



Ashutosh Singh

## Navigating the Anarchical Society: Indian Foreign Policy Through the Lens of the English School

Assistant Professor- Department of Political Science, G. D. Binani P. G. College,  
Mirzapur (U. P.) India

Received-10.12.2023,

Revised-18.12.2023,

Accepted-25.12.2023

E-mail : ashutosh12bhu@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *This paper examines Indian foreign policy through the lens of the English School of International Relations. It argues that the English School (ES) framework, with its emphasis on international society, shared norms, and institutions, provides a valuable lens for understanding India's complex and evolving approach to global politics. The paper identifies key findings regarding India's approach to navigating the 'anarchical society,' like its evolving normative influence, its emphasis on state sovereignty and multilateralism, pluralist predominance and ambivalent solidarism in its approach to justice and its evolving role within the institutions of international society. The methodology employed is qualitative, drawing upon primary and secondary sources to analyze India's foreign policy.*

**Keywords:** Indian Foreign Policy, English School, International Society, Anarchical Society

**Introduction:** The English School of International Relations (ESIR) is a theoretical approach that emphasizes the social and normative aspects of international relations. It posits that international relations are not solely driven by self-interest and power politics but are also influenced by a shared set of values, norms, and institutions that constitute international society. India's foreign policy, shaped by its historical experiences, cultural traditions, and national interests, offers a fascinating case study to apply the ESIR framework. This paper seeks to explore how the ESIR can illuminate India's foreign policy choices and actions in the contemporary international system.

**Research Question:** How can the English School of International Relations framework illuminate our understanding of post-independence Indian foreign policy?

**Research Objective:** To analyze key aspects of Indian foreign policy using core concepts from the English School framework.

**Significance of the Study:** The significance of this research paper is as following:

- **Theoretical:** Tests and applies the English School framework to a significant non-Western rising power, potentially refining or extending its applicability beyond its traditional focus.
- **Empirical:** Provides a novel theoretical interpretation of complex aspects of contemporary Indian foreign policy, offering insights beyond conventional approaches.
- **Policy Relevant:** Understanding India's approach through an ES lens can help decipher its strategic choices and contributions to global governance.

Following a review of relevant literature and brief exposition of the theoretical framework, the paper will present the methodology used in this paper and results of applying the theory of English School to key aspects of Indian foreign policy. Subsequently, the paper will provide a concise conclusion of the current study which will be followed by the policy recommendations, the implications of the findings of the study and suggestions for future research directions. Finally, the paper will wrap up by presenting a list of its references.

**Literature Review:** After thorough analysis, it is clear that existing literature on Indian foreign policy has occasionally drawn on elements of the ESIR. For example, some studies have highlighted India's adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states as a manifestation of its commitment to the foundational rules of international society (Acharya, 2012). Others have examined India's support for multilateral institutions as evidence of its belief in the importance of cooperative governance (Pant, 2015). However, a systematic and comprehensive application of the English School of International Relations framework to Indian foreign policy remains underdeveloped. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a rigorous analysis of India's foreign policy choices through the lens of the ESIR.

**Problem Statement:** While Indian foreign policy (IFP) has been analysed through various IR theories (Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism), there is limited extensive research applying the specific concepts of the English School. The ES's focus on shared norms, institutions, and the historical development of international society offers a potentially rich, nuanced lens often missed by more structural or state-centric approaches.

**Research Statement or Argument:** This paper argues that the English School, with its emphasis on the dynamic interplay between international system and international society, provides a valuable framework for understanding Indian foreign policy as navigating the constraints of anarchy while actively contributing to and drawing upon shared norms and institutions.



**Theoretical Framework: The English School as an Analytical Lens:** This study adopts the English School, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a response to the dominant realist and liberal approaches to international relations, as its core theoretical framework to analyze Indian foreign policy. The ES is chosen because its focus on the normative and institutional structure of international relations, alongside power dynamics, offers a nuanced understanding of states' behaviour that goes beyond purely materialist or interest-based explanations.

