

# The Jaishankar Doctrine: India's Pragmatic Approach to Global Diplomacy

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## ABSTRACT

The Jaishankar Doctrine represents a transformative shift in Indian foreign policy, emphasizing pragmatic realism, strategic autonomy, and interest-based multi-alignment in an increasingly fragmented global order. Developed under the leadership of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, the doctrine departs from traditional frameworks like Nehruvian idealism and non-alignment, opting instead for a proactive, issue-based diplomacy that seeks to position India as a leading power. This article critically analyzes the foundational principles of the Jaishankar Doctrine, its divergence from earlier policy models, and its influence on India's bilateral and multilateral engagements. It also explores how the doctrine navigates the balance between national sovereignty and global interdependence, while assessing its broader implications and limitations for India's leadership ambitions amid ongoing geopolitical disruptions. The study concludes that while the doctrine enhances India's global relevance, its long-term success depends on bridging structural gaps and sustaining credible leadership through both values and performance.

**KEYWORDS:** *Jaishankar Doctrine; Indian foreign policy; strategic autonomy; multi-alignment; Global South; diplomacy; Nehruvian idealism; multipolar world; geopolitical disruption; global leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a profound transformation in the global geopolitical landscape, characterized by a resurgence of great power rivalries, fragmentation of multilateralism, and the reconfiguration of global economic and security architectures. Amid these shifts, India's foreign policy has evolved significantly to navigate an increasingly complex international environment. Central to this transformation is the emergence of what has come to be known as the Jaishankar Doctrine, a pragmatic and interest-driven approach to diplomacy articulated and implemented by Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's current External Affairs Minister. Appointed in 2019, Dr. Jaishankar, India's first career diplomat to assume this ministerial post, brought with him a deep institutional memory and strategic sensibility shaped by decades of service in key global capitals. His tenure has coincided with a period of immense global churn: the rise of an assertive China, declining Western cohesion, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and mounting challenges in India's immediate

neighbourhood. Within this volatile context, the Jaishankar Doctrine has emerged as a distinctive and coherent foreign policy framework that seeks to safeguard India's core interests while expanding its global footprint.

Unlike previous doctrines, such as Nehruvian idealism, which stressed moral leadership and non-alignment, or Gujral Doctrine, which focused on neighborhood diplomacy, the Jaishankar Doctrine is explicitly realist, transactional where necessary, and unapologetically rooted in national interest. It promotes a multi-alignment strategy where India builds issue-based partnerships across ideological divides, while preserving strategic autonomy. The doctrine positions India not as a fence-sitter but as a "leading power", willing to take stands, shape debates, and assert its voice on issues ranging from climate change and global governance to technology standards and regional security.

This reorientation is not merely rhetorical. It is evident in India's active role in plurilateral groupings

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such as QUAD, BRICS, I2U2, and the International Solar Alliance; in its vocal advocacy for reforming multilateral institutions like the UN and WTO; and in its calibrated approach to balancing ties with antagonistic global powers, such as the United States, Russia, and China. Equally significant is India's leadership claim in representing the Global South, most notably during its G20 presidency, where it positioned itself as a bridge between the developed and developing world. Despite its strategic coherence and growing global resonance, the Jaishankar Doctrine is not without limitations. India continues to face structural constraints—ranging from economic bottlenecks and capacity deficits to regional security challenges and questions about its domestic democratic trajectory. Moreover, balancing strategic autonomy with the demands of a deeply interdependent world remains a delicate task.

This research article explores the conceptual foundations, strategic dimensions, and geopolitical implications of the Jaishankar Doctrine. It traces the doctrine's divergence from earlier foreign policy paradigms, assesses its impact on India's bilateral and multilateral engagements, and evaluates its capacity to reconcile autonomy with global interdependence. Finally, it reflects on the potential and constraints of the doctrine in enabling India's emergence as a global leader amid ongoing international disruptions. Through a critical and comprehensive lens, the article argues that the Jaishankar Doctrine represents not just a tactical shift, but a strategic reimagining of India's place in the world.

## Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Indian foreign policy has traditionally revolved around frameworks such as Nehruvian idealism, non-alignment, and strategic autonomy, with seminal contributions by scholars like K.P. Misra, Rajesh Rajagopalan, and Shashi Tharoor exploring India's normative and civilizational diplomacy. In recent years, however, there has been a perceptible shift in academic and policy discourse towards a more realist and interest-based paradigm, especially following India's rising global aspirations and assertiveness post-2014. Analysts like C. Raja Mohan, Harsh V. Pant, and Shivshankar Menon have documented India's gradual evolution towards strategic pragmatism and multi-alignment, particularly in response to China's assertiveness and shifting global power dynamics. The writings of Dr. S. Jaishankar himself, particularly *The India Way* (2020) and *Why Bharat Matters* (2023), serve as primary articulations of this emerging doctrine, framing India's foreign policy as one that is flexible, confident, and unapologetically self-interested. While

some commentators view the doctrine as a continuation of long-standing principles of autonomy and plural engagement, others argue it constitutes a rupture from India's earlier idealistic posture, emphasizing performance, reciprocity, and geopolitical agency. Despite growing attention to the Jaishankar Doctrine in think tanks, policy briefs, and editorials, systematic academic inquiry into its theoretical coherence, strategic implications, and long-term sustainability remains limited creating a gap this study seeks to address.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical methodology rooted in the traditions of political realism and foreign policy analysis. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including official speeches and writings by Dr. S. Jaishankar, policy documents from India's Ministry of External Affairs, government white papers, and multilateral declarations such as those from G20, BRICS, and QUAD summits. Scholarly books, journal articles, and opinion pieces by prominent foreign policy experts have been critically examined to trace the conceptual evolution and strategic application of the Jaishankar Doctrine. A comparative approach is also employed to evaluate the doctrine against earlier Indian foreign policy frameworks such as Nehruvian idealism and the Gujral Doctrine. The study uses content analysis to identify recurring themes and strategic principles and situates them within the broader global geopolitical context. By synthesizing theoretical insight with empirical observation, the methodology aims to provide a comprehensive and interpretative understanding of how the Jaishankar Doctrine reflects a new phase in India's diplomatic trajectory.

## Objective

The primary objective of this research article is to critically examine and articulate the contours of the Jaishankar Doctrine as a defining feature of contemporary Indian foreign policy. It aims to explore how this doctrine represents a decisive shift from earlier paradigms such as Nehruvian idealism and the doctrine of non-alignment. The study seeks to analyze how this evolving diplomatic approach enables India to navigate an increasingly multipolar, fragmented, and competitive international order, while simultaneously pursuing strategic autonomy. Furthermore, the research evaluates the doctrine's influence on India's bilateral and multilateral engagements, particularly with major global powers and regional stakeholders, and assesses its implications for India's aspirations for global leadership. By doing so, the article intends to

contribute to the theoretical and policy discourse on India's emerging role as a global strategic actor.

### Importance

This research article is crucial in understanding the shifting contours of India's foreign policy in the 21st century, particularly under the leadership of Dr. S. Jaishankar. As India seeks to assert itself as a global power in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world, the Jaishankar Doctrine offers an insightful framework for navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. By critically examining this doctrine, the article contributes to the broader academic discourse on Indian diplomacy, offering a nuanced analysis of its departure from traditional models like non-alignment and its evolution towards a more pragmatic, interest-driven strategy. Furthermore, this study enriches the debate on how middle powers, particularly in the Global South, are recalibrating their foreign policies to safeguard autonomy while engaging with competing global interests. The findings are vital not only for policymakers and diplomats but also for scholars of international relations and global governance, providing a deeper understanding of India's role in shaping the future of global diplomacy.

