From Global South Voice to Climate Leader: India's Diplomatic Push

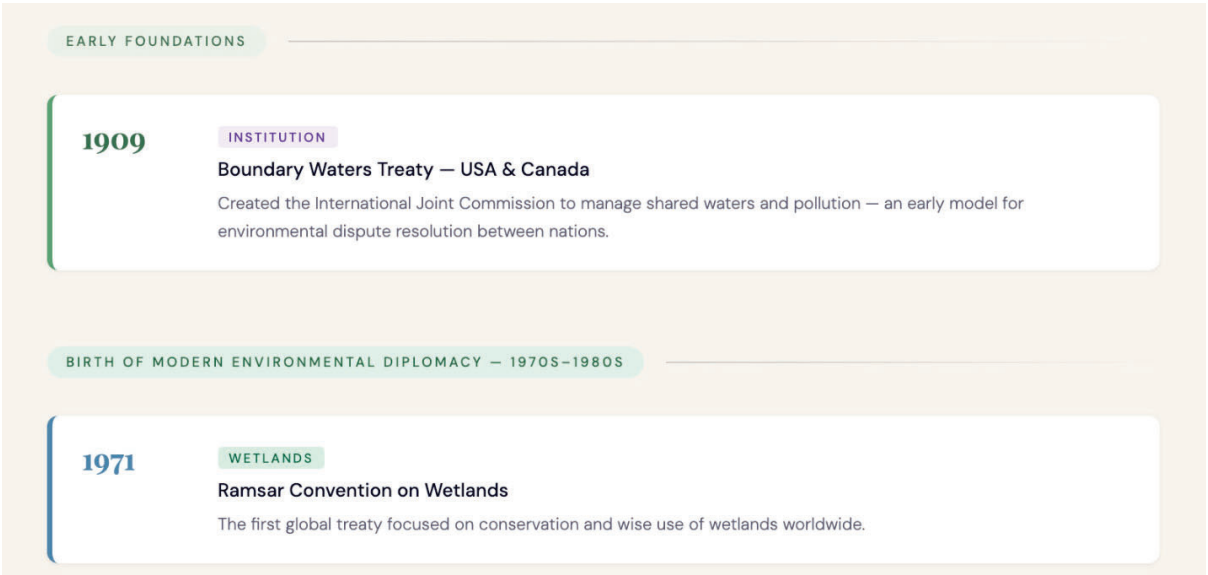
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Introduction

Environmental diplomacy employs international negotiation, cooperation, and law to safeguard the environment and harmonise national interests and developmental needs. It is the process by which states and other parties, including the United Nations (UN) bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and businesses, engage in dialogue and enter into appropriate agreements. Environmental diplomacy treats problems such as climate change, deforestation, water sharing, and marine pollution as mutual security and development issues, rather than domestic ones.[1]

Numerous environmental issues (greenhouse gas emissions, mobile species, ocean plastics, transboundary air quality) do not respect political boundaries, and thus collective regulations and institutions are required. The outcomes impact daily life by making air and water cleaner and stabilising the climate. They also ensure long-term availability of resources used in industries such as agriculture, fisheries, and energy. Collaboration on environmental matters may build trust and spill over into improved political and economic relations between states.[2]

Figure 1. Chronological Milestones in Environmental Diplomacy[3–5]



1972 — INSTITUTION

Stockholm Conference & UNEP Founded

The UN Conference on the Human Environment launched global environmental diplomacy, produced the Stockholm Declaration, and established the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

1973–83 — CONSERVATION & POLLUTION

MARPOL, CITES & Migratory Species

Key treaties on marine pollution (MARPOL, 1973), trade in endangered species (CITES, 1975), and conservation of migratory animals (CMS, 1983).

1987 — OZONE

Montreal Protocol

Set binding limits on ozone-depleting chemicals, becoming the benchmark for successful multilateral environmental agreements.

FROM ENVIRONMENT TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT — 1990S

1992 — RIO CONVENTIONS

Rio Earth Summit (UNCED)

Produced the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the three "Rio Conventions": UNFCCC, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and UNCCD — embedding sustainable development in global diplomacy.

1994 — CLIMATE

UNFCCC Enters into Force

Committed signatories to stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations to prevent "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system."

1995 — CLIMATE

COP1 — Berlin Mandate

First UNFCCC Conference of the Parties launched negotiations that would lead to a binding climate protocol.

1997 — CLIMATE

Kyoto Protocol at COP3

Created the first legally binding greenhouse-gas reduction commitments for industrialized countries.

CONSOLIDATION & REGIME CHANGE — 2000S–2010S

2001–05 — CLIMATE

Kyoto Protocol Enters into Force

Despite U.S. withdrawal in 2001, the Protocol took effect in 2005, demonstrating the resilience of multilateral climate diplomacy.



