

Leading from the South: India's Quest for Institutional Legitimacy in the Emerging World Order

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Abstract

The end of the world with a center of its gravity that was still a clear post-Second World War order around the United States, around Western institutions, means that the elements of this new world are unknown. New voices and new ideas are responsible for the building of a new world order. India's role is especially critical. It is an important and growing player in global climate change governance, transitioning from a passive norm-taker, adapting to rules made by others, to a norm shaper, a country looking to propose an alternate and to speak for the Global south. The chapter covers India's evolution from a non-aligned power struggling to avoid subjugation to the Cold War superpowers (given India's limited global reach) to its current position covering Global South Summits and leading the promotion of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and India's turn at the G20 presidency to promote the philosophy of inclusion summed up in the slogan Vasudaiva Kutumbakam ("One Earth, One Family, One Future"). India's climate diplomacy and development partnership are beginning to change the norms of legitimacy and cooperation through innovation, albeit with some limitations. However, there remain numerous concerns around India's ability to lead, whether it is willing and capable of rising to the occasion, whether it can reconcile its aspirations of leading the world with its domestic constraints and whether it will truly represent the South. However, India's evolving role highlights an important fact: the Global South is no longer just a place where norms are acted upon, but is now a place where norms are actively created. By analyzing India's history, this chapter seeks to show how the Global South is reimagining its future from the South, with India acting as one of its primary architects.

Keywords: India's Foreign Policy, Global South, Norm-Shaper, Multipolar world Order, institutional legitimacy, BRICS and G20, Vasudaiva Kutumbakam, Global Governance.

Introduction

The international order in the twenty-first century is experiencing a tectonic shift. The age of American unipolar dominance established in the wake of the Cold War, is gradually giving way to a more complex multipolar order. Although the United States is still a major actor in international affairs, its normative dominance is increasingly challenged by the rise of new

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powers, the diffusion of international power, and the assault on Western voices in standards and norms setting. The well-known international institutions founded in the aftermath of World War II the UN, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) were all founded prominently on American leadership and interests. Today, however, questions are being raised concerning their effectiveness and legitimacy, especially by the countries of the Global South, which are a majority of the world population, but historically have had little voice in framing the institutions that govern their future. The role of India in this changing environment acquires special importance. The largest democracy in the world, an emerging economic power, and nation with long civilizational traditions, India is no longer content to live on the fringes of global governance. Once conceived mainly as a “norm-taker” a country which adapted itself to rules set by others, India has now begun to conceive itself as a “norm-maker,” a state which attempts to design new ideas, institutions, and practices of international cooperation.

This movement from passive existence to active participation is not a matter of mere semantics, but it reflects more profound changes in India's material capabilities, diplomatic activity, and strategic vision. The difference between “norm-taker” and “norm-shaper” in terms of understanding this transition is important. A norm-taker respects international law but has little influence in creating global rules. During the Cold War, despite its moral leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India lacked the economic and institutional power to reshape the world order. In contrast, a norm-shaper actively contributes to agenda-setting, institution-building, and global norm creation. In recent years, India's leadership in BRICS, the G20, the International Solar Alliance, and its development partnerships across the Global South indicate a shift from adaptation to norm-building. The central research question is whether and how India is transforming from a norm-taker into a norm-shaper in the emerging multipolar order. The article traces India's Cold War foreign policy, its rise through South–South cooperation (including IBSA), and its current global initiatives, while also examining limitations such as domestic challenges and strategic rivalry, particularly with China. It concludes by assessing India's future potential and the growing role of the Global South in shaping global norms.

This article addresses the following research questions: (1) What historical and ideational foundations underpinned India's early role as a norm-taker and norm entrepreneur? (2) Through which mechanisms has India attempted to move from the margins to a more central voice in the Global South? (3) In which issue areas is India effectively shaping norms and institutions, and what constraints limit its leadership? The central argument is that India has become a selective norm-shaper in finance, climate and digital governance, drawing on a long-standing normative repertoire, but its influence is uneven and contingent on domestic and geopolitical factors. Methodologically, the article employs qualitative analysis of speeches, official documents (such as the ISA Framework Agreement and G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration), and secondary literature on India's foreign policy and the multiplex world order.

