

## India's Foreign Policy since 2014: Strategic Orientation

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### Abstract:

*Since Narendra Modi's election as Prime Minister in May 2014, India's foreign policy has seen an active and purposeful reorientation—marked less by doctrinal rupture than by greater operational energy, clearer strategic priorities, and tactical flexibility across bilateral, regional and multilateral arenas. New Delhi emphasised “Neighbourhood First”, recast “Look East” into a more proactive “Act East”, deepened alignments with major democracies (notably the United States and Quad partners) while preserving an enduring partnership with Russia, and expanded economic and energy diplomacy in West Asia and Africa. The 2014–2025 decade also witnessed a more muscular posture on borders (especially after the 2020 Galwan clashes with China), pragmatic hedging between power blocs, rapid expansion of defence diplomacy and defence procurement diversification, and greater use of multilateral platforms (G20, BRICS, SCO) to advance India's global presence. Simultaneously, India pursued energetic diaspora and commercial diplomacy, and sought greater say in global governance (UNSC reform, global trade architecture). This article maps these strategic vectors, evaluates drivers (domestic politics, economic imperatives, systemic changes such as a more competitive multipolarity), examines key bilateral relationships (U.S., China, Russia, neighbors, West Asia), and assesses prospects and policy trade-offs for the coming decade. The analysis draws on government statements, think-tank assessments and recent academic literature to argue that India's post-2014 foreign policy is best characterised as calibrated pragmatism underpinned by strategic autonomy and powered by sustained diplomatic activism.*

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### Introduction:

India's foreign policy has historically been shaped by the principle of non-alignment, the need to safeguard sovereignty, and the aspiration to emerge as a bridge between the Global North and South. Since 2014, however, India's foreign policy has undergone a distinct reorientation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Rather than a doctrinal rupture, this period reflects a transformation in style, emphasis, and execution. The era is marked by greater diplomatic activism, high-level summitry, and a shift towards pragmatic engagement with global powers. Modi's government has sought to rebrand India as a confident global actor, balancing traditional commitments to strategic autonomy with new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, West Asia, and beyond.

2014 is a useful inflection point: the BJP's decisive electoral victory gave the executive stronger political coherence and a leadership — Prime Minister Narendra Modi — who placed high priority on projecting India's international profile. Rather than discarding previous frameworks, the government rebranded and operationalised them (e.g., “Act East” replacing “Look East”), introduced emphases (neighbourhood and economic diplomacy), and pursued high-tempo diplomacy — frequent summitry, targeted bilateral investments, and a visibly activist public diplomacy. These features make the 2014–2025 period distinct in intensity and ambition.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The study of India's foreign policy since 2014 is important both academically and practically, as it highlights a shift from a cautious approach to a more assertive and pragmatic orientation. Policies like *Neighbourhood First*, *Act East*, and Indo-Pacific engagement reflect India's strategic reorientation in a multipolar world. It examines India's influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, its role in regional and global forums, and its impact on stability, connectivity, and economic integration. The study also explores major power relations, showing India's balancing strategy with the U.S., China, and Russia, and its implications for strategic autonomy. Furthermore, it links foreign policy with economic and security priorities, including energy security, defence diversification, and technology cooperation, highlighting their role in national development. By filling a gap in academic literature on the post-2014 era, the study provides insights for policymakers, diplomats, and analysts, while guiding future research on India's evolving global role and long-term strategic trajectory.

### **Conceptual framing: strategic autonomy, calibrated pragmatism and activist diplomacy:**

To understand India's foreign policy since 2014, it is essential to examine it through three interlocking conceptual lenses: strategic autonomy, calibrated pragmatism, and activist diplomacy (Tharoor, 2015; Pant, 2017). These concepts provide a framework to analyse how India balances competing pressures in a rapidly changing global environment while pursuing national interests (Jha, 2019).

**Strategic Autonomy:** Strategic autonomy has been a foundational principle of Indian foreign policy since independence (Raghavan, 2018). It refers to the ability to make independent decisions in international affairs without being constrained by external pressures or compelled into permanent alliances (Rajagopalan, 2016). Post-2014, this principle continues to guide India as it navigates relationships with major powers (Chaturvedi, 2020). Strategic autonomy allows India to engage with the United States, European countries, and Quad partners while simultaneously maintaining historical and transactional ties with Russia (Kapur, 2021). It also underpins India's measured approach to China, balancing cooperation in trade and global forums with assertive responses to security challenges along the border (Scott, 2021). By preserving flexibility, India retains the capacity to pursue issue-specific partnerships rather than ideological or bloc-based alignments, ensuring that its foreign policy remains guided by national interests rather than external expectations (Pant, 2017).

