



India in the Multilateral System: UN, Bretton Woods and Club Governance

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Introduction

Since independence, Indian foreign policy has been based on the twin goals of strategic autonomy and the protection of national economic policy space, and regional dominance in its immediate neighborhood. In multilateral institutions, India has been a key founder and supporter of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) ever since the 1955 Bandung Conference and have sought to position itself as a representative of the “Global South”, and a key contributor to UN peacekeeping, amongst other things. For decades, the role of India as a leading power within NAM on political issues and, paired with its role within the G77 on developmental and economic issues, remained relatively stable, also after the end of the Cold War.

Now, however, India’s global role has shifted, in no small part due to its size and significant economic growth. While still balancing against China and between the US and Russia, as it did during the Cold War, the stakes of that balancing are much greater. Moreover, India’s role as a voice of the Global South is arguably changing. At the same time, the multilateral system is undergoing significant changes, with new “club” formats such as the G20 and BRICS+ becoming more important relative to the UN. While there is a sizeable academic and policy-oriented literature on the general changes in the multilateral system, and on the role of the US and China within it, there is much less knowledge on the role of India in this regard.

We see three reasons why a focus on India in the multilateral system is important in the present context. First, given India’s clout, combined with its historical and also current balancing between other major powers, it is arguably one of the primary candidates for being a strategic broker or blocker of any significant reform efforts within multilateral institutions. Second, India’s claim to be a voice for the Global South is important and credible, but it is also contested and fragile, as combining a position as a great power emphasizing national interests – including in the region – with developmental concerns for smaller states generates friction. Third, debates about reforms and changes in the multilateral system revolve to a considerable degree around inclusion and participation from under-represented states in the Global South, where India is a leading proponent of calls for expansion of membership in the UN Security Council and changes in voting shares in international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Below, we discuss India’s role in the multilateral system and analyze how India’s multilateral role is shaped by the primacy of domestic and regional concerns. We discuss India’s historical role in the UN, emphasizing its investment in the UN’s political-legal track via negotiations within different committees under the UN General Assembly (UNGA). We contrast this with the UN’s technical-administrative track, focused on the design and delivery of development assistance etc, where India – as other states in the Global South – have had less influence. We also discuss the considerable role of India in contributing to UN peacekeeping. Across these arenas, we identify trends in India’s role and discuss how India’s growing international clout has resulted in changes in its position-taking within multilaterals. Next, we discuss the role of India in club formats like BRICS+ and the G20, which has grown in importance over the last two decades. We note how India, in these club formats, continues to advance arguments linked to its historical role as advancing the role of the Global South but also how it complicates calls for reforms based on arguments about greater inclusion and representativeness.

We note that changes in the multilateral system – notably increased geopolitical rivalry, US partial withdrawal and the emergence of new club formats – suggests that India may play a more significant role in the years to come not only because of its growing material power but also because of its historical investment in multilaterals, its participation in club formats that is becoming more influential, and its position as a state that cooperates with both Russia and the US. What role India will choose to play will nonetheless be shaped primarily by the degree to which investments in multilaterals align with its primary focus on regional developments. More specifically, we foreground the primacy of *domestic* political and economic developments and evolving relations with neighboring countries (cf. Barthwal and Rio 2025) as decisive in shaping India’s multilateral approach in the future.

India’s foreign policy

India’s foreign policy is best understood as an on-going and pragmatic effort to maximize “strategic space” for domestic transformation and to control and prevent the neighborhood from becoming unstable. A large academic literature portrays this as a development-conscious grand strategy where the external world matters chiefly because it can either enable or constrain India’s growth, technological upgrading, and internal cohesion. India’s foreign policy is in this sense aimed at protecting autonomy of choice, and alliance commitments are flexible to advance this end (Malone, Mohan & Raghavan 2015). At the same time, India’s objectives are inseparable from hard security realities—especially persistent concerns about territorial integrity and cross-border tensions with Pakistan and China, among others. This helps account for how India is seeking influence but resisting binding alignments that could reduce flexibility (O’Donnell & Papa 2021).

More specifically, a primary objective is preserving sovereignty, which shows up not only in India’s resistance to external conditionality from international financial institutions but also in its preference for “multi-alignment” or issue-based partnership where different partners are mobilized to provide specific assets, rather than relying on one key ally to provide it. This approach is typically seen as a way to hedge to manage uncertainty, keeping options open amid U.S.–China rivalry and managing the enduring need for access to Russian oil and defense equipment even as India expands cooperation with the United States and its partners (O’Donnell & Papa 2021). A second objective is neighborhood stabilization and primacy, often summarized in scholarship on India’s “Neighbourhood First” posture: India seeks a surrounding region that is politically stable, economically connected, and strategically insulated from external powers’ leverage, because the neighborhood is the most direct corridor through which security threats and geopolitical encirclement risks can materialize (Aryal 2023). First and foremost, India’s fraught security relationship with both China and Pakistan are of primary concern despite broadly converging views on, for example, global macro-economic questions discussed in the G20 and in the BRICS+.

