

# The Hoover Institution's **Survey of India**

Edited by Šumit Ganguly and Dinsha Mistree



Huntington Program on Strengthening US-India Relations



## 4. A Focused and Dynamic Foreign Policy for India

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Chris Ogden

In the last decades, India’s foreign policy has come to rest at the very fulcrum of the country’s wider modernization and development goals across all spheres. As a means by which New Delhi can enhance its economic, military, diplomatic, and—now arguably cultural—strength, success in global affairs has the potential to augment its domestic affairs. Particularly since the gradual embrace of economic liberalization began in the early 1990s, and certainly across the last decade of governance under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), such sources of strength have all significantly expanded in scale and scope. Underscoring this progression has been a belief since the foundation of India in 1947 that the country was destined to be a major force in global affairs. As its first prime minister, and the architect of its foreign policy inclinations, Jawaharlal Nehru noted that “a free India, with her vast resources, can be a great service to the world and to humanity. India will always make a difference to the world; fate has marked us for big things.” This belief has persisted across all leaders to this very day.<sup>1</sup>

Negative experiences of colonialism under the British Raj had debased India’s regional and international significance over many centuries, while undercutting its prior status as a great power. From

this basis, India’s leaders after 1947 had a foreign policy approach based on positive neutralism and *purna swaraj* (complete independence) from great-power politics. During the Cold War, Indian diplomacy encompassed complementary policies of nonalignment, self-reliance, *ahimsa* (non-violence), and nuclear disarmament. Furthermore, India’s global conduct was based on the idealistic internationalism of a Nehruvian world order that strove for peace, harmony, cooperation, and development, whereby all countries were treated equally regardless of status or position. Other core characteristics included equilibrating balances within an Indian society that was multicultural and multiethnic in nature—namely, tolerance, equality, and general detachment.

Colonial legacies (especially the violence of Partition that led to the formation of Muslim-dominated Pakistan and secular India) played into these logics by instilling an inherent distrust of outside forces. The colonial period also gave birth to a range of border issues, mainly with Pakistan and China, which would persist for the next seventy-five years and beyond. These would also test principles of nonviolence with India engaging in wars with Pakistan (1947–48, 1965, and 1971) and China (1962). Such a Nehruvian approach to security represented a “strategy of balance

of power for a militarily weak but large and self-confident nation in a bipolar world.”<sup>2</sup>

As the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, India was forced to reassess the conduct of its foreign policy. Although Nehruvianism had enabled New Delhi’s regional preeminence in South Asia and had given it a well-recognized international voice (via the Non-Aligned Movement [NAM] created in 1961), its socialist and inward-looking economic policy had nearly bankrupted the country. The resultant balance of payments crisis of 1991 made India’s leaders appreciate the advantages of economic liberalization in terms of status acquisition, providing a strategy to engage with the international system’s great powers. Such understandings recognized the realities of a post-Cold War world, which had depleted Indo-USSR links, increasingly made the NAM irrelevant, and demanded new foreign policy dimensions—especially if great-power status was to be achieved. A stronger economy also meant more resources to protect India’s borders and was a way to attract—and, to a degree, bind—other countries to New Delhi in a win-win dynamic.

The post-Cold War period further saw the advent of the Hindu nationalist BJP, as India’s domestic politics shifted away from the control of Nehru’s Indian National Congress (INC). In 1998, a BJP-led coalition gained power, breaking decades of INC rule. With a stress on regaining India’s glorious (Hindu) past, the BJP sought to reverse the apparent inability of India to fruitfully assert itself regionally and globally. The party revitalized calls for India to recover its rightful place in the world and “a role in world affairs commensurate with its size and capability.”<sup>3</sup> This assertion included a strategic tilt toward the United States (US), enhancing ties with all the great powers, broadening India’s security horizons out across all parts of Asia, embracing economic liberalization, and taking an overt pro-nuclear weapons stance (via the 1998 nuclear tests). For the BJP, these changes indicated how India should now be led

only by its own—not other—great-power interests. More pragmatism, assertiveness, and proactive engagement underpinned these policies, producing a “structural shift in New Delhi’s worldview.”<sup>4</sup> These fundamental recalibrations persisted when the BJP left office in 2004 and were generally retained by two successive INC-led governments until 2014.

## THE IMPACT OF THE BJP AND NARENDRA MODI

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Since the BJP’s election victory of 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the conduct of Indian foreign policy became more focused and dynamic. Although still concerned with achieving the same set of “key goals, including the national economic transformation, ensuring national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity,” and addressing “our key regional and global concerns,” the overriding style of Indian diplomacy changed.<sup>5</sup> Self-confident, shrewdly assertive, and more calculated in its delivery, India’s leaders and diplomats now sought “a paradigm of confident engagement with simultaneous pursuit of different interests with various partners while maintaining a cohesive unity in our overall strategic vision.”<sup>6</sup> In many ways, this emphasis is more sophisticated and determined than that of previous Indian governments.

