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A PLACE IN THE WORLD: INDIA'S SEARCH FOR VOICE, STATUS, AND STRATEGIC BALANCE IN A FRAGMENTING INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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Abstract

This paper argues that India's foreign policy in 2022 is best understood through three interconnected dimensions: diplomatic voice, international status, and strategic balance. Existing scholarship has often explained India's external behavior through the lenses of rising power politics, strategic autonomy, or status-seeking, but these are too often treated separately. A more integrated framework shows how India's search for a meaningful place in world politics depends not only on material capabilities, but also on its effort to speak for broader constituencies, to be recognized as a consequential power, and to preserve room for maneuver amid systemic fragmentation. Using a qualitative, interpretive analysis of official speeches, policy statements, summit declarations, and scholarly literature, the paper examines how India in 2022 sought voice through multilateral diplomacy and claims to represent developing countries; sought status through leadership performances and external recognition; and pursued strategic balance through multi-alignment across the United States, Russia, Europe, and Asian partners. The paper contends that these three dimensions are mutually reinforcing but also tension-ridden. Together they illuminate India's contemporary quest not simply to rise, but to define the terms on which it belongs in an unstable international order.

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Introduction: -

The question of India's place in the world has long animated scholarship on Indian foreign policy, but 2022 brought that question into sharper relief. The international order was marked by overlapping fractures: the continuing effects of the pandemic, sharpening United States-China rivalry, war in Ukraine, energy and food insecurity, and visible strains on the institutions of global governance. In this environment, India did not present itself merely as a state navigating turbulence. It sought to project itself as a consequential actor with something distinctive to say about order, representation, and power. Its diplomacy in 2022 was neither reducible to balancing China, nor exhausted by

a civilizational narrative, nor fully captured by the vocabulary of non-alignment's afterlife. Rather, India pursued a place in world politics through a layered search for voice, status, and strategic balance.

The core claim of this paper is that India's contemporary foreign policy is best understood through the interaction of these three dimensions. Voice refers to the effort to shape international agendas and speak credibly in multilateral arenas, especially on behalf of underrepresented interests. Status refers to the pursuit of recognition as a major power whose preferences matter and whose leadership claims deserve acknowledgement. Strategic balance refers to the preservation of autonomy and maneuverability through flexible partnerships, issue-based alignments, and selective distance from bloc politics. In 2022, these dimensions converged with unusual clarity. India sought to speak for concerns associated with the Global South, especially on development, food, fuel, debt, and reform of multilateral institutions. It pressed claims to leadership and recognition through high-profile diplomacy, including its assumption of the G20 presidency in December 2022 and its activism at the United Nations. At the same time, it preserved strategic flexibility by deepening cooperation with the United States and the Quad while maintaining ties with Russia and avoiding full incorporation into Western coalition politics.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on India as a rising power, status and recognition, strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, and Global South diplomacy. The second outlines a focused theoretical framework combining status-seeking, role theory, and strategic autonomy, supplemented by a limited postcolonial sensibility where useful. The third explains the paper's qualitative methodology and 2022-focused interpretive design. The fourth develops the analysis through three interconnected themes: voice, status, and strategic balance. The conclusion argues that India's search for place is best seen not as a singular rise, but as a political project of being heard, being recognized, and remaining unbound in a fragmenting order.

Literature Review:-

A large body of scholarship treats India as a rising power whose external behavior reflects shifts in material capability, domestic politics, and regional ambition. Foundational analyses highlighted the transition from postcolonial idealism and non-alignment toward a more interest-based diplomacy shaped by economic reform and changing power balances (Mohan, 2003; Malone, 2011; Ganguly&Pardesi, 2009). More recent work has emphasized the distinctive features of India's rise: its democratic identity, civilizational claims, ambivalent relationship to liberal order, and persistent developmental constraints (Hall, 2019; Paul, 2021).

A second strand of literature examines status-seeking. Here India is understood not only as accumulating power but also as pursuing recognition as a major power. Status in international relations is not reducible to material capabilities; it depends on social acknowledgement by others and on successful performances of role and prestige (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Murray, 2019; Renshon, 2017). Applied to India, this perspective helps explain why institutional reform, summit participation, nuclear legitimacy, and leadership claims matter so deeply. Paul (2021) shows that India's search for major-power standing has been central to its foreign policy across different governments. Yet status scholarship alone can underplay the ideational and diplomatic registers through which India presents itself as more than a self-regarding aspirant.