Historical Foundations of India's Normative Identity

India's leaders when it gained independence in 1947, were firm that the country's foreign policy would represent its own civilizational values and historical experiences instead of being influenced by foreign powers. Nehru, the Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister, was

the one who not only gave this vision an intellectual but also a political manifestation. In his speeches from 1946 to 1961, Nehru made it clear that India's external engagement would be based on "independence of thought and action", whereby he not only resisted the Cold War bloc polarization but also asserted a space for newly decolonized nations to explore their own paths (Nehru 1961). Apart from this, the Constitution of India was also a major factor that influenced the external approach of the country.

According to Granville Austin (1966), the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights could be called the "conscience of the Constitution" which was a way of expressing the moral responsibility to bring about justice, equality, and welfare. These principles greatly influenced India's foreign relations: the Constitution, as it were, promised social change in India while the foreign policy proclaimed an era of decolonization, racial equality, and peaceful coexistence all over the world. An example of such a moral orientation is the Panchsheel Principles of 1954 agreement with China. The five principles—mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence were soon taken up at the 1955 Bandung Conference and became one of the cornerstones of the Non-Aligned Movement (Appadorai 1961; Nehru 1961). The Sino-Indian war of 1962 certainly strained the trust between the two countries but the Panchsheel paradigm still found its way into India's diplomatic language and is still referred to in the present-day debates on global governance. Again, the foreign policy was not free from contradictions.

As J. N Dixit (2003) often said that India's moral compass often clashed with strategic realities. One such example was the 1971 Indo-Soviet treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. It could have been seen as a compromise to the non-alignment, but it provided vital security support during the Bangladesh Liberation War. This balancing act between principle and pragmatism became a hallmark of India's diplomacy, allowing it to uphold its ideals while protecting core interests when necessary. A. Appadorai (1961) also provided in-depth theoretical aspects to these choices, urging that foreign policy must serve the welfare of humans rather than only state power. He claimed that India was trying to tell the world that the values, law and dialogue were the foundations of diplomacy while military coercion was just one way of doing it. The first decades of India's independence defined its role as a norm entrepreneur. India could not impose its vision on the world due to its lack of economic and military power, but it managed to formulate a vocabulary: non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonial solidarity, that the newly independent nations could relate to. In this way, India started to influence the international discourse long before it got the required material means to change the institutions.

- ***Nehru's Vision and Non-Alignment***

Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy dream was the starting point of India engaging with the outside world during the postcolonial period. He always insisted that India's outside policy had to be "independent and rooted in its own historical and civilizational ethos" as opposed to being influenced by others' conflicts. From 1946 to 1961, in his speeches and writings, Nehru highlighted the themes of "peace, anti-colonialism, and equality among nations" (Nehru, 1961). To him, India was not totally free unless it also had a say in world affairs through an independent voice.

Thus, Non-Alignment was not a passive-neutrality act but rather a conscious and “active choice for strategic autonomy”. It was intended to protect India’s freedom of judgment by keeping the door open to both power blocs on global issues. K.P. Misra (1981) pointed out that non-alignment did not mean isolating India but rather that it was able to work with both sides of the ideological divide while staying sovereign. It drew its strength from “Gandhian ethics and India's cultural philosophy of balance and tolerance”, the moral ideals being animated through pragmatic statecraft.

This method was very important especially at the time when the Cold War had divided the world into two hostile camps. India’s non-alignment was not a sign of weakness but rather a demonstration of its confidence in civilizational identity and moral authority.

- ***The Ethos of Non-Alignment***

The idea of non-alignment was much more than a diplomatic posture; it represented a moral and philosophical worldview that reflected India’s civilizational identity. As scholars such as K.P. Misra (1981) have noted, non-alignment was never intended as a policy of isolation or neutrality. Rather, it was an active strategy of engagement: a conscious choice to participate in global affairs without succumbing to the rigidities of Cold War bloc politics. Rooted in India’s cultural traditions and the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, non-alignment embodied the belief that peace and justice could be pursued through dialogue rather than domination. It drew upon India’s ancient idea of *Sarva dharma sambhava* (respect for all paths) and the moral universalism that shaped its civilizational outlook. By refusing to align militarily with either the United States or the Soviet Union, India sought to uphold the principle that every nation—especially newly independent ones—had the right to determine its own destiny free from external coercion (Nehru, 1961).

