

## **Continuity and Change in Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi since 2014- An Evaluation.**

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### **Abstract**

Foreign Policies of nations are significantly coloured by leadership. Indian foreign policy has also saw significant transitions under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The current article endeavours to trace major initiatives of Narendra Modi which are significantly different from the previous administrations since he assumed power in 2014. The article concludes that Narendra Modi has prioritised neighbourhood, emphasized strategic autonomy and multilateralism. Under his leadership India has reached out to its diaspora more effectively.

**Keywords-** Neighbourhood First Policy, Strategic Autonomy, Multi alignment, Narendra Modi, Indian Diaspora.

Foreign Policy of nations is more about continuity rather than abrupt changes. The primary reason behind this is state's national interests. While leadership change geopolitical and geoeconomic reality of a nation do not. For instance, India's Nonalignment policy during the cold war era was a masterstroke. It was a natural foreign policy choice for a newly independent country like India which wanted to avoid super conflict rivalry and receive aid from both the superpowers. During the post cold war era India foreign policy shifted from Non-Alignment to Multi alignment. However, the core principle remained the same i.e. strategic dealignment and maintaining independence of foreign policy. The present article attempts to trace major initiatives of Narendra Modi which can be significantly different from the previous administration. The Narendra Modi government has brought significant changes to India's foreign policy since its inception in 2014. These shifts are reflective of India's evolving geopolitical landscape and its aspirations for a more prominent global role.

### **Neighbourhood First Policy**

One of the primary initiatives of the Modi government is the Neighbourhood First policy, which focuses on strengthening ties with India's immediate neighbours in South Asia. The concept of 'Neighbourhood First' emerged in 2008 but received a push only in 2014, under Modi. The policy aims to foster strong and friendly relations with neighbours on a consultative, outcome-oriented, and non-reciprocal basis (Shivamurthy, 2025). In 2014 Narendra Modi invited Prime Minister and Presidents of all SAARC nations in his swearing ceremony (Jain, 2014). Another display of this policy was when Indian Prime Minister deliberately chose Nepal which was diplomatically neglected for 17 long years by his predecessors. Similarly, Prime Minister chose to visit its southern neighbour when he visited Sri Lanka after a long hiatus of 28 years (Sajjanhar, 2021).

Through Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, New Delhi has "increased its outreach in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster response, security cooperation, political engagements, investments, and development assistance and grown more sensitive to the interests of these countries" (Shivamurthy, 2025).

In continuation of "Neighbourhood First Policy" New Delhi resolved a long border dispute with Dhaka by exchanging 162 enclaves. India also revived five pre 1965 railway links with Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2024). India has taken significant strides in terms of economic and energy cooperation with its South Asian neighbours also. For instance, Dhaka has received 8 billion line of credit for infrastructure and Srilanka received 4 billion emergency package during its recent economic crisis in 2022 (Bhowmick & Bardhan, 2025).

In consonance with the principle of non-reciprocity during the Covid 19 pandemic Indian government distributed millions of doses of indigenously developed vaccine to its South Asian neighbours like Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Bangladesh etc. One must take note of the fact that this was happening when most nations including developed nations were hoarding them for domestic use. India happened to be the only exception to vaccine nationalism. Vaccine diplomacy "is a value addition

to India's soft power diplomacy which has created a space in the hearts of the people in the recipient countries like South Asia (Sen & Ramudamu, 2023).

### **Act East Policy**

India long back realized that it needs to venture beyond South Asia as a rising power. Under the leadership of PM PV Narasimha Rao India launched Look East policy. India tried to increase its economic relations with the fast-growing economies of Southeast Asian countries. India became a dialogue level partner in 1996 and later it became a summit level partner in 2002 (Jha 2008). However, until 2014 this relationship largely remain economic oriented. It was only under since 2014 a security level dimension was added to this. Prime Minister Modi transformed Look East policy to Act East Policy which focussed on security. This becomes important in context of increasing Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea (NGA & Thuong, 2021). The significant shift lies in making security the cornerstone of this relationship. Under all previous administration the focus was on trade and commerce. New Delhi government shedding all fears supplied BrahMos missiles to Philippines Wankhede, R. (2024). This was in stark contrast to previous administrations which hesitated to do so because this would have antagonised China. What has made India Act east policy different is its approach which seems more fearless, action oriented and aspirational. For instance, for long New Delhi ignored connectivity of Northeastern states with the outside world. As it was considered sensitive. However, under Act east policy India have focussed on infrastructural connectivity. Fast tracking Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link connecting India and Bangladesh and trilateral highway connecting India-Myanmar-Thailand are cases in point (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