### Foundational Principles and Strategic Objectives:

The Jaishankar Doctrine, as articulated and implemented by India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar since 2019, marks a significant shift in India's foreign policy ethos. Rooted in realism, strategic autonomy, and issue-based alliances, the doctrine reflects India's adaptation to a multipolar world order.<sup>1</sup> It emphasizes safeguarding national interests, leveraging India's growing economic and strategic clout, and repositioning India as a decisive actor in global affairs.<sup>2</sup> Unlike earlier doctrines characterised by moralism and non-alignment, this approach prioritises pragmatism, balancing idealism with hard-nosed diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> Strategic autonomy in the Jaishankar era no longer denotes passive neutrality but denotes flexible agency in diplomacy. This is evident in India's engagement with both the United States and Russia, despite growing East-West tensions. Dr. Jaishankar's oft-quoted assertion that "India will do what is in its national interest" encapsulates this guiding principle.<sup>4</sup> Autonomy here is framed as the freedom to choose—to engage, disengage, or hedge—based on India's sovereign interests.

Rather than avoiding entanglements, India now engages in multi-alignment by participating in diverse groupings like QUAD, SCO, BRICS, and G20. The capacity to manage competing relationships with China and the United States, or with Iran and Israel,

signals a mature, non-ideological diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> Such balancing enables India to capitalize on global opportunities without sacrificing its independence. The doctrine embraces a realist worldview. India enters issue-based coalitions where cooperation is transactional and mutual, not ideological. For instance, India partners with the U.S. on defense technology, with France on climate change, and with Russia on hydrocarbons without exclusivity. This realism has allowed India to maneuver through global disruptions like the Ukraine war and COVID-19 with greater agency.<sup>6</sup>

National interest is now paramount. India's consistent stand on purchasing discounted Russian oil amid Western pressure, or defending domestic agriculture at WTO negotiations, illustrates a doctrine that places India's development priorities above external expectations.<sup>7</sup> Sovereignty is not just territorial, it is economic and diplomatic. Dr. Jaishankar has redefined public diplomacy. His assertive interviews, books, and speeches articulate a clear Indian narrative firm, unapologetic, and self-assured. This narrative control counters misrepresentations in Western discourse and strengthens India's soft power.<sup>8</sup>

India's leadership in securing African Union's G20 membership and investments in capacity building through the ITEC programme underline a renewed engagement with the Global South.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the BRI, India's development diplomacy is based on respect, transparency, and mutual benefit. Technology diplomacy is a key pillar. India's semiconductor initiatives with the U.S. and Taiwan, and its promotion of UPI and Aadhaar abroad, show how tech is being used to project influence.<sup>10</sup> Trade corridors like IMEC further illustrate India's goeconomic aspirations. India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean is being solidified through naval exercises, defense exports, and strategic logistics agreements. This enhances deterrence and counters China's growing maritime presence.

### Departure from Previous Doctrines:

The Jaishankar Doctrine represents a departure from the Nehruvian tradition of idealism and moral diplomacy, replacing it with pragmatism and strategic assertion.<sup>11</sup> While rooted in the civilizational ethos of Indian foreign policy, it adjusts the framework to meet contemporary challenges. Nehru's foreign policy was grounded in ethical norms and a rules-based international order. In contrast, Jaishankar openly embraces realism, acknowledging that power and interests drive global affairs.<sup>12</sup> India's stances on issues like Ukraine and Gaza reflect this departure.



While non-alignment once meant refusing to join any bloc, multi-alignment now means selective engagement with all, maximizing gains without commitments.<sup>13</sup> India's simultaneous presence in BRICS, QUAD, and SCO exemplifies this recalibration. Instead of passive equidistance, India now actively balances rival powers, asserting its autonomy while extracting value from both sides. This is evident in India's military deals with Russia and strategic tech collaborations with the U.S. India today prioritises national interests over ideological positions, such as in energy diplomacy with Russia or refusing WTO concessions that harm farmers.<sup>14</sup> This shift aligns India's diplomacy with developmental imperatives, not just moral postures. Unlike the Nehruvian era's low prioritization of trade diplomacy, the Jaishankar Doctrine treats geoeconomics, FTAs, FDI, digital infrastructure as core components of foreign policy.<sup>15</sup>

India is repositioning itself not as a nostalgic Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) leader but as a modern developmental partner in the Global South, offering technology and training rather than political slogans.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Jaishankar's candid and sometimes confrontational public statements are a deliberate strategy of asserting narrative control, contrasting Nehru's soft-spoken moralistic tone.<sup>17</sup> India is no longer wary of institutionalised partnerships. It signs strategic agreements like LEMOA, BECA, and COMCASA with the U.S. while negotiating trade corridors with Europe and the Gulf.

