

A Fine Balance: India's Voting Record at the UNGA

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ABSTRACT This brief studies India's foreign policy preferences using an index based on historical voting patterns of member states at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). By visualising the trajectory of policy preferences for all member states in the UNGA, with a particular focus on India, this work identifies how India's policy stance at the UN has evolved in relation to its peers. It finds that Indian policy has maintained an exceptionally high degree of consistency over seven decades of membership at the UNGA, and that the Indian position has served as a common thread for various coalitions of developing nations in the period 1946-2015. The brief finds evidence for a consistent and active engagement by India at the UNGA, particularly as a leader amongst developing nations.

INTRODUCTION

The voting data of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is a rich source through which to explore states' foreign policy preferences over time. Such insights derive from the UN's unique status as a truly global forum in which member nations—of which there are currently 193—openly reveal their stance on a wide variety of matters ranging from humanitarian issues to questions of economic development.

However, there may be a distinction between the revealed preferences of a member state, as

expressed by its voting patterns at the UNGA, and its 'true' preferences. The way that a country votes on a given resolution can hinge not only on underlying policy preference but also on other strategic motives. Nevertheless, since UNGA votes are non-binding, it is likely that strategic voting is a less common phenomenon than in the UN Security Council, where the votes are binding (Bailey et al.). Thus, the voting patterns seen in the UNGA can be expected to be fairly representative of a country's 'true' policy preference. The inferred policy preferences of

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member states can, therefore, be enlightening, especially when studied in conjunction with the preferences of other states. Such data can give insights into the long-term stance of a particular nation on a given issue of interest, and enable the construction of various measures quantifying the degree of agreement between nations.

The quantitative measure used in Sections 1–7 of this brief can intuitively be seen as points on a policy-preference spectrum, one end of which represents the Western position, and the opposite end, an anti-Western position. The spectrum itself varies from year to year, depending on the content of the resolutions introduced in the UNGA in that year. Therefore, instead of quantifying absolute policy preferences on a given topic, the main purpose of the metric presented here is to highlight the evolving distance between the policy positions of given member states. This serves to show how a state votes relative to other states over time, particularly with respect to the degree to which

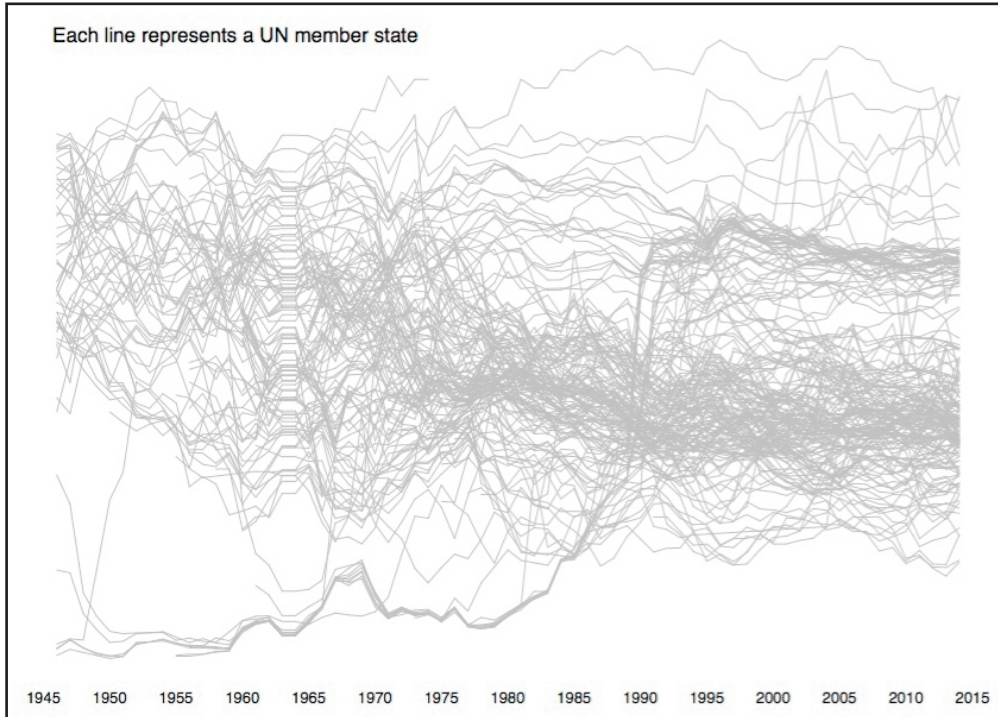
it tends towards the United States-led liberal order, i.e., towards policy preferences that are typical of the Western member states of the UN.

This paper visualises the historical trajectories for all member states of the UN, with a focus on India, to examine how historical events have influenced India's policy stance at the UN. It finds that Indian policy has maintained a high degree of consistency over the years, often withstanding major transitions on the international stage. Furthermore, the evidence presented here suggests that the Indian position has served as a common thread for various coalitions of developing nations throughout the history of the UN. This latter pattern—Indian policy positions coinciding with the collective interests of developing nations—is shown to hold increasingly in recent years. The overall picture presented, as seen in the graphs, is thus that of consistent and active engagement by India at the UN, particularly as a leader amongst developing nations.

The Ideal Point Estimator of Foreign-Policy Preferences

The graphs presented in Figures 1.1 to 1.6 use an index known as the Ideal Point Estimator, created by Bailey et al. to capture the foreign-policy preferences of member states on a yearly basis. This estimator is a dynamic ordinal spatial model that measures preferences by estimating points along a preference spectrum, which changes based on the content of the resolutions introduced each year. The Ideal Point measure resolves the problem of separating shifts in the UN agenda from changing state preferences by using resolutions that were identical across years as “bridge observations.” This approach makes preference estimates comparable over time, such that fluctuations in a country's trajectory in the given graphs can be interpreted as shifts in policy preference rather than shifts in the UN's agenda.

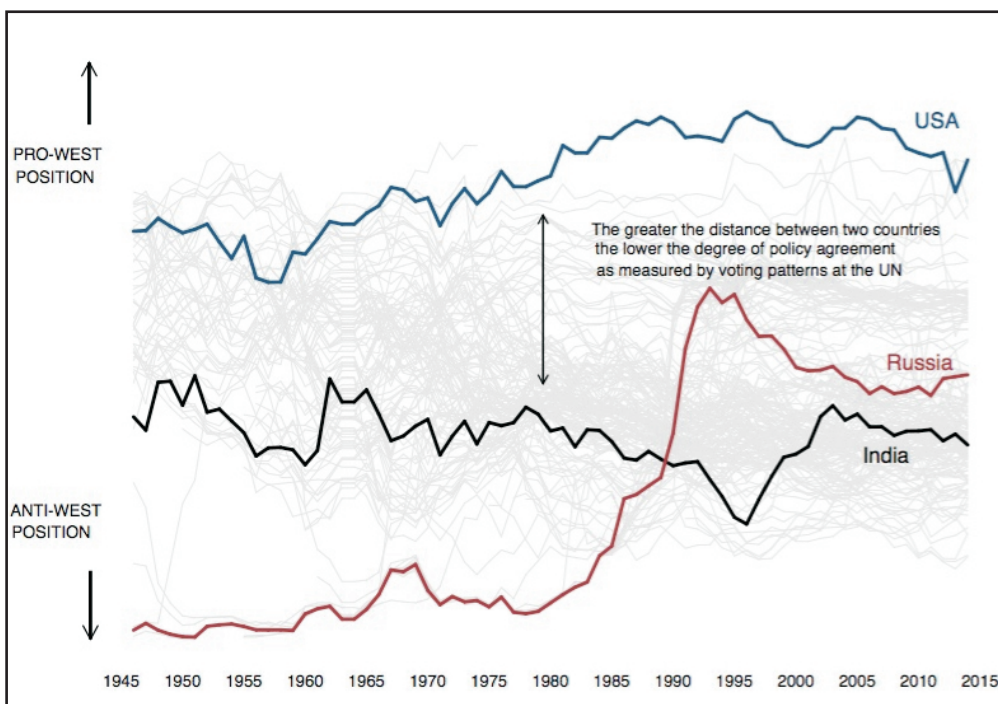
Figure 1.1: UNGA, 1946–2014



Interpreting Graphs of the Ideal Point Estimator

The exact numerical value plotted as the Ideal Point of a given state in a given year changes based on the content of resolutions and changes in an individual member nation's policy preference. However, intuitively, the lines represented on the graphs may be interpreted as tending toward the US-led liberal order when values are higher on the y-axis, the direction in which the Western states tend to vote (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Policy Positions



