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The Tussle Between Principles and Rationality in Foreign Policy in a Complex Neighbourhood: India's Democratic Dilemma

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Abstract: Despite the global experience of a purported fourth wave of democracy, South Asia confronts a stark reality – the consolidation of threats and challenges to democratic norms. This observation underlines the pressing need for concerted efforts to fortify democratic institutions in the face of mounting challenges. With the onset of the new millennium and the advent of the fourth wave of democratisation, the prospect for India for furtherance with the democratic ideals accelerated manifold. India, as a preeminent regional power and considering its potential to shape the dynamics of neighbouring countries, it is expected that New Delhi would play a pivotal role within geopolitical calculus of the region. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has persuaded a foreign policy that places a significant emphasis on strengthening relations with its neighbouring countries, with the overarching goal of upholding democratic values in the region. This approach is characterized by several key principles, such as- Neighbourhood First Policy, Economic Diplomacy; Cultural and People-to-People Ties; Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation; Development Assistance and Capacity Building; and Conflict Resolution and Diplomatic Engagement. The distinctive hallmark of the Modi era has been to present itself as an exemplar, where India aims to inspire other nations on their democratic trajectories and serve as a beacon of democratic success.

In this changing scenario, this particular paper in concern intends to identify the paradigm shift in India's neighbourhood policy and probe into the rationality and scope of furthering democratic assistance as an alternative neighbourhood foreign policy strategy.

Keywords: Upholding democracy, Democratic assistance, Neighbourhood policy, capacity-building, High Impact Community Development programme.

The advent of the new millennium coupled with overarching phenomena like the 'fourth wave of democracy' and the deployment of democracy promotion as a foreign policy instrument, exerted a profound influence worldwide, including South Asia. This observation underlines the pressing need for concerted efforts to fortify democratic institutions in the face of mounting challenges. Success in this endeavour requires a subtle understanding of regional dynamics, a commitment to long-term engagement and an ability to navigate the intricacies of international politics. It becomes an imperative that democratization might be assisted by some external force, but at the same time it should be some intra-regional actor. Sunil Khilnani, an eminent foreign policy analyst, once asserted that the future of western political liberal thoughts will be

decided in India. At the present backdrop, India has the potential to be the 'beacon of democracy' not only because of the values that it espouses but also because of the principles it practices (Mehta 2011: 101). Considering India, as a preeminent regional power, concurrently, being the largest democracy, it is expected that New Delhi would play a pivotal role within South Asia's geopolitical calculus.

In India, foreign policy is used as an apparatus for comprehending the national priorities rather than engineering democratic revolutions in the region. Indian neighbourhood policy has been explicitly interlinked with Kautilyan philosophy of 'Raja-Mandala Theory' (371-283 BC) where 'Peace is preferable to war' (Sinha 2017: 129). Since its inception, India's security and foreign policies were defined by the consequences of the partition; and the developments at the global level. Despite of her own social and economic challenges, as an act of expressing solidarity, India shared its scarce resources and proficiency (in form of grants and multiyear loans) with the neighbouring countries (Muni 2009: 124-25). At the backdrop of cold war politics, India's role in endorsing democratic movements, such in case of Myanmar and particularly in Bangladesh, had exclusively been motivated by strategic and security imperatives. Though, Nehruvian philosophical convention heavily emphasized on secularism and democracy, India has been tolerant even to the undemocratic regimes in the interest of maintaining friendly relations with her neighbours by perceiving the 'doctrine of ironing out of differences'.

In the new millennium, India, as a key player in the region, has designed its diplomatic courses much cautiously. Though, in the 21st century, 'promotion of democracy' has turned out to be a foreign policy recourse for deepening and reinforcing the country's footprint in the global affairs, India's foreign policy has never been crafted as an instrument of exporting democratic ideals (Muni 2009: 116-117). It played only a marginal role and avoided from joining the 'free world' of western democracies in abusing the ideological smoke screen of freedom and democracy for promotion of their respective strategic goals. Rather, New Delhi has shown greater sensitivity towards supporting the cause democracy and other such related issues. There were always apprehensions revolved around that- to what extent would, New Delhi, balance its commitment of assisting development; safeguarding human rights; and respecting the sovereignty of other nations, in concurrence with upholding democratic facades. Even though the Indian Ministry of External Affairs may not have formulated anything like official programmatic documents explicitly outlining the foreign policy objective of supporting democracy, but these can be inferred very well through a qualitative content analysis of "key" speeches and statements made at various occasions by the significant representatives of the Indian foreign policy- that supporting democracy is in the agenda. But it will be materialised enroute developmental mechanism and other means, not the way generally as it has been perceived globally by others.

