

Between Territory and Worldmaking: The Evolution of India's Double Conception of Sovereignty from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi

Raphaëlle Khan

City College of New York, USA

rkhan4@ccny.cuny.edu

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the evolution of India's relation to sovereignty since independence. While the latter is a key concept in International Relations and foreign policy, India's relation to sovereignty is not well understood. It has often been argued that India was simply a strong defender of the principle of state sovereignty. However, historical research shows not only that its behaviour did not always match this description, but also that its views have been more complex and strategically defined. Taking a historical perspective, this article first posits that, since independence, India's conception of sovereignty has rested on two pillars: a territorial understanding and a flexible understanding of sovereignty, which was a function of its international worldmaking projects. It then traces how these two understandings evolved during four foreign-policy eras: under Jawaharlal Nehru, under Indira Gandhi and in the 1990s–2000s, and under Narendra Modi. It argues that whereas India's territorial view of sovereignty has remained constant and amplified under the prime ministership of Narendra Modi, Indian worldmaking ambitions have narrowed. This narrowing has, in turn, transformed India's relation to sovereignty internationally. This evolution partly reflects, and helps assess, the role of the Hindu nationalist worldview in India's foreign policy, as well as the changing understandings of sovereignty in the current world.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Worldmaking, Hindu Nationalism, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi

Entre el territorio y la creación del mundo: la evolución de la doble concepción de la soberanía en la India desde Jawaharlal Nehru hasta Narendra Modi

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la evolución de la relación de la India con la soberanía desde su independencia. Si bien este último es un concepto clave en las relaciones internacionales y la política exterior, su relación con la soberanía no se comprende bien. A menudo se ha argumentado que la India simplemente defendió con firmeza el principio de soberanía estatal. Sin embargo, la investigación histórica muestra no solo que su comportamiento no siempre se correspondió con esta descripción, sino también que sus perspectivas han sido más complejas y estratégicamente definidas. Desde una perspectiva histórica, este artículo plantea, en primer lugar, que, desde la independencia, la concepción india de la soberanía se ha basado en dos pilares: una comprensión territorial y una comprensión flexible de la soberanía, en función de sus proyectos de construcción del mundo internacional. A continuación, analiza cómo estas dos comprensiones evolucionaron durante cuatro eras de política exterior: bajo Jawaharlal Nehru, bajo Indira Gandhi y en las décadas de 1990 y 2000, y bajo Narendra Modi. Argumenta que, mientras que la visión territorial de la soberanía en la India se ha mantenido constante y se ha intensificado bajo el mandato de Narendra Modi, sus ambiciones de construcción del mundo se han reducido. Este estrechamiento, a su vez, ha transformado la relación de la India con la soberanía a nivel internacional. Esta evolución refleja en parte, y ayuda a evaluar, el papel de la cosmovisión nacionalista hindú en la política exterior de la India, así como la cambiante comprensión de la soberanía en el mundo actual.

Palabras clave: Soberanía, Creación de mundos, Nacionalismo hindú, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi

在领土与世界建构之间：从贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁到纳伦德拉·莫迪，印度双重主权概念的演变

摘要

本文分析了印度自独立以来主权概念的演变。主权是国际关

系和外交政策中的一个关键概念，但印度对主权的概念却并不清晰。人们常常认为印度只是国家主权原则的坚定捍卫者。然而，历史研究表明，印度的行为并非总是符合这种描述，而且其主权观念更为复杂，更具战略性。本文从历史视角出发，首先提出自独立以来，印度的主权观念建立在两大支柱之上：领土主权和灵活的主权观，后者是其国际建构计划的产物。随后，本文追溯了这两种主权观念在四个外交政策时期的演变过程，这四个外交政策时期分别为贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁时期、英迪拉·甘地时期、20世纪90年代至21世纪初、以及纳伦德拉·莫迪时期。本文认为，尽管印度的领土主权观在纳伦德拉·莫迪总理执政期间保持不变并得到强化，但印度构建世界格局的雄心却有所收窄。这种收窄反过来又改变了印度在国际上与主权的关系。这一演变在一定程度上反映了印度教民族主义世界观在印度外交政策中的作用，并有助于评估当今世界不断变化的主权理解。

关键词：主权，构建世界格局，印度教民族主义，贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁，英迪拉·甘地，纳伦德拉·莫迪

Introduction

Given the rise of populist nationalist ideologies, new geopolitical tensions, and disillusionment with globalization, sovereignty is once again a prominent topic amongst academics and politicians. Ironically, this resurgence of sovereignty in public discourse has happened at the same time as sovereignty has been under attack as a norm of international law. These ironies and ambiguities are however not new. The meaning and shape of sovereignty have constantly been debated throughout the twentieth century. In the interwar period, the weakening of empires led to the emergence of federal schemes to reconfigure imperial spaces; new legal inventions such as the man-

dates system; and political visions of polities beyond the nation-state, imagined by anticolonial actors. During the 1940s–50s, in the midst of decolonization, new debates revolved around the meaning of sovereignty, including the very real limitations of economic and political sovereignty in newly decolonized states. By the 1980s, the extent to which state sovereignty had been eroded by economic globalization became a major concern. In the 1990s, major humanitarian failures in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia renewed debates about the legitimacy and possibility of humanitarian interventions that could infringe upon state sovereignty to protect the human rights of populations. The 2000s witnessed a new display of state power through the war on terror, new

surveillance technologies, and increasingly harsh migration controls. In the 2010s, and most clearly in the past few years, new discourses have reclaimed sovereignty as supreme authority over the ever more bounded national territories, in a world shaken by economic crises. At the same time, the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity by Russia's invasion in 2022 and claims made by states including the United States over foreign territories have raised new alarms about actual and potential breaches to the United Nations (UN) Charter.

To what extent, and why, states' understanding of sovereignty have evolved in such dramatic ways? This article takes on this question by focussing on India. It examines India's engagement with the conception and practice of sovereignty in the sphere of foreign policy from India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), in power since 2014. It analyses whether, and to what extent, the Indian government's engagement with sovereignty has undergone reorientations, and draws conclusions on how this evolution reflects the state's changing relation to the international order.

India's case requires particular attention for several reasons. Despite being a major international actor, India's relation to sovereignty remains poorly understood and is often boxed into old static tropes. New Delhi is usually seen as exemplifying the strong and strict support to the principle of state sovereignty—as non-interference in internal

matters and territorial inviolability—that is deemed to characterize former colonies. This support would derive from the experience of foreign domination, a more fragile state-building, and a distrust of the motives of great powers when it comes to advocating liberal interventionism. Yet this characterization of a “sovereignty hawk” is simplistic and not historically accurate.¹ Furthermore, the BJP has claimed to mark a break with the long-lasting consensus in the Indian government and the strategic community around the Nehruvian political model, both at home and in its foreign policy. Domestically, there is no doubt that Hindutva ideology has changed Indian society and politics, including via the “saffronization of the public sphere” (Anderson and Jaffrelot, 2018).² However, the claim that Hindu nationalist ideology has changed foreign policy requires further assessment. India's rhetoric has clearly evolved through the refusal of the old Nehruvian non-alignment discourse and its replacement by other concepts such as “multi-alignment,” as well as the Hinduization of foreign policy idioms.³ Yet analysts have tended to argue that changes have been “minimal” and that there is a broad continuity in foreign policy orientations (see Gupta et al., 2019). India has maintained both its core objective of strategic autonomy and its post-1991 pragmatic foreign policy approach—which is shaped by practical constraints, strategic logics, and national interests rather than ideology (see Hall, 2015; Manjari Miller and Sullivan de Estrada, 2017; Basrur, 2017, Gupta et al., 2019). If anything,

domestic constraints have historically limited India's foreign policy ambitions and influence—from Nehruvian times until today (see Hall, 2022).⁴ However, new research has demonstrated deeper, less visible change in foreign policy directly resulting from its linkages with a new domestic ideology (for example, the saffronization of the Indian Foreign Service has led an old elite to be replaced by a new one (Huju, 2022)). The current state of research has left mostly underexplored the impact of domestic politics and ideology on India's foreign policy (for exceptions, see Basrur, 2023, Hall, 2019; Blarel, 2025).

This article addresses India's relation to sovereignty and aims to define its evolution and character by comparing the practices and conceptions of sovereignty over four eras. I am here concerned with sovereignty in the context of foreign policy, thus with how the state defines its meaning, in speech and through practice, in relation to the international sphere.⁵ In this respect, sovereignty is both a recognized structuring norm of the international order and an idea whose meaning is the site of political struggles over different worldmaking projects and visions of the international order. By worldmaking, one means the attempt to remake the world order, a "project of reordering the world" (Getachew, 2019: 2). Worldmaking attempts by states or political groups do not have a priori any given or fixed normative orientation; their political content is historically contingent. They can carry emancipatory, progressive, or hierarchical if not outrightly reactionary political visions, ranging

from myriads of decolonization projects against domination to Nazi Germany's racial projects (Heilbronner, 2021).⁶ With various levels of ambition to restructure a given order, worldmaking attempts have been more common than often recognized (Ibid; Murray, 2024; Harnett, 2022). The period of decolonization between the 1940s and the 1960s might have most dramatically exemplified the struggle over competing notions of sovereignty—from pan-Asian or Arab proposals to federal plans to nation-state claims—underpinning alternative worldviews. However, any debate on sovereignty at the global level implicitly involves contending worldviews which, in turn, presume different power configurations. From that perspective, worldmaking projects are necessarily related to the question of sovereignty: they express a certain conception of sovereignty held by the actor formulating them. For this reason, such debates are always about challenging the parameters of an existing order. I use here the term "worldmaking," rather than the more conventional terms in foreign policy analysis of reform of the international system or order building, because it both encapsulates the project of change and its imaginary.

This article builds on the finding that, between the 1920s and the 1960s, Indians who promoted different political projects for the future of the world and of India did not have a simple, strict understanding of sovereignty (Khan, forthcoming). Indians were not the only ones—they were representative of the creative agency that fueled new political imaginations in the colonies

during colonial times (Cooper, 2014). Partly in continuity, partly in rupture, when independent India emerged in 1947, its understanding of sovereignty developed around two conceptions: 1) one built around its relation to state territorial sovereignty, and 2) one that emerged from its strategic actions in international fora like the UN, aimed at refashioning the global order, dependent on its worldmaking ambitions. Indian understandings of sovereignty became capacious enough to make space for flexible conceptions that allowed the government to promote global anticolonial objectives (Khan, 2021).

