

## Research Article

# A Study of India's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of National Identity

**Amin Ahmad**

Research Scholar (Part-Time), Dept. of Political Science and Public Administration,  
Andhra University

**Corresponding Author: Amin Ahmad**

## Abstract

India's foreign policy has evolved significantly since independence, shaped by its complex national identity rooted in historical, cultural, and political dimensions. This study explores how India's national identity influences its foreign policy decisions, examining key historical phases, contemporary strategies, and global interactions. By analyzing the interplay of identity elements such as cultural heritage, democratic values, and post-colonial aspirations, this research highlights how India positions itself in the global arena. Using a qualitative methodology, including historical analysis and case studies, the study underscores the dynamic relationship between national identity and foreign policy, offering insights into India's global ambitions and challenges.

**Keywords:** India, foreign policy, national identity, post-colonialism, cultural heritage, global power

## 1. Introduction

India's foreign policy reflects its aspirations to be a global power while navigating its unique national identity. National identity, encompassing cultural heritage, historical experiences, democratic ethos, and post-colonial aspirations, shapes how nations articulate their global roles. For India, a civilization-state with a diverse population and a history of colonial subjugation, national identity is a critical lens to understand its foreign policy choices. From the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War to its current multi-alignment strategy, India's foreign policy has been a balancing act between asserting sovereignty and engaging globally.

The need for this study arises from the growing complexity of India's global engagements. As India emerges as an economic and strategic power, understanding how its national identity influences its foreign policy is crucial for scholars, policymakers, and international actors. The interplay of identity and foreign policy offers insights into India's strategic priorities, such as its relations with major powers, its role in multilateral forums, and its approach to regional security. Moreover, in a globalized world, where identity politics shapes international relations, studying India's case provides a model for other post-colonial states navigating similar challenges.

The scope of this study covers India's foreign policy from independence (1947) to the present (2025), focusing on key historical phases: the Nehruvian era (1947-1964), the post-Nehruvian shift (1964-1991), and the post-Cold War era (1991-2025). It examines how

elements of national identity—cultural heritage, democratic values, secularism, and post-colonial aspirations—shape India’s foreign policy decisions. The study also explores India’s relations with major powers (e.g., the United States, China, Russia), its regional policies in South Asia, and its role in global institutions like the United Nations and BRICS. This research employs a qualitative methodology, combining historical analysis, case studies, and discourse analysis of official statements and policies. By integrating primary sources (government documents, speeches) and secondary sources (academic literature, media reports), the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how national identity informs India’s foreign policy.

## **2. Need for the Study**

The study of India’s foreign policy through the lens of national identity is both timely and essential for several reasons. First, India’s rise as a global power necessitates a deeper understanding of the internal factors driving its external behavior. National identity, as a composite of historical experiences, cultural values, and political ideologies, serves as a foundational framework for India’s foreign policy. Unlike Western states, where national identity often aligns with homogenous cultural or ideological narratives, India’s identity is pluralistic, shaped by its ancient civilization, colonial past, and democratic present. This complexity makes India a unique case for studying how identity influences foreign policy.

Second, the global geopolitical landscape is increasingly shaped by identity politics. From the resurgence of nationalism in Europe to the assertion of cultural identities in Asia, nations are redefining their roles based on historical and cultural narratives. India, with its emphasis on “civilizational exceptionalism” and strategic autonomy, offers a compelling case to explore how identity shapes foreign policy in a multipolar world. For instance, India’s insistence on strategic autonomy, rooted in its post-colonial identity, influences its reluctance to align fully with any single power bloc, as seen in its participation in both the Quad and BRICS.

Third, India’s foreign policy has undergone significant shifts since independence, reflecting changes in its self-perception. The Nehruvian era emphasized non-alignment as a rejection of colonial hegemony, while the post-1991 liberalization era saw India embrace global integration while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness. Understanding these shifts requires analysing how India’s national identity—its democratic ethos, secular principles, and cultural heritage—has evolved and influenced its global outlook.

Fourth, the study is relevant for understanding India’s regional and global roles. As a leader in South Asia and an emerging power in global institutions, India’s foreign policy decisions impact regional stability and global governance. For example, its approach to neighbours like Pakistan and China is influenced by its identity as a secular, democratic state, while its global ambitions reflect its desire to be recognized as a civilizational power. Analysing these dynamics provides insights into India’s strategic priorities and challenges.

