



## **Gandhian Elements in India's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century**

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**Abstract:** Gandhian principles of universal humanism, trusteeship, nonviolence, peaceful coexistence, moral persuasion and empowerment continue to shape India's foreign policy from the 1950s till date. Gandhian values influence India's nuclear doctrine, multilateral engagements, development assistance and global governance. It can be traced in the historical continuity through India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, peacekeeping and principled responses to world crises. Gandhian elements are also highlighted in modern adaptations as well as the nuclear no-first-use policy, Vaccine diplomacy, climate advocacy in G20/BRICS, and active participation in forums like SAARC, G4, QUAD, G7, and ASEAN.

Through doctrinal and comparative analysis of speeches, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the research paper tests three hypotheses (1) Gandhian values underpin India's nuclear restraint and global moral credibility; (2) development partnerships reflect trusteeship and empowerment; and (3) multilateral diplomacy embodies universal humanism and peaceful cooperation. Content analysis reveals themes such as moral autonomy, non-alignment, disarmament, developmental trusteeship and intergenerational equity.

The case studies involve India's role in NAM (1955), UN peacekeeping (1950s), the 1971 Pakistan-Bangladesh conflict, nuclear doctrine post-1998, development outreach through SAARC, BRICS, ASEAN, climate action in G20, and Vaccine Diplomacy (2020). It is evident that India integrates Gandhian values both as moral vision and strategic framework. In doing so, India projects ethical leadership and strengthens Gandhi's relevance in modern diplomacy. Gandhian thought remains a living compass in India's global conduct and diplomacy in a multi polar world.

**Keywords:** Gandhism, Non-alignment, nuclear doctrine, Trusteeship, Multilateralism, Moral diplomacy

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### **Hypotheses:**

1. Gandhian philosophy supports India's nuclear doctrine and no-first-use stance, boosting its moral authority.
2. Trusteeship, universalism, and empowerment shape India's south collaborations and development diplomacy.
3. India's engagement in SAARC, NAM, UN, BRICS, G20, QUAD, and UN reform reflects non-violent universalism and peaceful coexistence.

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## **Research Methodology**

The research adopts a qualitative, historical and comparative approach to examine how Gandhian ethical principles of truth, nonviolence, self-reliance, human dignity and universal brotherhood are reflected in India's domestic policies and international strategic conduct. Through textual analysis and interpretive reasoning, the study traces the evolution of ethical communication in Indian governance and compares modern strategies with Gandhian ideals.

## **Research Focus:**

The study seeks to identify key Gandhian ethical markers such as:

- a) Ahimsa in nuclear restraint,
- b) Sarvodaya in humanitarian outreach,
- c) Satyagraha in diplomatic resistance, and
- d) Trusteeship in economic and environmental policy.

Together, these elements reveal how Gandhi's legacy continues to inform India's ethical positioning in a complex global order.

## **Introduction**

India's foreign policy has long been guided by its civilizational ethos and moral foundations, with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy at its core. His ideals of non-violence, truth, trusteeship, and universal humanism have extended beyond domestic reform to shape India's international identity. He believed that "Man becomes great exactly in the degree in which he works for the welfare of his fellow men."<sup>1</sup> As the world navigates growing multi polarity, geopolitical tensions, and global inequalities, Gandhian ethics of prioritizing dialogue over deterrence and cooperation over coercion gain renewed relevance. He remarked "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible."<sup>2</sup>

From India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War to its present-day support for peaceful coexistence, humanitarian aid, and strategic autonomy, Gandhi's vision continues to influence India's global conduct.



This research examines how these ethical principles have been adopted and adapted in India's foreign engagements from the 1950s to today. Using doctrinal analysis and empirical examples, the study explores India's participation in global forums and key policies like nuclear no-first-use, Vaccine and climate diplomacy. It argues that India's diplomacy is shaped not only by strategic interests but also by moral responsibility and soft power, rooted in Gandhian thought. In a world facing war, ecological crisis and inequality, India's ethical governance anchored in Gandhi's timeless values offers a compelling model for global peace and justice.

### **Gandhian Outlook in Contemporary Global Forum Engagements**

#### **1. Universal Humanism & Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**

For Gandhi Nationalism is not the highest concept; the highest concept is world community i.e. 'Mankind is one family'. This belief in universal brotherhood upholds India's active role in forums like NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) and ASEAN, where it advocates for collective problem-solving, respect for cultural diversity, and cooperation among developing countries. Gandhi claimed, "My patriotism is not an exclusive thing. It is all-embracing and I should reject that patriotism which sought to mount upon the distress or exploitation of other nationalities."<sup>3</sup>

#### **2. Trusteeship & Empowering Other Nations**

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship i.e. holding wealth or power in trust for the welfare of others has echoed in India's developmental partnerships, from lines of credit to Africa to capacity-building initiatives within BRICS. It reframes India not as a donor, but as a guardian partner in shared growth. He strongly believed "All men are brothers, being the children of the same God. We are all leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots, which are deep down in the bowels of the earth. The mightiest winds cannot move it."<sup>4</sup>

#### **3. Peaceful Coexistence & Non-Violent Conflict Resolution**

Gandhi envisioned conflict resolution through non-violence, emphasising peace building, disarmament, and civilian-based defence. "Peace will not come out of a clash of arms but out of justice lived."<sup>5</sup> Within UN, UNESCO, G20 and G4 diplomacy, India pursues multilateral arbitration over coercion, reflecting the Gandhian strategy of moral persuasion over force.



