



India's foreign policy toward China: A neoclassical realist analysis

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Abstract

India's foreign policy toward China has become one of the defining dimensions of contemporary Asian geopolitics, shaped by shifting power balances, persistent border disputes, expanding economic ties, and intensifying strategic competition. While conventional realist explanations emphasize the influence of changes in the international distribution of power, they often overlook the domestic processes through which external pressures are interpreted and translated into foreign policy decisions. This study employs the analytical framework of Neoclassical Realism to examine how India's approach toward China is shaped by the interaction between systemic constraints and domestic political factors. Drawing upon qualitative research methods and secondary sources, including government documents, policy reports, scholarly literature, and strategic analyses, the paper investigates the growth of India's China policy from post-colonial engagement to contemporary strategic competition. It argues that India's responses cannot be understood solely through the dynamics of power politics but must also account for leadership perceptions, institutional capacity, strategic culture, economic priorities, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The study analyses key developments, including border tensions, China's expanding regional impact, the Indo-Pacific strategy, and India's growing security partnerships, to demonstrate how domestic variables mediate external challenges. The findings indicate that India's foreign policy reflects a calibrated strategy that combines deterrence, diplomatic engagement, defence modernization, and multilateral cooperation while preserving independent decision-making. By integrating structural and domestic levels of analysis, the paper offers a comprehensive explanation of continuity and change in India's policy towards China illustrating the explanatory value of Neoclassical Realism in understanding the foreign policy behaviour of emerging powers. The study contributes to the broader literature on international relations by providing a nuanced interpretation of India's strategic choices in an evolving multipolar order and highlighting the complex relationship between external pressures and domestic decision-making in shaping contemporary foreign policy.

Keywords: Neoclassical realism, India–China relations, Indian foreign policy, strategic autonomy, Indo-Pacific strategy

Introduction

India's foreign policy toward China has emerged as one of the most significant issues in contemporary international relations because it lies at the intersection of territorial security, great-power competition, economic interdependence, and regional order. The relationship between the two Asian powers has evolved from early diplomatic optimism to sustained strategic rivalry, reflecting profound changes in both the regional balance of power and the global political landscape. While India and China continue to cooperate in multilateral forums and maintain substantial economic linkages, persistent border disputes, geopolitical competition, and conflicting strategic interests increasingly define the bilateral relationship ^[1]. Consequently, understanding the logic behind India's policy toward China requires more than a descriptive account of historical events; it demands a theoretical explanation of why India has adopted a strategy that combines deterrence, engagement, and strategic restraint.

This paper argues that Neoclassical Realism provides the most persuasive framework for explaining India's foreign policy toward China because it captures the interaction between external power dynamics and domestic political factors. Conventional realist theories attribute state behaviour primarily to the distribution of power in the international system, suggesting that states respond rationally to external threats in pursuit of survival ^[2]. Although this perspective explains why China's rapid rise has compelled India to strengthen its security posture, it

cannot fully account for the variation, continuity, and gradual evolution of India's strategic choices. If systemic pressures alone determined foreign policy, states facing comparable security environments would be expected to adopt similar responses. India's experience, however, demonstrates that foreign policy is also shaped by leadership perceptions, institutional capacity, economic priorities, and domestic political constraints ^[3].

India and China's relationship really shows this point. Back in 1950, India was one of the first non-socialist nations to recognise the People's Republic of China. They even tried to build a cooperative relationship based on the Panchsheel principles of peaceful coexistence. However, things went downhill. Unresolved territorial claims, different ideas about strategy, and a lack of trust eventually led to the Sino-Indian War in 1962, which really changed how India saw its own security ^[4]. Even though they normalised diplomatic ties in the late 1980s and signed agreements to build confidence, these measures did not resolve the core border dispute. Then came the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the clash in Galwan Valley in 2020 ^[5]. These events made it clear that mere talk was not enough to eliminate the strategic competition between them. Because of all this, India has been accelerating its military modernisation, improving its border infrastructure, building more strategic partnerships, and rethinking aspects of its economic ties with China, all while keeping diplomatic channels open.

