

# Global South Diplomacy: India's Leadership Aspirations and the Ukraine War as a Test of South-South Solidarity

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## Abstract

India, through its diplomatic actions in favor of multipolarity and solidarity, is becoming an increasing force in world affairs; particularly in the context of the Global South, which includes developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As part of this study on the leadership aspirations of India in Global South Diplomacy, we will be analyzing India's position regarding the Ukrainian War as a test case of South-South solidarity. Our research will rely upon theories related to middle-power diplomacy and solidarity politics in order to analyze India's neutral position on the conflict; its support for dialogue between Russia and Ukraine; and its initiative of consensus building at the G20 in order to create a unified front for the Global South against western pressure and Russian/Ukrainian division. The study demonstrates that India's role in the Global South has been both enhanced (by being able to use the crisis to amplify Indian voices regarding the negative impact of sanctions on food security) and diminished (due to differing levels of alignment with Russia and criticism of economic opportunism). The study demonstrates that India's approach to the crisis has increased solidarity among Southern states by focusing on common vulnerabilities; however, there are significant barriers to continued solidarity, including China's competitive interest in Southern states and ongoing internal divisions. The study provides further evidence of the agency of the Global South in crises, while also demonstrating India's ability to help bridge divides toward a reformed global order. Overall, the Ukrainian War illustrates both the strength and the limits of solidarity in a multi-polar geopolitical environment.

**Keywords:** Global South Diplomacy, India's Leadership, South-South Solidarity, Ukraine War, Multipolar Order, Strategic Neutrality, G20 Consensus, Food Security, Sanctions Impact, Middle Power Agency

## Introduction

India's pursuit of global leadership is an example of one country attempting to lead a coalition of states to promote reform within international institutions to help ensure that all countries have equal opportunities for development. India's Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) background provides the basis for such efforts, which are also grounded in India's experience of being colonized and economically marginalized by the North (Parkash, 2025). As a result, India seeks to represent the Global South's interests when acting as a leader. The Russia-

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Ukraine conflict offers a recent opportunity to demonstrate that ability. In addition, the conflict exposed tensions between the West's use of sanctions and Russia's relationships with other countries of the South. These tensions also exposed differences in the priorities among Southern nations (Hans, 2023). This research examines India's leadership aspirations based on the premise that the conflict provided a test bed for and reinforced the solidarity of the South. It is further argued that the conflict enhanced India's global status, while simultaneously presenting internal challenges. This study illustrates that India's abstentions from United Nations votes and appeals for peaceful solutions to the conflict were reflective of a foreign policy approach focused on addressing the concerns of the Global South regarding inflation and supply chain disruption, rather than adhering to ideological commitments. Methodologically, this study analyzed policy discourse, diplomatic outcome, and perceptions of various forms of data sources using solidarity theory to evaluate the degree of solidarity. This study adds to the field of International Relations by illustrating how conflicts such as the Ukraine conflict increase the role of middle powers in promoting unity within a fragmented system. Through analyzing the foreign policy approaches used by India, the solidarity tests faced by India, and the implications of these tests, this study illustrates India's emerging position in a multipolar world.

### **Background: Global South Diplomacy and India's Aspirations**

The idea of a Global South was first conceptualized at Bandung Conference in 1955. Since then, it has developed into a group of countries that are working together to obtain an equal footing in global governance. The Global South is showing solidarity in many different ways including in various organizations such as NAM and G-77. Organizations such as NAM and G-77 are primarily focused on the areas of development, climate justice and anti-hegemony. In recent years, India has been attempting to take a leading position in the Global South through the use of "Vishwa Guru" or "World Teacher." India has used its economic growth, diaspora and soft power to be able to speak to the needs of the Global South and provide representation for their interests (Long & Guo, 2024). However, India's ability to represent itself in the Global South is constantly being challenged due to internal contradictions and an increasingly close relationship with Western countries (Long & Guo, 2024). Despite potential challenges to India's credibility as a true representative for developing nations, India has been active in many multilateral forums and conferences such as the G-20 and BRICS. These forums have provided India with the opportunity to further solidify the identities and interests of the Global South member states as well as advocate for equitable global development (Kamalakar, 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2023). Before the Ukraine war, India's diplomacy had continued to focus on a multipolar world order. Examples of this are India's expansion of BRICS, and its "Act East" policy. Some of India's other goals include reforms to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and increasing the voices of developing nations on issues such as debt relief. The Ukraine war caused a disruption in India's multipolar ambitions and increased the vulnerability of the Global South by imposing additional sanctions on them. For example, the Ukraine war created food shortages in Africa and energy crises in Asia, testing the solidarity between countries in the Global South. In terms of how India has responded to the war and subsequent sanctions, India's response is rooted in the country's civilizational ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, and positions India as a bridge builder between countries. However, there are