The language used in the annual reports of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) from 2014 onward reflects this change. As such, they successively speak of “a more pro-active and pragmatic approach,” “renewed energy, vigour, and planning in India’s engagement with the rest of the world,” and the need for “active diplomacy . . . creating new directions for the growth and expansion of India’s foreign policy.”<sup>7</sup> As the years progress, they also note the desire for an “outcome-orientated foreign policy” that has “strategic autonomy at its core,” and the “purposeful pursuit of national interest.”<sup>8</sup> The pursuit of national interests through “non-interference, flexibility, (and) pragmatism” is

also of importance, as is having a wide “policy of neutral approach, focusing on development.”<sup>9</sup>

There is also a continuation of a phenomenon first emphasized by the BJP during the 1998–2004 National Democratic Alliance government of foreign policy becoming critical to electoral politics.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the MEA annual reports speak of an “increased emphasis placed by government in establishing close linkages between our foreign policy and our domestic developmental aspirations, . . . to create the most propitious climate for domestic growth.”<sup>11</sup> India’s ongoing privileging of its great-power diplomacy above all other relations is pivotal here, whereby through “the continued engagement with the major powers of the world, . . . India leverage(s) all these important relationships to increase the flow of trade, investment, and technologies into the Indian economy.”<sup>12</sup>

Such goals buttress the current government’s Make in India, Skill India, Digital India, and Startup India programs, all of which are geared to fulfill the BJP’s commitment “to build [developed India] by 2047” and to establish “a futuristic, prosperous, inclusive and developed society.”<sup>13</sup>

These narratives are underpinned by a self-awareness concerning India and its place in the world. Recognizing India’s position as a rising, would-be great power and as a major actor in the Asian twenty-first century, reports note how “the continuing geo-political shift towards Asia imparted new momentum and positive trajectory to our partnerships.”<sup>14</sup> The rise of China and the West’s activist diplomacy to try to bring New Delhi into an anti-Beijing axis have also added weight—and opportunities for India—to this shift. As part of this change, India is seen to be occupying “a new role in the world, as a confident, articulate, rising power, willing to claim its place on the global high table and able to discharge its responsibilities.”<sup>15</sup> This new positioning further includes “India’s emerging role as ‘force for the good’ in contributing global solutions to global problems.”<sup>16</sup> Such a realization embraces a mutual recognition of how “the world

visibly acknowledge[s] India’s potential to act as a leading power, under a determined and decisive leadership with a regional and global vision.”<sup>17</sup>

A central part of these discourses is the BJP’s ongoing desire “to fundamentally reboot and reorient . . . foreign policy goals, content and process.”<sup>18</sup> The key factor within such an aim has been not only to instill a difference in style, tone, and approach but also the fundamental Hindu edge that the BJP is doggedly injecting into Indian politics. Prime Minister Modi’s status as a senior member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a hard-line Hindu nationalist organization that propagates a Hindu-dominated worldview, underpins this assertion.<sup>19</sup> The BJP is the RSS’s political wing, and RSS is the BJP’s umbilical cord to more severe ideological leanings.<sup>20</sup>

Modi’s widespread image as a powerful, strong, and messianic orator further plays to Hindu nationalist ideals of a resurgent India.<sup>21</sup> He has also been central to the BJP’s electoral success since 2014. Talismanic, if divisive in some quarters, he maintained exceptionally high approval ratings in his two periods in office up until 2024. These ratings did not drop below 64 percent and peaked at 93.5 percent.<sup>22</sup> In August 2023, 79 percent had a favorable view of Modi, including 55 percent who had a *very* favorable view.<sup>23</sup> This popularity has been instrumental in the BJP’s electoral majorities in 2014 (282 seats and 31 percent of the total vote) and in 2019 (303 seats and 37 percent of the total vote).<sup>24</sup> Even though the BJP did not gain a majority in the 2024 elections and won only 240 seats, it still maintained its voter base at 37 percent.<sup>25</sup> Such results have, to a degree, defied the incumbency effect, whereby most leaders in Indian elections lose voters after gaining power. Such success was thought to be nearly impossible for a Hindu-dominated party to achieve in an ethnically diverse and political complex country such as India.

As a result of his electoral success, Modi has come to completely dominate the BJP as a political

brand, both domestically and internationally. A pro-capitalist, pro-market embrace, backed up by large donations from big business, is also a vital pillar of this political success.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this synergy between the foreign and domestic spheres—in terms of policy overlap and his leadership—firmly locates Modi at the fulcrum of India’s contemporary fortunes. Reflective of this dominance, the BJP’s *2024 Election Manifesto* had the title *Modi Ki Guarantee*, which could be found another seventy-five times throughout the document. In this way, Modi has come to equal not only the BJP’s success but the general international standing of India itself.

Especially in the BJP’s first term in office from 2014, Modi cast himself as a prominent global leader striding across the world from summit to summit.<sup>27</sup> He also centralized all foreign policy decision making in the Prime Minister’s Office. Such proactive diplomacy made sure that Modi—and by extension India and Indian interests—became a highly prominent and well-established part of the strategic calculi of all other states.<sup>28</sup> It also helped define him as a world leader whose longevity and gravitas now arguably put him in the same bracket as a generation of ruling figures such as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Moreover, observers note how Modi “wants to be seen as the biggest and most popular globally accepted political leader from India ever. He wants to have iconic status globally.”<sup>29</sup> Winning the 2024 elections have also put him on a par with India’s founding father—and global statesman—Jawaharlal Nehru with three victories. If Modi were to win again in 2029, he would be India’s most successful election winner and would become India’s longest-serving prime minister. Such success would only heighten his global presence and personal prestige.

Reflective of the BJP’s foundations and linkages, the MEA annual reports now frequently assert that “India’s foreign policy has civilizational roots and heritage and is based on the principled pursuit of our national interests.”<sup>30</sup> As such, the reports note “the growing impact of India’s civilizational values

on international cooperation, underpinned by the enduring conceptual framework of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (the world is one family), as well as “traditions of peaceful co-existence, pluralism and peace.”<sup>31</sup> Since 2014, the MEA has had “a dual objective of propagation and promotion of Hindi abroad and the implementation of its use in day-to-day official work.”<sup>32</sup> The Indian Council of World Affairs and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations are also used as organizations to promote Hindi as an international language.

