



INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TRANSFORMATION AFTER 2014

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Abstract:

India's foreign policy has undergone a marked transformation after 2014, coinciding with the rise of a new political leadership under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While elements of continuity with earlier doctrines remain—particularly the emphasis on strategic autonomy—the post-2014 era has introduced a more confident, outward-looking, and multi-aligned diplomatic posture. India now places greater emphasis on economic diplomacy, defense partnerships, diaspora outreach, technological cooperation, and leadership in global governance. This research paper examines how and why India's foreign policy has changed since 2014, comparing the new approach with earlier patterns, and explaining the strategic implications of these shifts.

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Introduction:

Foreign policy reflects a nation's worldview, strategic priorities, and its self-image in global politics. India's foreign policy for most of the post-independence period was shaped by non-alignment, a strong moralistic tone, and caution regarding military entanglements. The early decades prioritized decolonization, peace, and autonomy in global affairs. Even after the Cold War, successive governments largely preserved these principles, adapting them gradually to new realities such as globalization and regional security challenges.

The year 2014 marks a significant turning point. With the rise of a strong majority government and personal diplomacy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India began projecting itself differently: not just as a balancing power or a moral voice, but as a confident emerging power ready to shape global outcomes. This transformation did not discard earlier traditions; rather, it infused them with new energy, clarity, and assertiveness.

This research paper critically examines these changes, tracing the main pillars of India's foreign policy after 2014, the motivations behind them, and their long-term impact on India's global role.

Historical Background: India's Foreign Policy Before 2014

To understand the transformations of the last decade, it is essential to recognize the foundations of India's foreign policy earlier:

1. Non-Alignment and Autonomy

India's foreign policy from 1947 was built on staying away from Cold War blocs. Even after the Cold War ended, India resisted formal alliances, emphasizing flexibility in external relations.



2. South Asia as a Priority

Although India saw its neighborhood as strategically important, earlier policies often suffered from cautious engagement, bureaucratic inertia, or sensitivity to regional perceptions.

3. Economic Diplomacy but Limited Projection

India's economic growth after 1991 enhanced its capabilities, but the country still hesitated to convert economic strength into strategic influence.

4. Modest Military Posture

India preferred diplomatic restraint over coercive signalling. Defence partnerships existed, but military diplomacy was not central to foreign policy. By 2014, India had already begun expanding its global partnerships, yet foreign policy lacked a distinct, coherent, and assertive orientation. This changed significantly under the Modi government.

Drivers of Foreign Policy Change After 2014

Several interconnected factors explain the notable shift in India's diplomatic behaviour:

1. A Strong Majority Government

A stable central government gave policymakers the ability to pursue long-term initiatives without internal political fragmentation.

2. A Changing Global Order

The rise of China, renewed global rivalry, and reordering of supply chains required India to rethink traditional hesitations.

3. Economic Ambition

India aimed to present itself as a major investment destination, a technological partner, and a manufacturing hub, linking foreign policy with domestic growth strategy.

4. Leadership Style

Prime Minister Modi's personal diplomacy—high-visibility summits, mass diaspora events, and proactive travel—gave India's foreign policy a more energetic and personal tone.

5. National Security Realities

Frequent border tensions and terrorism concerns pushed India to adopt a firmer security posture. These drivers shaped a foreign policy with new priorities and an expanded global footprint.

Key Transformations in India's Foreign Policy Since 2014

1. From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

Earlier non-alignment emphasized avoiding great-power blocs. The post-2014 approach accepts that engaging all major powers—even simultaneously and selectively—maximizes India's leverage. India deepened defence and strategic cooperation with the United States (e.g., signing logistics and communication agreements). It continued long-standing defence ties with Russia despite Western pressures. Partnerships with Europe, Japan, Australia, and Middle Eastern countries expanded dramatically.



This flexible, interest-driven strategy has sometimes been described as “multi-alignment” or “issue-based alignment,” where India partners with different countries depending on the specific domain—technology, energy, trade, defences, or regional security.

2. Rejuvenation of Regional Diplomacy: Neighbourhood First

India placed unprecedented focus on South Asia through:

- Invitations to neighbouring leaders at official ceremonies,
- Cross-border connectivity projects,
- Energy, water, and digital cooperation,
- Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,
- More assertive handling of security challenges.

