

India's Diplomacy in a Multipolar World: Analyzing 'Issue-Based Coalitions'

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Abstract

India's foreign policy has shifted from a traditional non-alignment approach to pragmatic, issue-based coalitions in response to an evolving global order. This paper examines how India is leveraging flexible partnerships like the International Solar Alliance, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and various trilateral frameworks to maintain strategic autonomy while enhancing its international influence. It also discusses the opportunities and challenges inherent in this diplomatic strategy, highlighting India's efforts to balance competing interests and shape the future of global governance. Issue-based coalitions emerge as both a necessity and a strategic advantage in India's pursuit of a more assertive global role.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, issue-based coalitions, strategic autonomy, global alliances, Indo-Pacific, diplomacy

Introduction: A New Game on the Global Chessboard

Global politics today looks fundamentally different from how it once was. The world today is no longer neatly divided between two dominant superpowers or trapped in the rigid, binary structures of the Cold War era. Instead, it has evolved into a vibrant, complex, and often unpredictable multipolar system, characterized by a diffusion of power across a diverse range of actors. Emerging powers, regional players, non-state entities, and transnational issues now compete and cooperate on a constantly shifting diplomatic chessboard. In this environment, countries like India find themselves in a uniquely advantageous yet challenging position. No longer confined to the role of passive followers of larger power blocs, nations such as India have emerged as active participants in shaping global norms and strategies. India's contemporary diplomatic behavior reflects this new reality. Rather than aligning exclusively with one bloc or another, India is increasingly adopting a nuanced approach rooted in strategic pragmatism and flexibility.

This transformation is visible in India's growing preference for what scholars and practitioners describe as "issue-based coalitions." Unlike traditional alliances, which often demand long-term commitments and ideological conformity, issue-based coalitions are purpose-driven partnerships based on specific shared interests. These partnerships may be temporary or context-specific, allowing India to collaborate on one issue with a particular set of countries while maintaining independence and flexibility on others. Creating coalitions focused on specific issues isn't merely an intelligent strategy anymore; it has become essential in our current reality, where challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity risks, pandemics, and maritime security are interconnected, and no single nation, regardless of its strength, can address them

independently. The diffusion of power among multiple centers makes rigid, exclusive alliances less practical and reduces their strategic appeal (Pandit, 2024)ⁱ.

This paper seeks to explore how India is navigating this evolving diplomatic landscape by focusing on issue-based coalitions. It examines the significance of this approach for maintaining India's strategic autonomy, analyzes real-world examples where India has effectively utilized this model, discusses the key challenges and risks associated with it. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how India is crafting its role as a leading power in the emerging global order.

Understanding Issue-Based Coalitions: A New Diplomatic Playbook

An issue-based coalition represents a significant departure from the traditional models of international alliances exemplified by structures like NATO or the Warsaw Pact. Unlike these rigid, formal alliances—often built on long-term commitments, ideological alignment, and mutual defense obligations—issue-based coalitions are far more fluid, selective, and pragmatic in nature. They are partnerships formed around specific areas of shared concern, such as climate change, maritime security, counterterrorism, or digital technology. Importantly, these collaborations are not designed to be permanent or all-encompassing. Instead, they allow nations to engage with one another on particular issues of mutual interest while retaining the freedom to disagree or pursue different strategies elsewhere.

This flexibility offers several strategic advantages. Countries participating in issue-based coalitions are not required to align their entire foreign policy agendas or security frameworks with their partners. They can cooperate intensively on one front while maintaining autonomy and even divergence on other matters. This ensures that nations do not become entangled in conflicts that do not directly serve their national interests, nor are they forced into binary choices between competing global powers (Abraham and Purushothaman, 2024)ⁱⁱ.

