

# From the Red Fort to the World: Thirteen Years of India's Foreign Policy

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## ABSTRACT

This op-ed critically examines the evolution of India's foreign policy under the current administration, tracing the recalibration of strategic autonomy through expanding strategic partnerships, intensifying great-power competition and shifting regional alignments. It analyses the interplay between India's external ambitions and domestic political dynamics, arguing that the sustainability of its global influence will depend on its capacity to navigate geopolitical uncertainty while maintaining domestic stability, institutional credibility and strategic flexibility.

The Prime Minister's thirteenth consecutive Independence Day address came at a particularly revealing moment in Indian politics. The Prime Minister stood at the Red Fort projecting an image of India as increasingly confident, self-reliant and strategically assertive, even as the political landscape surrounding his government has become considerably more unsettled. The rise of a youth-led emergent political formation, growing public anger over administrative irregularities and unemployment, renewed attempts by opposition parties to coordinate against the government, and increasingly contentious debates over democratic institutions have created a domestic political environment markedly different from the early years of the current administration. Yet, to understand the significance of this moment, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate political context. Since the Prime Minister assumed office in 2014, India's foreign policy has steadily expanded in both scope and ambition. Strategic autonomy has remained a recurring principle, but its practice has evolved alongside changing domestic priorities, regional dynamics and the shifting balance of global power. From the early emphasis on neighbourhood diplomacy and development to India's growing engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the Global South and major powers, the current era has gradually widened the conception of India's place in the world.

Over the past twelve years, the current government has sought to reposition India from a major regional power with global ambitions to a state increasingly determined to shape the international order. This ambition is closely embedded in the broader vision of *Viksit Bharat @2047*, which seeks to link India's economic transformation at home with its strategic influence abroad. The expansion of strategic partnerships, new defence and economic agreements, India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, its outreach to the Global South and its growing diplomatic activism across the Middle East and Europe demonstrate the scale of this ambition. This contradiction offers an important lens through which to understand the broader foreign-policy project of the current administration, not merely through recent developments, but across its thirteen-year evolution. It allows us to examine India's growing global recognition, its

positioning among competing centres of power, and whether these diplomatic gains can remain resilient amid continuing geopolitical and domestic uncertainty.

The current era cannot be reduced either to traditional realism or to ideological nationalism. It represents an intersection of strategic calculation, complex interdependence, economic ambition, civilisational assertion and domestic political communication. Foreign policy under the current administration has repeatedly been used to demonstrate that India has acquired a voice commensurate with its size and aspirations. The Prime Minister's highly personalised diplomacy, his engagement with world leaders, and the extraordinary visibility given to overseas visits have made foreign policy a more prominent instrument of domestic political communication than it traditionally was. This public-facing character is crucial, as it has increasingly blurred the boundary between external diplomacy and domestic political narratives.

India has simultaneously deepened its relationship with the United States and maintained strategic engagement with Russia. It has strengthened the QUAD while remaining active in BRICS. It has expanded its engagement with the Gulf while developing ties with Israel and Iran. It has sought closer relations with France, Australia, Japan and Southeast Asia while retaining its claim to strategic autonomy. This balancing act is perhaps one of the most consequential foreign-policy achievements of the current administration. India has resisted being locked into a single strategic camp. Rather than choosing between Washington and Moscow, or between the West and the Global South, New Delhi has attempted to retain flexibility across multiple geopolitical theatres. However, this geopolitical complexity increasingly tests India's ability to sustain its strategic flexibility.

The emergence of new security alignments is complicating India's strategic calculations. The defence pact signed in Mecca between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, though not formally directed against India, has raised concerns in New Delhi over its implications for regional stability and India's security environment. Its significance extends beyond military cooperation, highlighting how quickly geopolitical equations can shift. India's long-standing engagement with Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf has been built on economic ties, energy security, diaspora interests and strategic cooperation. The pact therefore illustrates a key challenge for India's foreign policy as economic and diplomatic proximity does not necessarily translate into durable strategic alignment when regional security calculations change.

The current administration's foreign policy has often been strongest when India has been able to maintain multiple relationships simultaneously. But the international system is becoming less permissive. Great-power competition is intensifying, regional alliances are becoming more fluid, and middle powers are increasingly willing to pursue issue-based partnerships rather than permanent alignments. The same lesson emerges from India's neighbourhood.

