INDIA'S MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND THE PURSUIT OF UN SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM: FROM IDEALISM TO STRATEGIC PRAGMATISM

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ABSTRACT

India's pursuit of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reflects its evolving foreign policy and broader ambition to reshape global governance. Since independence, India's external engagement has shifted from Nehruvian non-alignment to a pragmatic and assertive diplomacy that blends principled multilateralism with strategic realpolitik. This transformation is most evident in its sustained campaign for UNSC reform, driven by its growing economic and geopolitical stature, democratic credentials, and active contributions to UN peacekeeping. India has leveraged multilateral forums such as the G4, BRICS, and G20, while maintaining solidarity with the Global South, to advocate for a more inclusive and representative international order. Despite these efforts, India's bid continues to face significant challenges, including opposition from entrenched powers, institutional inertia, and regional instability. This paper examines how India's evolving foreign policy characterized by a shift from idealism to issue-based pragmatism aligns with its strategic aspiration for UNSC reform. It also explores the tensions between India's post-colonial identity, domestic constraints, and global leadership ambitions. Ultimately, India's approach reveals the complexities faced by emerging powers in navigating traditional power structures and contributing to the democratization of global institutions.

Keywords: Strategic autonomy, Multilateralism, UNSC permanent membership.

India's long-standing aspiration for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reflects both its rising global stature and its evolving foreign policy strategy. As the world's largest democracy and a consistent contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, India frames its claim within the broader push for equitable representation and reform of global governance institutions (Dabhade, 2022).India's early post-independence engagement with the UN, marked by active participation between 1947 and 1962, was later tempered by a more restrained posture, before giving way to a pragmatic and issue-based multilateral approach from the mid-1970s onward (Kochanek, 1980). This historical evolution demonstrates India's capacity to adapt its foreign policy to global and regional shifts while maintaining its foundational commitment to multilateralism.India's call for UNSC reform is aligned with the G4 coalition comprising Brazil, Germany, Japan, and India, which collectively advocates for the expansion of both permanent and non-permanent membership categories (Kaura & Singh, 2021). India's position is further strengthened by its recent leadership roles on the global stage, including hosting the G20 presidency, which has showcased its diplomatic maturity and policy influence.Additionally, India's advocacy for reform is rooted in its belief that the current UN structure inadequately represents the realities of the 21st century, where emerging powers play crucial roles in maintaining global stability. Its growing economic influence, expanding strategic partnerships, and commitment to multilateralism reinforce its suitability for a permanent seat.Moreover, India's consistent

support for peacekeeping, sustainable development, and South-South cooperation reflects its readiness to shoulder greater responsibilities within the UN framework. This combination of historical engagement, moral legitimacy, and strategic capability forms the backbone of India's bid for UNSC reform and permanent membership.In particular, India has emphasized the need to revitalize the UN to better address contemporary challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and non-traditional security threats (Murthy, 2010). Despite growing recognition of India's capabilities, the reform process faces significant political roadblocks, including resistance from certain P5 members and competing interests from the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group (Kaura & Singh, 2021).While India has traditionally relied on moral legitimacy and its democratic credentials, scholars argue that achieving permanent membership will ultimately require a realist approach involving hard power bargaining and strategic coalitions. Since the 1990s, India has intensified its diplomatic outreach, gradually shifting from normative appeals to pragmatic multilateralism. This strategic recalibration includes building flexible alliances, leveraging bilateral partnerships, and aligning with like-minded nations on key global issues (Singh & Joon, 2018).In the current global context, where the UNSC's relevance is increasingly questioned due to veto-induced gridlock, India's campaign also resonates with broader demands for democratic reform and inclusivity in international institutions.

India's approach to multilateralism has undergone a significant transformation since its independence, evolving from Nehruvian idealism to a more assertive, pragmatic engagement with the international system. Initially, India adopted multilateralism as a defensive tool to navigate Cold War bipolarity, emphasizing universalism, non-alignment, and moral leadership (Mukherjee & Malone, 2011). However, in the post-Cold War context and amidst its rising power status, India has increasingly shifted towards strategic pragmatism. It now pursues greater influence within institutions like the United Nations, WTO, IMF, G20, and BRICS (Efstathopoulos, 2016). This strategic shift is further highlighted by India's broader engagement in global governance and multilateral forums (Hans, 2023).This evolution is most visibly reflected in India's sustained campaign for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) a core objective of its foreign policy and a symbol of its global aspirations .India's case rests on its democratic credentials, its significant and longstanding contributions to UN peacekeeping missions, and its growing economic and geopolitical influence .Moreover, India's recent G20 presidency has further positioned it as a responsible stakeholder in global governance, enhancing its image as a credible candidate for UNSC reform .

