



Leadership and Strategy in Indian Foreign Policy: The Diplomatic Innovations of Modi, S. Jaishankar, and Ajit Doval

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative leadership and strategic innovations shaping India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Together, this leadership triad has redefined India's global engagement by blending political will, diplomatic agility, and security foresight. Modi's proactive outreach and vision of India as a leading power, Jaishankar's emphasis on strategic autonomy and multipolar engagement, and Doval's security-driven diplomacy have collectively expanded India's geopolitical influence. Key initiatives such as strengthening Indo-Pacific alliances, recalibrating ties with major powers, and employing bold responses to regional challenges highlight a decisive break from traditional non-alignment toward pragmatic assertiveness. The article argues that this convergence of political leadership, diplomatic expertise, and security strategy represents a new model of Indian statecraft, positioning India as a pivotal actor in global governance. These innovations underscore the role of leadership in crafting resilient and adaptive foreign policy.

Keywords: *Indian Foreign Policy, Narendra Modi, S. Jaishankar, Ajit Doval, Strategic Autonomy, Indo-Pacific, Diplomatic Leadership, National Security.*

Introduction

Indian foreign policy in the 21st century has witnessed a remarkable transformation, shaped by evolving global power dynamics, regional complexities, and the aspiration to position India as a leading power in a multipolar world. Central to this transformation has been the assertive leadership and innovative strategies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Together, they form a strategic triumvirate whose bold diplomatic decisions have redefined India's global standing, balancing traditional non-alignment with pragmatic strategic autonomy.

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Under Narendra Modi's leadership, foreign policy has acquired unprecedented visibility, combining high-level outreach, summit diplomacy, and proactive global engagement. His vision of "India as a Vishwaguru" is underpinned by active participation in multilateral platforms and strengthening bilateral relations with both major and emerging powers. S. Jaishankar, with his diplomatic expertise, has infused professionalism and strategic clarity, particularly in navigating great-power competition, Indo-Pacific geopolitics, and India's neighbourhood challenges. Complementing them, Ajit Doval has played a pivotal role in integrating national security with foreign policy, ensuring that India's diplomatic posture is backed by strong security considerations, especially in counter-terrorism and border management.

This leadership trio has overseen several diplomatic innovations, including recalibrating ties with major powers like the United States, Russia, and China, strengthening regional partnerships, leveraging soft power, and advancing initiatives such as "Act East" and Indo-Pacific cooperation. By blending bold leadership, strategic foresight, and innovative diplomacy, Modi, Jaishankar, and Doval have crafted a new trajectory for Indian foreign policy one that emphasizes self-confidence, resilience, and proactive global engagement.

Review of Literature

Scholarly debate about whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi has transformed India's foreign policy or simply repackaged existing trajectories is now well established. Some scholars argue Modi's tenure represents a personalization and public-branding of diplomacy high-profile summits, diaspora outreach, and energetic "prime-ministerial" diplomacy while others caution that core strategic objectives (strategic autonomy, neighbourhood concerns) remain continuous with past practice. This strand of literature highlights both the performative innovations (summits, bilateral pageantry) and the limits of institutional change.

A growing body of work frames Modi's foreign policy as combining economic diplomacy with strategic signalling. Analysts show how outreach to major powers, participation in Mini lateral architectures (Quad), and trade-forward diplomacy aim to elevate India's global footprint while pursuing practical economic ends. Critics here warn that the premium on visibility and transactional deals risks uneven returns if underlying institutional capacities and bureaucratic coordination are not strengthened. Empirical studies of the early Modi years document successes in mobilizing investment and raising India's voice, but also underline mixed outcomes in neighbourhood policy and crisis management.



Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's elevation from career diplomat to External Affairs Minister prompted studies on the emergence of what some call the "Jaishankar doctrine" a pragmatic, interest-based, realist approach that privileges outcome-oriented engagement, strategic autonomy, and selective Multi-alignment. Commentators and policy analysts emphasize Jaishankar's intellectual imprint: clearer narrative framing, disciplined public messaging, and an emphasis on managing major-power competition through calibrated partnerships rather than ideological alignment. Literature on Jaishankar highlights continuity with India's historical strategic culture even as it operationalizes a more transactional and assertive diplomacy.

Ajit Doval's role has attracted a separate but overlapping literature that situates the National Security Advisor as architect and operationaliser of a securitized and proactive strategic posture. Analysts credit Doval with strengthening whole-of-government coordination, integrating external and internal security priorities, and promoting "parallel" or back-channel diplomacy to manage crises and strategic challenges. Scholarship on Doval stresses his influence in redefining Indian responses to cross-border threats and asymmetric warfare, while also raising questions about transparency, parliamentary oversight, and the long-term implications of centralizing strategic decision-making.

