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**OCCASIONAL PAPERS**

# **From Non-Alignment to Vishwamitra Bharat**

*Reimagining India's Foreign Policy for a Multipolar Future*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present paper revisits the conceptualisations of India's foreign policy within the specific context of policymakers' use of Vishwamitra Bharat frameworks. The emergent Vishwamitra framework has been invoked through a deeply civilizational and cultural idiom. The paper, while charting the historical evolution of Bharat's foreign policy principles, aims to emphasise upon civilizational ethos, multi-alignment, dialogue and diplomacy, and networked partnerships as essential cornerstones of the new foreign policy framework. Moving beyond rhetorical repositioning, the Vishwamitra Bharat framework draws from both the domestic public sphere and the external environment to shape and forecast India's foreign policy in a multipolar order. Furthermore, the paper argues that the Vishwamitra framework becomes a strategic act of balancing national interests with global responsibilities in light of Vision Viksit Bharat 2047 development priorities. The increasing geopolitical instability and structural limitations of India's hard power present significant challenges to operationalising Vishwamitra policy principles in practice.

**KEYWORDS** *Vishwamitra · Foreign Policy · Multi-Alignment · Strategic Autonomy*

## 01 INTRODUCTION

**FOREIGN POLICY IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE** and established means of communicating a country's national interests and strategic concerns within the geopolitical arena. From the principles of non-alignment established by a newly independent nation in the mid-twentieth century, to the famous declaration of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* during India's G20 presidency in 2022-23, which advocates for a shared future for the world, India's foreign policy frameworks have consistently demonstrated independence, pragmatism, and a focus on peace and stability, despite lacking a formal doctrinal or institutionalised approach. India's historical and cultural experiences have continuously shaped the philosophical foundations of its foreign policymaking. Furthermore, guided by a reflective intellectual tradition, India's foreign policy principles have anticipated and responded to geopolitical and national developments.

There is a scholarly consensus on the evolution of foreign policy in India and its framing from non-alignment principles to expressions of strategic autonomy. Today, the geopolitical order, strained with wars, conflicts, and trade disruptions, coincides with India's march towards the vision of a developed nation, i.e., Viksit Bharat 2047. As the most populous country and the fourth-largest economy by nominal GDP, soon to become the third-largest economy, India, in the twenty-first century, requires an unambiguous approach and a culturally rooted idiom to foreign policymaking that provides the ideational moorings to its ambitions and global engagements.

In this context, the paper argues that the contemporary expressions of Bharat's *Vishwamitra* foreign policy framework, in both political and academic discourse, present a coherent, multi-aligned, and engaging policy alternative that supports India's rise as a confident and proactive global power. The paper suggests that the shift from non-alignment philosophy to the *Vishwamitra* Bharat principles offers further policy and practical imperatives to enhance Bharat's role as a responsible, partnership-focused, and leading twenty-first-century power while advocating for multi-polarity and multilateral governance to promote a stable and predictable

world order. The paper also provides a systematic definition of Vishwamitra Bharat frameworks and their analytical variables for foreign policy analysis.

## 02 EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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The foundational principles of Indian foreign policy were formulated by the Jawaharlal Nehru government, rooted in post-colonial idealism, pan-Asianism, and a deliberate distancing from Cold War Bloc alignments, while supporting an international order based on peace and universalism (Verma 307). The Panchsheel principles (five principles) — mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence — first articulated in the trade and relations agreement with Tibet, signed between India and China, came to embody this idealism (Verma 311).

The inclusion of the Panchsheel principles in the Ten Principles of International Peace and Cooperation in the 1955 Bandung Conference declaration, involving 29 Afro-Asian nations, made the bilateral frameworks of India and China relevant for the broader post-colonial world. It can be argued that the Panchsheel principles enabled newly independent nations to conduct foreign policy and pursue their interests without relying solely on military or economic influence (Sen 13). Therefore, India and other developing countries, which had experienced violent histories of imperialism, adapted the idealism of Panchsheel as a new diplomatic approach for peace, cooperation, and development within the context of Cold War bipolar alliances.

