

Navigating Complexity: India's Middle Power Diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Abstract

India's trajectory in the international system reflects its evolution from a post-colonial state to a significant middle power shaping the global order. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of the middle power concept through realist, liberalist, and constructivist lenses, highlighting the characteristics and strategies of middle powers in navigating the complexities of international relations. India's foreign policy is examined within this framework, emphasizing its role as a leader of the Global South and its reliance on coalition-building and multi-alignment strategies to assert influence in global governance. The paper delves into India's normative middle-power internationalism, demonstrating how it advocates for equitable global reforms while balancing national interests.

India's diplomatic efforts underscore its commitment to inclusive decision-making and structural reforms in international institutions, reflecting a pragmatic approach to fostering global stability. By leveraging its middle-power status, India champions the interests of developing nations and positions itself as a stabilizing force in an increasingly multipolar world. Through a comprehensive analysis of India's foreign policy and multilateral engagements, this study sheds light on how its middle-power identity shapes its approach to global governance, underscoring its critical role in shaping a more equitable and cooperative international order.

Keywords: Middle power diplomacy, Global governance, India's foreign policy, Multipolar world, Coalition-building.

Introduction

India's position in the international system has transformed significantly over the decades, evolving from a post-colonial state striving for sovereignty to a prominent middle power advocating for a more equitable global order. The concept of middle powers, historically situated between great powers and smaller nations, provides a valuable lens for understanding India's diplomatic strategies and its efforts to influence global governance. This research paper explores the development of the middle power concept from historical and analytical perspectives, delving into realist, liberalist, and constructivist interpretations. Each framework offers insights into the characteristics and behaviors that define middle powers, illustrating how they navigate the complexities of international relations.

Furthermore, this paper examines the normative discourse surrounding middle-power internationalism, particularly as it pertains to India's foreign policy. As a leader of the Global South, India has leveraged coalition-building and multi-alignment strategies to assert its influence in global governance while balancing its national interests. Its evolving multilateral approach reflects a commitment to fostering inclusive decision-making in international institutions. By analyzing these dynamics, the paper aims to

elucidate how India's middle power status enables it to champion reforms that resonate with developing nations, ultimately positioning itself as a stabilizing force in a multipolar world. This comprehensive examination of India as a middle power underscores its critical role in shaping the future of global governance and international cooperation.

Introduction to Middle Powers

The middle power concept in international relations refers to a state that does not possess a great power's economic or military dominance but is still influential enough to shape global affairs. Middle powers are typically characterized by moderate capabilities, including substantial economic, political, and military resources. While they lack the hegemonic reach of superpowers, middle powers exert influence through diplomacy, coalition-building, and multilateral engagement, often working to bridge divides between great powers or mediate conflicts. They are also known for playing essential roles in shaping international norms, institutions, and agendas, mainly through contributions to peacekeeping, humanitarian initiatives, and global governance.

Historical and Analytical Development of the Middle Power Concept

The concept of the middle power has deep historical roots, dating back to the 15th century in the writings of Italian philosopher Giovanni Botero. He defined a middle power as a state with enough capabilities to stand independently without external support (Shin, 2015). The term gained more formal analytical prominence during and after World War II when states such as Canada and Australia began to assert their roles in global diplomacy. Hume Wrong, a Canadian diplomat, applied the functionalist theory in 1942, arguing that Canada could act as a middle power by contributing to global governance in areas where it had specific expertise or interests.

There are two primary approaches to defining middle powers: the realist and pluralist positions. The realist perspective emphasizes tangible attributes like military strength, economic capability, and geopolitical position. By contrast, the pluralist approach focuses on immaterial characteristics, such as leadership, advocacy of democratic values, and active participation in international diplomacy (Baç, 2015). The pluralist definition also aligns with the notion that middle powers are strong proponents of multilateralism, often advocating for international cooperation and supporting global institutions.

