



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

India's Covert Diplomacy in South Asia (2018–2023): Weaponization of Multilateralism, Reputation, and Strategic Partnerships

Mian Mazhar Waqas

Department of International Relations and Political Science, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan Email: mazhar1986.mw@gmail.com

Dr. Aamir Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations and Political Science, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar
Email: aamiropriday@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Interstate competition has fundamentally changed in the 21st century. The statecraft of indirect confrontation is gaining in power through diplomacy, economics, information and institutions. In this paper, the author discusses India's covert diplomacy toward Pakistan in the years 2018–2023, concluding that it was able to pursue its regional interests through its economic power, strategic relations, multilateral initiatives and reputation-building without engaging in any direct confrontation. A qualitative interpretivist approach with thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources was used to examine the use of multilateral institutions, strategic alliances, digital diplomacy, and narrative management as force multipliers in India's foreign policy. The results indicate that India shifting from traditional diplomacy to Multi-alignment approach helped it to make international platforms platforms for strategic influence. This diplomatic attitude had significant consequences for Pakistan in terms of its reputation, economic position and ability to maneuver, manoeuvre and advance in international fora. The paper suggests that interstate competition in the modern age has begun to exist in a "grey zone" between peace and conflict in which influence, legitimacy, and institutional leverage are increasingly important factors in national power. The study is part of the emerging body of literature on non-kinetic statecraft, asymmetric competition and changing dynamics of diplomacy in the South Asian region.

Keywords: Covert Diplomacy, India-Pakistan Rivalry, Strategic Partnerships, Multilateralism, Reputational Statecraft, Geo-economics, South Asia, Asymmetric Warfare

Introduction

The current international system is experiencing a major change in the behaviour of inter-state relations. Surveys of possible instruments of power have seen the advent of more subtle or indirect modes of influence, including economic, informational, institutional, and reputational (Chaaroui, 2024). The ongoing globalization has led to a greater interdependence and an increase in the costs of traditional warfare, prompting states to pursue strategic goals in non-kinetic ways which do not involve direct warfare (Codevilla A. M., 2008). As a result of these developments, there is a competitive landscape in which the influence of narratives, institutions, and international norms can often yield similar results to what is typically seen through military means.

In this evolving dynamics, the India-Pakistan competition is a significant example to



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

explore the dynamics of interstate rivalry. After becoming independent in 1947, the bilateral relations between the two countries have been marked by bloody wars, territorial disputes, nuclear rivalry and the continued existence of diplomatic tensions (Bluth & Mumtaz, 2020). The scholarship on the rivalry has concentrated mostly on wars, crises, deterrence stability and conventional military balances. But the situation has changed significantly since the nuclearization of South Asia in 1998. The development of nuclear weapons for both states made the cost of a major war much higher, which led to the search for other means of competition (Khattak, Khan, & Qamber, 2019).

The years 2018-2023 are a time of significant change in this transformation. India started to use indirect diplomacy to pursue strategic goals in these years. Instead of just bilateral pressure, New Delhi leveraged its expanding economic power, strategic relationships, increased global prominence and involvement in multilateral institutions to influence the regional and international narrative (Jaishankar S. , 2020). India's emergence as an economic player and strategic partner of the Western powers was concurrent with the broader geopolitical changes that have grown out of concerns about China's increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific region (Auslin, 2020). The developments gave India unprecedented diplomatic opportunities to strengthen its international status and at the same time to limit its regional rivals.

One of the hallmarks of contemporary Indian foreign policy is its shift from the old non-alignment to what is known as "multi-alignment. In this way, India can develop good relations with a wide range of power centres without being drawn into bloc politics (Kukreja, 2020). India has been expanding its diplomatic reach through various channels, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), its engagement in the G20, and its participation in the BRICS group, as well as its strengthened strategic partnership with the United States and other Indo-Pacific nations, which have improved India's international standing and credibility (Verma, 2025). The developments have not just enhanced India's strategic profile but also enhanced its ability to shape international agenda on issues of relevance to South Asian security and governance.

Covert diplomacy in this study indicates the use of indirect diplomatic, economic, informational and institutional tools to affect the behaviour, reputation, and strategic circumstances of a rival nation without direct engagement. Covert diplomacy, unlike coercive diplomacy, is not an overt exercise of pressure but rather one that is far less obvious and is sometimes woven into the legitimate international processes. This can involve strategic lobbying in international bodies, forming alliances, influencing norms and perceptions within the international context, economic leverage, and the construction of narratives through media and digital platforms (Chaaraoui, 2024).

India has been getting more and more involved in international institutions, allowing the country to promote a narrative that fits with global worries about terrorism, financial control and regional security. Consequently, institutions like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) became one of the most important platforms where issues of concerns about terrorism financing got mixed with wider geopolitical competition (Mirza A. M., 2022). At the same time, India's growing digital diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and soft power efforts bolstered its capacity to influence international perceptions and further solidified its image as a responsible and emerging global power (Dasgupta & Vora, 2024).

In an age of fast information technology and new global connectedness, reputation has become a significant aspect of today's international politics. Having a good reputation can be beneficial for a state's diplomatic relations, foreign investment, and its ability to mobilize international support for its strategic initiatives (Palit, 2023). The economic



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

development, democratic process, technological advancements and India's growing presence in the international institutions of governance have created what can be called a reputational umbrella for India. Such a goodwill is also used to exert influence and mitigate international concerns about some regional policies and activities (Prajapati, 2024).