This use of Hindi has been more prominent than under previous non-BJP governments, and since 2014 there has been a consistent emphasis on major development mantras, such as *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwa, sabka prayaas* (together, for everyone’s growth, with everyone’s trust, with everyone’s effort).<sup>33</sup> It is also highly notable that the term “India” is largely absent from the BJP’s *2024 Election Manifesto*, with a clear preference for “Bharat,” which is the Hindi designation for India. Although both Bharat and India are in the Indian Constitution, this is a newer emphasis and is the more open assertion that the use of “India” is now an unwanted colonial name.<sup>34</sup> Its greater usage also mirrors the replacement of colonial-era city names across the country. Bharat further speaks to BJP national self-conceptions of a state whose borders, interests, and strategic footprint are larger than those of modern India, which thus informs major BJP foreign policies like the “extended strategic neighbourhood,” Act East, and Think West. These conceptions also link to BJP aims to build a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu country) and historical notions of Akhand Bharat (undivided India) when Indian territory extended into Afghanistan, Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>35</sup>

## MAJOR CONTOURS OF CONTEMPORARY FOREIGN POLICY

Indicative of the pragmatic core running through India’s strategic outlook, a high degree of strategic

flexibility is central to New Delhi's contemporary foreign policy. Although always evident through Cold War policies such as nonalignment, the general tilt toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the post-1998 strategic convergence with the US, in recent years has become a highly noticeable trait within Indian diplomacy. The defining moment—at least from the perspective of the international community—was in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. New Delhi's refusal to condemn Moscow's military action challenged Western strategic expectations that India was a natural part of a pro-democracy bloc. Instead, India has consistently shown itself to be an astute chameleon on the world stage that is able to nurture positive relations with a range of states that are frequently in (very direct) competition with each other.<sup>36</sup>

This positioning underscores how New Delhi does not wish to be compelled by long-lasting alliances but instead pursues multiple cooperative partnerships *simultaneously*, even if they are counterintuitive in terms of strategic alignment. Fundamentally, this approach allows India to maintain a path of maximum strategic flexibility and autonomy in global affairs. New Delhi can use this elasticity to actively position itself as a diplomatic bridge between the West and its major antagonists, be they Russia, China, Iran, or others, which is of increasing strategic value as India's multilateral engagement expands. It is also so deeply embedded within India's historical experience to now become a core foreign policy prerogative. As Modi noted in his 2020 Independence Day speech, "India faced centuries of foreign rule. All efforts were made to destroy our nation, our culture, our traditions, but they underestimated our self-belief and determination."<sup>37</sup>

Within this context, the BJP's foreign policy proclivities rest on the "5S approach of *Samman*, *Samvad*, *Sahyog*, *Shanti* and *Samridhi* (respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity)," which in earlier versions also had references to

*suraksha* (regional/global security) and *sanskriti evam sabhyata* (cultural/civilizational links).<sup>38</sup>

Central to the BJP's policy approach are a predominant focus on three core dimensions: self-reliance, great-power diplomacy, and multilateralism. Each area straddles the foreign and domestic spheres, and they thus effectively feed and build off each other. Overarching all these dimensions and spheres has also been the BJP's active reference to Hindutva (Hinduness) as an ideological, political, and synergistic touchstone for the crafting of contemporary Indian—or even proto-*Bharatiya*—strategic thought and foreign policy.

## ENSURING SELF-RELIANCE

Ever since Independence in 1947, India has pursued its quest for influence and status in international relations by preserving and enhancing its autonomy and self-sufficiency. Under the BJP, Modi has recast this fundamental strategic aim, calling it Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (self-reliant India mission). This understanding centers on the five pillars of "economy, infrastructure, technology-driven system, vibrant demography and demand" and is designed to avoid any over-reliance on external actors.<sup>39</sup> Predominantly economic in focus, it seeks to help establish India as a center for global manufacturing that is not wholly dependent on external supply chains. It places a greater emphasis on attracting ever-higher amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI) and signing more bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), in order to make India a major exporter rather than an importer. The vision also translates into a wider sense of enhanced strategic autonomy, particularly by modernizing India's military power base.

In the last decade, India has become one of the international system's largest economic powers. In 2022, it had the world's fourth-largest economy in terms of GDP purchasing power parity, which was worth US\$11.9 trillion, behind the US (\$25.4 trillion), the European Union

(EU) (\$25.6 trillion), and China (\$30.3 trillion).<sup>40</sup> Significantly from 2014 to 2022, India's economic size expanded at an overall faster rate than both the US and the EU, growing by 77.5 percent versus 44.9 percent and 55.9 percent, respectively, and was only just behind China's economy, which increased by 77 percent during the same period. Moreover, at 7.2 percent, India's annual GDP growth in 2022 outstripped all these entities (the EU, 3.4 percent; the US, 1.9 percent; and China, 3 percent) and virtually all other major economies.<sup>41</sup> In these regards, India's position as a top-tier economic power is indisputable in global affairs and appears to be on a trajectory to even be the largest economy by 2050. India's now world-leading (and very young) population of over 1.43 billion will be a valuable resource in this regard, although high youth unemployment due to the insufficient creation of jobs has recently been a major domestic issue.<sup>42</sup>

The Indian government's launching of the Make in India plan to encourage manufacturing and create jobs, as well as the Digital India drive to expand digital infrastructure and access to technology, have aided economic success. Underpinned by Modi's personal diplomacy, the relative maturing and slowdown of the Chinese economy, and India's large middle-class population of some 450 million people, India has become a major destination for FDI. From 2014 to 2022, FDI into India rose by 108 percent from \$24 billion to \$49.9 billion.<sup>43</sup> In turn, in 2022 India was the world's tenth-largest exporter (from fifteenth in 2014) and the world's seventh-largest importer (from thirteenth in 2014).<sup>44</sup> Together these factors enhance New Delhi's overall increasing self-reliance and self-sufficiency in economic terms. They also indicate an increasing interdependence and interreliance between the international system and India, augmenting its strategic necessity in the calculi of other global actors.