This ethical orientation gave non-alignment a distinctive moral legitimacy. It allowed India to build bridges among diverse states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, uniting them under a common cause of decolonization and equitable development. The Bandung Conference of 1955 and later the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) institutionalized this vision, transforming India’s philosophical ideals into a collective diplomatic force (Appadorai, 1961). Though India’s influence was often constrained by its limited economic and military capacity, non-alignment represented its first real attempt at norm creation in international relations. It introduced a new vocabulary—of independence, peaceful coexistence, and South-South solidarity: into global politics. More importantly, it signaled that even a newly independent nation could articulate universal principles capable of challenging the dominance of great powers. While much of India’s early foreign policy was guided by moral ideals, practitioners within the diplomatic establishment often faced the challenge of translating those ideals into action. J.N. Dixit (2003), who served as India’s Foreign Secretary and one of its most seasoned diplomats, offered a candid assessment of this balancing act. He characterized the early decades of Indian diplomacy as a blend of idealism and realism, where moral conviction often collided with geopolitical necessity. Dixit observed that India’s pursuit of peace and autonomy was frequently constrained by security threats and economic vulnerability.

The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, for instance, illustrated this tension vividly. Though it seemed to contradict India's commitment to non-alignment, it was a strategic imperative during the Bangladesh Liberation War. As Dixit argued, such decisions reflected not hypocrisy but the pragmatism of survival: a young nation securing its interests within a highly polarized international system. At the same time, he noted that India consistently sought to return to its principled moorings. Even when circumstances forced compromises, the underlying framework of peace, independence, and equality remained intact. This oscillation between moral aspiration and strategic constraint became a recurring pattern in Indian diplomacy. Dixit's reflections provide a valuable insider's perspective on the evolution of India's foreign policy. They remind us that the making of policy is not a linear application of ideals, but an ongoing negotiation between values and realities—a process that would continue to define India's role in global politics well into the post-Cold War era.

Constitutional and Panchsheel Legacies

India's early foreign policy drew strength not only from political vision but also from intellectual and constitutional principles that grounded its global outlook in moral legitimacy. Thinkers such as A. Appadorai (1961) provided the academic foundation for this approach. He argued that the state exists to serve human welfare, not merely to preserve power, and that diplomacy must remain tethered to ethics and justice. Appadorai's writings reflected a belief that international relations should be guided by moral restraint, where the pursuit of national interest does not come at the expense of universal peace and cooperation. This moral framework found strong resonance in India's Constitution, which embedded ideals that extended naturally into foreign policy. As Granville Austin (1966) noted, the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights together form the "conscience of the Constitution." These provisions articulate India's commitment to equality, human dignity, and social justice—values that shaped its early diplomatic priorities. By advocating for decolonization, racial equality, and the peaceful settlement of disputes at the United Nations, India was, in effect, projecting its constitutional values onto the global stage. India's domestic pluralism also deeply influenced its international posture.

The nation's commitment to democracy, secularism, and peaceful coexistence at home translated into a foreign policy that valued dialogue over confrontation. Its call for global disarmament, economic equity, and a rules-based world order stemmed from the same moral universe that underpinned its internal governance. Thus, India's intellectual and constitutional heritage gave coherence to its diplomacy. It ensured that even as a developing nation, India's voice in world affairs carried moral authority and normative weight—qualities that would later enable it to emerge as a key advocate for the Global South. The Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 stands as one of the most enduring expressions of India's early diplomatic philosophy. Jointly articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, it established five guiding principles for interstate relations: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Government of India, 1954). These principles reflected India's desire to move beyond the logic of confrontation that dominated Cold War geopolitics. For Nehru, Panchsheel represented both a moral and practical framework for international engagement. It

combined the Gandhian ethos of peace and non-violence with the realism of a developing nation seeking security in a divided world. When the principles were endorsed at the Bandung Conference in 1955, they gained global resonance among newly decolonized states of Asia and Africa, many of which saw in Panchsheel a diplomatic philosophy consistent with their own struggles for autonomy (Appadorai, 1961; Nehru, 1961). Though the Sino-Indian War of 1962 severely tested these ideals, Panchsheel's moral appeal endured. It continued to inform India's diplomatic vocabulary and reappeared in subsequent dialogues on non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and South-South solidarity. Even decades later, the principles have been reaffirmed in India's foreign policy discourse, including in references made during Modi–Xi meetings, underscoring their long-term symbolic value (Indian Express, 2023).