### **Bilateral and Multilateral Engagements:**

The Jaishankar Doctrine has significantly recalibrated India–U.S. relations from a hesitant partnership to a strategic convergence based on technology, defense, and economic ties. Under this framework, India has signed foundational defense agreements such as COMCASA and BECA, expanded participation in 2+2 ministerial dialogues, and launched the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in 2023.<sup>18</sup> The doctrine prioritises leveraging great power partnerships for national development, while retaining autonomy. India's response to the Ukraine conflict, criticising the war but not aligning fully with the West—demonstrates this balance. Despite increasing ties with the U.S., India under Jaishankar has retained its historic relationship with Russia. The doctrine supports a transactional, interest-based approach that allows India to continue defense procurement and energy imports from Russia, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine conflict and Western sanctions.<sup>19</sup> This dual alignment reflects the doctrine's realism and avoidance of Cold War-era binaries. India's decision to abstain on multiple UN

votes regarding Ukraine reflects the strategic imperative to preserve maneuverability.

India's enhanced role in the QUAD grouping illustrates a multilateral application of the doctrine. Rather than forming a military bloc, the grouping has been recast around maritime security, vaccine diplomacy, climate cooperation, and infrastructure development.<sup>20</sup> This aligns with India's Indo-Pacific vision of “inclusiveness, rule of law, and ASEAN centrality,” allowing India to build coalitions without formal alliances. The Jaishankar Doctrine has sought to reclaim regional leadership through both hard and soft power. The “Neighbourhood First” and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiatives reflect India's attempt to counterbalance China's expanding influence in South Asia.<sup>21</sup> India's financial aid to Sri Lanka during its economic crisis in 2022, its infrastructure commitments in the Maldives and Nepal, and vaccine diplomacy through *Vaccine Maitri* have reinforced regional credibility, though challenges persist.

India's foreign policy under Jaishankar has also pivoted toward Europe and the Gulf. The India–EU Strategic Partnership has focused on climate change, digital governance, and connectivity, while India has built deeper defence and trade ties with France, Germany, and the Nordic countries.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneously, partnerships with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have flourished under the India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States (I2U2) grouping and economic corridors like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), reflecting India's pursuit of issue-based multilateralism. India's presidency of the G20 in 2023, during which it successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member, underscored its aspiration to become a “voice of the Global South.” The Jaishankar Doctrine allows India to engage simultaneously with institutions like the BRICS, SCO, and G20, seeking reform of multilateral governance systems while also working with Western-dominated institutions.<sup>23</sup> This dual engagement strategy is a hallmark of Jaishankar's pragmatic diplomacy.

India's outreach in multilateral settings increasingly focuses on tech norms, cyber governance, climate equity, and digital public infrastructure (DPI). Under Jaishankar's leadership, India has co-led forums on data sovereignty, global vaccine equity, and digital finance with countries like Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa.<sup>24</sup> These initiatives show India shaping global discourse without depending on bloc politics—precisely the objective of a post-ideological, post-alignment doctrine.