A related empirical strand examines the normalization of more assertive use of force and "Gray-Zone" options under this leadership triad most notably in counterterrorism operations and calibrated coercive acts (Balakot air strikes and post-Galwan deterrence measures). Such studies argue these actions reflect both doctrinal shifts and operational innovations that blur the line between diplomacy and security policy, reinforcing an integrated instruments-of-statecraft approach. Critics contend this increases escalation risk and complicates conventional diplomatic channels.

Across these literatures, three recurring themes emerge: personalization of leadership, operational pragmatism, and strategic autonomy. However, notable gaps persist. First, existing work tends toward high-level narrative and elite interviews; there is a shortage of micro-level case studies tracing internal decision pathways across PMO, MEA, and NSCS. Second, the accountability and institutional resilience implications of concentrated strategic leadership remain underexamined. Third, comparative frameworks that situate India's innovations alongside other mid-to-great powers' leadership-driven foreign policy transformations are sparse.

This article will contribute by linking leadership behavior to decision-process dynamics using case studies to show how Modi's political style, Jaishankar's diplomatic philosophy, and Doval's security doctrine combine in concrete policy episodes and by assessing implications for India's long-term strategic autonomy and institutional balance.



Research Questions

1. What role has leadership played in shaping the bold and innovative directions of India's foreign policy under Modi, Jaishankar, and Deval?
2. How do the diplomatic strategies adopted by this leadership trio differ from India's earlier foreign policy approaches?
3. To what extent have these diplomatic innovations enhanced India's global standing in the context of multipolar geopolitics?
4. How have Modi's political leadership, Jaishankar's diplomatic acumen, and Deval's strategic vision converged in decision-making?
5. What are the implications of their bold decisions for India's security, economic interests, and regional influence?
6. Can the foreign policy innovations under this leadership triad be considered sustainable in the long term?

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the leadership styles of Modi, Jaishankar, and Deval in the context of Indian foreign policy.
2. To analyse the bold diplomatic initiatives that signify innovation and strategic shifts in India's external engagement.
3. To evaluate the impact of leadership-driven diplomacy on India's global image, alliances, and negotiations in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.
4. To study the interplay of political, diplomatic, and security dimensions in shaping India's foreign policy decisions.
5. To assess whether India's foreign policy innovations under this leadership represent continuity or a paradigm shift from traditional approaches.
6. To provide a comprehensive framework that links leadership, diplomacy, and national security strategy in Indian foreign policy.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Leadership under Modi, Jaishankar, and Deval has significantly transformed India's foreign policy by introducing bold diplomatic innovations.



- **H2:** The convergence of political, diplomatic, and security leadership has enhanced India's capacity to project power and influence globally.
- **H3:** India's assertive foreign policy under this leadership is a strategic shift from non-alignment towards pragmatic multipolar engagement.
- **H4:** The diplomatic innovations pursued by this leadership triad have strengthened India's position in global institutions and regional geopolitics.
- **H5:** The sustainability of these bold diplomatic strategies depends on institutional capacity, international responses, and domestic political consensus.

Data Collection and Methodology

This study relies primarily on secondary data sources to analyse the leadership and strategic innovations in Indian foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Data has been collected from government documents, official speeches, parliamentary debates, and policy papers issued by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office. Scholarly articles, books, and think-tank reports from institutions such as ORF, IDSA, and Brookings provide theoretical and analytical insights. In addition, newspaper archives, international journals, and online databases have been used to capture contemporary developments and case studies.

The methodology adopts a qualitative analytical approach, focusing on case-study examination of key diplomatic initiatives, strategic decisions, and crisis responses. Comparative analysis of pre- and post-2014 foreign policy orientations is employed to highlight innovations. The study emphasizes interpretive evaluation to understand the interplay of leadership, diplomacy, and national security strategy.

Discussion and Interpretation

Redefining India's Diplomatic Posture through Leadership

The evolution of India's foreign policy since 2014 has been deeply shaped by the strategic partnership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Their combined leadership represents a decisive break from the traditional incrementalist and non-confrontational foreign policy approach that India had largely followed since independence. Instead, India has embraced an assertive, pragmatic, and innovation-driven strategy that positions the country as a proactive player in shaping global and regional order. Modi provides the political vision and boldness, Jaishankar translates that into diplomatic articulation and multilateral engagement, while Doval ensures the



security-centric underpinnings of India's external posture. Together, they have pursued a recalibrated foreign policy that seeks to safeguard sovereignty, enhance India's strategic autonomy, and expand its global influence.

