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INDIA'S TRANSITION FROM RULE-TAKER TO RULE-MAKER: ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

India is increasingly shifting from being a passive "rule-taker" to an assertive "rule-maker" in global governance, driven by its rising economic and military capabilities and its growing role in shaping international norms leading to peace, justice, and strong governance at the global level. This transformation is marked by strategic autonomy and multi-aligned foreign policy undertaken by India, which allows it to engage with diverse partners, including Western powers and emerging economies, while retaining independent decision-making to balance its developmental priorities and goals. India's participation in forums such as BRICS reflects its commitment to multilateralism and reforming global institutions to better represent a multipolar world and build inclusive societies. Simultaneously, its engagement with the major powers such as the US, Japan, and Australia through the QUAD highlights efforts to strategically counterbalance the Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region, further strengthening its geopolitical clout. However, India's global ambitions are tempered by internal challenges, including economic inequality, limited institutional capacity, regional tensions, democratic backsliding, religious populism, and arbitrary practices, which restrict its growth. In this context, the authors aim to focus on Indian foreign policy and its role in strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing regional stability, and promoting economic growth internationally, as well as how it will influence the trajectory of global governance in the 21st century, for which it needs to align its internal functioning in accordance with the objectives of its foreign policy. India's ability to influence global governance will depend on how effectively it can balance these competing pressures at the domestic and international levels. Its success will define its future and shape the evolving international order, which is crucial in achieving global peace, security and a rule-based legal order in the current fragmented international order through global partnerships and reducing inequalities within its internal structures.

Keywords

India, Democracy, Peace, Justice, Security and Partnerships.

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Resumo

A Índia está cada vez mais a passar de um papel passivo de «aceitante de regras» para um papel assertivo de «criadora de regras» na governação global, impulsionada pelas suas crescentes capacidades económicas e militares e pelo seu papel cada vez mais importante na definição de normas internacionais que conduzem à paz, à justiça e a uma governação forte a nível global. Essa transformação é marcada pela autonomia estratégica e pela política externa multialinhada adotada pela Índia, que lhe permite se envolver com diversos parceiros, incluindo potências ocidentais e economias emergentes, mantendo a independência na tomada de decisões para equilibrar suas prioridades e objetivos de desenvolvimento. A participação da Índia em fóruns como o BRICS reflete seu compromisso com o multilateralismo e a reforma das instituições globais para melhor representar um mundo multipolar e construir sociedades inclusivas. Simultaneamente, o seu envolvimento com as principais potências, como os EUA, o Japão e a Austrália, por meio do QUAD, destaca os esforços para contrabalançar estrategicamente a influência chinesa na região Indo-Pacífico, fortalecendo ainda mais a sua influência geopolítica. No entanto, as ambições globais da Índia são moderadas por desafios internos, incluindo desigualdade económica, capacidade institucional limitada, tensões regionais, retrocesso democrático, populismo religioso e práticas arbitrárias, que restringem o seu crescimento. Neste contexto, os autores pretendem centrar-se na política externa indiana e no seu papel no reforço das instituições multilaterais, na melhoria da estabilidade regional e na promoção do crescimento económico a nível internacional, bem como na forma como irá influenciar a trajetória da governação global no século XXI, para o que precisa de alinhar o seu funcionamento interno de acordo com os objetivos da sua política externa. A capacidade da Índia de influenciar a governança global dependerá da eficácia com que ela conseguir equilibrar essas pressões concorrentes nos níveis doméstico e internacional. O seu sucesso definirá o seu futuro e moldará a ordem internacional em evolução, o que é crucial para alcançar a paz global, a segurança e uma ordem jurídica baseada em regras na atual ordem internacional fragmentada, por meio de parcerias globais e da redução das desigualdades dentro das suas estruturas internas.

Palavras-chave

Índia, democracia, paz, justiça, segurança e parcerias.

