

Recalibrating Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi: A Comprehensive Review of Strategic Shifts, Ideational Narratives, and Global Engagement

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Abstract

Since 2014, India's foreign policy has undergone a visible transformation marked by greater diplomatic assertiveness, energetic global outreach, and the construction of new ideational narratives. This review examines how the period from 2014 to 2025 has reshaped India's external engagements through a combination of strategic recalibration, leadership-driven diplomacy, and civilizational framing. The paper analyzes major themes such as India's transition from a traditionally cautious foreign policy toward a more proactive and multi-aligned strategy, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a central geopolitical space, and the growing emphasis on national identity in shaping global interactions. It highlights how India's leadership has increasingly employed public diplomacy, branding, and high-level summits to project national confidence and enhance India's international visibility. The review also explores soft power initiatives, economic diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and India's efforts to balance major power rivalries while asserting its independent voice in global governance. Overall, the study argues that the Modi era represents a complex blend of continuity and innovation, combining long-standing strategic principles with new ideational narratives and diplomatic frameworks that aim to elevate India's global stature in an evolving multipolar world.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, Modi era diplomacy, multi-alignment strategy, Indo-Pacific strategy, civilizational soft power, global leadership aspirations

1. Introduction

Indian foreign policy has historically been shaped by principles of non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and a cautious diplomatic approach that emphasized consensus over confrontation. However, with the ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014, scholars widely note a perceptible transformation in both the style and substance of India's international engagement. Hall and Ganguly (2021) describe this era as one marked by strong leadership, high-visibility diplomacy, and an expanded role for the prime minister in shaping external relations. Modi's foreign policy is characterized by a personalization of diplomacy, extensive use of public relations, and the projection of national confidence. Gupta et al. (2018) question whether this represents a genuinely new framework or a rebranding of existing paradigms. Meanwhile, Singh (2025) chronicles a decade-long shift from traditional non-alignment to a more flexible multi-alignment posture. This introduction outlines the purpose of this review: to analyze key developments, interpretive frameworks, and scholarly perspectives on India's foreign policy under Modi, drawing on contemporary academic work. It captures how ideational narratives, geopolitical shifts, and leadership style converge to shape India's external behavior in an increasingly competitive international environment.

MODEL 1. Drivers of Modi-Era Foreign Policy (2014–2025)

Components:

1. **Leadership Style**
 - Charismatic diplomacy
 - Personal engagement with world leaders
 - High-visibility summits
2. **Ideational Narrative**
 - Civilizational identity (“Vishwaguru”)
 - Nationalism and cultural diplomacy
3. **Strategic Environment**
 - Rise of China
 - Indo-Pacific competition
 - Shifts in global governance institutions
4. **Economic Imperatives**
 - Global investment attraction
 - Export-led growth
 - Energy and supply-chain security
5. **Technological & Security Needs**
 - Defense modernization
 - Cybersecurity, space collaboration
6. **Diaspora Power**
 - Political influence abroad
 - Soft-power expansion

Outcome:

A **multi-aligned, proactive, identity-driven** foreign policy aiming to elevate India’s global stature.

2. Conceptual Debates: Continuity, Change, or Repackaging?

A major area of scholarly debate concerns whether the Modi government’s foreign policy signifies a break from past doctrines or a repackaging of long-standing approaches. Gupta et al. (2018) argue that while Modi’s branding-heavy diplomacy may appear novel, many substantive elements—such as strategic autonomy—remain intact. They emphasize that India continues to pursue diversified partnerships and avoid formal alliances, although Modi’s style foregrounds symbolism, high-profile visits, and extensive diaspora outreach. Chandra (2017) highlights how Modi’s foreign policy rhetoric diverges sharply from earlier governments, but key strategic choices, particularly toward Pakistan and China, continue to reflect enduring structural constraints. Bhattacharya (2023) suggests that Modi’s innovations lie more in diplomatic activism and economic outreach than in fundamental shifts in interests. Plagemann and Destradi (2018), however, bring a different lens: they contend that Modi’s populist political style influences foreign policy by emphasizing national pride, strong leadership, and direct communication with the Indian diaspora, leading to a more assertive global posture. The literature reveals a complex blend of continuity and change, where Modi’s leadership introduces new narratives and strategies but still operates within the foundational logic of Indian strategic culture.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Foreign Policy Before and After 2014