also differences among countries in the Global South. While some countries are supporting Russia because of resource interests, other countries in the Global South have received Western aid, but the aid is conditional on the country supporting Western interests (Kapoor, 2024). Although India has demonstrated strategic autonomy by continuing its long-standing partnership with Russia and not abandoning it, India's response to the Ukraine war demonstrates a level of nuance to its diplomacy. India's decision to abstain from voting on several United Nations resolutions regarding Ukraine and to purchase nearly 7 times more Russian gas and oil than it did before the start of the war demonstrate India's commitment to maintaining its relationships and to balancing both historical alliances and current geopolitical realities (Forough et al., 2023; Ogden, 2023). India's response to the war and sanctions has been to protect both its national interests and the interests of the Global South (Alden, 2023; Oberoi & Leandro, 2023; Sisodia & Seth, 2025; Unnikrishnan & Kapoor, 2023). In addition to demonstrating strategic autonomy, India's foreign policy has evolved to reflect a form of multi-alignment and engagement with multiple blocs based on national interest rather than solely based on the Cold War era of non-alignment (Morales, 2025; Williams & Papa, 2020). This context sets the stage for India's ambition to enhance solidarity among the countries of the Global South during the war. However, critical perspectives suggest that the rising status of India could lead to power imbalances and overshadow the interests of smaller countries.

### **India's Diplomatic Strategies during the Ukraine War**

India's diplomatic posture during the ongoing global conflict is an exemplar of strategic neutrality, as India has refrained from voting against resolutions condemning Russia at the United Nations while continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. The positioning of India represents a test of leadership, as it has aligned India with the sentiment of the Global South to oppose bloc politics. India has utilized several key strategies including promoting dialogue as expressed by Modi in his G20 remarks, as well as promoting unity instead of division. Additionally, India has assisted in the formation of consensus among the international community regarding declarations related to the ongoing conflict, as India has included the priorities of the Southern Hemisphere, such as facilitating the Black Sea grain deal to alleviate food insecurity (Ogden, 2023). Furthermore, India is utilizing its G20 presidency to position itself as a mediator between Russia and the West, as well as to address the broader economic and humanitarian impacts of the conflict on the Global South (Ogden, 2023; Verma & Li, 2025). Through this strategy, India is demonstrating its desire to serve as a bridge between the West and the Global South, and to create a more inclusive international order (Williams & Papa, 2020). Also, India's ambiguous and nuanced stance toward the conflict - characterized by "strategic ambivalence" and a refusal to unconditionally condemn Russia - demonstrates India's commitment to creating a multipolar world order, as well as maintaining India's own interests through multi-alignment (Forough et al., 2023). In terms of economics, India's increase in the importation of Russian oil - reaching 2 million barrels per day - positions India as a model for how sanctions can be navigated, and how benefits can be shared through re-exportation to Southern hemisphere countries. Multilaterally, India supported the African Union's inclusion in the G20, increasing the voice of the Global South. These actions demonstrate India's aspiration to lead by example, to create solidarity through practical engagement. Discursively, Indian officials are framing the conflict as a northern conflict with

southern costs, reinforcing anti-imperialist narratives (Forough et al., 2023). This strategic narrative further solidifies India's credibility as an advocate for developing nations, and differentiates India's foreign policy from that of traditional Western powers (Verma & Li, 2025). Additionally, India's assertive position on global issues, most notably emphasized during its G20 presidency, illustrates India's commitment to transforming multilateral institutions and to addressing the development needs of the Global South, and therefore differentiates India's foreign policy from that of the other major powers (Verma & Li, 2025). Finally, India's commitment to strategic autonomy, which allows India to maintain both bilateral and multilateral relationships with complexity, will shape India's responses to international crises, allowing India to give priority to its national interests, as well as to navigate various diplomatic challenges (Kara, 2025; Park, 2025). This type of flexibility enables India to utilize flexible partnerships and issue-based coalitions to improve its international influence while adhering to its commitment to a multipolar world order (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). While these strategies have received scrutiny, specifically from Western media who label India's response as "sitting on the fence", and by some Southern hemisphere countries that view the oil deals as self-serving, India's diplomatic efforts have raised India's profile as demonstrated by India receiving positive receptions in Africa and Latin America.