Meanwhile, Pakistan was also grappling with major economic issues, political turmoil and governance shortcomings as well as reputational costs in the same time period. These vulnerabilities provided opportunities for external actors to influence through non-military means. As a result, the India-Pakistan conflict shifted its focus from military force to narratives, legitimate authority, institutional access, and influence in politics as well. The field of battle changed from the territory to the international organizations, digital platforms, investments streams and world public opinion.

This paper aims at analyzing India's covert diplomatic efforts to further its strategic agenda in South Asia from 2018-2023. It examines in particular how multilateral institutions, strategic partnerships, reputation diplomacy and economic pressure are helping to reinforce India's role in the region. The study contends that India's achievements in the period were not only due to the power of its military or traditional diplomacy but also due to the integration of economic development and diplomatic relations with international institutions and international narratives under a single umbrella of non-kinetic competition.

The paper is a part of the general body of literature on modern statecraft, in which a new player can use non-traditional tools of influence to pursue strategic goals. It also offers clues to the changing dynamics of South Asian geopolitics, where the competition between the two nations takes place through institutional and reputational arenas, rather than military means. To comprehend these dynamics is critical to the analysis of future patterns of rivalry, cooperation, and power projection in a more interconnected international system.

India's Strategic Transformation: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

The Indian foreign policy has also undergone a shift towards becoming a major player in the twenty first century. India has been enveloped in the spirit of non-alignment and strategic autonomy, a diplomatic stance which has been gradually altered to suit the present multipolar world order. It was most prominently seen from 2018 to 2023, when India was able to successfully leverage on its economic power, strategic partnerships, and international credibility to push its geopolitical agenda. This was not a simple diplomatic or military posture, but a nuanced strategy that leveraged geo-economic influence, multilateral engagement, and strategic partnerships, all aimed at enhancing India's international influence. India's approach was not a purely diplomatic or military one but a more complex strategy that involved geo-economic influence, multilateral engagement, and strategic partnerships, all aimed at maximizing India's international leverage (Jaishankar S. , 2020).

The Development of foreign policy of India is incomplete without the consideration of the remarkable economic development of India. India has become one of the fastest growing major economies of the world in the last 20 years. The economic development and growth has granted New Delhi a lot of diplomatic capital and it has made it a more attractive strategic partner for the developed and developing world (George, 2023). In the modern world, economic power is growing to be the basis of diplomatic influence for states to influence international political agendas, to attract foreign investment and to secure strategic partnerships. The Indian market, demographic strengths, technological



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

capabilities, and its expanding presence in the global supply chains have given it a greater bargaining power internationally (Prajapati, 2024).

Economic development has also empowered India to have a more ambitious foreign policy agenda. In contrast to past eras where economic restrictions dominated foreign policy, today India has the means to engage with foreign policies on a number of fronts and at length. This has enabled India to build closer ties with major powers, extend development cooperation, bolster defence cooperation, and extend soft power more than ever in history (Kukreja, 2020).

One of the most notable features of Indian foreign policy in the modern era has been the transition from the old concept of non-alignment to the new concept of "multi-alignment. Multi-alignment is not a policy of keeping a distance from power groupings in the cold war years, but is an attempt to build positive relationships with multiple actors at the same time. This approach allows India to strike the right balance between being flexible in its approach and not unduly reliant on one power centre (Jaishankar S. , 2020). The architecture has allowed India to keep balancing its partnerships with the U.S., Russia, European powers, Gulf states and different Indo-Pacific partners despite the challenges these countries face in balancing their relationships.

India's strategic shift has also taken place in the wake of China becoming a major global competitor. Beijing has rapidly become an economic and military power in the region, leading to growing concerns about its influence in Asia. This has put India in the focus of Western countries as a key strategic balancing force in the Indo-Pacific region (Auslin, 2020). In this geopolitical scenario, New Delhi has been able to improve its international profile and foster ties with nations that wish to mitigate the influence of China.

One of the most prominent expressions of this change is the United States–India strategic partnership. In the field of defence and security, intelligence, technology, trade and the regions, bilateral cooperation grew during the study period. More broadly, the increased alignment between Washington and New Delhi highlights a new geopolitical tussle over the Indo-Pacific balance of power (Verma, 2025). India has secured strategic resources through various measures like the foundational defence agreements, intelligence sharing protocols and advanced technology collaborations, which have contributed to its growing influence on the international stage.

At the same time, India has sought to be active in regional and multilateral fora. In the Indo Pacific region, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia has become a key forum for the strategic coordination (Kaura, 2020). The QUAD has thus far been preoccupied with pushing a free and open Indo-Pacific agenda, but it has also helped to make India more strategically visible and effective in its diplomatic outreach to key democratic countries. The forum has also given India greater space to influence the narratives of the region and to join relevant discussions on the regional security architecture.

In addition to security measures, India has been actively pushing its involvement in economic and diplomatic related agencies. Its involvement in BRICS, the G20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and many regional mechanisms reflect a conscious effort to engage as much as possible in different diplomatic forums (Pant, 2016). The diversified nature of the engagement is indicative of India's recognition that in today's international politics, influence is built on engagement with international institutions in which norms, narratives and policies are being shaped.