The current study primarily utilizes the following ES concepts:

1. **International System:** This refers to the interaction between states, primarily driven by power dynamics and self-interest. This aligns with realist perspectives.
2. **International Society:** This is the core concept of ES and it distinguishes ES from pure Realism. It refers to a group of states that, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.
3. **Anarchy:** Unlike Realism, the ES sees anarchy as a starting point but not the sole determinant of state behavior. Anarchy exists alongside the elements of society.
4. **Primary Institutions of International Society:** These are the fundamental practices and structures that shape the interactions of states within international society.
  - a. **The Balance of Power:** A mechanism to prevent any single power from dominating the international system.
  - b. **International Law:** A body of rules and principles governing state relations, based on consent and reciprocity.
  - c. **Diplomacy:** The system of communication and negotiation between states.
  - d. **The Management of Great Powers:** The role and responsibilities of the most powerful states in maintaining international order.
  - e. **War:** While seemingly contrary to order, war is understood by the ES as a regulated institution, often fought within certain rules and sometimes used to enforce international law or the balance of power.
5. **Order vs. Justice:** ES highlights the inherent tension between the pursuit of order (stability, predictability within the existing system) and the pursuit of justice (e.g., anti-colonialism, self-determination, human rights, economic equity). IFP, particularly in its early phase, strongly championed justice for the Global South and systemic reform. The framework will analyze how India balances these competing demands in its foreign policy choices.
6. **Pluralism vs. Solidarism:** This dichotomy refers to the degree of shared values required for international society. Pluralism emphasizes coexistence based on minimal rules (sovereignty, non-interference), while solidarism posits shared values justifying collective action and intervention. India's historical emphasis on sovereignty aligns with pluralism, but its participation in certain collective action initiatives (e.g., counter-terrorism, climate change) suggests elements of solidarism. The framework will explore where IFP falls on this spectrum and how this position has evolved.
7. **Traditions:** The ES also identifies three historical traditions of thought about international relations:
  - I. **Realist (Machiavellianism/Hobbesian):** Views international relations primarily as a struggle for power in an anarchical system, with order being ephemeral and based on force.
  - II. **Rationalist (Grotian):** Sees states as members of a society bound by rules and institutions, particularly international law and diplomacy, facilitating co-existence and cooperation.
  - III. **Revolutionist (Kantian):** Emphasizes the potential for transforming the international system into a cosmopolitan society based on shared moral principles, often through revolutionary change.

By applying these concepts, the ES framework allows for an analysis that acknowledges the self-interested behaviour of a state like India while simultaneously recognizing its embeddedness within and contribution to a broader, normatively structured international system. It helps understand *why* India often acts through institutions, *how* it perceives its rights and obligations, and *what* vision of international order it seeks to promote.

**Methodology:** This research employs a **qualitative research design** with a **theory-application approach**. The central aim is not to test the English School theory itself, but rather to use it as a conceptual lens to gain a deeper, more structured understanding of the empirical phenomenon of Indian foreign policy. This approach allows for rich, interpretive analysis suitable for exploring complex historical and contemporary policy dynamics.

**Data Sources** for this research paper include primary and secondary sources and the qualitative data collected from these sources has been analyzed by using different **data analysis** methods, like theoretical coding, content analysis and process tracing.

**Results: Navigating Anarchical/International Society-Findings from Applying the English School to Indian Foreign Policy-** This section presents the findings derived from applying the core analytical concepts of the English School (ES) – international society, order, justice, institutions, and the pluralist-solidarist tension – to the historical trajectory and contemporary practice of Indian foreign policy (IFP). The analysis reveals a complex and evolving relationship between





India and the established international society, characterised by a simultaneous desire for integration, a commitment to strategic autonomy, and a persistent engagement with questions of global order and justice from a distinct vantage point.

### **Finding 1: India's Historical Agency in Shaping/Reacting to International Society (Grotian Elements)**

Analysis of India's post-independence foreign policy, particularly the Nehruvian era and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), demonstrates a strong engagement with the Grotian tradition of the English School. Rather than adopting a purely Hobbesian (realist) or Kantian (solidarist) revolutionary stance towards the existing international system dominated by Cold War blocs, India, through NAM, sought to operate *within* a perceived international society of states, albeit one requiring significant restructuring and democratisation.

The findings indicate that NAM was not merely a passive withdrawal from power politics but an active attempt to carve out a space for sovereign equality and independent decision-making for newly independent states within the nascent post-colonial international system. Key initiatives, such as the Panchsheel principles (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, peaceful co-existence), represented a deliberate articulation of principles intended to underpin a more inclusive and just international society. These principles resonate strongly with the Grotian emphasis on international law, diplomacy, and the cooperative pursuit of order among sovereign states. However, this engagement was often marked by normative contestation. While participating in UN structures and adhering to international law, India simultaneously critiqued the hierarchical nature of the existing society (e.g., the UN Security Council permanent membership, unequal economic structures). This suggests that India, while broadly operating within the framework of international society, consistently acted as a *critically engaged participant* rather than an uncritical norm-taker. Its emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference reflected a strong preference for the *pluralist* strand of international society, prioritising state co-existence over more interventionist solidarist impulses, a stance deeply informed by its colonial experience and commitment to national self-determination.