With the power transition in India's political landscape since 2014, there was a dramatic shift in economic and strategic policy. In the pursuit of India's economic resurgence, Prime Minister Modi's has been keen on giving emphasize on economic diplomacy with the overarching goal of upholding democratic values in the region. Under his leadership, India has pursued a foreign policy that places a significant emphasis on strengthening relations with its neighbouring countries. This approach is characterized by several key principles, such as Neighbourhood First Policy, economic diplomacy; Cultural and People-to-People Ties; Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation; Development Assistance and Capacity Building; and Conflict Resolution and Diplomatic Engagement. Recognizing that a secure and stable neighbourhood is conducive to democratic progress, India under Modi has engaged with neighbours by providing development assistance that includes capacity-building programs, technical expertise and financial support; along with security cooperation to counter terrorism

and transnational threats. These aimed at strengthening governance structures, civil society and democratic institutions.

Under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy outlook, apparently remained unaltered. Though 'Democracy' - as an avowed ideology has stepped down the ladder in priority, it is still an obtainable opportunity. In rhetoric the emphasis has been on upholding and endorsing the principles of democracy (India Today 2022). His nationalist perspective on geopolitics has meshed well with the notion of perpetuating democratization. This was accentuated in the PM Modi's, 76th UNGA speech where he had given emphasis on overall transformation by following the mantra of "Reform-Perform-Transform" (India Today 2020). He explicitly reaffirmed India's commitments to bring about transformation in the lives of millions of its citizens as well as the people around the world, those who are striving for consolidation of democracy (UNGA 2021). Ensuring the longevity of democratic institutions at our neighbourhood is a significant challenge. Proactive engagement in neighbouring countries, sometimes has been met with apprehension and accusations of interference in internal affairs. In that context, the implications of the doctrine of 'Neighbourhood First Policy' represented a strategic shift towards a more cooperative approach towards the neighbouring states, which add immense value to the purpose of upholding democratic ideals and transitions.

While being abided by the principle of non-interference, India had persistently been committed to support countries seeking assistance in building credible and effective democracies. India's bilateral aid to her neighbouring countries is a combination of direct and indirect democracy promotion strategies. In Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar- India has actively extended technical cooperation for the establishment and strengthening of democratic institutions. Moreover, India has played a pivotal role in providing training to a multitude of bureaucratic officials and politicians; and equipping them to address the challenges associated with the democratic transition. With the aim of increasing the credibility of the institutions of neighbouring countries, initiatives were undertaken, in collaboration with civil society organizations to enhance the capabilities of human resources (Cartwright 2009: 420). India's diplomatic participation combined with economic assistance, contributed to the restoration of democratic norms in the country. Thereby, indicating its keen interest in facilitating the democratic process.

India's distinctive approach for consolidating democratic transition within South Asia, sets it apart from the strategies employed by the US and EU. Unlike the US and EU, India does not directly channelize the funds for NGOs through its Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) or any of its internal aid agency. Instead, Indian contributions are amalgamated with those from other sources and disbursed through the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF). Incidentally, India is one of the largest contributors to UNDEF that supports several NGO-led projects in South Asia (Cartwright 2009: 423). These initiatives are spanning across the countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (United Nations Democracy Fund 2017c). The majority of these projects are geared towards enhancing grassroots participation, with a specific focus on empowering women, youth and marginalized communities. The primary focus has been educating and raising awareness about political rights and institutions. This primarily aims at capacity building and development of broader framework where democratic values and norms are cherished indirectly but unwaveringly.