India's getting more worried now that China's become such a big economic and military player. China is expanding its

reach with things like the Belt and Road Initiative, beefing up its military in the Indo-Pacific, and generally competing more with the U.S. All of this is shifting the regional balance of power ^[6]. Yet India's response has not been one of straightforward military balancing or alliance formation. Instead, it has pursued a multidimensional strategy that combines enhanced defence preparedness, closer cooperation with partners such as the Quad, participation in regional institutions, economic diversification, and the preservation of strategic autonomy ^[7]. This pattern of behaviour suggests that India's foreign policy cannot be understood solely through systemic incentives but must also be interpreted in light of domestic political calculations and institutional decision-making.

The central contention of this study is that India's foreign policy toward China represents a calibrated balancing strategy filtered through domestic political realities rather than an automatic reaction to structural changes in the international system. Neoclassical Realism explains this outcome by arguing that external pressures influence foreign policy indirectly through intervening variables such as leadership perceptions, state capacity, bureaucratic institutions, and national strategic priorities ^[8]. In India's case, these domestic factors have shaped both the pace and the form of strategic adaptation, producing a policy that seeks to deter coercion without abandoning diplomatic engagement or strategic independence.

Despite the extensive literature on India–China relations, many studies remain confined either to structural explanations centred on power politics or to issue-specific analyses of border disputes, trade, or regional competition. Such approaches often underestimate the domestic role of political processes in translating international pressures into concrete policy decisions. By applying Neoclassical Realism in the study of China and India policy, this paper addresses this analytical gap and offers a more comprehensive explanation of continuity and change in India's strategic behaviour.

Neoclassical Realism and India's Approach to China

Neoclassical Realism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding India's foreign policy with China's engagement because it explains how external security pressures are mediated by domestic political factors. Unlike Structural Realism, which views the international distribution of power as the primary determinant of state behaviour, Neoclassical Realism suggests that what happens in foreign policy comes down to how two things interact: the limits imposed by the global system and the factors within a country that can change things ^[9]. These variables include leadership perceptions, state capacity, bureaucratic institutions, strategic culture, and economic priorities. Consequently, states facing similar international challenges may adopt different foreign policy strategies depending on how their political leadership interprets external threats and how effectively domestic institutions can mobilize national resources.

The theoretical foundations of Neoclassical Realism were introduced by Gideon Rose in 1998 and later refined by scholars such as Randall L. Schweller, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and William C. Wohlforth. These scholars argue that the international system establishes opportunities and constraints, but governments do not respond automatically to structural

changes. Instead, foreign policy is filtered through domestic political processes and institutional capabilities. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing India's evolving approach toward China, where strategic decisions reflect both changing regional power dynamics and internal political considerations.

China's rapid economic and military growth has completely changed how things are strategically in Asia. Ever since it became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, China has continued to build up its economic strength, technological know-how, and military might ^[10]. This has naturally boosted its influence across the region, shifting the power balance and intensifying competition. For India, China's military build-up along its disputed Himalayan border, its growing sway in South Asia, and its increased involvement in the Indo-Pacific pose on-going security and geopolitical headaches ^[11]. From a neoclassical realist perspective, however, these external developments alone cannot explain India's foreign policy. Rather, India's responses are shaped by how political leaders perceive these challenges and by the country's institutional and economic capacity to address them.

Historical experience has also played a decisive role in shaping India's strategic outlook. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 exposed weaknesses in India's defence preparedness and transformed official perceptions of China from a cooperative neighbour to a long-term strategic competitor. Although bilateral relations improved through diplomatic engagement and confidence-building agreements from the late 1980s onward, in 2017, the Doklam standoff in and in 2020, the Galwan Valley clash reaffirmed the continuing significance of the unresolved border dispute ^[12]. These developments prompted India to strengthen border infrastructure, modernize its armed forces, and enhance defence preparedness while maintaining diplomatic channels to manage tensions.

Domestic political factors further explain the nature of India's China policy. Leadership perceptions influence how external threats are interpreted, while democratic institutions, bureaucratic coordination, and state capacity determine how effectively strategic decisions are implemented. India's participation in the Quad, stronger defence cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia, and continued engagement through forums such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the G20 demonstrate this dual strategy of balancing and engagement ^[13].