Finally, the study addresses a gap in existing literature. While much has been written on India’s foreign policy from strategic, economic, or security perspectives, fewer studies focus on the role of national identity. This research bridges that gap by examining how cultural, historical, and ideological elements shape India’s global interactions. It also contributes to broader international relations scholarship by offering a non-Western perspective on identity and foreign policy, challenging Eurocentric frameworks.

## **3. Literature Review:**

The literature on India’s foreign policy is vast, but studies explicitly linking it to national identity are limited. Constructivist scholars like Alexander Wendt (1999) argue that national identity shapes state behaviour in international relations. For India, this perspective is particularly relevant, given its unique historical and cultural context.

**Historical Context:** Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of India as a non-aligned, anti-colonial power is well-documented (Tharoor, 2003). Nehru’s emphasis on sovereignty and solidarity

with the Global South reflected India's post-colonial identity. Post-Nehru, scholars like C. Raja Mohan (2013) note a shift toward pragmatism, driven by security and economic challenges, yet rooted in India's self-perception as a resilient nation.

**Cultural Heritage:** India's civilizational identity is a recurring theme in foreign policy discourse. S. Jaishankar (2020) argues that India's ancient heritage informs its global ambitions, evident in initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, which projects India's cultural emphasis on sustainability. Scholars like Deep K. Datta-Ray (2015) highlight how India's Buddhist and Vedic traditions shape its soft power diplomacy.

**Democratic Values:** India's democratic identity influences its foreign policy rhetoric, particularly in multilateral forums. Amrita Narlikar (2020) notes that India's commitment to pluralism shapes its advocacy for reformed global governance, such as seeking a permanent UN Security Council seat. However, critics argue that domestic challenges, like communal tensions, sometimes undermine India's secular image abroad.

**Post-Colonial Aspirations:** India's post-colonial identity drives its emphasis on strategic autonomy. Harsh V. Pant (2021) argues that India's reluctance to align fully with Western powers reflects its historical resistance to external domination. This is evident in its multi-alignment strategy, balancing relations with the United States, Russia, and China. Gaps in Literature: While strategic and economic analyses dominate, fewer studies explore how cultural and ideological elements of national identity shape India's foreign policy. This study addresses this gap by integrating historical, cultural, and political perspectives, offering a holistic understanding of India's global behaviour.

#### **4. Nehruvian Era (1947-1964)**

Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, the country's foreign policy was deeply intertwined with its emerging sense of national identity, rooted in anti-colonialism, pluralism, sovereignty, and a vision of global moral leadership. This era, marked by the challenges of nation-building and the Cold War's global polarization, saw India articulate a foreign policy that reflected its aspirations to be a unified, independent, and influential actor on the world stage. The article argues that Nehru's policies were not merely strategic responses to international dynamics but deliberate expressions of India's self-perception as a nation with a unique historical and cultural legacy, striving to assert its agency in a divided world.

Nehru's foreign policy was heavily influenced by India's colonial past, which fostered a national identity centered on resistance to external domination. The article emphasizes that this historical experience shaped India's commitment to sovereignty and non-alignment, key pillars of its foreign policy during the Nehruvian era. Non-alignment, formalized through India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), was a direct reflection of this identity. Nehru envisioned India as a nation that could avoid entanglement in the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, instead advocating for the interests of newly decolonized states. The article highlights how NAM, co-founded by India alongside leaders like Tito of Yugoslavia and Nasser of Egypt, positioned India as a moral and diplomatic bridge between East and West. This stance was not merely pragmatic but a projection of India's identity as a nation committed to independence, peace, and solidarity with other post-colonial states. Nehru's speeches at international forums, such as the 1955 Bandung Conference, underscored this vision, emphasizing unity among Asian and African nations and reinforcing India's role as a voice for the Global South.

Another key aspect of Nehruvian foreign policy discussed in the article is the principle of Panchsheel, or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which Nehru promoted as a framework for international relations. Panchsheel, which included mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, and non-interference, was rooted in India's identity as a pluralistic and secular nation that valued coexistence and dialogue. The article notes that these principles

were formalized in agreements with China in 1954, reflecting Nehru's idealism in seeking cooperative relations with neighbors. This approach was also evident in India's advocacy for global disarmament and its opposition to nuclear proliferation, aligning with its identity as a nation committed to peace and moral authority. Nehru's emphasis on these ideals was intended to project India as a model for other decolonized nations, demonstrating that a country could assert its independence while promoting global harmony.

