

The Dragon-Elephant Dance: India's Diplomatic Ascent in the Global South Amidst China's Dominance

Anisha Anirudhan * & Santhosh Mathew **

Abstract: Amid shifting global power dynamics, India's rise as a critical player in the Global South contrasts with China's dominance, creating a compelling discourse. Recent developments and data compare India and China, evaluating India's contributions and challenges in leading the Global South. This study explores how India's diplomatic strategies, economic initiatives, and cultural diplomacy efforts set it apart from China's more assertive geopolitical tactics. This research delves into how India navigates complex regional dynamics while asserting its global influence by examining India's leadership role in forums like the G20 and its strategic partnerships across South Asia and beyond. It highlights India's proactive approach to addressing critical global issues such as climate change, vaccine distribution, and renewable energy adoption. Despite infrastructural gaps and bureaucratic hurdles, India's diplomatic trajectory offers insights into its future role in the Global South.

Keywords: India, China, Global South, Soft Power, Leadership, G20.

The relationship between India and China, the two dominant economic and political powers in the Global South, has become intensely scrutinised in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. While China has long wielded significant influence in the region, India's recent strides have challenged the status quo, positioning it as a formidable contender in the global arena.

The primary objective of the liberal world nexus led by the Quadrilateral grouping (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), known as the "Quad," is to foster transparency, accountability, and equity in a regional order increasingly dominated by China. This initiative aims to encourage China, an authoritarian power, to integrate the interests of the Global South by mitigating its assertive national security-centric actions. At the heart of the Indo-Pacific concept lies the rising influence of China as a regional

*Research Scholar, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry University

**Associate Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry University

power, its pursuit to shape a unipolar Asia, and its strategic engagements in the Indian Ocean Region.

The Quad is driven by strategic motivations, with each member state—the United States, Japan, and India—pursuing its unique and specific objectives within the alliance. The United States seeks to uphold its global hegemony. Japan aims to rejuvenate its regional and international significance, while India endeavours to establish itself as a pivotal player in regional and global affairs. However, the overarching emergence of the Indo-Pacific predominantly reacts to and mirrors the evolving dynamics within the Global South (Panda, 2019).

The geopolitical landscape of the Global South includes diverse critical issues extending beyond maritime domains, including territorial disputes, competitive connectivity projects, economic collaboration, and regional economic integration. Many of these issues are governance-centric and pivot around the cumulative influence of India and China. The interactions between these two rising powers—India and China—define strategic equilibrium and disequilibrium within the region, significantly impacting global dynamics.

China's Asia strategy, which extends to the Global South, aims to establish a Sino-centric order that positions China as the predominant power in the region, thereby reshaping the global power structure in its favour. India is viewed as a partner for multilateral cooperation and a competitor in China's regional ambitions. Beijing's strategy in the Global South reflects its broader foreign policy, combining localism and globalism, with India featuring prominently as both a co-operating and competing entity (Jie, 2023).

Historically, China has prioritised Asia in its foreign policy since the post-World War II era, aiming to enhance its influence and shape the continent's future. Initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) underscore China's multilateral approach to consolidate power in the Asian region (Panda, 2019). Despite its extensive economic activities, including implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China encounters obstacles in persuading neighbouring countries of its benign ascent and the benefits of its system.

India, in contrast, remains cautious of China's strategic initiatives like the BRI and has refrained from participating in the "community of common destiny" proposed by Beijing. India's approach within the Global South focuses on fostering strategic partnerships and countering China's regional influence, particularly in South Asia. The complex dynamics between India and its neighbours, compounded by boundary disputes and geopolitical manoeuvring, highlight the intricate balance of regional cooperation and competition.

China's strategy in the Global South also involves engaging with emerging economies to counterbalance the liberal world nexus, led primarily by the United States and supported by India. This strategic manoeuvre aims to create a coalition of economic alliances that challenge the dominance of the Quad and other liberal partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

Historical Context

In the context of shifting global power dynamics, India and China have emerged as two pivotal players in Asia, significantly influencing the geopolitical and economic landscapes of the region. The historical context of India-China relations is rooted in a complex interplay of cooperation and competition, dating back to their ancient civilisations. However, modern interactions between these two nations are shaped by their colonial legacies and subsequent rise as independent states with divergent political and economic ideologies.

