

## From High Ground to High Table: The Evolution of Indian Multilateralism



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*Independent India's multilateral strategy was designed defensively as a means to provide the country with some leeway in an intensely competitive bipolar world. Today, India casts itself as an emerging power intent on exerting the bilateral and multilateral influence that the country's founding leaders had long aspired to. Obsolete frameworks such as nonalignment and developing world leadership have mostly been jettisoned in the process. However, questions remain about India's willingness and capacity to take on global responsibilities to match its global aspirations. This article traces the evolution of India's multilateral approach and examines its multilateral stance through several prisms: the UN Security Council, the World Trade Organization, global climate change negotiations, and some emerging international groupings of states in which India plays a role. Among our conclusions is that, in India's diplomacy, much depends on domestic factors. **KEYWORDS:** India, multilateralism, non-alignment, United Nations Security Council, World Trade Organization, climate change, BRIC, IBSA, Group of 20.*

THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S APPROACH TO MULTILATERALISM OVER RECENT decades constitutes a silent, but as yet incomplete revolution. From idealist moralizer to often pragmatic dealmaker, India's transition mirrors its rise—second only to China—from the confines of severe poverty and underdevelopment. India's voice carries more weight today in multilateral forums largely due to its enhanced economic power, political stability, and nuclear capability.

India spent many years after independence in 1947 struggling to achieve the international status that it expected because of its civilizational greatness and geopolitical uniqueness. But a lack of material resources and military capability long prevented it from securing a place under the “diplomatic sun.”<sup>1</sup> The Cold War global confrontation between East and West offered shelter through alliances, but threatened India's newfound independence. During those early years, India turned to multilateralism as a way of magnifying its influence in international affairs until it could exert influence more materially.

Today, in almost every international forum, India has explicitly engaged with smaller groups of powerful nations to affect outcomes at the expense of the more broad-based universalist approach that it traditionally espoused (or claimed to). India does not extensively rely on the multilateral treaty-based system, preferring instead bilateral relationships with major and regional pow-

ers in almost every field of international cooperation from trade to nuclear technology.

India today has outgrown its Cold War role as a third world, non-aligned nation to exercise influence as an emerging power through global governance by oligarchy—be it as part of the Five Interested Parties in the World Trade Organization (WTO); the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China (BRICS) group at the Copenhagen climate change negotiations of 2009; or the Group of 4 (G4) coalition of countries (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) demanding permanent membership in the UN Security Council. By choosing this variation on multilateralism, India is buying into a strategy developed largely by the United States, Russia, China, and several Western European powers to co-manage international economic and, to a lesser degree, security systems. However, India has so far been tentative about its willingness to assume much responsibility within these systems. Public opinion in India may well be ready for such a transition, but it is not yet clear that much of India's often conservative establishment is.

First, we trace the evolution of India's approach to multilateralism from 1947 to 1991. Then, we look at India's performance in four substantive fields of foreign policy or multilateral forums of significance to India: the UN Security Council; the WTO and its Doha Round negotiations culminating in 2008; international efforts to combat climate change through the Copenhagen and Cancun UN conferences; and some emerging international groupings of states in which India is playing a role. In the concluding section, we lay out the challenges that India faces in its approach toward multilateralism today.

## **Historical Overview**

Postindependence India was an enthusiastic supporter of the multilateral system, at that time comprised largely of the United Nations and its associated organizations. In September 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru professed “wholehearted co-operation and unreserved adherence, in both spirit and letter” to the UN Charter.<sup>2</sup> Parts of India's subsequently drafted constitution laid out directive principles of state policy on international affairs that adhered noticeably to principles of the UN Charter such as promoting peace and security, promoting international law, and settling international disputes through arbitration.<sup>3</sup>

### *Kashmir: 1947–1948*

New Delhi encountered a major setback at the UN on the issue of Kashmir in the winter of 1947. Faced with the choice of unilaterally repelling a Pakistani attack and consolidating India's hold on the erstwhile princely state, or referring the matter for arbitration to the UN, Nehru chose the latter option. Much to his disappointment, the Security Council failed to endorse India's claim to Kashmir; instead, insisting on a plebiscite of the state's population. India real-

ized belatedly that “the Security Council was a strictly political body and that decisions were taken by its members on the basis of their perspective of their national interest and not on the merits of any particular case.”<sup>4</sup>

The Kashmir episode permanently colored Indian thinking on the UN. Since then, India has been loath to allow any form of multilateral intervention in the South Asian region.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan’s consistent efforts to internationalize the Kashmir issue at the UN doubtless contributed to India’s growing preference for bilateralism over multilateralism.<sup>6</sup> New Delhi’s aversion to any UN inclination to override state sovereignty is evident even in its approach to peacekeeping—India’s most celebrated contribution to the UN, through its generous provision of military and civilian staff—for which it emphasizes the need for consent of the parties involved.

