



# India's Evolving Foreign Policy: Leadership and Diplomacy in the Global South (2000–2025)

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the evolution of India's foreign policy between 2000 and 2025 and evaluates how the country has positioned itself as a leading voice of the Global South. Building on its postcolonial legacy of non-alignment and South–South cooperation, India has adopted a multi-dimensional strategy that integrates multilateral diplomacy, development finance, vaccine and health diplomacy, digital public infrastructure sharing, and strategic partnerships. Through platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations, India has increasingly shaped global governance debates, advocating for equity, climate justice, institutional reform, and inclusive development. Initiatives like Vaccine Maitri, concessional Lines of Credit, and digital cooperation demonstrate a shift from symbolic leadership to tangible implementation. However, India's leadership remains constrained by capacity limits, domestic pressures, and geopolitical competition. The paper concludes that India's emerging leadership model blends normative advocacy with pragmatic partnership, offering an alternative, non-coercive framework for Global South cooperation.*

**Keywords:** *India's Foreign Policy, Global South Leadership, Multilateral Diplomacy, South–South Cooperation, Vaccine Diplomacy, Development Finance, Digital Public Infrastructure, Strategic Autonomy.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a transformation in the global order, marked by the relative decline of Western hegemony and the growing influence of developing nations, collectively referred to as the *Global South*. The term *Global South* encompasses countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Oceania that share historical experiences of colonialism, economic underdevelopment, and aspirations for equitable global governance. *Global South leadership*, therefore, refers to the ability of one or more states within this group to articulate, represent, and advance the common political, economic, and developmental interests of these countries in international forums. Such leadership is not defined purely by economic might, but by agenda-setting power, coalition-building, and the projection of soft power that resonates with other developing nations (Acharya, 2017; Ticker, 2019).

Since the early 2000s, India's foreign policy has undergone a strategic evolution that aligns with the international landscape. Building upon its postcolonial legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and South–South cooperation, India has sought to redefine its global role — not merely as a regional power, but as a *voice and advocate of the Global South*. This shift is evident in India's increasing diplomatic activism in multilateral platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations; its humanitarian outreach through *Vaccine Maitri* during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sridharan, 2021); and its development partnerships with African, Asian, and Latin American nations. India's self-identification as the "*Vishwaguru*" (world teacher) and "*Voice of the Global South*" further underscores its intent to merge moral leadership with practical diplomacy.

The time frame of this study — *2000 to the present* — captures a distinct period in India's external engagement. The early 2000s marked a post-liberalization consolidation phase when India's economic rise, technological growth, and greater participation in global governance began to translate into foreign policy assertiveness (Mohan, 2003; Jacob, 2020). This era includes critical developments such as the 2008 U.S.–India civil nuclear deal, participation in BRICS formation (2009), India–Africa Forum Summits (since 2008), the "Act East" policy, and more recently, India's G20 presidency in 2023. Taken together, these milestones demonstrate a systematic attempt to position India as a credible and influential leader within the Global South.

How has India's foreign policy evolved since 2000 to position itself as a leader of the Global South, and through what diplomatic, economic, and soft-power strategies has it advanced this leadership role?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The evolution of India's foreign policy in the 21st century has generated a wide and diverse body of scholarship that examines the country's strategic choices, ideological foundations, and emerging leadership roles. Existing literature may be broadly grouped into four thematic strands: continuity and change in Indian foreign policy, South–South cooperation and development diplomacy, India's multilateral and regional engagements, and emerging debates on Global South leadership.

### Continuity and Change in Indian Foreign Policy

Scholars such as C. Raja Mohan (2003), Shashi Tharoor (2012), and David Malone (2011) highlight how India's post-1991 liberalization initiated a transition from moral idealism to strategic pragmatism (Mohan, 2003; Tharoor, 2012; Malone, 2011). The early 2000s marked a decisive phase when India sought to balance *strategic autonomy* with *global integration*.

Authors like Harsh Pant and Happymon Jacob argue that while the Nehruvian legacy of non-alignment endures, it has evolved into “**multi-alignment**”, reflecting India’s simultaneous engagement with the U.S., Russia, China, and regional groupings (Pant, 2019). This approach has allowed India to protect its national interests while retaining its independent foreign policy identity — a prerequisite for credible Global South leadership.

