

Sustainability as Strategy: India's Foreign Policy vision for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

Sustainability has become a central strategic principle guiding the foreign policy of nations within the changing dynamics of global politics. India, acknowledging the inseparable link between national interest and global sustainability, has aligned its diplomatic engagements, integrating 'sustainable development goals' into its foreign policy to foster inclusive growth and global cooperation. This explores how India is promoting sustainable infrastructure and advocating for a sustainable future. The main objective is to analyze the integration of sustainability within India's foreign policy framework. A qualitative analysis methodology is used, involving policy documents, agreements and speeches at international summits related to sustainable development. Secondary sources includes academic literature and think tank reports. Findings reveal that India's foreign policy prioritises, 'sustainable development goals' to redefine strategic partnerships. Multilateral channels like India's G20 Presidency and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) highlight a shift towards sustainability-led diplomacy. The study concludes that sustainability is no longer a peripheral concern but a central component of India's foreign policy strategy.

Keywords

Sustainability, India's Foreign Policy, Climate Diplomacy, Global Governance, Cooperation

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as a critical principle shaping international relations and foreign policy strategies across the world. As global environmental crises and resource scarcity deepen, the traditional notions of state security and national interest are increasingly intertwined with sustainable development imperatives. India, as a rapidly growing emerging power and a major global player, has been uniquely positioned to incorporate and transform, sustainability from a developmental agenda to a strategic foreign policy. Recognizing that its national growth and

Submission: 28 September 2025; **Acceptance:** 21 November 2025; **Available online:** November 2025



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security depend on a stable and sustainable global environment, India has embarked on a path that integrates environmental concerns and development goals into its diplomatic engagements. India's foreign policy has evolved in the 21st century to reflect the realities of global sustainability challenges. The nation's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), active participation in global climate governance, and promotion of renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure underscore this transformation. India's leadership in launching the International Solar Alliance (ISA), advocacy for climate justice, and strategic use of sustainability to enhance geopolitical partnerships illustrate how sustainability is becoming central to India's global vision.

This paper aims to explore how India has integrated sustainability into its foreign policy vision. It evaluates how India's promotes climate diplomacy and engages in multilateral environmental frameworks and advocating for sustainable development.

Sustainability in Global Politics

Sustainability in global politics is a comprehensive strategy that balances ecological integrity, economic growth, and social justice to meet current needs without compromising the future and encompasses climate action, biodiversity preservation, renewable energy, and social equity, and increasingly influences international diplomacy. This aligns closely with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocate for a global partnership for people, planet, and prosperity (United Nations, 2015). As global challenges like pandemics, resource scarcity, and migration intensify, sustainability becomes a cornerstone of diplomatic efforts. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development codified this vision, offering a unified framework of 17 SDGs promoting partnerships for "people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership" (United Nations, 2015). India recognizes that non-traditional security threats demand global cooperation, inclusive development, and environmental stewardship.

Strategic Shift from Traditional Security to Sustainable Security

The global shift toward recognizing ecological degradation as a security issue has prompted states to expand their definitions of national interest. In this context, sustainable diplomacy has emerged as a tool not just for climate protection but also for enhancing national security and influence. India's security paradigm has traditionally centered on territorial integrity, military preparedness, and geopolitical threats. However, in recent years, there has been a strategic shift toward sustainable security, recognizing that challenges like climate change, resource scarcity, pandemics, and environmental degradation pose equally significant threats to national stability. And this is evident in India's foreign policy, where sustainability is increasingly seen as both a moral obligation and a strategic necessity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's declarations at global forums-such as COP26-and the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into diplomatic and development agendas reflect this transformation.

India's Sustainability-Driven Foreign Policy: Evolution and Key Initiatives

India's foreign policy historically focused on non-alignment, economic development, and regional security. With 1991's economic reforms, India began integrating into the global order. Environmental diplomacy emerged at the Johannesburg Summit (2002), and reached critical mass with India's proactive role in the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). In addition, India's blended

trade pacts include sustainability; renewable-energy diplomacy through partnerships and investments.

