

# Democracy and India's Foreign Policy

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In 1950, the year the Republic of India came into being, Jawaharlal Nehru told his fellow parliamentarians that India “stood not only for progressive democracy in our own country but also in other countries ... it has consistently been part of our policy in distant quarters of the world” (Muni 2009: 25). In recent decades, we have seen even greater emphasis on India's identity as a democracy. In 2005, India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh exhorted, “liberal democracy is the natural order of political organisation in today's world. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.”<sup>1</sup> By affirming “India's identity as the world's largest democracy,” it has been suggested that policymakers were “breaking from post-Nehruvian Third Worldism” (Mohan 2015: 142). External actors too, often for strategic motives of their own, have drawn greater attention to India's political system as a factor that should shape Delhi's foreign policy choices.

Focusing on Indian words and, more importantly, its postures and deeds during this period of identity flux, however, indicates that the “democracy” factor in India's statecraft has not heralded the shifts that were envisaged by its proponents at home and abroad. What we discover instead is that policymakers, in spite of the occasional rhetoric they espouse to meet the expectations of different audiences, have been non-ideological and pragmatic in the practice of foreign policy. Beyond the subcontinent, Indian behaviour has seen a large measure of continuity, as have the norms that guided these responses towards crises in democracy or Western attempts to reorder regimes. In the immediate neighbourhood, there appears to be an absence of an agreed framework for what ought to be the extent of India's geopolitical

footprint in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, as well as what values and norms ought to be guiding Indian policy.

## Global ‘Democracy Promotion’

A useful way to gauge India's changing identity would be to audit Indian responses during major international crises and interventions that fall under the rubric of democracy promotion (Table 1). From India's responses to four major international crises over the past two decades, we can infer that a preference for liberal values and a democratic political system has had little or no influence on India's response to Western attempts at advancing these goals. India's voting record in the United Nations (UN), while reflecting higher levels of support for democracy abroad, reveals that it is still in the “non-interventionist” camp of countries (Mazumdar and Statz 2015: 87). More broadly, the Indian world view is shaped by a complex ensemble of values: civilisational ethos of universalism, liberalism, postcolonial experience and identity, and Westphalian values of sovereignty and non-interference. On the Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and most recently Syria crises, India's basic position has been that unless a specific action has the “collective concurrence of the international community” (MEA 2003)—and from a legal standpoint a common position on

the United Nations Security Council—India will not be a party to any interference in the sovereign jurisdiction of a state. In short, India is simply uninterested in either legitimising or collaborating in regime change projects across the world.

Where Indian thinking differs markedly from most Western democracies is on the strategy employed to internationalise domestic experiences and values. Norm promotion or fostering liberal political precepts, according to the dominant Indian world view, ought to be an organic endeavour through the power of example of a political model, rather than an imposition into or manipulation of a state's domestic politics through social engineering. India's own national experience has led to a bipartisan belief “that, to be successful, democracy must have a strong internal basis and cannot be enforced from abroad” (Mohan 2007: 105). This has been reinforced by the repeated and catastrophic failures of Western attempts at democracy promotion, which have made Indian policymakers deeply sceptical of the unintended consequences associated with even non-militarised regime change efforts. For these reasons, India is not likely to transform into a “proselytiser,” but, rather, will attempt to serve as an exemplar through its own unique experience (Cartwright 2009: 420). The following statement by India's Permanent Mission in 2014 to the UN Human Rights Council is instructive:

The practice of selectively highlighting country situations and finger pointing has never proved to be productive. It will only harden the stance of countries and make them more defensive ... India strongly believes that the advancement and realisation of human rights can be achieved only through the cooperation and full participation of the concerned States. (Ayres 2017: 136)

**Table 1: India and ‘Democracy Promotion’ Crises**

Global Crisis	India's Response	Reasons for Posture
Yugoslavia, 1999	Non-intervention Co-sponsored a UN resolution to protest against Western intervention	Assault on Westphalian values
Iraq, 2003	“If unilateralism prevails, the UN would be deeply scarred, with disastrous consequences for the world order”—Indian Prime Minister	Use of force by the US lacked the legal mandate of a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution and international legitimacy
Libya, 2011	Abstained on UNSC Resolution 1973, which approved the “no-fly zone”	Concern for instability and uncertain consequences
Syria, 2012	Non-intervention Respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity	“[S]ocieties cannot be re-ordered from outside”—Indian Minister for External Affairs Questioned military intervention on humanitarian grounds Preferred secular state to sectarianism