#### 4. Views on War, Nation Empowerment & World Conflicts

Gandhi's writings make it clear that all war stems from exploitation and results in permanent moral harm. Even in World Wars, his approach was to stand by truth while supporting the defender in a non-violent manner. His open letters to Hitler and Mussolini in 1939–40 mentioned "You are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war" "stand as testament to his appeal for universal humanism. Through global bodies like the SAARC, UNO, G7, and QUAD, India channels this legacy by forging coalitions based on shared values rather than polarized blocks.

#### **Integrating Gandhi into India's Foreign Policy Strategy**

1. Universal empathy: India champions global initiatives on climate, health, and development echoing Gandhi's "step into the shoes of adversaries".
2. Trusteeship in action: Indian aid to developing countries aims for mutual empowerment and not for supremacy over them.
3. Nonviolent diplomacy: India consistently seeks conflict resolution through negotiation, arbitration, and multilateral platforms rather than force. Gandhi criticized the violence and moral degradation leading to such destructive technology. He writes, "War is the result of exploitation of the people by the rulers, and the atom bomb is its inevitable fruit. It is the last word in violence."<sup>7</sup>
4. Empowerment through capacity-building: By sharing technical, educational and health resources reinforce self-reliance among partner countries.
5. World-order reform: By engaging with Security Council reform (G4) and digital governance (G20), India seeks structures guided by moral equity and not by dominance. Gandhi wrote, "The force of nonviolence is mightier than the mightiest weapon."<sup>8</sup>
6. Collective security over military blocs: India's outreach through NAM, SAARC, ASEAN, and BRICS emphasizes cooperation over confrontation even with major powers, mirroring the Gandhian ethos of moral coexistence amidst difference.



## **Post-1950s Case Studies**

1. UN Peacekeeping Missions: Since 1950, Indian troops participated in Korea, Congo and Lebanon supporting humanitarianism without aggression, embodying Gandhian principles of trusteeship and non-violent intervention.

2. Bangladesh Liberation War & 1971 Crisis: While India engaged militarily to support East Pakistan's secession, its principles emphasized humanitarian aid and the moral duty to protect millions of refugees closely aligned with Gandhian justice.

3. Nuclear Doctrine Post-1998: After Pokhran-II, India declared a no-first-use policy and credible minimum deterrence, rejecting nuclear aggression. This restraint reflects Gandhi's denunciation of mass violence and faith in moral strength.

4. G20 Climate Leadership

India emphasizes sustainable lifestyles and intergenerational justice reflecting Gandhi's advocacy for simplicity and environmental respect.

5. Vaccine and Global Health Diplomacy (2020–2021)

During COVID-19, India exported vaccines to 70+ countries, exemplifying Gandhian universalism, non-violence and trusteeship in health diplomacy. It echoed Gandhi's belief that "My nationalism is as broad as the universe. It includes in its sweep all the nations of the earth."<sup>9</sup>

## **Global Forums and Gandhian Diplomacy**

Mahatma Gandhi may not have held political office in independent India, but his values of nonviolence, truth, trusteeship, human dignity, and moral responsibility have deeply influenced India's foreign policy orientation. India's engagement in various global and regional forums often reflects these Gandhian principles, whether explicitly or subtly. This form of diplomacy, rooted in ethical commitment rather than power politics has come to be known as Gandhian Diplomacy, a strategic approach that prioritizes peace, justice, cooperation, and moral leadership.

The following global forums illustrate how India has practiced Gandhian ideals on the international stage:



## **1. Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**

Gandhian Principle: *Strategic Autonomy and Global Unity*

India's Practice: India was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), initiated under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Drawing directly from Gandhi's principle of nonviolence and independence from unjust influence, NAM emerged as a platform for countries to avoid alignment with either the US or the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Gandhi's idea of *Swaraj* (self-rule) found expression in NAM's insistence on strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence and global solidarity. Even today, India uses NAM to voice support for global South cooperation, disarmament and equitable global governance.

## **2. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)**

Gandhian Principle: *Regional Peace, Mutual Cooperation, and Goodwill Among Neighbours*

SAARC consists of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Maldives. India's engagement with SAARC reflects Gandhian ideals of peaceful coexistence, neighbourhood harmony and regional upliftment. Gandhi believed in resolving conflicts through dialogue, trust-building and nonviolence, emphasizing interdependence and service over dominance. Gandhi stated "Three-fourths of the miseries and misunderstandings in the world will disappear if we step into the shoes of our adversaries and understand their standpoint."<sup>10</sup> Guided by this vision, India has consistently worked for regional cooperation through SAARC in areas such as education, health, trade, disaster relief, connectivity and poverty alleviation.