Adam Chapnick (1999) introduced three models for understanding middle power behavior: functional, behavioral, and hierarchical. In the functional model, middle powers exert influence in specific areas where their interests or expertise align with global needs. For example, Andrew F. Cooper (1997) described this as "niche diplomacy," where states focus on areas where they can achieve the most significant impact. Conversely, the behavioral model defines middle powers by their actions—states supporting multilateralism, mediating disputes, or acting as good international citizens (Cooper, 1997). Finally, the hierarchical model classifies middle powers based on their rank in the global system, determined by economic, military, and developmental indices.

The middle power concept has undergone several revisions, particularly during the Cold War and post-Cold War period. Eduard Jordaan (2003) identified several criteria used to classify middle powers, including state power, position in the global order, and the normative characteristics of the state. Traditional middle powers, such as Canada and Sweden, were identified as stable democracies with egalitarian wealth distribution that rose to prominence during the Cold War. Emerging middle powers, like

South Africa and Brazil, are typically characterized by less consolidated democratic practices and greater regional ambitions.

Jordaan (2017) later critiqued the middle power bifurcation into "traditional" and "emerging" categories, arguing that this distinction is too Western-centric and overlooks the diversity of roles middle powers play globally. He suggested that emerging middle powers, often from the Global South, advocate for multipolarity and challenge the unipolar dominance of the U.S.-led liberal international order. These states focus on regional integration and multilateralism, often creating alternative institutions like the BRICS New Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

The concept of middle power has continued to evolve in the 21st century. Andrew Cooper and Emel Dal (2016) highlighted three chronological waves of "middlepowerdom." The first wave consisted of Cold War-era middle powers, such as Canada and Australia, who played legitimizing roles by aligning with the U.S. in maintaining the global order. The second wave emerged after the Cold War, with countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa pushing for a more inclusive global order while creating parallel institutions that complement existing ones. The third wave brought new middle powers into elite forums like the G20, expanding their influence in shaping global economic and political norms. Struye de Swielande (2019) proposed a more nuanced typology for middle powers, categorizing them into Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian types based on their perceptions of anarchy and international relations. Hobbesian middle powers prioritize security and power politics, while Lockean middle powers balance security with diplomacy, and Kantian middle powers emphasize multilateralism, cooperation, and bridge-building.

Despite its widespread use, the middle power concept has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that the term has become too vague, encompassing a broad range of countries, weakening its analytical value (Jordaan, 2003). But the traditional/emerging middle power distinction tends to oversimplify the diversity of states' behaviors and contributions. Robertson (2017) advocated for a more pragmatic approach, focusing less on defining a middle power and more on how the concept can be applied in different contexts, particularly in global governance. In this context, a middle power can be seen as a state with the interest and capacity to collaborate with others in strengthening global institutions through material resources, diplomatic influence, or creativity. This pragmatic definition reflects the evolving roles of middle powers in an increasingly multipolar world, where their ability to mediate, cooperate, and innovate remains critical in shaping international relations.

Middle powers' roles, characteristics, and influence vary according to their theoretical lens, whether it be realism, liberalism, or constructivism. These theories offer distinct insights into middle powers' behavior, strategies, and identities.

The *Realist Perspective* conceptualizes middle powers by emphasizing positional, quantitative, material, and structural aspects. Realists view middle powers as occupying an "intermediate" position in the international hierarchy, bridging the capabilities of small powers with those of great powers (Holbraad, 1971). Such states possess resources, including economic strength, organized armed forces, and territorial assets, though their force projection remains modest in comparison to great powers (Holbraad, 1984). The Asia Power Index published by the Lowy Institute categorizes powers in the Asia-Pacific by evaluating factors like military capability, diplomatic influence, and economic relationships, ranking Japan and India as notable middle powers due to their positioning behind superpowers such as the US and China (*Asia Power Index*, 2021).

Middle power behavior varies according to the structure of the international system, whether multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar, which shapes their strategic opportunities and limitations (Walton & Wilkins, 2019).

According to Wood (Wood, 1987), middle powers are attuned to changes in global power dynamics, and Holbraad (1984) suggests that, in some cases, they may strive to diversify power relations by forming a “third bloc,” thus adding complexity to global politics. Cox (1989) highlights that middle powers often adopt a neutral stance in conflicts, aiming to mediate and expand common ground among conflicting parties, thus reducing the likelihood of escalated tensions. This diplomatic weight is often significant in alliances, where middle powers contribute military capabilities and confer diplomatic legitimacy due to their international standing (Walton & Wilkins, 2019).