A third literature focuses on strategic autonomy, often treated as the updated idiom of India's long-standing reluctance to subordinate its choices to external powers. The language has changed from non-alignment to autonomy, issue-based coalitions, and multi-alignment, but the underlying concern with preserving decision-making independence remains visible (Hall, 2016; Jaishankar, 2020; Malone, 2011). This literature has been especially valuable in explaining India's willingness to work simultaneously with the Quad, BRICS, Russia, Europe, and regional minilateral arrangements. Related work on hedging and flexible alignment is useful for conceptualizing this behavior under conditions of uncertainty (Lim & Cooper, 2015; Rajagopalan, 2020).

A fourth body of scholarship emphasizes India's postcolonial identity, multilateral diplomacy, and claims to represent developing-country interests. Chacko (2012) shows that postcolonial identity has had lasting effects on how Indian elites narrate foreign policy purpose. Narlikar's work on multilateral bargaining reveals how India has often combined distributive concerns, normative language, and hard bargaining in global forums (Narlikar, 2006). This literature helps explain India's recurring emphasis on equity, representation, sovereignty, and reform of global governance.

The gap is not the absence of insight, but the tendency toward analytical separation. Studies of India's rise often foreground capability and strategy. Status-centered work emphasizes recognition and prestige. Research on strategic autonomy highlights flexibility and independence. Work on multilateralism and Global South diplomacy stresses legitimacy and representation. Fewer accounts integrate voice, status, and strategic balance into a single framework. That gap matters particularly for 2022, when India's diplomacy was shaped by all three at once. India was not merely seeking influence, nor merely hedging, nor merely speaking for developing countries. It was trying to connect those projects into a coherent claim about its rightful place in world politics.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper adopts a focused framework built around three concepts: status-seeking, role performance, and strategic balance. Status-seeking in international relations refers to a state's effort to obtain recognition of rank, prestige, and standing from relevant audiences (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Murray, 2019). For India, status is visible in demands for institutional reform, aspirations to great-power membership, and the cultivation of leadership symbolism. Yet status claims are persuasive only when they are linked to a credible role.

Role theory helps illuminate that connection. States act not only according to interests and capabilities, but also through role conceptions: self-understandings about what kind of actor they are and what functions they should perform internationally (Holsti, 1970). India's role conceptions in 2022 included major power, bridge-builder, voice of the developing world, civilizational state, and strategic swing actor. These roles were not perfectly consistent, but they structured diplomatic language and institutional behavior.

Strategic balance, as used here, refers not to classical balance-of-power behavior alone, but to the political management of relationships across competing poles of power. It includes strategic autonomy, selective alignment, hedging, and issue-based partnership. For India, strategic balance means avoiding rigid bloc affiliation while expanding options across multiple theaters and issue areas. This is not pure equidistance. India's deepening ties with the United States and its partners coexist with continued security and energy engagement with Russia, as well as efforts to retain leverage in multilateral platforms that include China.

A limited postcolonial and Global South perspective sharpens the analysis of voice. India's diplomatic claim is not only that it is powerful enough to matter, but that it speaks from a location historically marked by colonialism, uneven development, and institutional exclusion. This does not make India a transparent representative of the Global South; representation is always partial and contested. But the postcolonial register helps explain why institutional reform, sovereignty, developmental justice, and equitable representation remain central to India's diplomatic vocabulary (Chacko, 2012).

Taken together, these concepts yield the paper's central proposition: India's search for place depends on the interaction of voice, status, and strategic balance. Voice supplies legitimacy to status claims. Status expands the platforms from which voice can be exercised. Strategic balance preserves the autonomy necessary to pursue both without being reduced to a subordinate ally or a purely revisionist dissenter.

Methodology:-

The paper uses a qualitative, interpretive approach focused on the calendar year 2022. Its primary materials include official speeches, policy statements, summit declarations, and government documents, especially those produced by the Ministry of External Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office, and multilateral forums such as the G20 and the United Nations. These materials are read alongside peer-reviewed and scholarly work on India's foreign policy, status-seeking, strategic autonomy, and multilateral diplomacy.

The purpose is not to produce a comprehensive event history of Indian foreign policy in 2022. Rather, it is to interpret how official language, diplomatic positioning, and institutional behavior reveal a particular foreign policy logic. The analysis therefore prioritizes meaning, self-presentation, and political signaling over quantitative measurement. A single-year focus is justified because 2022 compressed several structural pressures into one unusually revealing moment: the war in Ukraine, intensifying great-power rivalry, supply-chain vulnerability, and visible crisis in global governance. These conditions made India's search for voice, status, and strategic balance especially legible.

