

**The Role of Gandhian Philosophy in India's Foreign Policy: Geopolitical Context and
Contemporary Relevance**

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Abstract

This study looks at how Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy has influenced India's foreign policy over time, from the post-independence era to today's global interactions. Gandhian ideas, such as *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satyagraha* (truth-force), *Sarvodaya* (upliftment of all), *Trusteeship* and *Self-reliance*, have historically shaped India's diplomatic approach, creating a framework that values moral authority more than coercive power. After independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru integrated these ideals through efforts like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Panchsheel Agreement, showing a commitment to peaceful coexistence and strategic independence.

In today's multipolar world, India still draws from Gandhian principles while dealing with challenges like rising powers, regional conflicts, climate change, and economic ties. This paper reviews India's foreign policy in several areas, including nuclear diplomacy, India-China relations, maritime security, climate leadership, humanitarian assistance, multilateral involvement, and soft power. It also looks at the difficulties of balancing Gandhian ethics with realpolitik, economic demands, and domestic political factors.

By analysing historical documents, policy choices, multilateral activities, and current diplomatic actions, the study shows how Gandhian philosophy remains a foundation for India's global strategy. Despite the tension between idealism and practicality, India's foreign policy strikes a unique balance, merging moral vision with strategic adaptability, which positions it as a

principled player in a more complex international landscape.

Keywords: Gandhian Philosophy, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, India's Foreign Policy, Non-Aligned Movement, Strategic Autonomy, Climate Diplomacy, Humanitarian Diplomacy, Soft Power.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, based on the principles of Ahimsa (non-violence), Satyagraha (truth-force), trusteeship, and Sarvodaya (welfare of all), has gone beyond its historical significance in India's independence struggle. It has influenced the country's diplomatic stance and its interactions globally. Gandhi believed that a nation's strength comes not just from military power or economic control but from its ability to promote justice, fairness, and human dignity both at home and abroad. After independence in 1947, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru put these ideals into action by creating a foreign policy focused on moral authority and peaceful coexistence in an increasingly changing world.

India's early diplomatic moves, like its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Panchsheel Agreement with China, showed a strong commitment to non-alignment, strategic independence, and ethical international relations. These policies were a clear break from the power-focused, militaristic approaches that had shaped global politics, especially following World War II and during the rising Cold War tensions. The NAM allowed India to assert its sovereignty, resist pressure from major powers, and encourage cooperation among newly independent countries in the Global South. Similarly, Panchsheel outlined the principles of mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence, reflecting Gandhian ideals in bilateral relations.

Today, the international landscape has become more complicated. The rise of China as a regional and global force, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, climate change, nuclear armament, and diverse economic structures challenge India to blend Gandhian moral principles with practical needs. India strives for strategic independence, managing cooperation with nations such as the United States, Russia, and China, along with regional groups. Throughout this, India emphasises ethical diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and soft power.

This research explores how Gandhian philosophy influences India's foreign policy across various areas, including strategic and nuclear diplomacy, India-China relations, climate action, humanitarian efforts, multilateral cooperation, and cultural impact. It also addresses the challenges posed by globalisation, realpolitik, domestic political pressures, and military interests that can limit the application of Gandhian principles. By examining these aspects, the study aims to show how Gandhi's lasting ethical framework continues to shape India's global engagements, combining moral vision with the realities of today's geopolitical landscape.

Objectives

1. To analyse how the Gandhian principles of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, trusteeship, and Sarvodaya shape and influence India's foreign policy and diplomatic methods.
2. To analyse India's position in nuclear, climate, humanitarian and multilateral diplomacy from the point of view of Gandhian ethics.
3. To identify the challenges and tensions in aligning Gandhian idealism with realpolitik and current geopolitical needs.