#### **South–South Cooperation and Development Diplomacy**

A second body of work focuses on India’s re-emergence as a development partner within the Global South. According to Chaturvedi (2016) and Mohan & Das (2020), India’s South–South cooperation emphasizes mutual benefit and capacity-building rather than conditional aid. Initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, the Development Partnership Administration (DPA), and the Lines of Credit to African and Asian states are frequently cited as institutional manifestations of India’s developmental diplomacy. Scholars have also noted that India’s Vaccine Maitri program during the COVID-19 pandemic and leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA) reflect its growing emphasis on health, energy, and climate diplomacy — areas of high salience to developing countries (Sridharan, 2021).

#### **Multilateralism and Global Governance**

Studies by Malone & Mukherjee (2010), Saran (2023), and Hall (2014) examine India’s active participation in global and regional forums such as BRICS, IBSA, G20, and the United Nations (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010; Saran, 2023; Hall, 2014). The literature suggests that India uses these platforms to amplify the concerns of developing economies and advocate for the reform of global governance institutions. Its G20 presidency in 2023 is frequently cited as a turning point, showcasing India’s role as a “bridge” between developed and developing worlds (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). However, scholars also point out the limitations of India’s influence, noting that institutional inertia and resource constraints sometimes reduce its capacity to translate diplomatic leadership into policy outcomes (Bajpai, 2022).

#### **Theoretical and Critical Perspectives on Global South Leadership**

Recent literature explores the conceptual foundations of “Global South leadership.” Scholars like Acharya (2017) and Tickner (2019) discuss how leadership in the Global South is often rooted in *normative power* — the ability to shape global discourse around equity, sustainability, and justice — rather than coercive or material power (Acharya, 2017; Ticker, 2019). Within this framework, India’s leadership is understood as “normative and solidarist”, emphasizing inclusivity and shared growth. Critical scholars, however, question whether India’s alignment with Western powers (e.g., through the Quad) undermines its claim to Global South representation (Singh, 2020). Others argue that India’s leadership is aspirational and situational, varying across issues and regions (Narlikar, 2021).

#### **Gaps in the Literature**

While existing research provides valuable insights into India’s external engagements, two key gaps remain.

First, few studies comprehensively trace how India’s domestic political and economic transformation since 2000 has reshaped its global leadership strategy. Second, there is limited analysis of how India’s new instruments of diplomacy — such as digital infrastructure sharing, humanitarian assistance, and climate financing — contribute to its positioning as a developmental leader in the Global South. Addressing these gaps offers an opportunity to better understand the mechanisms through which India’s foreign policy evolution underpins its emerging global identity.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that India’s foreign policy in the 21st century has moved beyond traditional non-alignment to a dynamic, multi-dimensional strategy that combines strategic autonomy, developmental cooperation, and normative advocacy. However, scholars remain divided on whether India’s approach constitutes genuine leadership or symbolic representation. This research therefore seeks to examine how India’s diplomatic initiatives, multilateral engagement, and development partnerships collectively function to position it as a credible and practical leader of the Global South.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

India’s foreign policy has historically reflected a balance between moral idealism and pragmatic self-interest. At independence in 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundations of a distinct foreign policy identity grounded in *non-alignment*, *anti-colonial solidarity*, and *peaceful coexistence*. This Nehruvian vision emphasized political autonomy, support for decolonization, and leadership among newly independent nations — ideas that later coalesced into the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). During the Cold War, India positioned itself as a moral voice for the developing world, advocating disarmament, equitable economic order, and South–South cooperation. However, despite its ideological leadership, India’s limited economic capacity and inward-looking development model constrained its global influence during the mid-20th century (Hall, 2014).

The end of the Cold War and the economic liberalization of 1991 marked a turning point. The collapse of the Soviet Union, India’s long-standing partner, forced New Delhi to recalibrate its foreign relations and integrate with the global economy. The shift from a state-controlled to a market-oriented economy expanded India’s international engagement, creating new strategic and economic opportunities (Mohan, 2003). In this period, India began diversifying its diplomatic partnerships — strengthening ties with the United States, the European Union, and East Asian economies — while retaining its traditional commitment to the developing world. The emphasis on *strategic autonomy* replaced rigid non-alignment, giving rise to what scholars term “multi-alignment” or “issue-based alignment,” reflecting India’s pragmatic adaptation to globalization (Jacob, 2020).

