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India's Post 2014 Space Diplomacy and Leadership in the Global South

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Abstract
Since 2014, India has reoriented its space programme from a development-centric model to a strategic tool of foreign policy, particularly aimed at asserting leadership in the Global South. This article investigates how India's post-2014 space diplomacy aligns with broader geopolitical shifts and foreign policy goals. Employing qualitative content analysis of secondary sources from government documents, multilateral agreements, and academic literature, the study explores India's deployment of space initiatives—including the South Asia Satellite, capacity-building programs like UNNATI, and military advancements such as the Defence Space Agency—as instruments of diplomatic influence. Framed under the normative power theory, neoclassical realism, and constructivism, the paper finds that India's space diplomacy emphasizes public goods provision, multilateral cooperation, and technological sovereignty, while also responding to regional security concerns, particularly regarding China. This dual approach allows India to position itself as both a cooperative peer and an emerging space power. However, limitations in resources, bureaucratic inertia, and geopolitical rivalry constrain its ability to fully institutionalize leadership in the Global South. The article concludes that India's evolving space strategy represents a hybrid model—blending realist calculations with normative posturing—that reflects its ambition to shape global space governance and reassert its identity as a leader among developing nations.

Keywords: India, space diplomacy, Global South leadership, normative power, neoclassical realism

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, shifting geopolitics have seen a return to great-power competition in space, with the United States, China, and others competing for strategic advantage. Concurrently, India too has consciously reoriented its civilian space programme (historically focused on development) toward strategic objectives under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. This reorientation aligns India's space activities with its broader foreign policy, as New Delhi seeks greater influence among developing countries through South–South cooperation. For example, the 2017 **South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9)** was explicitly pitched as India's "gift" to neighbours, reinforcing Modi's "neighbourhood first" (PTI, 2017). Further emphasizing its strategic ambitions, India conducted an anti-satellite (ASAT) test in 2019, becoming the fourth country to demonstrate such capability.

This move, while officially framed as a defensive measure, was widely interpreted as a demonstration of India's growing military prowess in space (Oberhaus, 2019). Recent statements from ISRO officials highlight the operational role of at least ten satellites dedicated to national security functions, including

surveillance and communication support for the armed forces (Kalita, 2025). Additionally, India's plans to establish its own space station by 2040 and aspirations to land an astronaut on the moon underscore its pursuit of international prestige and leadership in space exploration (HUSSAIN, 2025). India's post-2014 space policy now emphasizes national security and international prestige over purely developmental goals. This article examines how India's space diplomacy has evolved since 2014 to bolster its leadership role in the Global South. We address the following research questions explicitly:

How has India's space diplomacy strategy changed after 2014, and how is it aligned with India's foreign policy?

What narratives (e.g. capacity-building, multilateralism, technological sovereignty) underpin India's space diplomacy with developing countries?

How do theories of normative power, neoclassical realism, and constructivism help explain India's post-2014 space diplomacy?

Answering these questions sheds light on India's use of space projects as instruments of foreign policy. We argue that India is leveraging its space programme and emerging technical capabilities to offer public goods (e.g. satellites, training) to developing nations, thereby asserting leadership in the Global South. At the same time, India's approach is influenced by strategic security concerns (especially vis-à-vis China), domestic factors, and India's historical identity as a champion of peaceful, development-oriented space use.

Methodology

This research employs **qualitative content analysis** of secondary sources like, scholarly articles (2014–2024), official policy documents, space policy briefs from the government of India and international agreements to trace India's space diplomacy trends. These texts are analysed for recurring themes and shifts in language concerning India's space objectives.

We interpret the findings through three theoretical lenses: **Normative Power Theory**, **Neoclassical Realism**, and **Constructivism**.

Normative Power Theory, as articulated by Ian Manners (2002), examines how India projects its values through space diplomacy. India emphasizes development, capacity-building, and non-alignment, aiming to shape international norms in space governance. This approach is evident in India's active participation in global initiatives like the Artemis Accords and the International Solar Alliance, reflecting its commitment to sustainable development and peaceful space exploration.