Neoclassical Realism therefore offers a more convincing explanation of India's foreign policy toward China than theories that focus exclusively on international power politics. It demonstrates that China's rise creates the structural conditions for strategic competition, but India's policy is ultimately shaped by the interaction of external pressures with domestic political institutions, leadership choices, and national strategic priorities. India's contemporary China policy thus represents a calibrated strategy that seeks to safeguard national security, preserve strategic autonomy, and strengthen its position within an increasingly multipolar international order.

Historical Evolution of India–China Relations

The trajectory of India–China relations has undergone a profound transformation over the past seven decades, evolving from post-colonial cooperation to strategic

competition. As two of Asia's most influential powers, India and China have shared a complex relationship shaped by historical legacies, territorial disputes, economic engagement, and shifting geopolitical realities. Although both countries have maintained diplomatic relations since 1950, their interactions have oscillated between phases of collaboration and confrontation. This historical evolution is essential for understanding India's contemporary foreign policy because past experiences continue to shape its strategic perceptions and policy choices toward China.

In the years immediately following independence, India viewed China as a natural partner in promoting Asian solidarity and resisting colonial influence. India demonstrated its early commitment to engaging with the newly established People's Republic of China by extending diplomatic recognition on 1 April 1950, becoming one of the first non-socialist countries to do so. Bilateral cooperation gained further momentum with the conclusion of the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954, which introduced a normative framework for interstate relations. Its five core principles, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, served as the guiding basis for the conduct of India-China relations^[14]. These principles reflected the shared aspiration of both countries to promote stability and cooperation in Asia. However, despite diplomatic goodwill, the absence of a clearly demarcated boundary and differing interpretations of the Himalayan frontier created underlying tensions that gradually weakened mutual trust.

The relationship entered a period of severe crisis during the late 1950s. The bilateral relationship experienced a marked deterioration when China developed a strategic road in the disputed area, while India's acceptance of the Dalai Lama as a political refugee after the 1959 Tibetan revolt further deepened mutual distrust. Border incidents became increasingly frequent, culminating in the Sino-Indian War of October–November 1962^[15]. The conflict resulted in a decisive Chinese military victory and marked the most significant turning point in bilateral relations. Beyond its military consequences, the war fundamentally altered India's strategic outlook by demonstrating the limitations of idealistic diplomacy in the absence of credible defence capabilities. Following the conflict, India began strengthening its military institutions and reassessing its security priorities, while China emerged as a long-term strategic concern in Indian foreign policy.

For much of the following two decades, political engagement remained limited and mutual suspicion persisted. The process towards rapprochement or normalisation has begun, though gradually, since Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988. This visit reopened high-level political dialogue and established a pragmatic framework for managing differences while expanding cooperation in other areas. Both governments agreed that the unresolved boundary dispute should not prevent progress in bilateral relations. By mutual agreement, India and China also signed several important confidence-building measures, which helped stabilise the border regions. These were: The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control, the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field, the 2005 Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding

Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question^[16]. These agreements reduced the risk of armed confrontation and facilitated greater diplomatic and economic interaction, although they did not resolve the underlying territorial dispute.

The bilateral economic ties had developed at a breakneck speed during the first two decades of the 21st century. India became one of China's largest trading partners after its admission to the WTO in 2001. Trade had blossomed at one end, but at the same time, security concerns continued to deepen. Beijing's rapid military modernisation, its growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, its expanding role in South Asia, and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) created uneasiness regarding the regional power balance and India's long-term security interests^[17]. India resisted BRI membership on economic and security grounds, as the BRI passes through disputed territories claimed by India.

The Strategic Situation in the Late 2010s. The strategic environment in the late 2010s worsened. India was put on alert in the wake of the 2017 Doklam incident, underscoring on-going border skirmishes and both nations' resolve to secure their strategic stakes along their mutually disputed borders. It had another turning point following the Galwan Valley conflict in June 2020 - the first fatal conflict between Indian and Chinese soldiers in decades, which was a paradigm shift in India's approach to China^[18]. This was accompanied by a faster pace of development of border infrastructure, acceleration of India's military modernisation programme, increased defence diplomacy with like-minded countries such as the US, Japan and Australia and a rise in suspicion towards Chinese investments and digital technology. This was complemented by engagement at the diplomatic level through bilateral dialogue and multilateral institutions to de-escalate and avoid war while ensuring the protection of India's strategic interests. India-China relations have historically been characterised by a complex combination of cooperation and rivalry rather than a consistently friendly or hostile relationship. Over the decades, the bilateral relationship has evolved through alternating phases of engagement, competition, and strategic caution. Events such as the 1962 border war and subsequent military confrontations have profoundly influenced India's security outlook and foreign policy priorities. At the same time, expanding economic ties and continued collaboration within multilateral institutions, including BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the G20, demonstrates that areas of cooperation persist despite persistent strategic differences^[19]. This dual pattern of competition and collaboration provides the foundation for understanding India's contemporary approach toward managing its relationship with China.