A third objective is shaping the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an open, multipolar maritime space and to treat sea-lane security and crisis response as means to deter dominance by others, without triggering escalatory commitments (Vinodan and Kurian 2024). A fourth objective is international status and seeking a position as a representative and voice of the Global South. India repeatedly seeks greater influence in global governance and to be recognized as a major power that can represent developing-country priorities, and to help shape agendas and to influence rules rather than merely being a “rule-taker.”

The strategies or means used to pursue these objectives are characterized by acting on converging and *issue-specific* interests over ideological affinity: This is often operationalized via overlapping partnerships, such as the Quad with the US and partners on some elements of its security, and Russia for oil and defense purchases, while still having extensive trade with China despite border long-standing conflicts (Malone et al. 2015). A second feature is the emphasis on India's historical experience that result in wariness of foreign influence and an emphasis on sovereignty and non-intervention (Chatterjee Miller 2013). Third, analysts also note that that India's foreign policy is marked by a recurring tension between (global) ambition and prioritization of domestic and regional control and consolidation (cf. Barthwal and Rio 2025).

One way to operationalize this tension is to see India's multilateralism as **selective engagement with a small set of non-negotiables, most notably on** sovereignty/non-intervention, distributive fairness, and strategic autonomy. India abstained on the UN Security Council's Libya "no-fly zone" resolution in 2011, reflecting caution about mandate expansion and coercive intervention tools (UN Security Council 2011). More recently, India abstained on the UN General Assembly's March 2022 resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, underscoring a pattern of restraint when core strategic relationships and regional security concerns are at stake. The same tendency can be seen in how India relates to some international treaties. For example, India has remained outside the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court, explicitly noting concerns about ICC mandate and state sovereignty.

In multilaterals, India claims a particular authority to speak for the Global South—historically through Bandung and the Non-Aligned Movement, and more recently through initiatives such as the "Voice of Global South" process around its G20 presidency in 2023. Yet leadership of the Global South is contested, and India's credibility depends on delivery and consistency, not rhetoric alone (The Economist 2024). The tension is sharpened by India's "multi-alignment": cooperating with Western partners on some issues while sustaining long-standing ties with Russia and other non-Western actors, and hedging against China's regional and global influence. This strategy is not without costs and helps shed light on the trade-offs that mark all multilateral engagement, also beyond India.

The same duality also makes India important to multilateral problem-solving. Some scholars have argued that India increasingly acts as a *modifier* of global rules—selectively leading where activism advances domestic priorities and status goals (Narlikar 2017). In global climate negotiations, for example, India has combined equity-based demands with initiatives that signal responsible-power credentials (Mohan 2017). India has also pursued institutional entrepreneurship, exemplified by the International Solar Alliance, which combines a treaty-based framework with flexible soft-law governance to mobilize developing-country coalitions (Jha 2021).

Of particular importance is the fact that India has evolved from being a major recipient of development assistance to now also being a significant provider of development assistance, using it as a key tool of foreign policy—especially since the Ministry of External Affairs created the Development Partnership Administration and strengthened coordination with EXIM Bank. Since 2000, the MEA has overseen more than \$48 billion in support to over 65 countries, mainly through grants and lines of credit, alongside capacity-building and training (Nainar 2024).

India at the United Nations

India's UN role has been shaped from the outset by the same mix of normative ambition and strategic calculation that characterizes its wider foreign policy. It was a signatory of the UN Charter in 1945 despite not yet being independent, and Nehru initially envisaged that the organization could evolve into something like a world government (Bhagavan 2015; Kochanek 1980). The late 1940s and 1950s have been described as the “high-water mark” of India's multilateralism (Bhagavan 2015), when the country saw principled universalism as the best way to serve its own interests as a newly independent state with limited material power (Mukherjee and Malone 2011).

India's UN diplomacy illustrates the same interplay of domestic priorities, status ambitions and coalition politics. Its most visible campaign – on Security Council reform - sits alongside a preference for sovereignty-protecting interpretations of intervention norms and a cautious approach to crisis leadership. Assessments of India's 2011–12 Security Council tenure highlight this ambiguity: India sought recognition as a responsible power, but often defaulted to caution, shaped by domestic and regional sensitivities and by the constraints of P5 divisions (Mukherjee and Malone 2013).