Against this background, this article makes three main arguments:

First, to think about the Indian take on sovereignty insofar as its external orientation is concerned, one must think of its two pillars: territoriality and worldmaking. This conceptualization complicates and nuances the common view that a postcolonial country would think of sovereignty in a monolithic fashion. Instead, it proposes to analyse it in relation to two axes along which conceptions and practices of sovereignty evolve: territorial and worldmaking. A *territorial conception of sovereignty* coexists with a *non-territorial and flexible notion of sovereignty*, one that challenged a simple notion of state sovereignty because it is a function of larger global worldmaking projects.

Second, through this lens, India's relation to sovereignty has only partially, yet critically, changed over time. Modi's emphasis on territorial sovereignty aligns with earlier interpretations that

first crystallized at independence under Nehru's prime ministership. His conception is an amplified version of this original territorial interpretation of sovereignty. However, his worldmaking ambitions have significantly shifted. India still holds worldmaking ambitions, however they are no longer driven by an expansive project of democratization of international society, spurred by a search for global equality.

Third, changes in India's conception of sovereignty were incremental. Under Indira Gandhi and post-1991 liberalization, Indian worldmaking ambitions and their related conception of equality narrowed gradually, reflecting evolving international priorities. India less and less strategically used flexible understandings of sovereignty to pursue systemic equality, as its earlier ambitions had involved.

Several factors may explain this evolution: India's increasing reliance on hard power and recognition to achieve greater equality, the new domestic ideological orientation under Hindutva, and post-Cold War global power dynamics, including the US-China rivalry, which have shaped India's strategic options.

The first section examines how IR theory conceptualizes sovereignty and uses a historical perspective to position India's understanding in relation to these frameworks. Next, I consider how India's conceptions of sovereignty have changed along the axis of its relation to territorial sovereignty and to its worldmaking projects. I chart this evolution across four foreign-policy eras: Nehru's era (1946–1960s), Indira Gand-

hi's leadership (1966–1984), the post–Cold War phase of India's economic rise (1990s–2000s), and the Modi administration (2014–present). Finally, I conclude with reflections on policy implications and a research agenda.

An Indian Perspective on Sovereignty

Much has been written on sovereignty. While mainstream IR dominates the field, post-colonial perspectives have emerged to account for the historical specificity of former colonies. Yet this corrective often reifies India's conception of sovereignty rather than interrogating its contingencies. Historians have allowed us to reconsider India's relationship to sovereignty in more granular and nuanced ways. This section briefly sketches this evolution and situates the argument within this context.

Mainstream IR Theories on Sovereignty

Research in mainstream IR emphasizes two approaches to sovereignty: it broadly defines it either as a legal convention shaped by a principle of domestic jurisdiction agreed within the international society (see Krasner, 2009) or as a social construct.⁷ In the first case, for realists, it is a legal idea. Domestic jurisdiction, which delimits a state's domestic sphere, is constituted through a legal agreement between states (although called into question by human rights debates). Sovereignty can be divided between legal recognition and objective control/independence,

within the broader distinction between an internal and external dimension of sovereignty. From that angle, sovereignty can be analysed in terms of interference and non-interference. In the second case, the political constructivist approach allows us to consider sovereignty not as a fixed but as a variable concept. For instance, one can ask what practices and, on whose behalf, sovereignty is constructed (Biersteker and Weber, 1996: 8). Such an approach raises other questions: how is sovereignty made? "What role do recognition, intervention, and language play in the construction of sovereignty?" (Ibid: 9). From this perspective, sovereignty is not a "timeless principle" underlying the state system, but different normative conceptions that "[link] authority, territory, population (society, nation), and recognition in a unique way and in a particular place (the state)" (Ibid: 3). The state is defined by claims about territory, authority and population. It can be analysed as a "set of ongoing norms and practices" and through constituent elements: autonomy, control, and legitimacy (Caporaso, 2000: 8). This constructivist approach allows analysing how the meaning of sovereignty evolves through time and space as these elements and concepts vary. Through this lens, sovereignty can emerge as the power to decide the exception (as discussed by Carl Schmitt). The sovereign is the one who wields the ultimate authority. This double legal/political approach is helpful to understand a state's behaviour and reflect on the impact of a regime's ideology on how a state understands sovereignty.

However, mainstream IR studies assume that former colonies have understood international norms in an *already constituted* playing field and rarely analyse how these colonies *came to* understand these norms. This is in great part because they think about IR concepts from European historical experiences and assume that, when becoming independent, former colonies merely internalized existing international norms (for a critique and corrective approach, see for instance, Acharya, 2004; Tickner, 2003; Shilliam, 2011). Mainstream IR's Eurocentrism limits the analytical scope of studies on sovereignty by obscuring how historical processes have shaped formerly colonized states' conceptions and exercise of sovereignty.

Postcolonial Sovereignty

At first sight, studies on postcolonial sovereignty, revolving around the argument that the emergence of modern nation-states after colonialism shaped the character of postcolonial sovereignty, remedy this problem of ahistorical Eurocentrism. According to that perspective, a distinct postcolonial understanding and experience of sovereignty emerged in the newly decolonized state due to the impact of colonialism. As a result of this colonial past, states like India and China would arguably have a strict (Westphalian) understanding of the principle of sovereignty. It is also recognized that, in practice, their relation to the principle of sovereignty has been more ambiguous.⁸ Yet critics have tended to characterize India as a "sovereignty hawk" (with a negative connotation), referring to its support for

a strong sovereignty principle, non-interference and non-intervention in a state's territory and its internal affairs.⁹ This expression has been used to characterize India's cautious attitude vis-à-vis international interventions and the use of military force (Chaudhuri, 2014: 262), and its reluctant attitude towards democracy/human rights promotion (Ganguly and Sridharan, 2013).

India's strict attitude to sovereignty has been explained by it being a post-colonial state and by its territorial issues with China (a disputed border) and Pakistan (the status of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir), which themselves are consequences of the decolonization process. According to the conventional narrative, India inclines to be protective of state sovereignty in multilateral settings and against foreign intervention in internal matters, in particular due to the unresolved and controversial problem of Kashmir, at the UN since 1947–8. Nehru referred the case to the Security Council, which internationalized ever since, to India's chagrin. To many scholars, this diplomatic setback would explain not only India's strong support for the principle of non-intervention but also a certain aloofness and ambivalence in dealing with issues at the multilateral level of the UN, marking a change in India's relationship with sovereignty in relation to the UN (Bajpai, 2013; Sreenivasan, 2009: 476).¹⁰ For instance, Kanti Bajpai argues that India's ambivalence towards multilateralism stems from "its historical experience with multilateral institutions" and "other third-party interventions on issues that affect its interests"

(Bajpai, 2013: 115). C. Raja Mohan links the “bitter experience” of Kashmir with India’s attitude of “[rejecting] all multi-lateral attempts at increasing the power of the UN and other bodies vis-à-vis the state” (Raja Mohan, 2010: 136).

The debate on India’s relation to sovereignty overlaps with the debate of whether India moved from a stance of idealism to *realpolitik*, as several authors place the Kashmir issue within this larger narrative. According to the latter, multilateralism and idealism informed India’s decision to approach the UN to solve the Kashmir problem and characterized early Indian foreign policy. The story goes that, after the setback, India relinquished multilateralism and idealism and instead turned to bilateralism and realism. The Indian leadership, it was argued, was led to reverse its attitude after Nehru realized that the UN was in reality “an institution of power politics, not an impartial police force” (Chellaney, 1999: 545).¹¹ Other turning points would be the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Nehru’s death in 1964, and India’s isolation after it intervened in East Pakistan in 1971. Realism would have followed a period of idealism and entail a new relation to sovereignty, characterized chiefly by a greater emphasis on territorial sovereignty.

Historians have dismantled this realist-idealist dichotomy, recast Nehruvian foreign policy in strategic terms (see, for instance, Raghavan 2010), and demonstrated that India actively pushed for third-party role in many issues, such as apartheid. Yet the conventional narrative on sovereignty has

remained mostly in place. Crucially, even this narrative remains thinly historicized and confines India to an overly simplistic, archetype. What is in effect a form of historical amnesia serves to veil the complexity of Indian views on sovereignty and, in doing so, distorts our understanding of India’s role internationally. India’s relation to sovereignty needs to be understood historically. Against this backdrop, I briefly demonstrate how new historiographical work on India’s sovereignty during decolonization has revised this limited view and pushed the boundaries of studies on sovereignty.

Sovereignty under Colonial Rule

As positivist international law emerged in the nineteenth century, European jurists defined sovereignty as absolute control over a territory. This territorial interpretation of sovereignty, termed “Westphalian,” implied non-intervention from other states.¹² Once European powers’ political and economic dominance expanded, it became a recognized international norm (Anghie, 2006: 746). However, while European jurists recognized the norm of sovereignty as the structuring norm of an international society and a universal template, they did not accord the recognition of sovereignty to non-European polities and societies. The close connection drawn by jurists between sovereignty, the standard of civilization, and the idea of a society of states instead entrenched a global system of structural inequality between

European and non-European polities.¹³ Sovereignty became a reference for non-European people, who only experienced its negation. Around that tension was built a hierarchical international system and the justification of colonialism.

Instead, in colonial India, British India and the princely states became a ground for ideas and practices of *layered and divided* sovereignty, rather than Westphalian sovereignty. At the imperial level, British colonial practices adapted this international template to establish India's subordinate status. Simultaneously, historians have shown that Indian nationalists and other political actors wrestled with the political potential and limits of these colonial practices to articulate and promote their own conceptions of sovereignty.¹⁴ Their conception was not fixed but changed over time. Varied anticolonial visions emerged on the terrain of late imperial politics (see Bayly, 2017; Guyot-Réchar and Leake, 2023; Khan, 2022), which did not necessarily imagine the future in the form of the nation-state. Those varied visions became paths not taken, yet retrieving them proves that the imagination of "the international" in the colonies was much more creative and diverse during the empires to states transition than what mainstream IR assumes. Other thinkers in Africa and the Caribbean also imagined sovereignty in new ways that would allow them to promote a more equal future, which they saw as part of fulfilling the promise of sovereignty (Cooper, 2014; Getachew, 2019; Wilder 2015).