Advantages of the Ideal Point Estimator

Most alternative measures to the Ideal Point Estimator are dyadic indicators of voting similarity. In other words, they quantify to what extent two member states voted the same way in a given year. The essential problem with these measures is that they fail to separate changes in the UN's agenda from shifts in the preferences of individual states. Thus, these measures often mistakenly attribute a change in the content of UN resolutions in a given year to a change in foreign-policy orientation. The Ideal Point measure has several advantages over the alternatives, particularly for intertemporal comparison, since it is better able to isolate policy shifts from a change in the content of the UN agenda. Furthermore, this measure, unlike dyadic similarity indicators, not only allows us to quantify the degree of policy similarity between two nations but also tells us which of the two nations was responsible for two states moving closer together or farther apart in a given year. Thus, we can see the difference between the “ideal points” of two or more states, and identify which state moved away from the others on the policy-preference spectrum.

INDIA AND THE COLD WAR

In its early years as an independent nation, India maintained a neutral position between the Cold War powers (see Figures 1.2 and 2.1). The policies of the US, the USSR and India followed parallel trajectories through the 1950s and

1960s, with India consistently taking a middle ground. At the same time, a marginal tilt towards the Soviet Union was apparent throughout this period. In only four out of 69 years—1946, 1948, 1950, 1962—did India's voting patterns at the UN adhere more closely to the US' than to those of the USSR or the Russian Federation.

Figure 2.1: Ideological Camps during the Cold War

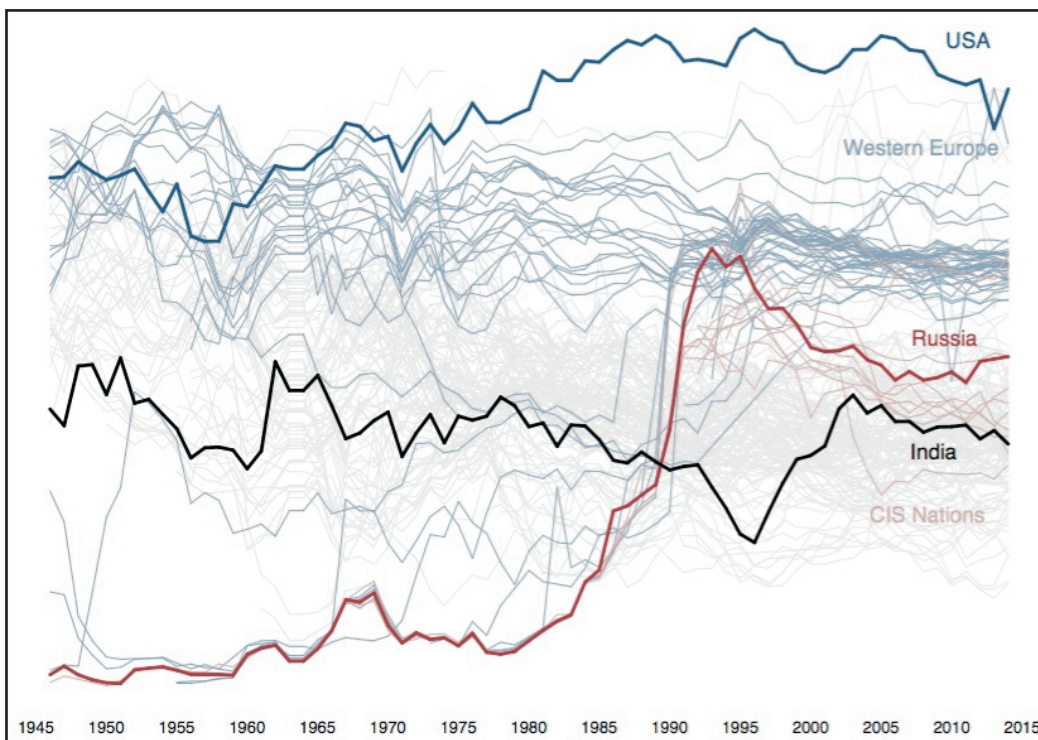
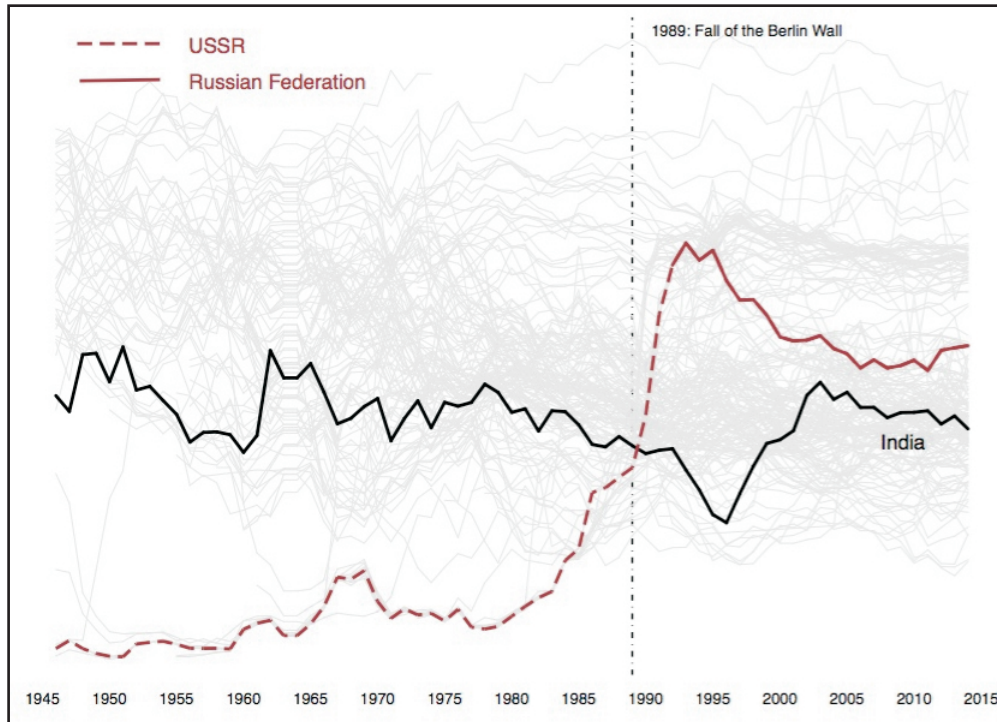


