions and administrative capabilities.
 7. As an influential voice of the Global South, India is expected to represent the interests of developing countries while simultaneously advancing its own strategic, economic, and security objectives. Reconciling these expectations with national priorities requires a balanced and credible diplomatic approach.
2. The country's large youth population and growing skilled workforce offer significant opportunities to promote innovation, research, entrepreneurship, and knowledge-driven development. Strengthening human capital will improve India's competitiveness and reinforce its long-term diplomatic and economic influence.
 3. Technological innovation is likely to become an increasingly important component of India's foreign policy. Advances in artificial intelligence, digital public infrastructure, financial technology, and digital governance create opportunities to expand international collaboration and support digital transformation in developing countries.
 4. Global concerns related to climate change, clean energy, and environmental sustainability provides India with an opportunity to assume a larger leadership role in promoting renewable energy, climate adaptation, and sustainable development. Active participation in these areas can enhance India's contribution to international environmental governance.
 5. In capacity building, technical cooperation and development partnerships, India's experiences hold vast potential to develop engagement with countries throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific. Enhancing these partnerships could further deepen South-South cooperation and enhance India's stature as a trusted development partner.
 6. The growing importance of regional connectivity and strategic partnerships creates opportunities for India to enhance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean Region, Africa, and other emerging regions. Greater collaboration in trade, infrastructure, maritime security, and economic connectivity can contribute to regional stability and shared prosperity.
 7. As debates on reforming international institutions continue, India has an opportunity to play a more influential role in shaping future governance frameworks. By promoting dialogue, inclusive decision-making and consensus-based diplomacy, India can contribute to the development of institutions that are better equipped to address contemporary global challenges.

Overall, India's future role in global governance will depend not only on its economic growth and strategic influence but also on its ability to manage geopolitical uncertainty, strengthen domestic capabilities, and build international consensus for meaningful institutional reform. Successfully addressing these challenges will determine the extent to which India can translate its growing global influence into sustained and effective leadership in a multipolar world.

Emerging Opportunities and Future Prospects

The transformation of the international system presents new opportunities for India to strengthen its role in global governance. The diffusion of global power, expansion of emerging economies, and increasing demand for cooperative solutions to transnational challenges have created an environment in which India can exercise greater diplomatic influence. Sustained economic growth, technological advancement, and an expanding international presence place India in a favourable position to contribute more effectively to global decision-making.

1. India's expanding economy provides a stronger foundation for international engagement. Continued economic growth can enhance the country's influence in global trade, investment, financial governance, and development cooperation while increasing its ability to contribute to international economic stability.

Overall, India's future influence will depend on its ability to convert economic progress, technological capability, and diplomatic engagement into meaningful international outcomes. Continued investment in innovation, institutional capacity, and multilateral cooperation will strengthen India's position as an influential stakeholder in a more representative and resilient multipolar international order.

Conclusion

The transformation of the international system towards greater multipolarity has created renewed momentum for reforming global governance institutions. As global challenges become increasingly interconnected, the effectiveness of international cooperation depends on governance structures that are more representative,

inclusive, and capable of responding to contemporary political, economic, and developmental realities. Within this context, India has strengthened its position as an influential participant in global affairs by advocating institutional reform, supporting multilateral cooperation, and promoting the interests of developing countries.

This study has shown that the evolution of India's foreign policy reflects a gradual transition from the principles of Non-Alignment to a more flexible framework of strategic autonomy. This shift has enabled India to engage with diverse international partners while preserving independent decision-making and adapting to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. Rather than pursuing leadership through traditional power politics alone, India has expanded its international role by combining diplomatic engagement, development partnerships, technological cooperation, and support for global public goods.

The analysis further indicates that India's contribution to global governance extends beyond calls for institutional reform. Its engagement in climate action, digital innovation, humanitarian assistance, capacity building, and South–South cooperation demonstrates an approach that links national development with broader international responsibilities. At the same time, India's efforts continue to be influenced by geopolitical competition, regional security challenges, institutional inertia, and domestic developmental priorities. These factors underline that effective international leadership requires not only diplomatic ambition but also sustained economic growth, institutional capacity, and broad-based international support.

Looking ahead, India's prospects for shaping global governance remain promising. Its expanding economy, demographic strengths, technological capabilities, and active participation in multilateral diplomacy provide important opportunities to influence the future direction of international cooperation. By encouraging dialogue, strengthening partnerships, and supporting equitable institutional reform, India can make a meaningful contribution to a more balanced and resilient international order. India's leadership in a multipolar world is best understood as a combination of strategic autonomy, constructive multilateral engagement, and development-oriented diplomacy. The country's growing influence will ultimately depend on its ability to transform policy initiatives into durable institutional outcomes and practical international cooperation. If these efforts continue, India is likely to play an increasingly significant role in shaping a global governance framework that is more representative, responsive, and better equipped to address the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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