

India's Foreign Policy and Strategic Autonomy in a Changing Global Order

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Abstract

In recent decades, India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation, particularly towards a de-hyphenated approach. During the era of rising multipolarity, characterised by a lack of concentration of power in a unipolar or bipolar framework, India has sought to assert its strategic autonomy by refraining from aligning with any singular primary power or bloc. This de-hyphenation program allows India to engage with diverse global actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union, free from ideological or geopolitical commitments. By prioritising national interests and diversifying its diplomatic efforts, India has aimed to enhance its global influence while maintaining its sovereignty within a fragmented and intricate international landscape. This article examines the rationale behind India's de-hyphenation policy, its internal effects on foreign policy, and its worldwide implications for geopolitics in a multipolar context. It argues that India's pursuit of strategic autonomy reaffirms its role as a significant player in the global political system and positions India as a proponent of a balanced and inclusive world order. The onset of the third decade of the 21st century has been characterised by notable occurrences, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the escalation of tensions between Israel and Palestine, and other confrontations between the United States and China across multiple domains. Furthermore, the formation of new alliance systems, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, QUAD, and I2U2, is further influencing global power dynamics. In 2014, a paradigm shift in political leadership transpired in India, resulting in a transformation of its foreign policy strategy. India has implemented several strategic efforts to manoeuvre within the emerging global power structure, including Panchamrit, multi-alignment, and strategic autonomy, among others. In the current global order, the East and West are polarised on multiple topics, as seen by the emergence of new alliance institutions. Conversely, India has established a strategic position in both the East and West by participating in both coalitions. This research paper comprehensively examines India's policy of de-hyphenation in the emerging multipolar world order.

Keywords: De-hyphenation, Multi Polarity, Global order, Multi-alignment, Strategic autonomy, Panchamrit.

Introduction

In recent years, the global geopolitical environment has experienced a significant transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. The ascent of developing powers, the reemergence of regional actors, and the increasing sway of non-state entities have led to the fragmentation of global authority. In this evolving context, India has adopted a foreign policy strategy characterised by its unique method of de-hyphenation (Kukreja, 2020). Historically, India's foreign policy was significantly influenced by its relationships with major global powers, especially the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As the global political system progressed, India aimed to liberate itself from the limitations imposed by the ideological and geopolitical conflicts of major nations. De-hyphenation, in this sense, denotes India's endeavour to prevent being characterised by its associations with any singular nation or bloc (Bhattacharya, 2018). It prioritises the cultivation of autonomous and balanced relationships with various global entities, highlighting strategic autonomy rather than alignment with rival global powers. This policy has become fundamental to India's diplomatic strategy, allowing the nation to manoeuvre through the intricacies of a multipolar world while safeguarding its essential interests and sovereignty (Sujith, 2023).

The foreign policy of a nation is essential, as it affects the country's security, prosperity, diplomacy, and capacity to address intricate global challenges. The realm of foreign policy is highly dynamic, encompassing intricate relationships and factors that shape a nation's external relations strategy (Bhattacharya, 2018). The foreign policy of a nation will adapt in response to alterations in the global and domestic landscape. India's foreign policy has also adapted to shifts in the global order. The conclusion of the Second World War coincided with India's independence. The Second World War underscored the global decolonisation drive; concurrently, India's foreign policy prioritised decolonisation, disarmament, and the backing of newly independent nations in Asia, Africa, and South America (Black, 1997). Following the Second World War, the world became divided along ideological lines, resulting in the onset of the Cold War (Black, 1997). During this period, India adopted a non-aligned foreign policy and emphasised the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), seeking to preserve autonomy from both the United States and the Soviet Union (Ganapathi, 2017). The non-alignment policy aimed to broaden foreign ties and preserve strategic autonomy with both blocs while refraining from public alignment with either superpower (Dubey, 2016).

The conclusion of the Cold War transformed global power dynamics, shifting the bipolar international order to a unipolar structure dominated by a singular superpower, specifically the United States (Krauthammer, 1990). The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the transformations occurring globally and domestically in the 1990s were also evident in India's foreign policy. Following the Cold War, India prioritised a balance among economic interests, security issues, and regional and global diplomacy (Ganapathi, 2017). The implementation of a novel liberal economic policy, commonly referred to as economic liberalisation, encompasses the ideas of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation. The implementation of economic liberalisation in India during the early 1990s resulted in an increased focus on economic diplomacy (Bhattacharya, 2018). Concurrently, India transitioned from its previous non-alignment policy to a strategy of multi-alignment. The implementation of a novel foreign policy strategy is more pragmatic and realistic, encompassing collaborations with other nations, including the USA, Russia, and China (Pande, 2017).

