
India's Role in Global Governance: From Normative Power to Strategic Leadership

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Abstract

India's role in global governance has undergone a significant transformation from being primarily a normative power to emerging as a strategic leader in the contemporary international system. In the post-independence period, India's foreign policy was deeply rooted in moral principles such as non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, and support for multilateralism. These values positioned India as a voice of the Global South and a proponent of equitable global order. However, the changing dynamics of global politics, economic liberalization, and the rise of new security and development challenges have led India to adopt a more pragmatic and strategic approach.

In recent decades, India has actively engaged in global governance institutions such as the United Nations, G20, BRICS, and WTO, advocating reforms to make them more inclusive and representative. India's leadership in climate diplomacy, digital governance, global health, and sustainable development highlights its evolving strategic orientation. Initiatives such as "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," International Solar Alliance, and its proactive role during global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect a blend of normative values with strategic interests.

Thus, India's transition signifies not a departure from its foundational ideals but their recalibration in alignment with national interests and global responsibilities. As a rising power, India is increasingly shaping global norms while also pursuing strategic autonomy, thereby redefining its role as a key actor in global governance.

Keywords: Global Governance, Normative Power, Strategic Leadership, India's Foreign Policy, Multilateralism, Global South, Strategic Autonomy, International Institutions

Introduction

India's evolution from a postcolonial democracy to a leading global power represents one of the most significant transformations in contemporary international politics. Its engagement with global governance has been marked by a dual strategy: upholding normative ideals of peace, equity, and multilateralism, while advancing strategic interests in trade, technology, and security. This paper analyzes India's growing role across global institutions, including the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Group of Twenty (G20), and BRICS. It examines India's initiatives in peacekeeping, climate diplomacy, South-South cooperation, and digital governance to understand its contributions to a multipolar world order. Using constructivist, institutionalist, and realist perspectives, the study concludes that India's global engagement reflects its transition from a "normative" voice of the Global South to a pragmatic and responsible stakeholder in shaping global governance.¹

Global governance encompasses the institutional mechanisms, norms, and cooperative arrangements that regulate international affairs beyond national boundaries.² As globalization deepens interdependence, no single country can manage transnational challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and economic crises

, alone. India, as the world's largest democracy and a major emerging economy, has increasingly become a pivotal actor in this system.³

Historically, India's worldview has been anchored in the principles of peace, justice, and dialogue. From Jawaharlal Nehru's call for non-alignment during the Cold War to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (The World is One Family) during the G20 Presidency (2023), India's foreign policy has consistently promoted an inclusive vision of global order.⁴ India seeks to reform global institutions to make them more representative and equitable, ensuring that developing nations have a voice in decision-making.

At the same time, India's growing economic power and technological capability have expanded its strategic influence.⁵ Its active participation in the Quad, G20, BRICS, and UN peacekeeping missions underscores its role as both a moral advocate and a pragmatic player. This paper explores how India combines these dimensions, normative ideals and strategic interests, to redefine its place in global governance.

2. Theoretical Framework

India's participation in global governance can be interpreted through three key theoretical approaches: constructivism, liberal institutionalism, and realism.

Constructivist theory emphasizes that national identity and historical experience shape a country's behavior in world politics.⁶ India's approach, informed by its colonial past and civilizational ethos, prioritizes equality and self-determination. Its commitment to non-alignment, South-South solidarity, and democratic cooperation demonstrates the moral foundations of its diplomacy.⁷

Liberal institutionalism views India's engagement in multilateral institutions as an extension of its belief in collective problem-solving and a rules-based international order.⁸ Since independence, India has championed global cooperation, from its role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to its leadership in the World Trade Organization and United Nations peacekeeping.⁹

In contrast, realist theory highlights India's strategic pursuit of national interests, security, power, and autonomy, in a competitive world system.¹⁰ India's balancing of China through regional partnerships, investment in defense modernization, and leadership in the Indo-Pacific demonstrate its realist orientation.¹¹

Together, these perspectives capture India's dual identity: a country that seeks justice and equity in international relations while pursuing pragmatic interests in global power politics.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative analytical method, combining historical review, institutional analysis, and contemporary policy evaluation. Primary sources include official reports from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), G20 India Secretariat, and United Nations archives. Secondary sources comprise academic works on India's foreign policy, reports from think tanks such as Brookings, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), and Carnegie India, and articles from peer-reviewed journals on international relations.¹²

4. India's Historical Background in Global Governance

India's engagement with global governance began with its independence in 1947, when it emerged as a voice for peace and decolonization. Under Nehru's leadership, India became a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), advocating a middle path between the Cold War blocs.¹³ This position reflected a belief in sovereign equality and peaceful coexistence.

