

The Evolving Trajectory of India's Climate Diplomacy: From Reaction to Positive Leadership

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Abstract

One of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century is to address the negative consequences of climate change. The severity of the problem has given rise to a coordinated global response and as such, has expanded the domain of diplomacy to address climate related concerns. India has always been the voice of the developing world in climate negotiations. This paper examines the evolution and shifts in India's climate diplomacy. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section established a conceptual framework for the term climate diplomacy. The next section examines the salient features of India's climate diplomacy since its inception in the second half of the 20th century. The final section posits that, since 2014, India has transitioned from being a reactive participant to an active norm creator in global climate governance. It therefore examines the major climate-related initiatives undertaken under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, highlighting India's strategic repositioning as an initiator of climate change related actions

Key Words: Climate Change, Climate Diplomacy, LiFe, Indian Solar Alliance, UNFCCC.

Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the most defining challenges of the twenty-first century, reshaping global politics, development pathways, and diplomatic engagements. As a country highly vulnerable to climate impacts—ranging from extreme heatwaves and erratic monsoons to sea-level rise and biodiversity loss—India occupies a critical position in the global climate governance architecture. Over the past three decades, India's climate diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a largely reactive and defensive posture to one characterized by constructive engagement, agenda-setting, and positive leadership at the international level. In the early phases of global climate negotiations, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s, India's approach was primarily shaped by concerns over economic development, poverty eradication, and equity. India consistently emphasized the principle of *Common but Differentiated Responsibilities* (CBDR), arguing that historical emitters in the Global North must bear the primary burden of mitigation. This stance, while justified, often positioned India as a cautious actor focused on safeguarding national interests rather than shaping global solutions. Climate diplomacy during this period was thus reactive—responding to external pressures while resisting binding commitments perceived as constraints on development. However, the landscape of climate diplomacy began to shift markedly in the post-Paris Agreement era. Recognizing the interconnectedness of climate action with energy security, economic resilience, and global stature, India recalibrated its diplomatic strategy. The country moved beyond a narrow defensive framework to embrace a more proactive and solution-oriented role. Initiatives such as ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), leadership in renewable energy transitions, and the co-founding of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) signaled a decisive turn toward positive climate leadership. India's evolving climate diplomacy is also closely intertwined with its broader foreign policy vision, including South–South cooperation, multilateralism, and the aspiration to be a responsible global power. By championing issues such as climate finance, technology transfer, adaptation, and climate justice for developing countries, India has sought to bridge the gap between developed and developing nations. Simultaneously, domestic policy

actions—such as large-scale renewable energy deployment, climate-resilient infrastructure, and green growth strategies—have enhanced the credibility of India's international commitments.

This transition from reaction to leadership reflects not only changing global expectations but also India's growing confidence in shaping normative frameworks for climate governance. The evolving trajectory of India's climate diplomacy thus offers critical insights into how emerging economies can balance development imperatives with global environmental responsibility. Examining this transformation is essential for understanding India's role in steering future climate negotiations toward inclusive, equitable, and sustainable outcomes.

Conceptualising Climate Diplomacy

Mitigating the effects of climate change is one of the pressing challenges of the 21st Century. The magnitude of the problem calls for a concerted and a coordinated global response. In 2015, the landmark Paris Agreement was adopted by 195 Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, on 12 December 2015 and entered into force on 4 November 2016. The stated goal of the Paris Agreement is to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and pursue efforts “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels” (United Nations Climate Change 2025). The introduction of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) requires that each country sets its own climate related targets and maintains accountability and transparency through periodic reporting and review mechanisms. Tskipurishvili (2022:1) aptly asserts that an important outcome of the Paris Agreement is the recognition of climate crisis as a “global issue touching upon diverse areas of international and foreign policy and climate diplomacy encompasses all diplomatic engagement relating to climate change”. Thus, the Paris Agreement has laid the foundations for collaboration among States and aligning their climate related objectives with the broader foreign policy objectives.

Climate diplomacy can be defined as the “practice and process of creating an international climate change regime and ensuring its effective operation. (Mabey, N., Gallagher, L., & Born, C. 2013). For the successful execution of climate diplomacy, Mabey et al (2013) identify three stages. The first stage entails the negotiation of a global agreement. In this stage, either individual countries or a coalition of countries introduce an initiative pertaining to any aspect of climate change and then aim at establishing a common consensus. The next stage of climate diplomacy is the building of international political conditions. The responsibility of this rests primarily with a country's foreign ministry or the ministries relating to environment and climate change. This stage may include dialogues, ministerial visits and participation in multilateral forums. The third stage, that of implementation and integration, is also the most challenging. It must be clarified first that although at a superficial level, integration and implementation may look distinct, these processes complement each other. Implementation requires that the specific climate related policy objectives are put into execution at the policy level at either at the domestic or international level. Integration implies embedding the climate change relating objectives in other sectors such as trade, security and finance. Therefore, the success of climate diplomacy depends on both implementation – fulfilling of specific climate related targets- and integration – aligning these climate related goals with broader policy making and governance.