The global power dynamics began to shift once more since the beginning of the 21st century. The global order has transitioned from a unipolar structure to a more intricate and varied multi-polar configuration (Bhattacharya, 2018). The 2008 financial crisis, China's economic boom, Russia's resurgence, the establishment of new major blocs, and other factors have rendered the global order multi-polar. This new system allocates power among multiple actors, establishing a global structure that prevents any single party from achieving a hegemonic position in the international arena (Kukreja, 2020). The context of India's foreign policy must be analysed within this framework and the underlying reasons for the government's adoption of new foreign policy principles since 2014. The formation of new alliance systems, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, QUAD, and I2U2, is intensifying global power dynamics, particularly against the backdrop of the East-West divide. India has established a strategic position in both the East and West by participating in both alliances through its de-hyphenation program (Pande, 2017).

In global politics, de-hyphenation denotes the autonomous management of two nations with a contentious relationship. This strategy entails cultivating a rapport with one nation while neglecting the intricacies of its interactions with another. A third nation that is excessively aware of the persistent animosity between two countries may face foreign policy difficulties in sustaining amicable relations with both. The de-hyphenation policy is defined by a pragmatic and realistic

strategy that entails a nation's autonomous interaction with two competing or conflicting nations, rather than perceiving them through a singular hyphenated perspective. A declarative policy of de-hyphenation fosters essential flexibility for the third nation by diminishing expectations of partisanship towards the other two nations (Sujith, 2023).

India's foreign policy has transitioned from the Nehruvian era's Panchsheel principles to the pragmatic and practical 'Panchamrit' policy of the Modi administration. The newly developed 'Panchamrit' has become a fundamental element of Indian foreign policy. India's 'Panchamrit' policy has reaffirmed its strategic stance in the emerging global order (Jaishankar, 2020). The alteration in foreign policy strategy is chiefly ascribed to the changing global landscape and domestic political factors. India is obligated to cultivate and protect its connections with other global powers on the world stage while ensuring its security, identity, and national interests. In this context, the 'Panchmrith' policy gains heightened importance, promoting five foundational pillars for India's Foreign Policy: 'Samman' (dignity and honour), 'Samvad' (increased engagement and dialogue), 'Samriddhi' (shared prosperity), 'Suraksha' (regional and global security), and 'Sanskriti' or 'Sabhyata' (cultural and civilisational connections) (Barik, 2021). An in-depth analysis of these foreign policy concepts highlights a significant focus on strategic autonomy. This paper examines the strategic rationale for this transition, its ramifications for India's foreign relations, and its broader effects on world geopolitics. This analysis of India's quest of strategic autonomy via de-hyphenation seeks to elucidate how the nation is positioning itself to enhance its impact and retain flexibility in a progressively fragmented global landscape. This research paper offers a thorough analysis of India's de-hyphenation policy within the context of the growing multipolar world order (Kukreja, 2020).

India and the New Global Order: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The onset of the 21st century signified the conclusion of the Cold War period and the rise of a unipolar international order led by the United States. During a significant portion of the post-Cold War era, global power dynamics were characterised by American predominance in both economic and military spheres. Nonetheless, the emergence of new powers—primarily China, India, and the European Union—is progressively fostering the development of a multipolar international order (Bhattacharya, 2018). This transformation is manifest not only in the rising economic strength of non-Western countries but also in the heightened need for political and strategic influence outside

the conventional centres of power. India, characterised by its substantial population, burgeoning economy, and increasing geopolitical clout, stands at the convergence of these global transformations (Sujith, 2023). The nation has shifted from its post-independence affiliation with the Soviet Union and subsequently the non-aligned movement to a foreign policy that prioritises strategic autonomy, multilateralism, and a diverse global relations approach. As the international system progresses, India's position as a significant global power becomes increasingly pivotal in creating the multipolar world order (Kukreja, 2020).