Panchsheel thus served as an early normative innovation—an attempt to offer the Global South a set of universal principles distinct from Western power politics. It reflected India's capacity to translate its civilizational ideals into the language of international relations, influencing the moral architecture of the postcolonial world. Taken together, India's early diplomatic experiences reveal a coherent intellectual and moral framework built upon three interconnected pillars. First, the philosophical tradition of non-violence and autonomy, rooted in India's civilizational heritage, provided moral legitimacy to its actions. Second, the strategic pursuit of independence amid Cold War pressures ensured that India's policies reflected pragmatic self-interest alongside idealism. Third, India's role as a normative leader—advocating decolonization, racial equality, and international justice—established its credibility as the moral voice of the developing world (Dixit, 2003; Misra, 1981). While India lacked the economic or military strength to enforce its ideas globally, it succeeded in crafting a distinct diplomatic vocabulary that redefined international legitimacy for the postcolonial world. Terms such as non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and solidarity became synonymous with India's worldview. More than just foreign policy principles, they formed the ethical DNA of Indian diplomacy, shaping its engagement with the Global South for decades to come.

From Margins to Voice: India and the Global South

When India entered the world stage after independence, it was a country with moral weight but limited material power. Nehru's leadership in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gave India visibility as a spokesperson for newly decolonized nations. Yet for much of the Cold War, India remained at the margins of decision-making. It could call for decolonization, racial equality, and disarmament, but it lacked the economic strength to translate its ideals into institutional change (Nehru 1961; Misra 1981). The idea of the Global South gradually took shape during these decades. Initially expressed through NAM and the Group of 77 (G77) at the United Nations, it reflected the shared grievances of developing countries—dependence on Northern economies, vulnerability to global shocks, and exclusion from the governance of trade and finance. India found itself naturally aligned with these demands, repeatedly emphasizing the need for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s (Appadorai 1961). However, its own economic weakness limited how much it could contribute beyond rhetoric. Despite these constraints, India sought to give substance to Southern solidarity through South-South cooperation. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, launched in 1964, offered

scholarships, training, and technical assistance to developing countries. Though modest in scale, ITEC built lasting goodwill, especially across Africa and Southeast Asia, by presenting India as a partner in capacity-building rather than as a patron (Rana 2023).

This marked the beginnings of India's development diplomacy—a tool that continues to define its identity today. India's balancing act between its Southern identity and ties with the West has always been a source of tension. During the Cold War, its tilt towards the Soviet Union was evident in security matters, while after 1991 liberalization brought closer ties with the United States and global markets. This dual positioning sometimes created doubts about India's credibility as a Southern leader. For instance, in the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations, India frequently led coalitions defending the interests of developing countries, particularly in agriculture. Yet scholars such as Amrita Narlikar (2011) have noted that India's stance often reflected its own domestic priorities as much as broader Southern solidarity. The 2000s marked a turning point in India's role. The creation of the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA) in 2003 signaled a more institutional approach to South-South cooperation. IBSA, though limited by geography and resources, was innovative in promoting democratic solidarity and pressing for United Nations reform.

Around the same time, India's participation in BRICS alongside Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa brought greater visibility. By helping establish the New Development Bank (NDB), India demonstrated that it could move beyond speeches to help design financial institutions that addressed Southern concerns (Stuenkel 2020). By the early twenty-first century, India's voice had clearly strengthened. Its rapid economic growth, technological advances in information technology, and diaspora networks gave it leverage. It continued to frame its diplomacy in terms of fairness and inclusivity, defending the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" in climate negotiations, or resisting unequal trade rules in the WTO. Yet unlike earlier decades, its words now carried more influence, backed by the credibility of a rising economy and a more assertive diplomacy (Tharoor 2012). India's transition from the margins to a central voice in the Global South reflects both continuity and change. The rhetoric of solidarity remained, but it was supplemented by resources, coalition-building, and practical initiatives. India no longer stood as a symbolic spokesperson; it had become an active player capable of shaping the agenda and influencing outcomes.