Post-World War II, India and China embarked on different paths of development. India adopted a democratic political system with a mixed economy, while China embraced a socialist model under the leadership of the Communist Party. The divergence in their political systems laid the groundwork for varying approaches to foreign policy and international relations. The 1962 Sino-Indian War marked a significant turning point, casting a long shadow over bilateral ties. Despite this, both countries have sought to manage their relationship through diplomatic engagements and economic cooperation (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010).

The Rise of China and India's Strategic Response

China's economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s propelled the country onto rapid industrialisation and economic growth, transforming it into a global financial powerhouse. China's GDP growth rates and its integration into the global economy have been nothing short of remarkable. This economic ascendancy has been complemented by a substantial increase in military capabilities, further enhancing China's influence on the global stage (Scobell & Wortzel, 2006).

In response to China's rise, India has pursued a multifaceted strategy to bolster its regional influence and global standing (Chandra, 2014). Indian foreign policy, particularly in the post-Cold War era, has been significantly shaped by the need to manage the implications of China's growing power (Mazumdar, 2011). Frederic Grare notes that managing China's rise was an Indian concern long before becoming American (Grare, 2017). India's strategic focus revolves around four strategic imperatives: reclaiming its stature as a prominent Asian nation, upholding strategic autonomy, enhancing ties with major global powers, and broadening its economic outreach, mainly through more robust connections with ASEAN countries (Panda, 2020).

India's Look East Policy

A cornerstone of India's strategic response to China has been its Look East Policy (LEP), initiated in the early 1990s by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. The policy aimed to re-establish and strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asian nations, enhancing India's role in Asia. This initiative, driven by the recognition of Southeast Asia's economic dynamism, desired to attract foreign direct investment from advanced Asian economies (Mohan, 1995). The Look East Policy has evolved, becoming the Act East Policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, emphasising proactive engagement with ASEAN countries and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

Duality in Indian Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy is shaped by a deep-rooted ambivalence reflecting its complex identity as both an emerging global power and a developing nation. Shyam Saran, a former foreign secretary of India, exemplifies this duality by illustrating how India aspires to a prominent position in global decision-making bodies such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the G20. However, India's significant influence stems from its leadership among developing nations with shared developmental challenges. This dual aspiration creates a tension between India's desire for a seat at the global "high table" and its intrinsic connection to the Global South (Saran, 2022).

Ramesh Thakur further elaborates on this ambivalence, highlighting India's often defensive and rarely entrepreneurial foreign policy stance. Thakur points out that India's identity as a rising economic power is counterbalanced by its status as a country facing numerous developmental hurdles. This duality leads to a cautious and sometimes fragmented approach in international relations, where India must navigate between enhancing its global stature and maintaining solidarity with less developed nations (Thakur, 2022).

Although similarly characterised by ambivalence, China's foreign policy demonstrates a different approach to managing its dual identity. Despite hesitating to take on expansive managerial roles in global governance, China has skillfully balanced its developing country status with its growing influence as a significant power. Hongying Wang observes that China's reluctance to fully shed its identity as a developing nation, despite its considerable global stature, contrasts with India's more pronounced struggles in this regard (Wang, 2022).

The structural differences between China and India underscore their distinct foreign policy approaches. India, with its democratic processes and vibrant internal debates, often exhibits a more fragmented policy

stance. In contrast, China's centralised governance under the Chinese Communist Party allows for a more strategic and coherent approach. It enables China to navigate its dual identity more effectively, enhancing its leadership in international institutions such as the G20 and BRICS while maintaining solidarity with the Global South (Shambaugh, 2022).

India's participation in BRICS and the G20 highlights its ambivalent stance towards global institutional leadership. While these platforms offer opportunities for increased status and influence, India often experiences tension between its aspirations as a rising power and its commitment to the Global South. This duality is evident in establishing the New Development Bank (NDB) and the lack of a unified BRICS/NAM/G77 summit, reflecting India's ongoing struggle to balance its dual identities (Smith, 2010).

China's participation in international institutions paints a contrasting picture. The country's strategic initiatives, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signify a more decisive approach. China has successfully elevated its status, formed new alliances within the Global South, and navigated its dual role with greater coherence and strategic purpose (Shambaugh, 2022).

Discussion

The ambivalence in Indian and Chinese foreign policies reveals the complexities of their dual identities. Both nations strive for recognition as top-tier states while retaining their connections to the Global South. However, their approaches to managing this ambivalence differ significantly. Understanding these differences is crucial for comprehending the nuances of their foreign policies and their impact on global governance. While both countries seek to enhance their status and influence, their distinct approaches to managing ambivalence shape their international engagements and strategic decisions.