For India, the model of issue-based coalitions is particularly attractive. It offers a way to maximize diplomatic reach and global influence without compromising on strategic autonomy—a core pillar of India's foreign policy for decades. By engaging in targeted collaborations, India can advance specific national interests, project itself as a responsible global actor, and contribute to collective problem-solving without becoming ensnared in rigid alliance structures that could limit its freedom of action. This method illustrates the development of India's conventional foreign policy stance. During the Cold War, India famously championed non-alignment, resisting pressures to join either the Western or Eastern blocs. In today's more complex and multipolar world, that ethos of independence has matured into what many analysts call "multi-alignment". Under this framework, India simultaneously engages with a wide array of global players—including the United States, Russia, the European Union, ASEAN, Australia, Japan, and emerging African and Latin American powers—based on specific interests and contexts, rather than ideological loyalty or permanent alliance obligations (Bhat and Rajeshwari, 2022)ⁱⁱⁱ. Thus, issue-based coalitions are not merely tactical partnerships; they are a reflection of India's strategic philosophy in the twenty-first century. They allow India to maintain a delicate balance between being a proactive global leader and a fiercely autonomous actor, ensuring that collaboration never comes at the cost of compromising its fundamental interests.

The Rise of Multipolarity and India's Strategic Recalibration

The Cold War era was fundamentally characterized by a bipolar international system, with the United States and the Soviet Union dominating global politics. Most countries found themselves compelled to

align with one of the two superpowers, as the international order was structured around ideological confrontation and security-driven alliances. When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, many believed the world had entered a "unipolar moment," with the United States emerging as the uncontested global hegemon. For a time, it seemed as though American primacy would define the contours of international relations indefinitely.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the unipolar order began to decline. Emerging centers of economic, political, and military power began to make their presence felt globally. The rapid ascent of China, India's increasing economic influence, Brazil's role as a leader in Latin America, Russia's renewed strength, and the strengthening of regional groups such as ASEAN and the African Union all indicated the emergence of a more intricate and dynamic multipolar world. In this new order, power is diffused across multiple actors, with no single nation able to unilaterally dictate terms (Jaishankar, 2020)^{iv}.

For India, the shift toward multipolarity presents a dual-edged reality. On one hand, it opens up significant opportunities: with multiple centers of power, India can diversify its partnerships, assert its strategic interests more confidently, and play a pivotal role in shaping global governance. On the other hand, this multipolarity presents intricate challenges. Conflicts between major powers may exert pressure on India to choose a side or face the danger of being sidelined. Navigating these competing relationships while safeguarding national interests requires diplomatic skill and strategic vision. Recognizing this, India has reshaped its foreign policy. At the core of this shift is an emphasis on strategic autonomy—the idea of engaging deeply with the world without becoming ensnared in rigid alliances or enduring dependencies. India seeks to build partnerships that are flexible, interest-driven, and issue-specific, avoiding permanent entanglements while maximizing its room for maneuver.

This nuanced approach is evident in India's diverse international engagements. With the United States, India collaborates extensively in areas such as defense, counterterrorism, technology, and the Indo-Pacific strategic architecture. Simultaneously, India retains its deep historical ties with Russia, particularly in defense procurement and energy cooperation, despite the growing closeness between Moscow and Beijing. With China, India's relationship is layered with both cooperation and competition: while geopolitical tensions, such as those in the border regions, persist, India also maintains significant economic relations with its neighbor. Beyond the major powers, India actively cultivates ties with the European Union, Japan, Australia, ASEAN nations, and the African continent. These relationships reflect a deliberate policy of multi-vector engagement, wherein India simultaneously deepens ties across regions and sectors, building resilience and options into its diplomatic toolkit (Mazumdar, 2021)^v.

At the heart of this strategy lies India's preference for "issue-based diplomacy." Instead of binding itself to any one alliance or ideological camp, India engages based on specific interests, forming partnerships that advance mutual goals in areas such as climate change, connectivity, health security, digital governance, and maritime cooperation (Baruah, 2022)^{vi}. This flexible and pragmatic approach allows India to navigate the complexities of multipolarity effectively while safeguarding its core national interests.