However, the article critically examines the challenges faced during the Nehruvian era, particularly the tension between India's identity-driven foreign policy and the realities of geopolitical competition. The 1962 Sino-Indian War serves as a critical case study in this regard. The article argues that Nehru's trust in China, based on the shared anti-colonial identity and the Panchsheel agreement, underestimated Beijing's strategic ambitions, leading to a humiliating defeat for India. This event exposed the limitations of an idealistic foreign policy when confronted with pragmatic security concerns. The war challenged the credibility of non-alignment and raised questions about whether India's national identity, as envisioned by Nehru, could adequately address the demands of national security. The article suggests that this setback prompted a reevaluation of India's foreign policy, highlighting the need to balance ideological commitments with military preparedness and strategic alliances.

The Nehruvian era also saw India's active engagement in international institutions, such as the United Nations, where it championed causes like decolonization and human rights. The article notes that India's leadership in these areas was a reflection of its national identity as a democratic and inclusive state. Nehru's government positioned India as a mediator in global conflicts, such as the Korean War armistice negotiations, further reinforcing its image as a principled actor. This international activism was driven by the belief that India's historical experience of overcoming colonial oppression gave it a unique perspective to contribute to global peace and justice.

Despite its achievements, the article acknowledges criticisms of Nehruvian foreign policy, particularly its perceived overemphasis on idealism at the expense of realpolitik. The failure to prioritize defense modernization and the reliance on moral diplomacy left India vulnerable to regional challenges, as evidenced by the 1962 war. Moreover, the article points out that Nehru's vision of national identity, while unifying in its secular and pluralistic outlook, sometimes struggled to accommodate India's diverse internal dynamics, which occasionally influenced its foreign policy priorities. In conclusion, the article portrays the Nehruvian era as a defining period in which India's foreign policy was a direct extension of its national identity. Nehru's emphasis on non-alignment, Panchsheel, and global leadership reflected India's aspirations to be a sovereign, moral, and influential nation. While these policies elevated India's global standing, they also faced significant challenges, particularly when idealism clashed with geopolitical realities. The study underscores that the Nehruvian era laid the foundation for India's enduring role as a major player in international affairs, shaping its foreign policy discourse for decades to come. By rooting its policies in a distinct national identity, India under Nehru sought to carve out a unique space in a polarized world, balancing its historical legacy with its ambitions for the future.

### **5. Post-Nehruvian Era (1964–1991)**

In the post-Nehruvian era (1964–1991), a period marked by shifting leadership, regional challenges, and a changing global landscape. Following Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964, India's foreign policy continued to reflect its national identity as a sovereign, pluralistic, and independent nation, but it adapted to new geopolitical realities and internal pressures. The article argues that while the foundational principles of non-alignment and anti-colonialism persisted, India's identity-driven foreign policy became more pragmatic, balancing ideological commitments with strategic necessities.

Under leaders like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi, India navigated a complex international environment shaped by Cold War dynamics and regional tensions. The article highlights the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan as defining moments, reflecting India's identity as a resilient nation determined to protect its sovereignty. The 1971 war, culminating in Bangladesh's creation, showcased India's emergence as a regional power, projecting a national identity rooted in supporting self-determination while asserting strategic dominance in South Asia. Indira Gandhi's leadership emphasized self-reliance, aligning with India's identity as an independent actor wary of external influence, evident in policies like the 1974 nuclear test, which signaled technological and strategic autonomy.

The article notes that non-alignment remained central, but its application became more flexible. India strengthened ties with the Soviet Union, particularly through the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty, to counterbalance U.S. support for Pakistan and China's growing influence. This pragmatic shift, while maintaining the rhetoric of non-alignment, reflected India's need to secure its interests in a polarized world. The article suggests that this period saw India's national identity evolve to incorporate a stronger emphasis on security and regional leadership, driven by experiences like the 1962 Sino-Indian War and ongoing border disputes.

Economic challenges and domestic diversity also shaped foreign policy. The article points out that India's identity as a pluralistic democracy influenced its advocacy for Global South issues, such as economic equity, at international forums. However, internal issues like economic stagnation and regional separatism occasionally constrained its global ambitions. Overall, the post-Nehruvian era saw India's foreign policy adapt its identity-driven principles to a more assertive and pragmatic approach, laying the groundwork for its role as a major power while navigating the complexities of a changing global order.