### *The Nehru Years: 1947–1964*

Despite its disappointment over Kashmir, India remained engaged with multilateral diplomacy because it believed that “the political game must be played in such a manner that India in spite of her political weakness could establish a politically strategic position.”<sup>7</sup> Also, “tensely surrounded by a galaxy of big, industrially-developed Powers to one of which interests she could easily fall a prey, the only possible defence for India perhaps was to get vigorously involved in the affairs of the United Nations.”<sup>8</sup>

Nehru’s foreign policy of nonalignment was a rational response to the tense post–World War II international system. He described it as “the natural consequence of an independent nation functioning according to its own rights.”<sup>9</sup> The policy was not simply one of neutrality. As the Indian representative at the UN, V. K. Krishna Menon, asserted, “there can no more be positive neutrality than there can be a vegetarian tiger.”<sup>10</sup> For India, nonalignment was a policy that stressed independence in international decisionmaking above all else.

India applied the nonaligned principle to its stance in the UN. It opposed the 1950 Acheson Plan, also known as the Uniting for Peace resolution, which empowered the UN General Assembly to act on security challenges at times when the Security Council was in deadlock. When war broke out in Korea, India initially endorsed UN intervention, but declined to label China an aggressor in the conflict or to support the crossing of UN troops into North Korea across the thirty-eighth parallel. When the UN did intervene in Korea, India sent not troops, but a field ambulance unit into battle. India adopted an equidistant approach at the Indochina conference of 1954.<sup>11</sup> But it did stake out ground as a “champion of pacific settlement of disputes” at the UN, contributing the highest number of troops to UN peacekeeping missions in Sinai and Congo.<sup>12</sup>

India was often criticized for not applying the nonaligned principle evenly in its behavior at the UN: “On the one hand, . . . India intensely desired to bring about a change in the political system of the world by supporting all kinds of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, while on the other

when faced with a real situation India supported the maintenance of status quo in the name of peace.”<sup>13</sup> And India’s failure to condemn the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 (while decrying Western military involvement on the side of Israel in the Suez crisis of the same year) led to perceptions in the West of Indian duplicity.

Decolonization provided India with a useful international influence multiplier. In 1947, Nehru championed the first Asian Relations conference in New Delhi. In 1954, India pushed for special provisions in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) for developing countries looking to protect their nascent economies from international competition.<sup>14</sup> In 1955, India was a key promoter of the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia. In the early 1960s, India lobbied for the expansion of the Security Council and was influential in the creation of the Group of 77 (G-77) developing countries that remains active to this day on economic and social issues within the UN system.

India’s appreciation of the multilateral system suffered an important setback in 1962 when China invaded India over a border dispute dating back to the colonial era. To Nehru’s appeal for China to be declared an aggressor in November 1962, only forty countries responded positively, of which only three were from the twenty-five nonaligned countries at the time.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Western bloc afforded India, both in spirit and in kind, significant support.

#### *A Global and Indian Hiatus: 1964–1971*

Nehru’s death in 1964 led to a gradual Indian disengagement from the UN and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), although New Delhi remained active enough to frustrate Pakistan’s attempts to isolate it on issues relating to their bilateral disputes. A more pragmatic focus on bilateral relations (including with the superpowers) took hold, qualifying the early idealism of India’s foreign policy, which had sought the moral high ground as a source of influence and “strategic space.”<sup>16</sup> Srinath Raghavan’s important recent work on Nehru’s strategic thought and foreign policy in fact severely qualifies a view of Nehru as primarily an idealist.<sup>17</sup>

Nehru’s successors, especially his daughter, Indira Gandhi, cleaved to powerful strains of realpolitik in their domestic and international dealings. India and Pakistan went to war in 1965, evoking a mixed response from the nonaligned countries, with more countries supporting Pakistan than India in part because of religious affinity. The UN did nothing more than to call for a cease-fire to end the crisis. Not surprisingly, in the NAM, India’s engagement became “general, rhetorical, and distant.”<sup>18</sup>

#### *Strategic Departures: 1971–1991*

India’s nadir in its engagement with the multilateral sphere came in 1971 during its military intervention in East Pakistan, which subsequently became

Bangladesh. India was roundly criticized in the UN and the NAM for interfering in what was legally a domestic matter for Pakistan. Despite making a plea on behalf of the millions of Bengali refugees who had crossed the border during the conflict, and the security implications of this exodus for India, New Delhi found itself almost entirely isolated in the international community. India, which had signed a treaty of friendship with Moscow only months earlier, escaped official censure by the UN solely because of the Soviet veto in the Security Council.