Figure 2.2: From USSR to the Russian Federation

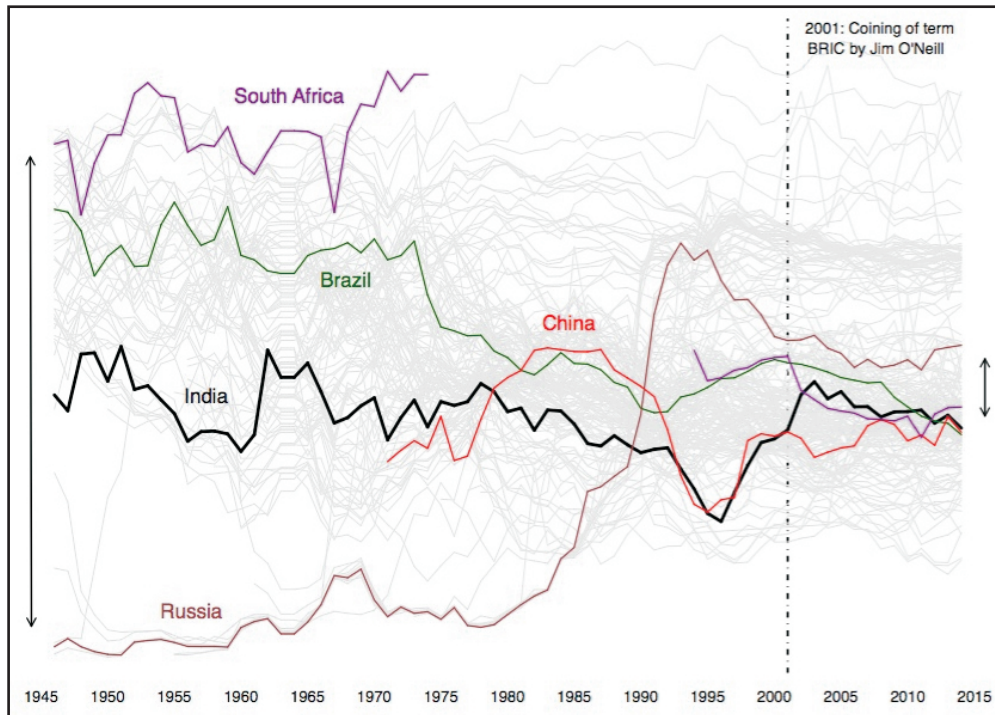
Starting in the mid-‘70s, India’s policy stance moved closer to the Soviet Union and further away from the US, though it should be noted that this change can be attributed both to shifts in the Soviet Union’s position as well as changes in India’s diplomatic outlook (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Today, India continues to vote more similarly to Russia and the other USSR successor states than to pro-US Western nations. This is likely due, at least in part, to India and the former-USSR states’ shared status as economically developing nations, rather than any inherent ideological affinity.

The transition between the USSR and the Russian Federation resulted in a dramatic change in policy positions at the UN (see Figure 2.2). Before 1990, India’s voting pattern often forged a middle ground between the Cold War powers (see Figure 2.1). After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, Russia’s position moved towards the US, while India’s moved away from it. Now, it is Russia that takes a middle ground between India and the West (see Figure 2.1).

India's balancing act between its old friend Russia and supposed new ally, the US is not actually reflected in its policy positions at the UN, where India takes a more anti-Western stance than Russia does. In a sense, this is indicative of India's quest to carve out a leading position amongst countries, including Russia, that seek to challenge Western dominance of the liberal world order.

INDIA AND BRICS

As Figure 3.1 shows, since the early 2000s, India has enjoyed a relatively high level of agreement with Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa in its policy preferences at the UNGA. Part of this policy affinity may be linked to the emergence of BRICS as a multilateral grouping. While the grouping only held its first summit in 2009, and South Africa was not inducted into the alliance until 2010, economist Jim O’Neill first coined the term ‘BRIC’ in 2001 in recognition of the similar economic and international political paths of the original four nations.

Figure 3.1: BRICS

**Missing observations for South Africa are due to its expulsion from the UN between 1974–94.*

Though formal, long-term, institutionalised dialogue on issues of mutual interest began later, UN voting patterns of the five countries reveal compatible diplomatic positions as early as 2001. The convergence in policy positions has since continued to increase, particularly 2006 onwards, when the first high-level meetings between the foreign ministers of the four initial members took place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

In the early decades of the UN, the nations that will eventually be known as BRICS held dramatically divergent stances. The considerable change in recent years can partially be explained by transitions to democracy in individual countries: Brazil transitioned away from military dictatorship in 1985 and adopted a democratic constitution in 1988; South Africa was expelled from the UN in 1974 and then readmitted in 1994 after its transition to democracy; the Russian Federation also transitioned to democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union in

1991. However, India's policy has remained uncommonly consistent throughout the history of the UN, as proven by its relatively stable trajectory in Figure 3.1. This suggests that in the recent policy convergence between BRICS, India's positions have served as a common thread between its five member states.

INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

For the most part, India's voting patterns are comparable to those of its peers in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) grouping (see Figure 4.1). This trend suggests that despite inherent political differences within countries in the neighbourhood, South Asia displays a consistent regional ethos on the international stage.

However, a comparison of the policy preferences of India and Pakistan at the UNGA shows considerable divergence during the 1950s. This chronology of discord bridges the