India was a founding member of SAARC in 1985 and has since provided economic assistance, technical training and humanitarian support to smaller South Asian nations. Initiatives like the SAARC Satellite (GSAT-9) and India's COVID-19 Emergency Fund contribution in 2020 under the SAARC framework demonstrates its commitment to trusteeship and Sarvodaya (welfare of all). These reflect Gandhi's belief in service to neighbours and shared regional responsibility.

However, challenges particularly with Pakistan have tested Gandhian diplomacy. Despite this, India has largely avoided coercion within SAARC, preferring bilateral engagement, dialogue-based conflict resolution and people-to-people contact in line with Gandhi's faith in truth and reconciliation.

### **3. ASEAN and East Asia Summit**

Gandhian Principle: *Peaceful Coexistence and Mutual Respect*

ASEAN includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Through its "Act East" policy, India strengthens ties with ASEAN nations by promoting mutual growth, cultural exchange, and regional harmony. This resonates with Gandhi's emphasis on respecting others' cultures and sovereignty, and building trust rather than dominance. For Gandhi, "My nationalism is as broad as the universe. It includes in its sweep all the nations of the earth."<sup>11</sup> India emphasizes dialogue over confrontation in Southeast Asia and supports ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **4. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)**

Gandhian Principle: *Economic Trusteeship and Shared Prosperity*

Gandhi's idea of trusteeship where wealth is held in trust for the welfare of all is echoed in India's commitment to inclusive development and global equity through BRICS. "The rich must hold their wealth in trust for the poor."<sup>12</sup>

India actively supports BRICS initiatives like:

- a) The New Development Bank (NDB) for financing sustainable infrastructure,
- b) Knowledge exchange platforms and
- c) Cooperative action on health, technology, and climate.

India advocates for a just economic order, where emerging economies are empowered, aligning with Gandhi's ethical economics.

### **5. United Nations / UNESCO**

Gandhian Principle: *Humanism, Peace and Education for Harmony*

At the United Nations and UNESCO, India consistently advocates for:

- a) Global peace and disarmament reflecting Gandhi's staunch anti-war stance,

- b) Universal education as a path to character building, and
- c) Dialogue between civilizations promoting a culture of peace.

October 2, Gandhi's birthday being recognized by the UN as International Day of Nonviolence is a direct reflection of Gandhi's legacy.

## **6. G7 (Group of Seven Industrial Nations)**

Gandhian Principle: *Ethical Responsibility and Climate Justice*

Although not a permanent member, India is increasingly invited to G7 summits, where it promotes the Gandhian ethos of moral responsibility, especially regarding climate change. India emphasizes:

- a) Equitable energy transition,
- b) Global climate finance for developing nations, and
- c) Lifestyles for Sustainable Development movement.

This aligns with Gandhi's vision of simple living and responsible consumption, addressing the modern crises of climate change and overconsumption.

## **7. G20 (Group of Twenty Largest Economies)**

Gandhian Principle: *Justice Between Generations and Sustainable Development*

During its G20 presidency in 2023, India championed the themes of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam emphasizing Gandhian values of universal brotherhood, economic justice, and environmental stewardship. India advocated:

- a. green development and climate finance,
- b. Sustainable lifestyles and renewable energy,
- c. Inclusion of the African Union in G20 echoing Gandhi's connection to Africa and global justice.

India's vision of inclusive and future-oriented development echoes Gandhi's commitment to Sarvodaya i.e. welfare of all and ecological responsibility.

## **8. G4 (India, Germany, Brazil, Japan)**

Gandhian Principle: *Justice and Equality in Global Governance*

India as part of the G4 coalition, advocates for reforming the UN Security Council to make it more democratic and representative. This mirrors Gandhi's belief in truth-based justice and global equality.

India argues that the current UNSC structure is outdated and unjust and seeks reforms that give voice to underrepresented regions like Africa, Latin America, and the Global South.

## **9. QUAD (India, USA, Japan, Australia)**

Gandhian Principle: *Cooperation Without Coercion*

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific through QUAD reflects *Gandhian moral politik* pursuing strategic interests through *cooperation and not coercion*. Focused on health, climate, technology, and maritime security, India promotes a *rule-based, inclusive regional order* without power projection. Across global forums like the *UN, G20, and QUAD*, India practices *ethical diplomacy*, rooted in *truth, nonviolence and human dignity*. In a world shaped by militarism and exploitation, Gandhi's ideals remain a *guiding light* for just international relations. India's soft power and principled conduct demonstrate that *ethical governance can* shape global politics as effectively as economic or military strength.

## **Conclusions**

1. India's foreign policy demonstrates a lasting continuity with Gandhian values, despite evolving geopolitical contexts.
2. No-first-use and nuclear restraint project moral power, giving India diplomatic credibility.
3. Trusteeship is realized through south-south solidarity, especially in Africa and ASEAN.
4. Gandhi's concept of global unity lives on through India's multilateral activism and reforms advocacy.
5. Non-violence shapes India's preference for dialogue over confrontation, evident in QUAD diplomacy and climate forums.
6. Gandhian ideas are not just moral decorations but operational tools in India's foreign relations.



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