Methodology

The present research is based on the qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approaches, relying on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official documents of the government, speeches of prime ministers of India, UN resolutions, NAM declarations, COP28

reports, and official pronouncements on nuclear and climate policy. It also looks at historical treaties like the Panchsheel Agreement (1954) and key policy documents such as Operation Smiling Buddha. Secondary sources include scholarly books on Gandhian philosophy and its applicability to foreign policy, apart from reports from international organisations such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, BRICS Secretariat, and International Solar Alliance. The research, therefore, assesses both historical and contemporary events within a Gandhian ethical framework that is underlined by the concept of non-violence, trusteeship, and Sarvodaya within its diplomatic, strategic, and humanitarian action. A comparative study of Cold War-era politics with contemporary strategy in a multipolar world helps in establishing the evolution of Indian foreign policy over time as determined by the Gandhian principles.

Gandhian Ideals in Contemporary Geopolitical Frameworks

1. The Non-Aligned Movement and India's Strategic Autonomy: From Cold War Ethics to a Multipolar World

1.1 NAM in a bipolar Cold War system

Emerging during the Cold War, NAM represented a keystone of Indian foreign policy that reflected Gandhi's dream of moral authority and ethical diplomacy. As such, India's non-alignment was underpinned by the Gandhian gospel of *Ahimsa*, or resistance to coercion, argued Nehru in 1954, and the quest for independent moral judgement in international relations. The NAM allowed India to protect sovereignty without giving in to the ideological imperatives of both the United States and the Soviet Union. The adoption of a mixed-economic model and the pursuit of nuclear capability through Operation Smiling Buddha in 1974, among others, were aimed at safeguarding strategic autonomy, with less than full alignment with either superpower.

The Cold War brought several predicaments to this non-aligned position of India. Certain pressing concerns for food security made India import through PL-480 in the United States and

hence made it susceptible to various outside influences and pressures (Chopra, 2005). While unresolved disputes over Kashmir brought the country into conflict with Pakistan in 1965 and again in 1971, such unresolved disputes plunged India into an increasingly precarious balancing act between its Gandhian non-violence and the realistic demands of national security. Its war with China in 1962 exposed further military vulnerabilities for India and led to a set of reforms in the nation's defences, underpinning at the same time the logic of strategic autonomy. Conducting its first nuclear test, India indicated a resolution for self-reliance – a compelling factor within Gandhian thought – as a means of asserting its sovereignty on the international stage (Raghavan, 2019).

The NAM continues to hold relevance even in the post-Cold War period in view of India's emphasis on South-South cooperation and its advocacy for the collective interests of the developing nations. At the 2024 NAM Summit, India committed herself toward global solidarity, equitable development, and empowerment of the marginalised nations in tune with Gandhian ideals of Sarvodaya and trusteeship.

1.2 Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World

The presence of multipolarity in the current international system, represented by the United States, China, Russia, and regional coalitions like the European Union and ASEAN, demands a more complex application of Gandhian principles (Kapur, 2022). A delicate balance of cooperation-independence characterises India's foreign policy – engaging with Russia and China in forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation while aligning with the United States through QUAD, I2U2, and the Minerals Security Partnership. India's diplomatic engagements also include active dialogues between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and Israel and Iran, demonstrating nuance in the application of moral diplomacy in high-stakes international conflicts.

The Indian nuclear programme, along with and separate from the NPT, essentially underlines a Gandhian commitment to equity and justice, at once challenging the discriminatory global normative while maintaining a No First Use policy to balance national security with ethical responsibility. (Chakraborty, 2018; Raghavan, 2019)

1.3 Challenges During the Cold War

Maintaining non-alignment during the Cold War was hounded by complex international pressures. India's dependence on U.S. food aid, border disputes with China, and military tensions with Pakistan more often than not led to pragmatic deviations from strict Gandhian idealism (Chopra, 2005; Singh, 2020). Yet, in its strategic autonomy, pursuit of nuclear self-reliance, and diplomatic engagement with both superpowers, India's commitment to ethical diplomacy was unmistakable. (Kapoor, 2018; Raghavan, 2019)

1.4 NAM Post-Cold War

Even with the fall of the Soviet bloc, India remains one of the most active participants in NAM, prioritising causes such as the representation of developing nations, ethical governance, and global cooperation. India's focus on inclusive international structures and equitable development is a sequel to Gandhian ideas tuned to the realities of multipolarity. (Bose, 2023; Jain 2024)

