



## **India's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Opportunities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the trajectory, determinants, and contemporary character of India's foreign policy during the first quarter of the twenty-first century. From the non-aligned posture forged in the immediate post-independence decades, Indian diplomacy has matured into a confident, multi-aligned, and interest-driven strategy that seeks to convert the country's demographic weight, economic dynamism, and civilisational reach into durable global influence. The study analyses the structural and agential determinants that shape policy choices, including geography, economic imperatives, security threats, and domestic politics. It then maps the principal dimensions of present-day strategy, the Neighbourhood First policy, the Act East policy, the Indo-Pacific construct, calibrated engagement with the major powers, and energy and economic diplomacy. The analysis identifies the most pressing challenges, namely contested borders, the persistent China and Pakistan dyad, regional instability and terrorism, global economic volatility, and the climate emergency. Against these constraints, the paper argues that India enjoys an unusually favourable opportunity structure, anchored in its emerging economic-power status, expanding strategic partnerships, a leadership role in global governance demonstrated through its 2023 Group of Twenty (G20) presidency, growing digital and technological capability, and a deep reservoir of soft power. The paper concludes that India's central diplomatic task is to manage strategic autonomy within a multipolar yet increasingly contested order, leveraging issue-based coalitions while avoiding entanglement in great-power rivalry.

**Keywords:** - Indian foreign policy; strategic autonomy; multi-alignment; Neighbourhood First; Act East; Indo-Pacific; Quad; BRICS; G20; soft power; energy diplomacy; multipolarity.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Foreign policy is the organised expression of how a state pursues its national interest beyond its borders. For a civilisational state of India's scale, with more than 1.4 billion people, a trillion-dollar-plus economy, and a strategic location astride the Indian Ocean, foreign policy is not a peripheral activity but a central instrument of national development and security. The twenty-first century has placed India at an inflection point: the relative decline of unipolarity, the rise of China, the diffusion of power towards Asia, and the emergence of transnational threats have together created both unprecedented risks and openings for a country long described as an emerging power. This paper situates India's contemporary diplomacy within its historical evolution and evaluates the balance between the constraints it faces and the possibilities before it.



### **1.1 Concept and Evolution of India's Foreign Policy**

India's foreign policy was shaped at independence in 1947 by the intellectual leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, who articulated non-alignment as a strategy to preserve autonomy in a bipolar world. Non-alignment was never neutrality; it was a positive assertion of the right to judge each issue on its merits and to avoid subordination to either Cold War bloc. The early decades combined idealism, expressed through Panchsheel and Afro-Asian solidarity, with hard lessons, most painfully the 1962 war with China and the recurring conflicts with Pakistan, which compelled a more realist appreciation of power.

The intervening decades were not static. The Sino-Indian rapprochement of the late 1970s, the Indira Gandhi government's tilt towards the Soviet Union formalised in the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, and the decisive intervention in the liberation of Bangladesh demonstrated a growing willingness to use power instrumentally in pursuit of national interest. Yet through these shifts the rhetorical commitment to non-alignment endured, providing ideological continuity even as practice adapted to circumstance. This pattern, of conceptual stability paired with pragmatic flexibility, became a defining feature of Indian diplomacy that persists into the present.

The 1991 economic liberalisation marked a decisive rupture. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed India's principal strategic partner and forced a reorientation towards the United States, Israel, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf. Economic diplomacy became inseparable from political diplomacy, and the nuclear tests of 1998 confirmed India's determination to be recognised as a major power despite the sanctions that followed. The civil nuclear agreement with the United States in 2008 subsequently ended India's nuclear isolation and symbolised its acceptance into the ranks of responsible powers (Pant & Joshi, 2017). By the turn of the century, the conceptual vocabulary had shifted from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and, later, to multi-alignment, the deliberate cultivation of overlapping partnerships that maximise leverage without binding commitments. This evolution reflected both the diffusion of global power and India's own growing confidence in engaging multiple partners simultaneously (Ogden, 2014).

### **1.2 India's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century**

Twenty-first-century Indian diplomacy is best understood as issue-based and interest-driven rather than ideologically fixed. India simultaneously deepens defence cooperation with the United States through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, retains a close defence-and-energy relationship with Russia, partners with European and East Asian democracies, and continues to participate in non-Western platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This apparent paradox is the essence of multi-alignment: India refuses to convert partnership into alliance, preserving freedom of manoeuvre in a fluid order. The period has also witnessed a more assertive articulation of India as a leading power and a voice of the Global South, a posture crystallised during its 2023 G20 presidency.

