

Call to democracy

An interesting feature of Southern Asia for decades has been the existence of a liberal democracy in India, in a region inhabited largely by non-plural or mixed regimes. A commitment to political and civil liberties, human rights, social and economic freedoms, and, a secular ethos are the hallmarks of India's Constitution. The commitment to internal diversity and pluralism has shaped the outlook towards international politics as well. Many in the West, who felt that India's identity as a democracy had been muted during the Cold War, expected that the 'end of history' thesis would also apply to India, that its leaders and elites would finally recognise the post-Cold War consensus around liberal democracy and capitalism and that this would define India's international identity and emerging role.

In 2000, India joined the Community of Democracies, a body of over 100 countries that endorsed the virtues of liberal political values. In his speech to the joint session of Congress in Washington in that same year, the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, spoke about giving "practical shape" to the "shared belief that democracies can be friends, partners and allies" and suggested "advancing democracy" as one of the future possibilities of India-U.S. cooperation.

We saw similar rhetoric from the Foreign Ministry and the United Progressive Alliance leadership as well. In 2005, India and the U.S. jointly launched the UN Democracy Fund, which aimed to strengthen democratic institutions across the world. Standing beside the U.S. President, India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had remarked, "For us, the democratic ideal is a common heritage of mankind. Those fortunate to enjoy its fruits have a responsibility to share its benefits with others." Both resolved "to create an international environment conducive to the promotion of democratic values..."

In practice, however, Indian statecraft has been more complex. While Indian leaders and elites have accepted the norms of a representative liberal democracy and a free-market economy, how and whether these ideas should become a universal norm and marketed abroad remain deeply contested. Note, for example, then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's remarks in 2007 in the context of protests in neighbouring Myanmar: "India is a democracy and it wants democracy to flourish everywhere. But we are not interested in exporting our own ideology." An influential think tank study (NonAlignment 2.0) in 2012 echoed a similar belief: "We are committed to democratic practices and are convinced that robust democracies are a surer guarantee of security in our neighbourhood and beyond. Yet we do not 'promote' democracy or see it as an ideological concept that serves as a polarising axis in world politics."

Broadly, there have been two strands of ideas that have shaped how Indian policymakers and strategists have historically thought about the internal affairs of regional states. The traditional Nehruvian approach prescribed a light Indian footprint into the sovereign realms of other states and also one where pressure and coercion were to be minimised in that engagement process. This approach underwent dramatic changes in the post-Nehru period, when an alternative worldview came to the fore — one that had fewer inhibitions about interfering or even promoting regime transformations in the neighbourhood. Consequently, we saw a whole period in the 1970s and 1980s when India was actively involved in re-orienting or securing the political structures within regional states. And, often this was aimed at changing the constitutional and political basis of regimes towards something resembling an image closer to India's own federal democratic values.

The post-Cold War period witnessed a sharp retreat from such interventionism towards a "pragmatic" and non-interference policy. This found the clearest expression in the 1997 Gujral Doctrine, a framework uncannily similar to the Nehruvian approach in that both sought to minimise

coercion and force in dealing with neighbours, accepting their internal quirks and flaws while attempting to craft a policy of friendship whereby positive inducements could be leveraged to produce a more stable and cohesive subcontinent.

But what did all this mean in terms of a diffusion of liberal values? In an important 2005 policy speech, India's then Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran explained that as "a flourishing democracy, India would certainly welcome more democracy in our neighbourhood... it is not something that we can impose upon others." So while democracy "would provide a more enduring and broad-based foundation for an edifice of peace and cooperation", the "importance of our neighbourhood requires that we remain engaged with whichever government is exercising authority in any country."

Ironically, the geopolitical projection of Indian constitutional values and secular ethos was far stronger during the Cold War period than in recent decades when India's identity as a democracy has come to the fore. Recall, for instance, the military assistance to the Sri Lankan regime to fend off a radical left-wing rebellion in 1971, the same year when India also successfully assisted in the emergence of a secular Bangladesh. Or in the late 1980s, when India intervened in Sri Lanka, at great cost to itself, to protect the citizenship rights of the Tamil minority and sought to shape a more pluralist federal structure, and, in Bangladesh when India mobilised popular support against the military regime in 1989-1990. And, finally, of course, there was the 1988 intervention in the Maldives when Indian paratroopers rapidly restored the authority of the Maumoon Abdul Gayoom regime after an attempted coup d'état.

In the post-Cold War period, in contrast, New Delhi has assumed a much lighter footprint, with perhaps the possible exception of Nepal, in how it chooses to involve itself and shape the political transitions and internal power struggles in the region. For the most part, it appears that homeland security and geo-economic considerations rather than ambitious realpolitik or normative concerns have shaped India's neighbourhood policy. And this has not been an unconscious drift but a choice. In 2011, the then National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon described India's regional posture as a "very selfish policy" and one that avoided "external entanglements" in order for India to focus on its own domestic transformation. In substance, has this approach really changed?

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