A cornerstone of this approach is the alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). India's National Development Agenda has been closely aligned with the SDGs. The NITI Aayog has mapped SDGs onto national priorities, and the Ministry of External Affairs integrates these goals into bilateral and multilateral talks (MEA, 2023). India has been a strong advocate for the SDGs, integrating these into its diplomatic agenda. The government's "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First" policies have included sustainability cooperation as a key pillar. By embedding SDGs into its diplomacy, India aims to align its national agenda with global priorities.

A landmark initiative in this sustainability-driven policy is the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Launched by India and France in 2015, the ISA is a landmark initiative promoting solar energy deployment globally, especially among solar-rich but financially challenged tropical countries. With over 120 member countries, ISA exemplifies India's use of sustainable energy diplomacy and represents India's leadership in clean energy and to strengthen South-South cooperation (ISA, 2015). At the founding conference, PM Modi said: "Through the ISA, we want to bring solar energy into the lives of the poor and reduce dependence on fossil fuels." (etvbharat.com).

India actively participates in multilateral environmental forums like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the G20 and other multilateral forums advocating for equity, climate justice, and technology transfer and this highlight India's commitment to global environmental governance. It consistently advocates for climate equity and differentiated responsibilities, maintaining that developed countries should bear a higher burden for climate mitigation (Nayak, 2020),.

This commitment extends to promoting green infrastructure globally. India's foreign policy encourages green investments in partner countries across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The India-Africa Forum Summit, for instance, highlighted collaboration in solar energy, waste management, and water conservation (TERI, 2022). India promotes these green technologies via lines of credit and technical cooperation, fostering sustainable energy solutions in countries like Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. A key moment in this global advocacy was India's G20 presidency in 2023, where it prioritized themes like the circular economy and climate resilience. During its presidency, India launched the "Green Development Pact," an initiative designed to embed sustainability into global economic frameworks and push for climate-resilient infrastructure investment (G20 India, 2023).

Strategic and Geopolitical Implications

Sustainability has become a lens through which India is reshaping its partnerships and sustainability has emerged as a diplomatic bridge between India and other major powers such as the EU, USA, and Japan. India frames its climate diplomacy through the lens of "climate justice," advocating for developing countries' rights to growth while ensuring environmental protection (Nayak, 2020). The India-EU Clean Energy and Climate Partnership and India-US Strategic Clean Energy Partnership illustrate the evolution of environmental cooperation into a core component of

foreign relations (Pant & Joshi, 2021). Shared environmental goals have enhanced cooperation beyond traditional security and trade concerns, and serve as bridges to broader engagement. India's domestic initiatives like the National Solar Mission, Smart Cities Mission, and Swachh Bharat are frequently cited in international forums as models for sustainable urban development, improving India's soft power credentials. India has strategic engagements and partnership for example the *India–Australia* Renewable Energy & Defence Partnership consisting of increased cooperation in solar manufacturing, batteries, green hydrogen, and green iron, alongside defence collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. Besides, India emphasized exploring “new cooperation on defence industry, critical minerals, renewable energy, ship building, and space” (Kirsty Needham, November 20, 2024).

In June 2025, CSIR–NEERI launched a Global South Network for Eco Sustainability, partnering with Sweden's IVL institute to develop Centers of Excellence in water and wastewater treatment, energy recovery, and circular economy practices (Sarfaraz Ahmed, May 29, 2025). India is nearing a comprehensive trade deal with the EU and the agreement signals India's openness to including gender and sustainability commitments-a notable shift toward integrating environmental priorities in economic diplomacy (June 11, 2025, Times of India). At the Raisina Dialogue 2025, themed “Kālachakra: People, Peace and Planet”, India reaffirmed sustainability as a security priority. EAM Jaishankar has repeatedly called for innovative multilateral diplomacy to tackle climate risks, pandemics, and geopolitical instability in the Indo-Pacific.

Global Agendas & Institutional Reforms

PM Modi at the ‘UN Summit of the Future’, September 2024, stated, “success of humanity lies in our collective strength, not in the battlefield,” advocating holistic approaches to food, health, and environmental security-key pillars of sustainable strategy.

