

Challenges to India's Foreign Policy amid the West-to-East Shift in Global Power Politics

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Abstract

The global order today is changing significantly as power moves from the West to the East. This shift is largely due to China's rise, Asia's renewed importance, and the decline of Western influence. As a result, India's foreign policy must navigate new challenges. It needs to balance its desire for independence with practical engagement. India faces a tough choice. On one hand, its historical connections and institutional ties link it to Western countries. On the other hand, its location and economic prospects tie it to growing influences in Asia. The key issue is how to reconcile these competing interests without harming national priorities. This paper looks at the various challenges that India's foreign policy faces amid the shift in global power. It reviews India's attempts to manage its relationships with the United States and its allies while also engaging with China, Russia, and regional partners in Asia. The analysis focuses on India's goal of maintaining strategic independence, its involvement in multilateral groups like BRICS and the Quad, and its efforts to find its way in a multipolar world. By placing India in the larger context of global politics, the study shows how changing alliances, economic ties, and security issues influence India's foreign policy decisions. In conclusion, the paper suggests that India's foreign policy challenges are about more than just picking sides. They involve developing a flexible and responsive strategy that protects national interests while taking advantage of opportunities in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.

Keywords: Balance of Power, India's Foreign Policy, Multipolar World, Asia.

Introduction

The contemporary global order is facing significant changes, with shifting power dynamics from the west to east, growing geopolitical tensions, and new centers of influence emerging. India, as one of the largest democracies and fastest-growing economies, stands at a pivotal point in these developments. Its foreign policy needs to respond to a changing environment where traditional alliances are changing, multilateral institutions face challenges to their credibility, and regional conflicts increasingly overlap with global strategic interests. The rise of China, the shift in U.S. engagement in Asia, and Russia's resurgence have created a multipolar landscape that requires careful responses from New Delhi.

India's foreign policy challenges are made worse by issues such as border disputes, energy security, technological competition, and the need to maintain its strategic independence while working with various partners. Balancing relationships with major powers, managing regional dynamics in South Asia, and asserting its role in global governance are key points in India's diplomatic agenda. This paper looks at how India navigates these challenges, pointing out the constraints and opportunities that come with the ongoing shift in global power politics. By examining India's strategies, the study aims to shed light on the changing nature of its foreign policy in a rapidly evolving world.

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*A Special Issue for the papers accepted for publication in the International Multidisciplinary Conference on India's Foreign Policy and International Relations: A Future Roadmap (IFPIR-2026) (Hybrid Mode)(22-24 January 2026) Organized by Geo-Politics & Defence Study Research Cell, Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions about India's foreign policy in changing global power dynamics focus on the tension between strategic independence and the need for stronger partnerships. Studies of India–U.S. relations highlight the growing cooperation in defense, technology, and Indo-Pacific security. However, they also warn against becoming too reliant, which could undermine India's independent position. Research on India–Russia relations shows their long-standing collaboration in defense and energy. Yet, recent studies point out the challenges arising from Moscow's closer ties with Beijing. Analyses of India–China relations consistently identify border disputes, trade imbalances, and China's increasing influence in South Asia as significant barriers to stability.

Regional studies examine India's neighborhood, where changes in leadership in Bangladesh and Nepal have created new uncertainties. Scholars suggest that these changes might reduce India's traditional influence and create opportunities for external actors, especially China, to increase their presence. Literature on South Asian geopolitics highlights the importance of India managing these transitions while maintaining its regional leadership.

Overall, the research indicates that India's foreign policy needs to balance global partnerships with regional relations. It must adapt to a multipolar world while protecting its sovereignty and supporting economic growth. This review highlights the need for thoughtful strategies that combine global goals with regional realities.