From the early 2000s onward, India’s foreign policy evolved to reflect both continuity with its anti-colonial past and change in its global aspirations. Continuity was visible in its enduring rhetoric of solidarity with developing nations — seen in support for United Nations reforms, advocacy for fair trade rules, and emphasis on sustainable development. Yet, change emerged in the methods and scale of engagement: India increasingly used economic diplomacy, technology transfer, and development assistance as tools of influence. This pragmatic turn was evident in initiatives such as the India–Africa Forum Summits (2008, 2011, 2015), the Lines of Credit program for infrastructure projects in Asia and Africa, and active participation in BRICS and G20 platforms (Sharan, 2023). This period also marked India’s gradual shift from being a “voice among many” in the Global South to positioning itself as a *leading representative* of its collective concerns. The growing recognition of India as an emerging power — supported by its IT and pharmaceutical industries, demographic advantage, and democratic credentials — allowed it to project leadership more confidently. This continuity of ideals and change in instruments defines India’s 21st-century foreign policy: a synthesis of its postcolonial legacy and contemporary aspirations for global influence.

## INSTITUTIONAL AND DIPLOMATIC PLATFORMS

India's emergence as a leader of the Global South has been closely tied to its active participation and leadership in multilateral institutions. Over the past two decades, India has strategically leveraged global and regional platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations to articulate the developmental priorities of the Global South while reinforcing its image as a responsible global actor. Through these forums, India has sought to balance its national interests with broader collective concerns — poverty reduction, climate justice, equitable global governance, and debt sustainability — thereby consolidating its diplomatic credibility among developing nations.

### The G20 Presidency and Global South Advocacy

India's G20 Presidency in 2023 marked a defining moment in its quest for Global South leadership. Under the theme “*One Earth, One Family, One Future*” (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*), India emphasized inclusive growth, digital transformation, green development, and reform of global financial institutions (Saran, 2023). More significantly, it positioned the G20 as a platform for amplifying the voices of the Global South, which are often underrepresented in global decision-making. India's hosting of the “Voice of the Global South Summit” in January 2023 — which brought together over 120 developing countries — symbolized its attempt to institutionalize South–South dialogue within the G20 process.

Through these initiatives, India sought to translate moral solidarity into policy influence. Its advocacy for debt relief for low-income countries, expansion of digital public infrastructure (such as India Stack), and the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent G20 member demonstrated concrete steps toward inclusive multilateralism. By framing the G20 agenda around issues that resonate across the developing world, India successfully projected itself as a *bridge-builder* between the industrialized North and the developing South.

Stated Priority (India's Agenda)	Examples of Proposed Initiatives	Reflected in Final G20 Leaders' Declaration?	Remarks / Outcome
Voice of Global South	Inclusion of African Union as permanent G20 member	Yes	Major diplomatic success symbolizing South inclusion
Green Development and Climate Finance	Global Biofuels Alliance, Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE)	Yes	Endorsed in G20 Declaration; institutionalized via alliances
Digital Public Infrastructure	DPI as global model for inclusion	Partial	Acknowledged; working group created
Reform of Multilateral Institutions	UN, WTO, IMF reforms	No	Deferred for future negotiations
Women-led Development	Gender equality, financial inclusion	Yes	Included in action points and side events

**Table 1.** shows that India achieved tangible progress on inclusivity, notably with the African Union's admission, while reform proposals for global institutions saw limited consensus. This highlights both the potential and constraints of India's Global South advocacy within established multilateral frameworks.

### BRICS: A Counterbalance to Western-Dominated Institutions

Beyond the G20, India's engagement with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has been central to its strategy of shaping alternative models of global governance. Since its formation in 2009, BRICS has served as a coalition of major emerging economies seeking to reform the international financial system and promote multipolarity. For India, BRICS represents both an opportunity and a challenge: an opportunity to champion South–South cooperation through initiatives like the New Development Bank (NDB), and a challenge due to geopolitical frictions with China (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010).

Despite these tensions, India has used BRICS to advance its developmental diplomacy — emphasizing infrastructure financing, technology sharing, and sustainable development. The expansion of BRICS in 2024, incorporating more countries from Africa and Latin America, further reinforced its Global South character. India's continued participation and leadership within BRICS illustrate its pragmatic approach: engaging in cooperative frameworks that amplify Southern agency while maintaining strategic autonomy from both Western and Chinese dominance.

### The United Nations and the Quest for Systemic Reform

At the United Nations, India has consistently advocated for reforms that reflect the realities of a multipolar world. Its demand for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC) is often framed not merely as a national aspiration, but as a call for fair representation of the Global South. India's participation in UN peacekeeping missions, its leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), and its contributions to UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) all reinforce its image as a responsible global partner committed to equitable development.

India's discourse at the UN also reflects continuity with its postcolonial heritage emphasizing sovereignty, development, and climate equity — while adopting a modern, solutions-oriented posture. For example, its advocacy for climate finance and technology transfer for developing countries aligns with the principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities*, resonating strongly with other Global South nations.