It must be categorically mentioned that while India's Look East policy was confined to ten ASEAN countries, Act east policy expanded India's strategic horizon to East Asia (Japan and South Korea) and Oceania (Australia). India active engagement with QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is testimony of this India's expanding sphere of influence (Wei, 2022). Thus one can clearly see that there has been a tactical shift in Indian Foreign policy under the visionary leadership of Narendra Modi wherein India has transformed its relation with ASEAN countries by bringing in a security and strategic dimension to it. There has been a more confident assertion when it comes to protecting its national interest. India has expanded its sphere of influence to EAST Asia and Oceania.

### **Strategic Autonomy and Multi-alignment**

Throughout the cold war India's foreign policy was defined by the Policy of Non-Alignment. This was a good foreign policy choice which helped India avoid power politics of that time. It allowed India to focus on economic development and get aid from both superpowers of that time. 1990's saw disintegration of Soviet Union and world became unipolar. Most countries were forced to reorient their Foreign Policy. Even the so-called Communist countries started reorienting their foreign policy. They started wooing USA. Under this changed political environment New Delhi too was forced to reorient their foreign policy. Non-Alignment which worked well as a foreign policy choice throughout the cold war didn't have that much relevance. To better protect its strategic autonomy and national interest, New Delhi under Prime Ministership of Modi redefined strategic autonomy (Pant, 2020) India which had avoided joining military alliances now thought strengthening partnerships rather than avoiding partnerships. India's started more actively engaging in forums like the Quad, which includes the US, Japan, and Australia. This reflects its willingness to collaborate with like-minded countries to promote regional stability and security (Curtis, Fitt, & Adams, 2022). India multi alignment strategy can be best summarized as being 'present at every table'. For instance, India is a active member of QUAD which is a security dialogue of four democracy's aimed at countering Chinese influence in the Indo pacific region. India is also a member of BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which consists of countries like China, Russia, Brazil etc. The purpose of these organisations is to reshape global financial architecture and promote regional stability in Eurasia (Efremenko, 2024). These organisations aimed at countering American economic dominance via organisations like IMF and WTO. India continues to be voice of the Global South on issues like climate change focussing on CBDR (Common but differentiated Responsibilities) (Singh, 2022).

The best litmus test of India strategic autonomy and multi alignment has been its stance on Russia- Ukraine conflict. Despite huge pressure from USA and European Union India kept on abstaining from United Nations General Assembly and Security council resolutions condemning Russia. This move shouldn't be seen as neutrality rather a conscious choice of keeping diplomatic channels open with both Russia and Ukraine while calling for cessation of

hostilities. Not only India refrained from imposing sanctions against Russia India scaled up its purchase of crude oil from Russia. This came at a time when Russia was cornered due to sanctions from USA and E.U. It must be noted that “India scaled up its purchase of Russian crude oil—increasing from less than 1% of its imports in 2021 to nearly 40% in 2024-25” (Saunders, 2024).

Another classic display of strategic autonomy and resisting Global pressure is during the current Israel Hamas conflict in Gaza. Just after Hamas attack on Israel on October 2023 Prime Minister Modi condemned the attack expressing solidarity with Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2023). This shows India’s strong commitment to eradicate terrorism and alignment with Israel. India abstained from resolutions that didn’t mention Hamas terror attacks against Israel (Sharma, 2023). However, despite a pro-Israel narrative propagated by domestic media. New Delhi voted in favour of New York declaration which suggests a two-state solution and pacific settlement of Palestinian issue. The resolution condemns Hams 7 October Hamas attack but also categorically condemns Israel retaliatory attacks against Gaza targeting civilians’ infrastructure. This approach is a classic example of India de- hyphenated approach meaning that India’s relation with Israel shouldn’t be seen in relationship with Palestine. India treats both these relationships as independent. India maintains an independent relationship with both based on its national interests. Israel happens to be our largest arms supplier wherein India continues to rely on Gulf for its energy requirements. No country can force us to choose to pick any one side. India continues its strategic ties with Iran due to Chabahar port and Iran also happens to be India’s gateway to Central Asia. One must take note of the fact that Iran happens to be an arc- rival of Israel. However, India has continued strengthening its relations with both Israel and Iran.

