

## Shifting India's priorities in the changing global landscape

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### Abstract

The idealistic foundation of Indian foreign policy is gradually shifting to realism, though this shift has started soon after the independence but the end of cold war further accelerated this process. The fact that India has two nuclear-armed adversaries as neighbors—China and Pakistan—is just one of several considerations that have forced India towards realism. Though idealism has also aided India in advancing its interests on the international scene, but leaders in India seem to have made up their minds of realism being more favorable for the growth of India than idealism. This paper tried to explore India's foreign policy in the context of idealism and realism. For this research paper, descriptive and analytical methods were used and the data was collected from secondary sources. It has argued that one can find the traits of both idealism and realism in Indian foreign policy, but gradually the influence of idealism is declining in Indian foreign policy, which may impact India's soft power in the future. This essay further added that Indian leaders overrate the relevance of realism while underestimating the importance of idealism. This belief may impact India's stature in world affairs.

**Key Words** - Idealism; Realism; USA; USSR; Cold-War; Indian foreign policy

### Introduction

The critical debate in international relations has always been what strategy is better for nations. Realism or idealism? This issue has always consumed those involved in international politics. What should a country choose: humanism, morality, and collaboration, or national self-interest, competition, and military might?

One could claim that the theory of realism, which traces its roots in writing of the great Greek historian Thucydides, appears to have prevailed in the intellectual conflict of IR. As a result, realists make up the majority of the nation's top foreign policy advisers. Making realism the dominant school of thought in the study of international affairs.

However, this does not imply that idealism is no longer present in international affairs. It is arguably the principal school that competes with realism in the field of international relations; it has taken on numerous forms and still has a strong influence on many nations's foreign policy choices. Primarily, because it also has advantages of its own.

These days, idealism is commonly recognized as liberalism when it comes to the subject of international relations.

Idealism approaches world politics with upbeat eyes. It holds that states are more motivated in working and growing together than in starting wars, in contrast to idealism's extremely optimistic view of the world, realism holds that nations seek to build powerful military capabilities, or what is known as "hard power," to protect their own interests in the global arena. According to realism, a state might wipe out another state only to serve its own interests.

In this essay, I have attempted to assess India's experience in international relations with both idealism and realism. This essay stated that although it is generally accepted that realism has a higher advantage, which is why it is the dominant school in international relations, idealism also has advantages that can assist any state increase its influence, as India did under Nehru's administration. Since 1954, India has been moving more and more towards realism, and under current leadership, this process has further intensified but declining influence of idealism in Indian foreign policy my adversely impact India's stature in world politics. This article came to the conclusion that both schools of IR have some benefits and drawbacks; as a result, India has seen both success and failure with its experiences of idealism and realism.

Prior to continuing further with the paper. Let's first talk about realism and idealism in detail.

### **The Realist School**

Realism as a formal discipline didn't arrive until World War 2, and prominent scholars E. H Carr and Hans Morgenthau were instrumental in shaping it as an discipline of IR. These days, most nations base their foreign policy decisions primarily on realism. It goes without saying that the majority of well-known IR scholars today, like John Mearsheimer and Stephan Welt, are proud realist.

Military might remains central in realism. It contends that there is anarchy on a global scale since there is no centralised body to enforce laws and punish offenders; as a result, states are left to resolve their issues among themselves. In that situation, whatever side possesses greater military might tends to rule over the other and enforce its demands (.N, 2017).

In realism, the international arena is comparable to the jungle; just as in the jungle, the strongest animal win out in the end, the same happen in the world affairs. It holds that although states are bound by agreements on trade, territory, and other matters, they only uphold these agreements when doing so is in their own best interests. States withdraw as soon as they notice that these treaties no longer serve states.

### **The Idealist or Liberal School**

In the field of IR, idealism is commonly understood to be liberalism. It is also the influential political theory in IR, battling with realism for supremacy in the discipline. Modern liberalism has its roots in enlightenment. Contrary to realism, it holds that most leaders instead of fighting prefer to work with their counterparts of other nation because war is expensive for both sides of the conflict.

It believes that collaboration, not competition, drive the foreign policy actions of the leaders. Idealism has an upbeat perspective on the world. Everyone will benefit if there is peace on earth. Additionally, it supports international institutions and treaties; as a result, it concentrates on strengthening to multilateral institutions.

