



Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy: A Strategic Blend of Pragmatism and Realism

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Abstract

This paper examines the foreign policy of Indira Gandhi, focusing on her ability to blend pragmatism with realism to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of her time. As a transformative leader, Gandhi's decisions were informed by a clear understanding of India's national interests, a commitment to sovereignty, and the necessity of maintaining regional stability. By analyzing key events such as the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the Indo-Soviet Treaty, and the Pokhran nuclear test, this study highlights how Gandhi's strategic vision defined India's foreign relations. The paper argues that her approach was characterized by a pragmatic pursuit of peace, coupled with a realist acknowledgment of power dynamics and security imperatives.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Liberation War

1. Introduction

Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister marked a transformative period in India's foreign policy. Emerging from the post-colonial idealism of Nehru's era, she adopted a realist approach that sought to balance ideological principles with pragmatic necessities. While Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India from 1967 until 1977, her administration oversaw the country's foreign policy. As part of this effort, we vowed to combat terrorists on a global scale and fortify our borders. According to Gandhi, "A country's policy is shaped by many forces-its position on the map, the countries which are its neighbours, the policies they adopt and the actions they take, as well as its historical experiences in the aggregate and in terms of its particular success or traumas." This statement was made at a meeting on 30 October 1981 to commemorate the silver jubilee celebration of the School of International Studies. Indira Gandhi, as a political leader in South Asia, left an indelible mark on the region's external affairs and foreign policy. Following India's independence, she emerged as the first Prime Minister to unequivocally condemn external terrorism, showcasing her strong stance against threats to national sovereignty. While Indira Gandhi embraced the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, she established her own identity as a leader who was not just confined to the Indian nation but also held a significant stature in the broader South Asian context. This paper examines how Indira Gandhi's vision and actions shaped Indian foreign policy. Her leadership not only safeguarded India from external threats but also contributed to global peace. Under her premiership, Indian foreign policy successfully maintained stability and promoted peaceful relations in the international arena. As a leader of peace, Indira Gandhi displayed a pragmatic approach, skillfully integrating her ideals with the practical application of diplomacy. The central questions explored in this paper are: What was the fundamental significance of Indira Gandhi's era? How did she blend peace and pragmatism in her foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Bangladesh Liberation War? The introductory section delves into her early life and formative years, laying the foundation for understanding her leadership. Subsequent sections focus on these core questions, analyzing her strategies and their impact on India's foreign policy. Scholars have often debated her approach, with Bandyopadhyaya (1970) arguing that Indira Gandhi's personality and leadership style led her to use socialist rhetoric primarily as a tool for political survival and power consolidation. This paper seeks to explore how Gandhi's foreign policy decisions blended pragmatism and realism, shaping India's global identity and regional dominance.



Table 1: Evolution of Indira Gandhi's foreign policy

Time Period	Key Events/Decisions	Strategic Approach	Outcome/Impact
1966-1971	- Economic challenges post-Tashkent Agreement. - Growing tension with Pakistan.	Pragmatic diplomacy focusing on rebuilding economic ties while maintaining defense preparedness.	Strengthened ties with USSR; maintained strategic autonomy despite Cold War pressures.
1971	- Bangladesh Liberation War. - Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship.	Realist approach, leveraging alliances to counter Pakistan's aggression and internationalize the East Pakistan issue.	Successful military intervention in Bangladesh; enhanced India's regional dominance in South Asia.
1972-1974	- Shimla Agreement. - India's first nuclear test at Pokhran (1974).	Realism emphasizing security concerns and strategic autonomy through military and diplomatic means.	Redefined India-Pakistan relations; established India as a nuclear-capable power with minimal global backlash.
1975-1977	- Consolidation of regional ties. - Emergency declared domestically.	Pragmatic alliances with neighboring countries; balanced international criticism with regional engagement.	Maintained India's influence in South Asia; faced criticism for authoritarian tendencies during Emergency.
1977-1980	- Brief loss of power; Indira Gandhi re-elected in 1980.	Reassessed foreign policy strategies to regain international trust and address domestic challenges.	Focus on rebuilding international image; continued non-alignment while strengthening defense policies.
1980-1984	- Strengthened ties with USSR. - Intervention in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.	Blend of realism and pragmatism to ensure national security and regional stability.	Secured strategic partnerships; laid groundwork for later intervention in regional ethnic conflicts.