India's Multipolar Vision and Strategic Engagements in the Indo-Pacific and Global South

India advocates for a multipolar Global South. New Delhi aims to achieve balanced leadership in the Global South alongside countries like China. Unlike China, India's economic footprint in the Global South remains limited, prompting New Delhi to emphasise economic integration. India seeks to foster collective leadership in Asia, emphasising shared responsibilities and engagements with ASEAN and the East Asia Summit to integrate into the regional economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi underscored this collective responsibility in his 2018 Shangri-La speech, highlighting India's commitment to collective security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

India's strategy aims to assert itself as a regional power amidst China's ascendancy. While some argue India lacks a coherent Global South strategy, it actively participates in the Indo-Pacific dynamics, viewing Asia as crucial to its foreign policy stature and global ascent. India, alongside China and Japan, views Asia as a strategic platform for economic integration and strengthening strategic partnerships. Rajesh Basrur argues that India's strategic partnerships aim to enhance its autonomy and safeguard its interests amid a shifting global order.

India's foreign policy has evolved from non-alignment to strategic autonomy, navigating between major and minor powers. This transformation is evident in India's approach to Asia, particularly in response to China's rise. Modi's call for India and China to collaborate reflects India's aspiration for shared leadership in Asia amidst concerns over China's assertive actions and attempts to disrupt regional stability. India's response includes enhancing its strategic architecture and forming multiple strategic partnerships to safeguard its interests.

India's strategy also emphasises inclusivity in the Global South, positioning itself as a re-sponsible stakeholder in regional governance. Addressing poverty, economic disparities, and infrastructure gaps through developmental assistance demonstrates India's commitment to regional stability and economic integration (Sharma & Shibata, 2023). The Indo-Pacific paradigm heavily influences India's approach to the Global South. This is evident in its focus on sub-regional policies such as Act East, Connect Central Asia, and Neighbourhood First. These policies reflect India's deepening engagement with ASEAN and Japan, showcasing its expanding Indo-Pacific outlook (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). India is also committed to safeguarding its maritime interests, as demonstrated by its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, which aims to ensure a secure maritime environment in the Indian Ocean (Panda, 2019).

India's connectivity initiatives, such as the India–Thailand–Myanmar Trilateral Highway and the North-South Transport Corridor, highlight its commitment to enhancing regional connectivity. These initiatives and partnerships with Japan and the United States underscore India's role as a connectivity builder and counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China's BRI challenges India's interests in the Global South, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. India counters this through the Indo-Pacific framework, enhancing maritime security and connectivity across the Indian Ocean. India's strategic partnerships within the Quad (US, Japan, Australia) and the broader Indo-Pacific region aim to promote a free and open maritime environment, countering China's assertiveness and ensuring regional stability.

India's approach is not only regional but extends to the Global South, where it positions itself as a responsible stakeholder in governance issues, such as poverty alleviation, reducing economic disparities, and promoting infrastructure development. India's Asia strategy, therefore, encompasses a broader Indo-Pacific vision, linking maritime Asia with Africa and aligning with liberal world frameworks to bolster its strategic and economic interests amidst China's assertive rise (Smith, 2010).

Economic and Diplomatic Initiatives

India's economic and diplomatic initiatives are pivotal in shaping its strategic engagements within the Global South, particularly in the context of evolving global power dynamics dominated by China. This section explores India's proactive stance in economic integration, regional diplomacy, and its efforts to enhance connectivity, all aimed at consolidating its position as a critical player in the international arena.

India's efforts to position itself as a regional leader have involved significant diplomatic and economic initiatives. Hosting the G-20 Presidency and organising the virtual "Voice of the Global South" summit are examples of India's proactive steps to champion the issues of developing nations. These initiatives reflect India's commitment to multilateralism and its ambition to be the "voice" of the Global South (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

In contrast, China's approach has been characterised by substantial economic investments in infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, primarily through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While these investments have boosted China's influence, they have raised concerns about debt-trap diplomacy. India's strategy has offered an alternative engagement model, emphasising sustainable development and mutual benefit (Holslag, 2013).

Economic Integration and Regional Diplomacy

India's approach to economic integration within the Global South is multifaceted and strategically nuanced. Central to this strategy is its active participation in regional economic groupings and partnerships. Moreover, India's "Act East" policy exemplifies its efforts to deepen economic ties with Southeast Asian nations and beyond. This policy underscores India's intent to leverage economic complementarities and strengthen connectivity through infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (Sinha, 2020).