In the past many states have fought the wars but wars have turned out to be exceedingly costly for all the warring states. Hence, national leaders seek a peaceful globe where they can trade with other countries and bring monetary benefit for their people and avoid popular uprising of their constituents.

Liberals are adamant that commerce, international institutions, and democratic governance, are the perfect recipe for ending international conflicts. The European Union is just one of many instances, where this recipe of liberalism has successfully worked.

### **India's Experiment with idealism**

The first prime minister of India, Pundit Nehru, was greatly influenced by the literature of anti-colonial struggles and by high moral ideals; as a result, at the commencement of Indian independence, he adopted idealism as the guiding concept of Indian foreign policy. Though, after the US pledged military assistance to Pakistan in 1954 and again during the Indo-China War, Nehru questioned some of his beliefs of idealism yet he refused to abandon his idealism entirely, hence, Nehru continued to advocate against nuclear proliferation, emphasised the UN's role in settling international conflicts and co-operation among nations for maintaining a peaceful world order.

Nehru idealism helped India to grow its soft power on global stage, the shine of its culture and tradition got brighter. Moreover, India was seen with respect because of its image as nation advocating for peace and ability to maintain unity at home in the face of extreme diversity. All these things helped India to gain enormous popularity among the developing nations, which helped it to expand its influence around the world in general and the global south in particular. As a result, India was acknowledged as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.

But some of Nehru idealistic decision during his reign as a PM, also become the reason for today's leaders of India to ridicule him. Following is the one example.

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, visited France in July 2023. During that visit France reaffirmed its commitment to supporting India's application for a permanent seat in the UNSC (ANI, 2023). Thus, a discussion was reopened in India on whether Nehru's choice to support China's permanent seat in the UNSC was wise or foolish. Following the PM Visit, numerous Indian news channels covered the story and criticised Jawahar Lal Nehru for declining the US and USSR's offer to give India a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. But, unfortunately, these debates fail to touch the critical aspects of those offers.

First, this claim that Nehru had an offer from US for a permanent seat in UNSC was a bit far-fetched as there has never been a formal offer from the USA for a permanent seat in UNSC, there was just ideas, being floated by the US officials (SHUKLA, 2019).

Second, Nehru didn't like even those ideas since those ideas were proposing that India should be offered a seat in the UNSC at the expense of China but Nehru felt that China was too big to be excluded from any international organization. Additionally, he didn't want the same fate for the UN as the League of Nations had suffered owing to the absence of two big powers of that time the US and the USSR. Also, the US's ideas were suspicious of being full of bad intent because, US, being in direct fight with communism, was not comfortable with two communist nations as a permanent member in the UNSC.

Nehru, also, refused the same offer by the USSR in 1955. On this, India's foremost political science scholar and constitutional expert, AG Norani, wrote Nehru decision to refuse the USSR offer was right because it was just a feeler to test India (Harder, 2019).

Nehru's logic of rejecting the seat of the UNSC was rooted in fact that if the global environment is peaceful and stable it will help all nations including India. The absence of China, a giant neighboring state of India, from the UN will make China, more dangerous for India because China will not be bound to follow any rule of UN. Also, India taking UNSC's seat at the place of China may create rivalry between China and India, which could badly damage India's economic prospect.

The Indian first PM had his own rules for Indian foreign policy, for many Indian realist thinkers, Nehru was too idealist to manage a successful foreign policy. Nevertheless, according to Nehru, certainly, nation's self-interests are significant but a nation is also a part of the world; if the world becomes unlivable, how will the nation's interests be served and the nation unaffected? It is impossible to distinguish between the interests of the nation and a peaceful world since they are so inextricably linked.

Additionally, Nehru's idealist policies put Indian tradition and culture at world stage. Yoga and Indian cinema have become so popular that they have touched every part of the world. Many nations named their streets and buildings after notable Indian leaders. Moreover, this helped India to emerge as the leader of the non aligned movement, and improved its standing as a reliable and peaceful partner among the world's nations.

India got economic benefits too due to this soft power, as India's image of a peaceful multicultural society helped it to attract investment, and tourists from all over the world. Many countries grant Indian workers work visas easily because of their image of the inhabitants of the peaceful country. Indian films are well-received abroad, earning significant money.