Further underlining these greater levels of interconnection, India has signed a series of FTAs

with other countries during the Modi premiership. From 2014, these have included agreements with Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand, a related Comprehensive Economic Partner Agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the ongoing upgrading of all its major trade partnerships. To the year ending February 2024, India's ten largest trading partners in descending order were the US, the UAE, the Netherlands, China, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Singapore, the United Kingdom (UK), Saudi Arabia, and Germany.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as India's economy continues to grow it is accounting for greater levels of energy consumption. In 2022, India's economy was the world's third-largest oil consumer and the world's third-largest energy consumer (including electricity, transport, and heating).<sup>46</sup> In 2023, India's biggest oil imports came from Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.<sup>47</sup> Given India's economic trajectory, such energy needs will only increase as it modernizes, thus creating more interdependencies. That stated, India has also seen dramatic investment in renewable energy, with its solar capacity increasing elevenfold from 2016 to 2023, which in the longer term will aid New Delhi's energy security self-reliance.<sup>48</sup>

The translatability of economic power means that it can be converted into other resources that can further enhance India's autonomy in its foreign policy. This conversion is most evident concerning military spending, which can be used to enhance the ability to protect India's borders and vital trade routes but also to project prestige and national modernization. In this regard, India spent \$83.64 billion in 2023, which ranked third behind the US (\$916.01 billion) and China (\$296.44 billion).<sup>49</sup> In turn, in 2023, India spent 2.44 percent of its GDP on its military versus 3.36 percent by the US and 1.67 percent by China.<sup>50</sup> A key element of this military spending is India's being the world's largest arms importer from 1950 to 2023, spending \$134.47 billion, or 6.5 percent of the global total.<sup>51</sup> Such figures point to a persistent need for new weaponry that we can expect to endure in

the future and that also creates further synergies with major arms exporters. The major military suppliers to India in 2023 were, in descending order, Israel, Russia, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and the US.<sup>52</sup> India is seeking to increase the “indigenisation of defence production” as part of Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan but with limited results, and it cannot be considered a major arms exporter.

Where India has enhanced its military capabilities is through continued and expanding military exercises with a range of countries, which is increasing interoperability and knowledge-sharing (including about counterterrorism and border security). According to various MEA annual reports since 2014, at the very least, India has conducted military exercises with Mongolia, China, Singapore, the Maldives, Russia, Vietnam, the Seychelles, France, Nepal, the US, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), IBSAMAR (India, Brazil, and South Africa Maritime), SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which includes China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), and Malabar (India, Japan, Australia, and the US). India has also assisted with military training in Uzbekistan, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Mozambique, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and South Korea. Further ties are apparent with Australia, Brazil, Belarus, Brunei, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, and Fiji. Other regular dialogues and exchanges increase such ties, which strengthen India’s overall self-sufficiency. All such linkages have significantly widened the scope of India’s military engagement over the last decade under the BJP.

Having enhanced military capabilities has also had a practical application for India since 2014. This usage has included deploying surgical strikes

in Pakistan in September 2016 and February 2019 and in Myanmar in June 2015, all of which targeted militants. Indian military personnel also participated in the June–August 2017 Doklam standoff with China, as well as the deadly skirmishes with China across their shared border in the latter half of 2020. Via Operation Ganga, Indian Armed Forces also evacuated twenty-five thousand of its nationals from Ukraine in 2022 after Russia’s invasion. More broadly, developing better naval capabilities has improved the protection of vital energy and trade security routes in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and boosted India’s much vaunted dominance of that region. Modi’s policy of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), articulated in 2015, continues to guide India’s policy for the Indo-Pacific, as does India’s Vision for the Indo-Pacific that desires “a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific.”<sup>53</sup> Both also inform India’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) together with the US, Japan, and Australia, which is designed to contain China.

Taking these economic and military developments together, they are providing ever-expanding foundations for the broadening of India’s global strategic footprint. Not only increasing New Delhi’s international influence and relevance making, they also make India more attractive to potential strategic partners. As such, having more economic and military power is emboldening India’s Neighbourhood First Policy in South Asia, as well as bolstering its “extended strategic neighbourhood” policy via the enhanced Look East Policy, with its new Act East dimension.<sup>54</sup> More widely, India is diplomatically active in regions hitherto largely untouched before 2014. These include regions in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (the first Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation met in 2014), as well as ongoing India-Africa Forum Summits. The MEA established a new Division for the Indo-Pacific in April 2019 and continued to enlarge the size and mandate of its Policy Planning & Research Division. Via the



Vaccine Maitri (vaccine friendship) initiative, which supplied more than 110 million vaccine doses to ninety-seven countries, India also boosted its global soft power credentials, thus stressing its desired “position as a responsible and reliable stakeholder.”<sup>55</sup>