In contrast to earlier hesitation, India now employs a mix of incentives and firm measures to shape regional behaviour, particularly regarding cross-border terrorism.

3. Act East Policy: A Deeper Indo-Pacific Engagement

The earlier “Look East” policy became “Act East,” indicating more concrete initiatives:

- Stronger defines ties with Southeast Asian nations,
- Increased naval presence in the Indo-Pacific,
- Participation in maritime security initiatives,
- Deeper strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia, and ASEAN.

India frames itself as a stabilizing power in the Indo-Pacific, aligning with like-minded nations concerned about regional balance.

4. Economic and Technology Diplomacy

Since 2014, India has explicitly linked foreign policy with economic transformation:

- major outreach to investors,
- Promotion of “Make in India,”
- bilateral agreements on digital governance, fintech, cybersecurity, and green technologies,
- Participation in new trade and supply chain frameworks.

Technological partnerships—especially in semiconductors, digital public infrastructure, and clean energy—have become essential pillars of external engagement.

5. Soft Power, Culture, and Diaspora Diplomacy

India has always had strong soft-power assets, but after 2014 they were more systematically utilized:

- The global promotion of yoga,
- Expansion of cultural centres abroad,
- Large-scale diaspora outreach events that enhanced India’s image,
- Use of films, music, literature, and heritage in diplomatic messaging.

The diaspora is now treated not only as an emotional asset but also as a strategic one—capable of strengthening India’s global influence.



6. A More Assertive Security Posture

A major shift after 2014 is India's readiness to respond more directly to security challenges: Willingness to take pre-emptive or retaliatory measures against terrorism, Firmer responses in border disputes, Rapid strengthening of military partnerships and logistics agreements. Defence diplomacy—joint exercises, arms production partnerships, naval missions—has become central to India's external engagement.

7. Proactive Leadership in Global Governance

India expanded its role in international institutions: hosting the G20, shaping digital governance debates, advocating for Global South concerns, promoting reformed multilateralism, leading climate change initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance.

India increasingly seeks to position itself as a voice for developing nations, while also aspiring to major-power status.

Continuity and Departure: A Balanced Assessment

Despite the clear changes, India's foreign policy after 2014 is not a complete break from the past. Several continuities remain:

1. Continuity

Strategic autonomy still guides India's choices—even while engaging multiple power centres. Commitment to peaceful diplomacy and multilateralism remains foundational. Long-standing ties with Russia, Southeast Asia, and Africa continue in updated forms.

2. Change

Diplomacy has become far more visible, energetic, and personalized. India is far less hesitant to use military, economic, or diplomatic tools assertively. Policy became more integrated with domestic goals—technology, manufacturing, and economic growth. India is more open to coalition-building beyond traditional comfort zones. The combination of continuity and change has allowed India to adapt without losing the core principles of its foreign policy identity.

Challenges and Risks:

The post-2014 foreign policy transformation, while ambitious, also presents certain risks:

1. Balancing Major Powers

Simultaneously maintaining strong ties with the United States and Russia, while managing an adversarial China, requires careful diplomacy. Missteps could strain strategic flexibility.

2. Regional Complexity

Despite "Neighbourhood First," political instability and competing external influences in South Asia threaten



India's efforts.

3. Economic Dependencies

Deepening integration into global supply chains can create vulnerabilities during crises, especially in technology or energy.

4. Domestic-Foreign Policy Linkages

Linking economic and foreign policy success means external politics can directly affect domestic expectations.

5. Growing Security Pressures

A more assertive security posture may intensify regional tensions, requiring India to maintain readiness for prolonged strategic competition.

Conclusion:

India's foreign policy after 2014 represents a significant evolution from earlier decades. The core principles of autonomy and peaceful cooperation remain, but they are now complemented by a proactive, confident, and multi-aligned approach reflecting India's rising ambitions. The shift from passive presence to active engagement—from Look East to Act East, from non-alignment to multi-alignment, from soft diplomacy to combined hard-soft power strategy—captures the essence of this transformation.

India today seeks not only to safeguard its interests but also to shape global norms, partnerships, and institutions. Its post-2014 foreign policy reflects the aspirations of a nation preparing to play a central role in the emerging world order.

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