In line with these initiatives, the Indian government introduced its own educational and training programs under the umbrella of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) as a capacity-building program. The government of India has made a considerable increase in the budget allocation from Rs. 1.33 crores in 2015–2016 to Rs. 47.97 crores in 2018–2019 (Choedon 2021: 170-171) and to ₹6,375 crore in 2025-2026 financial year, (Pant and Gupta,

2025). Undoubtedly, this is a substantial portion of the total MEA budget, highlighting its importance in India's diplomatic efforts. Presently, the ITEC's focus is on providing assistance for organizing elections, training the personals, developing an independent judiciary, promoting a free press and recognizing human rights. Under the high-impact community development programme, Government of India (GoI), has been working out several people-oriented projects at the grass-root level of the districts of Sri Lanka and Nepal. They have cut across several sectors including infrastructural developments of railways, health, livelihood, agriculture, housing, education, renewable energy, rehabilitation industrial etc; and are building, schools, colleges, drainage, drinking water facilities, hospitals, sanitation, hydropower, rural electrification, embankment and river training works, so as to improve the overall quality of life at the local level. In January 2024, the cap for each project has been increased to Nrs 20 crores, only in Nepal itself (MEA, Indo-Nepal Bilateral Briefs: 2023-24). ITEC has continued to extend support in development of small-scale projects that would directly benefit the local communities; and align with the program's objectives of sustainable development of apparatus conducive of democratization in neighbouring countries.

Additionally, within the well-structured frameworks, India offers technical aid to both established and transitioning democracies, when such assistance is pursued by the host country. Such assistance, notably focusing on technical aspects related to democratic processes, where the expertise of institutions like the ECI (Election Commission of India) are offered. The India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM), established in 2011, offers training to electoral officials on various aspects- including voter education and registration, specific voting technologies and diverse electoral systems. Varying from extending guidance on setting up of election organizations to monitoring the electronic voting machines. (Cheodon 2015: 166-170). Till date, IIIDEM has played a pivotal role in training officials from approximately fifty countries of sub-Saharan Africa and at India's neighbourhood. Numerous agreements brokered between the ECI and foreign counterparts, fall into this category of providing assistance.

Under this ITEC training and capacity enhancement program, India has already trained thousands of civil servants, professionals, bureaucrats and defence personnel of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal (except Pakistan) on nuances of functioning of electoral and parliamentary systems (The Wire 2023). Every year around 300 slots to Bhutan, 402 fully-funded slots to Sri Lanka and 800 slots to Bangladesh are availed by the government officials and private sector employees for progression of their administrative and technical skills; and an additional 1000 Maldivian civil servants will also be trained in India (MEA, Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25). Further, over the next five years, under the framework of Cooperation Agreement, 1500 Sri Lankan civil servants will be trained under aegis of National Centre for Good Governance. Four batches of 40 each have already completed training in 2024. In addition, a special course for 23 Sri Lankan Diplomats/officials at SSIFS was organized in 2024 (MEA, Indo-Sri Lanka Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25). Since 2007, more than 2000 professionals, bureaucrats and defence personnel from Nepal have undergone this capacity building program. In the last two years, around 50 Nepali from the Office of Attorney General, 200 doctors, 180 Nepali Police officials and 20 judicial professionals, have been the beneficiaries of this ITEC program (MEA, Indo-Nepal Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25). With the disruption in international travel, due to Covid-19 pandemic the ITEC courses have moved to an online mode of learning and in the FY 2021-22, 267 Myanmaries have participated in 112 e-ITEC courses on English language, Data Analytics, Gender Inclusive Governance, courses for educational administrators, Buddhism and Covid related areas (MEA, Indo-Myanmar Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25). Besides, in recent past of February 2025, when the Speaker of People's Majlis (Maldives) with sixteen parliamentarians were on an official visit to India, hold bilateral talks with his Indian counterpart, Speaker Om Birla to discuss the opportunities for

training and capacity building of parliamentarians. He also requested for extending technical support to the People's Majlis of Maldives for smooth digitalization of its parliamentary resources. India is also extending grant assistance of INR 300 crore towards implementing Sri Lanka Unique Digital Identity project; and MoU was exchanged on providing assistance for introduction of UPI in Maldives as well (during Jai Sankar visit in 2024).