### **The Ukraine War as a Test of South-South Solidarity**

India solidifies the global south by revealing common vulnerabilities and conflicting self-interests. India has become a leader by articulating the collective challenges created by the war including; the financial sanctions imposed by western countries have caused inflation to rise to levels never seen before by 80% of all developing countries around the world. This has prompted India to advocate for reforming international financial institutions so that all countries will have an equal say and access to international finance. The war also revealed cracks in unity within the Global South. Although both Brazil and South Africa supported India's position of neutrality towards the war between Russia and Ukraine, there were many other countries in the Global South that expressed support for one or the other country involved in the conflict. This reflected the different types of dependence that each country had on the parties involved (Verma, 2023). In addition, India demonstrated its ability to strengthen unity among countries in the Global South. In forums such as SCO, India acted as mediator for those countries that were either pro-Russia or neutral during the war. Furthermore, humanitarian evacuations of southern university students from Ukraine increased perception of India as a protector. Finally, quantitatively, 70% of respondents from Global South countries reported they viewed India positively based on their response to the war, however, quantitative assessments indicated that the war presented two major barriers to the strength of India's influence in the Global South: China's growing presence in Africa and internal economic disparities that prevented Global South countries from taking unified action (Üçağac & Muslu, 2025). This experience validates India's status as a leader of the Global South while illustrating the fragile nature of solidarity in a polarized world.

### **Challenges to India's Leadership and South-South Solidarity**

The geopolitical environment presents many challenges for the Southern Unity of India. Western "Wedge Strategies" are designed to isolate India from Russia, and this is challenging

the unity of the South (Sharma & Atri, 2023). Russia and China have established what can be described as "no-limits" ties in the form of an agreement, which creates competition between two leaders for influence over the South, while China has been investing in the South through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Sharma & Atri, 2023). There are also domestic factors that challenge the unity of the South in India. Some of the time Hindu Nationalist ideologies in India have alienated some of the Southern states whose population is mostly Muslim (Srinivas, 2023). There are also critiques of economic opportunism when India profits from Russian Oil while many of the Southern states in India do not have enough oil to meet their needs (Srinivas, 2023). These critiques were amplified by the War and have also created new opportunities such as Climate Crises and Debt Crises which have diverted attention away from the issues of Solidarity (Srinivas, 2023). India has the opportunity to build closer ties to the Southern Nations and increase its Soft Power as it has done through the creation of Digital Public Goods and Vaccine Diplomacy (Rached & Sá, 2024; Sharma & Atri, 2023). In order to take advantage of the opportunity and to address the challenges, India will pursue "Multi-Alignment." This means that India will maintain relationships with multiple countries, while maintaining the principles of the South. Critical scholars view India's pursuit of "Multi-Alignment" and other forms of cooperation with the South as a reflection of Neocolonial Continuities. They believe that the Northern Conflicts create divisions among the Southern States. For Critical Scholars, the way to address the challenges that create divisions among the Southern States would be for India to engage in inclusive diplomatic efforts such as joint South-South initiatives in sustainable development.

### **Implications for Global Order and Future Trajectories**

The Ukraine War will likely have implications for India's role in creating a strengthened multipolar world order. As India takes on more leadership roles in promoting agency of the Global South, it is likely to push for reform at both the IMF and WTO. Additionally, India's success in maintaining unity among member states during the crisis may create momentum for India's bid for permanent membership on the UNSC. However, failure to maintain this unity may put its bid into jeopardy due to loss of credibility. In addition, the division between countries in the Global South on how to balance their economic and political relationships with other nations may limit the ability of the Global South to act together to make institutional reforms to the current global governance structure (Oberoi & Leandro, 2023; Park, 2022). These divisions may also limit the ability of the Global South to act together in making institutional reforms to the current global governance structure (Oberoi & Leandro, 2023; Park, 2022) — further reinforcing power asymmetry within these institutions (Verma & Li, 2025). Furthermore, such divisions within the Global South could lead to an increase in ad-hoc coalitions formed around a particular interest rather than a region or ideology — potentially leading to an even more fragmented international system (Ioannides, 2022). India, along with China, is seeking to create a new world order with multiple centers of power. While advocating for this new world order, however, they are still limited by their own strategic capabilities. Digital diplomacy and climate coalitions can help build and sustain solidarity between the Global South countries. Policymakers should therefore pursue equitable partnership strategies with India and other BRICS members to mitigate competition from China through cooperative

projects. Overall, the Ukraine War has validated India's aspirations for a Southern-led global governance model.

## Conclusion

The global South solidarity appears to be in serious decline. The Ukraine War has tested India's global South diplomatic efforts with respect to its role in advancing its global leadership aspirations through the reinforcement of South-South solidarity via the use of neutral and inclusive foreign policy strategies; however, while the challenges are numerous, the war highlights India's capacity for providing a unifying function that contributes to multipolar equity and therefore, future attempts at building resilient alliance(s) may utilize this model.

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