1.5 Contemporary Strategic Autonomy

India's foreign policy today represents a Gandhian balance between idealism and pragmatism. If China's policies in the Indo-Pacific region have become more assertive, India has fostered strategic partnerships but then avoided formal military alignments, reflecting Gandhi's emphasis on dialogue, non-violence, and moral authority (Kapur 2022; Sharma 2023). These would extend

to include initiatives such as the "Make in India" and Atmanirbhar Bharat campaigns that reflect how the application of Swadeshi in the attainment of economic self-reliance amidst global interdependencies can be rendered. (Mehta, 2023)

2. India-China Relations – From Panchsheel to Pragmatic Engagement

2.1 Panchsheel Principles and Gandhian Foundations

The Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 was a touchstone moment in the relations between India and China, which enshrined the Gandhian ideals of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and ethical diplomacy. Panchsheel had the following five principles:

- Mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Mutual non-aggression.
- Non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
- Equality and mutual benefit.
- Coexist peacefully. (Bhattacharya, 2010)

These principles were deeply imbued with Gandhian idealism, emphasising non-violence, or Ahimsa, and negotiation through truth, or Satyagraha, as basic tenets of foreign relations.

2.2 Early Challenges: Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the 1962 War

Despite the Panchsheel Agreement, Indo-China relations started off on a sour note. The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the exile of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 eroded mutual trust bilaterally, with China's "Five Fingers Policy" of expansionism claiming rights over Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh (Gupta, 2015). Tensions culminated in the 1962 Indo-China War, testing the limits of Gandhian non-violence against regular territorial aggression. The war ended following a declared unilateral ceasefire by China, but India bore scars that led to changed equations in the bilateral relationship, exposing painful inadequacies in

the country's defence preparedness (Raghavan, 2019).

2.3 Contemporary Border Disputes and Military Standoffs

Tensions along the India-China border persist, evinced by incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020. Yet, India remains engaged with dialogue and mechanisms for dispute management through bilateral means, revealing the principles of Gandhian conflict resolution. Agreements over the disengagement of troops and mutual patrolling in contested regions reflect the commitment of India toward peaceful negotiation, coupled with territorial integrity.

2.4 China and Economic Diplomacy

Increasing Chinese influence through "cheque-book diplomacy" and manufacturing hegemony tests India's strategic autonomy. Consequently, a Swadeshi policy as preached by Gandhi has been pursued by India in the form of the Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat policies to date (Sharma, 2023). This set of initiatives reduces the country's reliance on Chinese imports and builds on domestic production, befitting Gandhi's ideals of economic sovereignty and ethical self-sufficiency (Kapoor, 2022).

While this is so, India continues to engage China through forums like BRICS, among others, in an expression of Gandhian ideals of mutual respect and cooperation even amidst competitive economic dynamics.

2.5 The QUAD, SAGAR, and Strategic Balancing

India's Indo-Pacific engagement epitomises the fine balance between the high idealism of Gandhi and strategic pragmatism. While participating in QUAD dialogues between India, the

USA, Japan, and Australia, and through its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy, India is keeping off formal military alliances while pursuing maritime security, economic cooperation, and freedom of navigation (Kapur, 2022; Mehta, 2023). It represents a neo-Gandhian approach where dialogue, diplomacy, and peaceful engagement have pride of place over coercion or militarisation.

While critics argue that Gandhian diplomacy has been a failure as far as China is concerned, India has applied the very same principles where feasible. Emphasis on bilateral negotiation, adherence to international norms, and engagement in economic cooperation demonstrate practical adaptations of Gandhi's philosophy to the present geopolitical realities (Raghavan 2019; Sharma 2023).

3. Diplomacy and Global Disarmament Efforts

3.1 Gandhian Philosophy and India's Nuclear Stance

Historically, India's nuclear policy has reflectively been tugged between two diverging courses of action: idealism in the form of Mahatma Gandhi and strategic necessity. It was the principle of Ahimsa by Gandhi and ethical conflict resolution that led India to follow nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, epitomising non-violent self-sufficiency (Narlikar, 2018).