India has been a leading advocate of decolonization and racial equality within multilaterals, and in the UN in particular. One of its very first acts was to place the “Treatment of Indians in the Union of South Africa” on the UN agenda in 1946 (Thakur 2017; O'Malley 2020). Through this and related initiatives on apartheid, India linked its own colonial experience to a broader critique of imperial structures. Indian representatives such as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who in 1953 became the first woman President of the UNGA, and Hansa Mehta, a key figure in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were central to this normative activism (Bhagavan 2015).

Nehru's non-alignment framed India's diplomacy from the 1950s into the 1960s. In the UNGA, India sought, first, to navigate between the superpowers; second, to defend sovereign equality and non-intervention; and third, to promote a broader Third World agenda, culminating in strong support for the New International Economic Order in the 1970s (Malone 2013; Chitalkar and Malone 2015). Later works emphasizes both the ambition and the limits of this decolonizing internationalism, highlighting how Cold War politics and domestic constraints pushed India towards more selective engagement (Bhagavan 2015; Raghavan 2022).

Quantitative analyses of UNGA voting confirm a pattern of India voting with the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement on decolonization, Palestine and development issues, while taking more differentiated positions on human-rights and security questions Das (2017). Ferdinand (2014) and Binder et al. (2022) similarly find that India's voting record places it closer to the Global South than to Western states, but with increasing *issue-specific* and situational variation. Rather than acting as a pure “spoiler” or a consistent Western partner, India behaves as an issue-based coalition-builder whose positions draw on both historical solidarities *and* contemporary strategic interests.

On peace and security, India's approach combines normative commitments to sovereignty with substantive operational contributions on peacekeeping. Kochanek (1980) and Murthy (1983) emphasize India's insistence on non-intervention in early Security Council debates, notably over Kashmir, where it opposed plebiscite proposals and intrusive UN roles seen as incompatible with sovereign control.

India's UN behavior is also directly shaped by the priority placed on preventing regional disputes becoming subject to multilateral frameworks that may limit India's flexibility. This helps explain India's resistance to third-party mediation frames on Kashmir. The same regional-security lens reinforces India's caution toward UN "naming and shaming" more generally: In its formal explanation on its vote on Syria at the Security Council, India emphasized the risks of escalation and stressed political process, reflecting a preference for sovereignty-protecting interpretations of crisis management that align with domestic jurisdiction sensitivities and neighborhood threat perceptions (MEA 2011). In short, India's large operational contributions to the UN (e.g. peacekeeping as an international mechanism to manage violent conflicts), is from within a broader political framework that places constraints on the UN and other international bodies' so that these should not become a venue that legitimizes intrusive roles for external actors.

India has become one of the largest contributors of troops and police to UN peacekeeping operations, and scholars argue that its experience has influenced doctrine on the use of force and protection of civilians (Bullion 1997; Dewan and Vermeij 2014; Bardalai 2022). On institutional reform, India has consistently advocated enlargement of the Security Council in both permanent and non-permanent categories. As part of the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan), it argues that the Council's composition reflects the power realities of 1945 rather than those of the twenty-first century and undermines the UN's legitimacy (Kaura and Pant 2021). In these debates, Indian officials typically frame reform first in terms of fairness and representativeness, second in terms of the growing weight of emerging economies, and only more occasionally as the "completion" of the decolonization project (Hall 2017; Jaishankar 2020).

As a leading advocate for de-colonization and a proponent of advancing developing objectives within the UN, it is interesting to note that India and NAM – with numerical power at the UNGA – have comparatively less influence over the agendas and policies of the UN's many programs, funds, and agencies. This is so because the multilateral system consists of different sub-systems that allow different political "projects" to co-exist: Political and normative agenda setting and resolutions may pass in the UNGA with the help of voting powers of the NAM. But these resolutions have comparatively little influence on the specific priorities of the UN's many funds, programs and agencies, which are predominantly controlled by western donors' contributions.

UNCTAD was born out of developing countries' agenda to prioritize structural transformation and a more equitable trade regime—captured politically in the "trade, not aid" slogan strongly associated with UNCTAD II in New Delhi (1968)—and it has tended to advance analyses and policy frames distinct from, and at times opposed to, those prevailing in the IMF/World Bank policy ecosystem (FAO, n.d.; UNCTAD, 2025). India has been deeply invested in the UN's intergovernmental, political-normative arenas - hosting UNCTAD II in New Delhi (1968) and historically acting as a leading voice in Global South coalitions - while simultaneously facing structural constraints in arenas where formal influence is tied more directly to financial contributions and weighted voting (UNCTAD, 2024; IMF, 2025).