New Delhi went on in 1974 to conduct its first nuclear test, snubbing the nonproliferation regime that India itself had championed just a decade earlier. In defending its action, the Indian government described the test as a peaceful nuclear explosion and, having never signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) on grounds that it was unfairly biased toward the established nuclear powers, claimed it could not be found in violation of it. But the test led to a strengthening of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, as India was cast into diplomatic *purdah* in the field of arms control and disarmament for the next three decades.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1980s, New Delhi was sorely tried by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (reserved on substance, but mindful of its close ties with Moscow) and grew further estranged from the NAM. And during that decade, India launched an ill-fated “peacekeeping” mission in Sri Lanka that was interpreted locally by many as more of a forcible military intervention, and also air-dropped food into Tamil areas of Sri Lanka under domestic political pressure to aid the population there in its fight against the Sri Lankan government. But by the end of the decade, growing rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union began to reinvigorate the Security Council as a forum for multilateral cooperation.<sup>20</sup> In this spirit, at a special session of the General Assembly in 1988, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi put forward an ambitious proposal for nuclear disarmament.<sup>21</sup>

### **Adjusting to a New World**

Post–Cold War, the UN became considerably more active than it had been over the previous two decades, marked initially by the 1992 Rio Summit on Climate Change, at which India played an important role.<sup>22</sup> In other UN conferences, including that leading to the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995, and the adoption of the Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, New Delhi occasionally opted for a stance viewed by some as a would-be “spoiler.”<sup>23</sup>

Domestically, reforms accelerated India’s economic growth rate and ultimately garnered it emerging nation status. The collapse of the Soviet Union administered the final nail in the coffin of nonalignment as a meaningful instrument. Political fragmentation within India meanwhile contributed to the

emergence of divergent opinions on the country's international role while Indian diplomacy took on distinctly economic hues.<sup>24</sup>

Third world leadership became only an intermittent and secondary goal of Indian foreign policy. Afro-Asian solidarity had little meaning in WTO negotiations where African agricultural interests could be at odds with those of India, as highlighted by Amartya Sen.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, India increasingly stepped up efforts, notably in Asia, to consider alternative pathways of international cooperation. In 1992, India recognized Israel, leading to a thriving relationship in military procurement. The same year, New Delhi launched its Look East policy, which focused on improving ties with Southeast Asian nations, culminating in full partnership in 1995 and membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in 1996.

In the following years, India's engagement with the world continued apace. Less than a decade after a second round of nuclear tests that invited the severe, but short-lived, ire of the United States and China, in 2007 New Delhi concluded the "123 Agreement" with Washington, DC, which would produce an end to over three decades of nuclear isolation. Following intense lobbying by both the United States and India, by October 2008 the deal had been approved by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the US Senate, achieving for President George W. Bush the main positive element of his foreign policy legacy. While a prominent author in India expressed alarm at the "self-conscious revolt in India against multilateralism" that the US-India deal represented, he worried more about "how much like the US we [Indians] want to become . . . unilateral, oriented towards hegemony more than stability of the world, and besotted with its own sense of power."<sup>26</sup>

### *India Rising: Reform of the UN Security Council*

Identifying early on an opportunity that India's new economic dispensation could create for the Security Council, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992 made a case for expansion of the Council "to maintain political and moral effectiveness."<sup>27</sup> The United States responded tepidly in 1993 with the suggestion that Council expansion should begin with Germany and Japan only. The US response was a pointed reminder to India that its earlier anti-Americanism in multilateral institutions still carried a cost.

In 1991–1992, India sat as an elected member in the Security Council during one of the body's busiest periods with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; Iraq's subsequent repression of its Kurds; the beginnings of the disintegration of Yugoslavia leading to a succession of wars in the ensuing years all featuring extensive UN involvement; and a UN humanitarian venture in Somalia. India sought to temper enthusiasm for armed intervention (as opposed to consent-based peacekeeping), later seeming prophetic of the risks then being courted.<sup>28</sup>

In 1996, India ran again for an elected seat. It competed with Japan for the single Asian seat available and lost massively. Indian foreign service members

spoke privately of the debilitating effects on their campaign of Japanese “checkbook diplomacy” in the developing world. Doubtless this factor played a role, but New Delhi’s caustic performance at the CTBT conference earlier that year alienated not a few of its NAM partners as well as many in the West.<sup>29</sup>