### Synthesis: From Participant to Agenda-Setter

Taken together, these multilateral engagements demonstrate a clear evolution in India's diplomatic posture — from a *participant* in the Global South movement during the Cold War to an *agenda-setter* in the 21st century. By embedding the concerns of developing nations into the agendas of powerful institutions like the G20 and BRICS, India has strengthened its legitimacy as a leader that speaks for and acts on behalf of the Global South. This institutional activism not only enhances India's soft power but also complements its broader strategy of achieving global influence through developmental partnership and normative leadership.

India can consolidate its leadership of the Global South by moving beyond episodic summits and creating permanent institutional structures that anchor its role.

Establishing a Global South Secretariat in India, supported by dedicated research units, policy cells, and technical teams would transform these dialogues into ongoing, outcome-oriented engagement. India could further institutionalize cooperation by creating standing working groups on climate finance, digital governance, health resilience, and food security, ensuring that Global South priorities are systematically articulated and advanced. Complementing this, a South–South Development Cooperation Fund would allow India to offer predictable, structured financial assistance rather than ad-hoc grants. Together, these mechanisms would convert India’s soft-power outreach into a durable architecture of leadership, enabling it to serve as the principal convenor and coordinator for developing-country interests.

## HEALTH AND VACCINE DIPLOMACY

Health diplomacy has become a vital instrument of India’s foreign policy, particularly in advancing its leadership within the Global South. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity for India to project itself as a reliable and compassionate global partner through initiatives such as “Vaccine Maitri” (Vaccine Friendship)(Sridharan, 2021). By supplying vaccines, medicines, and medical equipment to developing countries, India positioned itself not only as the “pharmacy of the world” but also as a humanitarian actor committed to equitable global health access.

### Vaccine Maitri: Symbol of Global Solidarity

Launched in January 2021, the Vaccine Maitri initiative epitomized India’s philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — the world as one family. Under this program, India exported vaccines to over 100 countries, including its South Asian neighbors (Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan), African partners (Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique), and nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. These supplies were delivered through multiple channels: grants, commercial exports, and COVAX contributions.

By March 2021, India had exported over 60 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, produced by the Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech. This swift outreach earned India international praise for its commitment to vaccine equity, particularly when many Western nations were criticized for *vaccine nationalism*. For several developing countries, India’s timely assistance filled critical gaps left by global supply shortages, reinforcing its image as a responsible and generous Global South leader.

Year	Gifted (million doses)	Commercial (million doses)	COVAX (million doses)	Total Supplied (million doses)	Number of Recipient Countries
2020	0	5	0	5	3
2021	107	35	65	207	94
2022	8	12	10	30	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>242</b>	—

**Table 2.** Vaccine Maitri distribution by category (gift, commercial, and COVAX) between 2020–2022.

### Strategic and Diplomatic Impact

While humanitarian in spirit, India’s vaccine diplomacy also carried clear strategic undertones. By prioritizing neighboring and partner nations, India strengthened regional goodwill and competed with China’s simultaneous “Health Silk Road” vaccine diplomacy. In South Asia, Vaccine Maitri helped repair regional ties strained by trade disputes and border tensions, while in Africa and Latin America, it enhanced India’s visibility as an alternative development partner.

Furthermore, India’s vaccine outreach complemented its participation in the Quad Vaccine Partnership, which sought to expand vaccine manufacturing in the Indo-Pacific. This demonstrated India’s ability to blend South–South cooperation with North–South collaboration, bridging diverse geopolitical groupings to promote global public goods. Such flexibility reflects India’s modern diplomatic identity — pragmatic, inclusive, and centered on shared human welfare.

### Constraints and Lessons Learned

Despite its early success, the Vaccine Maitri initiative faced setbacks when a severe second wave of COVID-19 struck India in mid-2021, leading to a temporary suspension of exports. This interruption, while necessary for domestic reasons, exposed the limits of India’s manufacturing capacity and the challenges of balancing domestic priorities with global commitments. Some recipient nations expressed disappointment, which temporarily dented India’s reputation.

However, India resumed exports later in 2021, reaffirming its long-term commitment to global health cooperation. The episode offered valuable lessons in policy coordination, supply chain resilience, and the need for scaling up public health infrastructure. It also underscored the broader theme of India’s Global South diplomacy: *leadership rooted in solidarity, but constrained by capacity* (Sridharan, 2021).