India has historically exercised substantial diplomatic influence through UN intergovernmental coalitions and South-South platforms (including NAM and the G-77/UNCTAD ecosystem), where formal equality of votes gives large postcolonial states leverage through coalition-building. By contrast, in the IMF—where voting power is quota-weighted—India's voting share (listed at 2.63%) remains far below the United States' (16.49%), underscoring the difference between "one-state-one-vote" legitimacy politics and "power-of-the-purse" governance (IMF, 2025).

More recently, India has also engaged the UN development system as a donor through the India–UN Development Partnership Fund, launched in 2017 and administered by the UN Office for South–South Cooperation. The Fund finances projects across the Global South and is presented as an instrument of South–South cooperation, a contribution to the 2030 Agenda and a demand-driven, nationally owned vehicle (UNOSSC 2021; UNOSSC 2023). Although its “Commonwealth Window” indirectly references shared colonial legacies, the operative language is that of SDGs, resilience and capacity-building rather than historical redress. Similarly, India is part of the India-Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) fund, managed by the UN Trust Fund, which emphasizes south-south cooperation and national ownership.

As debates over UN reform intensify—covering mandates, management, and chronic budget pressures—India’s accumulated political capital in UNGA can potentially translate into influence over the administrative and technological agendas of the UN and other multilaterals as well. This includes questions of peace operations performance, development-system coordination, and emerging digital governance debates. In that sense, India’s rhetorical and coalition investments in representation and fairness are not only symbolic - they can also help shape reform proposals within UN funds and programs as well as international financial institutions, and not only UNGA debates.

UN Peacekeeping as an illustration

India is consistently among the largest contributors of troops and police to UN missions and has deployed military contingents, police units, medical teams and engineers in operations across Africa, the Middle East and Asia (UN 2023; Kumar and A.S. 2025). India uses peacekeeping to bolster its image as a responsible and constructive actor in global affairs and to underline what it sees as a central contradiction in the current global order: that states with substantial political, economic and security capabilities, such as India, are not represented permanently on the Security Council. Indian officials routinely link the country’s long and extensive peacekeeping record to its campaign for a permanent Council seat, arguing that its contributions to international peace and security strengthen the case for reform (Goswami 2025; Kumar and A.S. 2025). Peacekeeping thus serves as both evidence of India’s commitment to the UN Charter and as a bargaining chip in debates over institutional redesign. In periods of fiscal pressure on UN peace operations and assessed contributions, being a reliable and politically engaged troop contributor can also function as institutional leverage in negotiations over mission mandates, performance reforms and budget priorities.

Viewed from a operational viewpoint, participation in UNPKOs provides the Indian armed forces with experience in multinational, multicultural and complex conflict environments. It enhances operational capabilities, interoperability and familiarity with UN procedures and rules of engagement (Dewan and Vermeij 2014; Bardalai 2022). From the perspective of the UN Secretariat and mission leadership, Indian contingents are valued for their discipline, logistical capacity and, in many cases, willingness to undertake difficult tasks under challenging conditions. Peacekeeping thereby contributes to India’s “security diplomacy”, making it an attractive partner for military training, joint exercises and defense cooperation.

Indian peacekeepers often engage in activities that go beyond their core security mandate, including medical services, engineering projects and capacity-building for local actors. This reflects a broader

“developmental-diplomacy” approach to peace and security, consistent with India’s technical cooperation programmes such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scheme (Kumar and A.S. 2025). The goodwill generated by such activities reinforces India’s soft power, particularly in African states where many missions are located, and supports its wider narrative as a leader of the Global South committed to cooperative and non-coercive approaches to security.

At the same time, Indian perspectives on the use of force in UNPKOs remain shaped by long-standing principles of non-intervention, consent and impartiality. Indian officers and analysts have often expressed ambivalence about more robust mandates and “stabilization” operations, emphasizing the risks to both peacekeepers and local populations (Dewan and Vermeij 2014; Bardalai 2022). This ambivalence mirrors India’s broader foreign-policy preference for negotiated solutions and respect for sovereignty, even as it adapts to evolving UN practices. The peacekeeping case thus illustrates how an analytical distinction between legal-political and technical-administrative modes can bring out the dual character of India’s multilateral practices: the same missions simultaneously generate political capital in New York and technical experience in the field.