Figure 4.1: SAARC Nations

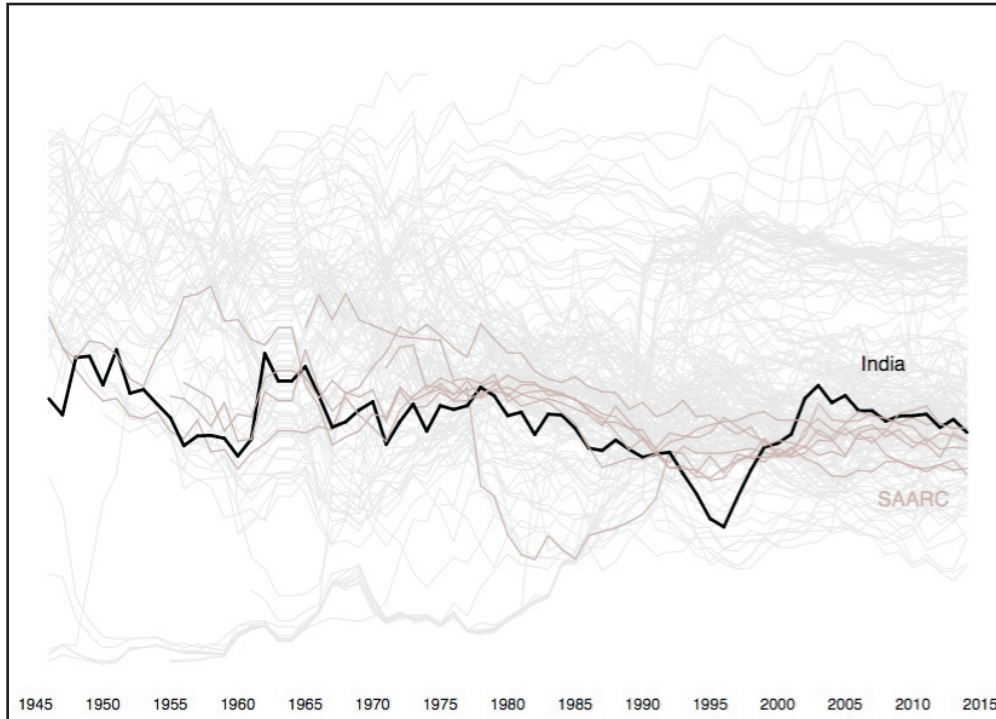
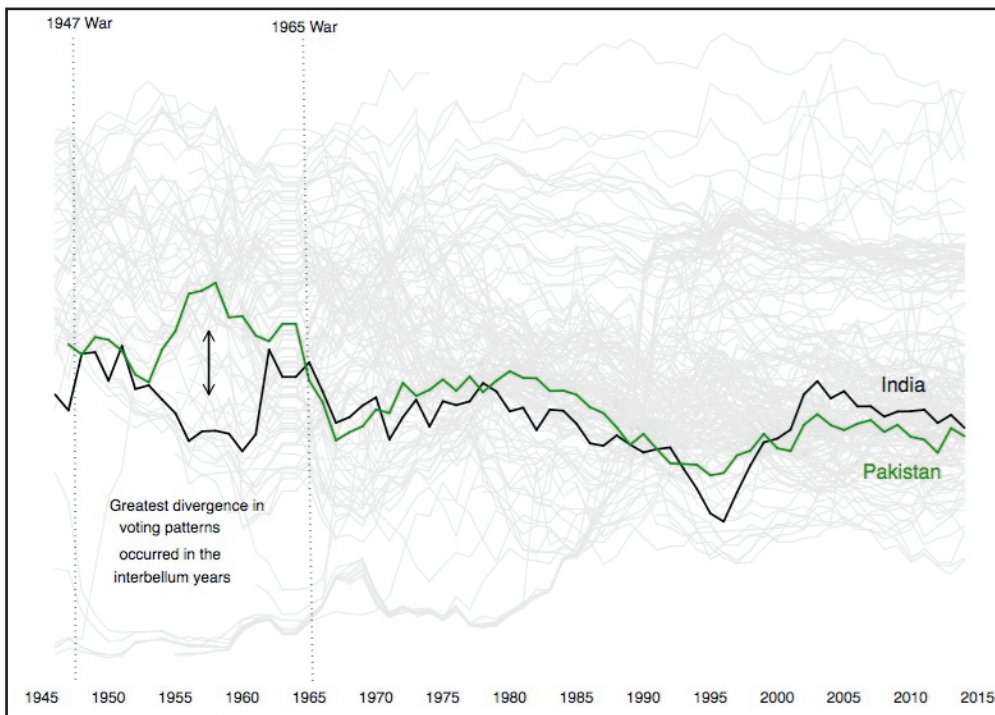
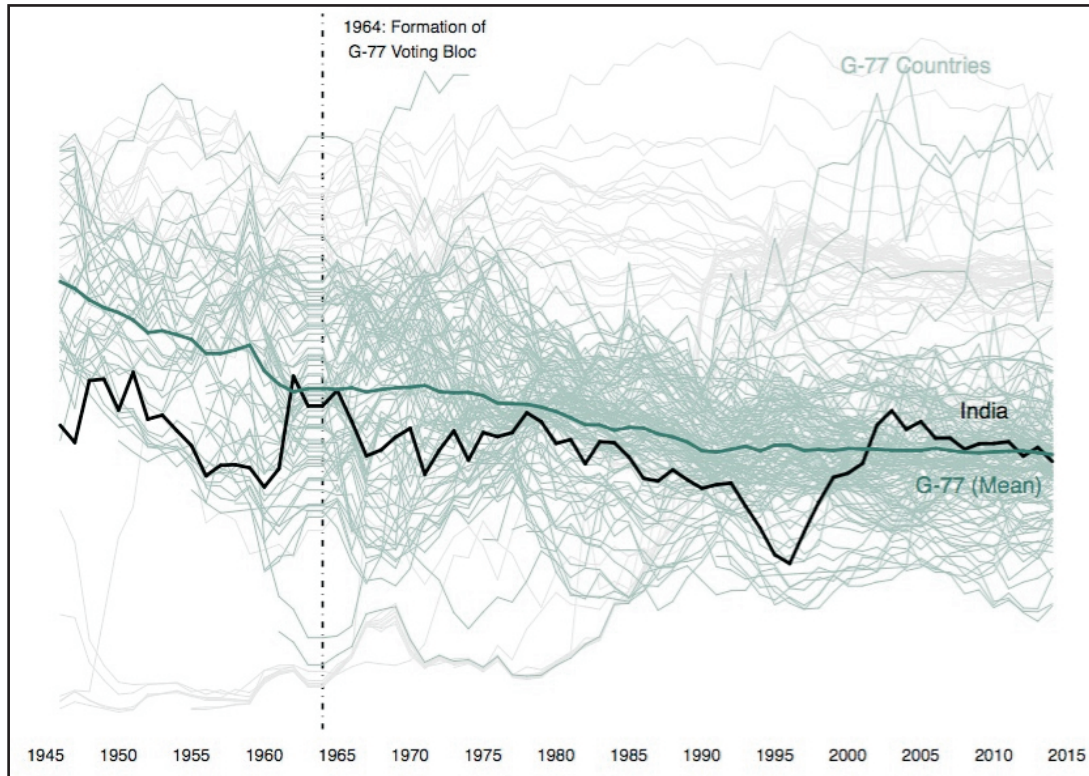


Figure 4.2: India and Pakistan



1947 and 1965 wars between the two nations (see Figure 4.2). Since 1965, the policy preferences of the two nations have largely aligned. Still, as Figure 4.2 shows, since the turn

of the 21st century, India's positions have become marginally more pro-West relative to Pakistan's, a reversal of the pattern observed for most of the prior years.

Figure 5.1: India and the Group of 77

**The dark green line represents the mean position of members of the G-77 (excluding India).
The light green lines represent the individual policy positions of the same set of countries.*

INDIA AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD

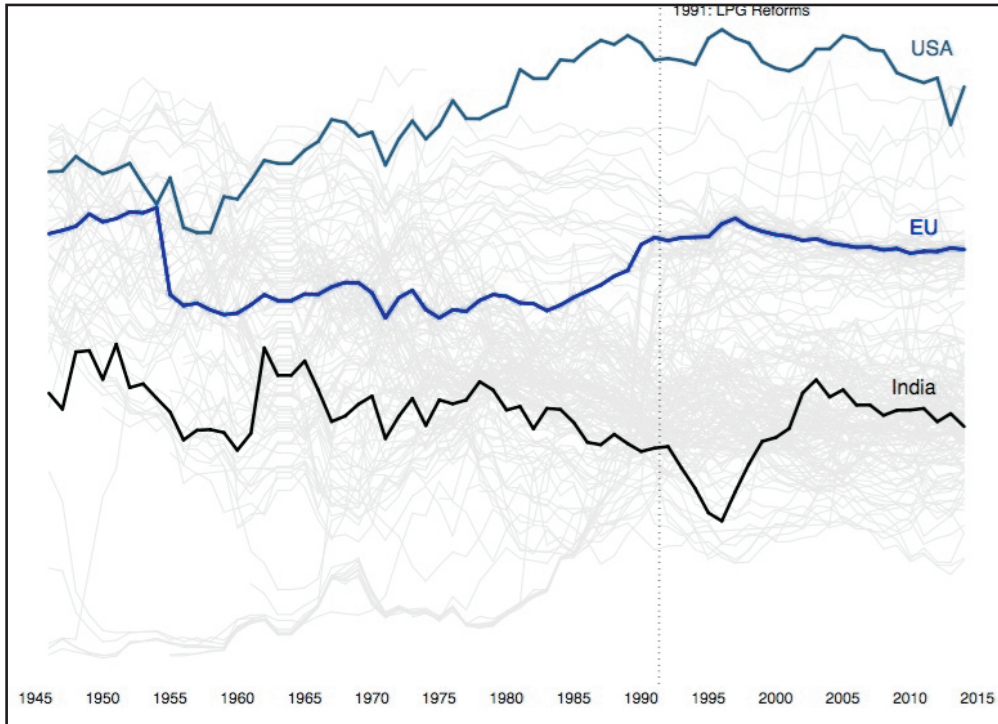
Since the early days of the UN, India has played a leadership role in representing the interests of developing nations. This is helped by the fact that the policy preferences of many developing nations have followed compatible trajectories over the history of the UN. Furthermore, India's own position has evolved quite closely with the mean position of the Group of 77, a coalition of developing nations formed in 1964 to promote the collective interests of its members at the UN. As Figure 5.1 shows, the mean policy preference of G-77 nations is very close to India's policy preferences, and particularly so since the beginning of the present century. This might suggest that in recent years, India has effectively aligned and represented the policy preferences of developing nations within the UNGA.

INDIA AND THE WEST

In its positions vis-a-vis Western nations, India stands closer to European nations than to the US (see Figure 6.1). Moreover, India's policy preferences relative to both the EU and the US have been mostly consistent over time, with the exception of the 1990s, coinciding with the aftermath of the LPG Reforms of 1991.¹ The temporarily increased distance between India and the Western nations' policy preferences during this period may reflect a reactive stance to the disruption caused by the reforms, which were pushed through with considerable Western pressure to liberalise the Indian economy.