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Introduction

Since its independence, India's foreign policy has significantly transformed, especially in the last two decades (Paul and Vinoda, 2024: 445-450). Historically, it has had a policy of non-alignment to uphold its independence in decision-making and, as a result, has largely not been part of global developments. However, India has evolved into a proactive member of the global community, particularly in international relations in the 21st Century, especially in its interactions with international institutions within the UN system, such as the UNGA, UNSC, ICJ, etc. (Mehrotra and Upadhyay, 2024: 295-308). This shift is evident through its active participation in multilateral platforms, strategic engagement with major powers, and vision for a reformed global order based on equity and responsibility through principles like Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR)for which it had advocated vigorously, leading to a more inclusive global order. (Bhattacharya, 2024) The transformation is not merely a rhetoric; it reflects a broader change in India's perception of its role in the world, from a rule-taker to an aspirational rule-maker contributing towards sustainable development to enhance its position and achieve the aim of a developed India (Vyoma, 2021).

The transition of India from a passive "rule-taker" to an active "rule-maker" reflects its desire to actively shape global governance that aligns with its national interests and ideals (Verma and Li, 2025). This transition is driven by its growing military and economic capabilities and its contribution to emerging norms in international forums, and a dynamic approach to international rules and norms enables it to navigate the complex dynamics of global power structures. India's multi-alignment policy aims to engage with various power centres while bridging the gaps between East and West (Tandon and Slobodchikoff, 2024). The BRICS coalition provides a platform for India to collaborate with other emerging economies in its efforts to conduct reforms in multilateral institutions, ensuring that they reflect the realities of a multipolar world. (Kumar, 2022) Further, India has strengthened its bilateral relations with the United States and its allies in the Asian and Indo-Pacific regions, which have recently been impacted due to tariffs being imposed by the US (Singh et.al, 2025).

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In general, India's proactive foreign policy and development-focused agenda resonates with other countries in the Global South, strengthening their ties and allowing them to voice their common concerns at international forums in ensuring equal access to justice for all (Singh et.al, 2025). However, India's global ambitions are tempered by internal challenges, including economic inequality, limited institutional capacity, regional tensions, democratic backsliding, religious populism, and arbitrary practices, which hinder India's transition to joining the high decision-making table internationally.

Despite the internal shortcomings, India seeks to assert its influence globally, wherein it faces the challenge of maintaining a delicate balance between competing powers. India's historical ties with Russia, juxtaposed with its growing strategic partnership with the US that has suffered recently, place it in a precarious position.

In this context, this paper explores India's aspiration to transition from a role of rule-taker to a rule-maker, which requires navigating a complex web of alliances, competing interests, and global challenges. It examines India's ability to sustain its balancing act between the BRICS coalition and Western alliances, while addressing pressing geopolitical issues as well as balancing internal imbalances, which will determine its future growth. This will be crucial in defining its role as a global power to form a more representative, accountable, and effective multilateral institution at global and regional levels through strategic global partnerships and to reduce inequalities within its internal systems.

Historically, Indian foreign policy has undergone three phases, ranging from one being rooted in morality and idealism, which marked the first important phase starting in 1947 and lasting till 1961. Through its belief in the Non-Aligned Movement, several issues were brought to the forefront, including decolonisation, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of any nation, the peaceful co-existence of all nations and the broader democratization efforts in the context of the UN, including prohibition of nuclear weapons, peaceful settlement of disputes, and anti-apartheid efforts (Majumdar, 2024).

After the India-China War in 1962, the second phase was initiated, which was marked by a gradual shift in the approach towards strategic autonomy towards multi-alignment. This phase was described as 'regime shifting' or 'parallel institutionalisation' from an international relations lens (Mallavarapu, 2025). There were two main reasons for this shift. Firstly, India no longer believed in the capability and impartiality of the UN system. Second, after being denied equal status with other developed countries, it shifted its focus to the politics of the Third World countries, as it was better to be the representative of the Global South than to be a mere follower of the Global North (Nandy et.al, 2025). Finally, the third and most important period of India's role in multilateral institutions began in the post-Cold War era, when India opened itself to the world by bringing the LPG measures, which are Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation. In contrast to its principled and ideological approach to multilateralism in the past during the Nehruvian era, post-Cold War India is far more pragmatic and realistic in its foreign policy towards its attainment of joining the high decision-making table at the international level and overcoming its obstacles within the country.