A significant other aspect of India's strategic shift has been the building of the country's soft power assets. India has significant cultural resources such as a large worldwide diaspora, a thriving entertainment industry, democratic systems, educational systems and



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

a globally recognized culture. These tools are increasingly now being used in foreign policy as instruments of influence and persuasion (Dasgupta & Vora, 2024). India's digital diplomacy, diaspora engagement, cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy efforts have improved its image in the world and its power to influence perceptions.

One aspect that deserves attention is that of digital diplomacy. Communication technology has changed the way states communicate with overseas audiences. India has proven to be fairly effective in leveraging digital platforms to deliver policy messages, reach out to the diaspora, and showcase positive narratives around the country (Palit, 2023). India's government institutions, diplomatic missions and political leadership have increasingly resorted to social media and to the use of digital communication tools to boost India's presence, and to consolidate its perception as a responsible, modern and innovative international player.

All of these have helped build the company's reputation. Reputational benefits offer states with significant strategic benefits such as increased international trust, better investment climate and more diplomatic influence. India's rising reputation as a fast-growing and technologically advanced economy, democratic nation and strategic partner of international significance has enhanced its capacity to influence international discourse and establish conducive alliances on matters of national significance (Prajapati, 2024).

It is not just a diplomatic outreach effort that has undergone such a shift. Instead, it represents an overall restructuring of the way India's national goals are achieved in a more interdependent world. The four elements—economic growth, strategic partnership, multilateral engagement, and reputation-based statecraft—are also beginning to reinforce each other in a comprehensive strategy to boost India's presence globally at minimal risk of direct confrontation.

These five years (2018-2023) are thus a crucial era in India's rise as a great power in the international arena. It was a quality that enabled it to blend traditional diplomacy and modern tools of influence to serve national interests in an indirect manner. These developments paved the way for the emergence of a more advanced version of competition in South Asia, in which diplomatic clout, institutional power, and reputational benefits increasingly supplemented conventional forms of national power.

India's War of Attrition in Kashmir

This is not only to say that India is rising as an economic power or is a potential military threat, but the fact that India uses various tools of influence at the same time. India has exhibited a sophisticated understanding of the workings of modern statecraft in the world in recent years, operating with the help of international institutions, strategic partnerships, economic interdependence, digital platforms and narrative construction, between 2018 and 2023. All these instruments helped India achieve its strategic goals without any hard consequences from the political arena and with plausible deniability. These instruments combined in their effect might be called a covert diplomacy framework in which influence was exerted through the existing international frameworks and norms.

Weaponization of Multilateral Institutions

The capacity to utilise multilateral institutions as "strategic levers" was one of the most important aspects of India's diplomatic approach in the study period. Today, international organisations are not just platforms of cooperation, but also spaces of competition for states to influence norms, narratives and policy outcomes. India was able to put on the



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

table its newfound international clout and shape the agendas of these institutions in a manner consistent with its overall strategic considerations (Pant, 2016).

This was when the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) became one of the most impactful forums for Pakistan. While addressing money laundering and terrorist financing, the FATF also became a field where other geopolitical dimensions were brought into play alongside the technical evaluations of the regulatory framework (Mirza A. M., 2022). Being placed on the FATF grey list had significant diplomatic, reputational and economic implications for Pakistan, influencing investors' confidence, international financial transactions and perceptions of the country. The FATF's decision to block the Indian Service was largely due to the compliance assessment, but the extent of India's involvement in diplomatic efforts is also significant, keeping global focus on matters related to terrorism funding and regional security concerns (Shah, Bashir, & Majeed, 2023).

The importance of the FATF episode is not limited to the financial sphere. It illustrates the power of international institutions to produce strategic impacts with no on-the-ground pressure. It not only brought negative ramifications on Pakistan's reputation but also strengthened the international narratives on governance and security issues. This is a representation of the growing institutionalization of statecraft and its indirect cost on target states, but still maintains the appearance of legality.

The government's involvement in international forums like G20 enhanced its representation in the global arena. India's presence in global governance forums like G20 further bolstered its diplomatic standing. Rise of the country in the G20 made it a more effective voice on the issues of economic governance, sustainable development, digital transformation and international security. Participation in these forums can not only shape policy but also provide international recognition and legitimacy to the states to be seen as leaders beyond their borders (Michael, 2019).

Likewise, India's involvement in BRICS showed its ability to play simultaneously in other global governance centres and at the same time to have close ties with the Western powers. This double play helped to make India a more flexible player in both developed and emerging international systems and strengthened its perceived role as an indispensable presence in both of them (Berkofsky, Iannini, & Beretta, 2023). Active involvement in various institutions helped India to gain influence in various diplomatic settings and reduce the risk of strategic isolation.

Ability to leverage strategic partnerships as a force multiplier

Another significant weapon in the covert arsenal of India's foreign policy was its growing network of strategic partnerships. The country's foreign policy increasingly turned to establishing mutually beneficial ties for the purposes of increasing international influence, but with indirect benefit to the country's standing against other regional countries.

The most prominent of these relationships was the growing strategic partnership with the United States. A common worry about China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific led to a historic convergence between Washington and New Delhi (Verma, 2025). The cooperation between the two branches of defence increased considerably through the agreements in the areas of intelligence sharing, logistical cooperation, technological collaboration and military interoperability. The developments helped to enhance India's strategic role and its leverage in international forums as well.