In the aftermath of the Indo-China War of 1962 and regional tensions, the Indian government felt the imperative for national security, hence nuclear deterrence; talks began but were confronted by pacifist voices within India that urged restraint, in keeping with Gandhian ideology, and emphasised the use of energy for peaceful uses and global disarmament (Bhattacharya, 2010).

3.2 Operation Smiling Buddha (1974) and Strategic Autonomy

The first nuclear test by India, Operation Smiling Buddha, was conducted in 1974 and marked its entry into the nuclear club. This test was not done out of aggression but with an urge for strategic

autonomy – an updated version of Gandhian self-reliance. This test indicated that India can protect its sovereignty and yet keep advocating disarmament – a balancing act between idealism and pragmatism.

Because of its discriminatory design, setting a legal dividing line between declared nuclear weapons states and the rest, India's nuclear programme remained outside the NPT. India's decision not to join the NPT was in tune with the principles of justice and fair play enunciated by Gandhi, and it essentially demonstrated India's concern for a just and equitable global order.

3.3 Operation Shakti (1998) and International Repercussions

The results of Operation Shakti, the 1998 thermonuclear tests, were international sanctions, and hence, the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) was formed to restrain India's nuclear development. India had to stand firm with its strategic autonomy while blending the ethical ideals of Gandhi with those of 'defensive realism'. India focused on the doctrine of NFU – no first use – and also the self-imposed moratorium on testing to balance the need for ethical nuclear policy without keeping the nation's security in jeopardy.

3.4 Nuclear Diplomacy and Global Disarmament Advocacy

India has actively involved itself in international dialogues on disarmament, advocating the cause of just methods for nuclear governance. It has emphasised a non-discriminatory framework wherein developed nations, given the history of proliferation, have a greater responsibility towards disarmament (Narlikar 2018). This is further in line with Gandhi's philosophy of trusteeship, that global resources, including nuclear capability, are to be used responsibly and ethically.

The nuclear diplomacy of India reflects Gandhian pragmatism whereby, while maintaining deterrence, India actively engages with international forums like the United Nations, IAEA

safeguards, and bilateral dialogues to promote peaceful conflict resolution and nuclear equity.

3.5 Balancing Idealism and National Security

This tension between idealism and *realpolitik* threads through the evolution of India's nuclear programme. On one hand, Gandhian ideals provide the moral compass in a call for non-violence, disarmament, and world justice. At the same time, strategic imperatives dictate readiness, deterrence, and subtle diplomacy in a noxious geopolitical ecology.

By continuing to adhere to NFU policies and advancing a self-imposed test moratorium, India proves that Gandhian ethics can coexist with modern nuclear strategy and create a model of responsible nuclear stewardship.

4. India's Role in Global Peacekeeping, Humanitarian Diplomacy, and Vaccine Initiatives

4.1 Gandhian Philosophy and Peacekeeping

India's commitment to UNPKO reflects the Gandhian ideal of non-violent intervention and moral responsibility. Since its inception, India has consistently contributed one of the single largest contingents to UN peacekeeping missions, deploying troops across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

In sum, India seems to reflect Gandhi's ideas of protecting the vulnerable without the use of coercive force to maintain world order through the participation in missions in South Sudan, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Such an approach locates India as a responsible actor in global governance, bringing ethical principles and practical engagement together.

4.2 Humanitarian Diplomacy

The Gandhian ideals of *Sarvodaya*, or the uplifting of all, and service continue to inspire India's

humanitarian diplomacy. India has consistently extended timely relief during global crises, demonstrating ethical foreign policy in action. In 2015, Operation Maitri provided rescue and relief during the Nepal earthquake (Chopra, 2019). In 2021, India supported Haiti through Operation Sanjeevani (Kapoor, 2022), and in 2023, Operation Dost sent search-and-rescue teams, along with essential supplies, to Turkey and Syria following devastating earthquakes that hit these countries (Mehta, 2023). More recently, during the Nepal floods of 2024, India sent over 25 tonnes of emergency relief, including medicines, food items, tents, and hygiene kits, and in 2025, Operation Brahma provided NDRF teams, medical personnel, essential supplies, and a field hospital to Myanmar within hours after a magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck. Finally, India has strengthened humanitarian support to developing nations and advocated for global disaster risk reduction initiatives.