The period was also accompanied by the concentration of power in the executive, which weakens institutional checks, the separation of powers among the legislative, executive and judiciary, followed by efforts to curtail the space for dissent, and through the use of majoritarian mandates with the aim of overhauling plural commitments, suggesting a form of electoral authoritarianism (Nartok, 2023). Such a state of affairs has affected the credibility in several matters of global concern, wherein both the civil-political and socioeconomic rights of the citizens have been violated. Despite its commitments to international frameworks, domestic policies often fail to address vulnerabilities faced by marginalised communities, especially on the basis of religion, caste and regional imbalances. In effect, the weakening of pluralist democracy directly translates into violations of citizens' rights to life, health, equality, and security, exposing the global implications of India's internal democratic decline.

Thus, this paper analyses the evolution of the foreign policy of India through the lens of strategic autonomy, multilateralism, and through its ability to represent the developing countries and the Global South, as well as being able to balance the relations with the West. It argues that India's transition must be understood within a changing geopolitical order, power imbalances, protectionist tendencies, and domestic political requirements in light of its aim to become a developed country both economically and politically. The analysis focuses on the role played by India in international platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the QUAD to demonstrate how it seeks to shape global governance norms while safeguarding its national interests with an aim to promote peace and justice domestically and internationally.

In this light, the article throws light on the Nehruvian approach to international relations; India's participation in multilateral forums; India's engagement in the Asian and the pacific region (Junuguru, 2025); along with its leadership role in the Global South, and finally, the challenges it faced both domestically and internationally in its pursuit of becoming a rule-maker from a rule-taker.

From Nehruvian Non-Alignement to Strategic Autonomy

The roots of India's foreign policy were laid post-independence by its first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated for non-alignment and peaceful coexistence as the most important pillars regarding India's engagement with the world so as to protect its newly found independence and not be clubbed with any power bloc**.** This approach was rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and a commitment to the sovereignty of nations and the principle of non-intervention. However, in the early 1990s, economic liberalisation, accompanied by the Soviet Union's dissolution and the end of the Cold War hostilities, resulted in a unipolar world and US hegemony, necessitating a reform of India's foreign policy strategy. (Mehta, 2009:209-233) Thereafter, India needed to recalibrate its diplomatic and foreign policy engagements to transition towards strategic realism in an increasingly multi-polar world.

As a result, strategic autonomy emerged as a substitute for non-alignment, allowing India to engage with various power centres in the West and be aligned with the needs and demands of the Global South. In contrast to non-alignment, which implied neutrality towards power blocs, strategic autonomy is a more flexible policy. It allows India to

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diplomatically navigate its relations with major global powers such as the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom without exclusively aligning itself with any bloc or being bound by their ideological commitments. Strategic autonomy is both a continuation and a contrast with the earlier Indian foreign policy. It allows India to focus on bilateral ties across political, economic, and security domains, such as in the case of QUAD and India's energy cooperation with Russia, which has been a matter of discussion since the Ukraine-Russia War (Vinodan and Kurian, 2024).

This approach reflects a pragmatic evolution shaped by the geopolitical shifts and domestic priorities requiring it to balance its ideological roots with the evolving multipolar world order to remain aligned with the changing global dynamics of diplomacy. The path of strategic autonomy has its challenges for India due to the balancing act needed to navigate the partnerships in the multipolar world, while catering to its vulnerabilities, such as energy dependencies requiring vast amounts of energy imports. The regional instability also affects India's resources and efforts to spread its influence beyond its neighbourhood (Pant and Super, 2015:747-764). including its strained relationship with its neighbours, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. At the same time, domestic challenges such as the rise of religious extremism and the push to uniformise personal laws to pursue the aim of a Uniform Civil Code further complicate its strategic aspirations, given the diversity of cultures that form the idea of India as a country (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2023: 198-211). The attempt to impose a unified normative framework in a society historically shaped by varying cultures undermines the very democratic values that set India apart from others in the global community. It will result in weakening the credibility of India's claims as the world's largest democracy, which is committed to equality and fraternity and is secular in its approach. In effect, the credibility of India's strategic aspirations cannot be separated from its internal governance issues. A plural, inclusive, and democratic India strengthens its claim to leadership in a fragmented world to lead the way as the world's largest democracy.