As historians have pointed out, after independence, Nehruvian India further developed a more complex conception of sovereignty than what is usually acknowledged in IR. Nehru was central (though not alone) in its formulation. Scholars remain divided about which kind of world configuration Nehru desired, how conceptually innovative he was, and to what extent he wanted to challenge the state system.¹⁵ However, it has been argued that he developed visions of a post-sovereign world order through the UN (Bhagavan, 2012; Chacko, 2011), beyond the fact that he talked about "One World," world government, and world federation. At the same time, he did not shy away from using force to assert the power of the state over other political logics, illustrating a gap between what he urged internationally and his actual policy, and leading scholars to question whether he actually "sought to erode the sovereignty of the state" (Raghavan, 2014: 152). Ultimately, historical contingencies shaped Nehruvian India's choices and postures over sovereignty and its relation to domestic and international issues (see Mishra, 2021; Khan, 2020, 2021; Khan and Sherman, 2022).

The following section focuses on four historical cases to examine how the Indian conception and practice of sovereignty has evolved after independence, along the axes of India's contingent relation to territoriality and its worldmaking ambitions.

India's Conceptions of Territorial Sovereignty and Worldmaking Ambitions

For analytical purposes, this article divides Indian foreign policy into four broad eras: the Nehruvian government (1947–1964), Indira Gandhi's government (1966–1984), the post-economic liberalization governments (1991–2014), and Narendra Modi's government (2014–present). It considers them in turn.

In August 1947, Partition fractured colonial India and gave birth to India and Pakistan. The two states emerged before the princely states' status was settled. India quickly sought their accession to the Union, but several states resisted. In these cases, India resorted to military force. What became ongoing nation- and state-building projects, and their coexistence with larger global projects of order refashioning, marked the rise of a double understanding of sovereignty in the Nehruvian government. Nehruvian policy set up an original and lasting tension between, on the one hand, a *territorial conception of sovereignty* driven by state-making and, on the other hand, a *non-territorial and flexible notion of sovereignty*, one that challenged a simple notion of state sovereignty because it was a function of larger global worldmaking projects (see Khan, forthcoming). Those understandings came to coexist—nascent independent India expressed a state logic, but it also challenged the norm of sovereignty internationally at several crucial moments by striving for a more equal global order (see Khan, 2020, 2021).

With state-making, new practices of sovereignty arose, anchored in territoriality. The new Indian government consolidated the state by centralizing power and erasing the competing sovereignties of reluctant princely states by force. In September 1948, it annexed the princely state of Hyderabad, whose ruler, the Nizam, had expressed the wish for independence. Earlier, in October 1947, India sent troops to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir at the request of the Maharaja, who faced a tribal invasion. Pakistan reacted militarily; ultimately, following several wars between India and Pakistan, Kashmir was de facto divided between India and Pakistan at the Line of Control. Both cases illustrate in their own way how the logic of integration backed by the use of force, that is, the primacy of imposed state sovereignty, prevailed over other political logics. India's handling of claims in the Northeast, in which insurgencies were quelled, is another case in point—the use of force by the state became a way to integrate these regions but also to assert state sovereignty (see Leake, 2016). Through these cases, in practice, a narrow territorial understanding of sovereignty emerged, accompanied by official discourses on non-intervention and legitimacy of territorial control, amid “cartographic anxieties” (to use Sankaran Krishna's expression in Krishna, 1994). According to this logic, Atul Mishra (2021) argues that, when statehood emerged after Partition, the pursuit of sovereignty became an end in itself.

Yet decolonization was as much about worldmaking ambitions (see

Getachew, 2019; Younis, 2022; Khan, 2021). Older global anticolonial objectives that had formed before independence did not disappear in 1947. Thus, for the Nehruvian government, the question and stakes of sovereignty extended beyond its territorial dimension of getting and consolidating a state. It also saw the decolonization project as a creative search for a new world order, against the hierarchies that characterized it from the time of empire. Even after the Kashmir setback at the UN, Nehru “did not give up on assertive multilateralism” (Bingham Kennedy, 2012: 200). New Delhi remained very active in that forum for at least another decade. Nehru was arguably particularly aware of the power of norms (Raghavan, 2014: 145), and Indian diplomats thus used the UN for various diplomatic goals. The new leadership was also keenly aware that gaining a state did not dismantle a hierarchical order, despite the stated principle of state equality in the UN Charter. Anticolonial leaders knew that sovereignty was not just a transfer of power and the realization of statehood, but rather that achieving it also entailed the transformation of structures of domination and the search for a more inclusive and democratic international order (see Grovogui, 1996; Getachew, 2019; Wilder, 2015). Furthermore, effective sovereignty also included economic sovereignty, which involved state intervention, self-reliance, control over foreign exchange, a socialist element of welfare provision, and a larger restructuration of asymmetric economic power relations.

The dynamic relationship be-

tween the Indian conception of sovereignty and the pursuit of a more equal order is manifest in India’s 1946 UN case against South Africa. In September 1946, as vice-president of the Interim Cabinet, Nehru declared non-racialism a fundamental objective of Indian foreign policy (see Thakur, 2018: 4). That was to be a feature of a new, more equal order. Originally, when the colonial government had brought a case against South Africa, it had argued that treaties agreed with the latter on the treatment of Indian minorities had been broken. However, when nationalist India became independent, Indian diplomats reframed the case and invoked the concept of Human Rights, challenging South Africa’s claim that racial policies were a matter of domestic jurisdiction. This was the first time that the concept of Human Rights, drawn from the UN Charter Preamble (which was not supposed to have any legal value) was mobilized to challenge sovereignty claims (on this case, see Lloyd, 1990; Thakur, 2017; Mazower, 2009; Khan, 2020). In this context, the Indian delegation argued that the existence of Human Rights limited the scope of the principle of domestic jurisdiction codified in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter. Beyond helping the Indian diaspora, this rethinking of sovereignty enabled India’s leadership in shaping a post-imperial normative order, as the government broadened its claim to argue that India was fighting on the basis of universalist principles on behalf of all Asians —a larger Third World (Khan, 2020). It opposed not only racial discrimination against Indian populations in South Africa but

also more generally the racial hierarchy of empire. In subsequent debates at the UN Human Rights Commission, the Indian delegate promoted a strong Human Rights regime by supporting a UN mechanism to implement and enforce these rights, their binding character, and a right of petition by individuals and organizations (Khan, 2020; for a larger context, see Burke, 2010). Despite its ambiguities, India's intervention at the UN opened up a field for normative contestation and transformed the UN "into a key forum for anti-colonialism" where the norm of sovereignty would be challenged (Mazower 2009, 152).

Between 1947–49, India also proposed a new basis of engagement with the Commonwealth that involved a flexible understanding of sovereignty. It proposed a non-national Commonwealth citizenship that would have granted reciprocal rights (and thus protection) to Commonwealth citizens in the Commonwealth (Khan, 2021). Thus, New Delhi was willing to relinquish exclusive national citizenship to advance the welfare of all citizens, including its diaspora, within a reformed Commonwealth.

Thus, worldmaking aspirations and state-building were in tension from independent India's very inception. The initiatives cited above show how the desire for greater racial equality shaped Indian views on sovereignty. This expansive conception of equality—not only for states but also for individuals—entailed promoting transnational rights and strong international organizations. The search for a more equal order and

the attempt to shape the norm of sovereignty internationally were linked (Khan, 2020; 2021). Indian diplomats strategically adapted their understanding of sovereignty to pursue a political agenda that derived from a larger anti-imperialist and democratic project of decolonization. This is not to say that India's policy was fully coherent or successful. The Nehruvian project of democratization internally had substantial limitations; some hierarchies were reinstated at home (see Dasgupta, 2024; Sherman, 2022). Externally, diplomats arguing against global hierarchies did not prevent casteist elitism in the diplomatic corps, leading Sankaran Krishna (2025) to talk about "vacuous diversity" (see also Thakur, 2016).

Under Indira Gandhi (1966–1977, 1980–84)

Under Indira Gandhi's prime ministership, India's relation to sovereignty underwent some changes within an overall trajectory of broad continuity with Nehruvian policy. On the front of territorial sovereignty, there was a marked continuity in the primacy of a logic of territorial integration. Indira Gandhi further consolidated Kashmir's integration into the Indian Union, and it was under her ministership that Sikkim was annexed in 1975 (see Datta-Ray, 1984). India thus continued to build and consolidate its territorial sovereignty by force, while becoming more interventionist in its neighbourhood. Its intervention in West Pakistan during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 is a case in point (see Raghavan, 2013). The tension between a discourse

of non-interference and actual practice increased.

As regards worldmaking, some Nehruvian ambitions survived, and they equally involved a more flexible relation to sovereignty. Indira Gandhi's left-wing, secular populism did not contradict the core Nehruvian foreign policy tenets inherited from the decolonization struggle. She maintained the broader goal of restructuring the global system in favor of more equality for Third World countries; kept an anti-imperialist rhetoric; presented herself as the spokesperson of the Third World; and pursued non-alignment understood at minima as a search for autonomy and independence. Gandhi's commitment to Third World development was reflected in India's instrumental role in establishing the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), first held in 1964, and in the adoption of the Declaration on the Establishment of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in May 1974 (Lall, 440). In the 1970s, she was among the leaders pushing for the last large movement to systemically restructure the international economic order. As Nils Gilman (2015: 1) notes, sponsoring the NIEO aimed at redirecting more benefits of transnational economic integration towards developing nations and thus "[complete] the geopolitical process of decolonization and [create] a democratic global order of truly sovereign states." That project aimed at "[reversing] the effects of colonialism" (Anghie, 2005: 199). Adom Getachew (2019:12) describes the NIEO as the "most ambitious project of

worldmaking" of anticolonial nationalists. As a key advocate, Gandhi (1983) highlighted at the UN that "the present world economic order [was] based on domination and inequality" and voiced the collective aspirations of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries by advocating "a new international economic order based on equality and justice." On the one hand, these proposals were an attempt from the Third World to use their sovereignty for a political project, to reassert control over national resources, and preserve "hard won sovereignty" (Moyn, 2018: 91). On the other hand, however, they also involved reimagining the meaning of sovereignty at a global level, since they involved "a radical recasting of sovereign equality as a demand for an equitable share of the world's wealth" (Getachew, 2019:12) as well as a collective conception of sovereignty (Anghie, 2005: 199), tied to redistribution and social justice. In the 1980s, Indira Gandhi sought to revive the NAM, at the 1983 New Delhi Summit. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation signed in 1971 had undermined India's commitment to non-alignment. Her chairmanship was an "opportunity [for her] to restore Indian leadership among Third World nations as well as her personal prestige" (CIA, 1983). She indeed presented herself as the "legitimate" spokesperson of the Third World, and supported the principles of decolonization, Third World development, and disarmament (Sawkar, 2022: 367-68, 371).