### Beyond COVID-19: A Model for Health Cooperation

India’s vaccine diplomacy represents more than an emergency response — it signals a durable model for future health and development partnerships. India continues to support medical training, telemedicine projects, and pharmaceutical production in African and Asian countries. Initiatives like the Pan-African e-Network Project and the Ayushman Bharat Digital Health Mission showcase India’s capacity to share technological expertise with developing nations.

Through these efforts, India has extended its influence from mere aid provision to capacity-building, empowering partner countries to enhance their own healthcare systems. This transition from transactional assistance to transformational cooperation strengthens India’s claim to moral and developmental leadership within the Global South (Chaturvedi, 2016; Mohan & Das, 2020).

In summary, Vaccine Maitri and related health diplomacy initiatives demonstrate how India transformed its pharmaceutical and technological strengths into tools of global influence. By prioritizing accessibility, equity, and shared progress, India redefined the contours of Global South leadership — not as dominance, but as partnership and solidarity in action.

## DEVELOPMENT FINANCE AND SOUTH–SOUTH COOPERATION

While moral solidarity and diplomatic rhetoric remain key aspects of India’s Global South narrative, its credibility as a leader increasingly depends on tangible economic engagement. Over the past two decades, India has institutionalized development finance, technical cooperation, and capacity-building programs that directly support partner countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Pacific.

Through instruments such as Lines of Credit (LoCs), grant assistance, and technical training programs, India has positioned itself as both a development partner and an advocate for a more equitable global economic order (Mohan & Das, 2020).

### **Institutional Foundations of Development Partnership**

The cornerstone of India's development cooperation is the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS), launched in 2004, which provides concessional Lines of Credit (LoC) to developing countries through the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of India. These LoCs are designed to finance infrastructure, agriculture, education, energy, and technology projects, aligning with the recipient country's priorities while promoting Indian expertise and technology.

Between 2004 and 2024, India extended over \$30 billion in LoCs to more than 65 countries, with a significant concentration in Africa and South Asia. Projects funded include railways in Mozambique and Ghana, power plants in Myanmar, sugar factories in Ethiopia, and water supply systems in Tanzania. This approach emphasizes partnership, and focuses on capacity-building rather than dependency (Bajpai, 2022).

### **Africa: The Heart of India's South-South Engagement**

Africa has emerged as a central pillar of India's development diplomacy. Through successive India-Africa Forum Summits (IAFS) — held in 2008 (New Delhi), 2011 (Addis Ababa), and 2015 (New Delhi) — India institutionalized a framework for long-term cooperation in trade, education, health, and infrastructure. These summits highlighted shared postcolonial experiences and development challenges, while offering concrete programs for technology transfer, skills development, and renewable energy.

India's development partnership with Africa also includes scholarship schemes (under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation, or ITEC), vocational training centers, and pan-African digital connectivity projects. Notably, the Pan-African e-Network Project, launched in 2009, has linked African universities and hospitals with Indian institutions through tele-education and telemedicine. Such initiatives strengthen India's reputation as a knowledge partner rather than a donor, resonating strongly with the ethos of South-South cooperation (Chaturvedi, 2016).

### **Expanding Outreach in Asia and the Indo-Pacific**

In Asia, India has used its development finance to bolster regional connectivity and strategic stability. Through the Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, India has financed infrastructure projects in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, including hydropower stations, road networks, and border linkages. These efforts aim to enhance economic interdependence, counterbalance external influences, and foster a sense of regional community.

Beyond its immediate neighborhood, India has expanded cooperation in the Pacific Islands, Central Asia, and Latin America, using both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. The Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), for instance, channels Indian grants for climate resilience and renewable energy, reinforcing its image as a responsible partner for small island developing states (Mohan & Das, 2020).

### **Principles Distinguishing India's Development Model**

India's development finance model stands out for its demand-driven, non-intrusive, and capacity-oriented approach. Indian assistance respects recipient sovereignty and responds to locally identified priorities, truly embodying the spirit of *South-South cooperation* — equality, mutual benefit, and respect.

Moreover, India's programs integrate human resource development through initiatives like ITEC and the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Fund, emphasizing knowledge-sharing and technology diffusion. These elements reinforce India's soft power by cultivating goodwill and long-term partnerships with emerging generations of professionals and policymakers in partner nations (Chaturvedi, 2016; Mohan & Das, 2020).