**Calibrated Pragmatism:** Calibrated pragmatism complements strategic autonomy by emphasizing flexible, issue-based decision-making (Narlikar, 2018). Rather than adhering to rigid ideological positions or formal alliances, India evaluates opportunities and risks on a case-by-case basis (Chakraborty, 2019). This approach is evident in its ability to deepen strategic and defence ties with the U.S. while continuing to procure critical military equipment from Russia (Kumar, 2022). Similarly, India engages selectively with China—cooperating in trade and multilateral forums, yet taking firm measures on border security and regional influence (Garver, 2020). Calibrated pragmatism allows India to hedge effectively, diversify partnerships, and respond dynamically to global and regional uncertainties without compromising its long-term strategic objectives (Pant, 2017).

**Activist Diplomacy:** Activist diplomacy refers to the proactive and high-profile manner in which India projects itself on the global stage (Tharoor, 2015). Since 2014, this has manifested in frequent high-level visits, robust engagement in multilateral institutions, and extensive economic and cultural diplomacy (Chaturvedi, 2020). India has leveraged diaspora networks, development assistance, trade negotiations, and global summits to enhance its visibility and influence (Jha, 2019). Examples include active participation in BRICS, SCO, G20, and the Quad, as well as leadership initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (Narlikar, 2018). Activist diplomacy allows India to not only assert its strategic priorities but also to build international goodwill, shape global norms, and secure tangible outcomes in defence, technology, and economic cooperation (Kapur, 2021).

**Interrelation of the Three Concepts:** These three concepts—strategic autonomy, calibrated pragmatism, and activist diplomacy—are mutually reinforcing (Rajagopalan, 2016; Tharoor, 2015). Strategic autonomy provides the overarching principle of independent decision-making. Calibrated pragmatism operationalizes autonomy through flexible, situational strategies. Activist diplomacy, meanwhile, projects India's choices on the international stage and converts strategic decisions into visible influence (Pant, 2017). Together, they explain India's simultaneous deepening of ties with the United States and Quad partners, engagement with BRICS and SCO, and transactional cooperation with Russia on energy and defence, all while maintaining firm stances on security challenges when necessary (Chakraborty, 2019). This conceptual framework captures the essence of India's post-2014 foreign policy: confident, adaptive, and globally engaged (Garver, 2020).

**Drivers of the Post-2014 Orientation Systemic Drivers:** Shifting global order—The end of unipolar stability, an assertive China, Russian westward tensions (post-2014) and an unpredictable U.S. foreign policy environment accelerated Indian moves to hedge, diversify partnerships and exploit opportunities presented by multipolarity (Kapur, 2021; Pant, 2017). India sought to preserve autonomy while building issue-based coalitions on trade, technology, and security.

**Domestic Drivers:** Politics, economy, and nationalism—A stable single-party government with a development agenda gave New Delhi political bandwidth for sustained external engagement (Tharoor, 2015). Economic priorities—manufacturing, energy security, and inbound investment—led to an emphasis on trade diplomacy (e.g., outreach to Japan, EU, Middle East) and on making India an attractive destination for supply-chain shifts (Chaturvedi, 2020). Domestic political messaging (leadership projection) also favoured frequent summitry and diaspora outreach (Jha, 2019).

**Strategic Drivers:** Borders, technology, and defence modernization—Border tensions with China (especially 2020–2022) and concerns over strategic technologies (telecom, connectivity) pushed India to diversify sources of military hardware, deepen defence cooperation with the U.S., France, Israel and others, and to accelerate domestic defence production (Garver, 2020). Energy imperatives (cheap Russian oil after 2022) and technology acquisition needs shaped choices that occasionally complicated ties with Western partners (Kumar, 2022).

**Regional Strategies South Asia: “Neighbourhood First”**—“Neighbourhood First” aimed at stronger political and economic ties with immediate neighbours via development assistance, infrastructure projects, connectivity initiatives and high-level visits (Pant, 2017). However, structural asymmetries, Chinese infrastructure competition (Belt & Road projects) and recurring Pakistan tensions constrained progress (Chakraborty, 2019). India experimented with differentiated engagement: active diplomacy with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal (but with occasional frictions), and a transactional posture toward Pakistan (Raghavan, 2018).

**East and Southeast Asia: Act East and Indo-Pacific Engagement**—The “Act East” push deepened defence and economic ties with ASEAN, Japan, Australia and South Korea, while New Delhi embraced Indo-Pacific vocabulary and multilateral maritime security cooperation (Quad activities, logistics agreements, joint exercises) (Garver, 2020). This region became central for India’s trade, supply-chain ambitions, and strategic partnerships, especially in view of a rising China (Kapur, 2021).