Neoclassical Realism provides insight into how India's external space policy is influenced by both strategic imperatives and domestic variables. Strategically, India's space endeavours are shaped by regional dynamics, particularly the need to counterbalance China's growing capabilities. Domestically, leadership visions and institutional interests play a pivotal role. For instance, the establishment of the Defence Space Agency and the Defence Space Research Organisation underscores India's focus on enhancing its military space capabilities.

Constructivism highlights the role of identity and norms in shaping India's space policy. India's self-image as a rising non-Western leader and advocate for peaceful space utilization informs its diplomatic narratives. The Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative exemplifies this, promoting technological sovereignty and emphasizing South–South cooperation. As scholars like Stroikos and Rajagopalan note, even predominantly realist analyses of India's space policy must acknowledge the influence of identity and normative factors.

Evolution of India's Space Diplomacy Post-2014

India's space policy has undergone a pronounced shift since Modi's 2014 election, moving from a narrow developmental focus to a broader strategic vision. Traditionally, India's space program focused on socio-economic development, utilizing satellite technology for applications in agriculture, education, and healthcare. However, recent years have seen a pronounced pivot towards strategic and security-oriented goals. This includes high-profile missions such as lunar and planetary exploration, the planned Gaganyaan human spaceflight program, and the development of a national space station, the Bharatiya Antariksh Station, slated for launch by 2028 (IBEF, 2024). Indian space program, once primarily driven by developmental objectives, now increasingly serves strategic purposes, including enhancing national security and projecting great power aspirations (Rajagopalan R. P., 2020). This strategic orientation is evident in initiatives like the 2019 Mission Shakti anti-satellite test, which positioned India among the few nations with such capabilities (Analysis Defense and Security Industry, 2025). The Modi administration has also fostered private sector participation in the space industry, leading to a surge in startups and increased investment. The establishment of the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Center (IN-SPACe) has been instrumental in this growth, with over 200 startups emerging in the sector by 2024 (Raghav, 2025).

A key element of this evolution is the **alignment of space and foreign policy**. Since 2014, the Indian government has deliberately integrated space technology into its diplomatic toolkit. For example, officials now describe satellites as instruments of soft power and goodwill towards other countries (Stroikos, 2024). India has now opted to draw on the use of space technology as a foreign policy tool – GSAT-9, PM Modi's gift to South Asia (ET Online, 2017). In February 2015, the composition of India's Space Commission was even altered to include the Foreign Secretary, signalling the priority given to space in foreign affairs (Sinha, 2015).

In addition to this India's space programme shows **militarization and security awareness**. New Delhi has begun to acknowledge the utility of military space capabilities, despite decades of a purely peaceful stance. The creation of a tri-service Defence Space Agency (DSA) in 2019 and development of dual-use satellites are clear markers of this change (Giri, 2024). In March 2019, DRDO conducted its first anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon test (Mission Shakti), demonstrating an indigenous capability to shoot down low-orbit satellites (DRDO, 2020). These moves respond to a perceived arms-race dynamic in space and to India's growing security concerns (particularly China's advances). India shifted "away from a policy based on declarations of morality" toward pragmatism and security-driven choices, softening its rhetoric on space weaponization as threat perceptions changed.

Strategic Narratives

India's space diplomacy is underpinned by several strategic narratives that frame its engagement with developing countries. These narratives serve both domestic and international audiences, highlighting India's role as a provider of capacity-building, a champion of multilateralism, and a proponent of technological sovereignty.