India as a Norm-Shaper: Case Studies

- ***Financial Governance: BRICS and New Development Bank***

In the twenty-first century, India's foreign policy has undergone a subtle yet significant transformation—from being largely a norm-follower in a Western-dominated order to becoming an active norm-shaper in a multipolar world. While India's moral diplomacy during the Nehru era gave it ideological legitimacy, it is in recent decades that the country has acquired the material capability, institutional influence, and technological innovation necessary to shape global norms in tangible ways. One of the clearest examples of this transformation is India's leadership within BRICS—the coalition of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Initially dismissed as a loose grouping, BRICS has evolved into a platform that challenges the dominance of Western-led financial institutions. Through the creation of the New Development

Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, BRICS has institutionalized alternatives to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Stuenkel, 2020). India has been central to shaping the group's emphasis on inclusive development and equitable global governance, signaling a shift from dependency to co-design in international institutions.

- ***Climate Diplomacy: International Solar Alliance and Climate Justice***

India's climate diplomacy has also become a hallmark of its norm-shaping agenda. The establishment of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2015, co-founded by India and France, is a defining example. With over 120 member countries—predominantly from the Global South—the ISA represents India's vision of climate justice and sustainable energy transition (ISA Framework, 2017). The alliance reframed climate action not as an imposition from developed countries but as a collaborative project for equitable growth. This initiative allowed India to project itself as a solution-provider, crafting norms that reflect Southern priorities such as affordability, access, and technology transfer. India's G20 presidency in 2023 further consolidated its emerging role as a global norm entrepreneur. The inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 during India's presidency symbolized the country's commitment to a more representative international system (MEA, 2023). The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration—anchored in the Sanskrit maxim *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("One Earth, One Family, One Future")—reaffirmed India's effort to blend ethical universalism with practical reformism. It underscored India's capacity to bridge North–South divides, articulating developmental and technological aspirations through an inclusive lens.

- ***Digital Public Infrastructure and Global Digital Norms***

Moreover, India's leadership in promoting digital public goods has introduced a new dimension to its global influence. The success of platforms like Aadhaar, UPI, and Cowin has inspired the idea of "Digital Public Infrastructure for Development, " championed internationally by Nandan Nilekani (2023) and supported by the United Nations and World Bank. This initiative positions India as a pioneer of an open, interoperable, and equitable digital model—offering an alternative to both the Western corporate-driven and Chinese state-controlled digital ecosystems.

In sum, India's evolving diplomacy reflects a shift from rhetoric to agency. Through institutional innovations like BRICS and ISA, normative leadership in forums such as the G20, and technological governance models in the digital sphere, India is no longer simply reacting to global norms—it is actively creating them. As Amitav Acharya (2018) notes, the emerging multiplex world order allows diverse actors to shape international rules. In this environment, India's hybrid identity—as both a developing nation and an emerging power—has become its greatest strength. It enables New Delhi to mediate between worlds, translating Southern aspirations into global standards and reframing multipolarity as an opportunity for collective norm creation rather than competition.

Geopolitical Logics, Challenges and Contradictions

The twenty-first century has witnessed a profound reconfiguration of global power structures. The unipolar order that followed the end of the Cold War—defined by U.S. dominance and

Western-led multilateralism—is increasingly giving way to a multipolar and “multiplex” world (Acharya, 2018). This transition has not only redistributed material power but also disrupted the normative and institutional architecture of global governance. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) face a growing legitimacy crisis. Their decision-making structures reflect a post-1945 hierarchy that no longer corresponds to the realities of the global economy or geopolitics. The inability of the WTO to address new trade disputes, the paralysis of the UN Security Council in responding to major conflicts, and the IMF’s unequal voting rights have all deepened calls for reform (Narlikar, 2011; Stuenkel, 2020).