The Indo-Pacific framework itself was a new diplomatic asset. New Delhi was able to attract political backing, economic tie-ups and technological assistance from the West as



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

it perceived India as a stabilizing power in Asia and its efforts to protect its overall international image were increasingly successful (Auslin, 2020). This improved status sometimes gave India more credibility when it raised its concerns about regional security issues, including Pakistan's.

Further, India's strategic voice was further strengthened by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The QUAD was supposed to be about promoting regional stability and cooperation, but it was a platform for the Indian side as well. The grouping played a positive role in India's strategic visibility and in strengthening India's image as a responsible stakeholder in the security of the region (Kaura, 2020).

India also stepped up its relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Israel, Japan, Australia and European nations. These linkages were part of New Delhi's multi-alignment policy, and helped to diversify the country's diplomatic arsenal. The improved economic cooperation with the Gulf countries was also very important as it removed political hurdles and opened up new avenues for strategic cooperation on the economic front, based on mutual interests (Dasgupta & Vora, 2024).

All of this resulted in a diplomatic ecosystem that served to expand India's footprint significantly beyond India's own unilateral efforts. Strategic partnerships were found to be force multipliers with India having greater ability to influence international narratives, policy discussions and national goals indirectly.

Narrative Warfare and Reputational Statecraft

In modern international politics, reputation serves just as a military and economic tool. Today, in international politics, reputation is one of the strategic resources that play a similar role as military and economic force. States with good brand value enjoy more diplomatic flexibility, foreign investments and are likely to receive the benefit of the doubt in international conflicts. The overall success of India's diplomacy between 2018 and 2023 was greatly improved by its ability to build and maintain a favourable international image (Palit, 2023).

A positive international reputation was built on the economic development, democratic processes, scientific advancement and growing international role of India. The benefit from this reputation allowed India to approach the regional issues in a way that was in tune with the international perceptions of terrorism, stability, economic development and democratic governance. This reputation enabled India to pose the regional issues in a manner that was in sync with the international concerns on the issues of terrorism, stability, economic development and democratic governance (Chandra & Sinha, 2023).

A new element within this strategy was the management of narratives. India began to not only exercise traditional diplomacy but also to try and influence international discourse. India's economic potential, technological innovation, humanitarian efforts and adherence to international norms was stressed through strategic communication campaigns. It boosted India's soft power and soft diplomacy quotient.

Reputational asymmetry is a concept that's helpful in describing this dynamic. With India's global credibility rising, Pakistan regularly faced damage to its reputation, due to its political turmoil, economic crises, governance issues and security concerns. This imbalance facilitated an environment where narratives from India were more easily read by an international audience than alternative ones. As a result, India's foreign policy efforts often occurred in a context that was conducive to its success.



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

Digital Diplomacy and Diaspora Engagement

The digital revolution has transformed diplomacy in every aspect. States today have, for the first time, unprecedented opportunities to directly reach audiences worldwide, circumvent traditional media gatekeepers, and shape international discourse as it happens. During the study period, the use of digital diplomacy by India has been one of the most active countries (Chenoy, Ghosh, & Shukla, 2019).

Digital media were increasingly being leveraged by government institutions, political leaders, and diplomatic missions to disseminate policy stances, connect with foreign audiences, and bolster national narratives. Social media took a significant role in shaping the image of India as a modern India, an innovative India and an India connected to the world. These activities helped increase India's visibility and helped spread the preferred narratives quickly to the rest of the world (Adnan & Fatima, 2015).

The other important asset was the Indian community overseas. The Indian community around the globe is one of the largest community of transnationals in the world with millions of people living outside the country. Diaspora networks play a role in economic investment, political influence, cultural outreach and public diplomacy. India has been successful in incorporating diaspora engagement into its foreign policy framework and has made its overseas communities valuable assets for soft power and influence (Datta, 2021).

Diaspora organizations often serve as unofficial diplomatic bodies with the power to shape policy debates and the media and political agenda of their host countries. Their operations complement official diplomatic activities as well as extend India's presence in the societies and political systems of the world. Such a mix of digital diplomacy and diaspora engagement helped India have a greater impact on shaping perceptions and projecting influence without using governmental actions.

Last but not least was the geo-economic dimension of India's secret diplomacy. The modern-day politics in the international arena has seen a convergence of economic and strategic policies where countries are using trade, investment, technology, and access to markets to influence others (Kumar & Singh, 2025).

As a result of Indian economic growth, its appeal in the eyes of foreign investors and its role in international value chains improved. The economic growth in India improved its attractiveness as an investment destination and as a partner in international value chains. While the international businesses looked for other options to excessive dependence on China, India took advantage of emerging trends like diversification and friend-shoring (Gopal, 2020). This was an economic importance that further bolstered India's role and importance in the international diplomacy of the great powers who were looking for trusted economic partners.

Economic influence complemented India's overall strategic goals. Good economic ties can lead to good political will, diplomatic co-operation and higher costs to partners of Indian interests. As a result, India's economic growth bolstered its capacity to form alliances and partnerships abroad and support its foreign policy.

The ability to use geo-economic leverage was especially effective because it was being used through incentives and not coercion. Over time, the states saw value in working with India that would be good for their economy and this positive feedback loop of economic appeal to diplomatic influence grew stronger. This type of influence is particularly potent because it is seen as voluntary and mutually beneficial, and yet furthering strategic agendas.