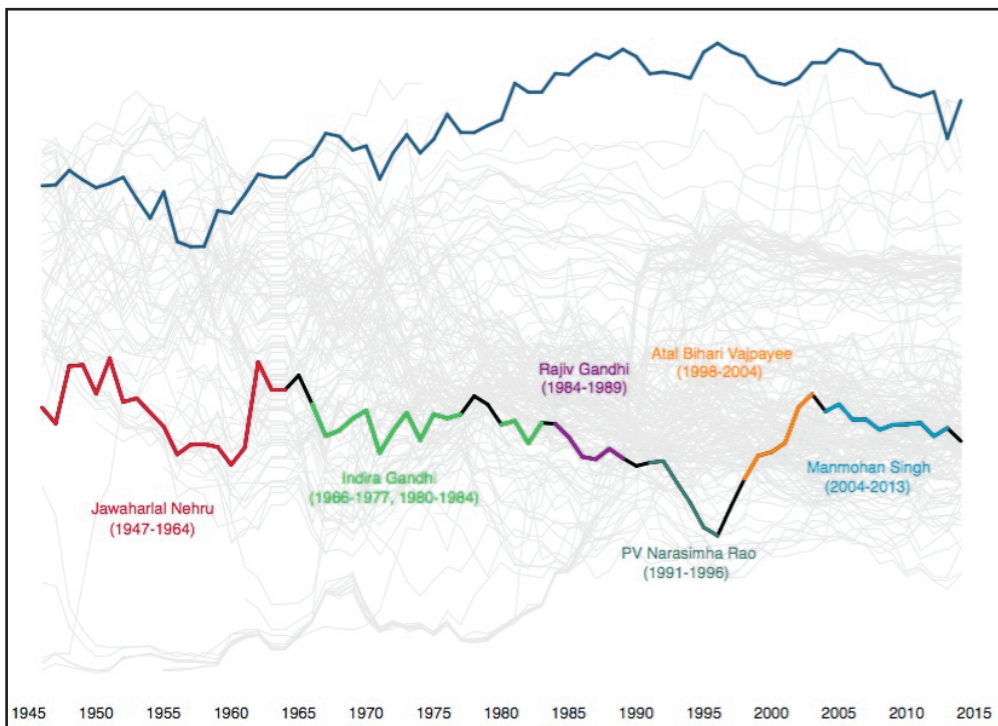
Since 2005, India's position has been mostly consistent relative to the West, a sign that India has found its place in an increasingly globalised world. However, the respective policy preferences

Figure 6.1: India, Europe and the United States



*The line graphed for the EU is a mean of the positions taken by member states of the EU.

Figure 7.1: Evolving Indian Policy



are at a greater distance from each other than in early years of the UN, perhaps indicative of India's greater recognition and vocal opposition to existing disparities in the liberal world order.

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AT THE UN UNDER DIFFERENT PRIME MINISTERS

While India's positions have always been considerably different to those of the US, under

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004), India's voting patterns moved in a relatively pro-US direction. In contrast, under all other prime ministers, India's position relative to the US stayed constant or moved marginally further away from the Western policy position. For the most part, therefore, it seems that internal political considerations have not drastically changed India's long-term foreign-policy priorities.

In the years 1994–2004, India's position first moved away from, and then towards the Western position in a relatively short span of time. However, as mentioned in the previous section, this period also coincided with the impacts of the transition seen in the economy

after the LPG reforms of 1991. This period in Indian history might be considered exceptional in that it necessitated a policy reorientation— independent of which political party was in power—as India took its place in the global economic order as an emerging economy.

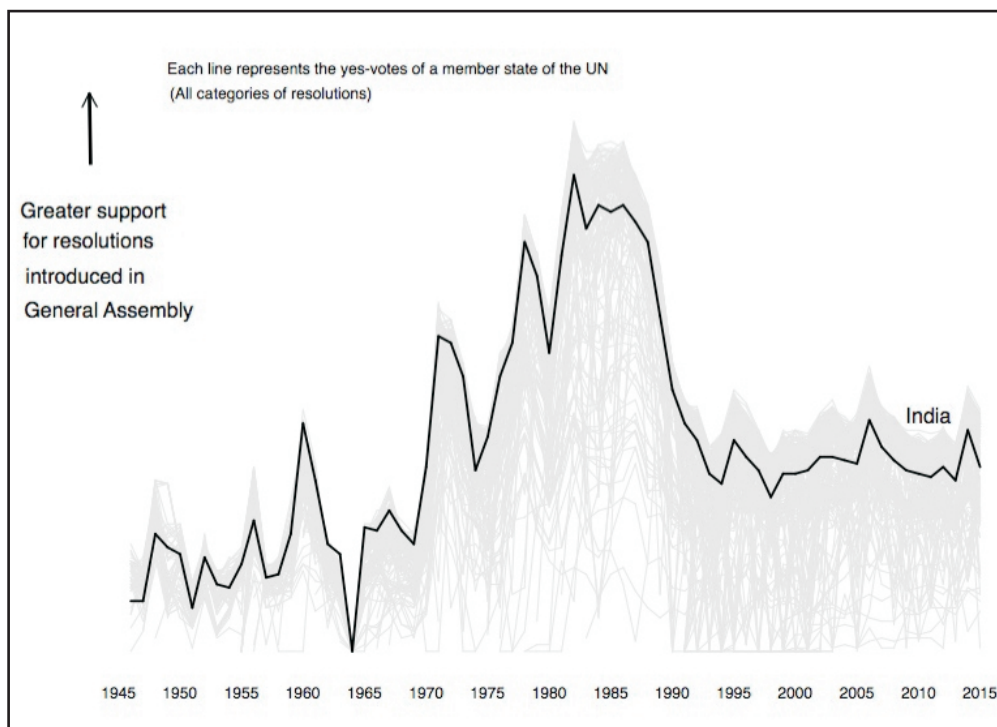
TOPIC-WISE BREAKDOWN OF INDIA'S POSITIONS AT THE UNGA

The graphs presented in the following section use raw votes to quantify the degree of agreement expressed by member states on resolutions related to topics introduced at the UNGA. Only “yes” votes have been depicted here, as a rough measure of the level of support given by individual member states to all resolutions on

Interpreting Raw UN Data

Since the number of resolutions on a given topic varies from year to year, the graphs in the second part of this brief should be considered in relative terms. In other words, the line representing India should be compared to the lines representing the other member states to get a visual idea of the relative frequency with which India votes “yes” on particular issues, rather than voting in the negative or abstaining.

Figure 8.1: “Yes” Votes



a particular issue in a given year. A higher value on the y-axis reflects a higher number of “yes” votes on a topic. Thus, this indicator is distinct from the metric presented in the previous sections. It merely reflects a given state’s level of support for resolutions introduced in each year on specific topics, and does not attempt to quantify a policy position associated with a particular state or group of states.

Palestine Issue

Despite India’s recent deepening strategic engagement with Israel, at the UN, India has historically tended to side with Islamic states over Israel (See Figure 8.2). This is especially true on resolutions dealing with the Palestine issue, on which India has historically been unambiguous in its condemnation of Israeli policy. However, this trend might be set to change. In 2015, Delhi signalled a considerable policy change by abstaining in a UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) resolution condemning Israel’s actions in Gaza.²

Economic Development

On resolutions pertaining to development, it is unsurprising that India votes closer to the G-77, a voting bloc for developing nations, than the G-7 or G-20. While the G-7 comprises the world’s most “developed” nations, the G-20 is a more diverse forum that encompasses key emerging economies as well as developed economies. The difference in the collective interests of these different groups can be inferred from the differences in how the member countries of these groups voted on economic issues throughout the history of the UN.