Strategic and Domestic Drivers of India's Policy towards China

The foreign policy of India toward China is influenced by a combination of strategic pressures in the international system and domestic political realities. Neoclassical Realism argues that although changing nature of the balance of power create external opportunities and threats, foreign policy decisions are ultimately shaped by domestic factors such as leadership perceptions, institutional capacity, economic priorities, and strategic culture. This approach is particularly relevant to India because its policy toward China has evolved through the interaction of external

security challenges and internal political considerations rather than through structural forces alone.

China's rapid economic and military growth has been the principal driver of India's policy on China. A rapid, post-reform China, the second-largest economy in the world, with advances in technology, military strength, and diplomatic power, poses an existential challenge to India's aspirations to achieve economic security and geopolitical weight. A more powerful, professionalised PLA, increasing activity by its navy in the Indian Ocean, and development of road, rail, and military infrastructure along the Sino-Indian border have reshaped the geopolitical landscape in the region ^[20]. These developments have increased India's concerns regarding territorial integrity, regional influence, and long-term national security. Consequently, India's foreign policy has increasingly focused on strengthening deterrence while maintaining regional stability.

The unresolved border dispute continues to represent a major strategic challenge in India-China relations. Although both countries concluded a series of confidence-building agreements in 1993, 1996, and 2005, disagreements regarding the alignment of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have persisted, resulting in recurring episodes of tension. The 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash highlighted the limitations of existing border management arrangements in preventing military escalation ^[21]. In response, India intensified efforts to strengthen border infrastructure, modernise its defence capabilities, expand surveillance and intelligence systems, and improve military preparedness along the frontier. At the same time, while continuing diplomatic engagement with China, India has increasingly pursued a more cautious and security-focused strategy in managing its bilateral relationship. The global environment, particularly, has impacted Indian strategy. The geopolitical milieu of greater China's reach and power through BRI and greater contestation between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region. India has countered this by enhancing defence and strategic engagement with the US, Japan, and Australia through the Quad ^[22]. However, India has avoided formal alliance commitments, reflecting its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy. This policy enables India to enhance its security partnerships while preserving independent foreign policy decision-making.

Domestic political factors are equally significant in shaping India's foreign policy toward China. Leadership perceptions influence how external threats are assessed and translated into policy. Successive governments have regarded China as both an important economic partner and a major strategic competitor, resulting in a balanced policy that combines engagement with deterrence. Democratic institutions, bureaucratic coordination, and state capacity further determine how effectively foreign policy decisions are implemented. Investments in border infrastructure, defence modernization, indigenous military production, and technological development demonstrate India's efforts to strengthen its national capabilities in response to emerging security challenges. While political relations between India and China have been marked by on-going friction, economic engagement has remained resilient. China continues to be one of India's principal trading partners, underscoring the enduring importance of economic interdependence. At the same time, concerns over trade deficits, dependence on Chinese imports, and technological vulnerabilities have

encouraged India to diversify supply chains and promote domestic manufacturing through initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat ^[23]. These measures illustrate India's attempt to balance economic cooperation with national security imperatives.

Viewed through the lens of Neoclassical Realism, India's foreign policy toward China represents a pragmatic response to both international and domestic realities. External pressures arising from China's rise provide the strategic context, but domestic leadership, institutional capacity, economic priorities, and the enduring commitment to strategic autonomy determine how India formulates and implements its policy. As a result, India has adopted a calibrated strategy that integrates military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, economic resilience, and strategic partnerships to safeguard its national interests while contributing to stability in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific region.