Scholars have questioned the impact of the declaratory Panchsheel principles on the actual conduct of the Nehru government's foreign policy; however, a scholarly consensus exists on the role of Panchsheel in strengthening non-alignment as a policy to avoid Cold War bloc commitments (Dasgupta 27). India, under the broader framework of the Panchsheel principles, avoided predetermined military and diplomatic obligations and thus preserved the right to assess and manage issues and relations on their merits. India actively pursued its limited foreign policy objectives through bilateral relations as well as in multilateral forums and even emerged as a global advocate of decolonisation in the 1950s. Nonetheless, this idealism also led to certain policy shortcomings, including limited defence spending and the absence of a strategic and security culture.

With the emergence of security concerns and military conflicts with China and Pakistan in the 1960s and early 1970s, India shifted its foreign policy in the post-Nehruvian era with the 1971 Indo-Soviet treaty. It was a pragmatic response to geopolitical factors without abandoning its principled stance rooted in the non-alignment movement. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation was a "defensive arrangement" against the posturing and "unwritten triple alliance" of China, Pakistan, and the United States of America (Singh 1056). During this period, India saw genuine threats to its sovereignty from China and Pakistan. Henry Kissinger's secretive diplomatic visit to Beijing via Pakistan, along with the influx of millions of East Pakistanis into India due to the genocidal actions of the Pakistani regime, provided the immediate reasons for the treaty.

The domestic and international criticism of the treaty regarded it as the end of India's non-alignment policy and indicated that it was a sign of India's alignment with the Soviet camp,

possibly due to the socialist inclinations of the then-ruling elite. Some even viewed it as a tool for the containment of China. However, later analysis of the treaty emphasised that, with the complete absence of binding clauses and "military content", the Indo-Soviet treaty was a quasi-defence agreement and not "of a military stock" (Singh 1059). The creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation following the India-Pakistan war in 1971 established India as the natural and primary regional power and provided the essential military credentials for its independent foreign policy. The principle of independent judgement championed in non-alignment was later clearly demonstrated by India's unilateral recognition of Bangladesh, its stance on the non-proliferation treaty, its pursuit of a nuclear programme, and its participation in multilateral institutions.

Bharat's foreign policy recalibrations in the late 1980s and 1990s, in light of the decline of bipolarity and the rise of globalisation forces, were also driven by strategic politicking and positioning. The globalised world order required economic reforms and development in the country while increasing global interdependence. Models of regional cooperation, enhanced economic integration with Western countries, and balancing relations with the US, China, and Russia became essential priorities of the foreign policy. The longstanding defence and strategic partnership with Russia, the technological and economic tilt towards the United States, and border issues with China involved careful diplomacy. The policy space created by non-alignment and the Panchsheel principles neither provided the language nor the partnerships needed by Bharat for a twenty-first-century future.

On the domestic front, after decades of socialist economic policies, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao initiated structural reforms through the 1991 economic liberalisation. As technology and market access became national priorities, the 1990s saw the integration of economic policy with foreign policy. It is worth noting that the principles of non-alignment were not entirely abandoned; in fact, in the pursuit of economic growth and development, India engaged in economic, political, and diplomatic partnerships while maintaining autonomy in decision-making. Significantly, the increase in Pakistan-sponsored terrorism introduced another crucial dimension to security concerns, necessitating a reimagining of foreign policy to blend economic priorities with security and counter-terrorism collaborations.

The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century proved crucial in shaping India's foreign policy. The agreements and partnerships shifted India from a protected economy to a globally integrated one. Bilateral trade, investment, civil and defence cooperation agreements signed with the UK, Singapore, France, Japan, Australia, Israel, the signing of the India-US nuclear deal, ties with ASEAN countries, Look East Policy, and the establishment of the WTO focused on attracting foreign investments and strengthening cooperation in technology, trade, and security (Nagaraj 1701). While Russia remained the most important defence partner, India began diversifying its defence purchases. Despite a significant breakthrough in the Indo-US nuclear deal, India maintained a cautious approach towards US relations, seeing alternative coalitions as essential to its strategic autonomy, which it considered a core aspect of its foreign policy.

A shift in foreign policy approaches was observed with the arrival of the Narendra Modi government in 2014. Fully aware of the rise of a multi-polar global order, increasing security

concerns, and changing models of technological and economic cooperation, the government's multi-vector strategy is shaping a more stable, rules-based, and partnership-oriented world order. Recently, scholars have examined the policy changes under Prime Minister Modi and have even suggested that his outlook and initiatives as India's diplomat-in-chief can be coherently understood as the Modi doctrine. Sreeram Chaulia in "*Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister*" (2016) and Anirban Ganguly et al., in "*The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy*" (2016), have mapped the paradigm shifts in foreign policy and argued that decisive policy choices after 2014 reflect a link between domestic transformations and global affairs. This period is also distinguished by India's policymakers portraying the country as a leading power and as the voice of the Global South, thus setting the stage for Vishwamitra Bharat.