Figure 8.3 shows that the greatest divergence in the mean voting patterns of the G-77 and the G-7 nations occurred during turbulent economic times, against the backdrop of simultaneous crises in the developed and developing world, namely, the Sovereign Debt Crisis in Latin America in the early 1980s, and the Savings and Loans Crisis in the US in the same decade. In contrast to these localised crises during the

Figure 8.2: How India Votes on the Palestine Issue Relative to Middle Eastern States

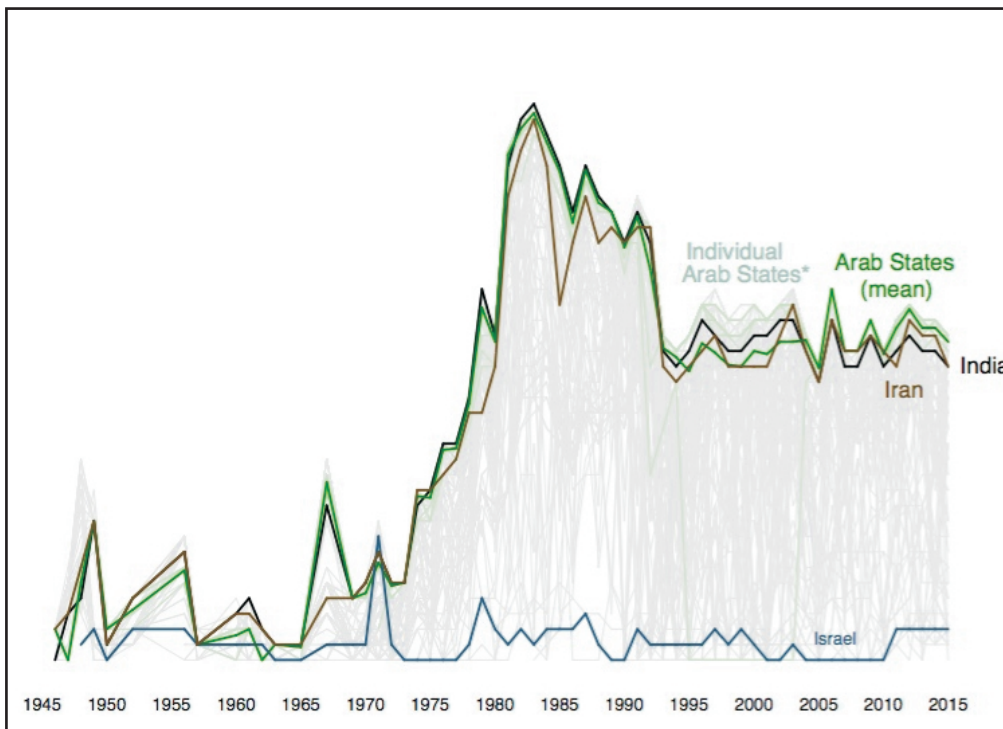
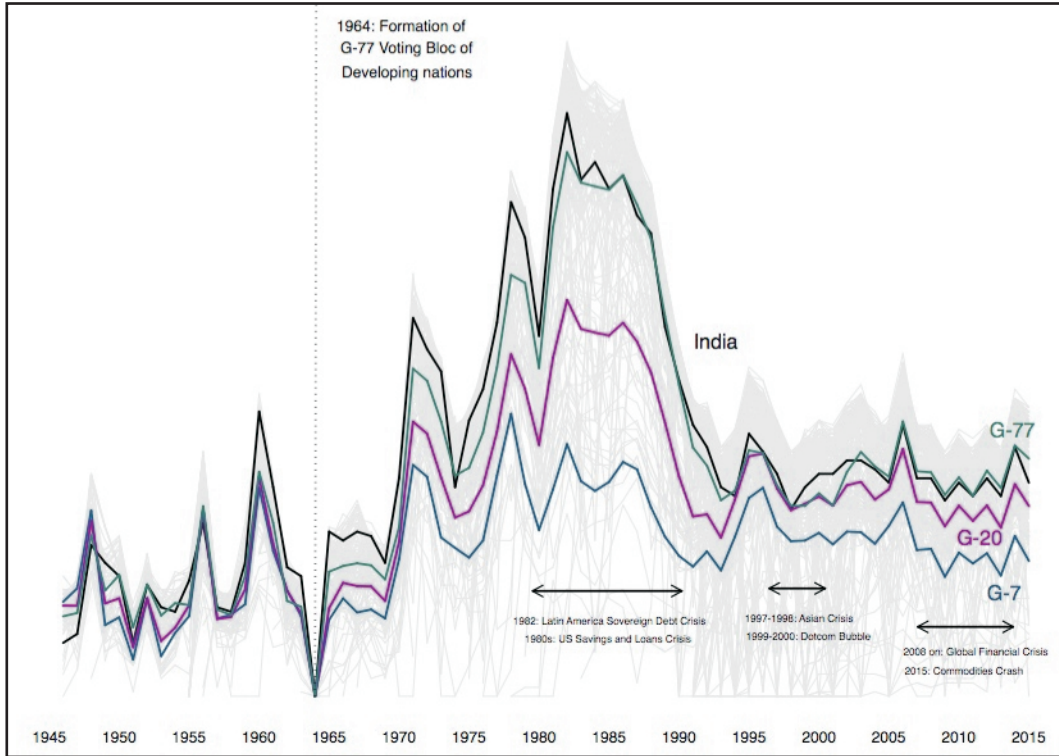


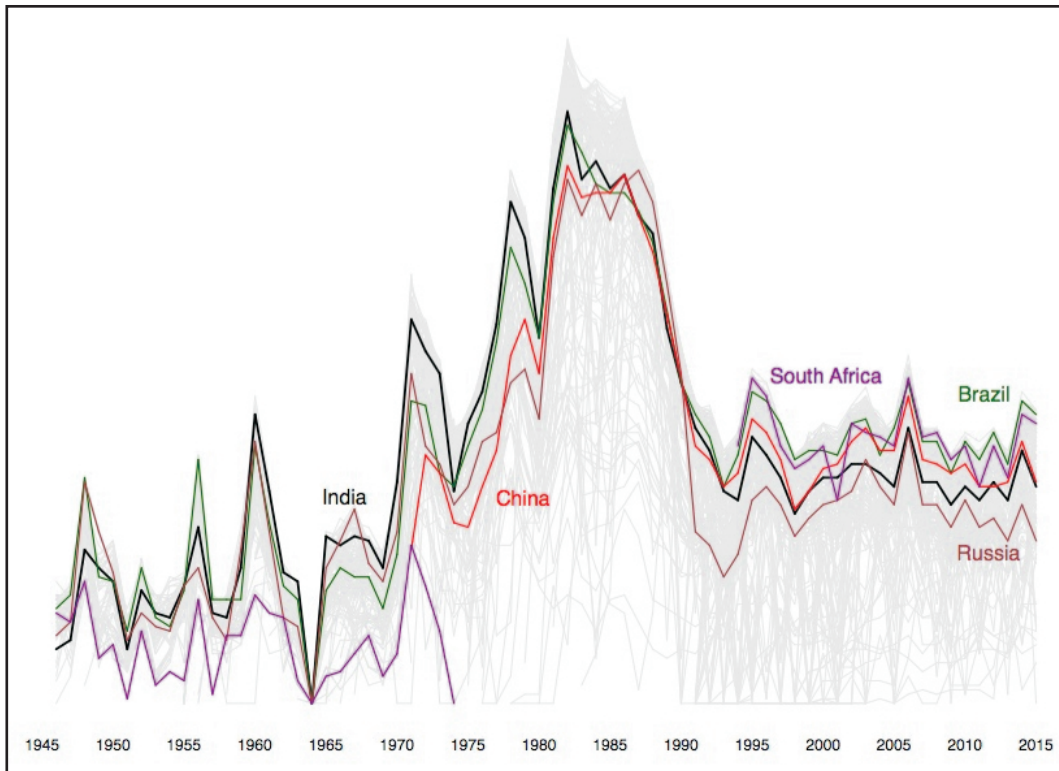
Figure 8.3: How Various Groupings Vote on Economic Issues



*The lines depicted above for G-7, G-20 and G-77 are all means of the positions of the members states of the respective groupings. India has not been included in calculating the mean for G-77 and G-20.