However, the Cold War and domestic dynamics had been changing. In response, Indira Gandhi advocated

flexibility and added the new ambiguous concepts of “security,” “territory,” “power,” and “prestige” to her diplomatic vocabulary (Mansingh, 1984: 26, cited in Sawkar, 2022). Emerged more clearly with her two other notions of sovereignty. The first one was close to the definition of sovereignty as the power of deciding the exception. Domestically, she declared the Emergency, transforming the country into an authoritarian state from 1975 to 1977. The Emergency suspended constitutional rights, curtailed civil liberties, and led to cracking down on dissent and political opposition as well as censoring the press (see Prakash, 2019; Jaffrelot and Anil, 2020; Raghavan, 2025). As Mansingh (2015) notes, “Indira Gandhi saw power in personal, or dynastic, terms and not institutional ones.”¹⁶ This authoritarian turn laid the groundwork for the “strong leader” model that was subsequently further developed by Narendra Modi. The second notion of sovereignty that emerged equated sovereignty with hard power and personal power. Her foreign policy displayed power overtly and built legitimacy through “personal branding” (Sawkar, 2022: 363-364). India carried out its first (underground) nuclear test in 1974. While those tests were presented as a “Peaceful Nuclear Explosion” and India remained pro-global disarmament, they signalled a new valorization of hard power in Indian foreign policy. Military nuclear power was also a symbol of the power of deciding on the exception, insofar as Indira Gandhi refused to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, turning India into a nuclear pariah.

Post-liberalization India of the 1990s–2000s (1991–2014)

In 1991, the Indian government borrowed from the International Monetary Fund after a grave balance of payment crisis and embarked on major economic reforms that liberalized its economy and opened it up to foreign investments. Finance Minister Manmohan Singh “[overhauled] the country’s trade and exchange rate regime—virtually overnight.” Foreign exchange controls were relaxed, restrictions on imports were reduced, and India adopted a flexible exchange rate regime (Irwin, 2025: 6). This shift away from the Nehruvian developmental model of centralized planning transformed India’s foreign policy, just as major geopolitical reconfigurations brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union were under way. The opposition—the BJP and the Communist Party—criticized the “acceptance of IMF conditionalities,”¹⁷ and expressed the fear that India would lose its national sovereignty. While the Congress leadership responded that it would protect Indian economic sovereignty (Irwin, 2025; Singh, 2005: 7-8), at that moment, India’s conception of economic sovereignty and its relation to the state transformed. The government came to think of economic sovereignty in the terms of economic liberalization. For instance, after refusing it for decades, it signed treaties that delegated sovereignty to international law on the protection of foreign investments (Ranjan, 2024). The treaties explicitly limited state authority by allowing investors to bring cases against it before international arbitration tribunals. Ac-

cepting them meant a “significant departure from the previous era when [India] zealously tried to preserve its sovereignty with respect to protecting foreign investment” (Ibid: 124).

However, while New Delhi committed itself to liberalization, the primacy of the territorial sovereignty logic remained paramount. In that sense, its relation to sovereignty stayed on its earlier trajectory. The government kept its territorial claims and established a stronger administrative and political control over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which involved granting exceptional powers to the military. AFS-PA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), which grants “sweeping” special powers and provides “virtual immunity from prosecution” to the army, was imposed in 1990 (see Amnesty International India, 2013). At the same time, the early 1990s saw the beginning of the militancy—Kashmir was arguably less integrated than before.¹⁸

Furthermore, the notion of Indian sovereignty as an expression of hard power and independence found deeper anchorage in the nuclear tests of May 1998, through which India declared itself a nuclear state. The BJP, which had won the elections that year, had made becoming a nuclear power a key part of its election campaign. It “prioritized bequeathing to India a full-fledged nuclear capability” (Fair, 2005: 25). As an analyst observed in 1998, “[t]he nuclear ambition ... has always been part of the BJP’s philosophy of negotiating with the outside world from a position of strength” (Malik, 1998: 201). This am-

bition also dovetailed with its discourse about a “strong India.” The new nuclear tests signalled India’s greater assertiveness in deploying hard power and underscored its aspiration to be recognized as a great power on the global stage, at a higher status in the hierarchy of states. Within India’s scientific and political circles, some argued that a robust nuclear capability might even pave the way for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Fair, 2005: 24). That was regardless of the international condemnation that it triggered.

On the worldmaking front, India’s ambitions narrowed after the Cold War. The worldmaking projects linked to its postcolonial identity evolved into more modest, targeted goals. This may partly be because it now acted within a capitalist system that, in a unipolar order, it had integrated and therefore no longer challenged. By then, the NIEO proposals had failed. Most developing countries of the Global South (which overlapped with the older Third World) had been weakened by the economic crises of the 1980s, and many had been hit by severe debt crises (Narlikar, 2006: 1026). New Delhi remained committed to promoting their interests, but its efforts mainly focused on global trade and climate negotiations. It had been an influential leader in advocating for the Global South at the GATT. During negotiations rounds at its successor, the World Trade Organization, its focus on issues of agricultural subsidies and intellectual property rights highlighted its continued engagement in promoting greater equality globally. Narlikar (2006: 1006, 1026) notes that, in these

negotiations, India sometimes supported demands of redistribution and equity that had little economic value to it or entailed costs, while as a more powerful actor it could have used a discourse of power. The country remained a significant voice for developing nations within multilateral negotiations. Furthermore, by presenting itself as a representative of the Global South, New Delhi continued to claim its identity as a defender of the interests of the developing world. However, its objectives had narrowed and were less systemically challenging than what the NIEO proposals had demanded in the past—they were no longer about distributive justice and radical transformation.

Another result of India's economic liberalization, its dramatic economic growth in the 2000s, further impacted New Delhi's relation to worldmaking and sovereignty. Based on this growth, India claimed the status of rising power. The group of the BRICS, in which it got involved, represented a new form of contestation of Eurocentric global governance by the Global South, but it also further problematized India's dual identity as both an aspiring great power and the advocate for the developing world. At the UN, New Delhi turned to narrower priorities, notably UN reform to get a permanent seat at the UNSC. The claim for a seat at the UNSC, along with the 1998 nuclear tests, were effort to assert itself as a rising power at an individual level, even though symbolically it could have collective resonance. Politically too, worldmaking ambitions further narrowed in terms of the scope of potential change, and the recogni-

tion of sovereignty as individual status became a more pronounced objective.

Lastly, it is worth noting that, over those years, India resisted other worldmaking projects that it perceived as reinforcing hierarchies, and that implied renegotiating the norm of sovereignty. The 2000s saw the emergence of a global debate on the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), which proposed to make state sovereignty conditional to the respect of Human Rights. In 2011, during debates on a possible intervention in Libya, India's stance on sovereignty slightly evolved,¹⁹ but finally retracted to its traditional stance on the primacy of state sovereignty.²⁰ It ultimately resisted the reconfiguration of sovereignty proposed by the United States and its allies and re-committed to its old territorial interpretation of sovereignty, in line with the Nehruvian conception.

Overall, during that period, there was a discernible continuity in India's core commitment to an old understanding and discourse of territorial sovereignty as well as of its worldmaking project of securing the interests of the Global South. However, its ambitions evolved in the post-liberalization context in a way that involved fewer systemic demands and less radical notions of equality. Therefore, it seems that they less required flexible notions of sovereignty. Notions of sovereignty became more flexible in relation to the private sector, as for instance in the case of treaties protecting foreign investments.

Sovereignty in Modi's India (2014–)

Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014 and was re-elected in 2019. Since then, his government has frequently portrayed India as the “Mother of Democracy” and emphasized that it was “the largest democracy in the world” (for an analysis of this discourse, see Chacko and Thakur, 2025). Claims have been made that India is more representative now than in the past (Shaikh, 2024). In 2025, a survey reported that Modi was the “most popular democratic leader” with an approval rating of 75 percent (NDTV, 2025). Nevertheless, the markers of liberal democracy have been fading. To many analysts, India has become an example of the “global democratic recession” (Tudor, 2023). There have been major “setbacks” of political rights and civil liberties in the country since Modi came to power (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022: 8; Ganguly, 2023) and attempts to legitimize older “authoritarian statist tendencies” (Chacko, 2018, citing Poulantzas, 1980). Ideologically, the Hindu nationalist BJP represents a rupture with the traditionally secular, pluralist, democratic vision of Indian society carried by the Congress since independence and embodied in the Indian constitution. The BJP’s ethno-religious conception of India, centred on the idea that India is a Hindu nation, has de facto challenged the core liberal principle of equal democratic rights for all citizens. The controversial 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which set a religious criterion for citizenship, in

combination with the National Register of Citizens, has created the possibility of “second-rate rate citizens” within the Muslim minority (Goodyear, 2024). Christophe Jaffrelot (2021) terms this configuration, where the majoritarian community defines the nation, an “ethnic democracy.” The government’s support for Hindutva has also fuelled broader violence and discrimination against minorities (Waikar, 2018; Kinvall and Svensson, 2010). Paradoxically, India’s undermining of liberal rights and democratic institutions at home has occurred alongside a warming of relations with the “liberal West,” enhancing its international recognition as a democratic power (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023: 451). This raises critical questions: How does Hindutva change India’s relationship to sovereignty and how has it affected its global role? This section argues that Hindutva has reshaped India’s conception and practice of sovereignty, linking domestic ethno-nationalism to selective international assertiveness and a constrained vision of global equality. Regional pressures have also affected India’s relation to territorial sovereignty.