### **India’s Diaspora Diplomacy**

Indian diaspora happens to be one of the most vibrant diasporas in the world. It includes Non-Resident Indians and Overseas Citizens of India. One of the earliest waves of migration happened during precolonial times. Most of these migrants were traders from costal Indian communities who went to countries like Fiji Surinam, Mauritius, Burma etc. The second wave of migration when Britishers took Indians as indentured labourers to work in plantation industries to countries like Srilanka, East Africa etc. Migration from India post second world war include conflict driven migration like Partition of India, creation of Bangladesh and Srilankan civil war (Nandy, 2005). These ,migrations were mainly forced. The other voluntary migration includes skilled migration fuelled by Growth of India’s IT sector, globalisation and other economic opportunities. According to world migration report 20222 “With nearly 18 million people living abroad, India has the largest emigrant population in the world, making it the top origin country globally” (World Migration report, 2022). India is ranked as top recipient of global remittances from abroad by World Bank (Khan, 2024). These remittances go a long way in eradicating poverty, hunger and unemployment in India. Diaspora play a major role in promoting trade and commerce. Indian diasporas create demand for Indian products in the country where they live. For example, “Indian diaspora who migrate to the Gulf region exhibit a strong preference for products from their home country, indicating a strong immigrant preference effect” (Douw, Lee, Tarnovski, & Sen, 2024). Indian diaspora plays an important role in protection and promotion of a country culture. Hindi happens to be the third most spoken language of the world (Yadav, 2023). India diaspora happens to be one of the most politically influential diasporas of the world. it is said that “diaspora acts as an informal ambassador to bridge the gap between the two countries” (Rathod, 2025). On matters significant to India, the Indian diaspora actively lobbies both international organizations and local governments (Bhat, 2018).

spans from promoting trade agreements to bringing attention to issues related to human rights. The diaspora of India can advocate for India's underprivileged populations by bringing attention to human rights abuses, advocating for legislative changes that advance equality and inclusion and supporting social justice movements.

While previous prime ministers have recognised the importance of Indian diaspora many of them have failed to see the potential of this diaspora in fuelling national development of India. BJP manifesto in the run up to 2014 general election says “The NRIs, PIOs and professionals settled abroad are a vast reservoir to articulate the national interests and affairs globally. This resource will be harnessed for strengthening Brand India” (Mohan & Chauhan, 2015). According to C Raja Mohan “Modi’s political emergence, his ambitions for India and his articulation of a special role for the diaspora in India’s rise, have generated a surge of optimism and pride within the overseas communities” (Mohan & Chauhan, 2015).

What makes Modi's approach in dealing with diaspora unique from his predecessors is Diaspora leaders were usually met by predecessors in quiet, private embassy meetings. Modi transformed these into enormous public events, such as Howdy Modi in 2019 and Madison Square Garden in 2014 (Hall, 2021). These demonstrations help to establish "Brand India." Modi fosters an environment that is conducive to bilateral trade agreements and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), which directly support the Indian economy, by demonstrating the political and economic power of the diaspora to leaders of the host nation (Sinha, 2024).

## Conclusion

2014 saw a non-Congress government coming to power with a thumping majority. The new leadership brought innovation and freshness in terms of executing India's national interests. India for long ignored its own backyard now started giving more importance to its neighbours. As a rising aspirational power, it started giving more importance to its South East Asian neighbours. New Delhi added a security dimension while dealing with its South Asian neighbours. While dropping its Non-Aligned stance India choose multi alignment and strategic autonomy. There has been a more confident assertion of India's national interest even when if this antagonised powerful nations. India driven by a more proactive and assertive approach to international relations. Modi Government had considered Indian diaspora as strategic asset which could be utilized to partner in India development. Indian diaspora also has positively reacted to this. As India traverses the complexity of the world, its aspirations to have a greater influence on the global order and its domestic priorities will likely continue to shape its foreign policy.

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