India's engagements with other countries in the Global South are focused on building inclusive partnerships and encouraging regional stability. Through its involvement in organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit, India demonstrates its

dedication to collective security and economic cooperation (Basrur, 2019). India's skilful diplomacy in these forums seeks to address regional challenges and promote a rules-based system that upholds territorial integrity and sovereignty (Kumar, 2022).

Connectivity Initiatives and Infrastructure Development

India's pursuit of connectivity initiatives is crucial to its economic and diplomatic strategy in the Global South. Projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port development in Iran exemplify India's efforts to establish robust maritime and land routes that enhance trade connectivity between South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond (Khan & Omid, 2023). China has been focusing on gaining strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean by investing in long-term lease agreements along the Maritime Silk Road. This includes acquiring ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, Djibouti, and Tanzania. Notably, China's establishment of a military base in Djibouti is seen as its first concrete military presence beyond its borders, raising concerns for India (Khan & Omid, 2023).

China's approach involves establishing intricate economic ties with South Asian and ASEAN countries, shaping political and economic connections to its benefit. Despite these concerns, India is progressively enhancing trade with China, heightening its reliance on Beijing. While India has not become a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has not openly opposed it. Instead, India is endeavouring to counterbalance China's influence through diverse geopolitical strategies like the Necklace of Diamonds and engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

China and India are working to secure access to essential resources and markets in Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. In this effort, Pakistan and Iran are pivotal in establishing communication routes across Asia. China has gained a new advantage over India by investing in Gwadar Port. In response, India focuses on investments in the Chabahar Port to counterbalance China's influence. The Chabahar Port is of significant importance to India in terms of both geopolitics and geoeconomics. It connects India to Central Asia and serves as a strategic counterbalance to China's connectivity initiatives. India's designation of July 31 as Chabahar Day reiterates the port's importance in its foreign policy (Press Information Bureau, 2022).

Furthermore, India's engagement in infrastructure development across the Global South, including Africa, through initiatives like the India-Africa Forum Summit, underscores its commitment to fostering socio-economic development and capacity building in partner countries (Sharma, 2020). These initiatives promote regional integration and enhance India's soft power and influence in shaping developmental agendas (Singh, 2023).

Strategic Partnerships and Security Cooperation

India's strategic partnerships within the Global South and beyond are instrumental in advancing its security interests and countering emerging challenges. The Quad framework exemplifies India's alignment with like-minded nations to uphold a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region (Chaturvedi, 2021). This partnership enables joint efforts in maritime security, humanitarian aid, disaster relief, and capacity building, highlighting India's position as a regional security provider (Gupta, 2022).

Moreover, India's bilateral engagements, such as the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, focus on enhancing defence cooperation, technology transfer, and joint infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific and beyond (Pant, 2020). These partnerships bolster India's defence capabilities and contribute to regional stability and economic resilience amid geopolitical uncertainties (Bhaskar, 2023).

India's economic and diplomatic initiatives within the Global South underscore its strategic agility and commitment to shaping a multipolar world order. India safeguards its national interests by fostering economic integration, enhancing connectivity, forging strategic partnerships, and contributing to regional stability and global governance.

Comparative Advantage and Strategic Alliances

India's democratic values, commitment to pluralism, and rule of law distinguish it from China and resonate with many nations globally. India's young, tech-savvy population and thriving scientific community have contributed to its growing stature as an innovation hub. These attributes give India soft power advantages that complement its economic and diplomatic efforts (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). India has strategically aimed to balance China's influence by enhancing partnerships with other major powers like the United States and Japan. These relationships are part of India's broader strategy to maintain regional stability and enhance its security capabilities. Including the African Union in the G-20 and advocating for climate financing for developing nations are further examples of India's diplomatic acumen and role as a bridge between the Global North and South (Panda, 2020).

India strategically utilises its comparative advantages and forges alliances to bolster its global influence while addressing critical global challenges such as vaccine access and climate change. This section explores how India's proactive stance on these issues, contrasted with China's approach, shapes outcomes in the Global South. India's comparative advantages in information technology, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy, and agriculture is pivotal in its global engagement strategy. These sectors enhance India's economic competitiveness and contribute significantly to addressing global challenges.