After this humiliation, the Security Council’s important role in the 1998–1999 Kosovo crisis and the 2002–2003 Iraq saga as well as its endorsement of US-led military action in Afghanistan in 2001 and thereafter represented further reasons why India wishes to secure its own accession to a permanent seat in the Council. In the run-up to the 2005 UN summit, India banded with Brazil, Germany, and Japan (together known as the G4) in order to press for Council reform involving the creation of four new permanent seats for them (and another two for Africa as well as four additional elected seats). In spite of a determined push from all of the capitals involved, the effort failed. The G4 had essentially argued its case on the basis of entitlement given the weight of the four countries in international relations, their financial share of the UN’s bills, and their contributions to aspects of the UN’s work such as peacekeeping. But this failed to address the concern of some member states that were more worried about the Security Council’s effectiveness than the additional legitimacy a wider composition could impart, fearing that a much larger Council could become paralyzed on key issues.

By 2006, the issue of the day was the candidacy of Indian UN Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor for the position of Secretary-General, an effort eventually torpedoed by the United States. Gradually what fervor there was in India for a permanent seat at the Security Council largely dissipated, particularly after the Group of 20 (G-20)—in which India played an influential role—emerged as the key leader-level forum in addressing the global financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009. Referring to India’s campaign for a permanent seat, former foreign secretary M. K. Rasgotra commented in 2007 that “things of that kind will come to India unasked as its economic and other strengths grow.”<sup>30</sup>

After a long gap, India returned to the Security Council in January 2011 as an elected member. Almost immediately, it was required to juggle contending principles within its foreign policy canon when Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi moved to repress the protest movement engulfing the country. India joined all other Council members in voting for sanctions and in referring the regime’s behavior to the International Criminal Court (of which India is not a supporter), leaving India’s ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri to explain that, while gravely concerned about events in Libya, India “would have preferred a more calibrated and gradual approach.”<sup>31</sup> Several weeks later, on 17 March 2011, Gaddafi’s repression having grown more severe, the Council decided by ten affirmative votes that carried the day against five abstentions (including India’s) to mandate “all necessary means” to protect civilians in Libya and also instituted a no-fly zone. Only days earlier, Indian foreign secretary Nirupama

Rao had stated that India would oppose the use of force.<sup>32</sup> Thus, India finds itself required to make difficult choices in extreme situations, appealing to different principles it sometimes evokes. The 17 March abstentions, all from international heavyweights (Brazil, China, Germany, India, and Russia), make clear that India's presence in such bodies as the Security Council is shifting the balance of international influence away from the West, even though Western powers carried the vote on this particular issue and day.<sup>33</sup>

#### *From Universalism to Individualism: The WTO*

A more confident India also asserted itself in the multilateral trading regime, as it formed a loose coalition of developing countries seeking to prevent the launch of a new post-Uruguay trading round.<sup>34</sup> Largely a passive spectator in the GATT/WTO regime until the late 1990s, India had spoken up at the 1999 Seattle meeting of the WTO against the inclusion of labor and environmental standards on the WTO agenda.<sup>35</sup> In the run-up to the Doha Round of 2001, India challenged the efforts of developed nations to introduce competition, investment, trade facilitation, and government procurement into discussions. India also battled hard for the interests of its pharmaceutical industry, threatened by the WTO intellectual property regime.<sup>36</sup> India's negotiating stance was aided by the fact that in the run-up to Doha, it was better prepared than other developing countries to meet many Uruguay Round commitments due to its economic reforms that began in 1991.<sup>37</sup>

At the WTO, India was careful to continue emphasizing its developing country credentials in order to form coalitions within the larger group of developing countries to pressure the industrialized nations for concessions. Brazil and India formed the G-20 group of developing countries in 2003, advocating their collective interests on a number of issues (distinct from the G-20 group of major economies that came together to tackle the global financial crisis in 2008).

In 2004, India was included in a small high-powered group at the WTO called the Five Interested Parties—along with the United States, the European Union (EU), Brazil, and Australia—that superseded the traditional Quad of the United States, the EU, Japan, and Canada. India's inclusion was a sign, beyond its economic significance, of the G-20's effectiveness as a negotiating bloc. It was also a sign of US acceptance of India as an important player in multilateral negotiations.