Research Objectives

The main objectives are as follows

- To analyze the foreign policy challenges amid a shift in global power politics as power competition intensifies.
- To examine the impact of regime changes in Bangladesh and Nepal on India's neighborhood diplomacy and regional security.
- To evaluate India's strategies for balancing partnerships with major powers while safeguarding sovereignty and economic interests and regional stability.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative and analytical approach. It mainly relies on secondary sources like academic books, journal articles, government reports, and policy papers to look at India's foreign policy challenges in a changing global landscape. Data is gathered from credible institutions, think tanks, and official documents to ensure reliability and relevance. The study examines India's relationships with major powers, including the United States, Russia, and China. It also looks at China's growing role in South Asia and the impacts of changes in leadership in Bangladesh and Nepal. A thematic analysis helps identify patterns in India's diplomatic strategies, focusing on strategic autonomy, multipolarity, and regional security. By bringing together different perspectives, this approach allows for a clear understanding of how India manages changes in global power while tackling local challenges. It emphasizes the need for investment in economic growth, technological innovation, and homegrown defense capabilities.

Challenges for India's Foreign Policy in an Era of Global Power Shift

• Shifting Equations: India - China Relations in Era of China's Rise

India's diplomatic relationship with China has become more complicated as Beijing's growth changes the global and regional landscape. China's fast economic growth, military upgrades, and aggressive foreign policy have made it a strong power, which directly affects India's strategic environment. The biggest challenge is the unresolved border disputes, especially along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Events like the 2020 Galwan Valley clash highlight the instability in their relationship and show how hard it is to keep stability while protecting sovereignty.

Beyond the border, China's increasing involvement in India's neighborhood presents significant diplomatic challenges. With projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has widened its economic and strategic reach in South Asia. Investments in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh have boosted China's influence, often undermining India's traditional role in the area. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through disputed territory, further complicates India's security concerns. Likewise, China's growing connections with Nepal and

Bangladesh, especially during changes in government, raise doubts about India's ability to maintain its influence nearby.

China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean and its expanding military partnerships with South Asian countries add more complexity. These changes challenge India's maritime security and leadership in the region. Additionally, China's advancements in technology and strength in key areas like 5G, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities create risks for India, which relies on outside partners for many of its defense and technology needs.

In this situation, India faces a twofold diplomatic challenge: managing a tough relationship with China while countering its increasing influence in South Asia. This calls for a careful mix of deterrence and dialogue, strengthening regional partnerships, and investing in domestic economic and technological skills to reduce risks. Only by building resilience at home and creating strong alliances abroad can India effectively handle the challenges that come with China's rise.

• **Coercive Bargaining in India - US Relations in the Trump Era**

India's recent foreign policy has increasingly leaned towards a closer partnership with the United States, driven by both economic practicality and strategic requirements. This shift has brought significant advantages, including enhanced defense collaboration, access to cutting-edge technologies, and increased trade. However, a thorough analysis indicates that India's pro-U.S. stance isn't without its challenges, especially when evaluated against its established principle of strategic independence.

A major worry is the diminishing of India's unique foreign policy identity. Traditionally, India has valued its non-aligned position, managing relationships with various global powers to protect its sovereignty. By aligning more closely with Washington, India risks being seen as part of a U.S.-dominated alliance, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where the QUAD is often viewed as a counterbalance to China. This perception may restrict India's diplomatic options and complicate its interactions with other important partners, particularly Russia, which continues to be a key source of defense technology and energy supplies.

From an economic perspective, India's alignment with the U.S. has not consistently resulted in fair outcomes. Disputes over tariffs, agricultural products, and intellectual property rights remain despite the claims of a strong partnership. The Trump administration's approach of using tariffs to pressure India exemplified how Washington could exert economic leverage to gain advantages. Tariffs imposed on Indian steel and aluminum exports, along with the revocation of India's preferential trade status under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), highlighted the susceptibility of India's economy to shifts in U.S. policy. While India attempted to respond with retaliatory tariffs, this situation brought to light the imbalances in negotiating power and raised doubts about whether closer ties with Washington genuinely serve India's economic interests.