Despite the persisting challenges, India's ability to adapt to global shifts and strengthen the multilateral framework while defending its interests is pivotal in shaping 21st-century geopolitics to build representative and accountable multilateral institutions that help create an inclusive and peaceful society and ensure access to justice for all, both at the municipal and international levels.

India as a rule maker in multilateral forums

India's aspiration to become a rule-maker manifests through its active participation in several multilateral institutions at the regional and international levels. Historically, at the United Nations, India has advocated for reforms in the functioning of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to reflect the realities of a multipolar world in ensuring peace and security and move away from the 1945 composition that regarded the Permanent Five (P5) members as supreme (Atwal, 2025). To illustrate, as a member state of the G20, India has argued for inclusive development, climate justice, and reforms in international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to raise the issues faced by the developing countries and the lease

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developed countries which was also the case with its presidency of the same when it invited the African Union to join G20 (Jindal and Kumar, 2025).

The change in India's approach towards the G20 can be best interpreted and understood through the systemic and domestic levels, as India has increasingly taken a more proactive role in multilateral institutions. It has resulted in an endeavour to deliver on global commons, specifically evident in the case of Climate Change Negotiations, wherein it seeks to integrate it into domestic laws and policy while balancing the need for economic development and poverty reduction with environmental protection. Nonetheless, these policies have faced obstacles domestically due to arbitrary practices of the executive organ of the government, which has resulted in the absence of adaptation and mitigation towards climate disasters as well as a lack of early preparedness, reflecting a gap between theoretical ambitions and practical realities. The implications of such governance gaps are multifaceted as India remains one of the world's most vulnerable nations to climate change, facing recurring floods, cyclones, and droughts that disproportionately impact marginalised communities. As the Global climate diplomacy increasingly demands synergy between international commitments and domestic action (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2024). In this context, the inability to institutionalise adaptation mechanisms affects India's normative position as a leader of the Global South advocating for climate justice.

Despite the obstacles, India has always advocated for the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) as this principle acknowledges the historical responsibility of industrial and developed nations owing to their contributing to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at various multilateral forums, including the BRICS, which was also positively reflected in the recent advisory opinion on Climate Change by the ICJ (Solomon, 2024). This principle has been central to India's climate diplomacy, emphasising the need for equity in addressing climate change. Being a developing country, India has consistently championed the rights of poorer countries in international climate negotiations, advocating for climate justice and equality-based shared responsibilities (Stahlke,2023).

In this regard, the presidency of India at the G20 in 2023 was a watershed moment. The theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future" highlighted India's renewed emphasis on *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam(Chaturvedi et.al, 2023)*, which means the world is one family rooted in ancient Indian philosophy. (Cooper, 2023) Through its G20 presidency, India put forth issues like digital public infrastructure, debt relief for the Global South, climate justice, and sustainable development.

Similarly, within BRICS, India has advocated for South-South cooperation and alternative financial architectures, such as the New Development Bank (Duggan et. al, 2021: 495-511). While the utility of BRICS has often been questioned, India's engagement with the bloc reflects its attempt to build consensus within developing countries to challenge the Western dominance of multilateral institutions.