## **6. Post-Cold War Era (1991–2025)**

In the post-Cold War era (1991–2025), a period marked by global realignments, economic liberalization, and India's rise as a major power. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War necessitated a reorientation of India's foreign policy, which continued to be shaped by its national identity as a sovereign, pluralistic, and aspirational nation. The article argues that India's identity evolved to emphasize economic strength, strategic autonomy, and global influence, adapting Nehruvian principles to a unipolar and later multipolar world.

The 1991 economic reforms, initiated under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, redefined India's national identity as an emerging economic power, influencing a more pragmatic foreign policy. The article highlights India's "Look East" policy, later Act East, as a reflection of its ambition to integrate with dynamic Asian economies and counterbalance China's rise, aligning with its identity as a regional leader. The 1998 nuclear tests under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government underscored India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, projecting a confident national identity unafraid of global backlash. This period saw India deepen ties with the United States, exemplified by the 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal, while maintaining non-alignment's spirit by diversifying partnerships with Russia, Europe, and ASEAN.

Under Narendra Modi's leadership from 2014, the article notes a assertive shift, with India's national identity emphasizing cultural pride and global leadership. Initiatives like "Neighbourhood First" and engagement in the Indo-Pacific through the Quad reflect India's vision as a civilizational state with regional and global responsibilities. The article points out that India's response to China's assertiveness, such as the 2020 Galwan clash, reinforced its identity as a resilient nation prioritizing sovereignty. India's advocacy for climate initiatives and digital innovation further projected its identity as a modern, responsible global actor.

Despite these shifts, the article highlights continuity in India's commitment to strategic autonomy, rooted in its post-colonial identity. Economic growth and diaspora engagement amplified India's soft power, while its pluralistic identity shaped its role in global forums like the

UN and G20. The post-Cold War era thus saw India's foreign policy blend pragmatism with its enduring identity as a democratic, independent nation, navigating global challenges while aspiring to great-power status.

### **7. Findings and Discussion:**

India's foreign policy is deeply rooted in its self-perception as a sovereign, pluralistic, and morally driven nation, with its identity evolving to reflect changing domestic and global contexts. The study identifies a consistent thread of strategic autonomy, stemming from India's anti-colonial legacy, which has guided its approach to international relations, even as it adapted to geopolitical shifts.

In the Nehruvian era (1947–1964), the article finds that India's identity as a newly independent, pluralistic nation drove its commitment to non-alignment and moral diplomacy. Policies like Panchsheel and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement reflected India's aspiration to be a global voice for decolonized states, though the 1962 Sino-Indian War exposed the limits of idealism. In the post-Nehruvian era (1964–1991), the study notes a pragmatic shift, with India's identity incorporating regional assertiveness and self-reliance, evident in the 1971 Bangladesh liberation and the 1974 nuclear test. The Indo-Soviet Treaty highlighted a strategic balancing act within non-alignment, responding to security needs while preserving India's independent identity.

The post-Cold War era (1991–2025) saw India's identity evolve into that of an emerging global power, with economic liberalization and the 1998 nuclear tests signalling confidence and autonomy. The article finds that India's "Look East" and later Act East policies, alongside engagements like the Quad, reflected its ambition to assert regional and global influence while maintaining strategic autonomy. Under Modi, cultural pride and diaspora engagement amplified India's soft power, aligning with its identity as a civilizational state. The study also highlights India's consistent advocacy for Global South issues, rooted in its democratic and pluralistic identity, which shaped its role in forums like the G20.

Overall, the article concludes that India's foreign policy reflects a dynamic interplay between its enduring identity as an independent, pluralistic nation and pragmatic responses to global challenges. While navigating tensions between idealism and realpolitik, India's evolving national identity—marked by sovereignty, cultural pride, and global aspirations—has consistently shaped its pursuit of a distinctive role in international affairs.

### **8. Conclusion**

India's foreign policy is a reflection of its multifaceted national identity, shaped by its cultural heritage, democratic values, and post-colonial aspirations. From the Nehruvian era's non-alignment to the current multi-alignment strategy, India has navigated global challenges while asserting its unique identity. This study highlights how India's self-perception as a civilizational state and democratic power influences its global engagements, offering insights for scholars and policymakers. Future research could explore how domestic identity politics, such as regionalism or communalism, impact foreign policy. As India continues its rise, understanding the interplay of national identity and foreign policy will remain critical for anticipating its global role.

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