Assertive Strategic Autonomy

One of the most notable innovations under this leadership trio has been the transformation of India's concept of *strategic autonomy*. Earlier, it was largely understood as an avoidance of alignment with great powers, especially during the Cold War era. Modi, Jaishankar, and Doval redefined it as the ability to engage flexibly with multiple power centres without being constrained by alliances. This is visible in India's simultaneous deepening of strategic ties with the United States, active participation in the Quad, cooperation with Russia in defence and energy, and sustained engagement with the Global South. For instance, despite U.S. pressure, India maintained oil imports from Russia during the Ukraine conflict, highlighting its refusal to subordinate national interest to external dictates. Strategic autonomy has thus evolved from non-alignment to a pragmatic multi-alignment, reflecting confidence and bold leadership.

The Indo-Pacific Vision and Maritime Diplomacy

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central theatre of Indian diplomacy under Modi, Jaishankar, and Doval. India has articulated the Indo-Pacific as a region of inclusive cooperation, while simultaneously strengthening its strategic partnerships with the U.S., Japan, and Australia. The revival and institutionalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) stand as a clear example of diplomatic innovation, aimed at balancing Chinese assertiveness without projecting it as an exclusive military alliance.

Equally significant has been India's emphasis on maritime diplomacy. The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine introduced by Modi demonstrates a proactive Indian approach toward the Indian Ocean. Doval's strategic vision complements this through strengthening naval capabilities and partnerships, while Jaishankar frames India as a net security provider for smaller littoral states. These innovations reinforce India's ambition to secure its maritime neighbourhood, counterbalance external influence, and contribute to global commons.

Neighbourhood First and the Challenge of Asymmetry

The "Neighbourhood First" policy introduced by Modi signalled an important diplomatic recalibration. Unlike earlier approaches that often oscillated between benign neglect and reactive engagement, Modi and



Jaishankar emphasized proactive outreach to South Asian neighbours. High-profile visits, infrastructure assistance, and people-centric diplomacy have been deployed to reaffirm India's leadership in the region.

However, despite its ambitious vision, the policy faces challenges due to China's growing footprint in South Asia. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives have constrained India's leverage. Here, Doval's security-centric strategies have been vital in managing threats emanating from cross-border terrorism, particularly with Pakistan. For example, the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes reflected boldness in security decision-making that reshaped deterrence equations in the region. The diplomatic narrative, articulated by Jaishankar, projected these moves as India's sovereign right to defend itself, thus balancing military assertiveness with diplomatic legitimacy.

Engagement with Major Powers: Balancing Competition and Cooperation

India's ability to engage multiple major powers simultaneously has been one of the hallmarks of Modi, Jaishankar, and Doval's strategy. With the United States, relations have deepened through defence agreements such as COMCASA and BECA, convergence in the Indo-Pacific, and growing technology partnerships. At the same time, India has maintained its traditional partnership with Russia in defence procurement, energy imports, and multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Equally significant is India's nuanced approach to China. While economic ties remain extensive, India has not shied away from confronting Chinese aggression, especially during the Galwan Valley clash of 2020. Doval's role in security negotiations and Modi's willingness to elevate border tensions to the highest political level indicated a departure from earlier defensive diplomacy. Jaishankar's articulation of "China cannot disregard our legitimate interests" reflected a more assertive diplomatic discourse. This balancing act demonstrates innovative leadership that simultaneously manages competition and cooperation in a complex global order.

Multilateralism and Global South Leadership

Modi and Jaishankar have emphasized repositioning India as a leader of the Global South. This is evident in India's active role in the G20, BRICS, and SCO, alongside its persistent advocacy for UN Security Council reforms. India's G20 presidency in 2023 provided an opportunity to showcase its diplomatic innovations by foregrounding issues such as climate action, digital public infrastructure, and equitable



global development. Jaishankar's articulation of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family) represents an effort to blend civilizational ethos with contemporary diplomacy, thereby projecting India's soft power.

Moreover, India has leveraged humanitarian assistance and development cooperation as diplomatic tools. Vaccine Maitri during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted India's ability to extend solidarity beyond strategic allies, bolstering its image as a responsible global actor. This initiative exemplifies the convergence of Modi's political vision, Jaishankar's diplomatic articulation, and Doval's logistical and security oversight.