The major powers engaged India at the WTO largely due to its growth potential. India was also in a better position to confront Western powers there since its trade no longer relied as much on them because it was gradually shifting toward China instead.<sup>38</sup> Further, whereas in the past India had opposed the inclusion of services in trade negotiations, India's services-led growth ensured that by 2004—when services accounted for approximately 52.0 percent of gross domestic product, up from 28.5 percent five decades earlier<sup>39</sup>—it was an



ardent advocate of liberalization in trade in services.<sup>40</sup> In its postliberalization era, India's traditional "deep antipathy toward the global trading system"<sup>41</sup> was gradually being replaced by the realization that some concessions were necessary in order to promote its economic interests and that negotiations involved cutting mutually acceptable deals instead of taking the unassailable moral high ground.

Nevertheless, the Doha Round discussions of 2007 and 2008 proved a brass knuckles affair amid a burgeoning global food security scare (with attendant inflation of basic produce prices in most countries). India and Brazil, speaking "for" the developing countries, confronted the United States on agriculture, an important issue in the run-up to national elections in the United States in late 2008 and in India in early 2009. While both Washington and New Delhi were open to successful talks, their political bottom lines collided in Geneva in July 2008. Rather damagingly for India's international image, in the final reel in Geneva, India was abandoned in its hard line by Brazil which, like many African countries, on balance, wanted an agreement even at the price of greater compromise. Indian commerce minister Kamal Nath stood out in his vehemence within the negotiations. "I reject everything," he was quoted as saying in response to a compromise proposal that others seemed to be prepared to swallow.<sup>42</sup> He was alone in seeming to claim credit for the talks' failure, with EU, US, and Chinese negotiators, who had contributed considerably to the overall deadlock, only too willing to deflect responsibility onto him.<sup>43</sup>

India's position was colored, above all, by domestic politics.<sup>44</sup> India had faced domestic opposition to its membership in GATT even back in the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> In the 1980s an economic analyst noted, "India's trade policy is congealed in a mould made by the domestic political interests."<sup>46</sup> The connection, according to this analyst, was simple—politicians are sustained on the votes of farmers and the money of industrialists. As a result, Indian negotiators find it safer to stick to the "official line of solidarity amongst the developing countries, based on an aggregation of demands and no concessions."<sup>47</sup> Nath, a highly intelligent, self-confident politician, was above all a long-time Congress stalwart with an eye constantly to domestic political advantage, keenly aware that 70 percent of India's population remains rural and largely sustained by agriculture.<sup>48</sup>

In India, Nath was largely portrayed in heroic terms.<sup>49</sup> Less was said about how the Chinese delegation was only too happy to see Nath in the lead. But in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's second consecutive term following the 2009 election, Nath was shifted to the road transport and highways portfolio and replaced by the emollient Anand Sharma. India promptly invited over thirty leading trade ministers to New Delhi for consultations, perhaps in order to allow this change of personnel and style to sink in fully and, in the words of one commentator, to cast India as a "pro-active participant in multi-lateral talks rather than a thorn in the flesh as the global media had suggested in 2008."<sup>50</sup>

Following the collapse of Doha Round negotiations, New Delhi redoubled its efforts to achieve bilateral and regional trade agreements. By September 2009, India had conducted ten rounds of trade negotiations with Japan, six rounds with the EU, and three rounds with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).<sup>51</sup> In August 2009, India also concluded the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA), albeit a limited one involving many opt-out options.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Shape of Things to Come: Climate Change*

Following the 2009 national elections and a first term in which environmental matters received scant attention within the government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed one of India's most talented and mediagenic younger politicians, Jairam Ramesh, to the environment portfolio. India's position had long been to stick closely to the terms of the Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, under which industrialized countries committed to specific targets for emission reductions while developing countries were not required to do so under the "common but differentiated" responsibilities approach that had characterized UN discussions and agreements on the issue since the Rio conference.

Ramesh at first yielded little. However, it soon transpired that within the government, Ramesh was arguing in favor of flexibility in line with the reported determination of Prime Minister Singh that, at the Copenhagen conference, India should be "part of the solution to the problem."<sup>53</sup> Ramesh was quoted as arguing that "India must listen more and speak less in negotiations" because its stance is "disfavored by the developed countries, small island states and vulnerable countries. It takes away from India's aspirations for permanent membership of the Security Council."<sup>54</sup> He was soon challenged by two of India's long-time negotiators. Specifically, they questioned an offer articulated by Ramesh that India could reduce its carbon intensity by 20 percent to 25 percent of 2005 levels by 2020, because New Delhi had not yet elicited reciprocal concessions.<sup>55</sup>