This assertiveness is accompanied by a more confident strategic discourse that openly embraces the language of national interest and rejects the defensiveness of earlier decades. Indian policymakers now speak of the country as a leading power rather than merely a



balancing one, signalling an aspiration to shape outcomes rather than simply react to them. At the same time, the persistence of formidable constraints ensures that ambition is tempered by realism, producing a diplomacy that is at once more confident and more pragmatic than at any earlier point in the republic's history (Bajpai et al., 2014).

### **1.3 Need and Significance of the Study**

As India approaches the status of the world's third-largest economy and consolidates its position as the most populous nation, understanding the logic of its external behaviour carries significance well beyond South Asia. The choices India makes on the Indo-Pacific, on climate, on trade architecture, and on the reform of multilateral institutions will materially affect the shape of the emerging international order. A systematic study of the determinants, dimensions, challenges, and opportunities of Indian foreign policy is therefore timely both for scholarship and for policy practice.

### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The study pursues three objectives:

- To trace the conceptual evolution of India's foreign policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment.
- To identify and analyse the principal determinants that condition policy choices.
- To examine the major dimensions of contemporary strategy across the neighbourhood, Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and the great powers.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The scholarship on Indian foreign policy has expanded considerably over the past two decades. Foundational interpretive works, such as Cohen's analysis of India as an emerging power and Ganguly and Pardesi's survey of post-independence transformations, established the framework within which most subsequent debate has proceeded (Cohen, 2001; Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009). A second strand, exemplified by Pant and Mohan, focuses on the strategic recalibration that followed the end of the Cold War and the deepening of the partnership with the United States (Mohan, 2003; Pant, 2016).

A third body of work interrogates the concept of strategic autonomy and its tension with closer alignment to the West. Hall's account of the diplomacy of the Modi era and Tharoor's reflections on India's place in the world illustrate the contested character of the underlying grand strategy (Hall, 2019; Tharoor, 2012). A practitioner perspective, articulated most influentially by the former Foreign Secretary and External Affairs Minister, reframes the central challenge as navigating a world of multiple poles and seizing opportunity amid disruption (Jaishankar, 2020). More recent contributions analyse the Indo-Pacific turn, the Quad, and India's relationship with China, situating bilateral friction within a broader systemic competition (Rajagopalan, 2020; Smith, 2021). The literature converges on the view that India is a rising but constrained power, yet it diverges sharply on whether strategic autonomy remains viable in an era of intensifying bipolar competition between the United States and China. This paper contributes a consolidated assessment that links determinants, dimensions, challenges, and opportunities within a single analytical frame.



### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design. It synthesises secondary literature, official policy statements, and documentary evidence to interpret the patterns and drivers of India's external behaviour. The approach is interpretive rather than statistical, appropriate to a subject in which the key variables, intentions, perceptions, and strategy, are not readily quantifiable.

#### **3.2 Sources of Data**

The paper relies on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed books and journal articles, reports and declarations of governmental and multilateral bodies, and reputable analytical commentary. Official sources include statements of the Ministry of External Affairs and outcome documents of the G20 and allied forums. No primary survey or interview data were collected.

#### **3.3 Scope of the Study**

The temporal scope is the period from 2000 to the present, with selective reference to earlier decades where necessary to establish context. The thematic scope covers determinants, the major dimensions of strategy, challenges, opportunities, and India's role in key international organisations. The study does not attempt an exhaustive country-by-country bilateral survey.

#### **3.4 Limitations of the Study**

As a secondary, interpretive study, the analysis is constrained by reliance on publicly available sources and is subject to the inherent fluidity of an evolving subject. Foreign-policy developments occur continuously, and assessments rendered here reflect the situation as understood at the time of writing. The absence of classified material and primary interviews limits insight into internal decision-making processes.

### **4. DETERMINANTS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Foreign policy is the product of an interaction between structural conditions and the choices of decision-makers. Four sets of determinants are particularly salient in the Indian case.