**The G-20 was founded in 1999. However, the pre-1999 mean position of its members has been depicted here.

Figure 8.4: BRICS and Economic Development



*The above graph does not include UNSC Resolutions.

1980s, recent economic crises, such as the global financial crisis of 2008 or the commodities crash in 2014, have been more widely felt because of globalisation. While the mean voting positions of different global groupings have continued to be distinct, they have moved relatively closer together, perhaps a sign of the increasingly shared stakes in the global economic order. It remains to be seen how the recent rise of populism across the Western world will shift, it at all, the overlaps in voting patterns between these economic groupings.

On issues of economic development, India has long held consistent policy affinities with its emerging market peers, as evidenced by how it votes relative to the other BRICS nations (see Figure 8.4). Note that the similarities in the level of agreement expressed by BRICS nations towards UNGA resolutions on economic issues began much before the formalisation of the group in the last decade.

Nuclear Proliferation and Disarmament

On the topic of nuclear proliferation, there is a split in the stance of the permanent members of the Security Council (P-5), the only five states officially recognised as “nuclear-weapon states” by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Particularly in the years in between India’s two nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998, Russia and China took positions that were broadly compatible with India’s views, whereas the Western members of the P-5 voted in the opposite direction. This may be a reflection of diverse reactions to the challenging of the status quo by India’s nuclear tests in 1974. Since the 2000s, the divergence has narrowed, though the US continues to offer a consistently low level of support for UNGA resolutions dealing with nuclear proliferation.

A similar pattern as Figure 8.5 is seen in resolutions pertaining to disarmament. Again, in the 1980s there seems to have occurred a considerable split between the positions taken

Figure 8.5: Nuclear Weapons States on Nuclear Proliferation

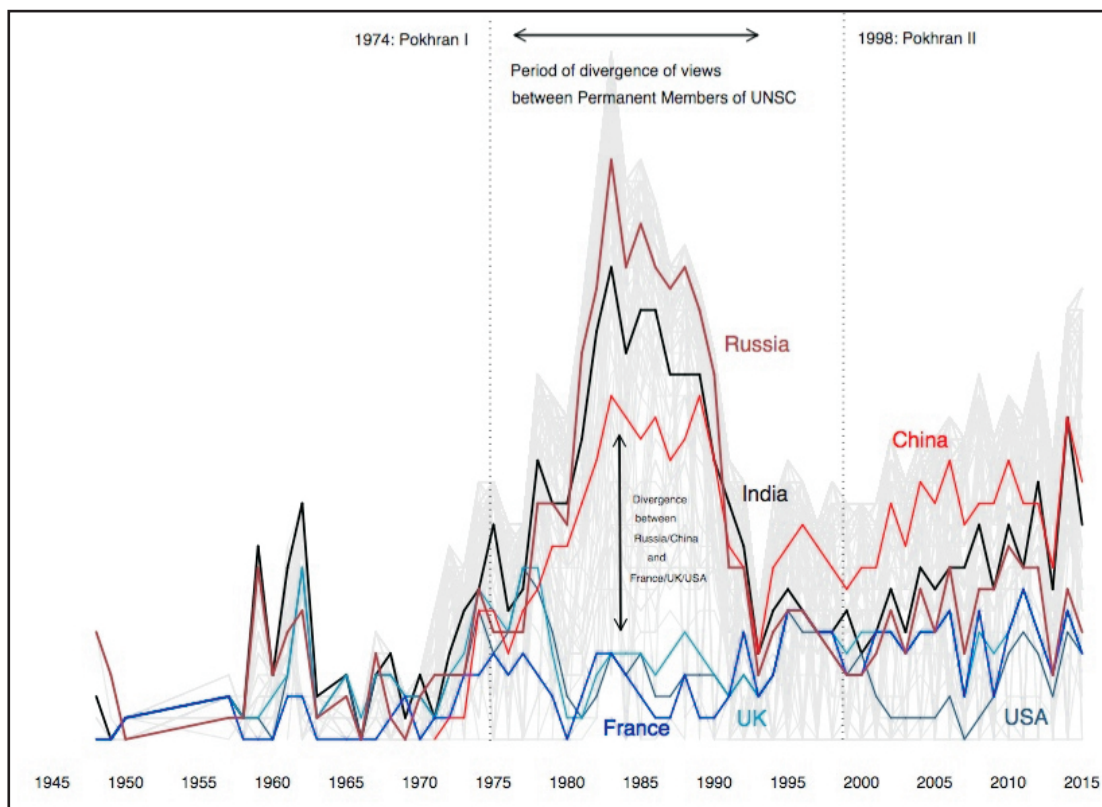
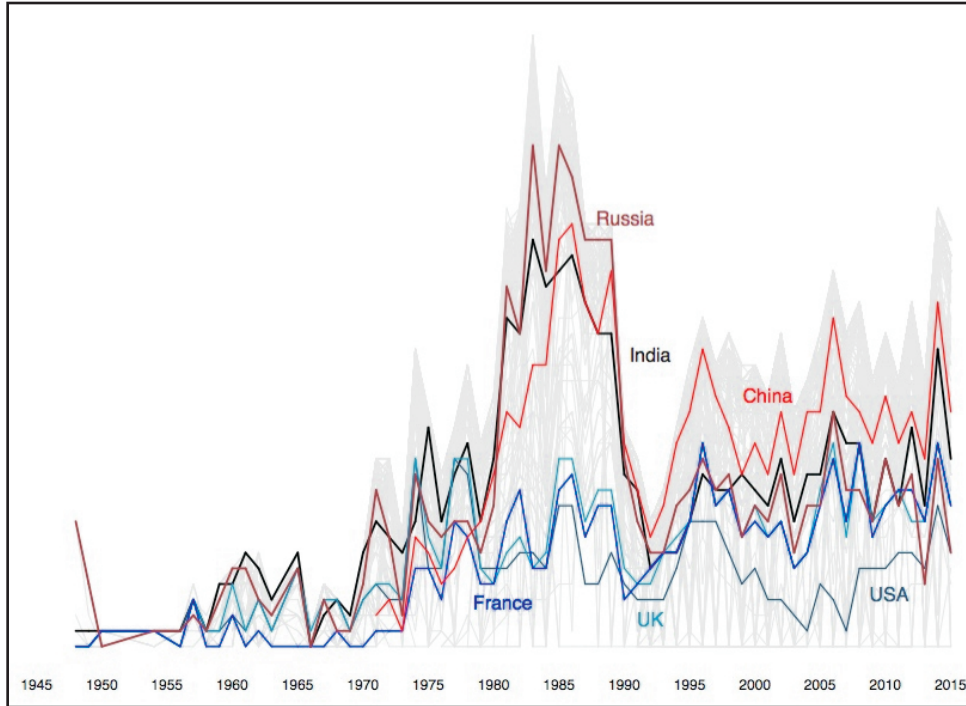


Figure 8.6: Views of the P-5 on Disarmament



by Russia and China and those taken by the Western P-5 members. Since the broad topic of disarmament under the UN deals with “global challenges and threats to peace,” and is thus closely related to the nuclear threat, the patterns seen here may be an extension of the debate sparked by India’s Pokhran-I tests in 1974.