### Reconciling Strategic Autonomy:

Unlike Nehruvian non-alignment, which emphasized principled distance from great power blocs, the Jaishankar Doctrine reinterprets strategic autonomy as calibrated engagement with multiple poles of power.<sup>25</sup> Rather than isolation or equidistance, the focus is on leveraging alignments without permanent entanglements. This redefinition enables India to pursue partnerships that serve national interests while avoiding dependency or ideological commitments, such as its balancing of defense ties with Russia and tech cooperation with the United States. The Jaishankar Doctrine views the emergence of multipolarity not as a challenge, but as an opportunity for India to act as a “bridging power” between competing blocs.<sup>26</sup> In global forums like the G20, BRICS, and the Quad, India simultaneously engages powers with conflicting interests, advocating for reform of global governance structures while maintaining ties with status quo powers. This layered diplomacy allows India to remain flexible in a fragmented world order.

India’s growing economic and technological interdependence does not mean strategic dilution. Instead, the Doctrine encourages issue-based coalitions what Jaishankar calls “multi-alignment with purpose”, where India cooperates selectively based on sectoral interests.<sup>27</sup> This allows India to shape global norms without surrendering sovereignty, and to pursue national development goals through constructive multilateralism. While prioritising national interest, the Jaishankar Doctrine rejects both hyper-globalism and neo-isolationism. India’s stances on trade protection, such as rejecting Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), or on data sovereignty, reflect economic realism, not withdrawal.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, India’s support for resilient supply chains, connectivity corridors like IMEC, and digital cooperation reflects its willingness to invest in interdependent frameworks on its own terms.

The Doctrine emphasises reciprocity and mutual respect as foundational to interdependence. India’s response to Western criticism on domestic issues, especially on democracy and rights, has grown more assertive under Jaishankar, reflecting an expectation of equal footing and non-interference.<sup>29</sup> This assertiveness is tied to India’s rise as a civilisational state that demands parity, not patronage, in its external engagements. Reconciling strategic autonomy with global interdependence is not without contradictions. India’s dependence on arms from Russia, energy from the Middle East, and markets in the West creates vulnerabilities. However, the Doctrine seeks to mitigate these through

diversification as seen in defense indigenization, energy transition, and FTAs with Europe and Australia.<sup>30</sup> The long-term goal is self-reliance (Aatmanirbharta) without delinking from the world economy.

### Implications and Limitations

The Jaishankar Doctrine positions India as a credible leader of the Global South, offering a non-Western model of diplomacy rooted in pluralism, strategic autonomy, and developmental equity.<sup>31</sup> India’s G20 presidency demonstrated this ambition by prioritising food security, digital public infrastructure, and the inclusion of the African Union into the G20. These efforts align with India’s image as a “voice of the voiceless,” enhancing its normative appeal in the developing world and carving a niche distinct from China or the West.<sup>32</sup> India under this doctrine has successfully adopted middle-power diplomacy through active participation in plurilateral initiatives like QUAD, I2U2, BRICS+, and IMEC. This flexible approach has enhanced India’s profile as a balancer in an unstable world, without being constrained by traditional alliance systems. The emphasis on connectivity, climate, and technology partnerships gives India a leadership role in shaping emerging global rules and architectures.

The doctrine has allowed India to extract strategic benefits from both the U.S. and Russia while engaging with China through selective cooperation and boundary management.<sup>33</sup> India’s presence in forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, despite friction with China, reflects the dual engagement strategy enabled by this doctrine. Simultaneously, India has diversified its defence and energy dependencies, strengthening its resilience amid global uncertainties. Despite diplomatic agility, the doctrine’s ambitions are constrained by structural limitations, notably economic disparities, technological gaps, and limited military projection capabilities.<sup>34</sup> India’s aspirations to global leadership are often tempered by challenges in implementation capacity, bureaucratic inertia, and uneven state capacity.

India’s simultaneous partnerships with democracies and authoritarian regimes invite criticism regarding ideological ambiguity.<sup>35</sup> This ambiguity complicates India’s image as a moral power or liberal global leader. Moreover, assertive diplomatic postures under Jaishankar, while effective domestically, risk perceptions of strategic aloofness or transactionalism abroad.<sup>36</sup> India’s global leadership trajectory is also shaped by domestic political factors. While Jaishankar has built a strong technocratic and strategic case for India’s rise, long-term continuity

depends on domestic political will, consensus, and investment in statecraft.<sup>37</sup> Any erosion in democratic values, civil liberties, or institutional robustness can weaken India's soft power credibility.