A More Assertive Territorial Sovereignty Toward Pakistan

Under the Modi government, India’s discourse on sovereignty has been elevated, amplifying the traditional Nehruvian inflexible conception of territorial sovereignty. However, it has been operationalized selectively, and its meaning has been reshaped unevenly. The rhetoric is assertive toward Pakistan, but cautious toward China. Concomitantly, India has become more interventionist

toward the diaspora, that is, it has become more flexible with the norm of sovereignty with some allied countries.

Hindu nationalists have a more assertive stance on national sovereignty, with greater emphasis on territorial integrity and territorial control. This stance goes hand-in-hand with valuing the use of hard/military power, and is in tune with the Hindu nationalist idea of a “muscular” India, which Modi embodies with the image of a strongman.²¹ In practice, this more assertive stance on sovereignty has manifested itself in relation to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, that is, also in relation to Pakistan. Under Modi, sovereignty has been invoked, performed, and exercised toward Pakistan with new intensity. First, India has shown an increased willingness to use hard power and claim sovereignty over the entire contested region. In February 2019, New Delhi decided to retaliate against Pakistan after a deadly terror attack in Pulwama, leading commentators to fear a potential nuclear war (Yusuf 2019). Second, in August 2019, the Government of India revoked the special status and autonomy of the state of Jammu and Kashmir by abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, downgrading it to two Union Territories directly ruled from the center, and imposing an unprecedented months-long shutdown, including a communications blackout. In May 2025, following an attack by militants in Pahalgam, India retaliated even more strongly by launching an attack on Pakistan. Operation Sindoor escalated tensions to new heights.

The Hindu nationalist more assertive stance on sovereignty has also manifested through what Atul Mishra (2021b) calls India’s new posture of “hard sovereignty.” He notes that, since 2019, after the BJP-led government changed the status of Jammu and Kashmir and the parliament passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, India’s message has been that “outsiders have no stake in India’s internal affairs, especially as it undergoes profound and rapid changes. India’s stance on non-interference in the domestic affairs of states has become more stringent. Overall, the Modi government has reacted increasingly strongly to perceived threats to sovereignty coming from Pakistan and has deployed a corresponding hard-sovereignty discourse.

Ambiguity Toward China

In contrast, India’s response to China has been more ambiguous. In this case, the generally strong Indian discourse on territorial sovereignty has not always been followed by actions. When June 2020, the Indian Armed Forces and the People’s Liberation Army of the PRC clashed at the Sino-Indian border in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh, along the Line of Actual Control, the Indian Army reported that 20 Indian soldiers had been killed in the encounter (Haider et al., 2020). This constituted a major national security crisis with high domestic salience: a direct threat to territory at the contested border that India considers its own. Indian sovereignty was under threat through Chinese actions. Yet, after the Galwan Valley clash, Modi’s initial public response advanced

a narrative of denial around the question of territorial loss. This was noted and criticized by the Indian media, the political opposition, and prominent diplomats as “[endorsing] the Chinese position” and surrendering territory (Outlook, 2020).

Subsequently, the government remained silent on the violation of India’s territorial integrity (Singh, 2022a), despite ongoing clashes and China’s continued infrastructure building and occupation within Indian territory. It provided little information on the border situation and the circumstances that led to the Galwan clashes (see Joshi, 2022). It “studiously avoided referring to the region when Chinese troops imposed their biggest blockade on the Indian side of the LAC” (Ibid). By December 2022, not only had China not withdrawn its troops, but fears were expressed among Indian military veterans and experts that it planned “to create a new status quo on the frontier by claiming ownership of territory they have occupied” (Siddiqui, 2022; see also Singh, 2022b). According to reports, it is estimated that, since May 2020, China has taken over and has occupied “close to 1,000 sq km of India-claimed territory in eastern Ladakh” by blockading areas that Indian troops patrolled until 2020 (Siddiqui, 2022; Singh, 2022b). India responded by increasing its defence budget in 2022 and 2023 and investing at the border (Kumar, 2023), and showed willingness to deepen its security and defence cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners. It thereby showed its will to materially balance China. However, in a context of strong

power asymmetry, India has tended to carefully signal via implicature towards China (Khan and Sullivan de Estrada, 2024) and de facto lost control of some territory. The extent of Chinese inroads was not acknowledged, and the sovereignty vocabulary was not used, preventing sovereignty from emerging as an issue to address.

In October 2024, India and China concluded a disengagement agreement leading China to withdraw its forces to pre-2020 positions, formally ending the four-year military standoff. However, it remains that India’s relationship to sovereignty regarding China seems to be changing. While earlier sovereignty challenges were treated more uniformly, since Galwan there has been a marked discrepancy between the strong reaction to Pakistan and the more ambiguous one toward China—both in speech and action. This seems to suggest that, under Modi, the power differential with a given state influences if sovereignty features in Indian discourse.²² Paradoxically, despite Hindu nationalism’s avowed commitment to territorial integrity,²³ regional constraints appear to have reshaped the traditionally strict discourse on sovereignty, producing a more pragmatic, cautious, approach.

Interference Abroad and the Diaspora

A further shift on sovereignty concerns India’s growing interference in other states through engagement with its diaspora. According to Canadian intelligence services, New Delhi perpetrated foreign interference and transnational repression “plays a central role in India’s

activity in Canada” (Reuters, 2025). This statement comes after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of being involved in the killing of a Sikh political activist on Canadian territory in 2023. The US Department of State (2023: 16) similarly noted reports of the Indian government being “engaged in transnational repression against ... members of diaspora populations.” Thus, India seems to signal that a more powerful state can prioritize its own perceived interests over strict adherence to the norm of sovereignty, even when this encroaches on the sovereignty of other countries—including partners

Hindu Nationalist Worldmaking Aspirations

Modi and the Hindu nationalist volunteer movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to which the BJP is closely connected, have long articulated world-making projects rooted in Hindu right-wing narratives developed in the early twentieth century (Jaffrelot, 1996; Bhatt and Mukta, 2000). These projects offer a clear vision of what the international order should look like. Arguably, the search for a more equal order no longer involves flexible notions of sovereignty for greater overall equality, partly because of the hierarchical assumptions of Hindu nationalism and its narrower conception of power.

On one level, the Hindu nationalist project resembles its Nehruvian predecessor. Both seek a more equal international order, pursue recognition for India as a major power, and affirm India’s exceptionalism. Modi similarly ad-

vances the belief that India has a moral and spiritual role to play in global affairs, encapsulated in the notion of “Vishwa guru” (world teacher), now common in official discourse. Kate Sullivan de Estrada (2023, 436) convincingly argues that it represents a fight for recognition in a persistently hierarchical world, with old roots: a “quest for superior social positioning ... to remake the global social hierarchy of civilizations and states.” As she notes, both “post-independence Nehruvianism and Hindu nationalism” are “grounded on a belief in India’s spiritual superiority, juxtaposed against the spiritual impoverishment of modern Western civilization, and imagine a moral community rooted in tradition at the level of the nation. Each expresses a sense of mission: an Indian duty to serve as the moral and spiritual leader of humanity” (Ibid, 448).

However, the underlying philosophies diverge sharply. Hindutva’s ethno-nationalist foundations contrast with the internationalist nationalism of the 1950s, which was tied to anti-colonial egalitarianism. Domestically, Hindu nationalism undermines liberal principles of political equality, raising the question of how a state that circumscribes equality at home can meaningfully promote it abroad. Moreover, Hindu nationalism shares aspects of cultural nationalism with contemporary white nationalist movements, particularly in its treatment of racial and religious difference (Ashutosh 2021). Its vision of decolonization is hierarchical rather than egalitarian. Indeed, the discourse of “decolonization” has frequently been deployed to de-

flect criticism and legitimize Hindutva projects—from anti-conversion laws to historical revisionism—which reinforce hierarchies rather than embody the egalitarian ethos of decolonization (Pani 2024).

These limits are also evident in India's attempt to position itself as the leader of the "Global South." The term re-emerged on the international scene after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Russell, 2023). As New Delhi seeks to maintain a multipolar order amid US–China rivalry, it has new incentives to speak on behalf of the Global South, though its close partnership with the U.S. (until recently at least) limited the extent of its ambitions for structural changes. New Delhi started to openly revive the rhetoric of India's Global South leadership in 2022, and especially in 2023, during the G20 and the three Voice of Global South Summits that it organized around it. India expressed its ambition to be the spokesperson for the Global South: Modi stressed India's intention to shape its G20 priorities in consultation with "fellow-travellers in the global South, whose voice often goes unheard" (PIB, 2022). External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argued that it was the duty of India to serve as "the voice of the global South" (NDTV, 2023). In July 2023, Modi argued that "[he saw] India being that strong shoulder that if the Global South has to make that high jump, India can be that shoulder to propel it ahead" (*India Today*, 2023). India's claim was reinforced by the G20 New Delhi Declaration, which admitted the African Union as a permanent member.

Yet this leadership seems to primarily serve to elevate India's status—especially its bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat—rather than to promote deeper equality across the international system. Significantly, India has made the link between being a voice of the Global South and getting a seat at the Security Council. Furthermore, India wishes to gain greater recognition and status (as in the past), but without the aspiration for a more expansive and deeper notion of equality in international society. Its current worldmaking project does not extend to advocating radical systemic changes that would redefine sovereignty globally for the sake of greater equality at an individual and collective level.

Current initiatives for the Global South remain quite modest and are no longer anti-systemic. India's South-South cooperation now seeks to find accommodation within the US-led order in the Indo-Pacific region, while advocating greater multipolarity and a more inclusive vision (Blarel et al., 2025). Equality seems to mean first and foremost the inclusion and recognition of other powers at the top of different hierarchies, as exemplified by the G20.