#### **4.1 Geopolitical Factors**

Geography is destiny in much of India's strategic thinking. The Himalayan frontier with China, the contested boundary with Pakistan, and a peninsular position that projects India deep into the Indian Ocean together define the parameters of policy. India sits astride the sea lanes through which a large share of global trade and energy passes, conferring both vulnerability and leverage. Encirclement anxieties, generated by China's expanding presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean through ports, infrastructure investment, and naval deployments, are a recurring driver of strategic behaviour. The maritime dimension has assumed growing importance as policymakers recognise that India's future security and prosperity are tied to the stability of the Indian Ocean region, an arena in which it aspires to be the preponderant resident power and a net provider of security (Mohan, 2012). Geographic realities thus simultaneously constrain India, by binding it to a turbulent continental neighbourhood, and empower it, by placing it at the centre of one of the world's most strategically significant maritime spaces.



#### **4.2 Economic Considerations**

Since 1991, economic growth has become the organising principle of Indian statecraft. Access to markets, capital, technology, and energy shapes the country's external priorities. The imperative of sustaining high growth to lift hundreds of millions out of poverty makes economic diplomacy, securing trade agreements, investment, and supply-chain resilience, a first-order concern. Energy dependence, with India importing the bulk of its crude oil, ties foreign policy directly to relations with the Gulf, Russia, and other suppliers.

#### **4.3 Strategic and Security Concerns**

India's security environment is among the most demanding of any major power. It faces two nuclear-armed neighbours, an unresolved boundary dispute, cross-border terrorism, and maritime security challenges. The doctrine of credible minimum deterrence, the modernisation of conventional forces, and the diversification of defence procurement away from a single supplier are all responses to this environment. Security imperatives consistently temper the country's economic and normative ambitions.

#### **4.4 Domestic Political Influences**

Domestic politics increasingly conditions foreign policy. Coalition dynamics, federal pressures from border states, diaspora interests, public opinion, and the personalisation of diplomacy under a strong executive all leave their mark. The growing salience of nationalism and the framing of foreign policy as an instrument of national pride have made external achievements politically valuable at home, reinforcing an assertive posture.

### **5. MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

#### **5.1 Neighbourhood First Policy**

The Neighbourhood First policy prioritises the stability and prosperity of South Asia, recognising that India's rise depends on a peaceful periphery. The policy emphasises connectivity, development assistance, disaster relief, and people-to-people ties with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Afghanistan. India has positioned itself as a first responder in regional crises, providing humanitarian assistance during natural disasters and, more recently, supplying vaccines and financial support to neighbours under economic stress. The approach reflects an understanding that a prosperous, well-connected periphery serves India's own developmental and security interests far better than an impoverished and unstable one.

Implementation, however, has been complicated by China's growing economic footprint in the region, by domestic political turbulence in several neighbours, and by the persistent difficulty of relations with Pakistan. Smaller neighbours have at times leveraged competition between India and China to extract concessions from both, while occasional perceptions of Indian heavy-handedness have generated friction. The challenge for Indian diplomacy is to deliver promised connectivity and assistance reliably and promptly, so that its partnerships are valued on their own merits rather than judged solely against Chinese alternatives (Chaulia, 2016).



## **5.2 Act East Policy**

Evolving from the Look East policy of the 1990s, the Act East policy deepens India's economic, strategic, and cultural engagement with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. The shift from looking to acting signals a move from passive observation to active partnership, including defence cooperation, connectivity projects, and a strengthened relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Act East positions India as a resident power in the broader Asian balance rather than a purely South Asian actor.

## **5.3 Indo-Pacific Strategy**

India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct reflects a maritime reconceptualisation of its strategic geography that links the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single theatre. India advocates a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific, underpinned by freedom of navigation and respect for international law. The vision is inclusive in rhetoric, avoiding an explicitly anti-China framing, while in practice it aligns India with partners concerned about coercive behaviour in the region (Rajagopalan, 2020).