## **INDIA'S UNIFIED PAYMENTS INTERFACE (UPI) MODEL AND THE EXPANSION OF DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE DIPLOMACY**

India's UPI has evolved from a domestic digital payments success to a model increasingly adopted across the Global South. Through partnerships and technology-sharing via NPCI International, countries such as Singapore, the UAE, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka have integrated UPI or developed UPI-based systems to expand financial inclusion and modernize their payment infrastructure. This international outreach has strengthened India's digital diplomacy and positioned it as a leader in offering low-cost, scalable fintech solutions to developing nations (Pant, 2019).

### **Strategic and Economic Implications**

India's development partnerships are not purely altruistic; they also serve strategic and economic goals. By financing infrastructure and capacity-building projects, India expands markets for its industries, strengthens energy and food security, and builds diplomatic support in multilateral forums. Many LoC recipient countries have backed India's candidature for a permanent UN Security Council seat and other international roles.

At the same time, India's engagement provides an alternative to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering developing nations a more transparent and locally attuned model of cooperation. This competitive yet constructive positioning enhances India's credibility as a *trustworthy* and *inclusive* leader of the Global South (Bajpai, 2022).

In essence, India's development finance architecture represents the material foundation of its Global South leadership. By combining financial assistance, capacity-building, and mutual respect, India has created a sustainable model of partnership that reinforces both its diplomatic influence and its moral legitimacy in international affairs (Chaturvedi, 2016).

## **GEOPOLITICS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

India's aspiration to lead the Global South unfolds within a complex geopolitical environment where major-power competition, regional rivalries, and transnational challenges intersect. To maintain credibility with developing countries while maximizing its national interest, India pursues a strategy of strategic autonomy: engaging with multiple partners, joining issue-based coalitions, and resisting exclusive alignments that could undermine its role as an independent voice for the Global South. This balancing act shapes India's partnerships with the United States, Russia, China, the Middle East, and regional groupings across the Indo-Pacific and Africa (Singh, 2020).

### **Balancing Great Power Relations**

India's relations with the United States have deepened markedly since the early 2000s, encompassing defense cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and economic ties.

These links enhance India's strategic heft and technological capabilities, enabling it to contribute more substantively to global forums. Simultaneously, India maintains important historical ties with Russia, particularly in defense procurement and energy cooperation, reflecting enduring strategic complementarities. Managing these relationships allows India to access advanced technologies and political support without becoming overly dependent on any single patron — a core attribute of its claim to speak for an autonomous, non-aligned Global South (Jacob, 2020).

At the same time, India's relations with China present both constraints and incentives. Competition over regional influence, border disputes, and differing visions of global governance have pushed India to fortify partnerships with like-minded democracies and regional partners. Nevertheless, India continues to engage China diplomatically and economically where mutual interests exist, underscoring a pragmatic approach that privileges issue-based cooperation over ideological rigidity (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). For example, even during periods of heightened border tensions, India has continued to work with China within BRICS on issues such as development financing, multilateral bank reform, and advocacy for greater representation of emerging economies in global governance.

#### **Issue-Based Coalitions: Quad, I2U2, and Beyond**

Beyond bilateral ties, India amplifies its influence through issue-based coalitions that combine Global South priorities with strategic convergences. The Quad (with the United States, Japan, and Australia) exemplifies this pattern: while primarily a security-focused grouping, it also includes initiatives on vaccine manufacturing, critical supply chains, and climate resilience that have direct benefits for developing countries. Similarly, frameworks like I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, USA) and partnerships with the European Union on connectivity projects blend strategic cooperation with development-oriented deliverables. These coalitions enable India to translate geopolitical alignments into practical goods for partner states, thereby reinforcing its leadership credentials (Singh, 2020).

#### **Energy, Diaspora, and the Middle East**

India's outreach to the Middle East highlights another dimension of its geopolitical strategy. Securing energy supplies, protecting remittance flows, and safeguarding the welfare of a large diaspora are core objectives that drive deepening ties with Gulf states. These relationships have economic and geopolitical payoffs: Gulf investment in Indian infrastructure, cooperation on energy transition, and diplomatic support in multilateral forums. By positioning itself as a partner that respects sovereignty and offers mutually beneficial trade and investment, India expands its influence among developing energy-exporting states (Bajpai, 2022).

#### **Maritime Strategy and the Indo-Pacific**

Maritime security and connectivity are central to India's projection of influence across the Indian Ocean and into the wider Indo-Pacific. Initiatives such as capacity-building for Indian Ocean littoral states, naval exercises, port development assistance, and maritime domain awareness programs bolster India's role as a security provider in a region critical to many Global South economies. These actions serve dual purposes: they reassure smaller states of India's commitment to a secure regional common and provide New Delhi with strategic depth to counterbalance extra-regional coercion (Pant, 2019).