Civilizational Discourse: From Nehru to Modi

Nehruvian and Hindu nationalist understandings of civilization are also starkly different. During decolonization, Nehru saw India as a civilizational state and wrote about Indian civilization in *Glimpses of World History* (1934) and *The Discovery of India* (1946). His discourse emerged in a context in which

Christian and enlightenment-based conceptions of civilization had served as the criterion for claiming sovereignty since the nineteenth century (Duara, 2001: 100). In the 20th century, after WWI, the idea of multiple civilizations gained prominence due to changing geopolitical circumstances and the rise of national movements. Duara notes that “ascendant national movements in the colonies [...] sought to utilize the notion of civilization precisely to counter Western definitions. The idea of civilization as warranting sovereign status circulated the world as different societies claimed this status” (Duara, 2004: 3). Like other civilizational discourses, the Nehruvian version thus went hand in hand with nationalism. These civilizational narratives, for India and China, “justified the leadership of each to the decolonizing world” (Dura, 2010: 23). They were also part of a strategy to regain a due place in the international sphere. These civilization discourses challenged the West by valorizing other values (Duara, 2010: 23). Nehruvian India put forward its “civilizational pacifism,” its civilizational ideals of “peace, contentment, solidarity, and world unity, as against the Western propensity to fight wars and cause destruction” (Thakur, 2018: 12). Nehru’s civilizational discourse was compatible with a liberal order and a larger anticolonial democratic ethos. Older claims of cultural influence in Southeast Asia and of Greater India, which could have led to claims over neighbouring countries, were relegated to the background, as Nehru distanced himself from them after independence.

In contrast, the Modi government’s rhetoric has been underpinned by a civilizational Hindu discourse. Commenting on the Hindu nationalist vision of India’s place in the international system, Rahul Sagar (2009: 801) notes that “Hindu nationalists want Indians to act as muscular defenders of Hindu civilization.” Saleem et al. (2022) observe that “Hindutva is currently a civilizational populist narrative that is the force behind India’s “saffron tide.” This ideology leads to a different relation to worldmaking and sovereignty internationally. Unlike Nehru, Modi defends the existence of a civilizational state different from (and against) the liberal order. This vision is not based on a universalist rights-based vision in which equality has an expansive meaning. It rather leads to arguing that universal standards like Human Rights should have a caveat for India, rather than be universally applied. Its opposition to the West leads it to argue for exceptions for India rather than for refashioning the international order at large.

The civilizational discourse of a Hindu India both undermines the principle of popular sovereignty as rights in the country, while implicitly challenging the territorial sovereignty of other states (on this, see Singh 2022a). The civilizational understanding of India has been used to justify either the exclusion of non-Hindu minorities from the Indian polity or to claim territories outside of national boundaries in the neighbourhood. Hindu nationalist discourses on an undivided India or “Akhand Bharat,” an imagined civilizational geography, echo older ex-

pansionist narratives of a greater India from the early 20th century, which had been rejected by independent India.

In sum, under Modi, India's sovereignty discourse and practice has been reshaped unevenly, depending on power asymmetries, notably regional power asymmetries, the civilizational ideas of Hindutva, and authoritarian trends. Whereas, under Nehru, sovereignty claims were linked to a universalist, egalitarian project rooted in anti-colonialism, under Hindutva, sovereignty is framed as the prerogative of a civilizational state entitled to exceptions, rather than a shared condition whose expansion benefits all. Not having a strong domestic liberal democratic ideal makes it difficult to deploy a worldview based on a broader egalitarian vision. India has rather continued to favour the realization of equality through accumulating hard power and individual recognition. Global structural constraints also shape this trajectory, though a full analysis of these is beyond this article's scope.

Conclusion

This article has argued that India does not have a simple and by default strict postcolonial conception of sovereignty, to be opposed to the supposed flexibility of Western powers. Rather, its understanding of sovereignty since independence can be analysed along two axes: a non-flexible territorial understanding, and a flexible understanding dependent on the nature of Indian worldmaking projects.

During the Nehruvian era emerged a territorial conception along with anticolonial worldmaking ambition that involved a strategic use of the norm of sovereignty for the sake of greater democratization and equality in the international society. The original territorial understanding of sovereignty remained throughout the century and, in fact, amplified and culminated under Narendra Modi's prime ministership. However, Indian worldmaking ambitions have narrowed. This narrowing, in turn, has changed India's relation to sovereignty. The Hindu nationalist ideology of the Modi government has played a role in unevenly changing India's conception and practice of sovereignty. In particular, the Hindu nationalist version to rights and democracy does not articulate the wider and deeper understanding of equality that underpinned the drive behind and the decolonization worldmaking project. It does not seek to use the norm of sovereignty strategically and shape it to pursue such objective. Yet Indian conception and practice of sovereignty have also changed incrementally. Evolutions are observable under the governments of Indira Gandhi and the post-liberalization governments of the 1990s–2000s—including, arguably, the narrowing of worldmaking ambitions. Further research should analyse the evolution of registers of equality in these governments, for while they used the same term, its meaning substantially evolved.

Notes

- 1 As US former deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott described India.
- 2 On Hindu nationalism, see Gould (2004), Hansen (1999), Jaffrelot (1996; ed. 2007), Hansen and Srirupa Roy (eds. 2022).
- 3 For instance, the use of Hindi acronyms (as in SAGAR), and debates on the use of Hindi in the Foreign Service. On multi-alignment, see Hall (2016); Baru (2021).
- 4 Those constraints include economic constraints, still clear today in relation to the BRI.
- 5 I do not focus on economic sovereignty, which is a distinct topic.
- 6 On other hierarchical and reactionary worldmaking visions, see for instance Dilawri (2023); Banerjee et al., forthcoming.
- 7 Liberals have tended to focus on debates on intervention and democracy promotion. This is less significant here for my argument.
- 8 See for instance India's interventions in its neighbourhood, or its attitude towards the Ukraine-Russia war.
- 9 One of its first uses in connection to India can be traced back to 2007, when the then United States Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott commented on the US-India negotiations over a deal on nuclear cooperation.
- 10 American aid to Pakistan and the latter's signing of military pacts also pushed Nehru to emphasize non-intervention.
- 11 For an overview of this debate, see Chacko (2012: 1–3).
- 12 On the role of these jurists, see Koskenniemi (2004).
- 13 On the hierarchical dimension of the international system, see Hobson and Sharman (2005); for the argument that this system was a regression vis-à-vis past practices in which European and non-European states had treated each other as equals, and a critique of the universalism of Western international law, see the work of C.H. Alexandrowicz, in Armitage and Pitts (2017).
- 14 New historical works on the concept and practice of sovereignty during colonial times have explored the behaviour of semi-sovereign or subordinate sovereign entities in the British empire, like princely states, how layered sovereignty worked, and the contestation of sovereignty under empire by different Indian actors (Banerjee, 2018; Shankar, 2022; Beverly, 2015). They have also highlighted the role of international law and its language in the construction and claim of sovereignty in South Asia before independence (see for instance Khan, 2017; Saksena, 2023), which continued after independence at the UN and in other fora.
- 15 See also Bhagavan, 2010; Chacko, 2011; Bajpai, 2003; Raghavan, 2010: 2–3.

- 16 He references Sahgal, 1982.
- 17 Bharatiya Janata Party (1991:16). Cited in Singh (2005:7).
- 18 My thanks to Vineet Thakur for mentioning that point.
- 19 India first accepted its principle in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, yet it proved “reluctant” to endorse R2P and its human rights promotion agenda (Destradi, 2017; for details, see Aneja, 2014; Bloomfield, 2015; Choedon, 2017; Jaganathan and Kurtz, 2014; Møller, 2017; Virk, 2013; Hall, 2013).
- 20 The focus of attention was two resolutions passed by the UNSC. The resolution 1970 condemned the use of force by the Libyan regime, imposed sanctions and referred the case to the International Criminal Court. The resolution 1973 was in favour of a military intervention through establishing an immediate ceasefire. It also authorized the establishment of a no-fly zone, called to enforce an arm embargo, decided an asset freeze. Most importantly, it allowed member states to “take all necessary measures,” except occupation, to protect civilians. India voted in favour of the resolution 1970 but abstained on the resolution 1973. It refused to approve it, despite lobbying from Western powers, including the United States (*The Hindu*, 2011). While remaining very cautious, India had first moved in favour of what looked like a shift in foreign policy (Hall, 2013), accepting a referral to the ICC. But it fell back to condemning violence and supporting state sovereignty. It remained reluctant to adhere to a new post-Cold War narrative linking human rights, democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention, despite engaging with a US democracy discourse under Manmohan Singh and supporting some of the US-led initiatives on democracy (see Sullivan, 2023: 449).
- 21 As Neilesh Bose (2024) notes, the term “muscular nationalism” has been often used to describe Modi. He refers for instance to Chawla (2022).
- 22 My thanks to Atul Mishra for mentioning this insightful point.
- 23 Varshney (1993).

References

- Acharya, Amitav. 2004. “How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism.” *International Organization* 58: 2, pp. 239–275.
- Adams, Simon. 2012. “Rwanda, Syria and the Responsibility to Protect.” April 4, *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/simon-adams/syria-united-nations_b_1403686.html. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Amnesty International India. 2013. “The Armed Forces Special Powers Act: A Renewed Debate in India on Human Rights and National Security.” Briefing, September, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/asa20042201>

[3en.pdf/](#). (Accessed November 15, 2025).

- Anderson, Edward and Christophe Jaffrelot. 2018. "Hindu nationalism and the "saffronisation of the public sphere": an interview with Christophe Jaffrelot." *Contemporary South Asia* 26: 4, 468–82.
- Aneja, Urvashi. 2014. "India, R2P and Humanitarian Assistance: A Case of Norm Containment." *Global Responsibility to Protect* 6, 227–245.
- Anghie, Anthony. 2005. *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*. Cambridge University Press.
- Anghie, Anthony. 2006. "The Evolution of International Law: colonial and postcolonial realities." *Third World Quarterly* 27, 5, 739-753.
- Armitage, David and Jennifer Pitts (eds.). 2017. *C. H. Alexandrowicz: The Law of Nations in Global History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ashutosh, Ishan. 2021. The transnational routes of white and Hindu nationalisms. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45(2), 319–339.
- Bajpai, Kanti. 2003. "Indian Conceptions of Order and Justice: Nehruvian, Gandhian, Hindutva and Neo-liberal." In *Order and Justice in International Relation*, ed. Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis and Andrew Hurrell, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bajpai, Kanti. 2003. "Indian Conceptions of Order and Justice: Nehruvian, Gandhian, Hindutva and Neo-liberal." In *Order and Justice in International Relation*, ed. Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis and Andrew Hurrell, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bajpai, Kanti. 2013. "India's Regional Disputes." In *Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order*, ed. Bruce Jones, Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu (2013), Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Banerjee, Milinda. 2018. *The mortal God: Imagining the sovereign in colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Banerjee, Anindita, Sherryl Vint, David M. Higgins and Jordan S. Carroll, eds. (Forthcoming). Reactionary Worldbuilding: From Speculative Imagination to Political Practice, MIT Press.*
- Baru, Sanjay. 2021. "India's 'multi-alignment' and the Jaishankar Way." *Deccan Chronicle*, 20 September.
- Basrur, Rajesh. 2017. "Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged." *International Affairs* 93: 1, 7–26.
- Basrur, Rajesh. 2023. *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*. Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.