Furthermore, while defense collaboration is expanding, it also showcases the risks of dependency. Although India's acquisition of U.S. military equipment and involvement in joint exercises improve coordination, they may also create dependencies that limit India's freedom of action in future confrontations. Additionally, Washington's hesitation to fully share critical technologies emphasizes the disparities in the partnership. India could find itself making substantial investments in a relationship that doesn't always provide equivalent strategic rewards.

Geopolitically, India's alignment with the United States complicates its effort to maintain balance with other significant powers. Its neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has already drawn disapproval from Washington, illustrating the conflict between India's pursuit of autonomy and U.S. expectations of alignment. Likewise, while both countries are concerned about China's assertiveness, India's economic relations with Beijing make it hesitant to embrace the confrontational stance advocated by Washington. This divergence was apparent during the recent India-Pakistan conflict, when the United States chose to remain neutral rather than openly support India. For New Delhi, this served as a reminder that Washington's strategic interests do not always coincide with India's security priorities, and that reliance on U.S. support during regional emergencies may be illusory.

Additionally, concerns extend to the U.S. involvement in South Asia beyond just India. Reports of American support for regime change in Bangladesh have raised concerns in New Delhi. Such interventions indicate that U.S. strategic goals in the region may not consistently align with India's desire for stability in its vicinity. If India continues its trajectory towards Washington without caution, it risks becoming intertwined in regional dynamics influenced by U.S. priorities rather than its own interests.

In conclusion, although India's strengthened alliance with the United States presents advantages in trade, defense, and technology, it also poses risks related to dependency, inequality, and diminished autonomy. A critical viewpoint indicates that India should proceed with caution, making sure that its pro-U.S. stance does not undermine its enduring commitment to independent decision-making and engagement in a multipolar world. The key challenge is to find a balance—capitalizing on the partnership with Washington while maintaining the flexibility to cultivate various relationships that align with India's national interests in a complex global landscape.

- **The India- Russia Partnership in a Changing World Order**

India and Russia have a long-standing strategic partnership based on cooperation during the Cold War and maintained through diplomatic, defense, and energy connections. However, as India attempts to strike a balance between its expanding engagement with the United States and other Western countries and its traditional reliance on Moscow, this cooperation confronts increasing problems in the modern global order. Cooperation in defense is one of the biggest obstacles. For a considerable portion of India's arsenal, Russia has long been the country's main supplier of military equipment. However, as India diversifies its defense imports and looks to the US, France, and Israel for cutting-edge technologies, this reliance has grown problematic.

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has exacerbated issues, disrupting supply chains and raising doubts about the dependability of Russian equipment. Furthermore, U.S. sanctions on Russia hinder India's ability to acquire spare parts and maintenance support, revealing weaknesses in India's defense readiness.

Energy collaboration, a key aspect of the relationship, also poses challenges. In light of the Ukraine crisis, India has ramped up its purchases of discounted Russian oil, which has drawn criticism from Western allies who see such trade as a violation of sanctions. Although economically advantageous, this reliance puts India in a difficult situation, balancing its need for low-cost energy against the desire to uphold its credibility with Western nations.

A further complication arises from Russia's deepening ties with Pakistan. Historically, Moscow maintained limited engagement with Islamabad, but recent years have seen growing cooperation in defense, energy, and infrastructure. Joint military exercises, discussions on energy pipelines, and arms sales signal a shift in Russia's South Asia policy. For India, this development undermines the exclusivity of its partnership with Moscow and raises concerns about Russia's willingness to balance ties between two rivals. Pakistan's closer alignment with Russia, combined with Moscow's strategic partnership with China, creates a triangular dynamic that could marginalize India's influence in the region.

In a diplomatic context, India needs to address the notion that its approach to balancing international relations is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Although New Delhi continues to advocate for multipolarity and strategic independence, its closer ties with Washington and involvement in groups like the QUAD are causing tension with Moscow. Russia has shown discomfort regarding India's deepening relationship with the United States, viewing it as a weakening of their longstanding partnership.