This is done through the combination of the multilateral institutions, strategic partnerships, reputational statecraft, digital diplomacy, diaspora engagement and geo-



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

economic leverage in an integrated plan of covert diplomacy. India didn't use any one instrument, but adopted a multi-dimensional approach to influence that would be felt diplomatically, economically, informatively and institutionally. This comprehensive strategy gave India a chance to enhance its presence on the regional and international stage, without risking immediate conflict.

Findings and Discussion

The study finds that India's achievements in diplomacy from 2018 to 2023 are not solely attributable to military power. Instead, the results show that India's power potential to influence created a multidimensional form of power that could bring about considerable strategic outcomes through the synergy of economic power, strategic partnership, institutional influence and reputation. The evidence indicates that India's covert diplomacy was an integrated whole, each component building on the others to compound the gains for India in the region and in the international arena, while limiting Pakistan's diplomatic options.

The analysis revealed four major themes: institutionalization of diplomatic influence; the development of reputational asymmetry; strategic use of partnerships as force multipliers; and the emergence of geo-economic leverage as a source of diplomatic power. These themes together make it clear that today's interstate competition takes place more often and more indirect through processes that are not directly related to a war.

Institutionalization of Diplomatic Influence

The first big insight relates to the Indian success in institutionalizing diplomatic influence. India was not only putting pressure on bilateral subjects but was also coming up with strategies through international organisations and multilaterals. This allowed New Delhi to frame its policy preferences in the context of other international agendas, thus lending greater legitimacy and lessening the perception of unilateral coercion.

A striking case in point is the FATF case. The fact of Pakistan's continued listing in the FATF grey list had far-reaching socio-economic implications that went beyond technical compliance concerns (Mirza A. M., 2022). What the findings show is that international institutions can be powerful weapons of strategic influence when issues of governance, security, and financial transparency are woven into the geopolitical narrative. While FATF decisions are supposed to be based on objective assessments, the diplomatic climate that envelops the processes has a significant impact on how states are viewed and assessed globally (Shah, Bashir, & Majeed, 2023).

Likewise, India's engagement in platforms like the G20, BRICS, and the SCO deepened its capacity for engaging with global dialogue and driving policy discussions. These institutions helped make India visible and legitimate, as well as provide opportunities to promote narratives in tune with its strategic concerns (Michael, 2019). The results indicate that, to some degree, the ability to influence the decision-making process within international institutions is becoming a form of power in and by itself, and that states can influence the results indirectly through the use of agenda setting, coalition building and the creation of norms.

This institutional dimension is very far removed from the classical notions of power politics. Influencing through the use of internationally recognised procedures and frameworks, instead of direct coercion. Thus, strategic competition is institutionalised in seemingly neutral institutions with outputs that can benefit some actors more than others.



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

The Forced Convergence of Groups.

The second major finding has to do with the rise of the reputational asymmetry as a crucial driver of modern diplomacy. According to the study, India's rising international image has had a positive impact on the success of its foreign policy efforts. Economic growth, technological innovation, democratic credentials and active participation in global governance helped to build an image of India in a positive light, enhancing its diplomatic credibility (Agarwal, 2020).

Reputation is a strategic asset in shaping the perception of state behaviour by international audiences. In such states, it is easier to promote policy preferences, forge alliances and shape international issues based on a high reputation. India's image as an emerging global power could often enhance the persuasiveness of its narratives and policy stands during the period under study (Goswami & Daultani, 2022).

In contrast, Pakistan faced ongoing branding issues related to political volatility, economic woes, governance problems, and security concerns. All these factors created an information imbalance and ensured that Indian stories were more accepted abroad. The results indicate that reputation differences can greatly impact strategic outcomes by framing conflicting claims and policy positions perceived by international actors.

This has been especially apparent with regards to discussions of terrorism, regional stability and international security. India's stories often mirrored global issues, making them more impactful to global audiences. The subsequent goodwill boost gave India a greater voice in diplomacy, and it did not need to resort to direct pressure or coercion to do so.

The results therefore reinforce the notion that reputation has become a key element of the nation's power in the information era. There are significant benefits for states that are able to develop and maintain positive international images, especially when doing so against others who are vulnerable to reputation attacks.

Strategic Partnerships as Diplomatic Force Multipliers

A third discovery is the importance of strategic partnerships in enhancing India's soft power. The available evidence suggests that India's foreign policy increasingly depended on a web of mutually reinforcing relationships which deepened India's foreign presence and increased its international legitimacy.

The strengthening strategic ties with the USA was especially important. The convergence in Indo-Pacific security, regional stability and growing apprehensions about China's rising influence boosted cooperation in various areas between the two sides (Verma, 2025). This connection improved India's strategic profile and also provided it more resources in terms of diplomatic, technological, and security.

Likewise, the QUAD has helped to raise India's international profile, and strengthen its position as a key player in the future Indo-Pacific security structure (Kaura, 2020). These collaborations are more than just about resources; they are about meaning. Strategic partnerships are symbolic and political, by providing evidence of international trust in the reliability, capability and leadership potential of a state.