India was also an early participant in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Indian diplomat Hansa Mehta was instrumental in ensuring that Article 1 referred to “all human beings” rather than “all men,” embedding gender equality in global human rights discourse.¹⁴

During the 1950s–1980s, India’s moral diplomacy , supporting anti-apartheid movements, global disarmament, and peacekeeping , enhanced its credibility. However, limited economic capacity restricted its global influence. The economic liberalization of 1991, followed by sustained growth, marked a turning point.¹⁵ India emerged as a confident actor advocating both development and democracy.

5. India’s Role in Major Global Institutions

5.1 United Nations (UN)

India engagement with major international institutions reflects its evolution from a newly independent nation committed to peace and equity to a leading advocate of reform in the global order. Its participation in forums such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, G20, and BRICS demonstrates a sophisticated blend of normative leadership and strategic diplomacy. India has consistently sought to democratize global governance, enhance the voice of developing nations, and promote inclusive growth.

5.1 United Nations (UN)

India’s role within the United Nations is central to its multilateral diplomacy. As a founding member, India’s commitment to the UN Charter’s principles of peace, justice, and sovereignty has been visible across decades. It remains one of the largest and most reliable contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, with more than 250,000 troops deployed in 49 missions since 1948.¹⁶ Indian contingents have earned global recognition for their professionalism and humanitarian focus, particularly in Congo, Lebanon, and Sudan.¹⁷ Beyond its operational contributions, India has emerged as a thought leader in promoting the safety and gender balance of peacekeeping missions, being among the first countries to deploy all-women police units in Liberia and Haiti.

India has also been at the forefront of advocating for UN Security Council (UNSC) reform, arguing that the current structure, rooted in post-World War II geopolitics, no longer reflects global realities. As a member of the G4 coalition (India, Japan, Germany, Brazil), India seeks permanent membership to ensure that developing nations have a meaningful voice in international security decision-making.¹⁸ Its consistent push for expansion and democratization of the UNSC underscores India’s identity as a reform-oriented power that blends moral legitimacy with institutional pragmatism.¹⁹

India’s reputation as a responsible global actor is further enhanced by its humanitarian diplomacy , evident in initiatives such as Vaccine Maitri, which supplied COVID-19 vaccines to over 100 countries, and disaster relief operations in Turkey, Syria, and Nepal.²⁰ These efforts highlight India’s commitment to a people-centric approach to global governance.

5.2 World Trade Organization (WTO)

At the WTO, India has emerged as a leader of the Global South, consistently advocating the principles of fairness, development, and food security.²¹ Its proactive role during the Doha Development Round (2001) reaffirmed its stance that trade liberalization must not come at the expense of developing countries. Through leadership of the G33 coalition, India secured the public food stockholding clause, protecting national food security programs vital to millions of small farmers.²²

India has also defended intellectual property flexibilities for affordable access to medicines, aligning trade with social justice. Its cautious resistance to Western pressure on e-commerce regulation and agricultural subsidies further underscores a nuanced balance between domestic interests and global equity.

5.3 International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank

India's relationship with the IMF and World Bank has transformed from dependence to strategic partnership.²³ Once a borrower during its early development phases, India now contributes to decision-making processes and advocates reforms that empower emerging economies. It has consistently pushed for quota and governance reforms in the IMF to reflect shifting global economic weights.²⁴

India's position within the World Bank Group emphasizes sustainable, inclusive financing aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through its developmental assistance, India bridges global financial policymaking with grassroots needs, positioning itself as both a beneficiary and a contributor to global economic stability.