Rather than merely balancing or aligning with great powers, Swielande (2019) proposes that middle powers can also forge new alliances to safeguard their interests independently, as seen in the Indo-Pacific, where middle powers like India and Japan have adapted a non-hegemonic approach to navigating Sino-American tensions. This independent approach enables them to avoid the “Thucydides Trap” by creating alternative frameworks for regional collaboration.

The *Liberal Perspective* of middle power focuses on normative roles, niche diplomacy, and a commitment to multilateralism. According to Cooper (1997), Middle powers pursue policies that generate the highest returns within specific domains, embodying “niche diplomacy.” These nations often act as “good international citizens,” upholding global norms and seeking equitable solutions. Nagy (2022) suggests that middle powers in the Indo-Pacific engage in “neo-middle power diplomacy,” a proactive strategy of alliance-building that reflects shifting regional dynamics. This approach emphasizes collaborative diplomacy, leadership in niche areas, and a commitment to global public goods, thus allowing middle powers to mediate disputes, promote stability, and reinforce international governance (Cooper, 1997; Nye, 2004). Middle powers also provide vital managerial support for maintaining global order and often employ soft power to shape international cooperation (Wilkins, 2019).

The *Constructivist Perspective* offers an ideational view of middle powers, emphasizing social identity, discourse, and intersubjective understanding. Constructivists argue that middle power status is socially constructed rather than based solely on material capabilities (Hurrell, 1995). This identity is shaped through discourse, enabling a state to project itself as a “middle power” based on shared norms and values (S. Shin, 2016). Constructivists assert that middle powers foster a domestic and international consensus that aligns their identity with global responsibilities. Through “middle power dynamism,” states can reinvent their international roles to adapt to changing power structures (Cox, 1989; Soeya, 2013).

While realism, liberalism, and constructivism offer distinct perspectives on middle powers, they also share some overlapping insights. All three theories acknowledge that middle powers have limited hard power compared to great powers. But, they differ in how they perceive middle powers' agency and influence in the international system. Middle powers are recognized for their potential to act as mediators, norm enforcers, and stabilizers within the global order. They leverage their positional, behavioral, and ideational resources to shape regional and international affairs. However, their roles and influence vary depending on systemic conditions and their self-perception within the global hierarchy.

Normative Discourse and Middle Power-Internationalism in India's Foreign Policy

A normative discourse rooted in non-alignment and middle-power internationalism has long shaped India's foreign policy. Initially articulated by Prime Minister Nehru, India's non-alignment stance during the Cold War allowed it to maintain autonomy amid superpower rivalries, asserting a unique identity as a leader of the developing world. This approach helped bridge divides between the East and West by fostering partnerships without formal alliances, which enabled India to focus on collaboration over conflict and

entanglement in global power struggles (Mitra, 2009). However, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a long-standing ally, forced India to reconsider its non-aligned stance. This shift gave rise to the principle of "strategic autonomy"—a recalibrated form of non-alignment that preserves independence while facilitating strategic engagement with major powers based on shared interests (Mohan, 2007a).

Strategic autonomy reflects a pragmatic approach that aligns with India's middle-power status and capacity limitations. This nuanced position allows India to adopt multilateralism and coalition-building as core tenets of its foreign policy, prioritizing stability and cooperation over confrontation. In multilateral fora such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77), India emerged as a powerful voice for the Global South, championing economic justice and equity for developing nations (Narlikar, 2007). By advocating for reforms in international institutions, India has cultivated an image of moral authority, extending its influence beyond regional borders and reinforcing its global responsibilities.

India's democracy promotion efforts reflect a pragmatic balance between its ideological commitments and strategic interests. While it has collaborated with the United States on initiatives like the UN Democracy Fund and the Community of Democracies (Mohan, 2007a), India's approach remains cautious, especially in regions where democratic advocacy might conflict with national priorities. For example, in Myanmar, India has prioritized regional stability and strategic interests, adopting a restrained stance over promoting democracy (Cartwright, 2009). This selective engagement underscores India's middle-power pragmatism, where its support for democratic values is guided by realist considerations, balancing its democratic identity with the need for stability and influence in a complex geopolitical landscape.