The global order after World War II was significantly influenced by the United States, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Tourangbam, 2021). The subsequent decade witnessed U.S. dominance in military, economic, and cultural spheres. The emergence of additional global actors, including China, India, and a revitalised Russia, has resulted in the reduced dominance of any singular power in international decision-making processes (Bhattacharya, 2018). China's swift economic advancement, military augmentation, and growing sway in global entities like the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation have established it as a preeminent power in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Concurrently, India has undergone considerable economic expansion, emerging as one of the largest countries globally and an increasingly influential participant in international affairs. As both nations establish their interests internationally, the concept of unipolarity has transitioned to the reality of multipolarity (Kukreja, 2020). India's foreign policy has experienced a significant transition since the conclusion of the Cold War. During the Cold War, India linked itself with the Soviet Union while upholding a policy of non-alignment. Following independence, India prioritised autonomous decision-making while refraining from aligning with any singular superpower. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 compelled India to re-evaluate its foreign policy and strategic stance (Tourangbam, 2021).

The early post-Cold War era seen India confronting economic difficulties, notably a balance of payments crisis in 1991, which prompted its initial significant economic changes and a transition towards liberalisation (Sujith, 2023). Through these reforms, India aimed to enhance its global economic interactions and strengthen its diplomatic connections with major powers, notably the United States (Tourangbam, 2021). In recent years, India has progressively adopted a strategy of strategic autonomy, seeking to maintain flexibility in its foreign policy and to refrain from alignment

with any singular power bloc. It has concentrated on establishing partnerships with a varied array of nations, including the U.S. and Russia, as well as significant regional players in the Asia-Pacific, the West Asia, and Africa (Bhattacharya, 2018).

India's emergence as a global force results from its domestic economic expansion and its capacity to adapt to the evolving global landscape. With the global centre of gravity transitioning towards Asia, India has emerged as a pivotal actor in influencing the future of global governance. The nation's expanding economy, military prowess, and demographic advantages provide it with considerable influence in regional and global matters. India's engagement in multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, BRICS, G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has established it as a significant contributor to dialogues on global trade, security, climate change, and development. Moreover, India's 'Act East' policy signifies its heightened involvement with East and Southeast Asia, especially regarding commerce, security collaboration, and opposing China's expanding influence in the region (Sujith, 2023).

The onset of the third decade of the 21st century has been characterised by notable occurrences, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the escalation of tensions between Israel and Palestine, and other confrontations between the United States and China across multiple domains (Bhattacharya, 2018). Furthermore, the formation of new alliance systems, such the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, QUAD, and I2U2, is further influencing global power dynamics. In 2014, a paradigm shift in political leadership transpired in India, resulting in a transformation of its foreign policy strategy. India has implemented several strategic efforts to manoeuvre within the emerging global power structure, including Panchamrit, multi-alignment, and strategic autonomy, among others (Barik, 2021). The rise of China has led to a shift in power dynamics, with complexities arising from the growing power hegemonic tussle between China and the US and geopolitical imperatives faced by other countries, particularly those in Asia. Middle powers, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, have found themselves vulnerable to balancing high-stakes security concerns with economic interests (Sujith, 2023).

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has accelerated the evaluation of global alliances, with countries like China and India remaining neutral. The latest war in West Asia, between Israel

and Hamas has also caused turmoil. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has implemented comprehensive policy initiatives, such as Act East, Neighbourhood First, Act West, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, to advance its strategic agenda. The emergence of new alliance systems like BRICS, QUAD, SCO, and I2U2 further contributes to global power dynamics. India's shift towards a multipolar world order is driven by its emphasis on multilateralism and reforming global institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (Kukreja, 2020). It advocates for more inclusive governance and greater representation of developing countries in global decision-making processes. India's regional security, particularly with China and Pakistan, is crucial, and its strategic partnerships with the U.S. and Russia help maintain power balance and national interests (Sujith, 2023).

Conclusion

India's growing economic power and strategic positioning are playing a pivotal role in the global order's transition from a unipolar to a multipolar structure. Through its policy of strategic autonomy, India advocates for a balanced and inclusive international system. India's ability to navigate the complexities of a multipolar world depends on its commitment to multilateralism, strengthening regional partnerships, and enhancing its influence in global governance frameworks. By leveraging its growing economic and political clout, India is well-positioned to shape the future of the global order. India's de-hyphenation policy in an emerging multipolar world order represents a strategic shift away from its historical global outlook, aiming for a more autonomous and nuanced position in the global political frame. This move aims to engage with major powers and emerging powers on individual merits, fostering India's national interest. India's membership in QUAD and SCO replicates its strategic autonomy. However, this policy poses challenges to India's diplomatic global missions, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. India must manage both its national and global interests in this critical juncture, managing global powers and delinking from its liberal ideal approaches. The policy of de-hyphenation is a pragmatic move that will guide India's global interests in this multipolar world order.

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