Ramesh's arguments seemed to recognize on the one hand that India could not stand idly by as its own environment headed toward serious degradation but also, implicitly, on the other that India needed to be in a position to offer something positive if nonbinding—including a degree of international follow-up on its implementation of commitments at the negotiating table—if it genuinely wanted to play, particularly in the big leagues.<sup>56</sup> Praful Bidwai, a noted Indian journalist and commentator, offered India a thoughtful agenda for Copenhagen that would aim for a "strong" accord, in the national and international interest, but he was not widely echoed.<sup>57</sup> In the event, India offered (voluntary) emissions goals that would be subject to international "consultation and analysis," but not scrutiny or formal review.<sup>58</sup>

The outcome of the Copenhagen talks, widely perceived as a fiasco and criticized by India's prime minister, actually served India's diplomatic interests

well in allowing it to be “part of the solution.” A last-minute truncated accord offered by the BASIC powers and the United States, and acknowledged—however reluctantly and only by taking “note” of it—by the conference plenary, underscored that India was now an indispensable negotiating partner on key global challenges such as climate change. Unlike its posture in Geneva at the WTO in 2008, when China shielded itself behind an assertive India, at Copenhagen India allowed China to take the heat for frustrating officials and non-governmental organization activists who were campaigning for an ambitious outcome.

Many at home in India perceived the results as positive rather than negative on the global climate conference and its limited outcome.<sup>59</sup> All in all, in contrast to its positions at the WTO in 2008, India demonstrated agility in the run-up to the Copenhagen conference and dexterity during the meeting, allowing it to emerge as one of the forgers of a compromise. Not surprisingly, it also adopted a flexible negotiating stance at the follow-up UN conference in Cancun in December 2010.<sup>60</sup>

### *New Diplomacy: New Forums*

The emergence of the G-20 at the leader level and India’s inclusion represent a politically significant graduation for the country rather than an introduction to serious consultations on global financial issues. After all, India had long been involved in such consultations at the International Monetary Fund and at the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, cutting an impressive figure in many instances. India’s “finance diplomacy” has been one of its strongest contributions to international relations writ large. The G-20’s emergence at the leader level while Manmohan Singh was India’s prime minister was a happy coincidence, as group insiders report that, given his extensive background in economic issues, he has consistently been one of the two or three voices most keenly anticipated and listened to around the table.<sup>61</sup>

India’s desire to be a “canny negotiator” that effectively walks the North-South line could shape the country’s engagement with the multilateral system in years to come.<sup>62</sup> However, as Nitin Desai argues, this approach may work less well in an era in which India is increasingly seen internationally as advancing its own interests rather than seeking to champion (more than rhetorically) those of a highly differentiated developing world as a whole.<sup>63</sup>

India’s tightrope walk is increasingly evident. It consistently voted with Washington against Iran’s nuclear program at the IAEA while continuing to maintain friendly bilateral relations with Iran and defend its own nuclear program. It promotes the notion of Brazil, India, Russia, and China (BRIC) as a coalition of emerging economies championing developing nation causes, but is careful not to antagonize Washington by endorsing an alternative international currency to the dollar, something for which China and Russia have expressed support.<sup>64</sup> It has joined Brazil in criticizing China’s exchange rate policies, making clear that BRIC solidarity is selective.<sup>65</sup>

It is increasingly clear that New Delhi will walk the North-South line largely to its own benefit, employing development rhetoric to both rally poorer nations and pressure richer ones, yielding at times to pressure from both sides, but very much keeping its national interests to the forefront in crafting its ultimate bottom line and exploiting its multiple international identities including its status as an emerging power.

While India seems willing to play its part in international summits and negotiations, New Delhi prioritizes bilateral ties, regional forums, small caucus groups within wider institutions, and new forums of particular relevance to India's interests. The US relationship has already paid rich dividends in terms of nuclear technology, trade, agriculture, science and technology, military cooperation, and a host of other areas. Buoyed by these successes, New Delhi has established strategic partnerships (of varying depth) with a host of powers, including the EU, Russia, Japan, Israel, Brazil, South Africa, and China.

In 2003 India, Brazil, and South Africa combined to form IBSA, a forum for credible South-South cooperation along both political and economic lines explicitly presented as a partnership of the leading democracies of their continents. Initially launched at the leader level in September 2006, this "dialogue" forum has so far focused mainly on trade while the three countries also emphasize the multiethnic nature of their societies. The forum has served as an arena of strategic cooperation between the three emerging powers. One analyst describes it as "both a strategic alliance for the pursuit of common interests of developing countries in global institutions but also as a platform for bi-, trilateral and interregional South-South cooperation."<sup>66</sup> While the economic content of IBSA is private sector led, in keeping with the market economies of the three countries involved, Prime Minister Singh has invested himself enthusiastically in this new forum. IBSA is for India a first-of-its-kind partnership based partly on political values. However, shared democratic values also underpinned the US-India rapprochement, and India has participated in several broader international gatherings of a democratic nature and repeatedly upheld the democratic character and content of the commonwealth.<sup>67</sup>