Analysis and Discussion:-

Diplomatic Voice: Multilateralism, Representation, and the Global South

India's search for voice in 2022 was rooted in a familiar but updated diplomatic instinct: to seek influence not only through bilateral power but through claims of broader representational legitimacy. This impulse has deep roots in postcolonial diplomacy and the politics of non-alignment, but in 2022 it was reframed for a more fragmented order. India's official discourse repeatedly emphasized food and energy insecurity, debt distress, resilient supply chains, vaccine equity, and the need for "reformed multilateralism" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). The argument was not simply that global institutions were ineffective, but that they remained misaligned with the distribution of interests and voices in contemporary world politics.

This language mattered because it positioned India as more than a national claimant. By foregrounding the distributive consequences of war and geopolitical rivalry for developing countries, India sought to present itself as a state attentive to constituencies sidelined by major-power competition. Its activism at the United Nations in late 2022, especially around reform of global governance, reinforced this framing. India's assumption of the G20 presidency in December 2022 further widened the stage on which such claims could be made. The message was carefully calibrated: India was neither anti-Western nor anti-systemic, but it insisted that order without representation lacked legitimacy.

The search for voice was thus inseparable from multilateral diplomacy. India has long used multilateral arenas both instrumentally and symbolically. Instrumentally, these forums provide opportunities to shape agendas, build coalitions, and widen diplomatic room. Symbolically, they allow India to perform a role larger than its still incomplete material transformation. In 2022 this performance gained particular resonance because many developing countries were reluctant to be drawn into a binary geopolitical script centered exclusively on Europe's war and major-power confrontation. India's language around development and governance reform resonated precisely because it drew attention to costs borne outside Euro-Atlantic theatres.

Yet India's claim to voice should not be romanticized. Speaking for the Global South is not the same as being authorized by it. India is a large and unequal state with its own strategic interests, regional frictions, and great-power ambitions. Its representation of broader developing-country concerns is therefore selective and politically constructed. Still, the point is not whether India uniquely embodies the Global South, but that its foreign policy in 2022 sought legitimacy by connecting national ambition to a wider discourse of representation. Voice, in this sense, was a resource in the making of international place.

International Status: Recognition, Leadership, and the Politics of Standing

India's search for status in 2022 was visible in both external recognition and self-conscious performance. Status-seeking literature stresses that major powers are made not only by material accumulation but by social acknowledgment (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Murray, 2019). India's diplomacy in 2022 displayed both the desire for such recognition and the unevenness of its attainment.

One dimension of status lay in India's increasing centrality across multiple diplomatic theatres. Western states intensified engagement with India during the Ukraine crisis, not merely because India was important in Asia, but because its position mattered to the legitimacy and reach of wider coalition politics. At the same time, Russia continued to treat India as a significant partner whose autonomy was worth preserving. This dual attention itself was a form of recognition. India was being courted because it could not be ignored. Its participation in the Quad, BRICS, the SCO, and other forums allowed it to appear as a power whose presence conferred weight across otherwise divided institutional spaces.

Another dimension was India's own leadership narrative. In 2022, India increasingly projected itself as a state capable of mediation across divides, even when it was not formally mediating. The oft-cited formulation that "today's era is not of war," voiced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the SCO summit, was significant less as a peace plan than as a status performance: it placed India in the position of articulating a normatively resonant line to a conflict involving major powers while retaining diplomatic independence (Prime Minister's Office, 2022). This was a claim to moral-political standing without assuming the burdens of alliance discipline.

Status, however, was not simply a matter of rhetoric. India's assumption of the G20 presidency at the end of 2022 was an important marker because it institutionalized leadership opportunity. Likewise, its continuing aspiration for

permanent membership in a reformed United Nations Security Council remained a classic status claim, linking recognition to institutional redesign. Such claims have deep historical roots, but 2022 made them newly salient by exposing the representational deficits of existing governance structures.

Even so, India's status remained incomplete and contested. Recognition was often situational rather than settled. India was valued as a pivotal actor, but not yet fully accepted as a rule-shaping great power on par with the established permanent powers. Its economic and military growth enhanced its standing, but developmental challenges, regional asymmetries, and institutional exclusion persisted. Precisely for that reason, status-seeking in 2022 was inseparable from voice and strategic balance. India's standing could be elevated by representing wider concerns and by demonstrating diplomatic independence under pressure.

