

India in the Emerging World Order during Amrit-Kaal: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract:

As India rises in the social, political, cultural, strategic, and economic domains and becomes the fifth-largest economy in the world, its aspiration to lead the world has also risen. In the 21st century, the world order is shifting from unipolar to multipolar, and India is seen as an alternative power bloc that can play a crucial role in helping weaker nations and representing them during crises. Strategically, India's approach is adding strategic autonomy to the Non-Aligned Movement, where India has started taking strong steps for fulfilling national interests and has moved away from the earlier policy of balancing the blocs. India's role in solving international conflicts, economic assistance to crisis-hit countries, health diplomacy during COVID-19, and its growing military, economic, and commercial relationships with countries are a few more examples of how India's profile is rising in the international domain. As the new world order is creating a favourable environment for India, it also poses several challenges.

Keywords: Non-Alignment Movement, Strategic Autonomy, Foreign Policy.

Research Question

The research paper underscores how India positions itself in the emerging multipolar world order during the Amrit Kaal period, and what opportunities and challenges shape its aspirations for global leadership?

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and primarily relies on secondary data sources. Data have been collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official government publications, speeches of policymakers, and reports published by international organizations. The study follows interpretive content analysis of foreign policy evolution and strategic responses of India towards contemporary geopolitical developments. The study is temporally focused on the post-Cold War period, with particular emphasis on developments taking place in the last decade where strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, economic diplomacy, and regional leadership have emerged as increasingly prominent features of Indian foreign policy. The paper systematically reviews academic and policy literature to identify recurring themes, competing interpretations, and emerging trends in the context of India's position in the changing global order. (Creswell)

Theoretical Background

International Relations have been defined in terms of interaction between nation states and other international actors. International relations are crucial in achieving these national interests. Strategic culture plays a crucial role in building the understanding of the nature of

engagement of a country. Realist school of thought defines international sphere to be anarchic in nature, where all the states tend to achieve their national interests by increasing their military and financial might. Lack of trust and communication between countries leads to this anarchic nature of international order (Mearsheimer).

The insights of Realism and liberalism align with India's role in the emerging world order. Realist scholars argue that states work within an anarchic international system where the pursuit of security, power, and national interest remains the primary objective of foreign policy (Mearsheimer). India's growing emphasis on military modernization, maritime security, strategic partnerships, and countering security challenges by taking proactive measures is a rational response to shifts in the regional and global balance of power.

On the other hand, Liberalism emphasizes the positive nature of human beings and states, highlighting the role of communication and cooperation in solving international problems. India's growing profile, autonomous strategic choices, and representation of the Third World and a balanced approach in solving conflicts has proven that India's approach aligns with both Realism and Liberalism. The paper seeks to develop an understanding of India's identity, priorities, values, historical experiences, leadership aspirations, strategic autonomy, and civilizational role. The Constructivist approach of international relations is very relevant here in understanding India's role in the evolving world order.

Introduction

Indian PM Narendra Modi, during his speech on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of India's Independence, talked about the concept of Amrit Kaal for the first time. Here, the PM also inaugurated the seventeenth Indian Cooperative Congress on the theme 'Amrit Kaal: Prosperity through Cooperation for a vibrant India' at Delhi's Pragati Maidan (MHA). The term Amrit Kaal comes from Vedic astrology meaning 'the best and most auspicious time to start any new task' (Joneja). The main objective of Amrit Kaal is to ensure that the lives of the citizens of the country improve, thereby reducing the gap between urban and rural areas along with reducing the interference of the government in public life (Joneja).

During his speech, PM Modi unveiled a new strategy for the next 25 years of 'Amrit Kaal'; this is a remark in order to derive the best out of everyone in every field (Joneja). During the 2023-24 budget presentation, the Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, also made many references to Amrit Kaal citing India's reference to be achieved at 100 years of Independence, the motto being, 'minimum government maximum governance' (Zee Media). It underscores a shift in India's approach towards the changing world order, where new dynamics in international politics are emerging; it becomes very crucial for India to move from simply being a non-aligned country to a country with strategic autonomy, which plays a leading role in the international domain during the next 25 years of Amrit Kaal.

In the formative phase of Indian Foreign Policy, Jawaharlal Nehru with Josip Broz Tito, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sukarno initiated the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) post Korean War in 1955. The NAM was the response that the Third World countries, the countries that joined neither the capitalist bloc nor the communist bloc, had for bipolar politics of the Cold War, where the world was divided into two blocs (Arnold 25). Even though most of these countries were struggling with poverty, economic hardships, and under-development due to their colonial history, their ideology to be non-

aligned was a bold step to showcase the optimism that these leaders had for their nations (Arnold).

