

Pax Indica: India as a Bridge in International Diplomacy

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Abstract

As the unipolar moment recedes and the international system drifts toward a “multiplex world,” the theoretical vocabularies that have long organised the discipline of International Relations — realism, liberalism, and constructivism — are proving individually insufficient to explain, let alone guide, the foreign policy of a rising, civilizational power such as India.

This article argues that India’s comparative advantage in twenty-first-century diplomacy lies precisely in its refusal to choose among these paradigms. Drawing on Shashi Tharoor’s notion of Pax Indica, S. Jaishankar’s doctrine of multi-alignment, and the wider Global IR literature associated with Amitav Acharya, the article develops a composite framework in which realist prudence about power (Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer), liberal-institutionalist faith in cooperation under anarchy (Robert Keohane), and constructivist attention to identity and norms (Alexander Wendt) are braided together and anchored in the civilizational idealism of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — “the world is one family.” The article then applies this framework to the most pressing test of Indian diplomacy in 2026: the global energy crisis triggered by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the tightening of sanctions on Russian hydrocarbons. It concludes with a set of case-by-case, issue-specific rules of engagement rather than a single doctrinal formula, consistent with the pluralist, non-exceptionalist reading of Indian statecraft that this article defends.

Keywords: Idealism, Realism, Liberalism, International Relations, Energy Security, Foreign Policy

Why “Pax Indica”?

Indian diplomacy, an anonymous veteran once told Shashi Tharoor, resembles the love-making of an elephant: it is conducted at a very high level, accompanied by much bellowing, and its results are not known for two years¹. The line is characteristically self-deprecating, but it also captures something true about the country whose foreign policy this article examines: a civilizational state that moves slowly, deliberates loudly, and yet, when it finally acts, often reshapes the terms of the conversation around it. Tharoor’s 2012 book, from which this article borrows its title, argued that India had to “move beyond non-alignment to multi-alignment” if it wished to translate its civilizational depth and economic weight into genuine global responsibility².

Fourteen years later, that argument has been substantially vindicated by events. Then–Foreign Secretary and now External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has formalized multi-alignment as doctrine in *The India Way*, arguing that in an era of “westlessness” and eroding US-led hegemony, India must “engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support” simultaneously, accepting that there will

be “convergence with many but congruence with none”³. This is not non-alignment’s abstention; it is what Jaishankar calls an “energetic and participative” re-engagement with a fractured order, conducted from a position of “strategic autonomy” rather than dependence⁴.

This article’s central claim is that such multi-alignment is intellectually coherent only if it is read as a deliberate, theoretically self-aware synthesis — not eclecticism for its own sake, but a considered blending of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, disciplined throughout by an idealism that is distinctively Indian: the Vedic maxim Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, “the world is one family,” which India invoked as the theme of its 2023 G20 presidency. Where the mainstream IR canon treats these three paradigms as rival, mutually exclusive lenses, India’s own diplomatic practice treats them as complementary instruments to be reached for as the situation demands — a pattern the Global IR literature associates with the “subsumption” rather than the replacement of Western theory.

Three Lenses, One Grammar: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism

International Relations theory has conventionally been organized around three broad families of explanation. Each offers a different account of what states are, what they want, and why the international system looks the way it does; each, read alone, also explains only part of how India actually behaves.

Realism: Power, Anarchy, and Self-Help

Kenneth Waltz’s structural, or “neo-,” realism holds that the absence of any central authority above the state — international anarchy — forces states into a logic of self-help, in which security and survival, not ideology, are the primary drivers of behaviour, and in which the distribution of capabilities across the system’s units defines its structure⁵. John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism sharpens this further: because states can never be certain of one another’s intentions, the anarchic, self-help system compels them to maximise their relative power position rather than merely to balance⁶.

Realism explains a great deal about Indian statecraft: the refusal to join formal alliances, the build-up of a nuclear deterrent after 1998, the wariness toward any arrangement that could constrain freedom of manoeuvre vis-à-vis China, and the blunt calculus by which New Delhi continued to purchase discounted Russian crude even under American pressure in 2025–26. Jaishankar’s own language — “engage,” “manage,” “reassure” — is the vocabulary of a realist reading capability distributions and hedging accordingly. But realism alone cannot explain why India spends scarce diplomatic capital on the International Solar Alliance, vaccine diplomacy, or UN peacekeeping, none of which yields an obvious relative-power payoff.