- Bayly, Martin. 2017. "Imagining new worlds: Forging 'non-western' international relations in late colonial India." *British Academy Review*, 30, 50–53.
- Beverly, Eric Lewis. 2015. *Hyderabad, British India, and the World: Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty, c. 1850–1950*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhagavan, Manu. 2012. *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World*. New Delhi: India Today Group; Noida: Harper Collins Publishers India.
- Bhagavan, Manu. 2010. "A New Hope: India, the United Nations and the Making of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (2), 311–347.
- Bharatiya Janata Party. 1991. *Election Manifesto 1996*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party All-India General Secretary, Manifesto Committee.
- Bhatt, Chetan and Parita Mukta. 2000. "Hindutva in the West: Mapping the antinomies of diaspora nationalism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (3), 407–441.
- Biersteker, Thomas J. and Cynthia Weber. 1996. "The social construction of state sovereignty." in *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, ed. Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blarel, Nicolas. 2025. "The Domestic-International Nexus in Indian Foreign Policy-making." *CSDS* 13:1, 48–60.
- Blarel, Nicolas, Thibault Fournol, Raphaëlle Khan, and Isabelle Saint-Mézard. 2025. "India in the Indo-Pacific: Ordering at the Margins." In *Order and Agency in the Indo-Pacific*, eds. Delphine Allès, Christophe Jaffrelot and Patrick Köllner, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bloomfield, Alan. 2015. "India and the Libyan Crisis: Flirting with the Responsibility to Protect, Retreating to the Sovereignty Norm." *Contemporary Security Policy* 36:1, 27–55.
- Bose, Neilesh. 2024. "The Resurgence of Religion: Worldmaking in the Era of Desecularization." Social Science Research Council. March 14. <https://intersections.ssrc.org/field-reviews/the-return-of-religion-and-nationalism-reconsidered/>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Burke, Roland. 2010. *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
- Caporaso, James. 2000. "Changes in the Westphalian Order: Territory, Public Authority and Sovereignty." *International Studies Review* 2, 2, 1-28.
- Chacko, Priya. 2011. "The Internationalist Nationalist: Pursuing an ethical modernity with Jawaharlal Nehru." In *International Relations and Non-Western Thought*,

- ed. Robbie Shilliam, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 94–212.
- Chacko, Priya. 2012. *Indian foreign policy: The politics of postcolonial identity from 1947–2004*, London: Routledge.
- Chacko, Priya. 2018. “The Right Turn in India: Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalisation.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48:4, 541–565.
- Chacko, Priya and Vineet Thakur. 2025. “Civilisation-Washing.” Caste and Indian Diplomacy at the G20 Summit.” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 20: 3, pp. 636–663.
- Chatterjee Miller, Manjari and Kate Sullivan de Estrada. 2017. “Pragmatism in Indian foreign policy: How ideas constrain Modi.” *International Affairs* 93: 1, 27–49.
- Chaudhuri, Rudra. 2014. *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States since 1947*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Chawla, Prabhu. 2022. “Muscular nationalism, pugnacious Bharat.” *The New Indian Express*, 10 September.
- Chellaney, Brahma. 1999. “Challenges to India’s National Security in the New Millennium.” In *Securing India’s Future in the New Millennium*, ed. Brahma Chellaney, London: Sangam Books.
- Choedon, Yeshi. 2017. “India on Humanitarian Intervention and Responsibility to Protect: Shifting Nuances.” *India Quarterly* 73:4, 430–453.
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States. “The nonaligned movement: India’s Chairmanship and relations with the superpowers.” 1 March 1983, paper, file CIA-RDP85T00287R000700650001-5.
- Cooper, Frederick. *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Dasgupta, Sandipto. 2024. *Legalizing the Revolution: India and the Constitution of the Postcolony*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Datta-Ray, Sunanda K. 1984. *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Destradi, Sandra. 2017. “India’s Reluctant Approach to R2P: Lessons from *Perilous Interventions*.” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 9, 229–236.
- Duara, Prasenjit. 2001. “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism.” *Journal of World History* 12:1, 99–130.
- Duara, Prasenjit. 2004. “The Discourse of Civilization and Decolonization.” *Journal of World History* 15: 1, 1–5.

- Duara, Prasenjit. 2009. *The Global and Regional in China's Nation-Formation*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Fair, C. Christine. 2005. "Learning to Think the Unthinkable: Lessons from India's Nuclear Tests." *India Review* 4: 1, pp. 23–58.
- Gandhi, Indira. 1983. Speech at the 38 session, General Assembly of the United Nations, 28 September. <https://pminewyork.gov.in/pdf/uploadpdf/73201lms32.pdf>.
- Ganguly, Sumit and Eswaran Sridharan. 2013. "The End of India's Sovereignty Hawks?" *Foreign Policy*, 7 November. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/07/the-end-of-indias-sovereignty-hawks/>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Ganguly, Sumit. 2023. "Modi's Undeclared Emergency." *Journal of Democracy* 34:3, 144–152.
- Getachew, Adom. 2019. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Gilman, Nils. 2015. "The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction." *Humanity* 6:1, 1–16.
- Goodyear, Sheena. 2024. "India's new citizenship law for religious minorities leave Muslims out." 13 March, CBC Radio, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/india-citizenship-law-1.7142959>.
- Gould, William. 2004. *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grovogui, Siba N'Zatioula. 1996. *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Guyot-Réchart, Bérénice and Elisabeth Leake, eds. 2023. *South Asia Unbound: New International Histories of the Subcontinent*. Leiden University Press.
- Gupta, Surupa, Rani D. Mullen, Rajesh Basrur, Ian Hall, Nicolas Blarel, Manjeet S. Pardesi, and Sumit Ganguly. 2019. "Indian Foreign Policy under Modi: A New Brand or Just Repackaging?" *International Studies Perspectives* 20:1, 1–45.
- Haider, Suhasini, Ananth Krishnan, Dinakar Peri. 2020. "Indian Army says 20 soldiers killed in clash with Chinese troops in the Galwan area." *The Hindu*, November 28. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-army-says-20-soldiers-killed-in-clash-with-chinese-troops-in-the-galwan-area/article61668218.ece> (accessed November 15, 2025).
- Hall, Ian. 2013. "Tilting at Windmills? The Indian Debate over the Responsibility to Protect after UNSC Resolution 1973." *Global Responsibility to Protect* 5, 84–108.

- Hall, Ian. 2015. "Is a 'Modi Doctrine' emerging in Indian foreign policy?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69: 3, 247–52.
- Hall, Ian (2016), "Multi-alignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi." *The Round Table* 105 (3), 271–286.
- Hall, Ian. 2019. *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*. Bristol University Press.
- Hall, Ian. 2022. "India's Foreign Policy: Nationalist Aspirations and Enduring Constraints." *The Round Table*, vol. 111, no. 3, 321–332.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom. 1999. *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Chichester: Princeton University Press.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom and Srirupa Roy, eds. 2022. *Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hartnett, Lianne. 2022. "Love is Worldmaking: Reading Rabindranath Tagore's Gora as International Theory." *International Studies Quarterly* 66:3, 1–12.
- Heilbrunner, Oded. 2021. "Review Article, Grossraum Europa: The Nazi Concept of 'Greater European Space' in Recent Literature." *English Historical Review* CXXXVI: 583, 1574–1594.
- Hobson, John M. and J. C. Sharman. 2005. "The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change." *European Journal of International Relations* 11, 1 63–98.
- Huju, Kira. 2022. "Saffronizing diplomacy: The Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule." *International Affairs* 98: 2, 423–441.
- India Today. "PM Modi bats for permanent UN Security Council seat, rights of Global South." 13 July 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/modi-france-visit-pushes-permanent-un-security-council-seat-rights-global-south-2405983-2023-07-13>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Irwin, Douglas A. 2025. "Dismantling the License Raj: The Long Road to India's 1991 Trade Reforms." Working Paper 33420, National Bureau of Economic Research, January. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w33420>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 1996. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed. 2007. *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic*

Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Jaffrelot, Christophe and Pratinav Anil. 2020. *India's first dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975–1977*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Jaganathan, Madhan Mohan and Gerrit Kurtz. 2014. "Singing the tune of sovereignty? India and the responsibility to protect." *Conflict, Security & Development*, 14:4, 461–487.
- Joshi, Manoj. 2022. "Going After Richa Chadha Won't Alter What Happened in Galwan, or Why". *The Wire*, December 6. <https://thewire.in/security/going-after-richa-chandha-wont-alter-what-happened-in-galwan-or-why> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Karmazin, Ales. 2023. *Liquid Sovereignty: Post-Colonial Statehood of China and India in the New International Order*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kawashima, Shin. 2023. "China, India and the Fight for Global South Leadership." *The Diplomat*, 7 February, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/china-india-and-the-fight-for-global-south-leadership>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Kennedy, Andrew B. 2012. *The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru: National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, Raphaëlle. 2017. "India as a Norm Claimer: Normative Struggles and the Assertion of Sovereignty at the San Francisco Conference (1945)." In *Theorizing Indian Foreign Policy*, eds. Mischa Hansel, Raphaëlle Khan, and MéliSSa Levaillant, Routledge.
- Khan, Raphaëlle. 2020. "Between Ambitions and Caution: India, Human Rights, and Self-Determination at the United Nations." in *Decolonization, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Global Human Rights Politics*, eds. A. Dirk Moses, Marco Duranti, and Roland Burke, Cambridge University Press, 207–235.
- Khan, Raphaëlle. 2021. "Sovereignty After the Empire and the Search for a New Order: India's Attempt to Negotiate a Common Citizenship in the Commonwealth (1947–1949)." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49:6, 1141–1174.
- Khan, Raphaëlle. 2022. "Disrupting the Empire and Forging IR: The Role of India's Early Think Tanks in the Decolonization Process, 1936–1950s." *The International History Review* 44:4, 836–855.
- Khan, Raphaëlle and Taylor C. Sherman. 2022. "India and overseas Indians in Ceylon and Burma, 1946–1965: Experiments in post-imperial sovereignty." *Modern Asian Studies* 56: 4, pp. 1153–1182.
- Khan, Raphaëlle and Kate Sullivan de Estrada. 2024. "Signalling through Implicature: How India Signals in the Indo-Pacific." *The British Journal of Politics and*

International Relations 27:1, 1–26.