Jawaharlal Nehru is considered the father of the Non-Aligned Movement; his idealism to portray India as a regional power that could play an important role in the world order was imperative in driving our foreign policies (Arnold 29-30). The signing of Panchsheel with China was another example of the unwavering idealism of Nehru; he believed that countries with different ideologies could coexist peacefully. In order to identify the injustices India and other developing countries faced, India used the NAM to demand changes in international politics (Ganguly). This led to India being hailed as the champion of pro-developing countries that called out the global foreign trade regime to redistribute the world's wealth (Ganguly).

Some scholars still believe that 'Nehruvianism continues to dominate India's strategic thought despite the fact that realpolitik and Hindu nationalism are alternatives for it' (Arya. K. Saraj). On the other hand, India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, in his writing "The India Way" argued that India's approach is moving towards a more realistic way of thinking.

The Strategic Autonomy is generally defined as a state's ability to seek its national interest and adopt its foreign policy without being restricted by other states in any capacity (Kalyanaraman). The way a state behaves in international politics depends on the 'strategic culture' that it has acquired over a period of time (Arya. K. Saraj). The French Prime Minister, while addressing Europe, talks about strategic autonomy and enhancing Europe's defence capabilities, capable of competing with NATO without depending on the United States (Vohra). Every ambitious nation that has political stability and economic growth along with military modernization thinks about achieving strategic autonomy as it is considered vital to pursue their ambitions without being dependent on anyone else. For India, the idea of strategic autonomy is becoming more important since a huge part of the world is looking at India for their concerns, representation, and solutions.

India and the Emerging World Order

Strategic Autonomy in today's world order is imperative for India as it helps India achieve its national interest without changing its security apparatus. The biggest challenge for India, in contemporary times, when it comes to strategic autonomy is the Chinese ambition. The only bright side of this challenge is that India has been ignoring China's weaknesses such as the skirmishes in Tibet and Xinjiang along with Taiwan, which means India has not played to its strength by exploiting the Chinese weaknesses. India too has its weaknesses internally where it needs to address economic disparities along with unemployment and inflation (Gogoi). Earlier, India did not have much impact on the global economic front as it was viewed as a poor country which was developing during the second half of the twentieth century (Bava). But now India, with China and Japan, has emerged as the most important players in the Asian region while the United States remains the key outside stakeholder (Bava). India's revival of engagement with South America, Africa, and West Asia for its energy requirements has prompted the idea that it needs to engage with both global and regional powers, and it needs to come out of the mindset of being only a regional player (Bava).

Strategic Autonomy to seek its national interest has always been the main objective behind India's foreign policy, and the factors that have always influenced its foreign policy are always its security concerns such as external security, internal security, sustained economic

growth, energy and maritime security, along with access to technology (Bava). Strategic autonomy correlates to the international system, and the most important question for India would be to understand what kind of international system would be beneficial to it. In order to pursue Indian autonomy, it would prefer a non-hegemonic and non-polarised international system (Bava).

India's Strategic Transformation and Opportunities

If India can leverage its domestic coalition management and complex negotiations, it has plenty of opportunities in the emerging world order. To face the challenges of the 21st century, India should ensure that its foreign policy has the right blend of Soft Power and Hard Power, coined as Smart Power by Joseph Nye (Gogoi). India has a cordial relationship with Afghanistan, so India should be diplomatically involved with countries bordering Afghanistan while ensuring that the country is not influenced by any others that could threaten India's security (Bajpae). Similarly, India could play an imperative role with North Korea and South Korea along with Iran and the United States, as India enjoys cordial diplomatic relationships with them (Bajpae).

India's ambition in the region should also resonate with global ambition similar to what China is undertaking with their activities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In the Middle East, China brokered what once seemed an impossible entente with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran; they have successfully brokered a deal restoring relations between them for the first time since 2016 (Gallagher Adam). India had lost a phenomenal opportunity here to broker a deal with them since India has good relations with both countries.

India's rising-power mindset is well complemented by its political stability, economic growth, and military modernization. Its biggest advantage undoubtedly is its demography; India could rightfully cater to all the service needs of its consumers if it wishes to do so. The two advantages India holds over its competitor China in this regard is the penetration of English language fluency (12% of Indians are fluent in English while only 6% of Chinese are fluent) (Statista) and another area where India has a significant advantage is in the IT sector (Statista). Undoubtedly, India's soft power opportunities are in plenty, ranging from Yoga, Arts and Handicrafts, Diaspora, to Religious and Cultural diversity. The trump card India has in its hand when it comes to soft power currently is the Unified Payment Interface, known as UPI. This is a major opportunity India can leverage in its foreign policy, as seen by the agreement to use UPI in France at tourist attractions (Padmanabhan). The economic diplomacy under PM Modi has been a success as evident by the inflow of foreign direct investments.