In this shifting context, India has emerged as both a beneficiary and advocate of change, a country that straddles the worlds of the West and the Global South. India’s approach to this transformation has been twofold. On one hand, it maintains strong strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Europe through platforms like the Quad, signaling a pragmatic alignment with Western democracies. On the other hand, India continues to assert its Southern identity through its leadership in BRICS, IBSA, and G20 forums. This dual posture, what scholars like Tharoor (2012) describe as “multi-alignment”, allows India to pursue strategic autonomy while amplifying its voice in reforming global governance. The competition with China adds another layer to India’s geopolitical positioning. Both countries project themselves as champions of the Global South, yet their visions of world order differ fundamentally. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represent a state-driven model of connectivity centered on infrastructure and financial dependence. India, by contrast, promotes an approach based on capacity-building, technology sharing, and institutional inclusivity (Paul, 2017).

Through initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Development Partnership Administration (DPA), India has attempted to create a model of cooperative, not coercive, leadership, a model that prioritizes legitimacy over leverage. At the same time, India’s engagement remains shaped by a tension between realism and idealism. Its participation in defense cooperation, nuclear partnerships, and technology diplomacy reflects pragmatic realism, while its persistent advocacy for UN reform, climate justice, and equitable development embodies its normative aspirations. This dualism is not a contradiction but a continuation of India’s long-standing diplomatic tradition, balancing moral principles with material interests, much as Nehru and his successors did during the Cold War (Dixit, 2003). In this emerging landscape, India’s strategic narrative has evolved from one of moral exceptionalism to one of normative pragmatism. It no longer claims the moral high ground alone but seeks to institutionalize pluralism creating spaces where developing nations can participate meaningfully in rule-making. This synthesis between ethical leadership and pragmatic adaptation defines India’s contribution to the current global transition. As Amitav Acharya (2024) argues, the rise of the Global South is not about replacing the West but about pluralizing power and ideas in world politics. In this context, India’s greatest strength lies in its ability to mediate across divides, between North and South, democracy and development, idealism and realism, making it a crucial architect of the evolving international order.

Challenges and Contradictions

Despite India’s growing visibility and influence in global governance, its transition from a

norm-taker to a norm-shaper remains fraught with internal and external contradictions. The very factors that give India legitimacy in the Global South—its democratic ethos, developmental experience, and moral diplomacy—also expose the limitations of its leadership in an increasingly competitive world. One major challenge stems from India's domestic constraints. Persistent issues such as inequality, bureaucratic inefficiency, and social divisions weaken its claim to moral authority. While India's democracy gives it normative appeal, concerns about governance capacity and rights protection sometimes complicate its soft power narrative. As scholars like Tharoor (2012) have argued, India's foreign policy credibility ultimately rests on its ability to deliver stability and prosperity at home. The gap between its aspirational rhetoric and domestic performance remains one of the most significant barriers to sustained leadership. Externally, India's ambition to represent the Global South faces structural and strategic hurdles. The growing rivalry with China exemplifies this tension. Both countries seek to speak for the developing world, yet their approaches diverge sharply. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) relies on state-driven infrastructure diplomacy and financial leverage, while India promotes a more consultative and partnership-based model, emphasizing capacity-building and transparency (Paul, 2017).

However, India's limited financial resources and slower project delivery often make it difficult to compete with Beijing's scale of engagement. Questions also persist about India's representativeness within the Global South. While India speaks of inclusivity and equity, smaller developing nations sometimes perceive its initiatives as India-centric rather than genuinely collective. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing leadership with empathy—ensuring that India's global rise does not replicate the very hierarchies it once resisted. Institutionally, India's reformist agenda faces an entrenched status quo bias within international organizations. Calls for expanding the UN Security Council or reforming IMF voting structures have been met with diplomatic inertia. This exposes the limits of India's influence in reshaping the deeper architecture of global governance (Acharya, 2018). Furthermore, the North–South divide continues to complicate India's diplomacy. While Western powers see India as a strategic counterweight to China, many Southern states still expect it to act as a developmental partner rather than a geopolitical player—a dual expectation that is difficult to reconcile. At a conceptual level, India continues to oscillate between idealism and realism, a dilemma that has shaped its foreign policy since independence. Its advocacy for moral principles such as climate justice and multipolar cooperation sometimes sits uneasily with its growing security partnerships and defense modernization.