## GREAT-POWER DIPLOMACY

Reflective of the cross-generation desires of all India’s leaders, the aspiration to be a great power in global politics is the lynchpin of Indian foreign policy.<sup>56</sup> Boosted by the BJP’s proactive policy plans, Modi’s global diplomatic presence, and New Delhi’s ever-increasing economic and military clout, such an aspiration is becoming a reality in international affairs. Apart from seeing the global system as innately hierarchical, with India looking to position itself in the very top tier of international actors, there is now also a deep-seated strategic belief that positively engaging with the current, future, and nascent great powers should be the major focus for Indian diplomacy. Such an approach is not only about socialization—that is, being among the group of powers that India aspires to be part of—but is also about the relative diplomatic gains to be made from such engagement that are proportionally far higher than boosting ties with much smaller entities. India’s ties with the US, Russia, China, and Japan are its most fruitful major relationships.

Great powers are also the international system’s gatekeepers who can provide entry to their great-power “club” and are able to provide exceptions if it meets their strategic needs. India’s 1998 nuclear tests are the *prima facie* case here. The US eventually allowed New Delhi to sidestep major parts of the nuclear nonproliferation architecture because Washington needed a stable strategic partner in the region, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. India’s democratic basis and large economic potential all aided such a calculus and have continued to gain weight in the last two decades as the US and its Western partners seek

to use India to balance out against a rapidly rising China. In turn, inculcating good relations with the great powers also opens up their own sets of relations with particular partners. Thus, and again with the US example, once Washington was seen to accept India as a legitimate diplomatic actor after 1998, then so did key allies such as Japan, Israel, Australia, and others. For India, this ongoing creation and expansion of a “web of partners,” via a hierarchical and omnidirectional diplomatic strategy, also pays increasing dividends in multilateral settings. In such spheres, New Delhi can now attract wide-ranging support from across a growing bank of great, middle, and small powers.

As the system’s foremost power, over the last decade New Delhi has inculcated “a qualitative reinvigoration” across its relations with Washington, typified by a “shift away from nonalignment and the pursuit of strategic autonomy.”<sup>57</sup> US president Barack Obama was the chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations in January 2015, and since then senior Indian and US leaders have made regular visits to each other, culminating in Modi’s first state visit to the US in June 2023. Underpinning relations has been burgeoning economic ties: bilateral trade rose from \$141.55 in 2018 to \$191.43 in 2022.<sup>58</sup> In 2022, the US was also the third-largest source of FDI in India and has invested “in high-quality infrastructure projects and development of economic corridors through the India Middle East Europe Economic Connectivity Corridor and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.”<sup>59</sup> In April 2021, the India-US Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership was launched, joining a range of dialogues and exchanges concerning science and technology, space cooperation, education, culture, and health.

With shared regional security concerns, the India-US defense relationship has also been deepened. As such, in 2015 the New Framework for Defence Cooperation was formally renewed for ten years, while defense procurements from the US amounted to almost \$20 billion in 2022.<sup>60</sup>

According to an MEA Bilateral Brief, “India has the largest number of military exercises with USA,” which involve India’s army, special forces, navy, air force, and tri-services, as well as a range of multilateral exercises.<sup>61</sup> Now regular 2+2 Ministerial Dialogues, cochaired by the minister of external affairs and the minister of defence and the US secretary of state and the secretary of defense, aid this cooperation, as do ongoing meetings of the Defence Policy Group to review all defense dialogues and mechanisms. These are now complemented by new joint working groups on counterterrorism and counternarcotics and by a cyber dialogue. Exemplifying all these linkages, the India-US relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership in 2020. US threat perceptions concerning an ever-more powerful, assertive, and ambitious China push Washington to actively court New Delhi to counterbalance Beijing. Reflecting this view, a senior US official noted that “it is no secret that India is one of the most sought-after players on the global stage” and that India-US ties are “the most important relationship on the planet.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite these assertions, India’s relationship with Russia continues to indicate New Delhi’s preference for a pathway of maximum strategic flexibility in its diplomacy.<sup>63</sup> Seen as a “special and privileged strategic partner” (the highest such designation by India in this regard), Russia is “a time tested and reliable friend.”<sup>64</sup> Annual summits between the Russian president and the Indian prime minister also heighten ties, as do the India-Russia Strategic Economic Dialogue and cooperation on nuclear energy, space, science and technology, and culture issues. Highly regular SCO, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), RIC (Russia-India-China), and UN meetings are also of significance. Underscoring their deep relations, in 2021 the India-Russia Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity Joint Statement was adopted. Russia also continues to support India’s quest to be a permanent member of a reformed UN Security Council,

as well as to advocate on behalf of India’s Kashmir claims.