Capacity-Building and Technical Assistance

India emphasizes its role as a mentor and enabler for other developing nations in space technology. A flagship example is the **UNNATI (UNispace Nanosatellite Assembly & Training)** program: launched at the UNISPACE+50 conference held in Vienna, 2018, UNNATI is an international training course where

foreign engineers and scientists learn nanosatellite assembly at ISRO's facilities. ISRO reports that participants from dozens of countries have built CubeSats and gained hands-on skills through UNNATI. Similarly, India offers data and training under initiatives like the INSAT system grants and tele-education networks (UNNATI Introduction). Through such capacity-building, India positions itself as the leading space mentor for the Global South. This narrative invokes **normative power**: India presents space technology as a collective good that should be shared with developing partners, reinforcing notions of solidarity and self-reliance.

Multilateralism and Global Governance

India casts itself as a cooperative actor in international space forums, reinforcing its image as a constructive global stakeholder. It is active in the **United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS)** and other UN bodies, often promoting principles of peaceful use and Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures (TCBMs). For instance, India has supported UN resolutions on space debris mitigation and long-term sustainability, and its diplomats have chaired COPUOS working groups on space safety (Lele (Retd.), 2016). India also engages in group frameworks like the **BRICS space cooperation**: in recent years it joined other BRICS nations in creating a virtual constellation of remote-sensing satellites, pooling data for disaster relief and environmental monitoring (PTI, 2021). Multilaterally, India routinely underscores the need for equitable space governance (reflecting norms of inclusivity) while also expanding partnerships beyond Western-led alliances. These activities convey that India seeks to "play a more active role as a norm-shaper in the global governance of space activities" commensurate with its rising status.

Technological Sovereignty (Atmanirbhar Bharat)

A third narrative is India's emphasis on indigenous capability and self-reliance. Under the broader **Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India)** policy, space is a showcase for domestic technology. The government frequently highlights India's "cost-effective" launch vehicles (PSLV) and satellites as evidence of national prowess. Initiatives such as the private-sector rocket launches and plans to indigenize critical components signal India's intent to build a homegrown space-industrial base (Government of India | Department of Space). This narrative appeals to national pride but also to international partners, who may view India as a source of affordable, self-funded technology rather than an aid-dependent agency. While not often explicitly cited in scholarly literature, this theme underpins policies like the 2020 launch of IN-SPACe and the repeated invocation of "Make in India" for space projects. Implicitly, it ties into India's quest for respect as a peer to other space powers, rather than a junior partner.

Case Studies

South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9)

The **South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9)** launched in May 2017 is a prime example of India's regional space diplomacy. Conceived by PM Modi as a "gift" to South Asian neighbours, GSAT-9 is a geostationary communications satellite offering shared services in telemedicine, tele-education, and disaster management. The satellite was originally intended for all SAARC members, but Pakistan declined participation for political reasons, leaving six beneficiary countries. Leaders of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka joined an ISRO video conference celebration of the launch, praising it as a step toward greater regional integration under India's "neighbourhood first" policy.

Beyond altruism, the South Asia Satellite also serves strategic purposes. Deploying GSAT-9 was a response to China's deepening ties with South Asia: India leveraged its space technology to maintain influence in its immediate neighbourhood. The satellite provided India "an opportunity…to balance China's military build-up in the region by assisting its neighbours with infrastructure projects". In short, GSAT-9 offered regional public goods (data relay, connectivity) while countering Chinese soft power in the subcontinent. The Space Policy analysis further observes that "as India emerges as a space great power, so does its international responsibility to offer public goods, and the pursuit of the South Asia Satellite can be understood from such a perspective". The case of GSAT-9 thus illustrates multiple diplomatic threads: providing capacity-building and developmental benefits to neighbours, enhancing India's prestige, and subtly asserting strategic influence (Rajagopalan, Rajeswari Pillai & Stroikos, 2024).