India and the Bretton Woods institutions

In international economic institutions, India’s positions are best understood as extensions of domestic political economy and development strategy. India has repeatedly used multilateral negotiations to defend policy space and to resist rules it sees as asymmetric—an approach that can resemble a “Just Say No” posture but is often a strategic calculation shaped by distributive fairness concerns and domestic constraints (Narlikar 2006). At the same time, India’s reform agenda is typically incremental: it seeks redistribution of voice and representation within existing institutions rather than their replacement, combining criticism with pragmatic engagement (Narlikar 2017; Efsthopoulos 2016).

How domestic political considerations shape India’s multilateral decisions can be seen in its efforts to protect domestic policy space on core issues such as food security and farming. In the WTO’s agricultural talks, India has prioritized domestic policy space to advance food security schemes and has resisted reform efforts where these are perceived as going against core domestic interests. India has also worked against the Investment Facilitation for Development agreement (supported by 125 members) on claims about legality/mandate, even though such deals are increasingly central to updating WTO rules, and it has opposed efforts to reform the criteria for assessing what countries can benefit from Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) (Manak 2025).

India’s relationship with the World Bank and the IMF has evolved from borrower dependence to a more reciprocal, though still asymmetric, partnership. India joined both institutions in 1945 and over the following decades became one of the Bank’s largest borrowers and a regular IMF client, before eventually becoming a net creditor to the Fund and a significant shareholder in both institutions (Kraske 1996; Kirk 2010).

In relations with the World Bank, one can distinguish between several broad phases of engagement: From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, engagement was cautious and shaped by fresh memories of colonial economic control. India sought to avoid dependence on a single external financier and to preserve room for state-led planning; Bank lending focused mainly on infrastructure and power, with relatively light conditionality (Kraske 1996). In the second phase, during the 1960s and 1970s, the

Bank became a central partner in India's state-led development strategy, particularly in the Green Revolution. Lending expanded to rural development, power and transport. Bank retrospectives present this era as laying foundations for growth and poverty reduction, while critical work points to persistent regional and social inequalities in the distribution of benefits (World Bank 2018; Prabhu 2016).

The third phase, spanning the 1980s and early 1990s, was marked by mounting external debt, growing current-account pressures and then the 1991 balance-of-payments crisis. In 1981, India entered an Extended Fund Facility arrangement with the IMF, accompanied by increased World Bank lending. As reserves dwindled in 1990–91, India implemented a package of stabilization and structural reforms with IMF and Bank support, including trade liberalization, fiscal consolidation and financial-sector reform (Chopra et al. 1995; IMF 2024a). Domestic debate over these issues were intense, with some scholars describing the period as “India under IMF rule” (Chossudovsky 1993) arguing that conditionality undermined sovereignty and social spending, while many policymakers and mainstream economists saw the crisis as an opportunity to correct structural distortions and shift towards a higher-growth path (Chopra et al. 1995).

In the fourth phase, from the mid-1990s through the 2000s, World Bank operations increasingly focused on sub-national lending, state-level reforms and social sectors. Howes (2007) documents the rise of policy-based lending to states for power-sector reform and fiscal adjustment. In this period, Country Assistance Strategies and later Country Partnership Frameworks emphasized “good governance”, investment climate, human development and targeted poverty reduction (World Bank 2018). In the fifth and current phase, from roughly the 2010s onward, the Bank presents India as a large middle-income client and knowledge partner. Across these phases, India appears neither as a passive recipient nor as a consistent resister of World Bank influence. Kirk (2010) describes a pattern of “negotiated influence”, in which Indian technocrats and political coalitions selectively adopt, adapt or resist Bank ideas, while Prabhu (2016) foregrounds the domestic distributional politics of Bank lending

India's IMF relationship follows a similar arc from borrower to creditor. In the decades after independence, it drew intermittently on IMF resources to manage balance-of-payments pressures. The 1981 Extended Fund Facility and, especially, the 1991 Stand-By Arrangement are key episodes (Chopra et al. 1995; IMF 2024a). The 1991 crisis looms large in both scholarship and policy analysis. Chopra et al. (1995) describe how fiscal imbalances, external shocks and structural rigidities combined to exhaust reserves, forcing macroeconomic stabilization and structural reforms under IMF auspices. These reforms are widely credited with helping to launch India's high-growth phase, even as debates continue over their distributional impact and social costs (Chopra et al. 1995; NCGG 2015).

By the early 2000s, India had repaid its IMF obligations and ceased to borrow. It later has emerged as a more significant contributor to IMF resources, including in response to the global financial crisis, and now holds a substantial quota and voting share, placing it among the Fund's ten largest shareholders (IMF 2024a; IMF 2024b). In this role, India has participated actively in debates about quota and governance reform, typically arguing for greater voice and shares for emerging and developing economies, for a stronger focus on low-income countries, and for preservation of the Fund's financial integrity.