Human Rights

On human rights issues, India has voted closer to authoritarian states such as Russia and China than to the US, which is known for its vociferous defence of human rights and its explicit government policy to “hold governments accountable to their obligations under universal

Figure 8.7: Human Rights Issues

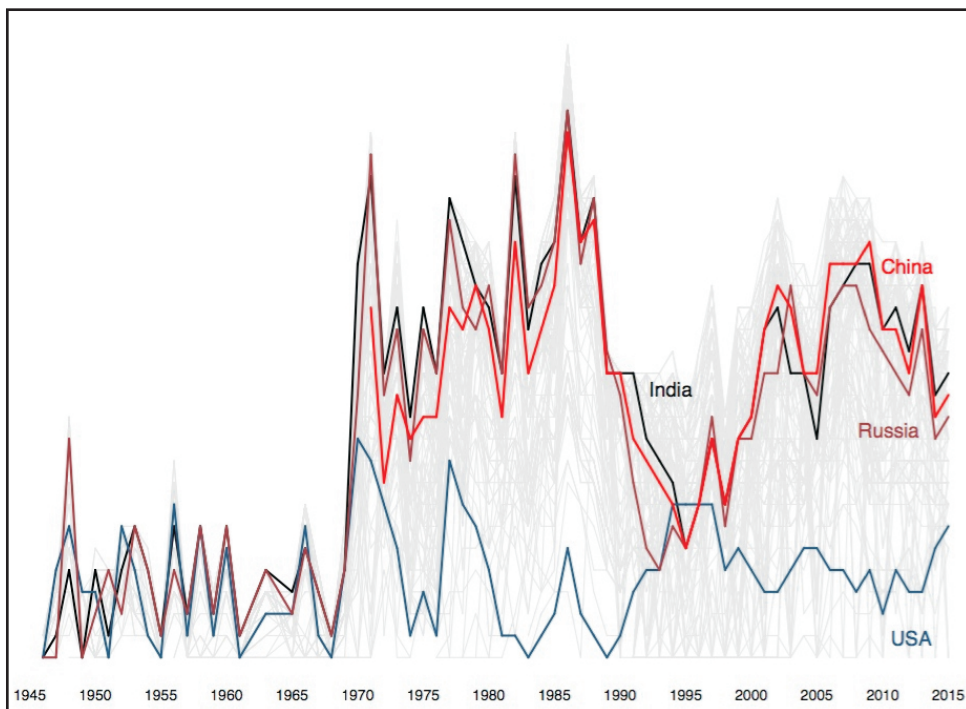
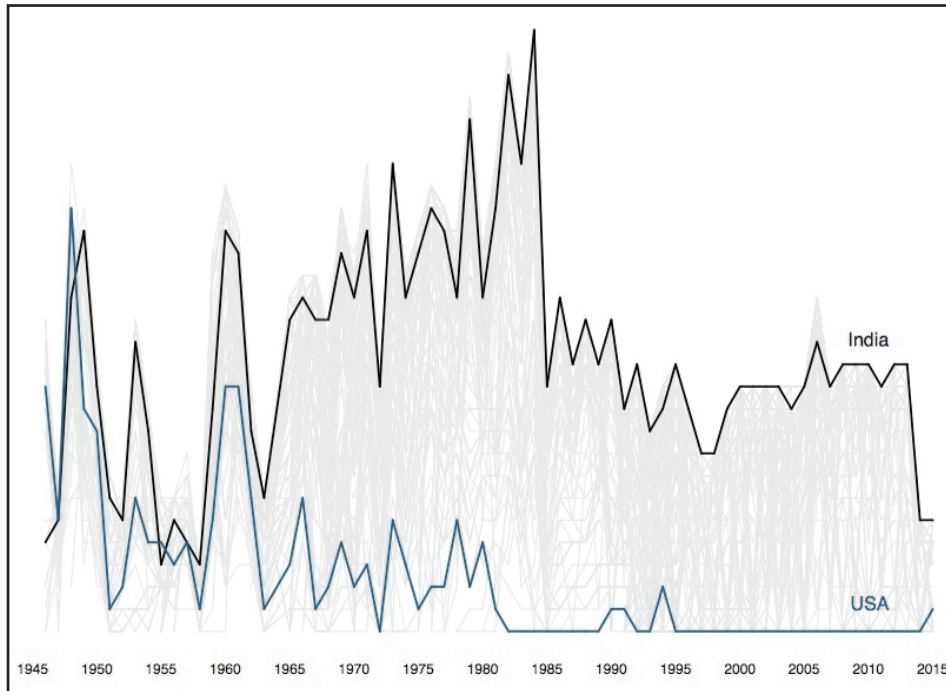


Figure 8.8: Colonialism

human rights norms and international human rights instruments.” However, India’s position should not be interpreted as an acceptance of human rights violations, but rather as evidence for India’s policy of non-interference in the internal issues of other sovereign states, a position shared by Russia and China.

Colonialism

India and the US—two former British colonies with very different historical trajectories and relations with their colonisers—take diametrically opposing voting positions on resolutions pertaining to colonisation. On this issue, as in the issues of economic development, it seems that the development status is an important predictor of a country’s degree of support for UN resolutions. Here, India tends to side with the perspective of former colonies. As evidenced by Graph 8.8, status as an ex-colony does not necessarily lead to a policy of agreement with UN resolutions pertaining to the issue of colonisation.

CONCLUSION

The graphs presented above, derived from voting history at the UNGA, present a long-term

picture of Indian foreign policy that offers several concrete conclusions about the dynamic nature of the country’s policy preferences. First, they suggest that India has held consistent policy preferences that have endured during major transition periods, both international and domestic. Secondly, Indian policy has not, as suggested by some commentators, been opportunistic with regard to geopolitical power poles. While India played a middle ground between the great powers during the Cold War, the trajectory of its policy preferences from the ‘90s onwards proves that it has maintained a consistent position even as Russian policy has moved in a markedly pro-Western direction.


In the foreign policy realm, India has often been accused of “sitting on the fence.” However, the data visualised here dispels this myth. Especially during the Cold War era, the data shows that contrary to some views that its policy was ad hoc or opportunistic, India took a deliberate and principled middle ground, based on policy preferences that it maintained even after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The overall picture that emerges from the data is that India has held broadly consistent policy positions throughout the history of its

membership in the UN, a rarity among other prominent non-Western nations. On overall policy preference, some fluctuations have been seen relative to other non-Western states. However, over the years, while other states have seen dramatic policy shifts, India has held a largely constant policy position relative to the West, both on particular issues and across internal political leadership. On issue-based votes, the data suggests that India expresses a high degree of agreement with the viewpoint proposed in UN resolutions.

Furthermore, in the various groupings in which India participates, such as the BRICS, G-77 and SAARC, the mean policy position tends to be very close to that espoused by India. This implies that despite significant differences with some of its neighbours, such as Pakistan or China, in multilateral groupings, India plays a role that is conducive to cooperation between developing nations, and that bilateral political differences

between developing nations are overshadowed by their shared common group interests in a multilateral setting. It further suggests that India's national policy preferences are an excellent fit with the policy preferences of other emerging and developing nations, which makes it a natural leader in groups such as the G-77. India effectively employs diplomacy at the UN to align the policy positions of like-minded nations to have greater impact in multilateral settings.

This exercise attempts to characterise the evolution of India's policy at the UN relative to the changing positions of other member states. It finds not only that India has held policy positions that have been consistent over decades, but also that the position advocated by India has served as a common thread for several sub-sets of member states, thus highlighting India's active and fruitful participation at the UN and its consistent historical position in support of a more equitable world order. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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3. Figures 7.1–7.8: Erik Voeten. "Data and Analyses of Voting in the UN General Assembly." *Routledge Handbook of International Organization*, edited by Bob Reinalda. 27 May 2013. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2111149>.

ENDNOTES

1. LPG Reforms of 1991: Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation refers to a host of macroeconomic reforms in India aimed at economic liberalisation. The reforms were wide ranging and included fiscal, monetary and financial-sector reforms, as well as changes in industrial and trade policy.
2. The dataset used here does not include resolutions introduced at the UNHCR. However, there may be a correlation between India's stance at the UNHCR and the UNGA.



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