As Dixit (2003) observed, India's diplomacy has always been a process of managing contradictions rather than eliminating them. Ultimately, India's greatest challenge as a norm-shaper lies in translating its ideas into enduring institutions and global practices. To maintain its credibility, it must demonstrate that its leadership—rooted in pluralism and partnership—is not merely rhetorical but transformative. Only then can India truly consolidate its position as the moral and institutional anchor of the Global South in the emerging world order.

India's Future in the Emerging World Order

As the world transitions from an era of Western dominance to a more diffuse and interdependent international system, India's role is becoming increasingly pivotal. The

emerging world order, which scholars such as Amitav Acharya (2018, 2024) describe as a “multiplex world”, is not merely multipolar in power but plural in ideas, institutions, and leadership. In such an environment, India’s future influence will depend less on coercive strength and more on its ability to shape the normative, developmental, and technological foundations of global governance.

1. Climate Leadership and Sustainability Diplomacy

India’s growing prominence in climate diplomacy is perhaps its most visible avenue of future leadership. As the founding architect of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and co-chair of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), India has positioned itself as a bridge between developed and developing worlds on sustainability issues. The ISA, encompassing over 120 member countries, has redefined global climate cooperation by reframing clean energy as a tool of equity rather than obligation (ISA Framework, 2017). India’s approach is rooted in the concept of climate justice, which argues that the burden of mitigation should be proportional to historical responsibility and current capability. By combining its national experience in renewable energy with developmental imperatives, India offers a model that balances growth and responsibility. During its G20 presidency in 2023, India’s theme— “One Earth, One Family, One Future”—symbolized this holistic vision, linking ecological balance to shared prosperity (MEA, 2023). Going forward, India’s credibility as a climate leader will rest on its ability to translate advocacy into measurable action: achieving its ambitious net-zero target by 2070, expanding green hydrogen capacity, and integrating climate adaptation with South–South cooperation.

2. Digital Diplomacy and Technological Norms

If the twentieth century was defined by territorial geopolitics, the twenty-first will be shaped by data and digital governance. India’s success in building a robust Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)—exemplified by Aadhaar, UPI, and Cowin—has become a global benchmark. As Nandan Nilekani (2023) notes, India’s DPI demonstrates how digital ecosystems can be open, inclusive, and secure without being monopolized by corporate or state control. Through platforms such as the Digital Public Goods Alliance and the Global Digital Compact, India is championing an alternative digital model that prioritizes sovereignty, privacy, and accessibility. This “digital diplomacy” aligns with India’s broader goal of reshaping global governance through innovation rather than ideology. For developing nations, especially across Africa and Asia, India’s digital model provides a tangible framework for leapfrogging bureaucratic and infrastructural constraints.

By framing data as a public good rather than a private commodity, India is asserting new norms for the digital age—norms that challenge the corporate-centric systems of the West and the surveillance-driven models of China. This domain offers India an unparalleled opportunity to define the ethical architecture of future global governance.

3. Strengthening South–South Partnerships

The Global South is re-emerging as a key collective actor, and India’s diplomacy is deeply embedded in this resurgence. Building on its historical leadership of the Non-Aligned

Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77), India is now driving modern iterations of South–South cooperation through platforms like BRICS, IBSA, and the Voice of Global South Summit (2023).

Through the Development Partnership Administration (DPA), India provides grants, lines of credit, and technical assistance to over 160 countries—reflecting its shift from recipient to donor. However, India’s leadership in the Global South is not purely economic; it is ideological. It represents a vision of equity, inclusivity, and pluralism—a continuation of Nehruvian principles adapted to contemporary realities. Yet, India’s challenge lies in managing expectations. Smaller developing countries often look to India for both representation and redistribution, while India’s own developmental priorities require resource discipline. Its ability to sustain leadership will depend on institutionalizing these partnerships through predictable funding mechanisms, capacity-building networks, and South-owned institutions. As Oliver Stuenkel (2020) argues, India’s credibility in BRICS and beyond will hinge on turning shared values into collective agency.