India should leverage a militarised QUAD along with a trilateral security agreement with Japan and the USA (Kukreja 14). Inviting the ASEAN chairs as observers to the meetings of QUAD would put more pressure on China. The Parliamentary Committee had already advised adopting a flexible approach to use Taiwan without putting China on the wrong side (Kukreja 14). India had signed the Logistical Exchange Memorandum Agreement with the US in 2016; it is a pragmatic approach that enables both militaries to exchange and govern within a framework (Kukreja 12). Signing the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018 to access the advanced defence system was another milestone between the two nations. The US needs India to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region, but India must

utilise its positive relationship not just militarily but also with dual-use technological exchanges as well.

Indo-Russian relations have stood the test of time, with only an abrupt decline in their relationship during the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Kukreja 13). Even though India's relation with Russia started with political, strategic, and security exchanges, there is still a lot of room for export markets, especially with the ongoing crisis in Europe. Russia, due to this crisis, is much more dependent on China than any other nation in the world, but India can change that status quo if it plays its cards right.

The BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) restructuring which includes enhanced transportation, electricity, and connectivity among these nations, together with the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which reduces the distance and improves connectivity among India's Southeast Asian neighbours, creates a new geopolitical and geostrategic environment in the region. Maldives is another area where India can change the existing geopolitical environment. Currently, India and Maldives have several bilateral projects; this is on top of the completion of different projects such as the construction of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, Faculty of Engineering Technology, India-Maldives Friendship Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies, and the National College for Police and Law Enforcement (HCI). During the visit of the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to Maldives, India announced 100 million Maldivian rufiyaa for community development projects there (AIR). India could significantly lure Maldives to its side from China if it plays its cards right, as they have a debt of around 1.5 billion US dollars to China (Kugelman).

The promise of building a SAARC satellite for the neighbouring countries of India by PM Modi is a positive sign for the revival of the regional organisation (Kukreja 16). The organisation which in itself is in limbo could be utilised for setting up trans-regional institutions and cooperation. The first step to such an initiative should be the reduction of tariffs for goods produced by the neighbouring countries of India. Such a move not only improves trade facilitation but also integrates the region automatically.

When it comes to East and South-East Asia, India's most notable allies could be Japan and Vietnam, as they are the most concerned about China's activities in the region (Kukreja 17). Improving partnership and cooperation with these countries would not only improve economic growth in India but also could provide them with strategic leverage. In the end, it can be said here that India's economic capabilities are growing and have become a significant source of geopolitical influence not only in her neighbourhood but also in major power politics. Its rapid growth, digital transformation, and rise as a major technology hub have bolstered its capacity to influence regional and global politics. Economic instruments are becoming an integral part of modern statecraft, as evidenced by initiatives such as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and India's increasing role in global supply chains (Bureau). But a burgeoning economy does not necessarily translate into strategic clout. Together, economic resilience, institutional capacity, technological innovation, diplomatic credibility, and military preparedness will provide a foundation for safe and sustainable global leadership. India has a demographic and development edge, but its long-term success will depend on its ability to convert economic gains into wider strategic capabilities.

Strategic and Structural Challenges for India's Trajectory

In order to achieve both internal and economic security, economic modernization is the way forward. Even though the demography of India is an advantage, in order to strengthen its adequate workforce India needs to invest a great deal in its health, education, and infrastructure sectors that will enhance the skills required in the contemporary market for its workforce (Bava). The enhancement of external security is a bit challenging for India as its military modernization and modernization of weapon systems will inevitably lead to a 'security dilemma', especially in Asia. India's outreach in South Asia and South-East Asia along with Central Asia has been critical in India's hard and soft power capabilities, especially with China's venture into the Indian sphere of influence.

India's economic modernization and liberalisation programme has been painstakingly slow due to bureaucratic roadblocks, political and ideological differences between the states and the central government, along with a lack of vision (Bava). In order to achieve foreign policy objectives, India seems to be moving away from the Non-Alignment of Nehru to Neo Non-Alignment; the Look East and Act East policies to engage more with ASEAN and ASEM members seem to be fruitful (Bava), which is also called strategic autonomy (Jaishankar). When it comes to its maritime security, the Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia to the Malacca Strait in South-East Asia needs more focus as it is one of the world's busiest transit lanes when it comes to oil and other raw materials; the region is important for India's energy, maritime, and economic security (Bava).