Another prominent definition of climate diplomacy has been put forward by the European Commission in which four major strands have been identified at the political level: 1) Commitment to multilateralism and urgency in swift implementation of the Paris Agreement; 2) Addressing the nexus between climate change and security; 3) To uphold, promote and protect human rights also in the context of climate change and climate diplomacy; and 4) The need to continue to strengthen political outreach and public diplomacy, up to the highest official levels, and through multiple policy communities and the full range of regional and sub-regional actors (Council of the European Union 2018). Thus, the European Union's conceptualisation of climate diplomacy

broadens the scope by not only calling for use of diplomatic tools to achieve climate related objectives but also through the identification that “climate change has direct and indirect implications for international security and stability, chiefly affecting those in most fragile and vulnerable situations, contributing to the loss of livelihoods, reinforcing environmental pressures and disaster risk, forcing the displacement of people and exacerbating the threat of social and political unrest” (Ibid: 3).

States, however, are not the sole actors engaged in climate diplomacy. Non-state actors, which include businesses, NGOs, and local governments, are now increasingly acquiring an important role. (Newell 2000). A recent report by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has recommended that non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations, businesses, cities and local communities should strengthen and support national climate efforts. Not only do non-state actors bridge the implementation of climate related goals through the implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies at the ground level, they also enhance transparency and accountability through measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) systems. The report recommends that Non-State Actors must be provided with the necessary support to facilitate data connection and reporting through the use of digital technologies (United Nations Environment Programme 2023). Backstrand et al (2017) term this interplay between State and Non-State Actors in climate cooperation as “hybrid diplomacy” in which the latter are not just passive observers but also oversee the monitoring and implementation of NDCs of States.

A Brief History of India's Climate Diplomacy

Even before the inception of the UNFCCC in 1992, India has been influential in voicing its concern on climate and environment related issues at the multilateral forums. Jayram (2022:5) contends that the first semblance of Indian climate diplomacy was manifested in then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's speech at the inaugural global conference on the human environment (UNCHE), held in 1972 in Stockholm. Indira Gandhi highlighted that the environmental problems of the developing countries were not due to the side effects of excessive industrialisation but rather a reflection of “ inadequacy of development” Indira Gandhi stated categorically that “ ecological crises should not add to the burdens of the weaker nations by introducing new considerations in the political and trade policies of rich nations.” (Down to Earth 2022). The speech by Indira Gandhi also highlighted India's positioning as the voice of the developing world, which continues to underpin India's stance in to this day.

By the 1980s, the question regarding the contribution or responsibilities of climate change had gained to acquire momentum and it was these very questions that were to shape future climate negotiations. The developing countries (primarily the G-7) suggested that regardless of their economic or political constraints, it was the responsibility of all countries to contribute in the efforts to combat global warming. The Noordwijk Conference on Atmospheric Pollution and Climate Change in November 1989 stated that “ a common concern of mankind” and stated that all countries, in their respective capacities and means at their disposal, “initiate actions and develop and maintain effective and operational strategies to control, limit, or reduce emissions of greenhouse gases” (United Nations 1989). At the 9th Summit of the Non -Aligned Movement held in Belgrade, the then Indian Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi questioned the rationale of asking the developing nations – facing financial and political constraints – to undertake ambitious climate commitments. Rajiv Gandhi suggested the establishment of a Planet Protection Fund (MEA 1990-91) under the aegis of the UN for the purpose of protecting the environment by developing or purchasing conservation-compatible technologies in critical areas. The Fund was proposed to be set up through global efforts to ensure the development of and access to environment friendly technologies for the benefit of the international community. It was proposed that all constituent members of the Fund contribute a fixed percentage of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

so that the annual contribution to the corpus of the Fund would be around \$ 18 million (Government of India 2012).

India's stance was clear. Developing countries carried the larger responsibility of combating climate change. In 1990, India hosted the Conference of Select Developing Countries on Global Environmental Issues in New Delhi where it was agreed that “ the ‘responsibility for reduction of greenhouse gases to prevent a climate change would, therefore, rest with the develop countries (Nachiappan 2019: 64).