Efstathiopoulos (2016) characterizes India's approach to global economic governance as one of "ambivalent reform": India seeks redistribution of voice and representation within existing institutions but stops short of advocating their replacement. This pattern is evident in India's positions at the IMF and World Bank, where officials speak frequently of quota and voting-share reform, better representation for emerging economies and stronger development and climate mandates for MDBs, while also emphasizing sound balance sheets and technical expertise (Efstathiopoulos 2016; IMF 2024b; World Bank 2018). Domestic debates, especially around 1991, have sometimes invoked colonial analogies and the language of "economic sovereignty", but this rhetoric is more prominent in parliamentary debate and critical commentary than in India's formal diplomacy in Washington (Chossudovsky 1993; NCGG 2015). In IMF and World Bank settings, India largely speaks the technocratic language characteristic of the more technical-administrative mode of engagement.

Recent G20 debates on debt, climate finance and multilateral development bank (MDB) reform illustrate how India tries to convert its autonomy and cross-bloc relationships into institutional change. Commentary around India's 2023 G20 presidency emphasized both the forum's continuing usefulness and India's convening role in keeping developing-country priorities on the agenda—especially MDB evolution, debt treatment and climate finance (Financial Times Editorial Board 2023; Wintour 2023). From the perspective of multilateral renewal, India is also widely seen as central to building legitimacy for reforms that Western states seek, but which will only succeed if they deliver fairer outcomes for developing countries (Vinjamuri 2023).

India in the G20 and BRICS

India's participation in the G20 and BRICS brings the "Global South" claim into sharp relief. These forums are arenas where developing-country preferences are coordinated, but also where leadership is contested and scrutinized (The Economist 2024). India's bridge-building ambitions are repeatedly tested by geopolitical polarization, especially over Russia's war in Ukraine, and by differences among emerging powers themselves. Reporting from the 2024 G20 process describe how compromise language on geopolitics and limited progress on climate finance reflected an increasingly strained consensus, with India and China among those resisting explicit condemnation of Russia (Ricard and Meyerfeld 2024).

Climate politics is a useful illustration of India's mixed role as both demander and agenda-shaper. India continues to foreground equity, differentiation and finance, but it has also moved from a primarily "protest voice" to more active agenda-setting, linking climate action to domestic co-benefits such as energy access and air quality (Mohan 2017). This combination of firm distributional demands plus selective initiatives also helps explain why India may serve as a bridge-builder in negotiations where North–South trust is low.

Recent work by Maglia et al. (2024) situates India's G20 and BRICS engagement within a broader analysis of emerging powers and reform of multilateral institutions. The report, which includes a case studies and a text-based analysis of speeches, underscores how India uses these forums to press for reform while also pursuing national priorities.