India's African engagement epitomizes its distinct approach as a responsible middle power. India has focused on capacity-building, technology transfer, and economic cooperation, emphasizing partnership and mutual respect through development aid and infrastructure projects (Six, 2009). This approach, often described as "moralpolitik," aligns with Nehruvian and Gandhian principles and bolsters India's image as a development partner invested in long-term growth rather than transactional gains. Through development programs prioritizing self-sufficiency and local empowerment, India strengthens its ties with African nations while promoting normative, values-based diplomacy that resonates with other democratic middle powers.

India's soft power strategy plays a crucial role in its middle-power diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy, led by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), has been instrumental in promoting Indian values and traditions worldwide. Initiatives like the "India Everywhere" campaign aim to enhance India's global image, fostering relationships grounded in shared cultural ties and values (Wagner, 2010). Additionally, the Indian diaspora—one of the largest in the world—serves as a bridge for diplomatic outreach, enabling India to maintain influence in diverse regions without resorting to coercive tactics. This strategy underscores India's commitment to unity in diversity. This democratic resilience complements its middle-power status and reinforces its role as a benign, responsible power on the world stage.

Peacekeeping has been a consistent feature of India's international engagement, with over 200,000 Indian troops participating in United Nations missions since the 1950s, emphasizing its commitment to global stability, especially in developing countries (Bullion, 1997). India's peacekeeping contributions align with its middle-power identity, emphasizing non-coercive, stabilizing roles rather than interventions. Alongside peacekeeping, India has extended humanitarian aid to crisis-affected nations, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Yemen, consolidating its reputation as a benevolent, crisis-resilient actor. These efforts reflect India's

dedication to “good international citizenship,” projecting values of solidarity, responsibility, and risk-averse crisis management as defining traits of its global identity (Mohan, 2007b).

India’s commitment to climate diplomacy has gained prominence as it is pivotal in bridging developed and developing nations’ interests on climate action. India’s commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2070, made during the 2015 Paris Agreement negotiations, illustrates its balancing act between developmental goals and environmental sustainability (Rizzo & Pouget-Abadie, 2023). Recognizing the pressing need for climate equity, India has called for increased financial support for the Global South, positioning itself as a mediator on climate issues. This approach encapsulates India’s evolution from non-alignment to a flexible stance that prioritizes sustainable development and resilience within a framework of multilateral cooperation. India’s stance reflects its unique ability to mediate on global issues, an increasingly important role for middle powers in the current multipolar world.

India’s multilateral engagements extend across various international organizations, where it actively advocates for the rights and voices of developing countries. India has consistently pushed for structural reforms in institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF), seeking greater representation and fairness for developing nations. In the WTO, for instance, India has maintained a developmental approach, emphasizing the need for an equitable multilateral trading system that benefits both developed and developing nations (Efsthopoulos, 2011). India’s long-standing participation in peacekeeping further demonstrates its commitment to global security, underscoring its identity as a middle power devoted to collective security and developmental solidarity (Bullion, 1997).

India’s strategic use of soft power in international relations also extends to regions like the Pacific Islands, where it engages through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). Through this initiative, India has provided assistance in areas such as renewable energy, healthcare, and climate adaptation, strengthening its ties with Pacific Island countries while promoting itself as a dependable partner in sustainable development (Pandey, 2023). India’s middle-power diplomacy in these regions reinforces its commitment to cooperative engagement, furthering its influence through cultural and developmental initiatives that prioritize long-term partnerships.

Moreover, India has strategically pursued relationships with West Asian nations that are critical for resource security and economic partnerships. Through strengthened ties with Gulf nations, India has leveraged the influence of its diaspora, deepening economic cooperation while advancing its interests in areas such as civil nuclear energy and defense (Solanki & Togashi, 2022). This balanced approach aligns with international non-proliferation norms and contributes to India’s strategic capabilities, illustrating its pragmatism in pursuing strategic partnerships based on mutual benefit.