India's UNSC strategy has transitioned from normative, idealistic appeals to pragmatic diplomacy, focusing on building issue-based partnerships, engaging in hard power bargaining, and aligning with emerging coalitions such as the G4. While maintaining solidarity with the Global South, India has simultaneously collaborated with powerful nations to advance institutional reforms, carefully balancing its national interests with the broader objectives of a rules-based international order.Despite securing support from four of the five P5 members, India's bid continues to face resistance from entrenched powers and competing aspirants (Jamali & Liu, 2024). This ongoing challenge underscores the complex nature of India's ambitions, which are not without dilemmas. To succeed, India must navigate intricate diplomatic terrain, managing institutional rivalry with China, maintaining strategic ties with the United States, and avoiding the perception among developing nations that it is joining an "expanded oligarchy" rather than promoting democratization within global governance (Stuenkel, 2010).

Internally, India must also address challenges related to diversity, governance, and maintaining a consistent foreign policy narrative as it transitions from historical non-alignment to a more assertive and interest-driven diplomacy (Singh & Pandey, 2025). Scholars argue that India's success in securing a permanent UNSC seat will depend on a sustained realpolitik approach that goes beyond moral persuasion to incorporate strategic bargaining and global leadership. As India prepares for potential future non-permanent UNSC terms, it must continue to demonstrate its commitment to multilateral cooperation, particularly on pressing global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and health crises .India's evolving foreign policy and its long-standing campaign for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reflect the country's ambition to reshape global governance in line with its rising power status. Since independence, India's external engagement has transformed from Nehru's idealistic non-alignment to an increasingly assertive and pragmatic diplomacy under recent leadership. This transition marks a broader shift in India's global outlook from a norm-driven actor focused on strategic autonomy to a state employing realpolitik and strategic bargaining to achieve tangible diplomatic outcomes (Ollapally, 2011). India's pursuit of UNSC reform is emblematic of this transformation. The country has consistently called for comprehensive reform of international institutions, advocating a more equitable and representative global order .India's bid for permanent membership is rooted in its historical contributions to the UN, leadership in peacekeeping, democratic credentials, and recent diplomatic successes such as hosting the G20 presidency .However, it faces several institutional hurdles, including the slow pace of reform, competing aspirants, and resistance from entrenched powers.

The Kashmir dispute was the first inter-state conflict formally addressed by the United Nations Security Council when India accused Pakistan of supporting the tribal invasion of Kashmir on January 1, 1948. Pakistan rejected these allegations and countered that India's actions since Partition threatened "the destruction of the State of Pakistan." The UN's involvement in the Kashmir issue unfolded in five distinct phases between 1948 and 1953. It began with direct intervention by the Security Council, followed by mediation efforts conducted by the United Nations Commission on India and Pakistan. These efforts were complemented by informal negotiations led by General A. G. L. McNaughton, as well as proposals advanced by Australian diplomat Sir Owen Dixon. Finally, Dr. Frank Graham worked to secure an agreement on demilitarization, which was considered a necessary step before holding a plebiscite (Brecher, 1953).Despite these interventions, the Security Council's attempts at mediation ultimately failed, largely because it approached the dispute primarily as a political problem without fully accounting for the legal frameworks underpinning India's and Pakistan's respective claims (Subbiah, 2004). UN Security Council Resolution 47, adopted during the First Indo-Pakistani War in 1948, called for both India and Pakistan to withdraw their forces and arranged for a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people (S/RES/47). While this resolution sought to implement the principle of self-determination, its limited scope offering accession only to India or Pakistan and its weak enforcement reflected the Council's prioritization of state sovereignty over the aspirations of the Kashmiri population. This tension between self-determination, enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter, and territorial integrity, under Article 2, underscores the inherent difficulty of resolving disputes over territories contested between sovereign states. Consequently, the Kashmir issue remains one of the longest-standing and most intractable problems in UN history.

India's military action in Goa in 1961 ended over 500 years of Portuguese colonial rule following the failure of diplomatic negotiations between New Delhi and Lisbon (Bravo,