One alarm bell triggered by IBSA and other such bodies is whether, rather than representing global outreach, such groupings represent, as Rajiv Kumar suggests, a "flight from the region" where India's own subregional organization, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is embarrassingly marking time.<sup>68</sup> All recognize that SAARC's effectiveness as a regional forum is in part undermined by tensions between Pakistan and India, but India's own leadership of the region within which it is, to a degree, a hegemon, has been hesitant, with little credible follow-up between summits and ministerial meetings. India has instead actively pursued regional relationships with ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), not least because of China's deep involvement in both organizations and the regions that their memberships cover. Because it does not include India among its full

members, the SCO may actually be of greater concern to India at present, focused as it is on Central Asia, with which North India has long historical and cultural ties, and which enjoys significant natural resource reserves.<sup>69</sup>

A reservation over much of the “variable architecture” available to India in its diplomacy today—as described by Shankar Acharya—is that most of the bodies mentioned above are not yet mature, have no secretariats, and constitute mainly highly informal institutions that are likely to prove of transitional rather than longer-lasting value.<sup>70</sup> This does not mean that they are irrelevant. On the contrary, they offer India opportunities for different types of engagement with an international system that is increasingly variegated in terms of the power and influence of individual countries or groups of countries, especially as US global hegemony continues to wane. India will need to remain nimble in assessing what groupings it should join and where it should invest its effort at a time of significant fluidity in plurilateral, regional, and multilateral arrangements.<sup>71</sup>

### *The Challenges of Domestic Politics*

When asked what India does best internationally, a noted denizen of India’s Ministry of External Affairs, and a keen bilateralist at that, replied without a moment’s hesitation “multilateral diplomacy.”<sup>72</sup> But in that sphere New Delhi’s posture has often been described as “defensive” and “obstructionist” by Indian and non-Indian observers alike, along with recognition that Indian negotiators are rarely less than “impressive” and often “brilliant.”<sup>73</sup>

Although reactions to some of India’s actions and positions over time no doubt overstate the tilt against multilateralism in Indian foreign policy, they do raise two important questions that are relevant today as India emerges as a premier global interlocutor. First, what kind of power does India aspire to be, and how will it engage with others in years to come? Second, is the Indian foreign policy establishment attuned to engaging with the multilateral system, not just on India’s own terms but also on terms that will appeal to others and contribute to positive outcomes?

In 2004 Manmohan Singh outlined India’s global philosophy, which he described as “cooperative pluralism.”<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless there exists a gap between prime ministerial and other Indian aspirations for a more genuinely multilateral management of international relations on the one hand, and India’s negotiating position and style in a variety of forums and issue by issue on the other. This gap is emphasized by a commentator on India’s earlier often obdurate climate change diplomacy: “How did a country likely to be on the front-line of climate impacts—with a vast proportion of the world’s poor and a reasonably good record of energy-related environmental policy and performance—reach this diplomatic *cul de sac*?”<sup>75</sup> The story is the same in trade—India holds up its economic liberalization as a major achievement in facilitating the free flow of goods and services across borders, yet gets saddled with the blame for obstructing the Doha Round. Similarly on nuclear technol-

ogy, India trumpets its record in nonproliferation and nuclear safety, yet is excluded for three decades from multilateral access to nuclear technology and is consistently chided for refusing to sign on to the NPT and CTBT.

Domestic politics play a key role in determining India's positions on hot-button international issues. And domestic politics in India have largely been geared toward constraining the positions of its negotiators and representatives, or influencing them unduly toward being intransigent and holding dogmatic positions on key issues for fear they may be seen as insufficiently sensitive to parochial national interests. Despite India's new membership in the multilateral power elite, the domestic chorus on multilateral challenges too often remains a resounding no. Negotiators are not equipped or mandated to pull domestic constituents along, at a time when India's domestic politics are getting more complex by the day. The climate change issue provides a case in point. India's representatives are routinely castigated by domestic politicians for the slightest hint of a conciliatory stance. In October 2009, Ramesh outlined the steps that India had taken to share the responsibility of arriving at an agreement.<sup>76</sup> However, "on cue, he was torn apart by sections of the domestic constituency, as he has been before, for making such utterances."<sup>77</sup>