Defense—rather than economic—cooperation is the mainstay of their relations and “has evolved from a buyer-seller framework to one involving joint research, development and production of advanced defence technologies and systems.”<sup>65</sup> These links are aided by the ongoing India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military & Military-Technical Cooperation and, from 2021, the first-ever 2+2 Format meeting between India and Russia with the participation of foreign and defense ministers of both countries. As a result of all these linkages, which build on those formed during the Cold War, and despite Russia’s pariah status in the West, New Delhi refused to abandon its long-standing strategic partner following Moscow’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As such, it abstained in UN resolutions concerning Ukraine and also significantly increased its gas and oil exports from Russia (by 700 percent) since early 2022.<sup>66</sup>

Within Asia, India-China relations can also be regarded as historically close, even despite their deadly military clashes over their disputed border in 2020. Indeed, both countries want many of the same things: to be developed and modernized, to be recognized and respected as returning and influential great powers in international affairs, and to recast the world order as being multipolar—rather than unipolar and US dominated—in nature.<sup>67</sup> This strategic outlook has the potential to deeply bind Beijing and New Delhi together. Thus, although they have major differences, concerning, say, ever-closer China-Pakistan ties and the Belt and Road Initiative on one side versus concerns on the other about a growing India-US strategic convergence and the Quad, this common long-term view of global order is of significance.<sup>68</sup>

The complexity of India-China relations is shown through the “more than thirty dialogue mechanisms in place at various levels, across bilateral political, economic, cultural, people-to-people

and consular matters, along with dialogues on regional and global issues.<sup>69</sup> Through these groupings, “both countries continue to cooperate and coordinate on important global issues such as climate change, food security and energy security, and maintain closer dialogue on important regional issues.”<sup>70</sup> Regular high-level participation by leaders from both sides at the BRICS, the SCO, and the RIC add to this engagement, as do the ongoing Special Representatives mechanism on the India-China Boundary Question, which has continued to meet despite the 2020 clashes. Through an Expert-Level Mechanism, there are also steady exchanges on cooperation about water resources. In 2014, the two sides established a Strategic Economic Dialogue and redefined their bilateral engagement as a Closer Developmental Partnership. Over the last decade, trade between New Delhi and Beijing has risen 93 percent from \$70.59 billion in 2014 to \$136.20 billion in 2023.<sup>71</sup>

Seen to share a Special Strategic and Global Partnership from 2014, the last decade has also witnessed a “qualitative shift” and a “transformation of relations” between India and Japan.<sup>72</sup> Regular annual summits and regular exchanges including at the foreign minister, defense minister, and national security advisor levels are central to this shift. So too are their ongoing Strategic Dialogue, the India-Japan Act East Forum established in 2017, and the inaugural India-Japan Forum in 2021, while Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe was Chief Guest at India’s 2014 Republic Day celebrations. There are also exchanges concerning the environment, space cooperation, education, tourism, and culture. Despite relatively low bilateral trade—rising from \$15.51 billion in 2014–15 to \$21.96 billion in 2022–23—there have been high amounts of public and private investment and financing from Japan to India.<sup>73</sup> From 2022 to 2027, this will amount to \$42 billion, including but not limited to the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Railway project and six Metro Rail projects.<sup>74</sup> Military-to-military

cooperation has also significantly deepened since 2014 to include agreements on Defence Cooperation and Exchanges (2014) and Transfer of Defence Equipment & Technology Cooperation (2015) among many others.<sup>75</sup> Common US ties, the Quad, a mutual fear of China, and a harmonized agreement on India’s SAGAR vision for the Indo-Pacific have also reinforced the two sides’ strategic partnership.

## EXPANDING MULTILATERALISM

The growing confidence of its leaders mixed with having more material power is allowing India to articulate herself as a *vishwaguru* (world guru); “a ‘leading power’ . . . equipped with a clear vision of how international affairs ought to be organized, not merely a power that accepts the system as it is.”<sup>76</sup> At the heart of this outlook is a desire to reorder the current international order and to build a multipolar system with New Delhi as a major pole of unquestioned influence. Relatedly, India remains “committed to seeking permanent membership in the UN Security Council to elevate Bharat’s position in global decision making.”<sup>77</sup> In unison with working with the great powers, being more prominent in multilateral settings highly amplifies its status and thus its great-power ambitions. As an emergent and relatively immature major power, there are, though, questions concerning India’s actual status. However, such an apparent “status inconsistency” as to whether New Delhi is a great power or not—and which perhaps prevents, say, an all-weather alliance with the US—makes it attractive to a much wider range of potential partners. Such a positioning thus enhances India’s diplomatic allure, especially in multilateral settings, and serves to amplify New Delhi’s strategic flexibility and autonomy in global relations.

In the last decade, India has shown an accumulating degree of visibility, relevance, and innovation in terms of its multilateral diplomacy. From such a basis, MEA annual reports talk of “India’s emergence as a global forum for deliberations

on international relations and globalization, . . . through the holding of international conferences covering the three pillars of geopolitics, geoeconomics, and geotechnology.”<sup>78</sup> One notable early grouping was the International Solar Alliance (ISA) that was first proposed by Modi in late 2015. Focused on endorsing clean energy, sustainable environment, public transport, and climate, the alliance seeks to boost the global use of solar power over fossil fuels. It now has over 120 members, mainly bringing together so-called sunshine countries, Suryaputra (sons of the sun), between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

Apart from the first Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation in 2014, as well as ongoing India-Africa Forum Summits, New Delhi has also sought to set up or advance other groupings. Thus, March 2017 saw the first Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Summit, while Modi hosted the first India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022, with the participation of the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Also under Modi’s initiative, the International Day of Yoga was introduced through the UN and was first celebrated on June 21, 2015, and every year since. Courtesy of its growing economic weight, India’s role across all other fora also continued to increase, including at the G20 and others. India has also become more prominent within climate change negotiations, especially ongoing UN Climate Change Conferences, and at COP26 in 2021 presented a Five-Point Agenda, or Panchamrit, which committed India to achieving “net-zero” carbon emissions by 2070.<sup>79</sup> India also remained one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping operations.