These initiatives epitomise Gandhian principles of compassion, non-violence, and selfless service and place India as a moral leader in crisis response at the global level.

4.3 Vaccine Diplomacy and Global Solidarity

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unusual opportunity for India to assume Gandhian-inspired moral leadership. Under the policy of Vaccine Maitri, or Vaccine Friendship, India provided vaccines to more than 90 countries, with a marked priority toward developing nations and/or underserved communities.

This initiative:

- Strengthened diplomatic ties through ethics resource-sharing.
- Demonstrated India's commitment to global health equity. This reflected Gandhi's notion of trusteeship.
- Improved India's status in multilateral cooperation: since vaccine distribution depended on coordination with WHO, UN, and regional organisations, Bhattacharya (2010) said the

following.

- Vaccine diplomacy reinforced India's soft power and showed the alignment between Gandhian philosophy and modern humanitarian strategy.

4.4 Middle East Peace Efforts

The foreign policy of India in the Middle East reflects the Gandhian ideals of dialogue and balance:

- Israel-Palestine Conflict: India advocates for a peaceful two-state solution, continuing to maintain diplomatic ties with both Israel and Palestine.
- Hamas Attack on Israel 2023: India expressed solidarity with Israel against terrorism and showed empathy for Palestinian humanitarian concerns – a balancing act from an ethical point of view in a geopolitically complex world (Kapoor, 2022).
- India-Iran Relations: India advocates for dialogue in order to ensure that the region is stable and does not resort to aggressive posturing, which is inconsistent with Gandhian principles.

It reflects the ability of India to balance its various interests by adhering to a Gandhian moral framework.

4.5 Africa and South-South Cooperation

The Africa-focused diplomacy of India reflects the Gandhian commitment to equity and upliftment.

- Initiatives also include the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, lines of credit for African nations, and the Pan-African e-Network Project (Narlikar, 2018).
- It completed 206 projects in 43 African countries valued at \$12.4 billion, with a focus on sustainable development and capacity-building.

- Programmes like ITEC scholarships and institution building develop human capital, aligning with the empowerment through knowledge and self-reliance vision that Gandhi espoused (Raghavan, 2019).
- India's engagement demonstrates its role as the leading voice for Global South solidarity, a process of institutionalising Gandhian ideals in economic and development diplomacy.

4.6 Multilateralism and Moral Diplomacy

- India's efforts in multilateral forums reflect the Gandhian principles of justice, equity, and inclusive decision-making:
- UNSC Reform: This would pave the way for the permanent representation of developing nations and hence make world governance more representative and multipolar.
- BRICS is calling for reforms in the IMF and World Bank to strengthen the voice of emerging and developing economies. (Reuters, 2025)
- G20 Leadership: inclusive growth, debt relief, sustainable development, and climate justice will, therefore, be the priorities during its leadership and reflect Gandhi's Sarvodaya philosophy.
- Global South Advocacy: This places India in the position of a bridge for the countries of the South, whose interests must enjoy due and equal prominence in international decision-making.

These initiatives represent a mix of ethical foreign policy and pragmatic diplomacy as pursued by India in giving voice to developing nations in global affairs.

5. Climate Diplomacy of India and Gandhian Sustainability

5.1 Gandhian Foundations in India's Climate Vision

The Gandhian philosophy of simple living, harmony with nature, and trusteeship reverberates in

India's climate diplomacy even today. His call for prudent use of resources and moral management of the environment finds resonance in the country's international environmental stance, where development is pursued not merely for growth, but for collective well-being.

5.2 Leadership through the International Solar Alliance (ISA)

Through the International Solar Alliance, India has reinforced its global leadership in driving cooperation in solar energy. ISA boasts 125 member and signatory countries as of 2025 – a strong multilateral vehicle for clean-energy diplomacy.