Information Technology (IT)

India's IT prowess is exemplified by its leading position in software services and digital technologies. Companies like Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys provide critical IT solutions globally, supporting digital transformation efforts in healthcare, finance, and logistics (Saggu, 2024).

Pharmaceuticals

India's pharmaceutical industry, known as the pharmacy of the world, plays a crucial role in global healthcare by supplying affordable generic medicines.

In health biotechnology, Indian firms have actively pursued technological advancement, primarily driven by their interest in export markets, particularly in the US and Europe. The current focus of most health biotech firms in India is on the domestic market. However, there has been a noticeable increase in the interest of medium and large Indian enterprises in exploring opportunities to export their products. Notably, India's traditional pharmaceutical sector saw a significant increase in foreign sales, growing by more than 21% annually from 1996 to 2005. The broader biotech sector in India derives 56% of its revenues from exports, showcasing its robust international footprint (Natesh & Bhan, 2009).

Major Indian firms have made substantial efforts to strengthen their export capabilities, particularly to the US, by enhancing their manufacturing facilities to comply with the stringent standards set by the FDA. Strategic alliances between Indian pharmaceutical companies and multinational corporations (MNCs) have also played a crucial role. These alliances leverage the manufacturing prowess of Indian firms and MNCs' extensive global marketing networks, facilitating access to international markets (Chittoor et al., 2008).

In contrast, countries like China have seen limited export of finished medicines to highly regulated markets due to challenges in meeting stringent manufacturing standards (Li, 2008). Indian companies have emerged as significant global players in vaccine production, with a notable portion of the biotech sector's revenues, amounting to US\$2.5 billion in 2007/8, derived from vaccine sales. A dozen Indian vaccine manufacturers collectively account for over 50% of these revenues, a testament to India's pivotal role as a global vaccine supplier (Natesh & Bhan, 2009). This growth trajectory began in the 1990s when manufacturers in industrialised countries started withdrawing from vaccine markets in developing regions, creating opportunities for firms in India and other developing countries to step in (Milstien et al., 2007).

While historically trailing India in vaccine development, China has intensified its efforts recently, supported by significant government

investments in technological advancements (Re-zaie et al., 2012). China now hosts one of the world's largest vaccine manufacturing sectors, comprising approximately 30 domestic enterprises producing over a billion vaccine doses annually (Zhou & Leydesdorff, 2006).

Renewable Energy

India's renewable energy sector has seen significant progress, driven by policy initiatives, international cooperation, and domestic innovation. Key among these efforts is the International Solar Alliance (ISA), established in 2015 by India and France. The ISA aimed to promote solar energy use globally, particularly in countries between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, to mobilise over \$1 trillion in investments and deploy over 1,000 gigawatts (GW) of solar energy by 2030. The ISA aims to mobilise solar resources and facilitate solar energy deployment in member countries, particularly in the Global South (Ghosh & Chawla, 2021).

Domestically, the National Solar Mission set an ambitious target of 100 GW of solar capacity by 2022. By the end of 2021, India had installed about 50 GW, marking substantial progress despite challenges like land acquisition and grid infrastructure (World Economic Forum, 2024). Additionally, decentralised solar solutions, such as solar pumps and rooftop installations, have enhanced rural energy access (Birol & Kant, 2022).

India became a leading global producer of wind energy, with over 39 GW of capacity by the end of 2021. Government policies, including wind resource assessment programs and fiscal incentives, supported this growth. Renewable sources, such as bioenergy and small hydro projects, were also explored to diversify the energy mix and support rural electrification (Birol & Kant, 2022).

During its G20 presidency, India emphasised global energy transition, advocating for international cooperation in clean energy research, technology transfer, and financing (Vaid, 2023). International partnerships, like those with Germany and the United States, facilitated knowledge exchange and technology transfer, helping to overcome technical and financial barriers. India's revised climate commitments under the Paris Agreement involve a target to generate 50% of its electricity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030 and to decrease emissions intensity by 33-35% from the levels recorded in 2005 (NITI Aayog, 2015; Birol & Kant, 2022).

Strategic Alliances and Global Initiatives

India's bilateral and multilateral strategic alliances reinforce its global engagement strategy and amplify its influence on critical global issues.

Bilateral Partnerships

India's partnerships with countries like the United States, Japan, and

France are crucial for technology transfer, defence cooperation, and economic collaboration. These alliances support India's defence and space exploration efforts (Pant, 2020).