Collaborations with the European Space Agency (ESA)

India's international cooperation extends to spacefaring partners like Europe. Cooperation with the **European Space Agency (ESA)** has expanded alongside India's rising ambitions. For example, India and ESA have deepened ties in satellite navigation: under agreements, India is a participating member in ESA's Galileo initiative and ESA contributes to India's future GNSS projects. Likewise, bilateral projects exist in Earth observation (India data contributing to EUMETSAT) and in science (joint instruments on Mars missions). Recently, ESA agreed to provide ground station support for India's **Gaganyaan** human spaceflight program, illustrating high-level trust and cooperation (Greenacre, 2025).

Such India–ESA partnerships reinforce India's image as a mature space power engaging on equal terms. As a European policy report notes, "the EU and India both have matured space programmes and a long history of cooperation in the peaceful exploration and uses of outer space". In practice, this includes technical collaborations (e.g. ESA tracking for Indian missions) and institutional linkages (joint working groups). These ties serve India's technological sovereignty narrative (access to advanced European technology and standards) while fitting its multilateral engagement: India is not isolating itself but building bridges with established space agencies. (In contrast to China's largely bilateral aid model, India emphasizes partnerships under multilateral or mutually agreed frameworks.) Thus, India-ESA cooperation exemplifies how India's space diplomacy blends technical exchange with strategic rapport.

Defence Space Agency (DSA)

In the security realm, the establishment of the **Defence Space Agency (DSA)** in 2019 marked a watershed in India's space policy. The DSA is a tri-service organization intended to oversee India's military space capabilities and joint defense space activities. Its creation signalled that India was treating space as an extension of terrestrial security domains. As Rajagopalan and Stroikos report, the shift to militarization is evident: India's "development of dual-use and dedicated military satellites and anti-satellite capabilities, and the establishment of a tri-service Defence Space Agency" are key markers of the new trajectory.

The DSA illustrates India aligning its space assets with broader defense strategy. It consolidates space situational awareness, satellite communication security, and potential counter-space operations under joint command. This move came in the context of growing Asia-Pacific tensions and followed by India's participation in multilateral security dialogues on space threats. While this case is less about Global South cooperation, it is crucial to note how India's space diplomacy now straddles civilian and military realms – a realistic response to international competition, as predicted by realist theory. The DSA thus complements India's foreign-facing outreach by ensuring it has the deterrent and reconnaissance capabilities to back its diplomatic standing (Rajagopalan, Rajeswari Pillai & Stroikos, 2024).

Public–Private Partnerships and the IN-SPACe Initiative

A notable feature of India's post-2014 space strategy is the rapid liberalization of the space sector to private enterprise. Historically, ISRO and government entities monopolized India's space activities. Recently, New Delhi has taken steps to involve industry and startups under the slogan of self-reliance. In 2020, the Department of Space launched **IN-SPACe** (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre) and **NewSpace India Limited (NSIL)** as nodal bodies to foster private participation. As one analysis notes, these institutions "will facilitate larger participation of the private sector and enhance their positioning contributing to the Indian space growth story".

In November 2022, Skyroot Aerospace (a private firm) successfully flew Vikram-S, the first rocket entirely designed and built by a private Indian company. IN-SPACe had played an "important role" in authorizing this mission. Skyroot's launch (dubbed Mission Prarambh) is hailed by observers as a landmark – it "rekindled excitement about the Indian space programme" and demonstrated that India's space ecosystem is evolving. Simultaneously, ISRO is transitioning its own technologies to industry: for example, the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) is now being commercialized so that private partners will manufacture and operate it. Plans have been announced to transfer even higher-end rockets (GSLV Mk III and the new SSLV) to private firms for development (Rajagopalan R. P., 2024).

These shifts align with India's **capacity-building and sovereignty narratives**. By engaging companies and startups, India seeks to multiply its launch and satellite production capacity, freeing ISRO to focus on exploration. Internationally, a thriving private sector makes India a more attractive launch and tech partner, offering cost-competitive options to other countries. From a normative perspective, India casts this as democratizing space – empowering its own entrepreneurs and by extension offering greater resources to fellow developing nations. At the same time, it strengthens technological sovereignty (producing space technology at home). Overall, the IN-SPACe initiative and related reforms signal that India's space diplomacy now includes a robust domestic component: policies intentionally crafted to unleash domestic potential and thereby augment India's global space influence.