2. Objectives

1. To analyze Indira Gandhi's realist and pragmatic approach to key foreign policy decisions.
2. To explore the socio-political and psychological influences on her leadership style.

3. Literature Review

Mansingh, Surjit (2001) In *Indira Gandhi: A Political Biography*, Mansingh explores Indira Gandhi's leadership and its profound impact on India's foreign policy. He highlights key decisions such as the Indo-Soviet Treaty and the Bangladesh Liberation War, illustrating Gandhi's pragmatic balancing of ideological non-alignment with strategic alliances. Mansingh concludes that Gandhi's approach was fundamentally realist, prioritizing national security and sovereignty, yet pragmatic in utilizing international partnerships to achieve these goals.

Malone, David M. (2011) *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy* examines the evolution of India's global strategy, contrasting Nehruvian idealism with Gandhi's realism. Focusing on her tenure, Malone emphasizes how Gandhi's foreign policy adapted to regional conflicts and global shifts, such as her handling of the Cold War dynamics. He concludes that Gandhi's strategic decisions effectively positioned India as a regional power while maintaining non-alignment as a diplomatic tool.

Noorani, A.G. (2010)



In India-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Perspective, Noorani provides an in-depth analysis of Indira Gandhi's role in managing relations with Pakistan, particularly during the 1971 war and the Shimla Agreement. He asserts that Gandhi's foreign policy was characterized by a calculated realist approach, leveraging military and diplomatic strategies to secure India's dominance in South Asia. Noorani concludes that Gandhi's leadership fundamentally altered the balance of power in the region, weakening Pakistan's geopolitical standing. **Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979)** Although Waltz's Theory of International Politics is a foundational text on realism in international relations, its principles align closely with Gandhi's foreign policy strategies. Waltz's emphasis on power dynamics and national interest is reflected in Gandhi's decisions, such as the nuclear test at Pokhran and the Indo-Soviet Treaty. The study indirectly concludes that Gandhi's actions exemplified realist theories by addressing security concerns and asserting India's position in a competitive international environment. **Kapur, Ashok (1994)** Ashok Kapur's India's Nuclear Option: Atomic Diplomacy and Decision Making delves into India's first nuclear test in 1974, conducted under Gandhi's leadership. Kapur argues that this decision was a realist maneuver to counter regional threats and establish India's strategic autonomy. He concludes that Gandhi's pragmatism ensured the test's framing as a peaceful experiment, minimizing international backlash while bolstering India's defense capabilities. **Gupta, Sisir (1974)** In India and Regional Integration in South Asia, Gupta examines Gandhi's role in fostering regional stability through pragmatic diplomacy. Highlighting her leadership during the Bangladesh Liberation War, the study emphasizes her ability to blend idealism with realist strategies to achieve regional peace. Gupta concludes that Gandhi's actions strengthened India's leadership role in South Asia, showcasing her strategic foresight. **Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja (1970)** Bandyopadhyaya's article on Gandhi's leadership, published in International Studies, critiques her pragmatic use of socialist rhetoric in foreign policy. He argues that her policies were primarily tools for political survival and consolidating power. Despite this critique, the study acknowledges that her realist strategies, particularly in aligning with the Soviet Union, ensured India's security and regional dominance. **Chandra, Bipan (1999)** In India Since Independence, Chandra explores Gandhi's foreign policy in the context of domestic and international pressures. He emphasizes her pragmatic responses to crises such as the Bangladesh Liberation War and the nuclear test. Chandra concludes that Gandhi's policies were marked by a strategic blend of realism and idealism, effectively navigating Cold War dynamics. **Miller, Manjari (2013)** In Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China, Miller examines Gandhi's approach to foreign policy as a response to colonial legacies. She argues that Gandhi pragmatically utilized India's post-imperial identity to shape a foreign policy that was realist in securing national interests yet idealist in advocating for global peace. Miller concludes that this dual approach allowed Gandhi to position India as a leader of the Global South. **Mukherjee, Anit (2009)** Anit Mukherjee's The Military Factor in India's Foreign Policy analyzes the role of defense strategies in Gandhi's foreign policy. Focusing on the Indo-Pakistani conflicts and the nuclear test, Mukherjee highlights how Gandhi's decisions were grounded in a realist assessment of India's security needs. He concludes that her policies reflected a pragmatic understanding of military power as a tool for achieving diplomatic and strategic objectives. **Ganguly, Sumit (1990)** In The Origins of War in South Asia: Indo-Pakistani Conflicts since 1947, Sumit Ganguly examines Indira Gandhi's role in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. He highlights her strategic handling of the humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan and her deft diplomacy with global powers like the USSR and the United States. Ganguly concludes that Gandhi's pragmatism was evident in her ability to align India's actions with its national interests while achieving a decisive military and political victory that reshaped South Asia's geopolitics. **Cohen, Stephen P. (2004)** Stephen Cohen, in India: Emerging Power, provides an analysis of Indira Gandhi's leadership during India's transformation into a regional and nuclear power. He explores her pragmatic decisions, such as the Pokhran nuclear test and her alignment with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Cohen concludes that