India's Strategic Approach to the Rise of China

As China's influence has continued to expand, India has progressively shaped a broad strategic framework designed to enhance national security while ensuring the autonomy of its foreign policy decisions. Instead of relying exclusively on military balancing or diplomatic accommodation, India has adopted a flexible approach that combines defence modernization, strategic partnerships, economic resilience, technological innovation, and active multilateral diplomacy. This strategy reflects the core premise of Neoclassical Realism: although shifts in the international balance of power create external pressures, the nature of a state's response is shaped by domestic priorities, institutional capacity, and leadership decisions. Consequently, India's China policy represents a carefully calibrated effort to secure its interests without limiting its strategic flexibility.

Alongside military preparedness, diplomacy continues to play a vital role in India's strategy. India has expanded cooperation with countries that support a stable, open, and rules-based regional order while maintaining diplomatic engagement with China through bilateral consultations and international forums ^[24]. dual-track approach allows India to strengthen strategic partnerships in areas such as maritime security, connectivity, critical technologies, and capacity building without compromising its independent foreign policy. By keeping channels of communication open, India seeks to manage competition responsibly while reducing the possibility of unnecessary escalation.

Economic resilience has become another important dimension of India's strategic response. Policymakers increasingly recognize that sustainable economic growth and national security are closely interconnected. As a result, greater emphasis has been placed on strengthening domestic manufacturing, encouraging industrial innovation, diversifying trade partnerships, and improving supply-chain resilience. Efforts to reduce vulnerabilities in strategically important sectors are intended to enhance economic stability while supporting India's long-term development objectives ^[25]. This approach reflects a broader understanding that economic strength constitutes an essential component of national power. Technological advancement has emerged as a defining element of contemporary foreign policy. These initiatives aim to strengthen national competitiveness and prepare the country for the technological challenges of the twenty-first century. India has also increased its engagement

with regional and global institutions to reinforce its diplomatic influence. Active participation in forums such as the G20, BRICS, BIMSTEC, and the East Asia Summit enables India to contribute to discussions on global governance, sustainable development, economic cooperation, and regional security. By participating in these forums, India advocates for an inclusive and rules-based international order that emphasises sovereignty, compliance with international law, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts ^[26]. This approach complements India's wider strategic objective of maintaining policy independence while reinforcing its position as a responsible and influential participant in the international system.

In essence, India's strategic response to China's rise reflects a balanced and adaptive foreign policy rather than a narrow security-centric approach. By integrating defence preparedness, diplomatic outreach, economic resilience, technological capability, and multilateral cooperation, India has sought to strengthen its national capacity while retaining the flexibility necessary to respond to an evolving geopolitical environment. This multidimensional strategy demonstrates how external strategic challenges are translated into coherent policy through domestic institutions and long-term national priorities, making it consistent with the explanatory framework of Neoclassical Realism.

Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific and the Evolving Future of India–China Relations

The regional security environment in Asia is undergoing a significant transformation as geopolitical competition increasingly shifts toward the Indo-Pacific. This region has become the focal point of global strategic interaction because of its economic importance, maritime connectivity, technological competition, and growing influence on international governance. For India, these developments have broadened the scope of foreign policy beyond bilateral relations with China, requiring a comprehensive regional strategy that integrates security, diplomacy, economic cooperation, and institutional engagement ^[27]. Viewed through the lens of Neoclassical Realism, India's regional approach is shaped not only by changes in the external environment but also by domestic strategic priorities and its aspiration to emerge as a leading power in a multipolar world. However, the important point of India's regional policy is its commitment to an inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Rather than supporting exclusive geopolitical blocs, India advocates a regional order based on sovereign equality, adherence to international law, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for maritime rights ^[28]. This approach reflects India's broader diplomatic philosophy that regional stability is best achieved through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect rather than coercive competition. By promoting inclusive regional governance, India seeks to strengthen confidence among Indo-Pacific countries while protecting its own strategic interests.

Maritime cooperation has become an increasingly important dimension of India's regional engagement. As economic prosperity depends heavily on secure sea routes, India has intensified efforts to strengthen cooperation in maritime safety, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, marine resource management, and environmental sustainability ^[29]. These initiatives demonstrate that India's maritime strategy extends beyond traditional defence considerations and

increasingly incorporates non-traditional security challenges that affect regional prosperity and stability.