#### **Limits and Trade-offs**

India's geopolitical balancing is not without tensions. Closer ties with the West can complicate India's image among some developing-country partners suspicious of great-power blocs; conversely, deep engagement with Russia or certain regional actors' risks friction with other partners. Resource constraints—financial, military, and diplomatic bandwidth—also limit how far India can sustain simultaneous commitments. Ultimately, India's ability to lead the Global South depends on navigating these trade-offs: projecting enough independence to be a credible Southern advocate while harnessing strategic partnerships to deliver material benefits to partner countries (Bajpai, 2022).

India's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict illustrates these trade-offs. Its neutral stance helped maintain credibility with much of the Global South, yet it created discomfort among Western partners expecting a stronger stand. This episode shows how India must constantly balance competing expectations while preserving strategic autonomy.

### **LIMITS AND CRITIQUES**

While India's expanding global engagement has strengthened its image as a leader of the Global South, this leadership remains **aspirational rather than absolute**. Several structural and policy-related constraints continue to shape — and sometimes limit — India's ability to sustain and scale its influence across the developing world.

#### **Capacity and Resource Constraints**

One of the most significant challenges lies in the gap between ambition and capacity. Despite being the world's fifth-largest economy, India's per capita income and fiscal space remain modest compared to other major powers. Its foreign aid budget and development finance flows are still limited relative to China's Belt and Road Initiative or Western development programs. The temporary suspension of vaccine exports in 2021 illustrated how domestic priorities can restrict external commitments. To maintain credibility, India must ensure that its development partnerships and humanitarian initiatives are both sustainable and resilient against internal shocks.

#### **Competing Narratives and Regional Rivalries**

India's leadership claim also faces competition from other emerging powers that seek influence within the Global South, particularly China, whose economic resources and infrastructure diplomacy far exceed India's. Similarly, some developing nations remain cautious of India's growing alignment with Western-led coalitions such as the Quad, viewing it as a potential dilution of its Global South identity. Within South Asia, India's perceived dominance can at times generate ambivalence among smaller neighbors, making regional cooperation uneven. Managing these perceptions requires diplomatic sensitivity and consistent engagement based on mutual respect rather than hierarchy (Narlikar, 2021).

#### **Normative Challenges and Global Governance**

At the normative level, India's advocacy for reform of global institutions such as the **UN Security Council**, **IMF**, and **World Bank** reflects a long-standing commitment to democratizing global governance. Yet, despite moral legitimacy, concrete reforms have been slow, partly due to resistance from entrenched powers. India's challenge is to translate its **discursive leadership** — as the "voice of the Global South" — into **institutional leadership**, where it can influence outcomes rather than merely agendas. Strengthening coalitions within BRICS, G20, and UN frameworks will be essential to advancing this transformation (Acharya, 2017; Tickner, 2019).

## THE FUTURE TRAJECTORY

Looking ahead, India's Global South leadership is likely to evolve along three interconnected dimensions:

- i. **Developmental Leadership** – Expanding South–South cooperation through digital public infrastructure, climate finance, and sustainable energy transitions.
- ii. **Diplomatic Leadership** – Using its growing influence in the G20, BRICS, and UN to align global governance with the needs of developing economies.
- iii. **Normative Leadership** – Promoting a vision of inclusive globalization anchored in equity, sovereignty, and collective welfare — principles deeply rooted in India's civilizational ethos.

To sustain this trajectory, India will need to balance idealism with institutional capacity, expand multilateral networks, and continue framing its global role as that of a *bridge* rather than a *bloc* leader (Pant, 2019; Mohan & Das, 2020).

## DISCUSSION

India's evolving foreign policy since 2000 reveals a deliberate effort to reconcile strategic pragmatism with normative leadership. The evidence across sectors — from vaccine diplomacy and digital partnerships to G20 initiatives and climate cooperation — supports the view that India's leadership of the Global South is not based on material dominance, but on *agenda-setting power*, *moral credibility*, and *coalition-building*. This discussion unpacks the significance of these dimensions and assesses how effectively they position India as a global voice for developing nations (Sridharan, 2021).

### Redefining Leadership in the Global South

Traditional understandings of “leadership” in international relations often emphasize economic strength or military capability. However, India's case demonstrates a shift toward soft-power leadership, rooted in shared developmental narratives, cultural diplomacy, and technological inclusivity. Through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Global Digital Public Infrastructure initiative under G20, India projects an image of a problem-solving leader — one that addresses global public goods rather than pursues hegemonic power. This model resonates with the Global South's growing preference for equitable partnerships rather than dependency-based aid relationships.

### Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy underlines both continuity and change. The principle of *strategic autonomy* — once synonymous with non-alignment — has been redefined for a multipolar 21st century. India now balances relations among the U.S., Russia, and China while maintaining strong South–South ties through forums such as BRICS, IBSA, and the G77. This pragmatic adaptability demonstrates India's capacity to modernize its diplomatic toolkit without abandoning its foundational ideals of sovereignty and equity. Such policy evolution has enabled India to simultaneously engage with the developed world and champion the concerns of developing nations (Pant, 2019; Tharoor, 2012).

### From Advocacy to Implementation

One of the most striking developments in India's global engagement has been the shift from rhetorical advocacy to tangible implementation. Vaccine Maitri, humanitarian assistance during natural disasters, and development partnerships in Africa and the Indo-Pacific have all given substance to India's claim of being the “voice of the Global South.” The 2023 *Voice of the Global South Summit* further institutionalized this discourse by allowing over 120 developing countries to articulate collective priorities on debt, energy, and digital equity under India's coordination. This transition from speech to action marks a maturing phase in India's global diplomacy (Saran, 2023).

### Challenges and Contradictions

Despite these achievements, contradictions persist. India's partnerships with Western powers through frameworks like the Quad sometimes create skepticism among Global South partners, who view such alignments as potential compromises of independent leadership. Additionally, resource constraints, regional tensions (especially with Pakistan and China), and internal developmental challenges can dilute India's ability to consistently deliver on its promises. These realities highlight the tension between normative ambition and practical capability, a defining characteristic of India's foreign policy today.

India's rise as a leader of the Global South has unfolded in a competitive landscape shaped by other influential developing nations, especially China, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia. China remains India's most significant competitor, with its massive manufacturing capacity, Belt and Road Initiative, and substantial economic influence across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet India holds distinct advantages: its demographic strength with a young workforce, its reputation as a democracy that respects sovereignty, and its ability to engage partners without creating debt dependencies. India's leadership in digital public infrastructure, affordable healthcare initiatives, and disaster-relief diplomacy has also strengthened its appeal among developing nations. However, challenges such as uneven manufacturing growth, dependency on energy imports, and slower bureaucratic processes sometimes limit India's influence. Nevertheless, India's balanced approach — combining economic partnerships, capacity-building initiatives, and a non-coercive model of development cooperation — positions it as a credible and increasingly preferred voice for the aspirations of the Global South (Narilakar, 2021).

### Implications for Global Governance

India's efforts to reform international institutions such as the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank illustrate a broader normative project — to democratize decision-making structures that have long marginalized the Global South. If successful, these reforms could reshape the global order by amplifying voices traditionally excluded from global governance. India's leadership thus has implications not only for its own status but also for the collective empowerment of the developing world. In this sense, India's evolving role is both national and systemic: it seeks not just to rise within the system, but to transform it (Acharya, 2017).

### Balancing Neighbourhood Pressures with Global Ambitions

India has long pursued a careful and resilient foreign policy shaped by the presence of difficult neighbours and the absence of stable regional partnerships in South Asia. Rather than allowing these challenges to limit its horizons, India has steadily expanded its diplomatic footprint, focusing on strategic autonomy and constructive engagement. This approach has enabled it to maintain a balance between managing immediate regional pressures and asserting itself as a broader global voice. Even as frictions in its neighbourhood have complicated cooperation and hindered regional integration, India has continued to cultivate ties across continents, build development partnerships (Pant, 2019)

## CONCLUSION

Since 2000, India's foreign policy has undergone a profound transformation — from the cautious diplomacy of the post-NAM era to a proactive and multifaceted engagement with the world. By integrating multilateral diplomacy, health cooperation, and development finance, India has sought to reassert its identity as a moral and practical leader of the Global South. The G20 presidency, Vaccine Maitri initiative, and South–South development partnerships collectively illustrate how India converts normative aspirations into concrete global action.

Yet, India's leadership remains a work in progress. Economic limitations, regional rivalries, and the complexities of global governance continue to test its ability to sustain long-term influence. Still, India's unique combination of democratic legitimacy, developmental pragmatism, and civilizational inclusivity offers a distinct model of Global South leadership — one grounded not in dominance, but in solidarity, partnership, and shared progress (Acharya, 2017; Narlikar, 2021; Pant, 2019).

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