Addressing the 8th ISA Assembly held in New Delhi in October 2025, President Droupadi Murmu called for inclusive global solar action under the principle of “One Sun, One World, One Grid.” India has been re-elected as President of ISA till 2026, which marks the continuity of its solar diplomacy. Besides fostering finance and technology transfer, ISA under the leadership of India has also launched the following innovative initiatives:

- A program called SUNRISE, short for Solar Upcycling Network, takes end-of-life solar panels and upcycles them into raw materials to be used in manufacturing; this is an application of a circular economy for solar.
- The 'One Sun One World One Grid' OSOWOG is a vision of a globally interconnected solar electricity grid across the continents.
- The ISA Academy & Global Capability Centre support capacity building, R&D, and digital solar training for member countries. Solar diplomacy is not mere symbolism for India.

On 26 Nov 2024, India inked a Project Implementation Agreement with ISA to deploy solar projects in several island nations – jointly funded under the Quad Climate Working Group, viz., Fiji, Comoros, Madagascar, and Seychelles. These include solar rooftop panels for healthcare

facilities and solar-powered cold storage to enhance resilience in remote communities.

UN climate change executive secretary Simon Stiell hailed India as a “model of solar leadership” for joining an elite league of only four countries to exceed 100 GW of solar capacity.

5.3 Climate Justice and Multilateral Diplomacy

India's climate diplomacy is deeply infused with the Gandhian ethics of justice and equity. At various international forums, India also vociferously advocates the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", saying that the already developed countries should take greater responsibility for emissions reduction.

India, through its Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, or the CDRI, supports resilient infrastructure for climate-vulnerable countries – a manifestation of its Gandhian commitment to collective global well-being.

This India-led ISA cooperation focuses on solar water pumps, mangrove resilience, and cross-border climate risk mitigation with integrated gender and sustainability concerns in the Bay of Bengal countries.

5.4 Emerging Projects and Grassroots Climate Action

At the recent high-level climate diplomacy events:

- India continues to demand climate justice, saying climate finance should become a legal and moral obligation for the rich world.
- In the run-up to COP 30 in Brazil in 2025, India has been focusing on multilateral mechanisms for technology transfer, sustainable finance, and lifestyle-based climate action.
- Domestically, the LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) movement of India, influenced by

Gandhian minimalism, encourages sustainable living day to day – waste reduction, water saving, and energy conservation.

- Meanwhile, youth-led climate diplomacy is growing through the IM1B "1.5 Matters" campaign to mobilise climate talent aligned with the 1.5°C limit to warming.

5.5 Strategic and Ethical Implications of India's Climate Diplomacy

Through the use of solar technology, India embeds Gandhian self-reliance into its energy transition and influences global norms. Its climate diplomacy epitomises ethical responsibility towards both developed and developing countries in reinforcing trusteeship.

Through systemic investments and global partnerships, India shows that climate leadership can combine moral vision with practical impact, particularly by empowering communities and vulnerable states.

5.6 Climate-related humanitarian actions

- The Mangrove Restoration by MISHTI gives a livelihood to the people in these coastal communities – true to Gandhi's principle of Sarvodaya. MEA, 2023
- LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) fosters sustainable practices at the community level by drawing on Gandhi's philosophy of simple living.

6. Multilateralism, Global Governance, and Soft Power: Gandhian Foundations

6.1 Multilateral Engagement and Advocacy for the Global South

India has consistently projected itself as a representative of developing nations, demanding equity and justice within international institutions:

- UNSC Reforms: The country advocates for permanent membership of developing nations in the UNSC as part of the G4 alliance comprising India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan.

(MEA, 2023).

- G77 and Global South Initiatives: India strengthens the representation of the Global South on issues of fair trade, decolonisation, and sustainable development.
- BRICS Leadership-India contributes to reforming international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, to include developing nations. (Kumar, 2023)

These initiatives reflect, on a global scale, Gandhi's concepts of justice, equality, and trusteeship.

6.2 Soft Power Diplomacy

Soft power is a cornerstone of Gandhian-inspired diplomacy in which persuasion, rather than coercion, is the operative word. Cultural diplomacy refers to the promotion of yoga, Indian literature, and Gandhian philosophy as a way to strengthen India's civilisational influence globally (Bhattacharya, 2022).

- International Day of Non-Violence (October 2): This institutionalises Gandhi's ideals at the UN and helps in strengthening India's moral authority. MEA, 2024
- Educational Exchanges and Think Tanks: Programmes such as the Gandhi Peace Foundation and the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies encourage global thought leadership on Gandhian ideals.