Real-World Examples: India's Issue-Based Coalitions in Action

India's practice of issue-based coalitions is not merely theoretical—it is visible in several real-world initiatives where India has taken leadership while carefully maintaining its strategic autonomy. These examples showcase how India is actively shaping the international agenda without binding itself to rigid alliances.

A prime illustration of this is the International Solar Alliance (ISA). India, in partnership with France,

initiated it at the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, aiming to bring together nations located between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn to enhance the adoption of solar energy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018)^{vii}. By leading this initiative, India has positioned itself as a global champion for climate action, particularly for the developing world. Importantly, the ISA reflects India's ability to lead a global movement without aligning itself exclusively with Western powers, maintaining its distinct identity as a voice for the Global South. In the same vein, India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), introduced at the East Asia Summit in 2019, embodies the concept of forming adaptable and voluntary collaborations. Through IPOI, India fosters partnerships with nations like Australia, Japan, and ASEAN members on essential matters such as maritime security, disaster management, and the sustainable advancement of the blue economy. Notably, IPOI is deliberately designed to be non-binding and inclusive, allowing countries to participate selectively based on their interests and capacities. This model aligns perfectly with India's broader diplomatic philosophy of multi-alignment and issue-based engagement. A notable instance is the collaboration among India, France, and Australia within the Indo-Pacific area. This alliance highlights essential values such as the freedom of navigation, development of infrastructure, and maritime security (Medcalf, 2020)^{viii}. It highlights India's growing comfort with "minilateralism"—forming smaller, focused groupings of countries with shared interests—without being tied to formal military alliances. These flexible arrangements enable India to pursue common goals while maintaining its strategic autonomy. India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) further showcases its balanced diplomatic approach. Initiated by the United States in 2022, the IPEF aims to strengthen economic ties among partner countries through cooperation in areas like supply chain resilience, clean energy, and digital economy. India has chosen to participate in negotiations on most pillars of IPEF, while notably opting out of binding commitments in the trade pillar. This selective engagement reflects India's pragmatic approach—seeking economic opportunities without compromising its policy autonomy or exposing itself to stringent external obligations.

Together, these initiatives highlight how India is effectively using issue-based coalitions to amplify its global role. Each example reflects a careful balancing act: engaging where it aligns with national interests, leading when it strengthens India's global voice, and opting out when the terms threaten its autonomy. In an environment of changing coalitions and intricate problems, this kind of diplomatic flexibility is increasingly defining India's approach on the international front.

Strategic Balancing: The Tightrope Walk

India's diplomacy today is a sophisticated balancing act. It strengthens defense ties with the U.S., deepens relations with Israel, continues strategic cooperation with Russia, and simultaneously engages China and others through platforms like BRICS and SCO. For instance, during the Ukraine crisis, while Western countries pressured India to condemn Russia, India pursued a nuanced path: emphasizing dialogue, maintaining energy ties with Russia, and upholding sovereignty principles without alienating key Western partners. This balancing strategy shows that India's issue-based coalitions are not random partnerships—they are deliberate, calculated moves on a complex diplomatic chessboard (Mohan, 2015)^{ix}.

While issue-based diplomacy provides flexibility, it is not without pitfalls. One key challenge is perceived opportunism. Partners might start viewing India as transactional, questioning its reliability in long-term strategic commitments. Secondly, when coalition partners have tensions among themselves—as seen between the U.S. and Russia, or Australia and China—India risks being caught in the crossfire. Moreover, institutional weakness is another concern. Issue-based coalitions often lack strong organizational

structures. Their success depends heavily on the political will of leaders, and can be vulnerable to regime changes, economic downturns, or shifting public opinion.

Future Trajectory: India's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons

Looking ahead, India's approach to coalition-building is poised to deepen and diversify into new and emerging domains, reflecting the evolving demands of global geopolitics and technology. As the world faces new challenges beyond traditional security concerns, India is positioning itself to lead flexible, interest-driven partnerships in cutting-edge sectors (Jamali & Liu, 2024)^x.