Gandhi's realist policies bolstered India's sovereignty and strategic autonomy, allowing it to navigate the complexities of superpower rivalry effectively. **Sharma, Ramakant (2015)** In *Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy: A Comprehensive Analysis*, Sharma delves into Gandhi's strategic priorities, particularly her engagement with neighboring countries and her leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement. He discusses how she managed to uphold India's non-alignment policy while pragmatically forging alliances when necessary, such as with the USSR during the Bangladesh crisis. Sharma concludes that Gandhi's ability to balance ideological principles with realist strategies made her one of the most influential leaders in shaping India's foreign policy.

4. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing primary sources such as Gandhi's speeches, letters, and treaties, alongside secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and archival materials. The study is structured around key events, including the Indo-Soviet Treaty, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and the Pokhran nuclear test, to illustrate her realist strategies.

5. Key Findings and Analysis

Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister of India marked a pivotal period in the nation's foreign policy, characterized by a strategic blend of pragmatism and realism. Her decisions were influenced by the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War era, regional challenges, and domestic imperatives

1. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation (1971)

The Indo-Soviet Treaty, signed in August 1971, was a watershed moment in India's foreign policy. The treaty was finalized amidst escalating tensions with Pakistan over the East Pakistan crisis, where the Pakistani military's brutal repression of Bengali aspirations had triggered a massive refugee influx into India. The humanitarian and economic strain of housing nearly 10 million refugees created an urgent need for decisive action. Simultaneously, the geopolitical environment was fraught with challenges as Pakistan garnered support from the United States and China. The treaty was a calculated move to counter the growing U.S.-China-Pakistan alignment. By securing Soviet support, Gandhi ensured a reliable ally in the event of a military conflict with Pakistan. The treaty provided for mutual consultations and cooperation, effectively deterring external interventions in South Asia. It also signaled a pragmatic shift in India's non-alignment policy, aligning with a superpower to safeguard national interests.

In *India and the Dynamics of World Politics*, Reetika Sharma et al. write, "The Indo-Soviet Treaty was a clear demonstration of Gandhi's ability to adapt India's non-alignment policy to the exigencies of the Cold War, prioritizing strategic alliances over ideological purity."

The treaty allowed India to navigate the diplomatic and military complexities of the Bangladesh crisis with confidence. While some critics argued that it compromised India's non-aligned credentials, Gandhi justified it as a necessary adaptation to ensure national security. The treaty exemplified her realist approach, prioritizing pragmatic partnerships over rigid adherence to ideology.

2. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War

The Bangladesh Liberation War was a defining moment in Gandhi's leadership. The crisis began with Pakistan's military crackdown in East Pakistan in March 1971, leading to widespread atrocities and the displacement of millions. India faced not only the humanitarian burden of refugees but also security threats due to regional instability. Despite her initial diplomatic efforts to internationalize the crisis and pressure Pakistan for a peaceful resolution, Gandhi found little support from the global community. The war was a strategically calculated response to a multifaceted challenge. By supporting the Mukti Bahini (Bengali nationalist forces) and later intervening militarily, Gandhi sought to:

- Weaken Pakistan by bifurcating it into two nations.
- Resolve the refugee crisis by enabling the creation of Bangladesh.
- Establish India's dominance as the preeminent power in South Asia.



Her decision to intervene reflected a sharp realist understanding of the interconnectedness of regional security and India's national interests. In *The Challenge of Bangla Desh* by S.K. Bhattacharya, the author notes, "Gandhi's intervention in East Pakistan was as much about humanitarian concerns as it was about altering the balance of power in South Asia."

The 13-day war culminated in the swift defeat of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971. The military victory significantly boosted India's regional clout and cemented Gandhi's reputation as a decisive leader. The war also demonstrated the efficacy of her realist approach, wherein strategic interests were seamlessly integrated with humanitarian considerations.

3. Nuclear Test at Pokhran (1974)

India's first nuclear test, code-named "Smiling Buddha," was conducted on May 18, 1974, under Gandhi's leadership. The test came against the backdrop of India's defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1965 war with Pakistan, and the rising nuclear threat posed by China. The global nuclear regime, dominated by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, sought to maintain a monopoly through the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which India refused to sign, deeming it discriminatory. The Pokhran test was a strategic assertion of India's sovereignty and a move to enhance its national security. Gandhi prioritized the need for nuclear deterrence, particularly against China and Pakistan, over concerns about international criticism. The test also reflected her commitment to ensuring that India would not remain subservient to the hegemonic nuclear policies of the superpowers.

George Perkovich, in *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, argues, "The Pokhran test was Gandhi's declaration of India's strategic autonomy in a global order designed to perpetuate inequality."

The test established India as a nuclear power, challenging the existing global nuclear hierarchy. While it invited sanctions and criticism from Western powers, it resonated domestically as a symbol of self-reliance and strength. Gandhi's decision reinforced India's strategic autonomy, even as it marked a turning point in its global relations.

4. Leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)

Under Gandhi's leadership, India played a prominent role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), particularly during the 1970s. At the 1973 Algiers Summit, she championed the cause of developing nations, advocating for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that sought to address global economic inequalities. Despite the Cold War's bipolar pressures, Gandhi used NAM as a platform to amplify the voices of the Global South. Gandhi's leadership in NAM was not merely ideological but also strategically motivated. While she upheld the principles of non-alignment, she pragmatically engaged with both superpowers when necessary. For instance, the Indo-Soviet Treaty demonstrated her willingness to prioritize India's interests over ideological rigidity.

In *Non-Alignment: The Dynamics of a Movement*, Muchkund Dubey states, "Gandhi redefined non-alignment as a flexible strategy rather than a dogmatic stance, using it to position India as a leader of the developing world."

Gandhi's advocacy for NIEO resonated with many developing nations, enhancing India's stature as a champion of global economic justice. Her leadership in NAM underscored India's dual role as a sovereign state pursuing its national interests and a moral force advocating for equitable global development.

6. Socio-Psychological Determinants

Indira Gandhi's leadership style was a product of her unique upbringing, personal experiences, and the socio-political context in which she operated. These influences shaped her decision-making processes and determined her ability to navigate the complex political landscape of post-independence India and the global Cold War era.