Since 2014, New Delhi’s standout—even watershed—diplomatic moment on the world stage was taking on the G20 Presidency from 2022 to 2023, culminating in the 2023 G20 New Delhi Summit. With a main element of the G20’s remit relating to the construction and maintenance of global financial architectures

and governance mechanisms, the presidency enhanced India’s ability to crucially influence such debates as its own economic authority increases on the global stage. With India’s great-power rise centering on core goals relating to development, modernization, status, leadership, importance, prestige, and pride, assuming the G20 Presidency gained an ever-greater significance. Modi’s hosting also aided India’s purposeful production of “a self-confident image, a sense of destiny and restored stature, which are as important for internal audiences as they are for external ones.”<sup>80</sup> Overarching this policy was the personality of Modi as a skilled and energetic global statesman seen to be able to broker global diplomacy.

New Delhi’s increasing status was also apparent in a number of regional organizations. In June 2017, India officially became a member of the SCO. Joining at the same time as Pakistan, this was the first time the SCO had welcomed new members since 2001. A Eurasian security organization that aims to combat the regional threats of terrorism, secessionism, and extremism, the SCO is the world’s largest regional organization, representing over 41 percent of the global population and around a third of its GDP. Along with core members Russia and China, its affiliates coordinate joint military operations, energy security concerns, and—most important from India’s standpoint—a belief in a future pluralistic multipolar world order. New Delhi’s membership furthers these strategic aims, demonstrating India’s diplomatic flexibility.

Elsewhere, the beginning of 2024 saw the BRICS grouping double its number of members. Adding Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, this expansion signified a major new phase for what is arguably the developing world’s foremost multilateral organization. It will also add greater credence to the group’s demands for a more equitable and representative world, as well as indicating “wide-ranging global south support for a recalibration of the global order.”<sup>81</sup>

Representing over two-fifths of global GDP and over a quarter of its territory, the BRICS helps to amplify India's diplomatic and economic prowess. The BRICS's New Development Bank bolsters these aims; from 2013 to 2023 the bank had lent around \$33 billion to ninety-six development projects compared with some \$67 billion lent by the World Bank.<sup>82</sup> BRICS plans to develop its own currency—potentially called the R5 or the R5+—are also important in this regard.<sup>83</sup> The currency would not be controlled by a single country or a nation-based central bank or limited to a specific geographic locale. As such, it would hugely reduce BRICS's trade dependence on the US dollar, euro, or yen and would reduce any economic shock waves emanating from the Global North and the West in the event of recessions or depressions.

## **BUILDING A HINDUTVA INDIA**

The final core factor concerning contemporary Indian foreign policy is the increasing role of Hindutva as the guiding ideology of the BJP. This presence is emblematic of the gestation of a “new India” under the aegis of Modi and the BJP and of a “fresh era” for Indian foreign policy. Such an influence is wide-ranging, including using anti-Muslim sentiments to aid the “othering” of Pakistan as a danger to Hindus and by extension Bharat/India. Increasing claims of Hinduphobia or of Hindus being under threat globally amplify such prejudiced narratives. These perspectives are bolstered by internal political developments, such as the removal in 2019 of Article 370 from the Constitution that revoked the special status of Kashmir or Modi's personal dedication of the Bhavya Ram Mandir at Ayodhya in 2024, which replaced a mosque of the site. Both actions were long-standing manifesto promises, with the BJP claiming that the latter “has rejuvenated our society, . . . [leading to] a new interest in our history and heritage.”<sup>84</sup> They also serve to directly inform such nationalist discourses of a resurgent India under the BJP.

This process is climaxing in what can be denoted as the “Hinduization of foreign policy.”<sup>85</sup> A feeling of threat infuses these predilections, be it against an India-centric hierarchy in South Asia, the potential loss of territory vis-à-vis China, or any factor or actor that jeopardizes India's overall status and wider influence among New Delhi's great-power peer group. Threat thus acts as a clear—and highly useful—emotional criterion for Indian diplomacy under the guidance of Narendra Modi. The specter of China further drives the ever-greater focus of successive Modi governments on their Hindutva foundations, in order to express, project, and ultimately protect India's national identity.<sup>86</sup> Further away from the Asian context, Hindutva is feeding into a “global India brand” such as within the Indian diaspora in the US.<sup>87</sup> This exportation also sustains ideas of Indian exceptionalism, pointing to the BJP's reach outside India's borders, and serves to pointedly augment its overall influence and status.

The growing influence of Hindutva within India is also of significance concerning its global image. This outlook is pertinent concerning the gradual deterioration of domestic human rights that not only undercuts BJP claims of “Bharat's rich democratic traditions going back millennia as the Mother of Democracy” but also signifies an antidemocratic shift, whereby “the authoritarian impulses evident before are more pronounced today.”<sup>88</sup> These developments are of significance concerning Indian foreign policy on universal human rights but where India lies on any democratic-autocratic spectrum in international affairs. They will hence be a major factor that affects the various strategic outlooks of other countries.