While other countries are not immune to the push and pull of domestic politics, India's disadvantage is that it has not yet developed a habit of conciliating domestic pressures with a results-oriented stance in some multilateral institutions. Indian experts point to a wariness of multimotive gains and a tendency by Indian negotiators to default to zero-sum calculations.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, the organization of Indian arguments around "principles," as Kumar points out, largely precludes compromise; whereas advancement of its "interests" might more greatly favor "give and take" in order to achieve overall positive outcomes.<sup>79</sup>

New Delhi's growing drive to join the major powers in managing the multilateral system creates a degree of unpredictability concerning how India's positions are likely to evolve during international negotiations. An Indian interlocutor comments that "Indian leaders may yet recognize the difference between perching themselves on a high chair at the high table where they must cooperate with those that really run the show, and sitting at the head of the developing nations' table where they can hold sway and appear to matter."<sup>80</sup> Given that the future of the international system is likely to be determined to a significant degree by Sino-US understandings and disagreements, India will likely continue to straddle as many multilateral divides as possible to keep its options open while its weight in international relations grows.

## **Conclusion**

Jaswant Singh, former foreign minister of India, comments that "multilaterally, many Indian voices have been very conscious of years of colonial 'subjecthood.' The result has been excessive Indian touchiness at times.

Underlying Indian positions in some international economic negotiations has been a fear of foreign economic looting rooted in our history.”<sup>81</sup>

India’s attachment to multilateralism is marked by a simple truth—postindependence, it was the next best option, second to wielding the actual power that it perceived itself to deserve in international affairs. Over the years, India has been constrained to remain mostly a (selective) rule taker in the multilateral system while believing it should have been a rule maker. This has led to a number of apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in its policy, not least with respect to its strong attachment to sovereignty and the nonuse of force, its feeble promotion of its own attractive values of democracy, and its internal struggle for the attainment of human rights.

India does take its international legal obligations very seriously if, as do other countries, occasionally in the breach. However, pooled or shared sovereignty is, in the words of one Western envoy in New Delhi, “not India’s thing.”<sup>82</sup> For many Indian practitioners and analysts, multilateralism is at best a defense against the unilateralism of others, just as arguments for multipolarity have been largely articulated with reference to a unipolar order centered on Washington, DC, that perhaps reminds too many Indians of the colonial dispensation to which they were once subjected.

As India takes on further responsibilities, like it currently is doing in the Security Council, New Delhi’s decisions may surprise some Indians by their pragmatism and also some of the country’s international partners on occasions when it harks back to some of its earlier principles. India has not yet thought through the extent to which it is able and willing to take on extensive and potentially expensive economic burden-sharing obligations. The voluntary, non-binding route in defining its commitments is more attractive for now but, as its economy and weight grow further, it will not find it easy to stick to this path.

Balancing domestic politics with a desire for international status—both economic and political—will be India’s challenge in the future. 🌐

## Notes

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4. Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, “India and the United Nations,” in Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta, eds., *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007), p. 200.

5. See C. Raja Mohan, "India and the New World Order," *Seminar* 529 (September 2003), [www.india-seminar.com/2003/529/529%20c.%20raja%20mohan.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/529/529%20c.%20raja%20mohan.htm).

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7. Werner Levi, "Necrology on Indian Neutralism," *Eastern World* 17, no. 2 (1963): 10, cited in T. Ramakrishna Reddy, *India's Policy in the United Nations* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1968), p. 26.

8. Chamling, *India and the United Nations*, p. 116.

9. *Asian Recorder* 3 (1957): 1531, cited in Priyanka Upadhyaya, *Nonaligned States and India's International Conflicts* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990), p. 7.

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13. Chamling, *India and the United Nations*, p. 155.

14. Indian Council, *India and the United Nations*, pp. 185–188.

15. Upadhyaya, *Nonaligned States*, p. 55.

16. Siddharth Varadarajan, national editor of *The Hindu*, interviewed by David Malone, New Delhi, February 2010.

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19. See Ian Anthony, Christer Ahlstrom, and Vitaly Fedchenko, *Reforming Nuclear Export Controls: The Future of the Nuclear Suppliers Group*, SIPRI Research Report No. 22 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 41–56.

20. See David M. Malone, ed., *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), particularly, pp. 4–13, 617–649, and the chapter by Peter Wallensteen and Patrick Johansson, "Security Council Decisions in Perspective," pp. 17–33.

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70. Shankar Acharya, former chief economic advisor of the government of India, interviewed by David Malone, New Delhi, February 2010.

71. The authors are grateful to Anwarul Hoda for sparking these thoughts during an interview with David Malone, New Delhi, February 2010.

72. Confidential interview conducted by David Malone with one of India's leading foreign policy practitioners, May 2008.

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78. Conversations with David Malone, New Delhi, February 2010.

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