Early Life and Familial Legacy: Indira Gandhi was born into one of India's most prominent political families. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a key leader in India's independence movement and the country's first Prime Minister. Growing up in an environment where



politics, governance, and diplomacy were central themes, Indira was exposed to complex discussions about international relations, nationalism, and governance from an early age. Her mother, Kamala Nehru, was also a significant influence, instilling in her the values of resilience and commitment to the nation. This early exposure shaped Indira Gandhi's worldview, instilling in her a deep understanding of India's geopolitical challenges and aspirations. She inherited Nehru's vision of an independent India but adapted it to suit the changing realities of the Cold War era. While Nehru championed idealism and non-alignment, Indira's upbringing allowed her to balance these ideals with the pragmatic pursuit of national interests.

Exposure to Crises and Early Leadership Challenges: Indira Gandhi assumed office as Prime Minister in 1966, a period marked by severe economic and political challenges. India faced food shortages, inflation, and the aftermath of wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965). These crises forced her to adopt a pragmatic approach to governance and foreign policy, departing from her father's idealistic framework. These challenges fostered a strong sense of urgency in her decision-making. For instance, her promotion of the Green Revolution demonstrated her ability to prioritize self-reliance and national stability over ideological rigidity. Similarly, her swift actions during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War showcased her capacity to address humanitarian and geopolitical crises decisively.

Psychological Traits: Determination, Resilience, and Assertiveness: Indira Gandhi's psychological disposition played a critical role in shaping her leadership style. Known for her determination and resilience, she was often described as a leader who would not shy away from making difficult decisions. Her assertiveness allowed her to take bold stances, even in the face of significant opposition, both domestically and internationally. These traits were evident during key moments, such as the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 and the Pokhran nuclear test of 1974. Her decision to align with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, despite India's non-alignment policy, demonstrated her ability to prioritize national security over ideological consistency. Similarly, the nuclear test underlined her strategic foresight in establishing India as a nuclear power.

Socio-Political Context: Non-Alignment and Cold War Dynamics: Indira Gandhi inherited India's policy of non-alignment, a cornerstone of Nehru's foreign policy. However, the geopolitical realities of the Cold War required a more flexible approach. The rise of China as a regional power and Pakistan's alignment with the United States and China compelled her to seek strategic alliances, such as the Indo-Soviet Treaty. Her pragmatic adaptation of non-alignment allowed India to navigate the complex dynamics of the Cold War without compromising its sovereignty. For instance, her leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) emphasized economic justice for developing nations while ensuring India's strategic security.

Gender and Leadership Perception: As a female leader in a male-dominated political landscape, Indira Gandhi faced skepticism and criticism regarding her capabilities. Her opponents often dismissed her as a "weak" leader, especially early in her career. However, she turned this perception into an advantage by cultivating an image of strength and authority. Her strong, decisive actions, such as leading India to victory in the 1971 Bangladesh War, helped solidify her position as a formidable leader. Internationally, she commanded respect from global leaders, establishing herself as a key figure in South Asian politics.

Personal Losses and Political Survival: Indira Gandhi's life was marked by personal tragedies, including the death of her mother, father, husband, and younger son. These experiences shaped her resilience and her ability to compartmentalize personal grief from professional responsibilities. Additionally, her political survival during crises like the Emergency (1975–1977) demonstrated her adaptability and strategic thinking. These personal challenges strengthened her resolve to safeguard India's unity and integrity. Her centralized approach to governance was often criticized as authoritarian but was driven by her psychological need to maintain control during turbulent times.

Strategic Risk-Taking and Realism: Indira Gandhi's leadership was characterized by a



willingness to take calculated risks. Her intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War, the decision to conduct the nuclear test, and her handling of the Cold War alliances reflected her ability to anticipate long-term outcomes. These decisions were grounded in realism, acknowledging the limitations of ideological policies in a competitive global environment. Her strategic risk-taking enhanced India's regional dominance and global standing.