India's influence with its neighbours Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka has shrunk significantly as they are tilting more towards China (Kukreja 9). There is no doubt that China wants to contain India's growing economic and military prowess and for that, they have been an all-weather friend of Pakistan (Kukreja 11). The Belt and Road Initiative by China poses another challenge to India's dominance in South Asia, even though some experts view these initiatives as a long-term debt trap. The construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea brings in the academic notion that China is creating a Rimland in order to act as a buffer zone between its interests in mainland China and coastal areas (Singh).

The weaponisation of the Brahmaputra River by the Chinese remains another challenge for India's north-eastern region, the harrowing challenge being India unable to do anything regarding this so far. China's stand on the Doklam region is another strategic pursuit by them, to overcome the narrow Chumbi valley (Kukreja 14). China has an upper hand against India in some key sectors; the option India has is to create interdependence rather than conflict (Kukreja 14). Meanwhile, India should focus on its economic growth, deal with its internal security challenges, modernise its armed forces, and create a Pax Indica in the Indian Ocean Region.

The integration of the South Asian region as a whole is underwhelming; for a multilateral organisation, SAARC remains dysfunctional and a non-starter (Kukreja 16). The revival of SAARC into an energetic organisation is still in limbo even though PM Modi has ambitiously called for deeper integration among South Asian countries (Kukreja 16). The India-US relationship has been transformed considerably in the last few decades as the two countries have gone from 'estranged democracies' to 'engaged democracies.' The India-US nuclear deal along with supporting India's ambition in the region and finally engaging with India after completely dehyphenating India from Pakistan in its strategic outlook shows the significance of this strategic partnership (Bava).

In contrast, the US response to India's import of Russian oil has strained its relationship with India. When Donald Trump imposed 25% tariffs and threatened more, India also started thinking about options. Strategic autonomy has become the banner of India's modern foreign policy, but its practice is fraught with difficulties. Strategic autonomy allows India to maintain decision-making independence and not be overly reliant on any one power bloc. On the other hand, the parallel partnerships with competing actors must be diplomatically managed with care.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The global shift towards a multipolar international order, taking place now, offers India both unprecedented opportunities and complex strategic challenges. Seen through the lens of Realism and Strategic Culture, India's current foreign policy is a mixture of continuity and adaptation. The traditional pledges of sovereignty and strategic autonomy still exist but are increasingly being sought through flexible, interest-based diplomacy. India needs to deal with the Chinese debt trap in her neighborhood; it is up to India to bring revisions to its policies and diplomatic measures to counter the Chinese trap and create a favourable environment in the region.

The current balance of power in Asia is such that, in order to bring around a rightful balance, Japan is ready to support India to become an economic powerhouse (Kukreja 17). The interest on Japan's part to invest around 33.5 billion US dollars in Indian infrastructure and smart cities should be utilised without further delay (Kukreja 17). The cooperation mechanisms can be enhanced with QUAD and they can positively transform India. Central Asia is another area, even though India is heavily dependent on external energy supplies, that needs extensive focus. India's relationship with the Russian Federation and the platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is key here.

In order to tackle radical Islamic challenges from Central Asia, promoting Sufism could be the key component (Kukreja 18). India should devise an 'Act West' policy just like the Look/Act East policy, but it should be compartmentalized and flexible enough to cater to the needs of this complex region. The landmark victory in Chinese diplomacy in restoring normalcy, to a certain extent, between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is a huge challenge for India and its interests in the region. The agonizingly slow developments in the Chabahar region diminish India's strategic advantage. India's diplomatic stand with Palestine and renewed interests with Israel is another key factor in West Asia.

India is also a key factor when it comes to multilateralism; its membership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, promotion of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the New Development Bank of the BRICS forum could challenge the economic, political, and strategic domination of the West on the Asian continent. India should focus on its soft power, especially its Diaspora, to promote cultural and political assets along with the newfound technological and economic advantage of the usage of the Unified Payment Interface. Since the time of Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy has focused more on economic aspects along with nationalism and a new pathway for Asianism, yet the fundamental aspects of previous policies remain intact (Kukreja 20).

When it comes to China and Pakistan, India should adopt a pragmatic yet stern approach. India seeks to promote itself as a regional and global power; for that purpose, the

theory of elimination could be followed. Eliminate the threats that threaten the internal security of the nation, bring in a regional balance of power by becoming an economic powerhouse, and finally, it could project itself as a key global player. The ambition to attain a permanent seat in the UNSC could then be fulfilled without much challenge.

Finally, India's contemporary foreign policy shows a mix of continuity and adaptation through the lenses of Realism and Strategic Culture. The old commitments to sovereignty and strategic autonomy persist, but are increasingly being pursued through flexible, interest-based diplomacy.

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