Several agreements were signed with an intention of empowering the Local Govt. representatives of Maldives by disseminating knowledge of their duties, rights and obligation as political representatives (MEA, Indo-Maldives Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25). India initiated MoUs for reinforcing the institutional linkages through training initiatives that includes (i) Civil Services between Civil Services Commission (CSC) and National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), (ii) Parliamentary Cooperation between Lok Sabha and Majlis, (iii) The National Judicial Academy of India (NJAII) and Judicial Services Commission (JSC) of Maldives (iv) Election Commission of India and the Elections Commission of Maldives, (v) Prasar Bharati and Public Service Media (PSM), (vi) Auditor General's Office (AGO) in the Maldives and the CAG, (vii) Judicial Cooperation between Maldives' Judicial Services Commission (JSC) and Ministry of Law & Justice, India and many more (MEA, Indo-Maldives Bilateral Briefs: 2024-25).

For decades, India has been the traditional partner for the neighbouring countries (except Pakistan) in human resource development. Indian institutes under 'Study in India Program' provide technical expertise on a diverse range of courses to students and professionals neighbouring nations (Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar). Through mutual understanding professional talents and technical specializations are shared in academic pursuits. Annually 710 scholarship slots are offered to Sri Lankan students. Under ICCR scholarships, Myanmar students have also availed scholarships to Indian universities and various Indian Institutes of Technology (MEA, Bilateral Briefs: 2024-2025). Since 2001, around 38,000 Nepali nationals have been direct beneficiaries of the Government of India scholarships (MEA, Indo- Nepal Bilateral Briefs: 2024-2025). Several Maldivian youths acquire their higher education in Indian Universities every year. For the year 2024-25, ITEC in-person training slots for Maldives have been increased from 200 to 300. On an average, more than 3,500 Afghan nationals undergo training/education in India every year (MEA, Indo- Afghan Bilateral Briefs: 2024-2025). Over 1000 scholarships are being provided annually to Bhutanese students to study in India on a wide range of disciplines including medicine, engineering, etc. Except Pakistan, time and again, every nation from the neighbourhood have been a part of such high community development and IETC programme. When India extends aid under this mechanism, the emphasis shifts towards capacity building and developing a framework where democratic values are cherished.

Since 2020 the reverse wave of democratization has swept across the region of South Asia. Started with Myanmar (2021) and Afghanistan (2021), eventually touched the shore of Sri- Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025). While prioritizing stability, peace and speedy restoration of democratic process, India's response to all these political upheavals have been complex and cautiously crafted. Regardless of the type of regime, India sustained, extensive economic ties and consistent engagement with the new leadership. Defined by pragmatic diplomacy New Delhi, has focused on carefully managing her security coordination, while avoiding direct interference. In all the instances of Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, initially India, responded by cautious public statement urging all the parties to exercise restraint and resolve the issue peacefully. With the appointment of the interim government India promptly engaged with the new administration, signalling India's recognition of the new interim set-up. India has learned from its past heavy-handed tactics which often led to the surge of significant anti-India sentiment. India's policy evolved from originally maintaining ties with the regime-in-power to eventually engaging with a broader

array of stakeholders. Such an approach of avoiding direct intervention in the internal political decisions of the neighbouring states, demonstrate its commitment towards ‘Neighbourhood First’ Policy, as well as her commitment towards upholding democratic ideals. This can be regarded as a deliberate and much wiser strategy to continue with her agenda.

Distinctiveness of India’s Foreign Policy in regard to Democratic Transition of Neighbouring Countries

The period from 2000 to 2020 witnessed a dynamic evolution of India's stance on extending support to democratization. Endorsing democracy in the realm of foreign policy is not without its challenges. It is a splendid blend of pragmatic engagement and principled advocacy. Territorially smaller neighbours, with their economic weaknesses and psychological complexities perceived, demographically huge, militarily and economically powerful India as a threat to their sovereignty and existence. One of the primary hurdles lies in striking the delicate balance between demonstrating respect for national sovereignty of her neighbouring counterparts and at the same time advocating for institutionalising democratic principles that leads towards sustainable democratization. Concurrently, India had projected the image of a benevolent hegemon that respects the sovereign decisions and refrained from meddling in the internal affairs of the incumbent nations- in recent times as in case of Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is important to assert that the scope of endorsing or assisting democracy cannot be uniform and must be tailored to the unique contexts of each nation. This involves recognizing the diverse political- cultural milieu; historical dynamics at play in different regions; and subsequently adopting strategies that resonate with local sensibilities and uniqueness. Moreover, in order to yield meaningful and lasting results, which would extend beyond immediate political cycles requires a sustained long-term commitment towards the cause of upholding democratic values.