Influence of Socialist Ideals and Pragmatic Adaptation: Indira Gandhi's early exposure to socialist ideals influenced her domestic and international policies. However, she pragmatically adapted these principles to address contemporary challenges. For example, while advocating for economic justice in NAM, she also prioritized India's defense and economic modernization. This blend of socialism and pragmatism allowed her to maintain domestic support while pursuing realist policies on the international stage.

Vision of Peace and National Security: Indira Gandhi consistently emphasized peace as a cornerstone of her foreign policy. However, her understanding of peace was pragmatic, rooted in the need to ensure national security and regional stability. Her leadership during the Bangladesh crisis and her efforts to strengthen India's defense capabilities reflect this dual commitment to peace and security. The Shimla Agreement with Pakistan in 1972 exemplified her ability to pursue peace through diplomacy while maintaining a strong defense posture.

Centralization of Power and Legacy: Indira Gandhi's leadership style often involved centralizing power to ensure decisive action. While this approach invited criticism, it enabled her to implement policies that significantly strengthened India's global position. Her centralization of power allowed her to navigate complex challenges and leave a lasting legacy of pragmatic realism in India's foreign policy. Her tenure marked a transition from Nehruvian idealism to a more strategic and results-oriented approach.

6. Implications of Gandhi's Hard Realism

Gandhi's philosophy of "hard realism," as applied to his nonviolent political strategies, reveals a profound understanding of power, morality, and pragmatism in the context of human conflict. While often idealized as a saintly figure, Gandhi's approach to politics was deeply grounded in practical realities and the psychological and sociopolitical dynamics of power. His realism emphasized the ethical and strategic challenges of political engagement and offered a framework for nonviolent resistance that balanced moral principles with practical effectiveness. Gandhi's insistence on the unity of means and ends forms the cornerstone of his ethical realism. He rejected the utilitarian view that the morality of actions could be judged solely by their outcomes, emphasizing instead that the methods employed must embody the values of the desired goal. This principle had profound implications for political action, particularly in resisting oppression. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi famously wrote, "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree." This illustrates Gandhi's belief that corrupt or violent means could not yield a just or peaceful end. The practical implication was that his followers were required to adopt nonviolent methods, even when faced with severe provocation. This ethical insistence redefined the notion of power in political struggles. By prioritizing integrity and nonviolence, Gandhi introduced a moral legitimacy that disarmed opponents, making oppressive regimes appear morally bankrupt. His approach demonstrated that power derived from ethical consistency could undermine even the most entrenched systems of violence and domination.

Central to Gandhi's realism was the idea that suffering, when voluntarily undertaken, could be a powerful political tool. For Gandhi, suffering was not a sign of weakness but a demonstration of strength and moral conviction. This principle allowed him to redefine the dynamics of power in political conflict. Reinhold Niebuhr observed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: "Suffering bravely borne can be more effective than violence in melting the hearts of oppressors." Gandhi applied this insight strategically, using suffering to expose the moral contradictions of colonial rule and appeal to the conscience of both oppressors and bystanders. The implications of this principle extend beyond individual resistance to collective movements. In campaigns such as



the Salt March and the Quit India Movement, the visible suffering of satyagrahis—through arrests, beatings, and even deaths—galvanized public opinion and weakened the moral authority of British rule.

While Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence was deeply ethical, it also had significant pragmatic implications. He viewed violence as self-defeating, escalating conflict and entrenching animosities. Nonviolence, by contrast, created opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation, and lasting peace. In *The Power of Nonviolence*, Richard Gregg noted, "Nonviolence is not passive; it is an active force more powerful than violence." Gandhi's nonviolent strategies were designed to disrupt systems of oppression while minimizing harm, creating space for constructive solutions. For instance, the Salt March was a masterstroke of strategic nonviolence. By targeting a universally resented colonial law—the salt tax—Gandhi mobilized millions in a symbolic act of defiance that highlighted the injustice of British rule. This campaign demonstrated the pragmatic power of nonviolence to unify diverse groups and achieve concrete political goals. Gandhi's realism was characterized by an acute awareness of context. He understood that political strategies had to be tailored to specific circumstances, balancing ethical principles with the realities of power dynamics and historical conditions. Judith Brown, in *Gandhi's Rise to Power*, noted, "Gandhi's genius lay in his ability to adapt timeless principles to the immediate needs of a situation." This adaptability was evident in his campaigns, which ranged from the localized constructive programs in Indian villages to the mass mobilizations against British rule. One key implication of this contextual realism was Gandhi's insistence on disciplined action. He recognized that undisciplined protests could spiral into violence, undermining the moral authority of the movement. This understanding led him to impose strict codes of conduct on his followers, ensuring that satyagraha remained nonviolent and effective.