India’s Influence in Global Governance: Leveraging through Coalition-Building and Multi-alignment

India’s approach to global governance and international relations has been marked by its role as a middle power, utilizing coalition-building, multi-alignment, and pragmatic engagement with major powers to influence global reforms and regional stability. Positioned as a leader of the Global South, India has committed itself to advocating for a fairer representation of developing countries in international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). As Efsthopoulos (2016) highlights, India’s position as a middle power allows it

to bridge divides and promote reforms that reflect the interests of emerging economies, championing an inclusive and representative international system.

India's evolving foreign policy is primarily shaped by its "multi-alignment" strategy, which involves balancing relationships across different power blocs without compromising its autonomy. Coined by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, multi-alignment envisions India as a "bridge" in global politics, enabling strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Russia, and other significant powers while avoiding exclusive alliances (Jaishankar, 2020). This approach has facilitated India's participation in initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which reflects its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. India's involvement in the Quad emphasizes shared security goals with like-minded nations, particularly in ensuring maritime stability and countering assertive actions in the region (Hall, 2016). Through this strategy, India asserts influence in global governance by positioning itself as an intermediary between East and West, advancing a balanced stance that strengthens its autonomy and diplomatic leverage.

India's multi-alignment policy represents an evolution from its historical non-alignment stance, initially implemented by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during the Cold War to maintain strategic flexibility. This policy allowed India to foster diplomatic relations across ideological lines, positioning itself as a leader of developing countries without aligning strictly with any superpower (Mitra, 2009). In the post-Cold War context, India's foreign policy evolved into a more nuanced "Non-Alignment 2.0," also known as strategic autonomy. This policy balances India's desire for autonomy with the pragmatic need to engage with major powers like the United States and China, reflecting the demands of a multipolar world (Khilnani et al., 2012). This shift aligns with India's pursuit of economic growth and security, allowing it to build coalitions with like-minded countries on global issues such as climate change and counter-terrorism.

India's foreign policy has increasingly focused on the Indo-Pacific region, where it engages in inclusive and cooperative security frameworks. India has strengthened its partnerships through collaborative maritime initiatives, recognizing the region's strategic importance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2018 address at the Shangri-La Dialogue outlined India's vision for a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific based on principles of transparency, respect for international law, and non-coercive dispute resolution (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). India champions ASEAN centrality in this framework, positioning itself as a stabilizing force and a bridge among regional actors. India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative underscores this commitment to maritime security. Introduced in 2015, SAGAR encourages littoral states to share regional security responsibilities while engaging non-littoral countries in addressing shared issues such as climate change, disaster relief, and piracy (Press Information Bureau, 2015). By advocating for a collaborative regional security architecture, India enhances its reputation as a responsible maritime power and a constructive actor in the Indo-Pacific.

India has also institutionalized its Indo-Pacific policy by establishing an Indo-Pacific division within its Ministry of External Affairs. This division addresses a range of regional priorities, from fostering strong relations with ASEAN to broader multilateral collaborations, such as with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The creation of this division reflects India's dedication to maintaining a coherent and structured approach to its Indo-Pacific engagements, positioning itself as a key player in regional stability (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). Additionally, India's participation in the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) extends its influence to the Pacific Islands, assisting in areas like climate adaptation, renewable energy, and healthcare. This outreach reflects India's ambition to forge partnerships

based on mutual respect and shared interests, thereby expanding its role as a development partner in the Indo-Pacific.

India's coalition-building extends beyond the Indo-Pacific to other regions, including Africa and the Middle East. In Africa, India's engagement has been marked by emphasizing economic cooperation, development assistance, and capacity-building rather than assertive influence. This approach contrasts with China's presence on the continent, as India emphasizes partnership and mutual benefit, focusing on technology transfer and capacity development. India's balanced approach aligns with its middle-power identity and its goal of being seen as a responsible and constructive partner. India has strengthened its ties with Gulf nations through economic and strategic partnerships, leveraging its diaspora and fostering investment opportunities (Solanki & Togashi, 2022). By maintaining balanced relationships with countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel, India positions itself as an influential yet pragmatic player in the region.

