



Positioning India in Global Power Dynamics

For Prelims: [Human Development Index](#), [Quad](#), [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation \(SCO\)](#), [Non-Aligned Movement](#)

For Mains: India's aspiration for Great Power status and its limitations, India's Strategic Autonomy Approach, Major Challenges Linked to India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy.

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Why in News?

India, as it grows as the **world's fastest-growing economy**, faces debates over its **great power aspirations**, with critics highlighting weak strategy and its **limited global influence** when compared to China and the US.

What are the Key Constraints Hindering India's Global Power Aspirations?

- **Ambition vs. Strategic Capacity:** While India aspires to global power status, critics argue it lacks the **strategic clarity and institutional capacity to translate ambition into influence**.
 - For example, [India's military expenditure in 2024 stood at USD 86 billion](#), far behind China's **USD 314 billion**, limiting its power projection capability.
 - India remains one of the **largest arms importers globally**, accounting for **9.5% of global imports (2016-2020)**, highlighting its dependency and underdeveloped indigenous defence capabilities.
 - India's dependence on **global supply chains for critical sectors** like **electronics and energy exposes** it to external shocks and geopolitical tensions.
- **Strategic Ambiguity in Global Alliances:** India's **emphasis on strategic autonomy, demonstrated by its cautious stance on the [Russia-Ukraine conflict](#) and its balancing act between the [Quad](#) and [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation \(SCO\)](#), has been beneficial in preserving its independence**.
 - However, critics argue that this approach may undermine India's image as a reliable partner in times of crisis.
- **Human Development Constraints:** In 2023, India ranks 130 out of 193 countries on the [Human Development Index \(HDI\)](#), indicating significant deficits in education, health, and income distribution.
 - Its Inequality-Adjusted HDI (IHDI) drops further to 0.475, reflecting high social and regional inequality that impedes holistic development.
- **Economic Power vs. Per Capita Strength:** Despite being the [4th largest economy globally](#), in 2024, [India's per capita GDP](#) was just USD 2,711, placing it among lower middle-income countries.
 - Globally, **India ranked 144th (out of 196) in per capita GDP** at market exchange rates, and 127th in **Purchasing Power Parity terms**.
 - This limits India's global leverage in economic diplomacy and soft power influence.

- **Technological Gaps and Innovation Challenges:** India ranked [39th on the Global Innovation Index 2024](#), compared to China's 11th and the US's 3rd.
 - While India has made digital strides (e.g., [UPI](#), [Aadhaar](#)), gaps remain in cutting-edge sectors like [semiconductors](#), [quantum computing](#), and biotech.
- **Internal Social Fault Lines:** India's rank in the World Press Freedom Index 2024 was 159 out of 180 countries, impacting its global democratic credibility.
 - Within India, states like Goa (HDI ~0.75) and Uttar Pradesh (~0.60) show stark development gaps.
 - Such disparities weaken national coherence and limit India's ability to act as a unified global actor.

What are the Key Foundations Supporting India's Aspiration to Become a Global Power?

- **Economic Growth and Demographic Advantage:** India's economy is projected to grow at an average rate of 6-7% per year over the coming years, positioning it to become the world's third-largest economy by 2030.
 - With a median age of 28.2 years, India has a young and growing workforce, which will drive innovation and industrial growth, further enhancing India's global influence.
- **Geopolitical Significance:** Strategically located at the crossroads of Asia, India controls key maritime chokepoints in the [Indian Ocean](#) and is central to global trade.
 - India's active role in forums like the Quad, SCO, and [BRICS](#) enhances its geopolitical leverage in [Indo-Pacific security](#) and global governance.
 - India is the de facto leader of South Asia, driving regional integration through initiatives like the [South Asian Free Trade Area \(SAFTA\)](#) and [Neighbourhood First Policy](#).
 - Its role in [ASEAN](#) helps shape the future of global trade and security in Asia, securing its position as a regional powerhouse with growing global influence.
- **Technological and Defence Strength:** India is emerging as a digital and technological powerhouse, with UPI as the world's leading mobile payment system and over 100 unicorns in tech startups.
 - India's space missions (e.g., [Chandrayaan 3](#), [Mangalyaan](#)) and growing indigenous defence capabilities (e.g., [Tejas](#), [INS Arihant](#)) underscore its technological and military potential.
 - Additionally, India has the second-largest military active personnel in the world, after China, and one of the largest standing armies in Asia.
- **Strategic Autonomy and Soft Power:** India's strategic autonomy allows it to engage with multiple powers, balancing relations with the US, Russia, and China.
 - Its leadership in the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) and its push for [UNSC reforms](#) reflect its diplomatic vision of a multipolar world order.
 - India's global profile is strengthened by its diaspora of over 30 million, particularly in the advanced economies, and its rich cultural heritage.
 - The country exerts significant soft power worldwide through its film industry, yoga, and advocacy on issues like climate change.

How Should India Navigate Evolving Global Power Dynamics?

- **Strengthen Domestic Foundations for Global Reach:** Focus on health, education, skilling, and infrastructure to **convert demographic advantage into economic dividends**.
 - Institutional reforms in judiciary, policing, and governance critical for rule-based development.
 - Guided by the principle of **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, the goal is not to immediately match all metrics of the US or China, but to **build strategic autonomy**, enhance domestic capacity, and consolidate sustainable growth.
- **Strategic Communication of India's Vision:** Clear articulation of India's unique development path, **democracy with diversity, growth with inclusion**, can counter Western misperceptions.
 - India should proactively tell its **"civilisational state" story on global platforms**.
- **Balanced Partnerships with Competing Powers:** India is calibrating its foreign relations by balancing assertiveness (on territorial issues, trade, sovereignty) with pragmatism (working with multiple powers, avoiding full alignment).

- It seeks to strengthen ties with the US, while also maintaining productive engagement with China and Russia in multilateral forums, **focusing on issue-based coalitions over bloc politics.**
- India is not yet a peer competitor of China or the US, but it is increasingly an important **Great Power in the making**, especially in Asia and in the **Global South.**
- **Leverage Soft Power and Technological Leadership:** Continue investing in tech diplomacy (Data Governance, Digital Public Goods, AI ethics).
 - Promote Indian thought leadership in international regulatory and ethical discourse on tech, environment, and global health.
 - The real battle for global influence might be **less about guns & tanks**, more about **technology, data, diplomacy, soft power**, areas where India is making credible inroads.

Conclusion

India's journey from **famine to food security**, from **Non-Alignment to balancing great power rivalries**, and from **industrial laggard to digital innovator**, is a story of **steady evolution**. In a world shaped by technology, civilisational resilience, and multipolar cooperation, **India is positioning itself not as a follower, but as a shaper of the new order in the emerging multipolar world.**

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. Is India's "big economy-low per capita" paradox limiting its global power? Discuss.

Q. Is India's "strategic autonomy" an asset or a liability in global geopolitics? Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Mains

Q. "With the waning of globalization, the post-Cold War world is becoming a site of sovereign nationalism." Elucidate. **(2025)**

Q. At the international level, bilateral relations between most nations are governed on the policy of promoting one's own national interest without any regard for the interest of other nations. This leads to conflicts and tension between nations. How can ethical consideration help resolve such tensions? Discuss with specific examples. **(2015)**

Q. 'The long-sustained image of India as a leader of the oppressed and marginalised nations has disappeared on account of its new found role in the emerging global order.' Elaborate. **(2019)**