India's relationship with Russia faces challenges not just from defense dependencies and energy issues, but also due to Moscow's shifting relationships with Pakistan. While this partnership retains its significance, India must skillfully navigate these connections to prevent excessive exposure to Russian vulnerabilities, while also maintaining its overall strategic independence in a world that is becoming more polarized.

Geopolitical Rivalries and India's Neighbourhood Challenges

South Asia has become one of the most contested regions in today's geopolitics. The rivalry between China and the United States intersects with local instability and fragile democracies. For India, which wants to strengthen its role as the leading power in the region, political unrest in neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal presents major challenges. These issues are worsened by accusations of outside interference, particularly regarding the United States' alleged involvement in Bangladesh's internal politics. There is also a growing closeness between Bangladesh and Pakistan as well as China. Meanwhile, developments in Sri Lanka and the Maldives complicate India's neighborhood policy. This situation highlights the difficulty of maintaining strategic independence in an era of changing global power dynamics.

Bangladesh plays a key role in India's foreign policy. The July Revolution in Bangladesh in 2024, which led to the resignation and escape of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is regarded as a critical moment in South Asian politics. Domestic discontent related to governance and economic issues was exacerbated by claims of U.S. involvement in promoting regime change, raising concerns about foreign interference in Dhaka's political path. Hasina's exit has opened up opportunities for opposition groups and nationalist factions, many of which hold anti-India views. These groups have criticized India's previous influence in Bangladeshi politics and have aimed for closer connections with China and Pakistan, both of which are keen to increase their presence in the Bay of Bengal. For India, the emergence of these factions presents a strategic challenge, making its neighborhood policy more complex amidst the growing rivalry between the U.S. and China. For India, a politically unstable Bangladesh threatens not only cooperation on counterterrorism and trade but also security of North East India. More concerning is Bangladesh's growing ties with China and Pakistan. Beijing has invested substantially in infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, including ports and power plants. Pakistan has revived historical ties through defense and diplomacy. These connections may weaken India's influence and create a strategic triangle that diminishes New Delhi's power in the Bay of Bengal, a maritime area already facing Chinese naval expansion.

Nepal adds another level of complexity. Its domestic politics remain unstable, with frequent government changes and significant ideological divides. Instability in Kathmandu often leads to unpredictable foreign policy, complicating India's diplomacy. Although India has long had cultural and economic ties with Nepal, recent years have brought increasing Chinese influence through infrastructure projects, trade, and political outreach. Nepalese leaders have frequently played India and China against each other to gain concessions, making it harder for India to secure long-term commitments on border management, hydropower cooperation, and transit rights. Furthermore, anti-India sentiment, fueled by perceptions of interference and past blockades, still affects Nepalese politics. For India, the challenge is to stabilize relations without appearing domineering while countering China's growing presence in the Himalayan state.

These developments in Bangladesh and Nepal occur against the backdrop of South Asia becoming a focal point of U.S.-China rivalry. Washington wants to strengthen democratic institutions and counter Chinese influence, while Beijing expands its economic and strategic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative. India, caught in the middle, must handle this rivalry with care. Thus, India's foreign policy faces the dual challenge of managing instability in its neighborhood and balancing external great-power competition.

Sri Lanka adds further complications. The island nation's economic crisis has forced it to rely on outside help, with both India and China stepping in. India has provided emergency financial aid, fuel, and humanitarian assistance, while China remains a major creditor and infrastructure partner. The Hambantota port, leased to China, symbolizes Beijing's strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean. For India, Sri Lanka's instability offers both opportunities and risks. It provides a chance to show India's reliability as a partner, but it also risks increasing Chinese influence if Colombo continues to rely on Beijing for debt restructuring and investment. The competition over Sri Lanka highlights the broader struggle for dominance in the Indian Ocean, where India seeks to maintain its standing while facing ongoing Chinese encroachment.