As part of ‘Digital Diplomacy & Climate-Coherent Connectivity’ India deepened sustainability-driven cooperation with Bhutan (hydropower, digital connectivity), Nepal (rail), Bangladesh (pipeline), and Sri Lanka (energy grid) - blending infrastructure with climate resilience and clean-energy imperatives (Kamala Kumari, 2025, 2021). At the domestic front as of October 2024, 46.3% of India's total 452 GW capacity (203 GW) comes from renewables, backed by ambitious targets-175 GW by 2022, 500 GW by 2030. India continues to lead initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and Global Biofuels Alliance, promoting global clean-energy adoption.

Challenges

Despite progress, India faces challenges as balancing developmental needs with sustainability commitments. Continued dependence on coal limits emission reductions; Access to climate finance (Green Climate Fund, etc.) is also an issue.

Methodology

This study has used qualitative research approach focusing on the interpretive analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources to explore India's sustainability diplomacy. The

methodology is structured around document analysis. Key policy documents, speeches by Indian leaders at international forums, agreements, and secondary literature from academic sources and think tanks have been used. Documents analyzed include the Ministry of External Affairs' policy statements, UN reports, NITI Aayog, and ISA declarations and UNFCCC and G20 communiqués. Besides, speech at COP, G20, UNGA has also been analysed. Academic journals and think tank reports from TERI, ORF etc also has been looked into.

These materials were selected based on their relevance to India's international sustainability positioning, policy priorities, and diplomatic narratives. The discourse analysis was used to identify recurring narratives, diplomatic strategies, and framing techniques related to sustainability and climate action. Attention was paid to language use, framing of responsibility. This approach ensures a robust and comprehensive understanding of India's sustainability diplomacy.

Results and Discussion

The evidence confirms that sustainability has moved from a peripheral concern to a central instrument in India's foreign policy. This strategic integration operates across multiple interconnected domains.

Sustainability functions as a diplomatic bridge and tool for partnership building, enabling India to transcend traditional geopolitical rivalries and forge coalitions around shared future interests. This is demonstrated through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which establishes a platform for South-South cooperation, and through strengthened bilateral ties with major powers like the United States and European Union via clean energy partnerships. By framing sustainability as a common objective, India secures access to technology, finance, and political goodwill, thereby diversifying its strategic options beyond conventional security and trade alliances.

Furthermore, India leverages its sustainability agenda to redefine global climate norms and enhance its soft power. Through consistent emphasis on "climate justice" and "common but differentiated responsibilities," India establishes itself as a moral voice for the Global South. This narrative challenges top-down approaches dominated by developed nations while asserting the non-negotiable nature of equity and development space. Simultaneously, India's ambitious domestic advancements in renewable energy deployment and its promotion of digital public infrastructure (such as Aadhaar and UPI) as models for sustainable and inclusive growth strengthen its international credibility. These domestic achievements are strategically presented as scalable, technological solutions to global challenges.

India employs a multi-instrument approach to advance this agenda, utilizing multilateral forums like the G20 to shape global sustainability discourse, deploying bilateral aid and credit lines to export green infrastructure expertise to partners in Africa and Asia, and incorporating sustainability clauses into new-generation trade agreements. This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of converting normative commitments into tangible diplomatic and economic influence.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation to place sustainability at its strategic core. As a global power, India balances its developmental priorities with environmental stewardship and climate diplomacy. India's sustainability-centered diplomacy signals a major shift, from traditional power projection to values-driven leadership in global governance. Initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and India's emphasis on SDGs within its diplomatic engagements highlight a new paradigm where sustainability shapes strategic partnerships and global governance roles. While challenges remain, India's sustainability-driven diplomacy represents a critical evolution in its foreign policy vision for a sustainable future.

“Success of humanity lies in our collective strength, not in the battlefield”- P M Modi, UN Summit of the Future

Acknowledgements

There is no grant or funding bodies to be acknowledged for preparing this paper

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