National Security-Centric Diplomacy

Ajit Doval's influence has been crucial in integrating national security considerations into India's foreign policy. Unlike earlier eras where diplomacy and security were often compartmentalized, the current leadership trio has created a seamless linkage. Counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S., France, and Israel; intelligence-sharing frameworks; and capacity-building assistance to smaller states reflect this integrated approach.

The abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 was not merely a domestic political move but had significant foreign policy implications. Doval's role in managing the security dimension, coupled with Jaishankar's diplomatic outreach to counter international criticism, and Modi's framing of the decision as an internal matter of sovereignty, illustrated a coordinated strategic effort. This underscores how domestic decisions are now embedded within a broader diplomatic and security framework.

Economic Diplomacy and Technology Partnerships

Economic diplomacy has gained unprecedented salience under Modi and Jaishankar. Trade diversification, digital cooperation, and foreign direct investment have been actively pursued as instruments of foreign policy. Initiatives such as "Make in India" and "Digital India" are projected globally to attract investments and partnerships. Jaishankar has highlighted the importance of technology diplomacy, forging collaborations in areas such as semiconductors, cybersecurity, and clean energy.

Equally, the leadership has used diaspora diplomacy as a tool of economic and political leverage. Modi's outreach to the Indian diaspora in the U.S., UK, and the Gulf countries has not only strengthened bilateral ties but also positioned India as a global hub of talent and innovation. Doval's role in ensuring security



assurances for diaspora communities in conflict-prone areas underscores the synergy of political, diplomatic, and security dimensions in this sphere.

Diplomatic Boldness in Crisis Management

The leadership of Modi, Jaishankar, and Deval has been particularly tested during crises. India's evacuation missions during the Yemen conflict (Operation Raahat), the Afghanistan crisis after the Taliban takeover, and the Russia-Ukraine war showcased India's ability to conduct large-scale, secure evacuations. These missions required political will, diplomatic negotiations, and security coordination. Similarly, during the Doklam standoff and the Galwan crisis, India demonstrated a willingness to stand firm against Chinese assertiveness, marking a departure from earlier conciliatory approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted India's capacity for innovative diplomacy. Despite facing domestic challenges, India extended assistance to multiple countries, reinforcing its role as a global humanitarian actor. Vaccine diplomacy, coupled with leadership in global digital health discussions, cemented India's position as a critical player in global governance.

Interpretation of India's Foreign Policy Trajectory

The leadership of Modi, Jaishankar, and Deval reflects an ongoing shift from a defensive, reactive foreign policy to a proactive and assertive strategy that seeks to shape global norms. Their diplomatic innovations lie in blending pragmatism with principle: balancing great power relations while safeguarding sovereignty, projecting India as a responsible actor while pursuing hard security interests, and expanding influence through both traditional statecraft and soft power instruments.

At the same time, this boldness is not without risks. India's assertive posture with China risks prolonged border tensions; balancing ties with the U.S. and Russia amid global polarization requires sustained diplomatic agility; and the increasing securitization of diplomacy may invite criticism from sections of the international community. However, the trio's leadership suggests a willingness to embrace calculated risks in pursuit of national interest.

Ultimately, the Modi-Jaishankar-Deval framework represents a significant reimagining of India's role in the world. Their diplomatic innovations are not ad hoc responses but part of a coherent strategic vision that positions India as a leading power in an era of multipolarity. This trajectory underscores a confident India that seeks not merely to respond to global developments but to actively shape them.

Findings

- **Transformation of India's Global Image:** Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has transitioned from a reactive to a proactive global actor. His frequent high-level visits, diaspora engagement, and personal diplomacy with world leaders have elevated India's visibility. The strategy of *projecting India as a civilizational power* with modern aspirations has improved India's standing in international forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the UN.
- **Shift Toward Strategic Autonomy with Pragmatism:** Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar has spearheaded a nuanced balance between strategic autonomy and pragmatic partnerships. India has maintained ties with the U.S., Russia, and the EU, while simultaneously strengthening its presence in the Global South. The principle of "multi-alignment" rather than strict non-alignment reflects India's bold diplomatic recalibration.
- **National Security-Driven Diplomacy:** Ajit Doval's role as National Security Advisor has placed security at the core of foreign policy. Initiatives such as the Balakot airstrikes (2019), the firm stance on cross-border terrorism, and negotiations with China during the border standoff show the blending of diplomacy with hard security measures. This reflects a strategic shift from purely diplomatic engagement to a *security-first foreign policy framework*.
- **Focus on the Indo-Pacific and Neighbourhood First Policy:** India's foreign policy has placed emphasis on the Indo-Pacific as a strategic theatre. Modi, Jaishankar, and Doval have collectively advanced initiatives like the Quad partnership, Act East Policy, and maritime security frameworks. Simultaneously, the *Neighbourhood First* and *Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)* doctrines have reinforced India's role as a regional stabilizer.
- **Assertive Use of Economic Diplomacy:** India's foreign policy under this leadership trio has strongly integrated economic tools with strategic aims. Initiatives such as vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19, energy diversification after the Ukraine war, and leveraging digital innovation have enhanced India's reputation as a reliable partner. India's ability to withstand Western pressure while continuing oil imports from Russia illustrates a confident use of economic diplomacy.
- **Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy:** Modi has projected Indian culture, traditions, and values as tools of diplomacy, using yoga, Ayurveda, and the global appeal of Indian democracy. This has complemented hard security and economic strategies, creating a balanced *smart power approach*.