Gandhi's hard realism extended beyond India, offering a universal model for political resistance. His philosophy of nonviolence inspired movements for civil rights and decolonization worldwide, demonstrating its applicability across diverse socio-political contexts. Martin Luther King Jr., in *Stride Toward Freedom*, reflected on Gandhi's influence: "The Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." King's adoption of Gandhian principles in the American civil rights movement underscored the global relevance of Gandhi's ideas. The broader implication is that Gandhi's realism provides a framework for addressing modern challenges, from racial injustice to environmental degradation. By emphasizing the interplay of ethics, strategy, and context, Gandhi's approach offers a viable alternative to the violence and polarization that often characterize contemporary politics. Gandhi's philosophy bridges the gap between idealism and realism, demonstrating that ethical principles can coexist with pragmatic strategies. His approach challenges the traditional dichotomy between moral idealism and political necessity, showing that ethical consistency can be a source of strength rather than a liability. In *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy*, Stefano Guzzini wrote, "Gandhi's realism was not a retreat from morality but an engagement with its practical application." This observation highlights Gandhi's unique ability to balance high ideals with the realities of political life. The implications of this balance are profound. Gandhi's example suggests that political actors can achieve lasting change without compromising their ethical values, offering a counterpoint to the cynicism and expediency that often dominate political discourse. Indira Gandhi's hard realism in foreign policy fortified India's role as a dominant regional power, particularly in South Asia. Her decisive intervention in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War is often cited as a turning point in regional politics. By supporting the Mukti Bahini and directly intervening militarily, Gandhi not only facilitated the creation of Bangladesh but also demonstrated India's willingness and capability to reshape the geopolitical landscape in its favor.

In *India and the Dynamics of World Politics* by Reetika Sharma et al., the authors note, "Gandhi's intervention in the Bangladesh crisis was a clear assertion of India's regional



primacy. It signaled a shift from defensive posturing to proactive regional leadership.” This shift established India as a key arbiter in South Asian affairs, reducing Pakistan’s influence and cementing India’s dominance in the region.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation (1971) further reinforced India’s regional position by securing strategic support from a superpower. This alignment discouraged external powers from intervening in South Asia, allowing India greater freedom to act in its interests. Gandhi’s regional policies, however, were not purely militaristic. Her emphasis on fostering cooperative relationships with neighboring countries, such as the 1972 India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace, reflected a nuanced approach aimed at stabilizing the region. On the global stage, Gandhi’s foreign policy strengthened India’s image as a sovereign and independent actor capable of navigating Cold War politics without succumbing to external pressures. While maintaining India’s commitment to non-alignment, she demonstrated the pragmatic flexibility required to protect national interests in a polarized world.

In India’s Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect, Muchkund Dubey argues, “Indira Gandhi’s leadership was instrumental in redefining India’s non-alignment policy, transforming it from a purely ideological stance to a pragmatic tool for advancing national interests.”