## **5.4 Relations with Major Powers**

Managing relations with the major powers is the most delicate dimension of contemporary strategy. The partnership with the United States has deepened across defence, technology, and trade, supported by foundational defence agreements and growing cooperation in critical and emerging technologies, while stopping short of a formal alliance that would compromise autonomy. The relationship with Russia, though diminished in relative weight, remains important for defence supplies, energy, and as a hedge against excessive dependence on the West; India's refusal to condemn Russia outright over Ukraine, while quietly increasing energy purchases, exemplified its insistence on judging issues by its own interests. Engagement with the European Union and individual European states, notably France, has expanded around trade, defence, and technology. China constitutes the central strategic challenge, combining deep economic interdependence with acute security rivalry along a contested frontier. India's response is a calibrated balance: cooperation where interests converge, competition where they collide, and a steady refusal to be drawn fully into either an American or a Chinese orbit (Jaishankar, 2020; Pant, 2016). This balancing act, sustaining productive relations with rivals simultaneously, is the signature achievement and the central vulnerability of contemporary Indian diplomacy.

## **5.5 Energy and Economic Diplomacy**

Energy and economic diplomacy translate developmental imperatives into external strategy. India pursues diversified energy sources, including a notable expansion of discounted crude imports from Russia, investment in renewables and the International Solar Alliance, and the negotiation of trade and investment agreements with partners across the Gulf, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. The Gulf states have become indispensable partners, supplying energy, hosting a large Indian workforce whose remittances support the domestic economy, and emerging as significant investors. Initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced during the G20 summit illustrate the fusion of connectivity, commerce, and geopolitics in current diplomacy, offering an alternative vision of infrastructure-led



integration. Economic diplomacy also encompasses the pursuit of free-trade and comprehensive economic-partnership agreements, the attraction of foreign direct investment in manufacturing, and the protection of the interests of the Indian diaspora, which constitutes both an economic asset and a constituency to which the government is increasingly responsive (Malone, 2011).

## **6. CHALLENGES TO INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

### **6.1 Border and Security Issues**

Unresolved boundaries remain India's most acute vulnerability. The Line of Actual Control with China witnessed serious clashes, including the deadly confrontation in the Galwan Valley in 2020, which fundamentally altered the tenor of the relationship. The Line of Control with Pakistan continues to be a site of periodic violence. These disputes consume strategic attention, impose heavy defence burdens, and constrain India's ability to project power beyond its immediate region.

### **6.2 Regional Instability and Terrorism**

South Asia is among the world's most volatile regions. Political instability in neighbouring states, the fragility of governance, refugee flows, and the persistence of cross-border terrorism complicate India's neighbourhood strategy. Terrorism emanating from across the western border has repeatedly strained relations and periodically threatened escalation between two nuclear-armed states.

### **6.3 Managing Relations with China and Pakistan**

The simultaneous management of China and Pakistan, increasingly aligned with one another, constitutes a two-front strategic problem. China's economic and military superiority, its deepening partnership with Pakistan symbolised by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and its expanding presence across South Asia and the Indian Ocean create a structural disadvantage that India seeks to offset through partnerships, military modernisation, and economic resilience. The asymmetry with China is particularly stark: the Chinese economy is several times larger than India's, and the gap in defence spending compounds the imbalance. India therefore pursues internal balancing through capability development and external balancing through partnerships, while seeking to prevent the consolidation of a hostile axis on two fronts simultaneously. Balancing deterrence with the need to avoid conflict that would derail development is a continuing dilemma, and the events along the Line of Actual Control since 2020 have made clear how quickly the relationship can deteriorate (Smith, 2021).

### **6.4 Global Economic Uncertainties**

India's growth model is exposed to global economic volatility, including supply-chain disruptions, energy-price shocks, protectionism, and financial instability. The fragmentation of the global trading order and the weaponisation of economic interdependence pose risks to a country that depends on open markets for capital, technology, and energy. Rising protectionism in major economies, the politicisation of trade, and the tendency of larger powers to use tariffs, sanctions, and export controls as instruments of statecraft complicate India's pursuit of a stable external economic environment. India has at times responded by protecting domestic industry and declining to join certain trade arrangements it judged



unfavourable, a stance that protects short-term interests but risks marginalisation from regional value chains. Navigating these uncertainties, balancing openness against the protection of domestic interests and strategic sectors, is a persistent and consequential challenge.