India's advocacy for global governance reform is rooted in its belief that international institutions should better represent the interests of developing nations. As an emerging economy and a leader of the Global South, India has consistently championed fairer representation in organizations like the UN, IMF, and WTO (Efsthathopoulos, 2016). Through these efforts, India underscores its role as a proponent of a just global order that respects the voices of underrepresented countries. However, India's multi-alignment strategy faces challenges, particularly in maintaining a consistent stance on contentious international issues. For instance, India's abstention from voting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has raised questions about its commitment to the rules-based order. This stance may require re-evaluation as it seeks to enhance its influence on the global stage (Burton, 2019).

Despite India's achievements in middle-power diplomacy, its strategy of multi-alignment presents challenges, particularly in navigating contentious global issues. India's abstention on certain controversial matters, such as the Ukraine crisis, has raised questions about its commitment to the rules-based order. For example, the State of Southeast Asia Survey noted that India ranks low in perceived leadership on international law and free trade, areas it may need to address to strengthen its middle-power image (Burton, 2019). India's balancing act—preserving autonomy while advancing national interests—requires careful management as it faces increased scrutiny on the global stage.

India's Evolving Multilateral Approach: Balancing Global Governance and National Interests

India's approach to foreign policy reflects a longstanding commitment to multilateralism, which is essential to its strategic vision in navigating global challenges and promoting peace, stability, and development. By actively engaging in multilateral organizations, India aligns its national interests with a broader global vision of a just, equitable, and inclusive order, seeking to reform global governance architecture (Mattoo & Subramanian, 2008). This commitment is evident in India's engagements with institutions like the United Nations (UN), where it advocates for democratic, representative structures that reflect contemporary geopolitical realities.

India's engagement in multilateral diplomacy has evolved significantly over the past 75 years. Initially rooted in idealism, India relied on the UN to resolve international disputes, a stance that reflected post-independence idealism (Kumar, 2022). However, the UN's perceived bias, particularly on issues like Kashmir, led to disillusionment, prompting India to adopt a 'regime shifting' approach from 1961 to 1991. During this phase, India played a key role in creating forums like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Group of 77 (G77), which emphasized the reform of global institutions in favor of developing countries.

This early engagement laid the groundwork for India's later strategic reorientation in the post-Cold War era.

The end of the Cold War marked a shift towards pragmatic multilateralism as India sought new partnerships while maintaining its autonomy. This transformation is evident in India's active participation in platforms like the BRICS, G20, and QUAD, balancing its strategic interests with multiple global powers (Mukherjee & Malone, 2011). Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's foresight in 1992, advocating for UN Security Council (UNSC) reform, was an early indication of India's commitment to reshaping global governance in alignment with emerging power dynamics.

Following the Cold War, India transitioned from traditional non-alignment to multi-alignment, engaging with global powers across diverse forums without formal alliances. This pragmatic shift enabled India to advance its geopolitical interests while reinforcing its role as a balancing actor on the global stage (Mohan, 2010). India's engagement with the United States and Europe, combined with its strategic ties with Russia, underscores its commitment to a multipolar world order. Despite occasional divergence on issues like human rights, India's multi-alignment strategy is grounded in its desire to maintain sovereignty and strategic autonomy (Madan, 2013; Tharoor, 2013). India's participation in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) illustrates its nuanced approach to multilateralism, aligning with countries that share its commitment to non-intervention and sovereignty. This hybrid strategy, rooted in both Western liberalism and traditional Indian values, reflects India's unique middle-power orientation and its desire for a more inclusive, multipolar order (Kumar, 2022).

India's approach to economic multilateralism has similarly evolved, reflecting the broader shifts in its foreign policy. Initially defensive in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), India adopted a more proactive stance within the World Trade Organization (WTO), driven by economic liberalization and the rise of its services sector. Key shifts in domestic political economy, including the influence of Hindu nationalism and democratic mobilization, underscored the need for a more assertive negotiation stance on issues like services liberalization (Efsthathopoulos & Kelly, 2014).