The Indo-Pacific and strategic balancing

Coming to the Asian and Pacific region, the strategic engagement of India in the Indo-Pacific exemplifies its growing geopolitical ambitions to take its place in the global order. The Indo-Pacific holds special significance for India, as it seeks to balance China's growing influence and secure its maritime interests that have threatened international peace and security. (Loc, 2023) Within this region, initiatives like the QUAD, which includes India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, demonstrate their willingness to collaborate with like-minded countries to uphold a rule-of-law-based order. Nonetheless, India is making efforts to ensure that it is seen as part of an anti-China alliance, especially given the recent geopolitical tensions with the US, as its strategy focuses on inclusivity and freedom of navigation while retaining space for bilateral engagement with China. This balancing act is symbolic of India's strategic autonomy, which allows India to consider multiple options, manage regional tensions, and assert its leadership independent of its deteriorating relationship with other countries, as well as garner support in situations where internal issues face challenges and criticism at an international level, especially territorial issues with China and Pakistan involving the regions of Kashmir and Ladakh (Aryal and Nair, 2025: 157-178).

Thus, considering the evolving China-US ties and shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, India continues to follow a 'balanced strategy,' despite being part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Tran et.al, 2025). Furthermore, India's continue to engage with China through institutions such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and G20, as well as its enhanced trade with China and Russia, manifests the pursuit of a balancing strategy in its ties with other major powers that has irked the Western allies and regional organizations such as the EU continue to impose sanctions on Russia. At the same time, India affirmed its support for regional organisations like ASEAN at the centre of its goals for the Indo-Pacific region, as it acknowledged the new order and aligned with their strategy to respect the territorial sovereignty of Myanmar and not to interfere in its internal affairs (Ghosh, 2024).

Thus, given the region's growing geopolitical complexities and power rivalries, strategic autonomy allows India to make decisions that best align with its national interests and ensure its long-term security, especially with states with which it shares borders, like Myanmar. As analysed, India seeks to continue with its strategic autonomy by avoiding over-dependence on any single power while actively engaging with the various countries in the Indo-Pacific region. By maintaining its independence and advocating for its interests, India has contributed to a multi-polar order in the region by engaging in significant multilateral institutions and initiatives, such as ASEAN and QUAD, to promote dialogue, cooperation, and a rule-based order. Its approach ensures and prevents any single country from dominating the region by enhancing regional stability, encouraging a collaborative approach to everyday challenges, and helping to provide balanced power sharing within the larger Southeast Asian region.

India and the Global South: reclaiming moral leadership

India's foreign policy discourse, which has focused on strategic autonomy as well as the commonalities that it possesses with other countries in the Global South, has facilitated

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its claim towards a leadership role within the Global South nations despite following a dual policy of supporting both developed, developing and least developed countries. From the historical solidarity of the Non-Aligned Movement to its current advocacy for a more equitable global order, India has consistently sought to position itself as a voice for developing countries (Kumar, 2022: 426-439).

In the 21st century, this aspiration is translated into developmental programs, strategic partnerships, and capacity-building programs that reflect developing countries' needs, aspirations, and global vision. The demonstrations of India's regional and global leadership have recently occurred amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. India, through its diplomatic efforts and initiatives such as the "*Vaccine Maitri"* (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, supplied millions of domestically manufactured COVID-19 vaccines to many countries in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and other parts of the world. (Singh et.al,2022) This initiative portrayed India's soft power capabilities and solidified the principle of South-South cooperation through mutual support and partnership.

Through these humanitarian solutions, India seeks to distinguish itself from traditional donor countries as it presents itself as an equal partner. This aligns closely with India's foreign policy principles of non-intervention, mutual respect, and strategic autonomy. Such an approach resonates with countries in the Global South looking for alternatives to Western development models that have led to the formation of Mini lateral organisations such as BRICS, SCO, etc. (Dash, 2008).

At the same time, India's efforts are not without their own set of challenges, as questions remain about how India's simultaneous pursuit of closer ties with Western powers, including participation in platforms like the QUAD, raises questions about how it balances its solidarity with the Global South with its evolving strategic alignments especially when the two blocs are at odds with each other as seen in the ongoing Ukraine and Gaza wars. As the geopolitical situation intensifies and multilateralism becomes more debated, India's ability to bridge between developed and developing countries is one of the most essential tools for navigating these challenges in building representative, effective and accountable institutions at the international level with the objectives of reducing violence, combating corruption and providing access to justice, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes.