Multilateral Engagements

As evidenced during its G20 presidency, India advocates for Global South goals on international platforms like the G20, focusing on issues such as vaccine access and climate change mitigation. Initiatives like the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) reinforce India's regional leadership (Sharma & Shibata, 2023).

Regional Initiatives

India's approach contrasts with China's assertive infrastructure development tactics in regions like Africa. India emphasises partnership, capacity building, and sustainable development through initiatives like the India-Africa Forum Summit and Lines of Credit for infrastructure projects (Akhter, 2022).

Contrasting Approaches: India vs. China in the Global South

India's approach in the Global South is characterised by democratic values, partnership, and sustainable development, contrasting with China's assertive economic diplomacy and infrastructure projects.

Line of Credits

India's Line of Credit is characterised by concessional terms, extended repayment periods, and low interest rates, offering a viable alternative to the commercial loans associated with China's BRI (Parkin, 2022). This approach mitigates the risk of debt distress and enhances the recipient countries' capacity to manage and sustain infrastructure investments independently. India's LOCs prioritise sectors critical to economic development, including energy, transportation, agriculture, and healthcare infrastructure. By addressing these sectors, India aims to build resilient economies and enhance the quality of life for local populations (Finch, 2024).

India strategically utilises lines of credit (LOCs) and development assistance to foster diplomatic relations and promote sustainable infrastructure projects across its key regions of interest, particularly in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).

Since its independence, India's development assistance has reached approximately \$107 billion by 2014, supporting over 300 LOCs and covering around 600 projects globally. These initiatives span infrastructure, healthcare, education, and cultural preservation, reflecting India's commitment to fostering economic and cultural ties abroad (Parkin, 2022).

In contrast to China's BRI, which has faced criticism for high debt burdens and question-able project viability, India's approach emphasises transparency and mutual benefit. Indian credit to Sri Lanka, for example, carries lower interest rates (around 1% in 2021) compared to Chinese loans (3.2%), showcasing India's focus on sustainable financing (Parkin, 2022). In contrast, Chi-na's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emphasises large-scale infrastructure projects often criticised for debt dependency and environmental concerns (Amineh, 2022).

India's development initiatives also serve strategic objectives by enhancing geopolitical influence and fostering closer ties with partner countries. The government's scheme offering concessional loans for strategic infrastructure projects abroad has encouraged involvement from Indian conglomerates like Tata, Larsen & Toubro, and the Adani Group, enhancing India's economic diplomacy. Projects funded through LOCs emphasise sustainable practices and local capacity building. This approach ensures that infrastructure developments are aligned with environmental standards and empowers local communities to manage and maintain these assets effectively (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).

Global Health Initiatives

India has aided countries in crisis by providing vaccines through bilateral and multilateral channels. Additionally, it has offered technical support and programs to strengthen healthcare systems. India's approach to global health diplomacy emphasises cooperation and compassion, guided by the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam principle — the world is one family. This philosophy underscores India's commitment to humanity's well-being (Chattu et al., 2023). The country showcased its leadership on the global stage by supplying medical resources and expertise to over 100 nations, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Brazil. India's Vaccine Maitri initiative showcased its commitment to global health equity by supplying vaccines to developing countries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

However, China's vaccine diplomacy has faced widespread scepticism regarding its motivations, often driven more by strategic interests than genuine need or equity. For instance, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi had announced that China had distributed over 400 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to more than ninety countries (Hillman & Tippet, 2021). Almost all recipient countries of Chinese vaccines participate in the BRI, highlighting China's use of vaccine diplomacy to advance its broader strategic objectives and enhance global leadership and influence (Vadlamannati & Jung, 2023).

Despite these efforts, China encountered significant challenges and widespread distrust early in its vaccine diplomacy endeavours. Many countries and populations remained hesitant to embrace Chinese-made

vaccines despite their arrival and availability (Choi & Janke, 2021).

India's strategic utilisation of comparative advantages and alliances in its global engagement strategy shows its leadership in addressing global challenges such as vaccine access and climate change. Contrasted with China's assertive tactics, India's approach in the Global South prioritises partnership, sustainability, and democratic values.

Conclusion

This paper has delved into the intricacies of India's ascent, examining its diplomatic initiatives and unique strengths in contrast to China's formidable influence. India's diplomatic efforts underscore its commitment to sustainable and inclusive development, particularly in addressing pressing issues like vaccine access, climate change, and economic cooperation among developing nations.