Bangladesh's political transformation after Sheikh Hasina's departure highlighted the vulnerability of highly personalised bilateral relationships. While the partnership

between the two governments delivered gains in connectivity, energy and security, India's close association with the former Prime Minister became a political liability in parts of Bangladesh. The government under Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has sought a 'conducive environment' for improved ties while continuing to press India on Hasina's extradition. The case therefore introduces an important qualification to the strengths of personalised diplomacy, wherein relationships built around political leadership must ultimately be supported by institutions and interests that can survive leadership change.

For much of the current era, the ruling party's political dominance enabled the government to project continuity and confidence in foreign affairs. Foreign policy could be presented as an area in which political divisions were secondary to national interest. But the emergence of a newly mobilised youth formation and the broader mobilisation of India's youth have disturbed that political confidence. This does not necessarily mean that domestic political contestation will immediately alter foreign-policy priorities; rather, it raises questions about the political sustainability of the narrative through which foreign-policy achievements are communicated at home in India. What began as a youth movement around examination leaks, unemployment and institutional accountability rapidly acquired national political significance. The movement's ability to mobilise large numbers of young people and the subsequent resignation of the then Education Minister represented an unusual moment for a government that has rarely appeared to retreat under sustained street pressure. Additionally, opposition parties that had frequently struggled to maintain unity found a common political cause in the youth protests. The principal opposition party, regional parties and other opposition formations supported the protesters and sought to convert the movement into a broader challenge to the government. The opposition's renewed coordination is not necessarily evidence of an imminent electoral realignment, as Indian opposition remains fragmented along ideological, regional and leadership lines. Yet its ability to unite around specific issues suggests that the ruling party's political dominance is no longer entirely immune to issue-based mobilisation, creating an intriguing contrast.

At home, the Prime Minister therefore faces a more contested political field, even as India continues to project strategic confidence abroad. These two developments should not be treated as unrelated, as foreign policy has increasingly become part of the domestic political vocabulary of the current government. India's defence preparedness, border security, diplomatic partnerships, space programme, semiconductor ambitions and energy independence are all presented as components of a broader national transformation. In this political narrative, a stronger India abroad demonstrates the success of a stronger India at home. The domestic-foreign policy relationship is therefore not incidental to the current model of governance; it is part of the political construction of India's rise.

This connection between domestic transformation and international standing was particularly visible in the Prime Minister's 2026 Independence Day address, where the vision of India's global rise was closely intertwined with his domestic development agenda. The Prime Minister emphasised youth aspirations, technological development,

self-reliance and the ambition of building a developed India by 2047. At the same time, he declared that armed Maoism was nearing its end but warned of "Dimagi Naxals," extending the political vocabulary of internal security to ideological dissent. This is where the thirteen-year trajectory acquires its larger significance: international influence cannot be separated indefinitely from the domestic foundations on which that influence rests. India's global ambitions depend upon its domestic stability, economic performance and institutional credibility. A country seeking a permanent role in global governance, leadership in the Global South and greater strategic autonomy must possess not only military and economic capabilities but also the political institutions necessary to sustain its legitimacy.

The challenge for India's foreign policy in its next phase is therefore different from the challenge of its first decade under the current administration. The first phase was primarily about establishing recognition of India's growing global weight and expanding its diplomatic outreach. The second was increasingly about strategic positioning, balancing competing centres of power without becoming dependent on any one of them. The emerging phase is about resilience — ensuring that India's diplomatic gains endure geopolitical shocks, shifting regional alignments and domestic political change. Seen in this sequence, the current era represents continuity in the objective of strategic autonomy but evolution in the methods through which it is pursued.

Furthermore, the Mecca pact, the changing politics of Bangladesh, intensifying China-US competition and the continuing uncertainty surrounding Russia all point towards a world in which India's diplomatic room for manoeuvre may narrow. At the same time, the emergence of a politically restless youth constituency and a more coordinated opposition means that the domestic consensus around the government's political narrative can no longer be taken for granted. The central challenge, therefore, is no longer simply to expand India's diplomatic space, but to make that space sufficiently resilient to survive changes in the international system as well as shifts in domestic politics.

Therefore, the Prime Minister's thirteenth Independence Day address provides a useful vantage point to observe this transformation, as it bridges the domestic and international by linking economic development with national power, self-reliance with strategic autonomy, and domestic aspirations with India's growing role in the world. From the Red Fort to the wider world, this thirteen-year foreign policy journey reflects neither a complete rupture with India's established strategic tradition nor simple continuity. It represents a recalibration of strategic autonomy in which India seeks greater influence while preserving flexibility across competing centres of power. The enduring question for the next phase is whether this diplomatic flexibility can be converted into resilient influence while remaining anchored in the domestic political, economic and institutional foundations of India's rise.