Implications for the Global South

India's post-2014 space diplomacy offers the Global South an alternative model to Western-led space hegemony. Whereas the U.S. and Europe often set the agenda for space norms and markets, and China pursues state-driven ties through initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank for space, India emphasizes **inclusive cooperation** and capacity sharing. For example, India's training programs (UNNATI) and "gift" satellites (GSAT-9) exemplify a more egalitarian approach: developing countries are treated as partners rather than dependents. India's narrative highlights peaceful development uses over weapons, resonating with many Global South states wary of military space races.

In policy terms, India frames itself as a **normative power** of the Global South in space. It champions principles such as equitable access, peaceful uses, and self-sufficiency. Providing space-based public goods accords with India's self-professed role as a rising space power. By contrast to more unilateral superpower tactics, India often invokes collective development goals (e.g. Agenda 2030) to justify its space initiatives. This normative angle can build trust: for instance, many African and Asian countries have welcomed Indian satellite services and training, viewing New Delhi as a partner rather than a patroniser.

However, India's model also faces **limitations and competition**. India's space budget and technological base remain smaller than those of China or the United States, so its ability to offer large-scale assistance

is constrained. Domestic political priorities and bureaucratic inertia slow initiatives: despite rhetoric, India has yet to comprehensively liberalize its space economy (the Space Activities Bill remains pending) or mobilize vast foreign assistance in space. Moreover, India's strategic rivalry with China colours its space diplomacy. Although India seeks South–South goodwill, it also uses space outreach to counter China's influence, which can strain New Delhi's non-aligned appeal. In the broader "space great power competition," India must navigate tensions with China (e.g. over satellite navigation systems) and with the U.S. (balancing cooperation and independent policy). Finally, the Global South itself is heterogeneous: India's leadership claim is sometimes contested by other space-capable developing states (e.g. South Africa, Brazil) that have their own agendas.

Neoclassical realism helps explain these dynamics: India's leaders project grand space diplomacy goals (seeking prestige and alliances) but domestic constraints and threat perceptions temper how far it can go. Constructivism also offers insight: India's historical identity as a leader of the Non-Aligned/Global South informs its cooperative rhetoric, yet its current nationalist discourse pushes for assertive posture. In sum, India's post-2014 space diplomacy bolsters its global leadership image among developing countries, but its impact will depend on sustaining resources and trust in a competitive environment.

Conclusion

India's strategic use of its space programme since 2014 reflects an ambitious effort to claim leadership in the Global South. Through high-profile missions, training initiatives like UNNATI, "gift" satellites for neighbours, and deepening multilateral engagement, India has leveraged space technology as a foreign policy instrument. This diplomacy showcases India's normative messaging: that space can and should serve collective development. At the same time, India has moved pragmatically to bolster security (ASAT test, Defence Space Agency) in response to regional threats.

The evidence suggests that India is gradually emerging as a credible space power in the eyes of other developing states. Its model offers an alternative to Western or Chinese templates by stressing affordability, capacity-building, and consensus-based multilateralism. Yet for India to consolidate this leadership role, it must continue investing in capability (including the success of its human spaceflight and heavier launchers), foster a vibrant private sector, and actively shape norms in international fora. Future steps could include formalizing space governance reforms (the Space Activities Bill), strengthening South–South coalitions in space (for example through a Global South space summit), and deepening cooperation with African, Latin American, and ASEAN partners. By maintaining its narrative of self-reliance coupled with generosity, India's post-2014 space diplomacy has indeed set the stage for an enhanced leadership role among the global South. Continued scholarship should monitor how India's ambitions unfold, and whether its blend of strategic realism and normative posturing can reshape global space governance.

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