### 03 MODI AND VISHWAMITRA BHARAT

It is worth noting that the Modi government has adopted a different vocabulary to define India's role and has positioned India's cultural and civilizational ethos as the guiding principles for strategic and diplomatic discourse. The self-fashioning is evident in the last speech delivered by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Central Hall of the old Parliament, where he declared that Bharat's foreign policy was to be a Vishwamitra.

*It is a matter of pride for all of us that today Bharat has found its place as a 'Vishwamitra' (global friend). The entire world is seeking friendship with Bharat, and the world is experiencing Bharat's friendship. The root cause of this is our culture, the wisdom we have gained from the Vedas to Swami Vivekananda, and the mantra of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" is uniting us with the world today.*

— PM MODI, 2023

Prime Minister Modi here emphasises the rising global stature of Bharat and highlights how the idea of Vishwamitra is rooted in Bharat's long-standing and continuous intellectual tradition. It originates from a cultural foundation that has always been non-dogmatic, accommodating, and supportive of the growth and development of all nations. Transitioning from a non-aligned stance, proactive responses to external environments and communication of India's national interests become central to this self-positioning of Vishwamitra. Similarly, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, reaffirmed during India's national statement at the 19th NAM Summit in Kampala that India considers itself as the "Vishwa Mitra (friend of the world)" (2024). Furthermore, during a book launch in the same year, Jaishankar elaborated on the role of Vishwamitra.

*India is today positioning itself as 'Vishwamitra'. We seek to be friends with as many as possible. This obviously generates goodwill and positivity towards us. It is reflected in the growing contribution we make to the global good. And indeed in closer engagement with the international community...If you look deeper, there are cultural and historical factors at work as well, including the fact that we are not a dogmatic civilisation.*

— EAM JAISHANKAR, 2024

Despite public proclamations and the deliberate framing of India's diplomatic discourse, there remains conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term Vishwamitra and its implications for India's role. The semantics of the chosen compound Sanskrit word – *Vishwamitra*, encapsulate a *dharmic*

(ethical) characterisation of Indian foreign policy principles. *Vishva*, in Sanskrit, means the world or all, and *mitra* means friend or companion. *Vishwamitra Bharat* thus becomes India, a friend of all or a global friend.

In foreign policy analysis, national role conceptions have consistently been regarded as a reliable analytical variable for explaining and predicting state behaviour. K.J. Holsti, in his foundational paper, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," argued that states and policymakers, while engaging in various relationships, hold perceptions of the roles their nations should play in global affairs (237). The extent and enthusiasm of nations' involvement in international matters also influence the self-perception of decision-makers. While Holsti's arguments focus on international systems shaping role conceptions, later scholars have revisited Role theory to highlight domestic dynamics in foreign policy positions (Breuning 2023). Policymakers in India, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, have actively constructed and adopted the role of *Vishwamitra Bharat*, anchoring the nation's capacity, civilizational history of coexistence, and soft power of Indian culture to justify the country's stance. It is an invocation of friendship without hierarchy. The Indian approach of cooperation (*sahayog*), friendship (*maitri*), and prosperity (*samrddhi*) lies at the heart of the practical implications of the *Vishwamitra* characterization.

The cultural rootedness of the concept ensures that the *Vishwamitra* role is viewed as a natural evolution and is accepted by the diverse domestic public sphere, and therefore is not threatened by democratic partisanship. Unlike the *Vishwaguru* (Sage of the world) conceptualisation, which was briefly invoked by certain intellectual circles, the *Vishwamitra* role is less pedagogical and is seen as a continuation of the principle of strategic autonomy.

The *Vishwamitra* principles, in the absence of a strict doctrinal definition, have been treated as a blend of a broader framework, narrative, positions, and characterisations that are continuously being developed. However, for the scope of the paper, multi-alignment, non-hierarchical engagements, civilizational diplomacy, and humanitarian leadership can be regarded as the core principles of *Vishwamitra Bharat*. Thus, *Vishwamitra Bharat* becomes a deliberate role construction, rooted in civilizational ethos, where Bharat positions itself as a multi-aligned and non-hierarchical actor pursuing its national interests through networks and partnerships for the global good.