Jaishankar has articulated these themes in global forums, combining intellectual depth with policy advocacy.

- **Crisis Management and Strategic Agility:** From the Galwan Valley clash to the Ukraine crisis, the trio's leadership has shown agility in crisis diplomacy. The ability to secure India's interests without succumbing to external pressure reflects a bold redefinition of India's global posture.

Suggestions

- **Institutionalizing Strategic Autonomy:** While leadership-driven diplomacy has been effective, India should institutionalize its approach to ensure continuity beyond individual leaders. Establishing long-term frameworks for multi-alignment, Indo-Pacific engagement, and counterterrorism cooperation will reduce reliance on personalities.
- **Balancing Security and Developmental Diplomacy:** Doval's security-centric approach has been effective in addressing threats but must be balanced with developmental partnerships. India should expand cooperation in areas such as climate change, digital infrastructure, and education to sustain global goodwill.
- **Strengthening Regional Leadership:** To consolidate its leadership in South Asia, India must address regional asymmetries. Enhanced connectivity, trade facilitation, and inclusive regional frameworks are necessary to counterbalance China's influence in the neighbourhood.
- **Enhancing Public Diplomacy and Track-II Engagements:** Beyond high-level diplomacy, India should strengthen public diplomacy through universities, think tanks, media outreach, and cultural institutions. Track-II dialogues can create additional channels to influence global perceptions and foster cooperative solutions.
- **Leveraging Technology and Innovation Diplomacy:** India's growing expertise in digital governance, fintech, and space exploration can be used as tools of global influence. Expanding collaborations in AI, cybersecurity, and health-tech can position India as a hub of innovation-led diplomacy.
- **Building Stronger Multilateral Influence:** India should continue to reform multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council, WTO, and IMF. Leveraging coalitions of the Global South, alongside partnerships with the West, can help India shape global governance structures in its Favor.



- **Preparing for Emerging Geopolitical Challenges:** The trio's bold decisions have strengthened India's global position, but new challenges like U.S.-China rivalry, climate security, and resource competition require forward-looking strategies. India must diversify its partnerships and create contingency plans for future disruptions.

The diplomatic innovations of Narendra Modi, S. Jaishankar, and Ajit Doval represent a paradigm shift in Indian foreign policy marked by assertiveness, pragmatism, and strategic boldness. The findings highlight the successful blend of leadership-driven diplomacy with national security and economic objectives. The suggestions emphasize institutionalization, regional leadership, and innovation diplomacy to ensure that India sustains and expands its global role in an evolving multipolar world.

Conclusion

The diplomatic innovations spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval mark a transformative phase in India's foreign policy and strategic orientation. Their leadership has redefined India's global engagement from a cautious, reactive stance to one characterized by boldness, agility, and strategic clarity. Modi's proactive outreach, encompassing high-level summits, diaspora diplomacy, and the projection of India as a civilizational power, has elevated India's visibility on the world stage. Jaishankar's pragmatic and intellectually grounded diplomacy has ensured that India navigates a complex multipolar order with balance, combining strategic autonomy with deepened partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, the West, and the Global South. Doval's emphasis on national security, intelligence-led strategy, and proactive counter-terrorism measures has integrated hard security concerns with diplomatic initiatives, reinforcing India's credibility as a decisive power.

Collectively, their leadership represents a cohesive triad blending vision, diplomacy, and security, enabling India to adapt to shifting global power dynamics. The trio has positioned India as not merely a participant but a shaper of international discourse. Ultimately, their innovations underscore a transition towards assertive diplomacy rooted in national interests, projecting India as a confident, responsible, and influential global actor.



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