### **India's experiment with Realism**

After Indian independence, US decision in 1954 to provide military aid to Pakistan for the expansion of Pakistan's armed forces was the first major incident of a major power intervening in the region (Singh, 2014). This invention put India at a challenging situation leading Nehru to realize for the first time that idealism alone couldn't be sufficient for the successful foreign policy.

It marked the shift in the approach of Indian foreign policy; subsequently, the Indo-China War persuaded Nehru that the value of hard power could not be understated. Even though

Indo-China War took place just two years before the death of Nehru, but that war left a big mark in the minds of Indian political leaders including Nehru. Ever since India started to build its armed forces by exporting expensive weapons from all over the world as at that time India hardly had a defense manufacturing capability.

Needless to highlight that according to SIPRI India has been the largest arms exporter in the world since 2013, amounting for 11% of global arms imports between 2018-2022 (SINGH, 2023). India being the biggest exporter of the arms for the last 10 years explains how much importance it place in its military strength.

Some recent instances of India openly embracing realism in its foreign policy are, that it sent weaponry to the military of Myanmar following a military coup because it believed it was impossible to maintain peace in the Indian north-eastern area without the support of Junta (SINGH D. , 2023). It did not condemn Russia for Ukraine invasion because it relies too much on Russia for its defence needs. India, which historically supported causes like Palestine and Cuba, appears to have taken a back seat to all of these humanitarian concerns (Mehdi, 2023), because for current Indian leadership think raising the issues of these causes, don't benefit India.

The logic of realist in New Delhi is simple whatever appears good for Indian interest is necessary for India, The rest is not helpful for the energies of Indian bureaucrats, who are already overworked from head to toe.

The Indian experience with realism, very much like liberalism, is a mixed story. And, it has indeed benefited India on numerous instances. For instance, Pakistan, with whom India has fought three full-scale wars, has reduced many of its illegal activities along the line of control out of fear of the much stronger Indian defensive forces, though, it continues to drive terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir, the rate of infiltration has significantly dropped (Sharma, "Reducing Footprints": Centre On Pak's Drone Strategy To Ferry Weapons, 2023). India helped create Bangladesh thanks to its powerful military, and this resolute military power of India has undoubtedly raised its status in global politics.

## Conclusion

The world still finds great appeal in India's image. India is seen as a peaceful, democratic, and secular nation. India has good reputation thanks to many of its actions on the global stage, some of which are still motivated by idealistic values.

When it comes to Indian experience with idealism or realism, we can state that it is typically a mixed story. From Nehru to Modi, no Indian prime minister has been able to adhere to just one philosophy. Generally speaking, the appropriate IR strategy has been used depending on the demands of the situation. Despite his reputation as an idealist in foreign affairs, Nehru frequently opted to act in a realist manner. For instance, Nehru criticised the Israeli, British, and French invasion of Egypt in the same year that the USSR invaded Hungary but said nothing about USSR invasion (Chauhan, 2023).

But Nehru and succeeding prime ministers of India after Nehru preferred to champion the concerns of poor nations, for instance by being a key figure in the non-aligned movement.

And the majority of the time, they adopted a highly idealistic stance on world affairs based on justice and equality. However, after the Cold War, this strategy changed. One of the many factors behind this change is the fall of the USSR, which meant that India had lost a significant and reliable ally. As a result, India gradually began to prioritise its own needs over global humanitarian causes like the fight against colonialism and for equality. Nothing shows this more clearly than India's decision to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992.

Moreover, under the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, the shift towards realism has gotten a boost with India being more focused on its own interest, military strength, and trying to cosy up with mighty countries such as the USA, without being much concerned about their role in international politics.

The supporters of this move argue that India wants a strong place in the decision making body of global affairs, and for that, India needs powerful and influential partners. Furthermore, what is wrong with being friends with powerful countries when they are ready to offer massive capital investment and better technology? India needs to first focus on building its own strength; the rest can be decided further.

It is quite difficult to make a determination about which foreign policy strategy is best for India because proponents of both IR schools have strong cases to support their positions. In the end, it may be concluded that it would be preferable if a thorough discussion take place prior to any significant foreign policy decision. Only, then we could have a foreign policy that would benefit all 140 million Indian.

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