## 04 OPERATIONALISING VISHWAMITRA BHARAT

Moving beyond simple vocabulary changes, the *Vishwamitra Bharat* employs ethical rhetoric and practical decision-making to convey India's multi-faceted strategies and intentions. Such a principle becomes essential in a world order that, viewed from a post-pandemic perspective, remains largely disrupted. With conflicts such as Russia-Ukraine, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Israel-Hamas, Iran-Israel-US, and other skirmishes, there is a clear lack of foresight to envisage a shared future. The supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 have not yet been fully resolved. Globally, the heavy dependence of countries on China's manufacturing and supply capabilities, along with pre-existing challenges, now presents a long-term issue. Adding to recent geopolitical instability, during Donald Trump's first term, American foreign policy shifted towards

protectionism, and in his second term, it reverted to a combination of protectionism and hegemonism. There have been numerous efforts to undermine and even dismantle multilateral governance institutions.

Amid the complexities of geopolitics and a fragmented global order, India's role as a *Vishwamitra* significantly influences its policy choices. *Vishwamitra Bharat* shifts from strict non-alignment, advocating for ongoing dialogue, cooperation, and multi-alignment on increasingly complex issues related to energy, economy, and defence. Unlike issue-based cooperation and transactionalism typical of strategic autonomy, *Vishwamitra* framework facilitates the creation of "a diverse network of strategic partnerships and relations" (Morales 2025). During the first two years of his first term, the Prime Minister visited 46 countries, with particular focus on the Arab World, European Union, Japan, and Israel (Rasgotra 81). These networks are encouraged to promote dialogue, diplomacy, and peaceful conflict resolution as normative processes, rather than resorting to coercive measures.

In the aftermath of reactionary politics emerging from different parts of the world, shaped by varied experiences of globalisation and monocultural internationalisation, India's multi-alignment policy does not disconnect from other societies and cultures. Instead, it consistently advocates for an inclusive principle of coexistence and shared humanity that transcends national boundaries. Support for legal migration, humanitarian aid, and global cooperation thus become tangible expressions of India's *Vishwamitra* diplomacy. India's recent support and aid to Turkey, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Myanmar, Gaza, Burkina Faso, among others, reinforce its committed stance on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief for the global good. These efforts in cultural diplomacy are notably strategic, especially given India's status as the home of the world's largest diaspora. The Indian diaspora encompasses a wide range of human resources, including high-skilled professionals, low-wage labourers, and students, making their welfare and ongoing engagement with India a foreign policy priority. Their presence in the Middle East, Europe, and North America not only strengthens people-to-people contacts but also boosts economic influence and soft power.

Inherent in the conceptualisation of *Vishwamitra* is also a knowledge principle whereby age-old Indian traditions and thought serve as repositories of knowledge and can offer solutions to the world's problems. Going beyond transactional relationships and machinations of statecraft, *Vishwamitra* articulates a deeply principled and dharma-informed conduct of international engagement. Building on this, India not only balances its relationships with major powers whilst avoiding bloc partnerships, but also promotes models of regional cooperation.

This approach was most evident during India's G20 presidency, as the G20 was made more inclusive by granting permanent membership to the African Union, which represents 55 African countries. India, thus as a *Vishwamitra* and a voice of the Global South, positions itself as the bridging force between the countries of the global south and the global north.

India's neighbourhood also stands to benefit most from this role it envisions for itself. Moving beyond the now-defunct SAARC, India's technological and economic growth will foster and expand regional models of cooperation on developmental and environmental issues. *Vishwamitra* principles emphasise a collaborative, problem-solving and benevolent approach in the neighbourhood, recognising time-honoured civilisational linkages among the nations. On

common issues of energy, development and environment, India's regional leadership will actively set agendas for engagement.

With China's rise in the twenty-first century, the emergence of minilateral and plurilateral arrangements, and the simultaneous decline of American unipolarity, India's self-positioning as a *Vishwamitra* presents many new geopolitical manoeuvres. Great and middle powers have formed minilateral arrangements such as QUAD, BRICS, SCO, AUKUS, I2U2, among others, in anticipation of the complex realities of a multipolar world. India's pursuit of regional security in the Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Arabian Sea requires strategic management of its relations.