Challenges to India's rule-maker aspirations

Despite India's growing stature as a global rule-maker and a representative and leader of the Global South, India continues to face various structural, strategic, and normative challenges both internationally and domestically that constrain its growth. These limitations highlight the gap that India's foreign policy needs to meet, which requires sustained reforms at the domestic level, coalition-building, and gaining international credibility. At the domestic level, the rise of a new regime under the *Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)* and the consolidation of power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014 have led to a more assertive, nationalistic, and ideologically driven approach to India's international interactions that have recently suffered setbacks, given the high rate of tariffs imposed by the US. In contrast to the Nehruvian doctrine of strategic restraint and multilateral idealism, the current government's leadership has instilled

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confidence, economic pragmatism, and a desire for global recognition in India that has advanced its position as the fourth-largest economy in the world. However, India is facing many domestic challenges in the form of rising majoritarianism underlying the democratic fabric of the country, accompanied by religious extremism and arbitrary practices in the form of allegations of corrupt electoral practices, instances of mob lynching, and denial of labour rights to inter-state workers. Despite achieving economic growth consistently over several years, the per capita income remains significantly lower than that of major powers, reducing its economic advantage in multilateral organisations, given the high number of people below the poverty line. The uneven economic development, skill gap, and other developmental challenges adversely affect India's global competitiveness. The exodus of talent and the relatively less investment in research and development hamper India's innovation and technological leadership. (Abdul et al., 2023). Consequently, wide-ranging socio-economic disparities, persistent unemployment, and unstable health and education indicators further weaken the soft power potential that India seeks to project. Moreover, challenges include bureaucratic inefficiency and legal system delays, which impede the state's ability to act assertively on the global stage (Yadav,2024).

Correspondingly, in the changing geopolitical order at the international level with the rise of an assertive China, the resurgence of the withdrawal of the United States from global multilateralism, especially evident as the Trump administration has come back to power, and the reconfiguration of power across regional blocs have led to a fragmented global order (Kassab et.al, 2025). As a result, emerging powers such as India are recalibrating their foreign policies, balancing strategic autonomy with a more assertive presence in institutions like the G20, BRICS, and the Indo-Pacific frameworks. In this context, the capacity of any one country with normative aspirations, like India, to shape global norms is significantly restricted without strategic alliances and sustained diplomacy.

This fragmented international framework has also led to a rebalancing of priorities among states. For example, climate change, global health, and cybersecurity have become new arenas of global rulemaking given the increasing instances of rights violations in these realms. India has taken significant steps in some of these domains by establishing the International Solar Alliance, i.e., an alliance of more than 120 signatory nations situated between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn (Ghosh and Chawla, 2021). Thus, this shift strengthens India's soft power appeal, particularly in the Global South, where decolonial and civilizational narratives relate strongly. By asserting itself as an alternative to Western models of modernity, India presents itself as a postcolonial power with Indigenous traditions that balance its historical civilisation ethos with the modern-day dilemmas.

However, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, a foundational basis of its foreign policy since the Cold War, sometimes creates diplomatic ambiguity for international partners, as balancing between countries is a delicate task. India's cautious approach to the Russia-Ukraine war has been heavily criticised and used as a ground to impose additional tariffs by the US. While India's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion is rooted in historical ties, defence partnerships, and energy interests, it has led to the belief amongst Western nations of tacit acceptance (Nandy, 2024). While India's position is