Strategic Balance: Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, and Flexible Partnerships.

If voice supplied legitimacy and status supplied aspiration, strategic balance supplied the operating logic of Indian foreign policy in 2022. Strategic autonomy did not mean aloofness. Nor did it mean equal distance from all poles. Rather, it meant resisting the reduction of foreign policy to bloc membership while expanding ties across multiple alignments (Hall, 2016; Jaishankar, 2020). The language of multi-alignment captures this shift well. India worked more closely with the United States, Japan, Australia, and European partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific and technology domains, while preserving longstanding defense and energy ties with Russia and participating in institutions that also included China.

The Ukraine war made this balancing act unusually visible. India did not join Western sanctions on Russia and avoided adopting the full moral vocabulary of the Euro-Atlantic response. At the same time, it did not endorse the invasion as a revisionist norm and repeatedly emphasized dialogue, diplomacy, and the costs of conflict. This was not indecision. It was a strategic choice shaped by defense dependence, continental security concerns, energy interests, and a broader refusal to let one crisis reorder all external relationships. The effect was to preserve maneuverability while signaling that India's foreign policy would not be outsourced to external expectations.

India's strategic balance in 2022 also operated in the shadow of China. The unresolved border crisis after 2020 remained a hard constraint on Indian diplomacy and pushed New Delhi toward stronger cooperation with like-minded partners. Yet India still avoided a fully formalized anti-China alliance. Its engagement with the Quad coexisted with continued participation in BRICS and the SCO. This was not contradiction for its own sake. It reflected a judgment that India's long-term interests required deterrence, diversification, and institutional pluralism rather than alliance lock-in.

Flexible minilateralism deepened this logic. India invested in issue-based partnerships where interests converged without demanding ideological homogeneity. Such arrangements helped it widen policy options in technology, infrastructure, maritime security, and supply-chain resilience. They also supported a broader status narrative: India as a state capable of operating across platforms rather than being confined to one camp. Strategic balance, then, was not a passive response to fragmentation. It was an active effort to turn fragmentation into diplomatic space.

The Interconnection of Voice, Status, and Strategic Balance

What 2022 reveals most clearly is that these three dimensions are analytically distinct but politically intertwined. India's voice was more credible because it was backed by growing status and by demonstrable autonomy. A state tightly embedded in one bloc would have found it harder to present itself as a bridge or representative of wider concerns. Conversely, India's status claims were strengthened by its ability to speak to systemic questions beyond narrow self-interest. Strategic balance, meanwhile, was not only about security prudence; it was also about preserving the social and diplomatic flexibility needed to pursue voice and status simultaneously.

This integrated reading also clarifies the limits of India's project. Voice can shade into overclaiming. Status can outrun capability. Strategic balance can appear opportunistic or normatively evasive. India's 2022 diplomacy was effective in creating room and relevance, but less effective in resolving the underlying tension between being a system-reforming state and a system-joining one. It seeks recognition from established powers and institutions while criticizing their representational limits. It wants autonomy without isolation, leadership without domination, and flexibility without ambiguity costs. These are not pathologies of Indian foreign policy; they are the constitutive tensions of a state seeking a meaningful place in a fractured order.

Conclusion:-

India's foreign policy in 2022 is best understood not as a simple story of rise, nor as a return to non-alignment, nor merely as pragmatic hedging. It was a political project organized around three interconnected aims: to secure diplomatic voice, to obtain international status, and to preserve strategic balance. Through multilateral diplomacy and the language of representation, India sought to speak for concerns marginalized in a great-power-centered order. Through leadership performances, institutional activism, and the cultivation of external recognition, it sought standing as a consequential power. Through strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and flexible partnerships, it sought room to maneuver amid widening geopolitical fractures.

These dimensions do not form a perfectly coherent doctrine. They pull against one another and produce recurring ambiguities. Yet their interaction explains more than any single framework alone. India's search for place is not only about how much power it has, but about how it is heard, how it is recognized, and how it avoids being pinned down by others' conflicts. In 2022, the fragmenting international order did not diminish this search; it intensified it. India's foreign policy was therefore less a reactive adjustment to crisis than a deliberate effort to define the terms of its belonging in world politics. That effort remains unfinished, but it has become central to understanding India's role in the contemporary international order.

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