The results also highlight India's multi-alignment policy, which allowed it to build up ties with a variety of actors at once. India's strategy of not becoming dependent on any single bloc was in contrast with the traditional alliance systems, which were frequently exclusive commitments (Awan, 2023). This flexibility gave India a greater measure of diplomatic independence and gave maximum opportunity for cooperative international relations.

In Pakistan, the development of India's strategic partnerships helped to reduce the space



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

of diplomacy. India's relationship with the big powers grew stronger and Pakistan's ability to build up similar support for its policies became more difficult. This imbalance further bolstered India's overall diplomatic strengths and enhanced its ability to shape regional discourse.

Geo-Economic Influence as Strategic Power

The fourth key finding relates to the increasing significance of the geo-economic dimension of international competition. Overall, the analysis suggests that India's economic growth was a key factor in its diplomatic ascendance, allowing the country to strengthen its ties with other nations, attract foreign investment, and become more relevant in the global stage.

As the economy becomes a more important strategic asset, it provides a motivation for cooperation and enhances a state's international appeal (Kamat, 2023). As India's growth, technology, and role as a global supply chain partner increased the country's negotiating power and its attractiveness as an ally. India has benefited from diversification and friend-shoring (Bhamidipati, 2024), as key economies looked for ways to reduce their reliance on China.

The results indicate that geo-economic leverage does not work like the traditional coercive tools. It does not impose costs directly, but rather offers opportunities to encourage voluntary cooperation. State and corporate interest in India grew, making interactions with India economically beneficial, and creating diplomatic goodwill for India's other foreign policy goals.

This development is indicative of a trend of increasing economic-strategic interdependence. In an increasingly globalized and technologically competitive world, economic appeal can mean political power. The fact that India can use its economic growth as the basis for its foreign policy is one of the most prominent aspects of Indian foreign policy today.

Evolution of Covert Diplomacy in South Asia

All these findings suggest that India's achievements from 2018 to 2023 were due to the fact that it has been able to combine several instruments of influence into a coherent strategic plan. Instead of simply diplomatic efforts, India's strategy was multidimensional, involving institutional engagement, reputational statecraft, strategic partnerships, and geo-economic leverage.

It implies that there is a new covert diplomacy that is different from what people think of when they hear the term covert action. Secret operations or clandestine activities are not the only ways of conducting modern covert diplomacy; it is often carried out through visible and legitimate institutions, partnerships and communication networks. Influences are indirect and manifest in shaping narratives, norms, incentives, and international perceptions, rather than by direct coercion.

The case of India & Pakistan, for instance, shows how power struggle is increasingly happening in between peace and conflict, as described by scholars as "grey zone. The world in this context is one in which diplomacy, reputation, institutional access, and economic pull play important roles in determining strategic success. Military strength continues to hold significance, but it does not necessarily have the greatest influence in a given situation.

The developments are of significance to international relations studies. Realist theories focus mainly on the material attributes and military strength of states as the main drivers of state behaviour. The findings show that intangible resources like reputation,



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

legitimacy, institutional power and narrative influence have become more significant in shaping national power, although these are not "new" resources. Some states can accomplish strategic goals without facing direct conflict if they successfully integrate these resources.

The South Asian experience, therefore, is a manifestation of the changes that are taking place in the international system as a whole. With the rise of globalization, digital communication and institutional interdependence changing world politics, covert diplomacy will probably come to play an increasing role in statecraft. The case study of India between 2018 and 2023 is instructive of how emerging powers can leverage these tools to improve their influence, perceptions, and strategic goals in a complex global environment.

Recommendations

The results of this study have significant policy, academic and planning implications for policy makers, academics and strategic planners to understand the changing dynamics of interstate competition in South Asia and elsewhere. The analysis shows that power competition in the modern world is no longer solely kinetic (military) but takes place through institutions, narratives, strategic partnerships, and economic means too. States therefore need to expand their concept of national security to include four aspects of power: diplomatic, informational, economic and reputational.

A reassessment of the National Power beyond Military Strength.

The major implication of this study is the challenge to the conventional notions of national power. In South Asia, the traditional approach to security has been dominated by military aspects, nuclear deterrence, and conventional forces. These are still prominent determinants but the results indicate the growing importance of diplomatic influence, institutional access, and reputational capital in today's world for influencing international outcomes.

The period of India's economic growth and diplomatic activity between 2018 and 2023 has proved the fact that economic power and diplomatic activity can provide India with strategic benefits similar to that of military strength. To strengthen international leverage, states should therefore not only invest in defence modernization, but also in economic resilience, diplomatic capacities, technological innovations, and institutional engagements.

Building institutional and diplomatic capacity

The study shows an increased significance of international institutions as spaces of strategic competition. The perceptions, legitimacy, and policy results are being increasingly shaped by organizations like the FATF, G20, BRICS and other multilateral-organizations. To achieve effective participation in these institutions has become a key element of the national strategy for developing states.

Pakistan and like other countries should build their diplomatic stronghold by investing in specialized teams, institutional involvement and Coalition building for the long haul. Reactive diplomacy is becoming more and more inadequate in a world where narrative and policy agendas are being continually created through multilateral relationships. States that don't show up in international bodies can be left without much resistance to competitors setting the agenda and shaping the results.



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

Prioritizing Reputational Security

One of the main conclusions of this study is that reputation has become a strategic asset that has real political and economic impact. The reputation of the country can affect investments, diplomatic relationships, foreign policy support, and institutional trust. States, therefore, have a duty to consider a matter of reputation as part of national security.