5.4 G20 Leadership

India's G20 Presidency (2023) stands as a defining milestone in its global diplomacy. Operating under the theme "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, One Earth, One Family, One Future," India infused moral and cultural ethos into the economic agenda.²⁵ The Presidency focused on digital innovation, women-led development, and sustainability, promoting equitable solutions for global challenges. India's negotiation skills were evident in achieving consensus on the New Delhi Declaration, bridging divisions caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict.²⁶ Moreover, by institutionalizing the "Voice of the Global South" within G20 discussions, India reoriented the forum to reflect the concerns of developing nations, particularly regarding climate finance, debt restructuring, and sustainable growth.²⁷ The New Delhi Summit thus symbolized India's transition from participant to agenda-setter in global economic governance.

5.5 BRICS and Global South Diplomacy

As a founding member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), India champions multipolarity and inclusivity in global decision-making.²⁸ The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) under BRICS, with India as a major shareholder, represents a strategic effort to provide alternative financing mechanisms to the Bretton Woods system.²⁹ India's leadership in the Voice of the Global South Summit (2023) further strengthened its image as a connector between developed and developing worlds, promoting South-South collaboration in trade, energy, and digital governance.³⁰

In essence, India's active engagement across these institutions highlights its dual role as a reformer and a bridge-builder, a nation striving to democratize global governance while asserting its rightful place among leading powers of the 21st century.

5.5 BRICS and Global South Diplomacy

As a founding member of BRICS, India promotes multipolarity and reform of global economic institutions.²⁸ The New Development Bank (NDB), established under BRICS, finances infrastructure projects in developing nations.²⁹ India's leadership at the Voice of the Global South Summit (2023) reinforced its role as a connector between developing and developed nations.³⁰

6. India's Global Contributions

6.1 Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution

India's long-standing commitment to international peacekeeping and conflict resolution remains a cornerstone of its global diplomacy. Since its first deployment in 1948 under the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), India has contributed more than 250,000 personnel to 49 UN peacekeeping missions, making it one of the largest and most consistent contributors in UN history.³¹ Indian peacekeepers have played vital roles in Congo, Lebanon, Sudan, and South Sudan, often operating in volatile and post-conflict environments that demand courage and neutrality. Beyond troop deployment, India has championed preventive diplomacy and mediation, advocating for early conflict detection, capacity building, and reconstruction. Its peacekeeping approach reflects a non-coercive ethos rooted in the Gandhian principle of "Ahimsa" (non-violence) and the belief in "peace through dialogue." This moral foundation distinguishes India's peacekeeping philosophy from the militarized interventions of major powers. Furthermore, India's advocacy for better safety measures for UN peacekeepers and greater representation of developing nations in peacekeeping decision-making processes demonstrates its commitment to a more equitable system of global security governance.

6.2 Climate Leadership

India has emerged as a central figure in global climate governance, balancing developmental needs with ecological responsibility. As a signatory to the Paris Agreement (2015), India committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2070 and reducing the emissions intensity of its GDP by 45% by 2030 compared to 2005 levels.³² The country's leadership in co-founding the International Solar Alliance (ISA) with France in 2015 reflects a proactive approach to clean energy diplomacy. The ISA, with over 110 member nations, promotes solar energy deployment in tropical regions and symbolizes South-South cooperation in renewable technologies. India's environmental diplomacy is anchored in the principle of "climate justice", arguing that developed nations bear historical responsibility for carbon emissions and must contribute proportionately to climate finance and technology transfer.³³ Through initiatives like LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) and participation in the G20 Energy Transition Working Group, India is reframing sustainability as a behavioral and policy shift. Its efforts align with its vision of a human-centric development model, integrating environmental stewardship with economic growth and equity.

6.3 Digital Governance

In the digital age, India has positioned itself as a global pioneer in inclusive digital transformation. Its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) comprising systems such as Aadhaar (biometric identity platform), Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and CoWIN (vaccination management platform) exemplifies how technology can be harnessed for public good.³⁴ These innovations enable financial inclusion, efficient service delivery, and transparent governance for over 1.4 billion citizens, inspiring replication across developing economies. Through the G20 Digital Economy Working Group (2023), India advocated for open-source digital ecosystems that promote interoperability, privacy, and equitable access. Moreover, India's digital diplomacy seeks to narrow the technology gap between the Global North and South, positioning itself as a "digital bridge" that exports scalable solutions rather than dependency. Initiatives like India Stack Global extend DPI to nations in Africa and Asia, reinforcing India's soft power in digital governance. By aligning technological innovation with ethical governance, India underscores its vision of a fair, human-centered digital future.