4. Strategic Balancing in a Multiplex World

India’s strategic environment is increasingly complex. It must simultaneously manage a tense relationship with China, deepen its strategic partnership with the United States, and maintain its identity as a Global South advocate. This balancing act reflects what Shashi Tharoor (2012) describes as “multi-alignment”—an approach that allows India to engage diverse power centers without compromising autonomy. India’s participation in groupings such as the Quad (with the U.S., Japan, and Australia) and BRICS exemplifies this dual engagement. While some critics see this as contradictory, it is in fact reflective of the multiplex logic—where multiple, overlapping coalitions coexist rather than compete. India’s balancing act thus becomes an expression of agency in a fragmented order, allowing it to act as a connector rather than a camp follower. In defense and technology cooperation, India’s role as a responsible stakeholder—rather than an alliance-dependent actor—has enhanced its strategic credibility. Its emphasis on “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliant India) complements its external partnerships, making it a more confident and credible participant in shaping both regional and global security frameworks.

5. Domestic Foundations and Global Credibility

No foreign policy can endure without domestic strength. India’s global ambitions must therefore be sustained by its economic resilience, institutional stability, and democratic vitality. A strong and inclusive domestic base—marked by innovation, human capital, and social cohesion—will underpin India’s capacity to lead internationally. As Granville Austin (1966) argued in a different context, India’s constitutional values form the “conscience of the nation.” These same values—democracy, equality, pluralism—now underpin its international identity. However, any erosion of these principles at home risks undermining its global legitimacy. India’s success as a norm-shaper will thus depend as much on internal coherence as on external activism. Moreover, India must address internal contradictions—inequality, environmental degradation, and uneven development—that can constrain its normative appeal. Its leadership

in the Global South will be persuasive only if it continues to embody the ideals of inclusivity and justice it espouses abroad.

6. Possible Futures and Strategic Choices

Looking ahead, India's trajectory in the emerging world order may follow three possible scenarios.

- The Integrative Scenario — India successfully harmonizes its dual roles: a major power in global governance and a moral leader of the South. It institutionalizes initiatives like ISA, DPA, and digital cooperation into enduring global frameworks, emerging as the principal bridge between developed and developing worlds.
- The Competitive Scenario — Rising China–India rivalry and Western transnationalism limit India's normative leadership. In this case, India remains influential but constrained, focusing more on regional than global norm-shaping.
- The Adaptive Scenario — India continues pragmatic multi-alignment, leveraging coalitions flexibly to advance its developmental and strategic interests. This scenario reflects India's historical pattern—balancing moral aspiration with realpolitik.

Given the fluidity of global politics, the adaptive model seems most plausible in the near term. It allows India to maintain autonomy, engage with multiple power centers, and evolve as a pluralistic power in a plural world.

Conclusion

India's journey from norm-taker to norm-shaper is rooted in its early postcolonial diplomacy, where non-alignment, Panchsheel, and constitutional ideals established it as a moral voice despite limited material power. Economic transformation, the diffusion of global authority, and the emergence of a multiplex order have since expanded the space for India to convert normative claims into institutional innovations, notably in development finance, climate cooperation, and digital public goods. Yet this transition remains incomplete and contested. Domestic socio-economic challenges, resource constraints, and geopolitical rivalry with China constrain India's ability to universalize its preferences, while the heterogeneity of the Global South demands leadership based on empathy and partnership rather than hierarchy. India is therefore best understood not as a replacement hegemon but as a selective norm-shaper whose influence is strongest where its historical experiences, normative vocabulary, and material capabilities intersect. In a multiplex world order that prizes pluralism and shared leadership, this hybrid role, as both developing country and emerging power, constitutes India's distinctive contribution to the evolving architecture of global governance. In the end, India's greatest strength may not be the ability to dominate but the ability to mediate and innovate. The Global South no longer accepts norms passively; it is beginning to create them, and India is among its most credible architects. The vision of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — "One Earth, One Family, One Future" — is not just a slogan but a claim that India can shape a more inclusive world order. Whether it fulfils that promise will depend on how well it manages its contradictions.

But one thing is clear: India is no longer simply adapting to rules written elsewhere. It is now helping write the script of the future.

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