At the Doha ministerial, India advocated for prioritizing existing agreements over the inclusion of new issues like Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs). This stance was echoed by the Like Minded Group (LMG) and emphasized India's commitment to a developmental approach within the WTO framework (Saggi, 2010). By leveraging its moral authority as a leader of the developing world, India has rallied support for a multilateralism that prioritizes developmental dimensions, enabling it to assert its economic interests while fostering partnerships within the Global South.

The post-Cold War shift towards multi-alignment reflects a strategic pivot from India's earlier commitment to NAM. Scholars argue that India's involvement in forums like the G20 and its pursuit of a permanent UNSC seat indicate a departure from NAM's idealism to a more pragmatic 'internationalism of the strong' (Mohan, 2010). Nonetheless, India's continued support for South-South cooperation in platforms like the WTO demonstrates its dedication to principles of equity and developmental justice (Kumar, 2022). India's regional engagements further illustrate this dual approach. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the "Act East" policy have enabled India to bolster regional integration while expanding ties with East and Southeast Asia. India's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) exemplifies its commitment to regional multilateralism, enhancing connectivity and fostering trade partnerships (Tharoor, 2013).

India's multilateral strategy increasingly incorporates reformism and parallel institutionalization, allowing it to pursue its interests across multiple frameworks. India's role in establishing platforms like BRICS and its engagement in the SCO demonstrates its use of alternative institutions to amplify its influence and promote a multipolar world order (Morse & Keohane, 2014). By participating in diverse international frameworks, India maintains autonomy while actively shaping global governance, reflecting its evolving priorities as a middle power. India's hybrid approach, grounded in both Western and traditional Indian values, reflects a strategic balance between sovereignty and engagement. While aligning with Western liberalism in specific forums, India emphasizes non-interference and multipolarity in forums with non-Western states. This nuanced multilateralism enables India to navigate a complex global landscape while asserting its unique perspective on international norms and institutions (Kumar, 2022).

India's G20 Presidency in 2023 marked a significant achievement in its multilateral engagement, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and cooperation. India's initiatives, such as integrating the African Union into the G20 and hosting the 'Voice of the Global South Summit,' underscore its commitment to a more equitable global order. By prioritizing issues like digital public infrastructure and climate justice, India has advanced a progressive agenda aligned with its vision of a just and sustainable world (Prime Minister's Office, 2023). This leadership role in the G20 reflects India's dedication to reforming multilateralism, fostering a dialogue that amplifies the voices of developing countries. As India passes the G20 Presidency to Brazil, its legacy of revitalized multilateralism, empowered by a commitment to sustainable development, continues to shape global governance.

Despite India's significant achievements, challenges persist in its multilateral engagements, particularly within the UNSC. India's calls for UNSC reform and its push for a more representative global order underscore its dissatisfaction with the current power dynamics in global governance. Conflicts in Myanmar and Afghanistan highlight the limitations of the existing multilateral framework in addressing regional security issues (Mukerji, 2024). India's balancing act between strategic partnerships and traditional alliances remains a cornerstone of its foreign policy. By focusing on areas where it holds advantages, such as soft power and moral leadership, India leverages its middle-power orientation to assert its influence while advancing its national interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India's emergence as a middle power in the international system reflects its strategic adaptability and commitment to promoting a more equitable global order. Through a nuanced approach that blends non-alignment with multi-alignment, India is navigating the complexities of contemporary geopolitics, engaging with diverse partners while safeguarding its autonomy. This paper has demonstrated that India's historical legacy, grounded in principles of non-alignment and moral authority, continues to inform its foreign policy today, particularly in its advocacy for the Global South and reforms in global governance institutions.

By leveraging its position in multilateral forums and regional partnerships, India has become a key player in addressing global challenges, from climate change to security concerns. Its contributions to peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and soft power initiatives underscore its commitment to stability and responsible global citizenship. However, the need for a balanced approach becomes increasingly crucial as India faces the dual challenge of rising domestic demands and shifting global power dynamics. Ultimately, India's middle power status enhances its influence on the world stage and positions it as a vital actor in shaping a collaborative and inclusive international order. As India continues to refine its foreign

policy strategies, its role as a bridge between diverse nations and interests will be instrumental in fostering dialogue, understanding, and cooperative solutions in an increasingly interconnected world.