It is through soft power that India advances normative influence, shaping worldwide debates on peace, justice, and sustainability.

6.3 Diaspora Diplomacy

The Indian diaspora essentially represents an extension of Indian soft power, reflecting Gandhian values of ethics and service:

- Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrates contributions by Indian expatriates while highlighting

Gandhian values of peace, resilience, and civic responsibility.

- Indian communities living abroad act as cultural ambassadors, as they shape international perceptions about India in positive ways.

6.4 Economic Diplomacy and South-South Cooperation

India's Gandhian-inspired approach to economic diplomacy underlines self-reliance, fairness, and cooperative development:

- South-South Cooperation: India partners with developing nations for the promotion of industrialisation, capacity building, and equitable trade.
- Africa Initiatives: India's lines of credit, the Pan-African e-Network, and scholarship programmes are contributing to regional development. MEA 2023
- Voice of Global South Summit & G20 Leadership: India for Inclusive Growth, Pandemic Recovery, and Equitable Development. (Tharoor, 2020)

These initiatives mimic Gandhi's Swadeshi and trusteeship principles at the macroeconomic and multilateral levels.

6.5 Global Leadership through Normative Action

India draws upon Gandhian ideals to exercise normative leadership rather than coercive power:

- Non-Violent Advocacy: Advocacy for human rights, conflict resolution, and environmental sustainability in various international forums. Rajagopal 2023
- Pharmaceutical Diplomacy: The "Pharmacy of the World" programmes epitomise Sarvodaya in extending medical assistance all over the world.
- International Yoga Day & Gandhian Education: Amplifies India's soft power to engender global well-being while guaranteeing ethical norms. (MEA, 2024)

Challenges of the Gandhian Way in Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy

1. Realpolitik versus Idealism

India's aspiration for strategic autonomy often runs into the imperatives of realpolitik. The enhanced great-power competition, especially in the Indo-Pacific, demands that India take assertive actions in military modernisation and strategic alliances, which may run afoul of Gandhian non-violence. In the case of balancing U.S.-China relations, decisions have to be taken more in line with security calculus than ethical considerations.

2. Pressures and Interdependence

India's foreign policy is therefore circumscribed by economic imperatives. While it has global leadership ambitions, India remains dependent on external supply chains for critical technologies, including semiconductors and energy resources. Trade interdependence with China – estimated at more than US\$150 billion in bilateral trade in 2024-25 – acts as a further constraint on New Delhi's ability to uphold Gandhian ethical consistency across international economic relationships. Various such dependencies have often forced compromises on moral alignment to safeguard national development imperatives.

3. Geopolitical Rivalries

The Gandhian ideal of non-violent conflict resolution is confronted by the regional security environment vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. Recent Line of Actual Control escalations and cross-border tensions with Pakistan highlight the requirement for a strong defence posture. Times of India, 2025; Reuters, 2025. Whereas Gandhi focused on dialogue and reconciliation, diverse contemporary threats more often necessitate the resort by India to deterrence strategies departing from exclusively non-violent frameworks.

4. Internal Political Dynamics

The domestic political situation in India also significantly influences the country's foreign policy. With growing nationalism and populist sentiments, policymakers are inclined to appear tough as a means of suppressing moral restraint. Multi-party politics and coordination challenges amongst various ministries at times lead to inconsistency with the application of these Gandhian principles.

5. Military-Industrial Complex and Defense Priorities

With an estimated \$80 billion defence expenditure by India in the year 2024 and indigenous defence production in full swing, pragmatism seems to guide national security. Such necessary developments, however, introduce tensions with Gandhian non-violence, emphasising the need for balance between ethical principles and strategic imperatives.

6. Global Power Structures and Multilateral Constraints

India's advocacy of reform in global governance institutions, such as the UN, WTO, and IMF, essentially conveys the Gandhian ideals of equity and justice. However, resistance from major powers at the institutional level and structural inertia at the level of global systems often dilute this. India, in multilateral negotiations, has to reconcile idealist goals with pragmatic compromises to arrive at actionable outcomes.