Through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and Vaccine Maitri, India has demonstrated leadership in addressing global challenges. These programs highlight India's innovative approach to problem-solving and its role as a responsible global leader. By advocating for equitable resource distribution and sustainable practices on platforms like the G20, India has positioned itself as a champion of the Global South.

As of 2023, China and India held second and fourth positions in global military expenditure, respectively. Both countries have achieved notable progress in nuclear capabilities and economic development. The relationship between Beijing and New Delhi is marked by collaboration and competition, focusing on the competitive aspect. Increased Chinese investments have propelled India's emergence as one of China's key trade partners. Additionally, their joint involvement in multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS has strengthened the bond between the two nations.

The competition between China and India for influence in the Indian Ocean region has created a complex geopolitical situation. Other global powers must closely monitor and engage with developments in this region to ensure stability and security. Balancing economic cooperation with strategic competition will be vital to navigating the complexities of this dynamic and influential part of the world.

India's soft power has also played a crucial role in its global strategy. By utilising its rich cultural heritage, democratic values, and the global reach of its diaspora, India has built strong cultural and educational ties among the Global South nations. This cultural influence helps build a favourable global image and fosters international goodwill, reinforcing India's position as a leader in the Global South.

In conclusion, India's rise on the global stage is marked by a strategic blend of economic initiatives, diplomatic engagement, strategic balancing, and cultural diplomacy. Through its comprehensive approach, India has positioned itself as a critical player in the evolving global power dynamics. By addressing global challenges, fostering regional cooperation, driving innovation, and promoting its cultural heritage, India continues to enhance its global influence and contribute significantly to international development. While the competition with China is complex and on-going, it drives India to innovate and adapt, strengthening its role as a pivotal player and shaping a more equitable and sustainable global order.

References

Amineh, M. P. (2022). *The China-led Belt and Road Initiative and its Reflections: The Crisis of Hegemony and Changing Global Orders*. Routledge.

Birol, F., & Kant, A. (2022, January 10). *India's clean energy transition is rapidly underway, benefiting the entire world – Analysis - IEA*. IEA. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/india-s-clean-energy-transition-is-rapidly-underway-benefiting-the-entire-world>

Chandra, P. (2014, May 29). China, a top priority in India's foreign policy: Modi tells Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/140529/nation-current-affairs/article/will-deal-outstanding-issues-narendra-modi-tells-chinese-prime>

Chattu, V. K., Singh, B., Kajal, F., Chatla, C., Chattu, S. K., Pattanshetty, S., & Reddy, K. S. (2023). The rise of India's global health diplomacy amid COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 13(4), 290–298. <https://doi.org/10.34172/hpp.2023.34>

Chittoor, R., Ray, S., Aulakh, P. S., & Sarkar, M. (2008). Strategic responses to institutional changes: 'Indigenous growth' model of the Indian pharmaceutical industry. *Journal of International Management*, 14(3), 252–269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2008.05.001>

Choi, D., & Janke, S. (2021, July 21). "Vaccine diplomacy"? - China's global vaccine efforts and controversies. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.ualberta.ca/china-institute/research/analysis-briefs/2021/vaccine-diplomacy.html>

Cooper, A. F. (2020). China, India and the pattern of G20/BRICS engagement: differentiated ambivalence between 'rising' power status and solidarity with the Global South. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 1945–1962. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1829464>

Finch, A. (2024, January 7). India: 20 years of development assistance through lines of credit | Medium. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@alexpfinch/india-20-years-of-development-assistance-through-lines-of>

credit-c75fedd50651

Ghosh, A., & Chawla, K. (2021). The role of the International Solar Alliance in advancing the energy transition in Asia. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 63–87). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-8905-8_4

Grare, F. (2017). *India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry*. Oxford University Press.

Hillman, J. A., & Tippett, A. (2021, April 15). *A robust US response to China's health diplomacy will reap domestic and global benefits* | *Think Global Health*. *Think Global Health*. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/robust-us-response-chinas-health-diplomacy-will-reap-domestic-and-global-benefits>

Jie, Y. (2023, July 23). Beijing Briefing: China goes for growth in Global South. *Chatham House*. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-08/beijing-briefing-china-goes-growth-global-south>

Khan, K. H., & Omid, A. (2023). China-India Counterbalancing Measures Through International Corridors and Ports: The Focus On Chabahar And Gwadar Ports. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 9(2), 171–190. <https://doi.org/10.47305/jlia2392171k>