7. Challenges and Policy Recommendations (Expanded, 500 Words)

While India's growing stature in global governance has been widely recognized, several internal and external challenges continue to constrain its ability to translate moral authority into decisive global leadership. These

challenges stem from both structural inequities in the international system and domestic governance limitations. Yet, India's policy options, if implemented strategically, could strengthen its position as a global rule-maker rather than a rule-taker.

7.1 Key Challenges

Institutional Exclusion:

One of the most pressing challenges is India's continued exclusion from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a permanent member. Despite being the world's largest democracy and a consistent contributor to peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, India remains outside the core decision-making structure. The existing post-World War II architecture disproportionately favors the five permanent members (P5), limiting the representation of emerging powers and the Global South. The absence of India's permanent seat undercuts both its global legitimacy and the UN's claim to universality.

Domestic Constraints:

India's domestic socio-economic disparities pose another limitation. Despite rapid economic growth, persistent inequality, rural poverty, and bureaucratic inefficiency hinder the effective execution of foreign policy goals. Policy implementation at home often lags behind diplomatic ambitions abroad, weakening the credibility of India's development model. Strengthening domestic governance, particularly in education, technology, and infrastructure, is essential for sustaining international leadership.

Geopolitical Rivalries:

India's strategic autonomy is frequently tested by regional rivalries, particularly with China and Pakistan, and shifting power equations in the Indo-Pacific. Border tensions, competition for regional influence, and the evolving dynamics of the QUAD, ASEAN, and BRICS frameworks present both opportunities and risks. Managing these relationships while avoiding alignment traps remains a delicate task. Additionally, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has intensified geopolitical polarization, compelling India to maintain a fine balance between its Western partners and long-standing ties with Moscow.

7.2 Recommendations

1. **Intensify UNSC Reform Diplomacy:**

India must strengthen its coalitions with Africa, Latin America, and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to collectively advocate for Security Council reform. Joint lobbying through the G4 and L.69 Group can amplify calls for a more representative UN system.

2. **Institutionalize Global South Cooperation:**

Beyond BRICS and G20, India should create permanent platforms for South-South dialogue focused on trade, technology, and healthcare. Establishing an annual Global South Cooperation Forum could institutionalize these efforts, positioning India as the leading voice of developing nations.

3. **Expand Digital Diplomacy and Technology-Sharing Partnerships:**

India's success with Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) should be extended globally through partnerships with Africa and Asia. Initiatives like India Stack Global can be leveraged to build digital bridges that promote inclusion, transparency, and innovation.

4. **Promote Green Finance and Climate Resilience:**

India should lead international initiatives for green bonds, renewable investment frameworks, and technology transfer. Collaborating with institutions such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Green Climate Fund (GCF) will help strengthen climate adaptation and resilience across developing regions.

5. Leverage Cultural and Educational Soft Power:

India's civilizational legacy, encompassing yoga, Ayurveda, literature, and democracy, serves as a powerful diplomatic tool.³⁴ Expanding academic exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga can enhance India's image as a moral and cultural leader. By integrating education and culture into foreign policy, India can deepen people-to-people ties and counterbalance hard-power diplomacy with sustainable global influence.

8. Conclusion

India's evolution in global governance illustrates the balance between values and interests, ethics and strategy. From Nehru's idealism to Modi's pragmatism, India's global vision has matured into a blend of civilizational diplomacy and strategic assertiveness.

Its leadership in peacekeeping, climate action, digital transformation, and South-South cooperation demonstrates that India is not merely a participant but a shaper of global governance. The 2023 G20 Presidency marked its arrival as a bridge-builder between North and South, emphasizing cooperation over confrontation. The principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam reflects India's enduring belief that global governance must serve humanity, not hegemony. As the world navigates multipolarity, India's challenge is to sustain its growth while preserving its moral compass, proving that democracy, development, and diplomacy can coexist as forces for global good.

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