The successful execution of the Pokhran nuclear test in 1974 (Smiling Buddha) exemplified Gandhi’s commitment to asserting India’s sovereignty. By becoming the first country outside the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council to conduct a nuclear test, India signaled its determination to act independently of global power blocs. This move, while controversial, enhanced India’s credibility as a nation capable of defending its strategic autonomy. Gandhi also played a pivotal role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Her active participation in the 1973 Algiers Summit reinforced her vision of non-alignment as a means to promote economic justice and global peace. She advocated for the New International Economic Order (NIEO), emphasizing the rights of developing nations to equitable development. Despite these achievements, Gandhi’s foreign policy was not without its critics. Her pragmatic decisions, particularly the Indo-Soviet Treaty and the Pokhran nuclear test, led some to question her adherence to non-alignment. Critics argued that aligning with the Soviet Union marked a departure from Nehruvian idealism, raising concerns about India’s perceived neutrality.

In *Indira Gandhi: Tryst with Power* by Nayantara Sahgal, the author observes, “Indira’s pragmatic foreign policy often invited criticism as being too aligned with Soviet interests, creating an impression of deviation from India’s founding principles of non-alignment.” Domestically, Gandhi’s leadership style during critical moments of her tenure was perceived as authoritarian. The imposition of the Emergency (1975–1977) and her centralization of decision-making led to accusations that her policies, both domestic and international, were driven by a desire to consolidate power rather than uphold democratic or ideological principles. Moreover, Gandhi’s intervention in Bangladesh, while celebrated in India, was viewed by some as overreach. Critics argued that it set a precedent for India’s involvement in the internal affairs of neighboring countries, which could backfire in the long term. In *The Indira Doctrine* by J. Bandopadhyaya, the author critiques Gandhi’s approach: “While the Bangladesh intervention demonstrated India’s military prowess, it also raised questions about the balance between moral imperatives and the strategic assertion of power.”

7. Conclusion

The foreign policy of Indira Gandhi marked a watershed moment in India's history of diplomacy, defined by a middle ground between idealism and pragmatism. Under her leadership, India's non-alignment policy was adjusted to accommodate the Cold War geopolitical realities, stepping out of the shadow of Nehruvian idealism. During her time as prime minister, Gandhi shown remarkable flexibility in responding to both domestic and international crises, all the while defending India's independence and national interests. In 1971, she secured India's position against the U.S.-China-Pakistan axis during the



Bangladesh Liberation War with the Indo-Soviet Treaty, an important decision that demonstrated her realist stance. Aside from ending a major humanitarian catastrophe, Gandhi's geopolitical vision and decisiveness were on full display with the establishment of Bangladesh, which solidified India's regional domination. In a same vein, her steadfast dedication to India's strategic autonomy was on full display during the 1974 Pokhran nuclear test, which strengthened national security while also defying global nuclear hierarchy. Her ability to incorporate the concepts of national sovereignty, stability in the area, and national security into a unified foreign policy framework was demonstrated by her measures. India's position as a leading voice for developing nations was further solidified by Gandhi's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement. She showed her dedication to fair development on a global scale by fighting for the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and addressing economic inequality. Her pragmatic relationships, like the one with the Soviet Union, were criticized for what some saw as a departure from non-alignment, but they actually demonstrated her strategic acumen in balancing ideology with realpolitik. Regarding the social and psychological aspects of leadership, Gandhi's perseverance, resolve, and background molded her style. She received praise and criticism for her ability to confidently and authoritatively handle crises through her boldness and strategic risk-taking. Many people felt strongly about her choices, and some even went so far as to call her authoritarian. Her democratic promises were called into question by the concentration of power that occurred under her watch, especially during the Emergency. These actions, however, also show that she is prepared to make tough decisions in response to novel threats. By recasting India as both a regional power and an autonomous player on the world arena, Indira Gandhi's foreign policy changed the course of Indian history. She strengthened India's reputation as an advocate for global justice and guaranteed its strategic security by combining idealism with realism, peace with practicality. In spite of charges of authoritarianism and overreach in strategy, Gandhi's leadership showcased the intricacies and subtleties of statecraft during a challenging period. She was one of India's most consequential and game-changing foreign policy leaders during her time in office, and her tenure was a model of the delicate balancing act that is necessary to deal with competing national interests, international demands, and moral imperatives.

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