India's Current Stance on Environmental Diplomacy

India has emerged as an activist, agenda-setting middle power in environmental diplomacy, striving to balance its development agenda, climate action, and equity. It positions itself as a representative of the Global South and consistently emphasises equity and Common But Differentiated Responsibilities[6] (CBDR) concept in climate negotiations. At home, India can boast of concrete actions, such as ramping up renewable energy, reducing emissions, and phasing out ozone-depleting substances. However, it is sceptical of pledges for binding commitments on fossil-fuels and finance that may limit its development.[7,8]

India is a signatory to all major international environmental treaties. These include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change[9] (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement, the Biological Diversity Convention, the Ramsar Wetlands Convention, the Montreal Protocol and its Kigali amendment, as well as the Minamata Mercury Convention, the Desertification Convention, and even the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, plus Conservation of Forest Carbon Stocks, Sustainable Management of Forests, and Enhancement of Forest Carbon Stocks). India will commence

reductions under the Kigali Amendment in 2028 and aims to bring them to only 15 per cent of the 2024-26 levels by 2047. India has already exceeded the reduction target set by the Montreal Protocol - 44% reduction compared to 35%. In Paris, it is already on track to achieve, or even exceed, its goals for emissions intensity. Non-fossil sources now account for more than half of total installed capacity.[10]

India has been a pioneer in several international initiatives, such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). These platforms help position the nation as a destination for solar power solutions and build resilience against climate catastrophes, especially for developing countries. There is also Mission LiFE and LifeStyle, plus national efforts like Swachh Bharat and tree-dropping campaigns. India presents these examples to the world to show how a lifestyle change, development, and climate action can be combined. India is pushing not only for longer producer responsibility and single-use plastic bans, but also for negotiations on a global plastics treaty. These actions highlight its self-proclaimed planetary leadership.

Since the Paris Agreement, and particularly at COP28, COP29, and COP30, India has been vocal about the need for greater climate finance, technology transfer, and mitigation support. It argues that unless richer nations contribute sufficient funds, no real global action can be taken. At COP29 in Baku, India criticized the New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance as too small to meet CBDR and the real needs of developing countries. India supports the principle of the Loss and Damage fund, but says it can not become fully operational unless developed countries make real and reliable contributions.[11]

India, at COP30 in Belém, emphasised that climate action should be based on equity, climate justice, and CBDR-RC (Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities). It cautioned against approving new packages based on unclear or overly dependent finance as older commitments were not fulfilled, and demanded that developed nations should fulfil their own existing commitments and increase the size of climate finance to the amounts established in the BakuBelem Roadmap of about USD 1.3 trillion/year, with significant and grant based and concessional support and higher balancing between mitigation and adaptation funds. It also highlighted the need for a Just Transition Mechanism, placing equity first and countering one-sided trade policies such as Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism[11] (CBAM). India applauded the Just Transition Mechanism as a huge victory for equitable low-carbon change. It wanted adaptation outcomes and financing to include space for questioning trade instruments that impose costs on poorer countries. At the same time, India highlighted its domestic achievements: its emissions intensity reduced by more than 36% since 2005, more than half its power generated by non-fossil sources, a new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) until 2035 and a first transparency report on the way, and massive domestic initiatives such as planting billions of trees, Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment), renewables and green hydrogen. However, India was open about the gaps—no large phase-out of fossil fuels and no major leap in finance. Still, India lauded much of the agreement and backed Brazilian leadership. Some criticized the delays in India's updated plans and the ambition level for the 1.5°C goal, but India insisted that no individual action can be unilaterally taken in the name of climate action. It said this principle aligns with UNFCCC Article 3.5 and the multilateral spirit.[10,12]

Current Opportunities and Constraints

Today, India's climate diplomacy is enjoying both benefits and limitations. On the upside, it can boast of sound domestic performance – reduction in emissions intensity, and rapid expansion of renewable energy potential. Agencies such as the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) provide it with a plausible policy foundation, enabling it to be heard more effectively at the negotiation table. Simultaneously, India has very high and growing energy demands, still depends on coal, faces development concerns, and has constrained public funds, which make it cautious about embracing externally formulated net-zero schedules or climate terms linked to trade. Going forward, India will be interested in rewriting global financial regulations to its benefit, strengthening its solar- and resilience-based relationships, and defining the interaction among trade, climate, and industrial policy, including through new arrangements with the European Union.[13]

Conclusion

Environmental diplomacy, as outlined above, uses scientific evidence and international law to reconcile national development with planetary boundaries. Issues such as climate change, air pollution, and plastic waste in our oceans can affect even countries far away, and laws in a single country cannot be enough to overcome these problems. The establishment of international agreements, treaties, and standards, both locally (bilateral) and globally (multilateral), is the main instrument of environmental diplomacy. It aims to strike a balance between the interests of the national economy and the overall duty to protect the global environment. This model of statecraft is based on scientific evidence to support political negotiations aimed at establishing binding commitments and cooperative structures for a sustainable future.

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