- Khan, Raphaëlle. (Forthcoming). *Decolonization and the Global Order: India and International Organizations, 1919–1960s*. Columbia University Press [provisional title].
- Kinvall, Catarina and Ted Svensson. 2010. “Hindu nationalism, diaspora politics and nation-building in India.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 64(3), 274–292.
- Koskenniemi, Martti. 2002. *The Gentle Civiliser of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960*, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krasner, Stephen. 2009. *Sovereignty: Organised Hypocrisy*, Princeton; Chichester: Princeton University Press.
- Krishna, Sankaran. 2014. “Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India.” *Alternatives, Global, Local, Political* 19:4, 507–521.
- Krishna, Sankaran. 2025. “Vacuous Diversity: Caste and Secularism in Indian Diplomacy.” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 1, 1–28.
- Kumar, Manoj. 2023. “India raises defence budget to \$72.6 bln amid tensions with China”. Reuters, February 1. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-raises-defence-budget-726-bln-amid-tensions-with-china-2023-02-01/> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Lall, K. B. “India and the New International Economic Order.” *International Studies* 17 (1978), no. 3-4: 435-461.
- Leake, Elisabeth. 2016. “At the nation-state’s edge: Centre-periphery relations in post-1947 South Asia.” *The Historical Journal*, 59: 2, pp. 509–539.
- Lloyd, Lorna. 1990. “‘A Most Auspicious Beginning’: The 1946 United Nations General Assembly and the Question of the Treatment of Indians in South Africa.” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 16: 2, pp. 131–153.
- Malik, J. Mohan. 1998. “India Goes Nuclear: Rationale, Benefits, Costs and Implications.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20: 2, pp. 191–215.
- Malone, David M. and Rohan Mukherjee. 2013. “Dilemmas of Sovereignty and Order: India and the UN Security Council.” In *Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order*, ed. Bruce Jones, Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu (2013), Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Mansingh, Surjit. 1984. *India’s search for power: Indira Gandhi’s foreign policy, 1966–1982*. Sage Publications.

- Mansingh, Surjit. 2015. "Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy: Hard Realism?" In David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan and Srinath Raghavan, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mazower, Mark. 2009. *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ministry of External Affairs. 2023. "1st Voice of Global South Summit 2023." 13 January, <https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Mishra, Atul. 2021. *The Sovereign Lives of India and Pakistan: Post-Partition Statehood in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mishra, Atul. 2021b. "Dangers of hard sovereignty." February 10, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/dangers-of-hard-sovereignty/article33795459.ece>.
- Møller, Bjørn. 2017. "India and the responsibility to protect." *Third World Quarterly*, 38:8, 1921–1934.
- Moyn, Samuel. 2018. *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Murray. 2024. "Slow Dissent and Worldmaking beyond Imperial Relations in "Kamer-amère" (Bitter Cameroon)." *International Studies Quarterly* 68: 2, 1–16.
- Narlikar, Amrita. 2006. "Fairness in International Trade Negotiations: Developing Countries in the GATT and WTO." *The World Economy* 29:8, pp. 989–1155.
- NDTV. 2023. "It's India's duty to become 'Voice of Global South': S Jaishankar." 6 January, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/its-indias-duty-to-become-voice-of-global-south-s-jaishankar-3670872>.
- NDTV. 2025. "PM Modi Most Popular Democratic Leader With 75% Approval Rating: Survey." 27 July, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/pm-modi-most-popular-democratic-leader-with-75-approval-rating-survey-8954349>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Pani, Sarayu. 2024. "How Decolonisation Lost its Way." *The Wire*, 25 September, <https://thewire.in/politics/how-decolonisation-lost-its-way>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Plett, Barbara. 2011. "UN Security Council middle powers' Arab Spring dilemma." 8 November, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15628006>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Poulantzas, Nicos. 1980. *State, Power, Socialism*. London: Verso, [c1978].

- Prakash, Gyan. 2019. *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Press Information Bureau. 2022. "Today, India commences its G20 Presidency – Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister." Government of India, 1 December, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1880141>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Raghavan, Srinath. 2010. *War and Peace in Modern India*. Palgrave Macmillan London.
- Raghavan, Srinath. 2013. *1971: A global history of the creation of Bangladesh*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press.
- Raghavan, Srinath. 2014. "The United Nations and the Emergence of Independent India." In *Charter of the United Nations: together with scholarly commentaries and essential historical documents*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Joseph Lampert, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Raghavan, Srinath. 2025. *Indira Gandhi and the years that transformed India*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Raja Mohan, C. 2010. "Rising India: Partner in shaping the global commons?" *The Washington Quarterly* 33, 3, 133-148.
- Ranjan, Prabhash. 2024. "India and international investment law: Preserving, delegating, and reclaiming sovereignty." *India Review* 23:2, 115–133.
- Repucci, Sarah and Amy Slipowitz. 2022. "The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule." Freedom House, Washington D.C., https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf.
- Reuters. 2025. "India is a perpetrator of foreign interference, Canadian intelligence agency says." 18 June, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/india-is-perpetrator-foreign-interference-canadian-intelligence-agency-says-2025-06-18/> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Rossow, Richard. 2024. "India and the Global South: Past Obstacles and Future Partnership." In *2024 Global Forecast: A World Dividing – Part IV*, eds. C. Cohen and A. Kisling, Washington D.C.: CSIS, 25-27.
- Russell, Alec. 2023. "Year in a word: 'Global South.'" *Financial Times*, 31 December.
- Sagar, Rahul. 2009. "State of mind: What kind of power will India become?" *International Affairs* 85: 4, 801–816.
- Sahgal, Nayantara. 1982. *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power*. New York: F. Ungar.
- Saksena, Priyasha. 2023. *Sovereignty, International Law, and the Princely States of Colonial South Asia*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- Saleem, Raja M. Ali, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Priya Chacko. 2022. "Civilizationist Populism in South Asia: Turning India Saffron." *Populism & Politics*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), February 24, <https://www.populismstudies.org/civilizationist-populism-in-south-asia-turning-india-saffron/>
- Sawkar, Smriti. 2022. "Champion of the Third World: Indira Gandhi and the Spectacle of the 1983 NAM Summit." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 60:4, 357–377.
- Shaikh, Mohammed Uzair. 2024. "S Jaishankar Says India's Democracy Has Now Delivered, More Representative Than Ever." 6 December, NDTV, <https://www.ndtvprofit.com/nation/s-jaishankar-says-indias-democracy-has-now-delivered-more-representative-than-ever> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Shankar, Devika. 2022. "A Slippery Sovereignty: International Law and the Development of British Cochin." *Comparative studies in society and history*, Vol.64 (3), pp. 820–844.
- Sherman, Taylor C. 2022. *Nehru's India: A History in Seven Myths*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Shilliam, Robbie, ed. 2011. *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, colonialism and investigations of global modernity*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Singh, Kulwindar. 2005. "Foreign Direct Investments in India: A Critical Analysis of FDI from 1991–2005." Paper, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi.
- Singh, Sushant. 2022a. "The World Ignored Russia's Delusions. It Shouldn't Make the Same Mistake with India." *Foreign Policy*, 8 May, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/08/india-akhand-bharat-hindu-nationalist-rss-bjp/>.
- Singh, Sushant. 2022b. "India's China Policy Is Confused". *Foreign Policy*, June 14. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/14/india-china-policy-ladakh-border-clash-quad-modi/> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Singh, Sushant. 2022c. "China Has India Trapped on Their Disputed Border". *Foreign Policy*, December 1. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/01/china-india-border-crisis-infrastructure-ladakh-arunachal-pradesh/> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Sreenivasan, T. P. 2009. "India at the United Nations: More Give than Take." *India Quarterly* 65: 4, 475–481.
- Sullivan de Estrada, Kate. 2023. "What is a *vishwaguru*? Indian civilizational pedagogy as a transformative global imperative." *International Affairs* 99: 2 (2023) 433–455.
- Thakur, Vineet. 2016. "When India Proposed a Casteist Solution to South Africa's Racist Problem." *The Wire*, 4 April, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/exploring-caste>

ism-in-indias-foreign-policy.

- Thakur, Vineet. 2017. "The 'hardy annual': A history of India's first UN resolution." *India Review* 16: 4, pp. 401–429.
- Thakur, Vineet. 2018. *Postscripts on Independence: Foreign Policy Ideas, Identity, and Institutions in India and South Africa*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- The Hindu. 2011. "India abstains from U.N. vote on Libya." March 19. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-abstains-from-un-vote-on-libya/article1551173.ece>. (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Thobani, Sitara. 2018. "Alt-Right with the Hindu-right: long-distance nationalism and the perfection of Hindutva." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42(5), 745–762.
- Tickner, Arlene. 2003. "Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World." *Millennium* 32:2, pp. 295–324.
- Tudor, Maya. 2023. "Why India's Democracy is Dying." *Journal of Democracy* 34:3, 121–32.
- U.N. Security Council [UNSC]. 2011a. March 17. 6498th Meeting (night). [INC]
- U.S. Department of State. 2023. "India 2023 Human Rights Report." Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2023, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/india/> (Accessed November 15, 2025).
- Varshney, Ashutosh. 1993. "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety." *Daedalus*, 122: 3, pp. 227–261.
- Virk, Kudrat. 2013. "India and the Responsibility to Protect: A Tale of Ambiguity." *Global Responsibility to Protect* 5. 56–83.
- Waikar, Prashant. 2018. "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi's Political Discourse." *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4 (2), 191–180.
- Wilder, Gary. 2015. *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Younis, Musab. 2022. *On the Scale of the World: The Formation of Black Anticolonial Thought*. University of California Press.
- Yusuf, Moeed M. 2019. "The Pulwama Crisis: Flirting with War in a Nuclear Environment." *Arms Control Today* 49:4, 6–11.