In these ways, in the last decade Prime Minister Modi has openly abused journalists as “presstitutes,” “dalals” (pimps), or “bazaru” (for sale).<sup>89</sup> Defamation laws have also been used to silence journalists and news outlets critical of the BJP government, while scores of journalists have been

arrested, detained, or interrogated.<sup>90</sup> Relatedly, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 2019 is “being used to harass, intimidate, and imprison political opponents . . . [and] silence dissent in academia.”<sup>91</sup> Revamped laws on defamation aid this repression, and since 2014 over seven thousand people have been charged with sedition under the wide-ranging Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code of 1870.<sup>92</sup> Over the same period, violence and discrimination against India’s 200 million Muslims have also increased. In this way, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 excluded Muslims from the same rights of the Hindu majority. Other policies include building vast camps for undocumented Muslim migrants in Assam, regarded as “the stage just before genocide,” as well as legislation to prevent marriages between Muslim men and Hindu women (to prevent so-called love jihad).<sup>93</sup>

For these reasons, according to *The Economist’s* 2021 Democracy Index, India was a “flawed democracy.”<sup>94</sup> This reality poses difficulties for Western leaders keen to highlight how an authoritarian China and Russia threaten the democratic liberal international order, which ostensibly includes India. Moreover, the very real possibility of a Hindutva India becoming more entrenched became an existential issue for the BJP’s electoral opponents in the 2024 elections. So great was the scale of this threat that in 2023 a formal political bloc was formed across all main opposition parties, called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or INDIA. In line with their fears of BJP authoritarianism, INDIA protested the suspension of 146 members of the Indian Parliament (a hundred from the Lower House and forty-six from the Upper House) in late 2023. Many members had their bank accounts frozen, limiting their 2024 election campaigns, which was denounced as the “murder of democracy.”<sup>95</sup> In turn, Modi was accused of “trying match-fixing in this election.”<sup>96</sup> Final results showed that INDIA was unable to fully counteract the electorate’s ongoing attraction to the BJP and Modi’s evident political popularity

and dominance, as well as “Modi’s Guarantee that we [the BJP] will work 24 by 7 for 2047.”<sup>97</sup>

## LOOKING BEYOND THE 2024 ELECTION

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Surveying the BJP’s *2024 Election Manifesto*, in conjunction with the party’s dominant media narratives, we can judge the core policy approaches embraced since 2014 to both continue and accelerate. In this way, we can expect Indian diplomacy to seek to augment India’s national power in any way it can—and with any country or multilateral grouping—so long as it positively aids its development, modernization, and status ambitions. As part of these continuities, the *2024 Election Manifesto* notes “following the Neighbourhood First policy,” “strengthening maritime vision (SAGAR),” “expanding Bharat’s diplomatic network,” “elevating Bharat as a global soft power,” “pioneering international alliances,” “bringing back Bharatiya artefacts,” “protecting Bharat’s Security Interests in the Indian Ocean Region,” and “develop[ing] Bharat as a global manufacturing hub.”<sup>98</sup> The strategic aims to achieve enhanced self-reliance via a focus on great-power diplomacy and global leadership will therefore be increasingly evident. We can also expect this latter dimension to become more prominent domestically, including the potential introduction of a Uniform Civil Code into the Indian Constitution that could pointedly curtail religious freedoms across India.<sup>99</sup>

Within its foreign policy, India is seen as a friend to the world (*vishwa bandhu bharat*).<sup>100</sup> Overarching Modi’s outlook concerning foreign policy is a sense of India’s destiny coming of age, of *Yahi Samay Hai, Sahi Samay Hai* (this is the time, the right time).<sup>101</sup> This perception is not only the BJP’s but is claimed to be that of the international system, whereby “today, many respected voices across the globe are also saying that this is India’s time. In fact, today, India is being seen

as an important player in the global efforts to create a better future.”<sup>102</sup> India’s status as major economic, military, and diplomatic actor will be used to bolster this positioning. Underpinning these viewpoints is a self-conception of the BJP having “established Bharat as a reliable, trusted and dependable voice globally . . . [and] we have demonstrated Bharat’s independence of thought and action.”<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, and as per the BJP’s Hindutva foundations, there are assertions that “our civilizational values, thoughts, wisdom and traditional knowledge have found a place of pride at the world stage.”<sup>104</sup>

From a wider perspective, India’s necessity to the strategic aims of other major actors has never been more apparent. As such, and in the same way that Washington engaged with China in the 1970s to balance against the Soviet Union (which was then the US’s primary competitor), enhanced ties with New Delhi are now used by the West to counterbalance the challenge posed by China. Within this compulsion, the West often discounts the new political—and authoritarian realities gripping India, as they are trumped by the higher desire of preventing Beijing from gaining global preeminence. Such inertia can be argued to be emboldening Indian foreign policy, whose intelligence services have been accused of targeting Sikh separatists in Canada, the UK, and the US. The West’s China-myopia thus makes criticizing New Delhi more difficult, while allowing other transgressions—be they domestic (the BJP’s attitude toward India’s minorities) or regional (surgical strikes against its neighbors)—to perhaps worsen.

Overall, India’s strategic necessity to the great powers of all ilks will embolden the Modi government to unashamedly pursue its foreign policy goals and New Delhi to increasingly flex its growing diplomatic muscles. Within this context, we can expect India to maintain and heighten its diplomatic flexibility and to not enter into long-standing alliances with any actors, no matter the potential benefits that such ties would bring.

While the post-2024 BJP government may see the appointment of a new foreign secretary and a new national security advisor, with potentially the same external affairs minister, the style and core fundamentals of Indian foreign policy will not change. Such an “India First” mind-set will prevail with a proactive and vocal Modi at the helm of a nascent proto-great power, which is now carving an undisputable place for itself in an emergent multipolar world order. What the last decade shows is that the BJP is firmly focused on achieving its foreign (and domestic) policy goals. Noting in an extremely rare media interview in April 2024 that “I am always in the moment . . . when I am doing something, I am 100 percent involved and engrossed in that task,” Modi has been at the center of these triumphs and will remain so for a long time to come.<sup>105</sup>

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