One promising area is the global competition for critical minerals—such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements—which are essential for renewable energy technologies and electric vehicles. Recognizing the strategic importance of securing these resources, India is actively exploring partnerships with resource-rich countries to build resilient and diversified supply chains. Similarly, in a similar vein, the semiconductor supply chain has become a new area of focus. India's partnerships with nations such as the United States and Japan seek to establish local semiconductor ecosystems and lessen reliance on a single source, particularly given the global chip shortages and increasing geopolitical conflicts. In the realm of digital governance, India is also stepping forward. With initiatives like the Digital Public Infrastructure model and the advocacy for an open, inclusive, and safe digital space, India is forging coalitions around setting global standards for technology, data governance, and cybersecurity. These partnerships are becoming essential as countries navigate the complexities of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and 5G networks. Space security and green energy alliances are additional areas where India's coalition diplomacy is likely to expand. India's advancing skills in space exploration, highlighted by the Chandrayaan and Gaganyaan missions, present opportunities for joint efforts in space situational awareness, planetary exploration, and managing space debris. Similarly, India's leadership in renewable energy initiatives, such as the International Solar Alliance, is expected to evolve into broader green energy partnerships aimed at advancing hydrogen technologies, biofuels, and sustainable urban solutions.

India's active leadership in forums like the G20, its engagement through the Quad Plus format, and participation in innovative groupings like I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, USA) further demonstrate a clear ambition: India is no longer content to merely be a participant in global dialogues (Ali and Kamraju, 2023)^{xi}. It increasingly seeks to shape global conversations, contribute solutions, and advocate for more equitable and representative international frameworks. At the core of this evolving strategy is a consistent theme—India's aspiration to be seen as a responsible, autonomous power. A power that is pragmatic yet principled, assertive yet collaborative. India's issue-based diplomacy is not only about protecting its national interests; it is about offering a positive, rules-based vision for the world, fostering cooperation where possible and creating new opportunities in a world marked by uncertainty and fluidity.

In essence, India's diplomatic chessboard is expanding. The moves are increasingly sophisticated, the partnerships more dynamic, and the stakes much higher. Yet, India's steady focus on strategic autonomy and flexible engagement ensures that it remains an agile and credible player in the global game.

Conclusion: India's Strategic Chessboard in Motion

India's embrace of issue-based coalitions is more than just a tactical adjustment—it is a strategic response to the realities of a fragmented, fast-evolving multipolar world. This strategy embodies India's larger goal: to skillfully maneuver through the challenges of international politics, safeguard its hard-earned

independence, and take the initiative on matters that directly influence its national priorities and global reputation. Issue-based coalitions allow India to move away from rigid blocs and ideological camps of the past. Instead, they empower it to build pragmatic, flexible partnerships that are tailored to specific challenges—whether in climate action, maritime security, digital innovation, or economic resilience. In doing so, India showcases a modern, confident diplomacy that respects its historical principles of strategic autonomy while adapting them to contemporary needs.

Nevertheless, the path forward will certainly be fraught with difficulties. The effectiveness of India's adaptable coalition approach will rely significantly on its capacity to foster and maintain trust among a variety of partners, manage conflicting expectations without stretching itself, and establish enduring collaboration where mutual interests converge. Additionally, India needs to stay strong amid diplomatic disruptions—whether they stem from worldwide emergencies, changing power relations, or regional conflicts. If India can master this delicate balancing act, it will not only safeguard its own national interests but also redefine its role on the world stage. India would no longer be seen as merely adapting to global realities—it would actively participate in designing them.

"India is not just balancing global powers; it is significantly influencing them." When analyzed within the context of issue-based coalition diplomacy, this goal goes beyond simple desire—it is gradually maturing into a tangible strategic pathway for India's rise in the 21st century.

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