2008). On December 18, 1961, India launched Operation Vijay, employing overwhelming force against Portugal's limited and outdated military presence. This operation raised complex legal questions under international law and highlighted contrasting interpretations between Eastern and Western powers (Wright, 1962). The international response was sharply divided along geopolitical lines. Western Europe and the United States reacted with surprise and disapproval, whereas most Asian and African countries welcomed the action as a triumph over colonialism. The Soviet Union responded enthusiastically, with Nikita Khrushchev sending a message of commendation and Leonid Brezhnev offering public praise during a visit to India, encouraging the nation to disregard Western criticism (Fisher, 1962). Within Goa, few residents actively engaged in nationalist debates, reflecting the limited influence of nationalist rhetoric on local opinion and emphasizing the need for historians to consider broader social and political dynamics in understanding national identity formation. Legally, the operation underscored divergent interpretations of UN law, demonstrating how global perspectives could differ based on geopolitical alignment.The UN Security Council has repeatedly intervened in Indo-Pakistani conflicts, particularly regarding the Kashmir dispute, through ceasefire resolutions. In 1965, as tensions escalated along the Kashmir Cease-fire Line, the Security Council urged both India and Pakistan to implement an immediate ceasefire, respect the demarcation line, withdraw military personnel to their respective positions, and cooperate with the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) to monitor compliance (United Nations, 1965). Established in January 1949, UNMOGIP became the longest-serving UN operation, tasked with supervising ceasefires between the two nations, although India eventually reduced its cooperation after the 1972 conflict. Despite these efforts, the legal status of Security Council ceasefire resolutions remains ambiguous, particularly regarding their binding nature and applicability to non-state actors in non-international conflicts, complicating enforcement (Henderson & Lubell, 2013).India's nuclear program has further intersected with international scrutiny. The country's first nuclear test in 1974, followed by a series of tests in 1998, demonstrated a longstanding commitment to developing an independent nuclear deterrent based on prior technological advancements and strategic considerations. The 1998 tests, conducted under the BJP-led government, marked a shift from India's earlier policy of nuclear ambiguity, reflecting both domestic political imperatives and a desire to project military strength internationally (Ganguly, 1999). These tests provoked strong reactions, with nuclear-armed states and other major powers condemning them as a challenge to the global nonproliferation regime, particularly the objectives of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) (Wallace, 1998). In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1172, calling on India and Pakistan to halt further nuclear testing and accede to the CTBT, highlighting concerns over regional security and nuclear escalation (Mistry, 1999). The tests also led to economic and diplomatic sanctions, sparking debates on balancing emerging nuclear capabilities with global nonproliferation objectives. India remains a strong advocate for comprehensive reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), viewing it as essential for establishing a more transparent, accountable, and representative system of global governance. Working closely with the G-4 coalition, India has consistently called for expanding both permanent and non-permanent membership to better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. Scholars such as Morris (2000) and Thakur (2011) argue that without structural changes, the Council's legitimacy risks erosion as global power dynamics evolve. India's reform agenda is rooted in its long-standing support for multilateralism and a rules-based international system, emphasizing equity, sustainable development, and fair representation for developing nations.

Despite wide international backing, including from major powers such as the United States, reform efforts face challenges from influential states and unresolved disagreements among

various groups, including the G-4, African Union, and the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) coalition (Schaefer, 2023). The historical claim that India declined a permanent seat in the 1950s remains disputed, with Prime Minister Nehru clarifying in 1955 that no formal offer was made (The Hindu, 2021).India considers UNSC reform not as a symbolic gesture but as a necessary evolution to address contemporary global challenges. Reflecting priorities highlighted in Our Common Agenda (Co-Chairs of the Intergovernmental Negotiations, 2022), India actively participates in the reform process, aiming to contribute to a more inclusive and effective multilateral order. The current UNSC structure, dominated by five permanent members with veto power, is criticized for reinforcing outdated hierarchies and failing to provide equitable representation. Reform efforts have repeatedly stalled due to reluctance among current permanent members to dilute their influence and persistent regional rivalries (Pace, 2015).Over the years, various proposals have sought to expand both permanent and non-permanent seats to better reflect global realities (Ali, 2018). Notably, the Razali Plan of 1997 proposed enlarging the Council to improve legitimacy and inclusiveness .While influential, progress has been limited by entrenched power politics and legal challenges. Historical attempts to improve representation date back to UNGA Resolution 47/62 in 1992, which called for a more inclusive Council aligned with the evolving global order (UNGA, 1992). Despite minor expansions in 1965, the core power dynamics established post-World War II remain largely intact. With UN membership more than doubling since then, the representational gap has widened, further challenging the Council's credibility (Rakhmatullaevich, 2024). Article 23 of the UN Charter emphasizes equitable geographic representation and recognition of contributions to international peace and security. Underrepresented regions, particularly Africa, and coalitions like the L-69, continue to advocate for broad reforms encompassing both permanent and non-permanent categories. The G-4 nations, including India, argue for permanent seats based on growing global influence and historical contributions to peacekeeping and stability (Nadin, 2016). India emphasizes that expanding only non-permanent seats does little to address structural imbalance favoring the original P5. Instead, it supports a criteria-based approach to permanent membership, incorporating accountability mechanisms and ensuring equitable African representation in both categories. India also opposes intermediate models granting extended or semi-permanent terms, warning that these could empower middle powers while excluding smaller nations (Mukherjee & Malone, 2013). By collaborating with a broad coalition of developing nations, India reinforces its commitment to a representative, effective, and legitimate multilateral security architecture.