The *Vishwamitra* principles enable India to pursue multi-alignment in this multipolar era. India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies this approach, where long-term energy and security ties are balanced with cooperation with the EU and the US. Using a principled stance, India condemned war as a means to resolve conflicts, provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and promoted dialogue and diplomacy as the only path forward without joining Western sanctions. Subsequently, during the Israel-West Asia crises and the Israel-US-Iran war, India has maintained that war is ineffective without sounding ambiguous. The *Vishwamitra* positioning allows India to reject binary frameworks and strengthen its bargaining capacity without appearing to hedge its options.

India's *Vishwamitra* positioning is also crucial to the future of multilateralism. Policy paralysis, the North-South divide, and ideological climate negotiations have been observed in traditional multilateral institutions. It is in this context that the G20 presidency gave India the opportunity to redefine the form and content of multilateralism and advocate for reformed multilateralism. At the start of its presidency, Prime Minister Modi opted to frame India's leadership around four guiding approaches: creating an "inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented and decisive" global order for human-centric progress (Modi 2022). These ideas were further emphasised when India chose the theme of the presidency as "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One Future*". It was a statement of intent, reminding the global community of India's commitment to multilateralism, inclusive development, and a shared future. The New Delhi Declaration, adopted unanimously, was a testament to cooperative problem-solving in digital infrastructure, women-led development, energy, and trade. Similarly, following COVID-19, the Vaccine Matri programme provided nearly 100 developing countries access to vaccinations, thereby strengthening India's credentials as a global health partner.

Bharat has engaged with alternative minilateral arrangements such as SCO, QUAD, and BRICS that seek points of convergence between Western and non-Western states, the Global North and the Global South, as well as smaller nations. These arrangements complement existing frameworks of multilateralism. Within the *Vishwamitra* narrative, India has argued for the expansion of the Security Council and the representation of the Global South in traditional multilateral organisations without sounding revisionist, even though these institutions do not reflect the reality of the twenty-first century. India's faith in multilateralism and multilateral institutions is expressed through the *Vishwamitra* framework.

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## 05 LIMITATIONS OF THE VISHWAMITRA FRAMEWORK

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The principal issue with this conceptualisation is that foreign policy is rarely determined by a universalist stance. Furthermore, in the case of a rapidly growing economy like India, the scope and opportunities to manoeuvre in foreign policy during critical situations—such as the US-Israel-Iran conflict—are constrained by operational choices. The idea of global friendship and cooperation can only serve as a diplomatic façade that must be supported by the strategic pursuit of self-interest in hostile circumstances. Likewise, in asymmetrical relationships with the US and China, strategic vulnerabilities do not align well with the Vishwamitra approach.

In recent years, the efforts to balance India-Russia relations through abstentions in UN votes are often viewed as inconsistent with the role of a bridging power. External actors might exploit these efforts as hedging, thereby undermining the idea of principled neutrality. Nonetheless, the posture of promoting global friendship, international cooperation, and co-existence can refresh the discourse of foreign policy, which is often dominated by arguments of hard power and self-interest. This conceptualisation should also be regarded as a civilizational-political philosophy emerging from India, and the twenty-first-century, globalised world can benefit from the generosity of thought and sense of responsibility embedded in the Vishwamitra concept. Developing resources and capacity in this direction will enable India to expand its global commitments.

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## 06 CONCLUSION

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Bharat's self-characterisation as a *Vishwamitra* and the embedded philosophical framework are far from being merely symbolic; they are driven by confidence and a proactive desire to shape the twenty-first-century global order. The *Vishwamitra Bharat* model highlights the importance of constructivist ideas such as identity, norms, and discourse, while also incorporating material power and pragmatism by balancing national interests with strategic considerations. Its view of itself enables the country to take on multiple roles and respond to external environments that promote stability and order.

The principles of *Vishwamitra*, including balancing power, managing middle powers, and cooperating with smaller states, ensure the protection of its national interests and strategic initiatives. At the same time, it supports India's emergence as a leading power within a multipolar world. This framework marks a timely evolution of India's foreign policy approaches and ambitions. The success of *Vishwamitra Bharat* in the twenty-first century, both as a guiding principle and as a strategic stance, will depend on its material capacity and ongoing credibility. Its success is fundamentally linked to the future of the multipolar world.

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