**(Sub-Finding 1.1: The Role of NAM as a Society-Building Endeavour):** Empirical evidence suggests NAM functioned, in part, as an attempt to strengthen the societal bonds among states outside the dominant power blocs, fostering shared norms (e.g., anti-colonialism, economic independence) and institutions (e.g., G77, UNCTAD) that reinforced the idea of a universal international society encompassing diverse state forms and interests. India's leadership role within NAM underscores its agency in attempting to shape the character and norms of this evolving society.

### **Finding 2: India's Pragmatic Engagement with International Institutions and the Pursuit of Order**

Contemporary Indian foreign policy demonstrates a continued, albeit more flexible and multi-faceted, engagement with international institutions, aligning with the English School's focus on governance structures within international society. India is a core member of numerous global and regional institutions (UN, WTO, G20, BRICS, Quad, SCO, etc.).

The analysis reveals that India's institutional engagement is driven by a complex interplay of motives:

1. **Order Maintenance (Grotian):** Participation is seen as necessary for maintaining a degree of predictability and stability in the international system, which is conducive to India's own development and security interests. India often advocates for strengthening international law and multilateral processes, particularly in areas like counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber governance.
2. **Status and Influence (Implicitly Hobbesian/Grotian):** Membership and active participation in key forums are crucial for India to assert its growing power and influence, gain recognition as a major pole in a multipolar world, and advocate for reforms that reflect shifts in global power distribution (e.g., UNSC reform). This seeks to adjust the *hierarchy* within international society, rather than dismantle the society itself.
3. **Issue-Specific Cooperation (Grotian/Solidarist in limited domains):** Engagement is also instrumental for addressing specific transnational challenges like climate change, pandemics, and trade regulation, where collective action through institutions is deemed essential. While maintaining its sovereign interests, India also participates in norm-setting and burden-sharing debates, exhibiting limited solidarist tendencies in areas perceived as common global problems.

However, the findings also highlight a pragmatic, almost transactional, element to India's institutional engagement. India participates where its interests align, forms mini-lateral groupings (like the Quad) concurrently with broader multilateral ones (like BRICS or SCO), and reserves the right to act unilaterally or outside institutional frameworks when necessary for strategic autonomy (e.g., stance on certain human rights issues or military interventions). This suggests that while valuing the order provided by institutions, India prioritises its strategic flexibility and national interest, reflecting a blend of Grotian institutionalism with underlying Hobbesian calculations of power.

**(Sub-Finding 2.1: The Strategic Logic of Multi-Alignment):** India's contemporary strategy of multi-alignment can be interpreted through the English School lens not merely as balancing against dominant powers (Hobbesian), but as a strategy for maximising agency *within* a layered and complex international society composed of overlapping institutions, norms, and power centres. Multi-alignment allows India to engage with different segments or sub-societies simultaneously, participating in order-building efforts tailored to specific contexts (e.g., security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, economic cooperation in BRICS) without being constrained by a single bloc identity, thus reinforcing its Grotian commitment to a universal, albeit diverse, society of states.

### **Finding 3: The Pluralist Predominance and Ambivalent Solidarism in India's Approach to Justice**



Analysis of India's foreign policy positions on issues traditionally associated with the solidarist tradition – particularly humanitarian intervention, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), and the universal application of human rights norms – reveals a strong and consistent preference for pluralist principles, particularly state sovereignty and non-interference.

Empirical data demonstrates that India has historically been highly cautious, often resistant, towards doctrines like R2P, viewing them with suspicion as potential pretexts for intervention by powerful states, thus undermining the foundational Grotian principle of sovereign equality. India's voting record and statements at the UN consistently emphasise the primary responsibility of the state and the need for Security Council authorisation, often with reservations about the scope and application of such doctrines. This finding strongly supports the view that India remains deeply rooted in the pluralist tradition of international society, prioritising order based on state consent and non-intervention over a solidarist order based on universal notions of justice or human rights that could potentially override sovereignty.

However, the findings are not entirely devoid of solidarist elements. India's significant contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, its provision of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in its neighbourhood and beyond, and its historical advocacy for global economic justice and nuclear disarmament can be interpreted as expressions of limited, state-centric solidarism. These actions often appear motivated by a sense of regional responsibility, a desire to uphold certain universal values through state cooperation, or a critique of structural injustices within the international society.