Regional connectivity and economic cooperation also occupy a prominent place in India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Through participation in infrastructure, trade, and digital connectivity initiatives, India seeks to enhance economic integration while promoting transparent, sustainable, and mutually beneficial development. Strengthening economic partnerships with Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and other Indo-Pacific economies supports India's long-term objective of expanding regional influence through development-oriented diplomacy rather than geopolitical rivalry alone ^[30].

Another important aspect of India's regional strategy is its growing engagement with multilateral institutions. Active participation in organizations such as ASEAN-led forums, BIMSTEC, the East Asia Summit, the G20, and BRICS reflects India's belief that regional challenges require collective solutions ^[31]. These institutions provide platforms for addressing issues including economic resilience, climate change, public health, maritime governance, and sustainable development. By supporting multilateral cooperation, India seeks to strengthen regional stability while enhancing its diplomatic profile in international affairs.

The future of India–China relations is likely to be defined by a combination of strategic competition and selective cooperation. Differences in geopolitical interests and regional priorities are expected to remain, yet complete disengagement is neither practical nor beneficial for either country. As two major Asian powers, India and China share responsibilities in addressing global issues such as climate governance, energy transition, counterterrorism, and reform of international institutions. The capacity of both countries to manage disagreements through sustained dialogue and institutional mechanisms will significantly influence the future security architecture of Asia.

Conclusion

India's foreign relation toward China reflects the complexities of managing relations between two neighbouring powers whose interactions are shaped by cooperation, competition, and strategic uncertainty. However the trajectory of the relationship clearly proves that Indian foreign policy cannot be merely explained by changing distribution of power within the international system. Instead, it is the product of continuous interaction between external geopolitical developments and domestic political, economic, and institutional considerations. As China's influence has expanded, India has gradually adjusted its foreign policy while maintaining its commitment to safeguarding sovereignty, protecting national interests, and preserving strategic autonomy.

This study has demonstrated that Neoclassical Realism offers a more comprehensive explanation of India's China policy than approaches that rely exclusively on structural or domestic factors. Although shifts in the regional balance of power create the strategic environment within which states operate, foreign policy decisions are ultimately filtered through leadership perceptions, state capacity, institutional effectiveness, and national priorities. In the Indian context, these intervening variables explain why policy has evolved as a balanced combination of security preparedness, diplomatic engagement, economic adaptation, and regional

cooperation rather than following a single strategy of confrontation or accommodation.

The analysis further highlights that India's foreign policy has become increasingly multidimensional. Security considerations remain important, but they are complemented by efforts to strengthen economic resilience, technological capability, diplomatic partnerships, and participation in regional and global institutions. This integrated approach reflects an understanding that national power in the twenty-first century extends beyond military capability and increasingly depends on economic competitiveness, innovation, institutional strength, and international cooperation. Consequently, India's strategic behaviour is guided by the objective of enhancing comprehensive national power while maintaining flexibility in an evolving geopolitical environment.

Another important finding is that strategic autonomy continues to serve as the guiding principle of India's external engagement. Rather than aligning permanently with any major power, India has sought to preserve the freedom to pursue issue-based partnerships that advance its national interests. This policy enables India to engage constructively with a wide range of countries while retaining the independence necessary to respond effectively to changing regional and global circumstances. Such flexibility has become increasingly valuable in an international system characterized by uncertainty, intensifying great-power competition, and the gradual emergence of multipolarity. While differences over security, regional influence, and geopolitical priorities are likely to persist, opportunities for cooperation continue to exist in areas such as trade, climate governance, sustainable development, public health, and reform of international institutions. Sustained diplomatic dialogue, confidence-building measures, and effective crisis-management mechanisms will therefore remain essential for preventing tensions from escalating into prolonged conflict.

India's foreign policy toward China illustrates the explanatory strength of Neoclassical Realism in analysing the foreign policy behaviour of emerging powers. The study demonstrates that external strategic pressures alone do not determine state behaviour; instead, foreign policy outcomes emerge through the interaction of international constraints and domestic political realities. As India continues to expand its economic, diplomatic, and strategic influence, its approach toward China is likely to remain pragmatic, adaptive, and interest-driven. Such a policy is expected to strengthen India's position within the evolving Indo-Pacific while contributing to a more stable, balanced, and multipolar international order.

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