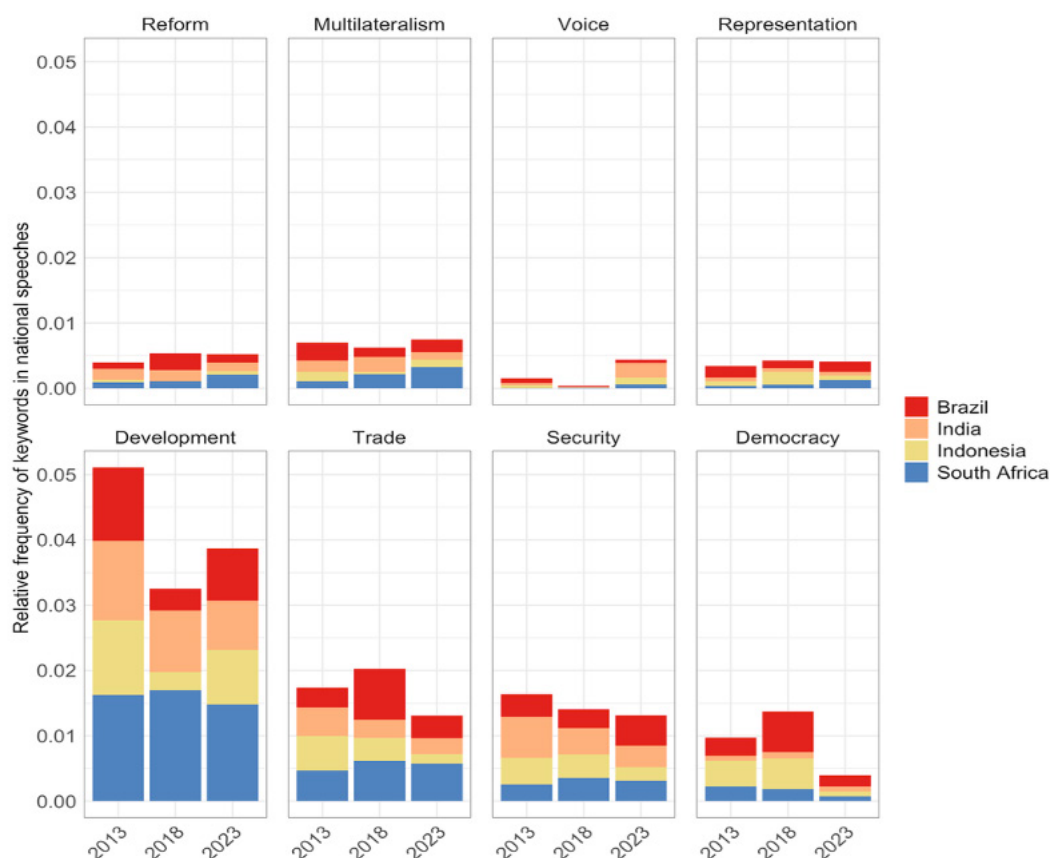


Figure 1 – Relative frequency of keywords in national speeches

However, as seen from Fig. 1, the emphasis on reform from India is comparable to that of other contenders for UNSC membership, like Brazil and South Africa, also in the sense that while reform calls are mentioned in key speeches by heads of state over a period of ten years (2013-2023), the emphasis is relatively modest compared to *other* priorities such as development, trade, and security.

In the G20, India is a founding member and hosted its first leaders' summit in New Delhi in 2023. The G20 functions as a "club" that increasingly orchestrates reform debates across formal multilaterals (Maglia et al. 2024). India used its 2023 presidency to project itself as a voice for the Global South, hosting two "Voice of Global South" summits that brought together leaders and ministers from more than 120 developing countries and feeding their priorities into the G20 agenda (MEA 2023; Arora 2023). It also pushed for MDB reform and expansion, calling for institutions like the World Bank to become "bigger, better and more effective" in providing climate and development finance, and showcased digital public infrastructure and inclusive growth as hallmarks of its development model (G20 2023; Maglia et al. 2024). The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration includes commitments to MDB evolution and endorses the African Union as a permanent G20 member, an outcome Indian officials present as a step toward more representative global governance (G20 2023). India's wider multilateral toolkit also includes institution-building outside universal bodies, such as the International Solar Alliance, which illustrates how India can set terms of cooperation through treaty "shells" governed by flexible, coalition-friendly soft law (Jha 2021).

India *is* a leading voice for reform across the multilateral system (UN and IFIs). One study (Maglia et al. 2024) finds that India is among the states that most frequently invoke “reform” in UNGA speeches and in statements to IMF and World Bank meetings, often in connection with representation, voice and financial architecture. In G20 leaders’ declarations, by contrast, the relative prominence of “reform” is more episodic, peaking immediately after the 2008 financial crisis and again around debates on MDB evolution in 2022–23, but overall lower than in UN or BWI corpora (Ibid.) This suggests that India’s calls for institutional reform is most intense in universal bodies, while in the G20 it competes with other priorities such as growth, trade, health and digital policy. In this sense, G20 summitry brings into view the tension in India’s foreign policy between emphasizing a role as voice of the Global South and calling for reform to include more participation from low-and middle-income countries, while still safeguarding its position as a “club” member in the G20. It should be noted, however, that one concrete manifestation of the call for greater inclusion, also within the G20, was that India did succeed in pushing for the inclusion of the African Union as G20 member during its 2023 G20 presidency.

India’s role in BRICS is complementary. It is a founding member of the grouping (originally BRIC in 2006, with South Africa joining in 2010) and a key shareholder in the New Development Bank (de Coning et al 2015). The expansion of BRICS in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has significantly increased the group’s economic weight (BRICS 2024; Carnegie Endowment 2024). BRICS summit declarations emphasize a more representative multipolar order, reform of the UN—particularly the Security Council—and greater voice and quota shares for emerging economies in the IMF and World Bank, while presenting the NDB as a complementary source of infrastructure and sustainable-development finance (BRICS 2024).

BRICS’ reform agenda is not only rhetorical, however: Recent leaders’ declarations explicitly reiterate support for comprehensive UN reform (including Security Council reform) and call for increased voice and representation for developing and emerging economies in global economic governance. In the 2025 Rio de Janeiro Declaration, BRICS leaders again endorsed UN Security Council reform to make the UN “more democratic, representative, effective and efficient,” and emphasized greater representation of developing countries, framing these demands as central to amplifying the voice of the Global South (BRICS 2025). On global financial governance, BRICS finance tracks have also converged around IMF quota realignment and governance reform—an agenda that received renewed emphasis in 2025, and included calls for changes to better reflect contemporary economic weight and reduce western dominance in senior leadership selection (BRICS 2025; Reuters 2025).