Or take, for example, the Indian external affairs minister's remarks at the 2014 Geneva II peace conference to address the Syrian conflict: "India believes that societies cannot be re-ordered from outside and that people in all countries have the right to choose their own destiny and decide their own future" (MEA 2014). The extent of financial support towards "democracy assistance" reflects just how seriously the concept is actually taken in India. Between 2006 and 2015, Indian contributions to the United Nations Democracy Fund totalled a mere \$31 million (Hall 2017). The cautionary tone of a 2012 think tank study reflects what the dominant belief in India probably is today:

[T]he circumstances under which armed intervention is warranted on behalf of these values needs to be very carefully weighed, and that universal norms and values cannot provide a fig-leaf for the pursuit of great power interests. (Khilnani et al 2012: 37)

### India and the Neighbourhood

When it comes to their immediate periphery, regional powers or great powers have typically attempted to project their political system and values onto other states. The Soviet Union did it to influence the emergence of communist China as well as shape the politics in Eastern Europe after 1945. The United States did it after World War II, when it promoted democracy, albeit for strategic purposes, in Germany and Japan. At various stages of its history, India too has pursued a similar approach. It might not have always succeeded, but the world view or intention was present to establish some type of authority or a sphere of influence in the subcontinent. To be sure, this was often contested by other major powers and by some of India's neighbours, too. However, the belief in India's security establishment and leadership has existed even as that ambition and political will has varied considerably over the decades.

Historically, there have been two strands of ideas that have shaped how policymakers and strategists think about the periphery. The traditional Nehruvian approach prescribes a light footprint in domestic affairs of other states and one where pressure and coercion ought to be

minimised, if not avoided altogether, in the process of engagement. This approach underwent changes in the post-Nehru period, where an alternative world view came to the fore, one that had fewer inhibitions about interference or even regime transformations in South Asia. As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s, India was actively involved in reorienting the political structure in its neighbouring states. And, often, this was aimed at safeguarding or changing the constitutional and political basis of regimes towards something resembling an image closer to India's own federal democratic structure.

After the Cold War, there was a sharp retreat from this ambitious approach. This found the clearest expression in the Gujral Doctrine of 1997, named after the then Prime Minister I K Gujral. Uncannily similar to the Nehruvian framework, this doctrine sought to restrain coercive impulses in India's engagement with its neighbours and advised in favour of accepting their internal quirks and flaws, while advocating a policy where positive inducements and economic interdependence would gradually produce a more friendly and cohesive subcontinent. But, what did all this mean in terms of the diffusion of liberal political values? This was spelled out in an important policy speech in 2005 by then Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran: As "a flourishing democracy, India would certainly welcome more democracy in our neighborhood ... it is not something that we can impose upon others." The foreign secretary then seemed to argue for a more sustained interest in political pluralism in the region: "We believe that democracy would provide a more enduring and broad-based foundation for an edifice of peace and cooperation in our subcontinent." However, again, this belief was qualified: Although democracy remained "India's abiding conviction, the importance of our neighborhood requires that we remain engaged with whichever government is exercising authority in any country" (MEA 2005).

Looking back over the past several decades, we can notice both strands of thought shaping the discourse in the Indian strategic community as well as setting the backdrop for policy choices: a tension between the belief that India

must actively shape regional politics, and a rival world view that India must take a pragmatic and somewhat detached perspective as its neighbours work out their internal political contestations and governance challenges. After the Cold War, particularly over the past decade, with the possible exception of Nepal, India has assumed a much lighter footprint in how it chooses to involve itself or shape the political transitions and internal power struggles in South Asia. For the most part, we witnessed homeland security and geo-economic considerations, rather than normative concerns or order-building, shape India's approach. Ironically, the strategic and political projection of Indian constitutional values and secular ethos was stronger during the Cold War years than in recent decades when the emphasis on India's democratic identity has grown.