7. Globalization and Structural Inequalities

Globalisation has increased interdependence but simultaneously constrained the ability of relatively small states to act purely on ethical grounds. India faces pressure to conform to dominant narratives and technological blocs, which are not always fair or equity-orientated; thus, that challenges the consistent applicability of the Gandhian principles of foreign policy.

8. Public Opinion, Media Influence, and Domestic Constraints

Public sentiment and media storylines in India can press for assertive foreign policy approaches in crises (Insights on India 2025). Domestic expectations often put tension on balancing with Gandhian moral restraint, as short-term political gains can conflict with long-term ethical commitments

9. Domestic Social Justice Challenges

Persistent internal inequalities, such as poverty, caste-based discrimination, and regional disparities, all demand prioritisation toward domestic welfare, which sometimes overshadows international ethical commitments. While Gandhi's idea of Sarvodaya suggests the inherent linkage of internal social justice with international moral leadership, practical limitations create trade-offs for policymakers.

10. Technological and Cyber Diplomacy Pressures

The rise of cyber diplomacy and digital threats presents a potential challenge to Gandhian ideals of ethical foreign policy. The country has to protect critical digital infrastructure, guard against misinformation, and react to cyberattacks – often requiring swift and strategic action. It is tough to balance national security with the principles of non-violence and moral diplomacy since technological imperatives often clash with Gandhian approaches. Ethical integrity in cyberspace demands nuanced policymaking and careful adaptation to modern realities (Chakraborty, 2024).

Conclusion

The abiding philosophy of Ahimsa, Sarvodaya, trusteeship, and self-reliance of Mahatma Gandhi has remained the guiding influence on the foreign policy of India, a moral beacon in a modern geopolitical maze. Ever since independence, and even now, India has been pursuing equilibrium between idealistic premises and strategic compulsions, reflecting an unusual amalgam of

idealism and pragmatism.

For India, moral sovereignty during the Cold War was epitomised by the leadership it undertook within the Non-Aligned Movement, while strategic autonomy in the multipolar world underlines the continuity of Gandhian ideals in contemporary diplomacy. Engagements with global powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, and through multilateral forums like BRICS, G20, and at the UN level, have brought to the fore India's role in fostering equity, justice, and a rules-based international order.

Peacekeeping and humanitarian diplomacy are further manifestations of the operationalisation of Gandhian principles. Deep involvement by India in UN peacekeeping missions, proactive disaster relief operations, and vaccine diplomacy initiatives such as Vaccine Maitri are a reflection of ethical leadership and solidarity with the global South on issues commemorating UNFCCC 2023. Similarly, India's climate diplomacy through initiatives such as ISA, LiFE, and MISHTI echoes Gandhi's vision for environmental stewardship, sustainable development, and community-centred action.

However, India still grapples with its idealism and realpolitik. Border disputes, regional rivalries, economic dependencies, and global power pressures often pull it in the direction of strategic compromise. Therefore, even while entering into security alliances or nuclear deterrence, India has never compromised on ethical diplomacy, as in its nuclear doctrine insisting on "No First Use" and self-imposed moratoriums on testing, referred to in news reports: Reuters 2025, Foreign Policy 2025.

Cultural engagement and educational exchanges, the promotion of yoga, and support for global nonviolence movements further amplify soft power diplomacy and India's image in the world as a moral actor. Guided by Gandhian ideals, India engenders trust, goodwill, and influence in international affairs without resorting to coercion, reflecting thereby the relevance of non-

violence and moral persuasion in global politics.

In sum, Gandhi's philosophy remains the guiding beacon for Indian foreign policy. It moulds India's strategic autonomy, humanitarian initiatives, climate leadership, multilateral engagement, and soft power projection. Indeed, while realities of the 21st-century global order demand pragmatism, India's diplomacy remains characterised by ethical considerations – a nuanced balance between principle and practice. And it is here that the Gandhian aspiration for a just, peaceful, and inclusive world is alive in India's international conduct and a demonstration that moral philosophy and strategic policy can combine in the elaboration of a resilient, ethical, and globally respected foreign policy framework.

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