### **6.5 Climate Change and Environmental Concerns**

Climate change is both a development and a security challenge for India. As one of the most climate-vulnerable large economies, India faces threats to agriculture, water security, and coastal populations, while simultaneously bearing pressure to decarbonise an economy still reliant on coal. Reconciling the imperatives of growth and poverty alleviation with international climate commitments, and securing equitable finance and technology, is a defining diplomatic task of the era. India has sought to turn this challenge into an opportunity by championing the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, by emphasising the historical emissions of developed nations, and by building coalitions such as the International Solar Alliance to position itself as a leader of the clean-energy transition in the developing world. Its commitment to ambitious renewable-energy targets demonstrates that climate action and development need not be mutually exclusive, though the financing gap and the pace of transition remain formidable obstacles.

## **7. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA IN THE GLOBAL ARENA**

### **7.1 Emerging Economic Power Status**

India's emergence as one of the fastest-growing major economies, on a trajectory towards becoming the third largest, provides the material foundation for greater influence. A large domestic market, a youthful workforce, and rising consumption make India an attractive partner for trade and investment and lend weight to its diplomatic positions. As multinational firms seek to diversify supply chains away from a single concentration, India is positioned to capture a growing share of global manufacturing and services, a process that further enmeshes it in the world economy and amplifies its bargaining power. Economic ascent expands the resources available for development assistance, defence, and global engagement, and it converts India from a recipient of aid and advice into a provider of both. The demographic dividend, if matched by adequate investment in education, skills, and employment, could sustain this trajectory for decades, lending India a structural advantage at a moment when many competitors face ageing populations (Tellis, 2016).

### **7.2 Strategic Partnerships and Alliances**

India's network of strategic partnerships, with the United States, France, Japan, Australia, the Gulf states, and others, multiplies its options and offsets structural disadvantages. The flexibility of multi-alignment allows India to assemble issue-based coalitions, drawing support from different partners on different questions while preserving autonomy. The Quad exemplifies this calibrated, non-treaty approach to security cooperation.

### **7.3 Leadership in Global Governance**

India has positioned itself as a bridge between the developed and developing worlds and a champion of the Global South. Its G20 presidency in 2023 illustrated this ambition. India secured the African Union's admission as a permanent member of the G20, expanding the



forum to represent the great majority of the world's population, and steered the unanimous adoption of the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration despite deep divisions over the war in Ukraine (G20 Research Group, 2023; Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

India also presses for reform of the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral institutions to reflect contemporary realities. Its advocacy for the Global South, voiced through initiatives such as the Voice of the Global South Summit, positions it as a normative leader for developing countries seeking a more equitable order.

#### **7.4 Digital and Technological Diplomacy**

India's success in building large-scale digital public infrastructure, including a national digital identity system and a real-time payments platform that processes billions of transactions, has become a distinctive diplomatic asset. Through the G20 and bilateral channels, India promotes the export and adoption of these models across the developing world, projecting technological leadership and shaping global norms on digital governance. The contrast between India's open, interoperable model of digital public goods and more centralised alternatives lends its approach normative appeal, particularly among developing nations seeking affordable pathways to digital inclusion. Space achievements, including cost-effective lunar and interplanetary missions, alongside a vibrant start-up ecosystem and growing capabilities in semiconductors and artificial intelligence, reinforce this dimension of influence and signal India's arrival as a serious technological actor whose partnerships are increasingly sought for both commercial and strategic reasons.

#### **7.5 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

India commands a deep reservoir of soft power rooted in its civilisation, democracy, diaspora, cinema, yoga, and cuisine. The international observance of the International Day of Yoga, the global reach of Indian cultural products, and the influence of a large and successful diaspora extend the country's appeal beyond the calculus of material power. Cultural diplomacy complements economic and strategic instruments, enhancing India's attractiveness as a partner (Tharoor, 2012).

### **8. INDIA'S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

#### **8.1 United Nations**

India is a founding member of the United Nations and one of the largest cumulative contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, a record that underpins its claim to greater institutional standing. It consistently advocates a permanent seat on a reformed Security Council, arguing that the existing structure reflects the power realities of 1945 rather than those of the present, and it coordinates this demand with fellow aspirants. Progress on reform has been slow, obstructed by the resistance of existing permanent members and the difficulty of building consensus among the wider membership, yet India persists in framing its candidacy as a test of the legitimacy and representativeness of the entire multilateral order. Its engagement with the UN spans development, climate, counter-terrorism, and the maintenance of international peace and security, and it has used elected terms on the Security Council to advance priorities including reformed multilateralism and a stronger response to terrorism (Malone et al., 2015).