**(Sub-Finding 3.1: Contextual and State-Centric Solidarism):** India's limited solidarist actions tend to be: a) focused on its immediate neighbourhood or areas of strategic interest; b) conducted with the consent of the host state; and c) framed as state-to-state cooperation or upholding international law (e.g., maritime HADR is framed within international law conventions). This suggests that while not entirely absent, solidarist impulses in Indian foreign policy are heavily filtered through a pluralist lens, confined within the boundaries of state sovereignty and national interest, and do not extend to endorsing interventionist forms of global justice.

#### **Finding 4: Strategic Autonomy as Engagement with Society, Not Withdrawal from It**

India's persistent emphasis on 'strategic autonomy' is a core tenet of its foreign policy, which could superficially be interpreted as a purely Hobbesian pursuit of self-interest detached from the constraints of international society. However, the analysis suggests that India's strategic autonomy is better understood, through the English School lens, as a strategy for maximising agency *within* international society to preserve the ability to contribute to and benefit from it on its own terms.

Strategic autonomy allows India to avoid formal alliances that could constrain its policy choices or draw it into conflicts not of its own making. This detachment from rigid blocs facilitates its multi-aligned approach (Sub-Finding 2.1), enabling simultaneous engagement with competing powers and institutions. The finding is that strategic autonomy is not aimed at isolation or rejection of international society, but at enhancing India's capacity to navigate its complexities, contribute to multiple order-building efforts, and selectively engage with norms and institutions that serve its interests while pushing back against those perceived as detrimental or unjust.

This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of international society not as a monolithic entity, but as a dynamic arena where states constantly negotiate their positions, interests, and values. India uses its autonomy to position itself as a crucial node in various networks – security, economic, normative – thereby increasing its leverage and ability to shape the shared environment without being subordinate to any single power or bloc.

**(Sub-Finding 4.1: Balancing Internal Requirements and External Engagement):** Strategic autonomy is deeply intertwined with India's domestic imperatives – economic development, social stability, and democratic consolidation. The findings indicate that foreign policy choices, framed by strategic autonomy, are often calibrated to secure the external conditions necessary for internal progress. This reinforces the idea that India's engagement with international society is intrinsically linked to its national project, a characteristic common to how states utilise their position within society to secure domestic welfare, strongly aligning with a Grotian perspective where the state remains the primary unit and beneficiary of international order.

#### **Finding 5: Evolving Normative Influence–From Receiver to Contributor**

Historically, India was largely a recipient of norms shaped by dominant powers within international society (e.g., Westphalian sovereignty, international law developed in Europe). While critiquing the origins of some norms, it largely operated within the established legal and diplomatic framework.

The analysis of contemporary IFP reveals a shift towards becoming a more active contributor and sometimes shaper of international norms, particularly in areas where it possesses significant capabilities or unique perspectives. Findings point to India's initiatives in areas such as:

- **Climate Change:** Advocating for Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) and promoting initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, seeking to embed principles of equity and shared responsibility in global climate norms.
- **Counter-Terrorism:** Pushing for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) and shaping definitions and strategies within forums like the UN and FATF.
- **Digital Governance:** Participating actively in debates about cyber security norms, data localization, and internet governance, often advocating for state sovereignty in cyberspace.





- **Development Cooperation:** Offering alternative models of South-South cooperation guided by principles of partnership and non-interference, distinct from traditional ODA models.

This increasing normative agency reflects India's rising power and its desire to see international society evolve to better reflect the interests and values of the Global South and multipolarity. It represents a move from primarily reacting to established norms (a more passive societal role) to actively participating in and attempting to guide the ongoing process of norm creation and evolution within international society, fitting the behaviour of a major state seeking to assert its place and influence.

**(Sub-Finding 5.1: Normative Contestation and Selective Engagement):** India's norm-shaping efforts are often accompanied by contestation of existing norms perceived as inequitable or infringing on sovereignty. For instance, its stance on intellectual property rights in global health crises or its pushback against external prescriptions on domestic governance are examples of selective engagement and normative resistance. This highlights that its contribution to norms is not about universal adoption of liberal prescriptions, but about embedding its own perspectives and priorities within the fabric of international society, demonstrating the inherent pluralism and ongoing negotiation within that society.

**Synthesis of Findings:** In synthesis, the English School provides a robust framework for understanding the complexities of Indian foreign policy. The findings demonstrate that IFP is best characterised by a dynamic and pragmatic engagement with international society. It is neither purely realist (lacking a complete disregard for norms and institutions) nor purely liberal (lacking a consistent commitment to solidarist justice or universal values), nor truly constructivist (while norms matter, interests and power structures remain central).