A seminal moment in climate negotiations came when the UN General Assembly established the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to negotiate a FCCC containing ‘appropriate commitments’ for ratification at UNCED slated for Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. In the negotiation process, India called for considering ‘new and additional funding’ to assist developing countries implement mitigation measures” but it was dropped at the behest of the developed nations. However, India was largely successful in ensuring that its core position found a mention in the final text of the UNFCCC adopted in June 1992. The final text stressed that the “The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and respective capabilities (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1992). The UNFCCC also made a two-fold distinction. The developed nations were listed in Annex I and were urged to take the lead in reducing global emissions. Annex II countries comprised those of the developing world and were free of obligations listed for countries in the other Annex. This was a major endorsement of India's position through embedding the idea of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) into the final text. The defence of this principle has since been integral to Indian negotiations on climate change (Sengupta 2020). India signed the UNFCCC in June 10, 1992 and ratified it on November 1, 1993.

Dubash(2009) posits that post the UNFCCC negotiations, Indian approach to climate diplomacy continued to be guided by the principle of equity rather than both of equity and environment. India's stance that internal inequalities in emissions were irrelevant to discourse on climate change was now subject to criticism. However, this criticism was harsh considering that in 2008, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released an Eight Point Agenda of Climate Change. It called out the following eight missions to promote India's development objectives – “solar energy, enhanced energy efficiency, sustainable habitats, water conservation, sustaining the Himalayan ecosystem, developing a ‘green’ India, sustainable agriculture and building a strategic knowledge platform on climate change” (Padma 2008). However, the domain of India's domestic actions and that of its internationally agreed commitments on climate change continued to be separate.

In 2009, India was instrumental in the formation of BASIC (an acronym for Brazil, South Africa, India and China) grouping. India played an active role in this framework, particularly with reference to leading a discussion on equity (Atteridge 2010). BASIC countries contend that the principle of equitable access to sustainable development rests on three principles: 1) fair access to atmospheric or carbon space; 2) Providing Developing countries time for meeting their commitment to low-carbon economies; and 3) Sustainability ensuring that actions for addressing climate change concern are aligned with and complement the development objectives (BASIC Experts 2011).

A major shift in India's climate diplomacy was perceptible at the 2010 United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Cancún, Mexico, also referred to as COP 16. At Cancun, India played a major role in the change of phrase from “ equitable access to carbon space' to 'equitable access to sustainable development'. However, Jairam Ramesh, the Union Minister for Environment and Forests, faced a multitude of criticism at home. His stance at Cancun was even dubbed as a “ Sweet Surrender” (Dasgupta 2011). The use of phrase

'equitable access to sustainable development' was seen as vague and disoriented and a dilution of India's principled position followed since the last two decades.

However, the principle of equity was not altogether abandoned in Indian discourse on climate change. At the 2011 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Durban, South Africa (also referred to as COP 17), the new Indian Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jayanthi Natarajan "junked" the stance of Jairam Ramesh and laid stress on the principle of equity "Equity is more fundamental and needs to be brought into our discourse to define the frame within which the global peaking (of emissions) is addressed, the equitable access to sustainable development is ensured and the nature of outcomes is determined," Natarajan remarked (Sethi 2011).

India's Climate diplomacy since 2014

India's climate diplomacy has witnessed a seismic shift since May 2014 when Narendra Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister of India. One of the first actions by the Modi government was to rename the Ministry of Environment and Forest to Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. It was significant as climate change was now officially included in the Ministry's nomenclature and that climate change was now regarded as an issue having domestic connotations too (Economic Times 2014).

A major diplomatic victory for India took place at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference(COP 21) held at Paris with the insertion of the term 'Climate Justice' in the Preamble of the Paris Agreement. At the Plenary Session of COP 21, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that developed nations pursuing ambitious targets goes much beyond the question of historical responsibility. " They also have the most room to make the cuts and make the strongest impact. And, climate justice demands that, with the little carbon space we still have, developing countries should have enough scope to grow" (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). India's position was thus made clear at COP21 that the primary responsibility of reduction in emissions rested with the developing countries.