There is an example from South Asia that a reputational crisis can exacerbate the effect of the external diplomatic pressure. Governments therefore need to focus on transparency, governance reforms, institutional accountability and effective strategic communication. This goes beyond good domestic governance, it enhances international credibility and resilience to adverse narratives.

Building Strategic Communication Skills

The results highlight the growing significance of the narrative battle in international politics. The ability to shape perceptions and influence discourse is a new way in which states can compete. Digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, and strategic communication are now key tools of foreign policy.

Government communication strategies need to be comprehensive and have the capacity to reach international audiences through traditional and digital channels. This encompasses more effective diplomatic communication, more comprehensive media outreach, more academic exchanges, and more effective messaging of national accomplishments. International legitimacy can be improved and vulnerability to reputational risks decreased through effective communication.

Leveraging Economic Statecraft

Economic power was one of the most important factors of diplomatic weight in the modern international system. The results suggest that geo-economic leverage can yield strategic benefits without resorting to direct coercion. A robust economy makes a state an attractive partner, investment, and a strong ally to the foreign policy goals.

Economic development must be treated as a national security matter for countries whose strategic position they have to improve. Technological progress, export diversification and integration into global value chains not only boost economic success, but also strengthen international political presence. For long-term strategic autonomy to be built, economic resilience forms the building blocks.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explore India's covert diplomatic efforts in South Asia from 2018 to 2023, emphasizing the influence of multilateral bodies, strategic alliances, reputation diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and geo-economic tools on shaping India's foreign policy goals. The study shows that it is not simply because of the economic growth or military might of India that the country expanded its international footprint during this period. Instead, this was the outcome of the effective use and combination of various instruments of statecraft into a coherent and reinforcing diplomatic strategy.

The results show that India successfully used international institutions as avenues of influence; bolstered its strategic standing through diversified partnerships; improved its global standing by maintaining engagement and communication; and took advantage of economic growth to broaden its diplomatic avenues. All these instruments combined made it possible for India to contribute to the global discourse and influence the outcomes of the region without depending on direct coercion or military confrontation as



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

its main means of influence.

The study also shows how today's interstate competition goes on a grey zone, with influence being exerted indirectly through institutions, stories, relationships, and economic ties. Under these conditions, the factors of reputation, diplomatic connections and institutional access have become key assets for national power. States that have the ability to deploy these resources efficiently could gain great strategic benefits without the costs and risks of conventional warfare.

The India–Pakistan case offers insights into the wider processes of change in international politics. The means of statecraft are evolving as globalization now fosters greater interdependence and digital technology increases the flow of information. Military force is still useful but is being joined by a variety of other factors – diplomacy, economic, information and reputation – that have a complex relationship with military power.

One way to analyse these developments is through the lenses of covert diplomacy. While classical covert action has focused on the secret and the covert in its operations, modern covert diplomacy is done openly and with legitimate intent and means, impacting perceptions, incentives and institutional processes. Diplomacy is only as effective as the extent to which it can incorporate strategic goals into familiar international norms and mechanisms.

In conclusion, the authors argue that India's trajectory from 2018 to 2023 offers a glimpse into a new approach to regional power projection, one grounded in multidimensional statecraft. India's ability to influence its strategic environment was strengthened through the role of economic power, institutional engagement, strategic partnerships, and narrative management, thereby reducing the need for direct confrontation.

This case illustrates the need to broaden analytical frameworks beyond the traditional military-based ones in international studies. In the future, the study of covert diplomacy in other regional environments and how emerging powers use non-kinetic means to promote national goals should be explored. The dynamics of covert diplomacy will grow ever more significant in the future for interpreting patterns of influence, competition and power in the twenty first century as the international system continues to evolve.

References

- Adnan, M., & Fatima, B. (2015). Strategic and Economic Interests of Pakistan and India in Central Asia. *South Asian Studies*, 30(2), 187-200. Retrieved from <http://111.68.103.26/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/view/3013/1225>
- Agarwal, R. (2020). India's Role at G20 and BRICS: A Path towards Global Leadership. *The Diplomatist*, 15. Retrieved from <https://diplomatist.com/2024/11/28/indias-role-at-g20-and-brics-a-path-towards-global-leadership/>
- Auslin, M. R. (2020). *Asia's New Geopolitics: Essays on Reshaping the Indo-Pacific*. Hoover Institution Press.
- Awan, Z. A. (2023). Indian role in SCO/ BRICS and the Region. *Modern Diplomacy*, 12. Retrieved from <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/07/14/indian-role-in-sco-brics-and-the-region/>
- Berkofsky, A., Iannini, G., & Beretta, S. (Eds.). (2023). *India's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges: Friends, Enemies and Controversies*. Springer International Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.in/Indias-Foreign-Policy-Economic-Challenges/dp/3031202694>
- Bhamidipati, G. K. (2024). Strategic Autonomy and India's Foreign Policy Towards the