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consistent with its principle of non-alignment, it may appear to some as unwilling to uphold international norms on sovereignty and territorial integrity that are essential to maintain global peace, security and a rule-based world order. This balancing act has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it preserves India's autonomy in a fragmented world order; conversely, it can affect its credibility as a defender of international law norms. As India seeks greater influence in global institutions like the United Nations Security Council, G20, and World Trade Organisation, its consistent stand on various issues will be closely scrutinised by allies and adversaries to show its normative and principled commitment. Lastly, India's bilateral relationship with China remains one of its most formidable strategic challenges, along with Pakistan, especially given the recent Galwan attack that resulted in Operation Sindhoor. Although the relationship with China has shown improvement in light of the recent Tariffs imposed by the USA, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) disputes, especially the violent clash in Galwan Valley in 2020, have reignited tensions, eroded mutual trust, and reshaped India's foreign policy (Panda, 2021). In addition to unresolved border disputes, India faces a significant trade imbalance with China, further complicating economic ties. At the regional level, Beijing's penetration in South Asia, via its Belt and Road Initiative and increased influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Maldives, continues to challenge India's role as South Asian representative (Sharma and Cheetri, 2022: 458-475).

In this context, India must navigate a delicate balancing act with China. At the same time, both countries are members of multilateral platforms such as BRICS and SCO. Furthermore, India's closer ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia, particularly through QUAD, have heightened concerns for China. While India's aspirations to be a global rule-maker are based on its developmental achievements and normative discourse, the path forward must be carefully manoeuvred, considering structural, strategic, and geopolitical challenges as well as domestic challenges. To achieve its place at the international level, India must not only address domestic reforms and economic inclusion but also engage in consistent diplomacy, strengthen regional partnerships, and stick to a more coherent global narrative, which would enable India's vision of a multipolar, equitable world order to move from abstract to reality.

Overall, through its civilizational history and assertive pragmatism, India is developing a new narrative of its place in the world, which necessitates consistency (Kaura, 2024). However, maintaining this narrative on the global stage will require a careful balance between consistent policy and pluralist diplomacy. Whether India can navigate these challenges successfully will be a key determinant of its future as a credible and respected global power.

Conclusion and way forward

India's efforts to delicately balance the world powers while maintaining the issue-based coalitions with various countries have allowed it to maximise its national interests following the policy of strategic autonomy. This balancing act has taken place despite domestic constraints in the form of democratic backsliding, religious extremism and arbitrary exercise of power and persistent economic vulnerabilities, which often limit

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India's growth. Nevertheless, India has sought to protect its sovereignty, retain its independence, and avoid being trapped in rigid alliances. The growing complexities in the fast-evolving multipolar world, in light of ongoing wars in various parts of the world and increasingly unstable regional dynamics, present significant challenges for India, compelling it to adapt its diplomatic and policy efforts to invest in domestic capacity building to increase its economic resilience while using its soft power to strengthen multilateral institutions, focusing on regional stability and global peace.

Thus, India's foreign policy trajectory reflects a complex and evolving interplay between ideology and pragmatism. As a rising power in a fragmented and increasingly multipolar world, India is engaged in the ambitious project of redefining its global role as a civilizational and strategic actor with global aspirations. India seeks to reconcile multiple tensions, which include strategic autonomy with multilateral alignment, civilizational identity, and normative leadership with the realities of the geopolitical world divided into multiple blocs or power centres.

As India engages actively in forums like BRICS, the Quad, the G20, and the SCO, while maintaining relationships with diverse countries such as the United States, France, Russia, and ASEAN, and pursuing significant developmental initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and *Vaccine Maitri*, it exemplifies how India is offering alternative models of global cooperation. However, India's rise is accompanied by challenges. Domestically, ensuring inclusive development and addressing socio-economic inequalities and the deficit in democratic structures will be critical, whereas internationally, India must navigate with China and the U.S.A. and continue to represent the interests of the Global South. Whether India can fully transition from a rule-taker to a rule-maker will ultimately depend on its capacity to project stable and inclusive leadership, while remaining responsive to the geopolitical constraints of the fragmented global order to contribute towards building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions domestically and globally. India's success will hinge on its capacity to institutionalise reforms domestically, sustain economic growth, and provide innovative solutions in areas such as climate governance and peacebuilding.

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