Liberalism and Neoliberal Institutionalism: Cooperation under Anarchy

Where realists see anarchy as a permanent constraint, Robert Keohane’s neoliberal institutionalism argues that anarchy does not preclude cooperation: states have durable common interests, and international institutions and regimes reduce transaction costs, provide information, and make cheating costly enough that self-interested states will nonetheless bind themselves to rules, even after the hegemon that first built those rules declines⁷. Cooperation, in this reading, does not require a benign world; it requires only that repeated interaction under shared institutions make defection more costly than compliance.

This is the register in which India has pursued its permanent-seat campaign at the UN Security Council, its leadership of the G20 in 2023, its founding role in the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, and its participation in minilateral groupings such as the Quad and

I2U2. None of these commitments is charity; each is India using institutions to lock in gains — technology transfer, market access, reputational capital — that raw power alone could not secure as efficiently or as legitimately.

Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and the Social Construction of Interest

Alexander Wendt's constructivism reframes the very ground on which realism and liberalism stand: anarchy, he argues, is "what states make of it" — a social structure whose meaning is constituted by the identities and shared understandings that states bring to it, so that self-help is a practice states have constructed, not a law of nature⁸. In *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt extends this into a full account of how state identities and interests are produced through interaction and can therefore change⁹. For India, the constructivist lens is indispensable precisely because India's foreign policy has always been argued about in terms of identity as much as interest: was non-alignment realism in idealist clothing, or idealism dressed as strategy? Amitav Acharya notes that Indian non-alignment has been read as both simultaneously, and that its widespread emulation by dozens of other post-colonial states shows it was never merely self-interested positioning but also a normative export — an idea about what kind of actor a newly sovereign, civilizational confident state should be in the world

Toward a Composite Grammar

The Jindal Global University overview of IR theory notes that realism, liberalism, and constructivism "are not mutually exclusive," and that each is best suited to explaining a different slice of state behaviour — war and deterrence for realism, cooperation and trade for liberalism, identity and normative change for constructivism¹¹. Acharya's brief on "Global IR" goes further, arguing that a truly global discipline does not supplant these mainstream theories but subsumes them, pushing realism to look beyond the distribution of power, liberalism to look beyond American hegemony as its point of departure, and constructivism to take fuller account of non-Western agency in the creation and diffusion of norms¹². India's multi-alignment, read this way, is not theoretical promiscuity; it is precisely the kind of syncretic, non-exceptionalist universalism Acharya identifies as India's most valuable possible contribution to Global IR — one that resists the temptation to construct a bounded "Indian School" of the kind China has built around the tributary system and Tianxia, and instead offers a method of theoretical bridge-building that other rising and middle powers can borrow¹³.

The Idealist Anchor: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Civilizational Universalism

What keeps this composite grammar from collapsing into pure opportunism is an idealist commitment that predates all three Western paradigms in Indian political thought: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, "the world is one family," drawn from the Maha Upanishad. Acharya's account of India's "syncretic universalism" situates this idealism carefully: India, he writes, "is rich in traditions, history, ideas and practices that constitute a key source for Global IR," ideas that have historically proved "highly exportable and compatible with the cultures and norms of other societies" rather than being asserted as uniquely superior¹⁴. This is the crucial distinction between India's idealism and the exceptionalism Acharya warns against elsewhere in the same brief — the tendency, visible in the Monroe Doctrine or in China's tributary-system nostalgia, to dress the interests of a rising power in universal language while using that language to justify dominance over the weak¹⁵.

Tharoor's own writing situates Pax Indica in exactly this idealist register: not a Roman-style peace imposed by Indian power, but an India whose global responsibility flows from its civilizational plurality and its demonstrated capacity to hold multiple truths, faiths, and alignments together without requiring any of them to dissolve into the others. This is not merely rhetorical. It supplies the normative ballast that keeps realist hedging from curdling into cynicism and keeps liberal institution-building from being read, in the developing world, as mimicry of a Western-designed order. A foreign policy that says simultaneously "we will buy Russian oil because our people need it," "we will build the International Solar Alliance because climate justice binds rich and poor differently," and "we consider the whole world one family" is coherent only if the third claim genuinely constrains the first two — that is, only if idealism functions as an ethical check on realist and liberal instrumentalism rather than as decoration for it.