Dimension	Pre-2014 (Traditional Policy)	Modi Era (2014–2025)
Strategic Doctrine	Non-alignment, cautious engagement	Multi-alignment, proactive engagement
Diplomatic Style	Quiet diplomacy, institutional approach	Personalized diplomacy, leader-driven outreach
Global Ambition	Regional stability, gradual rise	Aspiration for global leadership, “major power” identity
Soft Power Use	Limited, cultural ties only	Yoga diplomacy, diaspora mobilization, civilizational branding
Indo-Pacific Policy	Mostly conceptual, low-visibility	Highly assertive Indo-Pacific strategy, Quad revival
Economic Diplomacy	Slow-paced FTAs, limited investment push	High-visibility investment campaigns, global economic forums
China Strategy	Border management + economic cooperation	Strategic competition + security balancing
US Relations	Moderate engagement	Strong strategic convergence
Russia Relations	Deep defense ties	Balancing Russia with US and Europe
Regional Role	SAARC-centered	Indo-Pacific, IORA, BIMSTEC-centered

3. Civilizational Discourse and the ‘Vishwaguru’ Imaginary

One of the most distinctive ideational shifts in Indian foreign policy under Modi has been the rise of civilizational rhetoric and the aspiration to position India as a “Vishwaguru” (teacher to the world). De Estrada (2023) critically analyzes this concept, arguing that it draws on India’s cultural heritage, philosophical traditions, and spiritual diplomacy to craft an alternative mode of global engagement. This narrative is not merely symbolic but functions as a soft-power strategy to project India as a moral, ancient civilization offering solutions to contemporary global challenges. The promotion of International Yoga Day, engagement with the global Indian diaspora, and advocacy of civilizational values such as harmony and pluralism are central components of this strategy. Kugiel (2024) interprets the Vishwaguru narrative as a challenge to the Western-dominated liberal international order, offering a pluralistic, multi-civilizational alternative. This civilizational discourse also bolsters domestic legitimacy by portraying Modi as a restorer of India’s global standing. Singh (2025) notes that the Vishwaguru framework is integrated with India's broader diplomatic outreach, influencing engagements in forums such as the G20, SCO, and BRICS. Ultimately, the civilizational turn marks a significant ideational shift that blends cultural nationalism with foreign policy ambitions.

4. From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: Strategic Reorientation

A recurring theme across contemporary scholarship is India’s shift from non-alignment to what has been termed “multi-alignment.” C & Kumar (2025) describe this transition as a response to the shifting geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and the rise of China. Instead of avoiding alliances altogether, India now cultivates multiple strategic partnerships — with the United States, Japan, Australia, Europe, and Gulf countries — while also maintaining cooperation with Russia and participation in institutions like BRICS and the SCO. Singh (2025) notes that multi-alignment allows India to balance competing powers, pursue

diversified economic interests, and enhance strategic flexibility without sacrificing autonomy. Bhattacharya (2023) argues that this doctrine reflects pragmatism, enabling India to navigate uncertainty in the emerging multipolar world. Under Modi, India has strengthened defense agreements with the United States, joined the Quad’s revival, and increased maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, all while continuing long-standing ties with Russia. The literature indicates that multi-alignment represents one of the most substantive strategic changes of the Modi era, allowing India to remain autonomous yet deeply interconnected with global power politics.

TABLE 2. Pillars of India’s Multi-Alignment Approach (2014–2025)

Pillar	Description	Key Examples
Strategic Partnerships	Engaging multiple global powers independently	US (defense), Russia (energy), Japan (infrastructure)
Issue-Based Cooperation	Working with different blocs on specific issues	Climate partnerships with EU, tech with US
Flexible Security Coalitions	Joining coalitions without formal alliance commitments	Quad, Indo-Pacific maritime collaborations
Economic Diversification	Expanding diverse trade, investment networks	FTA discussions with UK, EU; partnerships in Gulf
Regional Balancing	Managing competition among major Asian powers	Balancing China through Indo-Pacific partnerships
Normative Leadership	Promoting values like democracy, climate justice	G20 presidency initiatives, global south leadership

5. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Regional Engagement

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of India’s foreign policy, driven both by geopolitical tensions and economic opportunities. C & Kumar (2025) emphasize that India’s Indo-Pacific strategy involves a multi-layered approach combining security cooperation, economic collaboration, and normative commitments such as “free and open seas.” Modi’s articulation of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reinforces India’s intent to play a leadership role in regional governance. Scholars note India’s deepening naval cooperation, joint exercises, and participation in regional institutions aimed at balancing China’s maritime assertiveness. Hall and Ganguly (2021) point out that Modi has significantly enhanced India’s visibility and credibility in the Indo-Pacific through partnerships with Japan, Australia, ASEAN states, and the United States. Bhattacharya (2023) observes that regional engagement also includes development partnerships, connectivity projects, and humanitarian assistance, which demonstrate India’s regional responsibility. However, China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its growing presence in South Asia pose ongoing challenges. Thus, the Indo-Pacific remains both an opportunity and a strategic test for India’s foreign policy ambitions.