**West Asia and Africa: Energy, Remittances, and Security Diplomacy**—India’s outreach to West Asia—including strategic partnerships with Gulf states, Iran (historically) and Israel—was driven by energy security, trade, and the Indian diaspora (Chaturvedi, 2020). Engagement with Gulf states expanded into defence, investment, and labour management (Pant, 2017). In Africa, India increased development cooperation, trade, and capacity building to build political goodwill and commercial ties (Jha, 2019).

**Major Bilateral Relationships India–United States:** Since 2014, India–U.S. ties deepened across defence, civil nuclear cooperation, technology, counterterrorism, and trade dialogues (Kapur, 2021). Strategic convergence on Indo-Pacific security and supply-chain resilience brought the two closer, culminating in elevated strategic dialogues, defence logistics pacts, and stronger Quad coordination. Yet trade tensions, differing stances on sanctions, and occasional diplomatic frictions show limits to convergence (Tharoor, 2015).

**India–China:** India–China relations were the most consequential balancing problem. Economic interdependence coexisted with strategic rivalry (Garver, 2020). The 2020 Galwan clashes produced a rupture in conventional behaviour and led to sustained military de-escalation and forward posture adjustments along the Line of Actual Control (Kumar, 2022). Political dialogue resumed intermittently, but border management, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and competition for influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean created long-term strategic friction (Pant, 2017).

**India–Russia:** Despite the post-2014 global shifts, Russia remained a central source of defence hardware and energy cooperation (Raghavan, 2018). New Delhi preserved pragmatic neutrality after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. India’s acceptance of discounted Russian crude and continued defence purchases exemplified transactional continuity, even as India diversified other partnerships (Kapur, 2021).

**Europe, Japan, and Others:** Relations with the EU, UK, Japan, and Australia increased in economic and technological content: trade talks, investment, critical-technology cooperation, and climate/green transitions (Chaturvedi, 2020). Japan emerged as a close economic and infrastructure partner (including Bay of Bengal connectivity), while the EU and UK were important trade and institutional partners for global governance goals (Tharoor, 2015).

**Instruments of Influence: Defence Diplomacy, Economic Statecraft, and Soft Power**  
**Defence Diplomacy and Capacity Building:** India extended training, joint exercises, port calls, and defence sales as instruments of influence—from the Indian Ocean Region to Africa and Southeast Asia (Garver, 2020). Defence procurement diversified beyond Russia to include the U.S., France, Israel, and domestic production under “Make in India” (Kumar, 2022).

**Economic Diplomacy:** Economic diplomacy targeted investment attraction, export promotion, and supply-chain realignment (Pant, 2017). Energy diplomacy—especially after 2022—saw India acquire discounted Russian oil to secure fuel needs while balancing relations with Western partners (Kapur, 2021).

**Soft Power and Diaspora Outreach:** India’s cultural diplomacy (Bollywood, yoga, scholarships), consular services, and diaspora engagement amplified influence, garnered remittances, and created economic linkages abroad (Tharoor, 2015; Jha, 2019).

### **Key Policy Dilemmas and Contradictions:**

1. Strategic autonomy vs. de facto alignment (Rajagopalan, 2016).
2. Energy pragmatism vs. Western pressure (Kapur, 2021).
3. Neighbourhood goodwill vs. geopolitical competition (Pant, 2017).
4. Economic openness vs. protectionism (Chakraborty, 2019).

### **Outcomes and Assessments (2014–2025):**

- Greater global profile: India is more present in multilateral agendas (G20 chairing, BRICS expansion) (Narlikar, 2018).
- Enhanced security partnerships: Tangible defence cooperation with the U.S., Japan, France, Australia, and others increased interoperability and supply options (Garver, 2020).
- Persistent structural limits: Geography, relative power asymmetries (with China), and internal governance constraints limit India's regional reach (Pant, 2017).

### **Conclusion:**

India's foreign policy since 2014 is neither a simple pivot nor mere continuity; it is an iterative, pragmatic reorientation emphasising strategic autonomy, activist diplomacy and diversification. The decade witnessed heightened activism in bilateral ties (U.S., Japan, Russia), regional initiatives (Act East, Neighbourhood First), and multilateral assertiveness. Security shocks (notably with China) and global disruptions (Ukraine, supply-chain shifts) forced tactical adjustments, but the broad direction is toward a more confident, globally engaged India that seeks influence while guarding independence. The central policy challenge ahead is to convert diplomatic energy and strategic flux into sustained capability building and predictable economic policies that can translate opportunity into long-term geopolitical weight.

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