Successive governments of India's have sought to strengthen its capacity as a ‘normative power’ in international relations and vis-a-vis tried to ascertain her role as a moral leader – a campaigner against colonialism, racism, national self-determination and nuclear disarmament (Chacko 2012:190-106). In the Modi era this objective has been reflected in the form of India's aspiration to serve as a beacon of democratic success. While showcasing its robust democratic institutions, inclusive governance models and vibrant civil society- both within the region and on the global stage, India intends to position itself as a model of democracy. The successful management of its deep-rooted pluralism while sustaining a decent economic growth rate, automatically secured her stature as a well-coordinated vibrant democracy. Thereby capitalizing on India's democratic experience as a prototype for other developing states, regarding how to manage a large, economically, linguistically and religiously diverse polity. This has been– albeit gradually and fitfully – was and remains a part of her foreign policy strategy (Hall 2017: 119). By presenting itself as an exemplar, India aims to inspire and encourage other nations on their democratic trajectories. This consideration will not rule out the chances of active Indian engagement in the service of democracy, but such arrangements will be modest at best. Most importantly this approach would allow India to continue to play the role of a “positive example” or “sought-after-teacher”, not proselytizer.

India has espoused a top-down, step-by-step tactic to implement developmental efforts that focuses on education and training projects to serve the dual purpose of enhancing capacity building for strengthening the ideological foundations of the concerned country and fortifying strategic interest for mutual benefits. Being receptive to local demands, New Delhi, has adopted the policy of extending assistance when requested. This aligns with its commitment of respecting the sovereignty of recipient countries.

India has adopted ‘Differentiated’ approach with a tint of reactive posture i.e. intervening only when democratic principles aligned with perceived security imperatives and national interests;

and the degree of engagement has been varied. Coupled with a parlance of differentiation, the shift from proactive to reactive engagement is profoundly evident in India's approach towards its immediate neighbors. The shift from mere passive advocacy to proactively engaging in capacity building, represents a strategic recalibration of India's foreign policy as per requirement.

Rather than adopting an aggressive posture to ensure the proliferation of democratic regimes, India has demonstrated a steadfast dedication to nurturing democratic values through non-intrusive means. This measured and cautious response aligns with the broader contours of India's foreign policy framework of non-interference. All these indicators hold significant relevance in assessing the present Indian government's perception of democracy assistance as a means to advance its foreign policy objectives. Further, India has been very cautious in such bilateral engagement. Instead of using the term 'democracy promotion', it prefers the phrases like 'democratic assistance' or 'democratic support'. India's shift towards proactive engagement in promoting democratic consolidation in neighbouring countries is a strategic imperative driven by security concerns, economic interests and a desire for enhanced regional influence.

Conclusion

Though democratic establishments are enormously appreciated, endorsing it has merely been an ideological predilection for India. It remains true that Indian leaders cherished democracy in high regard as an ideal, yet they never perceived the promotion of democracy as an instrument to augment their influence in Asia or within the immediate neighbourhood. India still continues to accord greater primacy to national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of other nations. Other factors like- prevalence of extra regional power like China; predominance of military; existing regime type like hybrid regime and geo-strategic importance, have heavily contoured India's response. The conglomeration of these factors prevents India from directly supporting political actors (even if such actors can be clearly identified) against incumbent non-democratic forces. As a corollary, India prefers to project itself as a possible representation of vibrant multicultural participatory democracy for other states rather than simply imposing a particular creed of democracy. By now it's an established reality that India has an inclination for strengthening democratic apparatus as opposed to spreading it. Thus, India employs the concept of 'constructive engagement' even with non-democratic states predominantly under the governance of hybrid regimes.

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