India as Bridge: The Global IR Case

Acharya's brief for the Observer Research Foundation was written to answer a narrower disciplinary question — what should Indian scholarship contribute to a more inclusive, "Global IR" — but its argument scales up neatly into a foreign-policy claim. A "multiplex world," in Acharya's formulation, is like a multiplex cinema: many powers screening different narratives under one shared architecture, with no single director able to monopolise the audience's attention, yet all bound by common security and normative mechanisms at the entrance to the complex¹⁶. In such a world, the most valuable diplomatic asset is not raw power but connective capacity — the ability to sit inside more than one "theatre" at once and to be trusted, or at least tolerated, by audiences who otherwise share little.

India's structural position gives it more of this connective capacity than almost any other rising power. It is simultaneously the world's most populous democracy and a leading voice of the Global South; a Quad member and a founding member of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; a longstanding buyer of Russian defence equipment and, since 2020, a deepening security partner of the United States; a nuclear-armed state outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty that nonetheless champions global disarmament rhetoric inherited from Nehru; and a civilizational culture whose Sufi, Buddhist, and syncretic traditions have historically travelled well beyond its borders without the baggage of colonial conquest. Acharya's point that India's non-alignment "proved highly exportable to so many countries around the world" because it was never packaged as exceptionalist is the crux of the bridge argument: India's comparative advantage is not that it is powerful enough to dictate terms, but that it is plural enough to be legible, and non-threatening enough to be trusted, across blocs that do not trust each other¹⁷.

Applying the Framework: The 2026 Global Energy Crisis

No episode tests the composite framework developed above more directly than the energy crisis that has gripped global markets since the escalation of the Israel–Iran conflict and the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026. The crisis compresses realist, liberal, and constructivist pressures on Indian policy into a single, fast-moving decision problem, and it is instructive to trace how each register has actually shaped New Delhi's response.

The Realist Layer: Energy Security as Survival

By mid-2026, India was drawing roughly a third to two-fifths of its seaborne crude through the Strait of Hormuz, and its refiners held only a few weeks of strategic reserves¹⁸. Washington had spent much of 2025 pressuring New Delhi to cut Russian crude purchases, imposing tariffs explicitly linked to that trade,

but the closure of the Strait forced an abrupt reversal: US officials granted India a temporary waiver to resume Russian purchases so as to prevent a domestic fuel shortage, with the US Treasury Secretary publicly stating that Washington had “given India permission to accept the Russian oil” and might “unsanction other Russian oil” to ease the crunch¹⁹. By June 2026, India’s Russian crude imports had returned to record levels, second globally only to China²⁰. This is realism in its purest form: national survival needs — fuel for a billion-plus population and a growing economy — overriding both alliance preferences and prior sanctions commitments the moment those commitments became materially costly.

The Liberal-Institutionalist Layer: Managing Interdependence

Yet India’s response was not simply unilateral hedging; it was conducted through and alongside institutional channels. India retained its strategic petroleum reserve arrangements, coordinated informally with G7 price-cap mechanisms even while exceeding their spirit, and used its position within the International Energy Forum and its bilateral relationships with Gulf suppliers (Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE) to diversify away from any single chokepoint. Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri’s public emphasis on buffer stockpiles and diversified sourcing reflects exactly the Keohanian logic of managing interdependence rather than either submitting to it or abandoning it: India used the institutional architecture of global energy markets — futures markets, long-term supply contracts, refining arbitrage — to convert an acute shock into a manageable adjustment, rather than treating either full alignment with Western sanctions or full alignment with Russia as the only two available postures.