India also emerged as an active player in climate diplomacy at COP21 in taking the lead in the formation of the International Solar Alliance (ISA). The ISA was on 30 November by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Francois Hollande. The ISA is a "common platform for cooperation among solar resource rich countries lying fully or practically between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn" with a common objective of significantly augmenting solar power in the respective countries and "making joint efforts through innovative policies, projects, programmes, capacity building measures and financial instruments to mobilize more than 1000 Billion US Dollars of investments that are needed by 2030 for the massive deployment of affordable solar energy (United Nations Climate Change 2015). During the launch, India pledged a support of \$30 million for the initiative and decided to host the ISA in the premises of its National Institute of Solar Energy, based in Gurgaon. Modi termed the ISA as "the sunrise of new hope" (Times of India 2015). ISA can be seen as a major diplomatic victory for India. Through the ISA, India articulated the interests of the Global South in an organised and coherent manner. Moreover, through placing the Ministry of External Affairs at the helm of affairs pertaining to ISA, India has also expanded its soft power through climate diplomacy. After the first Summit of the ISA held in New Delhi in 2018, India announced a \$1 billion line of credit for 23 solar projects in 13 African countries (Chaudhary 2018). Since its inception a decade ago, the ISA has delivered measurable impact across Member countries anchored on four strategic pillars: " Catalytic Finance Hub, Global Capability Centre & Digitisation, Regional and Country-Level Engagement, and Technology Roadmap & Policy" (International Solar Alliance 2025). The ISA has successfully made a transition from an advocacy making body to an action-oriented entity. On October 28, 2025, during the Eighth Session of the ISA held in New Delhi, a number of flagship initiatives were launched with the stated objective to make solar energy accessible in the developing world. The major initiatives announced at Eighth session of the ISA were:

1) Solar Upcycling Network for Recycling, Innovation & Stakeholder Engagement (SUNRISE) with an objective of making optimal use of solar waste; 2) One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) to facilitate connections through solar grid; 3) Global Capability Centre (GCC) intended to become a hub for research and development, innovation and digital capacity building; 4) Signing of a Memorandum by 16 Small and Developing Island States (SIDS) with the World Bank for coordinated procurement (Das 2025). Through the ISA, India is striving to be a voice of the Global South and in the words of Pralhad Joshi, Minister for New and Renewable Energy, India & President of ISA Assembly, “turning that voice into actions, helping nations harness solar power and share technology” (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy 2025).

At the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit held at New York, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). Under the leadership of India, CDRI was formed as a partnership of national governments, UN agencies and programmes, multilateral development banks, financing mechanisms, private sector, and knowledge institutions, with an objective to “promote the resilience of new and existing infrastructure systems to climate and disaster risks,” CDRI is an Indian initiative that seeks to enhance the country’s leadership role in climate change and disaster resilience. CDRI is headquartered in New Delhi. Its stated mission is “by 2050, to drive US\$10 trillion of new and existing infrastructure investments and services to be resilient to natural hazards and climate change through enhanced capacity, informed policy, planning, and management, thereby improving environmental quality, livelihoods, and overall well-being for more than 3 billion people worldwide” (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.2025). CDRI has voiced its concerns for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Land Locked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and SIDS. At COP 26 in Glasgow, CDRI under the aegis of Narendra Modi’s leadership along with that of Australia, Fiji, Jamaica, Mauritius and United Kingdom launched the initiative “Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS) to achieve and deliver resilience and climate adaptation solutions to the SIDS, which are among the most vulnerable and exposed countries (Ministry of Home Affairs. 2017). India has thus positioned itself globally as a country committed to safeguarding the rights of SIDS through helping to address their most pressing infrastructure challenges by converging resources and capacities (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change 2022b).

At COP 26, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also presented Panchanmrit (Five Nectar Element) that formed the basis of India’s climate action. They are: 1) Reach 500GW Non-fossil energy capacity by 2030; 2) 50 per cent of its energy requirements from renewable energy by 2030; 3) Reduction of total projected carbon emissions by one billion tonnes from now to 2030; 4) Reduction of the carbon intensity of the economy by 45 per cent by 2030, over 2005 levels; and 5) Achieving the target of net zero emissions by 2070 (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change 2022a).

Climate Diplomacy was an integral component during India’s G20 Presidency in 2022. Green Development, Climate Finance, and LiFe were one of the key priorities of India’s G20 Presidency. One of the important components of the G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Summit Declaration was the Green Development Pact for a Sustainable Future. The Declaration read:

“We recognize that the impacts of climate change are being experienced worldwide, particularly by the poorest and the most vulnerable, including in LDCs and SIDS. Mindful of our leadership role, we reaffirm our steadfast commitments, in pursuit of the objective of UNFCCC, to tackle climate change by strengthening the full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and its temperature goal, reflecting equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstance”(G20 2023: 11-12).