The Jaishankar Doctrine's pragmatic, post-ideological approach offers India a chance to lead not through power alone, but through the pluralistic articulation of global rules, reform, and partnerships.<sup>38</sup> If backed by economic reform, digital leadership, and responsible global behavior, India can shape the 21st-century order as a principled but pragmatic power. However, success hinges on navigating internal constraints, regional instability, and evolving global alignments.<sup>39</sup>

## Results

The analysis reveals that the Jaishankar Doctrine represents a substantive recalibration of India's foreign policy posture, characterized by pragmatic engagement, strategic autonomy, and interest-based diplomacy. Unlike earlier frameworks rooted in normative idealism, the doctrine emphasizes India's agency as a "leading power" in shaping global outcomes rather than passively aligning with blocs. The findings indicate that this approach has led to more dynamic bilateral relations—with enhanced defense, trade, and technological cooperation with major powers like the U.S., France, and Russia—and strengthened India's plurilateral participation in groupings such as QUAD, I2U2, and BRICS. India's assertive leadership during the G20 presidency and its positioning as the voice of the Global South further illustrate the operationalization of the doctrine. Simultaneously, the results show that India has maintained its strategic autonomy by refusing to be drawn into Cold War-style alliances, even while deepening selective partnerships. However, the doctrine also faces structural limitations, including economic constraints, regional tensions, and the balancing act required to maintain credibility across diverse strategic theatres.

## Discussion

The emergence of the Jaishankar Doctrine marks a significant evolution in India's diplomatic thinking, reflecting a shift from normative idealism to strategic pragmatism suited for a multipolar, fragmented world. By prioritizing flexibility, interest-based alignments, and issue-specific coalitions, the doctrine allows India to navigate the complexities of great power competition while advancing its national interests. This repositioning aligns with global trends where middle powers assert greater autonomy in international affairs. However, the doctrine's emphasis on multi-alignment also introduces challenges, particularly in maintaining strategic

coherence and avoiding contradictions—such as balancing relations between rival powers like the U.S. and Russia or managing border tensions with China while engaging in multilateral platforms. Additionally, while the doctrine amplifies India's global voice, especially among developing nations, it must be complemented by domestic economic resilience, institutional capacity, and technological advancement to sustain credibility. The discussion suggests that the success of the Jaishankar Doctrine hinges on India's ability to combine assertive diplomacy with long-term statecraft and internal strength.

## Conclusion

The Jaishankar Doctrine represents a pivotal evolution in India's foreign policy, marking a clear departure from traditional paradigms such as Nehruvian idealism and non-alignment. By emphasizing strategic autonomy, pragmatic diplomacy, and interest-based multi-alignment, the doctrine has positioned India as a dynamic actor in an increasingly multipolar and interconnected world. The strategic shift toward global engagement and assertiveness—while maintaining flexibility in partnerships—has enabled India to strengthen its ties with major powers and play a more influential role in regional and international platforms. Furthermore, India's leadership during key multilateral summits, like the G20 presidency, has underscored its growing global influence, particularly as a representative of the Global South.

However, the implementation of the Jaishankar Doctrine is not without challenges. The balancing act between autonomy and interdependence remains a delicate task, especially in the face of geopolitical tensions and competing interests. India's ability to manage these contradictions, while also addressing its internal economic and technological limitations, will be critical for the long-term success of the doctrine. While India has expanded its diplomatic footprint, sustaining its global leadership ambitions will require continued internal reforms, a clear strategic vision, and a nuanced approach to its relationships with both established and emerging global powers.

Ultimately, the Jaishankar Doctrine offers a compelling model for a self-confident, independent India navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world order. Its long-term viability, however, depends on India's ability to sustain its diplomatic momentum, enhance its economic strength, and continue asserting its leadership role in shaping a more equitable and multipolar global system.



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