The Constructivist Layer: Narrating the Choice

Crucially, India did not simply act; it narrated its actions in a register consistent with its claimed civilizational identity. New Delhi’s public position throughout the crisis emphasized the language of energy justice and the disproportionate vulnerability of developing, oil-importing economies — the same countries in Southeast Asia and Africa that had least cushion against the Hormuz shock — rather than framing its Russian purchases purely as national self-interest. This is a constructivist move: it seeks to keep India’s identity as champion of the Global South intact even while its behaviour, examined in isolation, looks like classic realist opportunism. Whether or not one finds this framing fully persuasive, its function is unmistakable — it is an attempt to ensure that hedging on energy does not corrode the normative capital India has built through the G20 presidency, vaccine diplomacy, and its consistent rhetorical commitment to Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Recommended Rules of Engagement: A Case-by-Case Approach

If the preceding analysis is correct, then India should resist the temptation — recurrent in both domestic commentary and foreign advocacy — to commit itself permanently to any single theoretical posture: neither a fully realist “India First” hedging strategy indifferent to institutions and norms, nor a fully liberal-institutionalist strategy that subordinates energy or security autonomy to alliance discipline, nor a purely constructivist strategy that privileges narrative consistency over material need. Consistent with Jaishankar’s own insistence that India will have “convergence with many but congruence with none,” the following rules of engagement are proposed as issue-specific defaults rather than as a single grand strategy.

Domain	Primary Lens	Recommended Rule of Engagement
Energy security (Oil, Gas, Refined products)	Realism, tempered by liberal risk management	Prioritise supply diversification and strategic reserves over doctrinal purity; buy from whichever legitimate source clears the market, while utilising multilateral price-cap and reserve-sharing mechanisms to maintain a transactional relationship with Western partners rather than an adversarial one.
Strategic technology (Semiconductors, AI, defence tech)	Liberal institutionalism	Favour deep institutional entanglement (Quad technology tracks, iCET, standards bodies) because durable technological interdependence, not one-off deals, is what locks in long-run gains and reduces coercive leverage against India.
Multilateral governance (UNSC reform, G20, WTO)	Liberal institutionalism, framed constructively	Invest in institution-building and coalition leadership (as with the G20's Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam framing and the African Union's G20 accession) to accumulate reputational capital that can be drawn upon in harder-power disputes.
Neighbourhood and South Asia	Realism, constrained by constructivist restraint	Accept the material logic of primacy in the immediate neighbourhood, but exercise it through the vocabulary of shared family rather than hierarchy, since regional legitimacy is itself a strategic asset against Chinese inroads.
Great-power balancing (US–China–Russia triangle)	Realism	Maintain strategic autonomy as a standing default: no formal alliance with any single pole; issue-based cooperation calibrated to relative gains, revisited continuously rather than fixed by treaty.
Global South leadership and climate/development diplomacy	Constructivism, operationalised through liberal instruments	Use identity-based leadership (Global South convenor, International Solar Alliance, vaccine

Domain	Primary Lens	Recommended Rule of Engagement
		diplomacy) as the primary currency, translating normative credibility into concrete institutional roles and financing mechanisms.

Two second-order principles follow from this table. First, sequencing matters more than doctrine: the same issue may call for a realist posture in an acute shock (Hormuz closure, week one) and a liberal-institutionalist posture once markets stabilize (reserve-sharing and price-cap diplomacy, month two). Second, the constructivist register should be treated as a constraint-checking device rather than a public-relations exercise: before any realist or liberal choice is finalized, Indian policymakers should ask whether the choice is defensible in the vocabulary of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — not because that vocabulary will placate critics, but because a foreign policy that cannot pass this internal coherence test risks the erosion of exactly the connective, bridge-like credibility that is India’s scarcest strategic asset.

Conclusion

Pax Indica, on the reading advanced here, does not mean a peace imposed by Indian primacy, in the manner the term’s Roman echo might suggest. It means something closer to what Tharoor originally intended and what Jaishankar has since operationalised: an India confident enough in its civilizational identity to hold realist prudence, liberal institution-building, and constructivist norm-shaping simultaneously, without treating any one of them as sufficient on its own, and without letting the idealism of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam become mere ornament. The 2026 energy crisis shows both the promise and the strain of this approach — India secured its fuel supply through realist hedging, managed the fallout through liberal-institutional channels, and narrated the whole episode in the language of shared vulnerability and family. Whether India can sustain this triple register as crises multiply, from energy to technology to climate finance, will determine whether “bridge power” remains a genuine description of Indian diplomacy or becomes, as Acharya warns, an exceptionalist claim that outruns the substance behind it. The case-by-case rules of engagement proposed in this article are offered as one way of keeping that gap from opening.

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