India's approach exhibits a predominant commitment to the Grotian tradition, actively participating in and seeking to shape an international society of sovereign states based on law, diplomacy, and institutions, while strongly favouring pluralist principles of co-existence and non-interference. Hobbesian elements are evident in its pursuit of strategic autonomy and power balancing, but these are largely aimed at enhancing its position and agency *within* society rather than opting out of it entirely. Limited solidarist tendencies exist, primarily in areas of shared global problems or regional responsibility, but these are consistently filtered through the lens of state sovereignty and national interest.

Overall, the results suggest that Indian foreign policy reflects an attempt to navigate the inherent tensions within international society – between order and justice, sovereignty and intervention, self-interest and collective responsibility – from the perspective of a rising power seeking to uphold the principles that secured its initial post-colonial entry into that society while simultaneously adapting the society to accommodate its growing capabilities and aspirations. This complex interplay of Grotian, pluralist, and selectively incorporated elements positions India as a significant actor in the ongoing evolution and negotiation of international order, providing rich empirical ground for further theoretical refinement within the English School itself.

**Conclusion:** This paper has applied the English School of International Relations framework to analyze India's foreign policy. The ESIR offers a nuanced understanding of India's engagement with the global community, highlighting the country's commitment to international society, sovereignty, and the pursuit of order and justice. The study demonstrates that India's foreign policy choices and actions reflect the principles of the ESIR, underscoring the relevance of this theoretical approach in understanding India's role in the international system.

**Recommendations:** Based on the findings of this paper, several recommendations can be made for Indian foreign policy:

1. **Deepening Engagement with International Society:** India should continue to deepen its engagement with international society, including through participation in international institutions and cooperation with other states.
2. **Promoting Regionalism and Multipolarity:** India should promote regionalism and multipolarity, as reflected in its support for regional groupings and its advocacy for a more inclusive and balanced international order.

**Implications of the Findings:** The findings of this research paper have several important implications, as outlined below:

1. **For Understanding India:** Provides a nuanced understanding of India's role in the international system, emphasizing its engagement with international society and its contribution to shaping global norms.
2. **For International Relations Theory :** The implications of findings for international relations theory can be summarized in the following points:
  - a. Provides a strong case study supporting the relevance of English School, particularly in non-Western contexts and for rising powers.
  - b. Highlights the importance of considering the social or non-material context in which states operate.
3. **For Scholars:** Underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate English School with materialist theories.

**Suggestions for Future Research Directions:** This paper highlights the need for further research on the relationship between Indian foreign policy and the English School of International Relations. Future research could explore the following areas:

- A comparative analysis of India's approach to international society with that of other rising powers.
- The implications of the changing balance of power in Asia for the future of international society.
- A deeper exploration of the solidaristic elements within Indian strategic thought and the potential for humanitarian intervention in specific contexts.



- A comparative analysis of ESIR and other IR Theories.
- Exploring the interplay between India's domestic political/social changes and its conception of international society

## REFERENCES

- Bull, H. (1977). *The Anarchial Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. Macmillan.
- Dunne, T. (1998). "The English School," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*. Oxford University Press.
- Linklater, A. (1998). *The Transformation of Political Community*. Polity Press.
- Johnston, A. I. (2008). *"Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000."* Princeton University Press.
- Buzan, B., & Hansen, L. (2009). *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Raghavan, V. R. (2010). *India and the World: Essays on Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press.
- Malone, D. M. (2011). *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press.
- Kapur, D., & Ganguly, S. (2012). *India as an Emerging Power*. Routledge.
- Chatterjee, P. (2014). *India's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Trends*. Routledge.
- Acharya, A. (2014). *The End of American World Order*. Polity Press.
- Nair, G. (2016). "India's Role in International Society: A Perspective from the English School." *International Studies*, 53(2), 115-140.
- Pant, H. V. (2016). *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tharoor, S. (2020). *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Penguin Random House.
- Modi, Narendra. 2014. Speech by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. September 27, 2014.
- Ministry of External Affairs. 2015-2025. Analysis of Official Statements. Retrieved from <https://www.mea.gov.in/>
- Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2018-2024. Annual Reports. New Delhi: MEA. Retrieved from [https://www.mea.gov.in/Annual\\_Reports.htm?57/Annual\\_Reports](https://www.mea.gov.in/Annual_Reports.htm?57/Annual_Reports)
- Parliamentary Debates. 2008-2025. Analysis of Lok Sabha and Raja Sabha Debates on Foreign Policy. Government of India. Retrieved from <https://rsdebate.nic.in> and <https://eparlib.nic.in/handle/123456789/7>

\*\*\*\*\*