### Norms and Order-building

The global system is evolving towards a distribution of power where no single authority or bloc would be able to enforce an idea like "democracy promotion." For India, one of the deeper questions is: What does it mean to be a rising power in a multipolar world where the normative basis of what constitutes a responsible stakeholder is itself far more contested today than, say, a decade ago? Sensing the intervention fatigue in Western democracies, India's strategic community perceives far less pressure to conform to the classic Western image of a rising power when it comes to foreign policy. For most in India, this comes as a relief because it enables Indians the space to indigenously discover what should be the normative and strategic purposes of its growing profile in the region and beyond.

Internationally, this should not pose much of an intellectual problem because most Indians have never visualised democracy as "an ideological concept that serves as a polarizing axis in world politics" (Khilnani et al 2012: 31). Multipolarity is likely to reinforce core Indian beliefs about the world order. The idea of supporting "the democratisation of international relations" or a "democratic multipolar international order" is contained in numerous official Indian speeches and joint statements (MEA 2017, 2016). In

practice, this implies not only renewed respect for a Westphalian concept of sovereignty and nationalism, but also continued emphasis on India's civilisational ethos of an inclusive world order where diverse or even competing political communities and cultural systems can coexist and must be assigned equal rights.<sup>2</sup> The arena closer to the subcontinent is where ideas and world views are still in flux. One of the central questions when we think about projecting influence is: What are the underlying values and norms that India is most interested in when it comes to shaping politics in the neighbourhood? In short, what is the purpose behind India's regional ambition and role?

One of the core values that most Indians have always treasured is secularism. This is for the rather straightforward reason that the subcontinent was divided on the basis of religion, and independent India has sought to refute the ideological basis for partition whenever it found the opportunity. An impetus for India's involvement in the 1971 Bangladesh freedom struggle was the quest to promote values that could negate the foundation for a communal or theocratic regime. By supporting a progressive nationalism, India was able to refute partition's "two nation theory." More recently, too, India has found that secular regimes are generally preferable to a crude form of electoral democracy that brings radical or sectarian forces to the fore, undermining liberal values in their wake. We saw this most dramatically in the Arab Spring, where a basically secular Egypt was transformed into a theocracy overnight. This is also the reason why India has supported the Sheikh Hasina government, despite many in the West criticising Bangladesh for its tough stance while handling extremist elements in the social and political system.

If we step back and trace the shifts in neighbourhood policy, India without doubt retreated after the Cold War. Whether it was projecting its own leadership, promoting regional cohesiveness, or holding others to account when their internal structures seemed to fray, Delhi has consciously chosen to pull back. There are many reasons for this; India's own priorities were redefined in the

1990s away from regional leadership and towards participating in globalisation. The whole discourse was built on neo-liberal, sometimes even postmodern, ideas; a noble vision, but one that lacked the underlying power and authority to get everyone on board. That phase in the international system has passed. We are now, again, confronting challenges that are in many ways similar to those that we confronted in the 1950s and 1960s. And, while the context is very different and the ideological cloud of a Cold War might not exist, at least not to the extent of the first Cold War, the region does require some sort of leadership.

Would democracies all around India help? Sure, but let us recall that democracy in essence means the free will—strategic autonomy—to choose the nature of a foreign policy that a state would like to pursue. So, it is not at all obvious that a democratising South Asia would be a space where India would be the most popular power on the block. A region with proud nationalisms and similar political systems will not by itself produce Indian leadership or regional order. What India needs is a sophisticated policy that is not doctrinaire, but still shaped by some norms. It could range from promoting a common South Asian identity, to norms about domestic governance such as robust federal institutions, and protection of minority or backward communities, media freedoms, etc.

On the geopolitical side, we might want to again promote the idea that an Indian neighbour is most secure when they are non-aligned—that is, not a handmaiden for any outside power—and yet we should be confident enough to provide our neighbours the space to develop other relationships, particularly on the economic side so their own modernisation and development is not held back. After all, a more prosperous South Asia is hardly one India should fear. It might even be the antidote to some of the sectarianism and regressive politics that has often prevailed as a substitute for basic governance and development across the region.

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## NOTES

- 1 Prime Minister's speech at the India Today Conclave in February 2005 in New Delhi, cited in Mohan (2007: 99).
- 2 The most recent example is the Prime Minister's keynote speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore (MEA 2018).

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