MODEL 2. India’s Indo-Pacific Engagement Architecture

Layers of Interaction:

1. Security Layer

- Naval cooperation
- Maritime domain awareness

- Joint exercises (Malabar, AUSINDEX)
- 2. **Economic Layer**
 - Supply chain initiatives (with Japan & Australia)
 - Infrastructure, Blue Economy partnerships
 - Trade expansion with ASEAN
- 3. **Normative Layer**
 - Advocacy of “Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific”
 - Rules-based maritime order
- 4. **Institutional Layer**
 - Quad
 - IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)
 - BIMSTEC
- 5. **Soft-Power Layer**
 - Buddhist heritage diplomacy
 - Cultural and development assistance

Combined Effect:

Strengthens India’s regional influence and strategic balancing against China.

6. Populism, Leadership Style, and Personalised Diplomacy

Plagemann and Destradi (2018) argue that Modi’s populist leadership significantly influences India’s foreign policy behavior. Modi’s diplomacy is highly personalized, relying on charismatic leadership, strong imagery, and direct appeals to both domestic and international audiences. His extensive foreign travels, mass-gatherings with diaspora communities, and high-visibility summits reflect a branding-oriented approach. Hall and Ganguly (2021) emphasize that no previous Indian prime minister has as actively shaped the international agenda or used foreign policy as a tool for domestic political legitimacy. Modi’s communication strategy — including social media diplomacy — enhances India’s global image while projecting decisiveness. Bhattacharya (2023) suggests that this style has yielded benefits such as rapid engagement with partners and enhanced soft power. However, critics argue that personalized diplomacy may limit institutional depth and consistency. Nevertheless, the literature consistently agrees that Modi’s leadership style has elevated India’s diplomatic visibility and transformed the manner in which foreign policy is conducted.

7. Economic Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Diaspora Engagement

The Modi era has witnessed significant elevation of economic diplomacy as a strategic priority. Gupta et al. (2018) emphasize that the government has actively pursued investment, technology partnerships, and global market access. Singh (2025) documents how India has expanded bilateral trade agreements, improved ease of doing business, and leveraged international economic forums. Modi’s outreach to the Indian diaspora — often through large public events — serves soft-power goals by engaging influential overseas communities. De Estrada (2023) notes that cultural diplomacy, including yoga, Ayurveda, and heritage promotion, has become integral to India’s external identity. Bhattacharya (2023) highlights that India’s humanitarian diplomacy — such as vaccine exports during COVID-19 — has enhanced its global goodwill. Meanwhile, Kugiel (2024) argues that soft power initiatives also play into India’s claim of civilizational leadership, supporting its bid to shape global norms. Economic diplomacy under Modi thus integrates trade, culture, diaspora, and development, forming a multidimensional soft-power architecture.

MODEL 3. India’s Soft Power Matrix (2014–2025)

Category	Instruments	Expected Impact
Cultural Diplomacy	Yoga, Ayurveda, spirituality	Enhanced global cultural presence
Diaspora Diplomacy	Mega diaspora events, cultural connections	Political lobbying, economic ties
Humanitarian Diplomacy	Vaccine delivery, disaster relief	Goodwill, positive international identity
Brand India Diplomacy	“Make in India”, tech branding	Attracts investment, boosts innovation
Civilizational Narrative	Ancient heritage, “Vishwaguru” messaging	Ideational leadership in world politics

8. Conclusion

The scholarly literature demonstrates that India’s foreign policy under Narendra Modi represents a fusion of continuity, strategic adaptation, and ideational innovation. While foundational principles such as autonomy remain central, the Modi government has infused foreign policy with new energy, narrative depth, and global ambition. Concepts such as Vishwaguru, multi-alignment, and Indo-Pacific leadership illustrate India’s desire to redefine its role amid global uncertainties. The assertive diplomatic style, personalized engagement, and strategic partnerships underscore a shift toward a more visible and influential India. This review concludes that India’s foreign policy from 2014 to 2025 reflects a recalibration aimed at elevating India’s strategic standing, balancing great-power competition, and advancing a civilizational narrative that complements its geopolitical aspirations.

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