The Maldives, though small, holds significant strategic importance because of its location along key sea lanes. Political changes in Malé have repeatedly tested India's influence. Recent shifts suggest a tilt toward Beijing, raising concerns in New Delhi about the decline of its traditional influence. The Maldives' swings between India and China reflect a broader pattern of small South Asian states trying to maximize benefits from great-power rivalry. For India, the challenge is to maintain goodwill through development assistance, defense cooperation, and people-to-people connections while countering narratives of "India out" that occasionally emerge in Maldivian politics.

Instability in Bangladesh and Nepal, along with changing alignments in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, presents a complex challenge for India. Political turbulence weakens India's ability to position itself as the natural leader of South Asia. Chinese and Pakistani influence in Bangladesh and Nepal may create vulnerabilities along India's borders, while maritime competition in Sri Lanka and the Maldives highlights the contest for influence in the Indian Ocean. As South Asia becomes a flashpoint for U.S.-China rivalry, India must adjust its approach. It should strengthen economic and cultural ties, offer credible alternatives to Chinese investments, and engage diplomatically without being overbearing. Only

by combining resilience at home with careful diplomacy abroad can India protect its interests in a region that is increasingly significant to global power dynamics.

Discussion

India's foreign policy is increasingly influenced by changes in global power and regional uncertainties. The strategic triangle involving the United States, Russia, and China offers both opportunities and challenges. With the U.S., India has strengthened its cooperation in defense, technology, and the Indo-Pacific. This positions India as a crucial partner in countering China's rise. However, India must manage this partnership carefully to uphold its long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy. Russia has been a reliable defense and energy partner, but its growing closeness with China makes it harder for India to maintain balanced relationships. At the same time, China's assertiveness, shown through border disputes and its increasing influence in South Asia, continues to threaten India's sovereignty and regional leadership.

India's neighborhood has also become more unstable. Changes in leadership in Bangladesh and Nepal have brought new political dynamics that raise doubts about India's influence in South Asia. These changes could allow external actors, especially China, to increase their presence, which further complicates India's strategic situation. To navigate these transitions, India needs to adjust its neighborhood policy, balancing economic cooperation with security needs.

Overall, India's foreign policy must respond to a multipolar world by diversifying partnerships, strengthening regional diplomacy, and protecting its sovereignty. The challenge is to find a balance between global goals and neighborhood stability, ensuring that India remains a credible and influential player in shaping the emerging international landscape.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy challenges, amid the ongoing shift in global power dynamics, show the need to balance external partnerships with internal strength. Relations with the United States, Russia, and China are crucial for India's strategic position, but the instability in these relationships highlights the dangers of becoming overly dependent. The U.S. provides important support in defense and technology, but India must avoid relying too heavily on it, as this could weaken its strategic independence. Russia remains a key partner in defense and energy, yet its closer ties with China make India's traditional dependence on Moscow more complicated. At the same time, China's aggressive actions along the border and its growing influence in South Asia pose ongoing challenges to India's sovereignty and leadership in the region.

India's neighborhood also faces uncertainties. Changes in leadership in Bangladesh and Nepal have altered political dynamics. These events challenge India's ability to maintain influence in South Asia while countering outsiders like China, who are trying to increase their presence. Managing these changes means India must improve its regional diplomacy, combining economic cooperation with security needs.

Looking forward, India should work to lessen its dependence on outside partners for defense and technology. It needs to focus on investing in its own defense technology, economic growth, and innovation. Building strong domestic capabilities will not only improve national security but also boost India's reputation as a self-sufficient player on the global stage. Economic strength and technological progress are vital for effective diplomacy. This will allow India to engage with major powers confidently rather than relying on others.

In the end, India's foreign policy should mix global goals with regional realities. It should prioritize sovereignty, stability, and sustainable growth. By diversifying partnerships, enhancing domestic abilities, and adjusting neighborhood strategies, India can navigate the uncertainties of a multipolar world and establish itself as a responsible and influential force in shaping the future international order.

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