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

- GCC, Israel and Iran: Exploring the Kautilyan Foreign Policy Principles. Retrieved from <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstreams/3651229e-af14-425c-9b7e-75bf4d019b21/download>
- Bluth, C., & Mumtaz, U. (2020). *India-Pakistan Strategic Relations: The Nuclear Dilemma*. ibidem Press.
- Chaaraoui, B. K. (2024). *The Dark Side of Diplomacy: Unseen Forces Shaping Nations and Fate*. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.in/Dark-Side-Diplomacy-Shaping-Nations/dp/145665618X>
- Chandra, R., & Sinha, D. (2023). The Strategic Role of Visual and Performing Arts as Instruments of India's Soft Power in International Politics. *Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 4(2), 1080–1089. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/download/118547312/The_Strategic_Role_of_Visual_and_Performing_Arts_as_Instruments_of_India_s_Soft_Power_in_International_Politics.pdf
- Chenoy, D., Ghosh, S. M., & Shukla, S. K. (2019). Skill development for accelerating the manufacturing sector: the role of 'new-age' skills for 'Make in India'. *International Journal of Training Research*, 17, 112-130. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14480220.2019.1639294>
- Codevilla, A. M. (2008). *Tools of Statecraft: Diplomacy and War*. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 7. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2008/01/tools-of-statecraft-diplomacy-and-war/>
- Dasgupta, A., & Vora, K. (2024). Increasing Digital Footprints: A Study of India's Digital Diplomacy in the Interconnected World. In *75 Years of India's Foreign Policy* (pp. 505-526). Springer Nature Singapore. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_22
- Datta, K. L. (2021). Economic Reform and Inclusive Growth. In K. L. Datta, *Growth and Development Planning in India* (p. 388). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190125028.003.0007>
- George, A. S. (2023). Evaluating India's Economic Growth: Challenges and Opportunities on the Path to 5 Trillion Dollars. *Partners Universal International Innovation Journal (PUIIJ)*, 1(6), 85-109. doi:10.5281/zenodo.10307006
- Gopal, P. (2020). Rebirth of the quadrilateral Malabar: Promises and portents for India. *Lowy Institute*, 13. Retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rebirth-quadrilateral-malabar-promises-portents-india>
- Goswami, M., & Daultani, Y. (2022). Make-in-India and Industry 4.0: technology readiness of select firms, barriers and socio-technical implication. *The TQM Journal*, 34(6), 1485–1505. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/TQM-06-2021-0179>
- Jaishankar, S. (2020). *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. HarperCollins India. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/India-Way-Strategies-Uncertain-World/dp/9353579791>
- Kamat, P. V. (2023). India's West Asia Policy under Modi Regime – Shifting Sands, Dynamic Perspectives. *Forum for Integrated National Security*, 25. Retrieved from <https://www.finsindia.org/indias-west-asia-policy-under-modi-regime-shifting-sands-dynamic-perspectives.html>
- Kaura, V. (2020). Incorporating Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral into India's strategic outlook. *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 15, 78-102. doi:10.1080/09733159.2020.1712012
- Khattak, D. U., Khan, D., & Qamber, D. (2019). Evolution of New Indian Military Strategy: Implications for Pakistan. *Margalla Papers*(1), 139-149. Retrieved from



Vol. 4 No. 2 (February) (2026)

<https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/issue/download/14/97>

- Kukreja, V. (2020). India in the Emergent Multipolar World Order: Dynamics and Strategic Challenges. *India Quarterly*, 76(1), 8-23. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928419901187>
- Kumar, R., & Singh, H. (2025). Geo-economics In South Asian Environment. (R. Kumar, & H. Singh, Eds.) WSPC. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/Geo-Economics-South-Asian-Environment-Rakesh/dp/9811298386>
- Michael, A. (2019). India and Multilateralism: Concepts, New Trajectories and Theorizing. In H. V. Pant (Ed.), *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy: Theory and Praxis* (pp. 149 - 171). Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/new-directions-in-indias-foreign-policy/india-and-multilateralism-concepts-new-trajectories-and-theorizing/A0D35B457AB8366D65C311064EC15BB4>
- Mirza, A. M. (2022). Financial Action Task Force (FATF) & Pakistan: Commitments, Compulsions & Challenges. *IPRI Journal*, 22(1), 181-209. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.220108>
- Mirza, A. M. (2022). Financial Action Task Force (FATF) & Pakistan: Commitments, Compulsions & Challenges. *IPRI Journal*, 22(1), 181-209. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.220108>
- Palit, P. S. (2023). *New Media and Public Diplomacy Political Communication in India, the United States and China*. Routledge India.
- Pant, H. V. (2016). India and multilateralism: from the periphery to the center. In *Book cover for Indian foreign policy: An overview* (pp. 224-237). doi:<https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9781784993368.003.0020>
- Prajapati, S. K. (2024). *India On The Global Stage - A Political Journey Through The Decade (2014-2024)*. Writer's Pocket. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388010185_India_On_The_Global_Stage_-_A_Political_Journey_Through_The_Decade_2014-2024#:~:text=The%20book%20explores%20how%20Narendra,future%20as%20a%20global%20leader.&text=All%20rights%20reserved.&text=imposed%20
- Shah, A. A., Bashir, F., & Majeed, T. (2023). Pakistan & FATF: A Journey from Grey List to White List. *The Dialogue*, 18(1), 44-59. Retrieved from <https://journals.qurtuba.edu.pk/ojs/index.php/thedialogue/article/download/659/265>
- Verma, R. (Ed.). (2025). *India-US Convergence and Divergence Under the Trump Administration*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from https://www.google.com.pk/books/edition/India_US_Convergence_and_Divergence_unde/iu1aEQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0