Li, X. (2008). The Impact of Higher Standards in Patent Protection for Pharmaceutical Industries under the TRIPS Agreement – A Comparative Study of China and India. *World Economy*, 31(10), 1367–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2008.01133.x>

Mazumdar, A. (2011). India's search for a Post-Cold War foreign policy. *India Quarterly*, 67(2), 165–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006700205>

Meredith, R. (2008). *The Elephant and the Dragon: The rise of India and China and what it means for all of us*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Milstien, J. B., Gaulé, P., & Kaddar, M. (2007). Access to vaccine technologies in developing countries: Brazil and India. *Vaccine*, 25(44), 7610–7619. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2007.09.007>

Ministry of External Affairs. (2016, November 11). *India-Japan Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Japan*. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27599/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+the+visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Japan>

Ministry of External Affairs. (2023, June 15). *Vaccine supply*. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm>

Mukhopadhyay, A. (2023, August 17). India's Lines of Credit, Development Cooperation, and G20 Presidency: A Primer. *Observer Research*

Foundation.

Natesh, S., & Bhan, M. K. (2009). Biotechnology sector in India: strengths, limitations, remedies and outlook. *Current Science*, 97(2), 157–169. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24111912>

NITI Aayog. (2015). *Report on India's Renewable Electricity Roadmap 2030: Towards Accelerated Renewable Electricity Deployment*. <https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-03/Report-onIndiaRenewableElectricityRoadmap2030.pdf>

Panda, J. P. (2013). Competing Realities in China-India Multilateral Discourse: Asia's enduring power rivalry. *The Journal of Contemporary China/Journal of Contemporary China*, 22(82), 669–690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766386>

Panda, J. P. (2019a). Asian Equilibrium: India's overture to China. In *India and China in Asia* (pp. 44–64). Routledge.

Panda, J. P. (2019b). *India and China in Asia: Between Equilibrium and Equations*. Routledge.

Parkin, B. (2022, December 21). *India's plan to take on China as South Asia's favourite lender*. Financial Times. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.ft.com/content/67abce3d-7313-4788-8649-abb9343a2ebc>

Paul, T. (2018). *The China-India rivalry in the globalisation era*. Georgetown University Press.

Press Information Bureau [PIB]. (2022, July 31). '*Chabahar Day*' observed to promote Chabahar – Link to INSTC-Connecting Central Asian Markets [Press release]. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1846716>

Rezaie, R., McGahan, A. M., Frew, S. E., Daar, A. S., & Singer, P. A. (2012). Emergence of bio-pharmaceutical innovators in China, India, Brazil, and South Africa as global competitors and collaborators. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-4505-10-18>

Saggu, M. S. (2024). *India at G20: Governance & International organisations*. Interdisciplinary Institute of Human Security & Governance.

Saran, S. (2010, November 1). *India and China take different roads to world leadership – Part I*. Yale Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://archive-yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/india-and-china-take-different-roads-world-leadership-part-i>

Scobell, A., & Wortzel, L. M. (2006). *Shaping China's security environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army*. US Army War College Press.

Sevea, I. S., Palit, A., & Rai, V. (2023). *India and the future of G20: Shaping Policies for a Better World*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Shambaugh, D. (2013). *China goes global: The Partial Power*. Oxford University Press.

Sharma, K., & Shibata, N. (2023, April 24). *India pushes "Global South" goals onto the G-20 agenda*. Nikkei Asia. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/India-pushes-Global-South-goals-on-to-G-20-agenda>

Smith, D. (2010). *The Dragon and the Elephant: China, India and the New World Order*. Profile Books.

Thakur, R. (2018). How representative are bricks? In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 43–60). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670133-4>

Vadlamannati, K. C., & Jung, Y. S. (2023). The political economy of vaccine distribution and China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Business and Politics*, 25(1), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bap.2022.26>

Vaid, M. (2023, March 15). Can India's G20 Presidency Facilitate Global Energy Transition? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/can-indias-g20-presidency-facilitate-global-energy-transition/>

Wang, H. (2019). The New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: China's ambiguous approach to global financial governance. *Development and Change*, 50(1), 221–244. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12473>

World Economic Forum. (2024, May 28). *How India is emerging as an advanced energy super-power*. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/05/india-emerging-advanced-energy-superpower/>

Zhou, P., & Leydesdorff, L. (2006). The emergence of China as a leading nation in science. *Re-search Policy*, 35(1), 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2005.08.006>