

1. India's Diplomacy – International Relations

In foreign policy, there is no substitute for nurturing trusted partnerships even while seeking new opportunities, as demonstrated by PM Modi's brief UAE stop en route to Europe amid fragile US-Iran ceasefire.

1. Background

India's diplomatic trajectory since independence has evolved from Non-Aligned Movement idealism through Cold War constraints to contemporary multi-alignment pragmatism navigating a complex multipolar world. Post-independence decades witnessed India's foreign policy filtered predominantly through Soviet Union proximity, limiting independent engagement with Western Europe and constraining strategic autonomy. The 1991 economic liberalization marked a watershed, necessitating diplomatic recalibration as India integrated into global markets, sought foreign investment and technology, and developed relationships beyond traditional Cold War alignments. The 21st century's rise of China, US-China strategic competition, Russia's diminished yet significant role, and Europe's quest for strategic autonomy created fluid geopolitical dynamics requiring India to balance competing interests without permanent alliances or rigid ideological commitments. Prime Minister Modi's recent diplomatic engagements exemplify this evolved approach—his brief UAE stop amid growing uncertainty over fragile US-Iran ceasefire demonstrates reciprocity toward trusted partners during their security concerns, while his European tour underlines how far India-Europe engagement has progressed beyond Cold War limitations when Europe was viewed through Soviet prism. Europe has become central to India's search for export markets, capital inflows, advanced technology partnerships, and green energy collaborations, reflected in trade agreements concluded with the European Union and European Free Trade Association signalling India's new strategic appreciation of Europe as an independent pole in global affairs.

The India-Africa summit scheduled later emphasizes a region whose importance will grow steadily—Africa's youthful population, expanding markets, and critical mineral endowments attract major power attention while parts of the continent emerge as geopolitical competition theatres. However, managing consequences of geopolitical turbulence, global trade restructuring, and disruptive technologies requires rapid internal reform, with bureaucratic resistance to change and political comfort with status quo remaining formidable obstacles to India fully leveraging emerging opportunities in the shifting world order.

2. Five Guiding Principles

Reciprocity

1. The UAE has been a consistent partner on issues of central importance to India including Kashmir and cross-border terrorism.
2. PM's visit signals that India, in turn, stands with the Emirates at a time of heightened threat to its security.
3. Reciprocity in diplomacy means supporting partners during their moments of vulnerability, not just when convenient.
4. This principle builds long-term trust and reliability crucial for sustained partnerships.

Diversification

1. PM's European tour underlines how far India's engagement with Europe has evolved beyond Cold War constraints.
2. During the Cold War, India's view of Europe was often filtered through close ties with the Soviet Union limiting independent bilateral relationships.
3. Europe is now central to India's search for export markets, capital, advanced technology, and green-energy partnerships.
4. The conclusion of trade agreements with the European Union and European Free Trade Association reflects India's new strategic appreciation of Europe.

5. Diversification reduces dependence on single partners and expands India's options in a multipolar world.

Strategic Flexibility

1. India's outreach to Europe unfolds amid the return of great-power politics and rapid restructuring of relations among the United States, Europe, Russia, and China.
2. For India, the challenge is securing its own interests, limiting negative fallout from great power competition, and seizing new possibilities emerging from global realignments.
3. The emphasis must remain on pragmatic pursuit of interests rather than ideological rigidity.
4. Strategic flexibility allows India to navigate competing pressures without permanent alliances constraining autonomy.

Strategic Expansion

1. The India-Africa summit at month's end highlights a region whose importance to India will grow steadily in coming decades.
2. Africa is central to the future global economy—its youthful population, expanding markets, and rich endowment of critical minerals attract increasing attention from all major powers.
3. Parts of the continent are also emerging as important theatres of geopolitical competition among major powers.
4. The relationship now requires greater strategic focus on trade, investment, connectivity, and security cooperation beyond traditional development assistance.

Domestic Renewal

1. Managing consequences of geopolitical turbulence, restructuring of global trade, and rise of disruptive technologies requires rapid internal reform.
2. Bureaucratic resistance to change and political comfort with the status quo remain formidable obstacles to India capitalizing on emerging opportunities.
3. Without domestic economic and institutional transformation, external diplomatic success remains incomplete.

3.Challenges in Current Context

Geopolitical Rivalries

1. Intensifying US-China competition creates pressure on middle powers like India to choose sides.
2. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions complicate India's traditional Russia relationship.
3. West Asian instabilities including Iran tensions affect India's energy security and diaspora interests.

Economic Uncertainty

1. Global inflation, supply chain disruptions, and protectionist tendencies threaten India's export growth.
2. Developed economies' recession risks reduce demand for Indian goods and services.
3. Technology decoupling between US-China blocs forces India to navigate competing technology ecosystems.

Technological Disruption

1. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology revolutions create winners and losers.
2. India risks falling behind without massive investments in research, education, and innovation infrastructure.
3. Digital sovereignty concerns require balancing openness with security.

Internal Constraints

1. Bureaucratic inertia slows policy implementation despite good intentions.
2. Political considerations sometimes override economic rationality in decision-making.
3. Infrastructure deficits, skill mismatches, and regulatory complexities constrain competitiveness.

4.Way Forward

Strengthen Trusted Partnerships

1. Deepen relationships with UAE, France, Japan, and other reliable partners through regular high-level engagements, defence cooperation, technology sharing, and people-to-people exchanges, while avoiding entangling alliances that constrain strategic autonomy, ensuring India retains flexibility to pursue independent interests in fluid geopolitical landscape.

Expand European Engagement

1. Leverage EU and EFTA trade agreements to boost exports in pharmaceuticals, IT services, engineering goods, and green technologies, while attracting European investment in manufacturing, renewable energy, and infrastructure sectors creating employment and enhancing technological capabilities through technology transfer and joint ventures.

Build Africa Presence

1. Scale up infrastructure financing through lines of credit and development partnerships in railways, ports, and digital connectivity, while strengthening security cooperation addressing terrorism, piracy, and maritime security threats, and expanding educational exchanges and capacity building programs creating goodwill and long-term ties.

Accelerate Domestic Reforms

1. Simplify regulatory frameworks reducing compliance burdens for businesses, while investing massively in education, skill development, and research infrastructure creating human capital for knowledge economy, and improving ease of doing business through digitalization, transparent procedures, and efficient dispute resolution attracting investment and fostering entrepreneurship.

Enhance Diplomatic Capacity

1. Expand diplomatic footprint particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia currently underserved, while strengthening economic and commercial diplomacy focusing on trade promotion, investment attraction, and protecting Indian businesses abroad, and building expertise in emerging issues including cyber security, space cooperation, and climate diplomacy.

Conclusion

In an era marked by geopolitical rivalries, economic uncertainty, technological disruption, and shifting global alignments, India's foreign policy must follow pragmatic, multidimensional approaches. Five principles—reciprocity (standing with UAE during security threats), diversification (expanding Europe ties beyond Cold War constraints with EU/EFTA agreements), strategic flexibility (pragmatically pursuing interests amid US-Europe-Russia-China restructuring), strategic expansion (deepening Africa engagement given youthful population, expanding markets, critical minerals), and domestic renewal (overcoming bureaucratic resistance and status quo comfort)—guide India through extraordinary international turbulence. Ultimately, India's ability to shape and benefit from evolving international order depends not only on diplomatic outreach abroad but also on continuous economic and institutional transformation at home ensuring India emerges as a significant pole in the multipolar world.

Source - <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/c-raja-mohan-writes-in-a-shifting-world-order-five-principles-should-guide-indias-diplomacy-10686420/>