## **8.2 G20**

The G20 has become a central platform for India's global ambitions. Its 2023 presidency, conducted under the theme drawn from the Sanskrit idea of the world as one family, produced concrete outcomes including the admission of the African Union, the launch of the Global Biofuels Alliance, and an action plan to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (G20 Research Group, 2023).

## **8.3 BRICS**

As a founding member of BRICS, India participates in a grouping that articulates the aspirations of major emerging economies for a more multipolar order and reformed global governance, including in areas such as development finance through the New Development Bank. India values BRICS as a platform for cooperation among non-Western powers and for amplifying the concerns of the Global South. At the same time, it resists any drift towards an explicitly anti-Western bloc, a tension that has grown as the grouping has expanded and as some members favour a more confrontational posture towards the West. India's careful navigation of this tension, engaging constructively while preventing the forum from becoming an instrument of any single power, again exemplifies the discipline of multi-alignment and its insistence that membership in one coalition must never preclude partnership in another.

## **8.4 SCO and QUAD**

India's simultaneous membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which includes China, Russia, and Pakistan, and its participation in the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, encapsulate the logic of multi-alignment. Through the SCO, India engages Eurasian security and connectivity questions; through the Quad, it advances a free and open Indo-Pacific. Operating in both forums allows India to hedge, to keep channels open across the geopolitical divide, and to maximise its strategic options.

## **9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Several findings emerge from the analysis. First, the dominant trend in twenty-first-century Indian foreign policy is the consolidation of multi-alignment as the operative grand strategy, replacing the older language of non-alignment while preserving its core commitment to autonomy. Second, the determinants of policy, geography, economics, security, and domestic politics, are increasingly interwoven, so that economic and security imperatives reinforce rather than contradict one another. Third, the China challenge has become the organising axis of strategy, shaping the neighbourhood, the Indo-Pacific turn, and the deepening of the partnership with the United States.

Fourth, India's opportunity structure has improved markedly. Economic ascent, a dense network of partnerships, demonstrated leadership in global governance, and distinctive digital and soft-power assets give India greater agency than at any time since independence. Fifth, however, persistent constraints, contested borders, a two-front security problem, economic exposure, and climate vulnerability, ensure that India's rise will be neither linear nor unchallenged. The central tension running through the analysis is between the ambition to be



a leading power and the structural limits imposed by a difficult neighbourhood and an intensifying great-power rivalry.

A further observation concerns the sustainability of multi-alignment itself. As competition between the United States and China sharpens, the space for hedging may narrow, and India could face mounting pressure to choose sides on specific issues. The Russian factor illustrates the difficulty: India's continued defence and energy ties with Moscow sit uneasily with its deepening Western partnerships, yet abandoning either would impose real costs. The skill with which India navigated this terrain during the Ukraine crisis, maintaining relations across the divide while protecting its own interests, suggests that multi-alignment retains vitality, but its durability cannot be assumed indefinitely. The discussion also indicates that India's normative leadership of the Global South, while a genuine asset, will be tested by the practical difficulty of reconciling the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of developing nations (Acharya, 2018).

## **10. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

India enters the second quarter of the twenty-first century as a rising but constrained power, possessed of growing capabilities and a clear strategic vision yet hemmed in by formidable challenges. Its diplomacy has evolved into a pragmatic, interest-driven, and multi-aligned strategy that seeks to convert demographic and economic weight into durable influence while jealously guarding strategic autonomy. The successful G20 presidency demonstrated India's capacity to lead on the global stage and to act as a bridge between the developed world and the Global South.

To consolidate its position, several suggestions follow from the analysis. India should continue to strengthen economic fundamentals and supply-chain resilience, since material capability underwrites diplomatic weight. It should deepen issue-based partnerships while preserving autonomy, avoiding entanglement in great-power confrontation. It should invest in its neighbourhood through credible delivery of connectivity and development assistance to counter strategic competition in South Asia. It should sustain leadership on global-governance reform, climate finance, and digital public goods to convert normative influence into institutional change. Finally, it should maintain robust deterrence while keeping channels of dialogue open with adversaries to manage the risk of escalation. If India can manage these tasks, the twenty-first century offers a realistic prospect of its emergence as a leading power and a central architect of a multipolar order.

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