India's strategy has shifted from idealistic leadership to one grounded in pragmatic coalition-building and issue-based multilateralism. It has actively engaged in forums such as the G4, BRICS, and G20 while maintaining solidarity with the Global South and emerging economies (Gajula, 2025). This approach enables India to balance national interests with broader normative goals, including support for a rules-based international order (Hans, 2023). Despite this outward pragmatism, India's foreign policy retains traces of its post-colonial identity, often characterized by an ambivalence toward great power politics and a commitment to strategic autonomy (Alam, 2017). This duality creates both opportunities and limitations. On one hand, India is uniquely positioned to serve as a bridging power between developed and developing nations (Kavalski, 2019). On the other hand, domestic constraints, regional instability, and global power shifts particularly the rise of China and the West's economic recalibration complicate India's diplomatic calculus. India's multilateral engagement continues to emphasize reform across institutions like the WTO, IMF, and World Bank, where it aligns with emerging powers to advance collective interests. At the same time, India leverages its soft power, cultural diplomacy, and economic clout to position itself as a

credible global leader committed to inclusive governance .As a non-permanent UNSC member, India has demonstrated its capacity to engage constructively on global security issues, further strengthening its case for permanent membership (Gupta, 2010). Ultimately, India's pursuit of a permanent UNSC seat is not merely a reflection of status-driven ambitions but part of a larger foreign policy vision to participate in global rule-making and transform existing structures to reflect 21st-century geopolitical realities. As it continues to adapt its diplomatic toolkit, balancing tradition with modernity, India stands at a critical juncture poised to reshape both its own role and the architecture of global governance. India's evolving approach to multilateralism and its sustained pursuit of a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reflect a broader transformation in its foreign policy from Nehruvian idealism to a pragmatic, interest-driven strategy. Through decades of engagement with the UN and other global institutions, India has sought to align moral legitimacy with strategic capability, positioning itself as both a responsible stakeholder and a reform advocate. Its leadership in peacekeeping, G20 presidency, and active participation in coalitions such as the G4 and BRICS underscore its readiness to assume greater global responsibility. However, institutional inertia, geopolitical rivalries, and competing aspirations continue to constrain progress. Moving forward, India's success will depend on sustaining a balanced foreign policy one that combines realpolitik with normative commitment, strengthens alliances across the Global South and major powers alike, and continues to project its vision of a more equitable and representative global order. In doing so, India not only advances its national interest but also contributes to the democratization and legitimacy of global governance in the 21st century.

KEY FINDINGS

- India's foreign policy has shifted from Nehruvian idealism to pragmatic, interest-driven diplomacy focused on UNSC reform and global engagement

- India's pursuit of a permanent UNSC seat reflects its ambition for global leadership and a more representative Security Council

- India leverages multilateral forums like the G4, BRICS, and G20 to build support for UNSC reform and amplify Global South representation

- India's UNSC campaign faces resistance from permanent members, regional rivals, and the slow pace of UN institutional reform.

- India's G20 presidency enhanced its global image and demonstrated its readiness for greater leadership responsibilities.

- India balances its postcolonial Global South identity with its rising power ambitions, navigating complex diplomatic expectations.

SUGGESTIONS

- India must continue its transformation from Nehruvian idealism to pragmatic diplomacy to strengthen its influence in multilateral institutions and advance its UNSC aspirations.

- India should actively leverage its democratic credentials, long-standing contributions to UN peacekeeping, and growing economic and geopolitical influence to make a compelling case for permanent UNSC membership.

- India must employ strategic coalition-building through forums like the G4, BRICS, and G20, while maintaining solidarity with the Global South, to gather broader support for Security Council reform.

- India should balance moral appeals with realpolitik, including issue-based partnerships and hard power diplomacy, to overcome resistance from entrenched powers and competing aspirants.

- India must navigate complex geopolitical dynamics, managing relations with China, the U.S., and other major powers, without alienating developing nations or compromising its postcolonial identity.

- India should continue to demonstrate leadership on pressing global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and health crises, showcasing its readiness for expanded international responsibilities.

- India must balance its historical non-alignment and postcolonial identity with its rising power ambitions, ensuring diplomatic messaging appeals both to established powers and emerging economies.

- India should leverage its soft power, cultural diplomacy, and economic clout to reinforce its image as a credible, responsible stakeholder in global governance.

- Ultimately, India must persist in its efforts to secure a permanent UNSC seat not merely as a symbol of status but as part of a broader vision to democratize and reform global governance for the 21st century.

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