Beyond institutional reform language, BRICS’ most concrete governance innovation has been the push to expand international **settlement and finance in local currencies, which is a move to reduce currency risks and dollar-dominance**. The 2023 Johannesburg II Declaration explicitly encouraged greater use of local currencies in trade and financial transactions and tasked finance ministers/central bank governors to work on local-currency payment instruments and platforms, signaling an intent to operationalize “multipolarity” through financial measures. Singh, Chaudhary, and Kumar (2024) portray India’s push for rupee-based trade settlement as a **pragmatic form of “transactional” de-dollarization** aimed at reducing vulnerability to dollar fluctuations and external shocks rather than building a rival monetary order. They link INR internationalization to **domestic economic payoffs** - including savings on foreign-exchange transactions and reduced FX exposure for Indian firms. The authors argue that for India, de-dollarization is **not about geopolitical rivalry**

but about cushioning the economy given high domestic needs for essential imports and associated vulnerabilities.

Despite these calls for reform and investments in “alternative” financial institutions, India often positions itself as a bridge between Western powers and non-Western coalitions. Commentators argue that India seeks to moderate strongly anti-Western language in BRICS documents, prefers a focus on development, finance and practical cooperation rather than bloc politics, and uses BRICS, IBSA and related coalitions to promote ideas of “climate justice”, South–South cooperation and digital infrastructure as tools of development (Maglia et al. 2024; DD News 2024). Thus, while the BRICS often leans toward legal-political language about multipolarity and justice, but much of India’s work within the NDB and BRICS financial tracks is highly technical, involving project appraisal, risk management and co-financing with other MDBs.

For India, the G20 and BRICS are thus complementary platforms rather than alternatives. The G20 connects it to established powers and major multilateral institutions and allows it to shape discussions on the global economic agenda; BRICS offers coordination with like-minded emerging powers and a way to signal dissatisfaction with aspects of the existing order while remaining engaged within it. Both venues allow India to advance long-standing demands for greater representation and voice, but they do so in different rhetorical and institutional registers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, and club governance in the G20 and BRICS+, three cross-cutting patterns stand out.

First, India’s multilateral positions are consistently anchored in domestic development priorities and regional security concerns. This “inside-out” logic helps explain India’s insistence on policy space, sovereignty and distributive fairness—and why a seemingly negative negotiating style can reflect strategic calculation rather than reflexive obstructionism (Narlikar 2006).

Second, India’s claim to represent the Global South is both an asset and a vulnerability. It can amplify India’s voice and enable coalition leadership, but it is contested and depends on delivery and consistency across issues and partners (The Economist 2024). In practice, India is often pulled between solidarity narratives and the realities of multi-alignment, including maintaining working relationships with both Western powers and Russia while balancing against China.

Third, India’s autonomy and balancing behavior can make it a pivotal broker in reform debates. India is frequently a “nay-sayer” when proposals appear to lock in asymmetric obligations, but it can also act as a modifier and bridge-builder—shaping agendas where reforms align with domestic priorities and status ambitions (Narlikar 2017). This is visible in climate diplomacy and in India’s institution-building strategies, such as the International Solar Alliance (Mohan 2017; Jha 2021).

India’s strongest and most consistent demands concern who is represented - seats, quotas and memberships - while its approach to rule-making is more selective and issue-specific. Yet investments in e.g. peacekeeping contributions, reform coalitions, Global South convening can become leverage over broader political questions within multilaterals, especially when organizations face pressure to streamline and reprioritize, as is currently the case at the UN, for example.

Nonetheless, India's growing influence within multilaterals follow primary from **material shifts in economic power and political clout outside the multilateral system rather than being an effect of its multilateral engagement itself. Put differently, India's bark may in the past have been more fierce than its bite, but now** India's material political and economic power is more influential, and we can expect India to become more influential within both formal multilaterals and club formats, and to be more cautious or selectively engaged to advance its interests.

Overall, India is likely to remain simultaneously a critic and a partner for multilateral renewal. For actors seeking reform pathways in the UN, the international financial institutions and the G20, this implies that engaging India effectively requires taking seriously the domestic and regional drivers of its positions, while recognizing India's potential to bridge blocs and to help legitimize reforms that deliver outcomes also for developing countries.

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