Thus, India articulated the interests of the Global South. The Green Development Pact is significant as it lays thrust on resource efficiency and sustainable consumption, a clean energy transition, sustainable finance,

ocean-based blue economy and building disaster resilient infrastructure (Council on Energy, Environment and Water 2023).

India's G20 Presidency can also be regarded as a success story in substantially increasing the finances for the developing countries to address the challenges of climate change (Chaudhary 2023). The G20 New Delhi Leaders' Summit Declaration recognised the need to "rapidly and substantially scale up investment and climate finance from billions to trillions of dollars globally from all sources" and noted "the need of USD 5.8-5.9 trillion in the pre-2030 period required for developing countries, in particular for their needs to implement their NDCs, as well as the need of USD 4 trillion per year for clean energy technologies by 2030 to reach net zero emissions by 2050" (G20 2023: 16).

Another significant climate initiative spearheaded by India is Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment). The initiative was introduced by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at COP 26 in Glasgow. At Glasgow, Modi remarked

Today, the world admits that lifestyle has a big role in climate change. So, I propose before you a One-Word Movement. This One-Word, in the context of climate, can become the basic foundation of One World. This word is- LIFE...L, I, F, E, which means Lifestyle For Environment. Today, there is a need for all of us to come together and take Lifestyle For Environment (LiFE) forward as a campaign. This can become a mass movement of Environmental Conscious Life Style. What is needed today is Mindful and Deliberate Utilization, instead of Mindless and Destructive Consumption. These movements together can set goals that can revolutionize many sectors in diverse areas such as Fishing, Agriculture, Wellness, Dietary Choices, Packaging, Housing, Hospitality, Tourism, Clothing, Fashion, Water Management and Energy (Ministry of External Affairs: 2021).

Mission LiFE has been billed as "India's signature initiative at the United Nations and other international platforms for showcasing climate action and early achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals." (Ministry of External Affairs 2022). A 2023 report by the International Energy Agency highlighted how India has integrated several energy transition policies aligned with the LiFE initiative. The report mentioned that the India's economy is already 10% more energy efficient than both the global and G20 average. India, the third largest national market globally for renewables, has also seen a surge in consumer-oriented energy solutions, particularly in distributed solar photovoltaic (PV) system. The report also lauded India for a surge in solar rooftop installations and the rising market share of Electric vehicles. The IEA report also stated that the global adoption of LiFE measures could annually reduce global CO₂ emissions by over 2 billion tonnes (Gt) and save approximately USD 440 billion by 2030. (International Energy Agency 2023).

Mission LiFE, which advocates the concept of circular economy, has proven to be a significant constituent of India's soft power strategy. India is no more a mere developing nation with a set of climate related responsibilities but now a norm setter that has linked sustainable lifestyles with climate related goals.

During its G20 Presidency tenure, India also launched the Global Biofuels Alliance (GBA), along with Singapore, Bangladesh, Italy, USA, Brazil, Argentina, Mauritius and UAE. The GBA's objectives are to "support worldwide development and deployment of sustainable biofuels, offer technical support for national biofuels programs, promote policy lessons-sharing and capacity building exercises across biofuels value chain, address and improve public perceptions, as well as enhance global trade." (Global Biofuels Alliance 2025). India's focus on biofuels is not only a reflection of its role as a convenor of climate initiatives but also the potential leadership role that developing countries can take in climate change.

Conclusion

India can be regarded as constructive player in climate diplomacy. India's climate diplomacy subscribes to the principle of multilateralism, as reflected in its working with institutions such as the UNFCCC. Post 2014, India has emerged as an initiator rather than a passive observer in climate diplomacy, as reflected through its pioneering initiatives like the ISA, CDRI, Mission LiFe and GBA. A key plank of India's climate diplomacy has been the articulation of the interests of the developing world, collectively referred to as the Global South. India ascribes to the view that it can become an effective climate leader only if deepens South-South cooperation. India has utilised climate diplomacy as a major soft power tool. The major climate initiatives introduced by India in the last decade have shown its capabilities as a norm-setting actor. Through an increasing emphasis on equity, climate justice, and sustainable lifestyles, India has articulated not only a distinctive voice for itself but has also shifted the climate discourse to one where voice of the developing world is now increasingly taking precedence over the traditional norms established by the developed nations. As aptly put by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at COP 26 in Glasgow, "India is moving forward on the subject of climate with great courage and great ambition. India also understands the suffering of all other developing countries, shares them, and will continue to express their expectations" (Ministry of External Affairs 2021).

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