

ENGAGING IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A CIVILIZATIONAL STATE: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN STATECRAFT

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ABSTRACT:

In the immediate period following its independence in 1947, Indian foreign policy sought to connect to Eastern Asia. Works of KM. Panikkar was based on the premise of homogeneity of the so-called Asian values and those being distinct from the so-called Western values, which were manifested in colonisation and subjugation, based on the assumptions of “White man’s burden”. India had a good start in the way it led the newly-decolonised nations under the framework of Asian Relations Conference, or the Non-Aligned movement. Later, India’s own domestic constraints came in the way of meaningful external engagement. Eventually, India’s strategic orientation was restricted to the continent, obliterating the vast maritime dimension. Indian leadership had to prioritise domestic situation which forced it to neglect the external environment. India’s engagement with the East was systemically revived under the aegis of the Look East Policy, which has been renamed to Act East Policy, signifying greater strategic attention to this geography. The Indian strategic policies or diplomatic efforts in contemporary times mark a break from the earlier decades characterised by reticence in security partnerships, particularly arms sales. There is a greater, conscientious effort at engaging the world in full spectrum, best exemplified by naval engagements in the form of Ex. Milan, Ex. Malabar. Unlike Nehruvian policy, the current diplomacy actively seeks to engage and nurture the Indian Diaspora in the Indo-Pacific. While such foreign policy transformation has been seen as something new, it is however a revival of the traditional Indian statecraft that had global connections, far and wide. The flagship policies and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, India’s G20 presidency, adoption of the Indo-Pacific narrative, etc. are indicative of India’s value-based statecraft, albeit the underlying realpolitik. This paper

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analyses contemporary Indian engagement in East Asia (that is Southeast Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific) to argue that it is a revival of the ancient Indian cultural traditions to emerge as a leading power in the world, shaping the narrative correspondingly. At the same time, the means to the end are strongly value-driven, which are drawn from its identity as a civilisational state. The study would focus on the maritime initiatives as well as engagement with the diaspora in Southeast Asia and further east.

Keywords: Civilisational state, Maritime, Diaspora, Indo-Pacific, Act-East

INTRODUCTION

The prolonged experience of colonisation had strong impact in the making of India's foreign policy. As a newly-independent nation, the Indian foreign policy had specific characteristics of a nation that has come out of two centuries of subjugation. The colonial experience was an aberration in the centuries-long continuity of the Indian civilisation. The governance during the British rule was a completely new system and had no semblance to the earlier models. The concept of 'Ram Rajya' which has been so intrinsic to the traditional Indian governance was lost. What replaced it under a foreign ruler was a governance based on exploitation and subjugation. Many Indian cultural practices were prohibited or looked-down upon by the European colonisers because it was unfathomable to their peculiar cultural-religious conditioning.

Many governance features of independent India were a carry-over of the British political system. The Western political commentators of that time had pessimism about the Indian democracy and few had hopes for its success. The general perception was that an extremely diverse country such as India; in fact, an amalgamation of several nations with distinct languages and dialects, cultural practices, religious diversity within in the Hindu fold-was inconsistent with liberal democracy. However, the 'Indian experiment' has not only survived, but thrived during the course of the last 76 years. What has come as a surprise to many is as to how a diverse state like India has survived, has managed economic growth and is now emerging as one of the

major powers. The role of the leadership in the immediate post-independence period is to be duly acknowledged. Particularly universal adult franchise, the expansive welfarism of the Indian State and progressive legislations. Yet, a lot of credit must go to the Indian people who amalgamated into the 'new' political system with ease, barring a few exceptions. As time has passed, there is a larger agreement that democracy in fact, is totally in sync with the Indian cultural traditions. The prime minister recently described India as the mother of democracy (PM addresses Summit for Democracy 2024). He was referring to the long, civilisational continuity of dialogue and discussion as the centrepiece of the Indian polity. Amartya Sen's 'The Argumentative Indian' written by Prof. Amartya Sen also examines the deliberative and dialectical discourses within Indian socio-political history. So, while India embraced the Westphalian notion of state and the modern governance system in the form of parliamentary democracy and a republic, there is an imprint of its civilisational ethos in its policymaking. Gandhi ideals, which itself were drawn from Bhartiya ethos, are still the guiding principles of governance (Bhat, 2019; Mishra, 2019; Ram, 2016). The Indian foreign policy too, was no exception to the continuity of the cultural ethos.

The thinkers in the post-independence period like K.M. Panikkar wrote extensively on the distinction of 'Asian' from the 'West'. The Asian Relations Conference held in 1947 in New Delhi was a notable Indian initiative to shape an alternative world, as seen in Mahatma Gandhi's speech on this occasion (Gandhi, 1947):

“What I want you to understand is the message of Asia. It is not to be learnt through the western spectacles or by imitating the atom bomb. If you want to give a message of truth, I do not want merely to appeal to your head, I want to capture your heart”.

Based on such ideals, the Indian foreign policy set out the following as its principles — non-interference, non-aggression, peaceful-coexistence, respect for territorial integrity, and, equality and mutual benefit, which have been enshrined as 'Panchsheel'. There is a principled policy that refrains from stirring up conflicts. So, Indian foreign policy is fundamentally opposed to

regime changes and imposing ideologies (Malhotra, 2019). It is believed that the choice with respect to electing or removing a political leader is solely with the people of that country. It also does not endorse unilateral sanctions or military actions. Further, the policy also champions constructive engagement over aggression (Malhotra, 2019). India's vision of international order which would be a peaceful, cooperative, collaborative and mutually-beneficial one, is drawn from the long-drawn Bhartiya philosophical tradition. Critics of the Indian idealism have called such principles and visions as utopian. Yet, these ideals are a prescription of a collective life wherein everyone is happy, healthy and prosperous (Principles and Objectives of India's Foreign Policy, n.d.). This vision is best expressed through the 'Kalyan Mantra' of Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah, Sarve Santu Niramaya... (Principles and Objectives of India's Foreign Policy, n.d.).

WHAT IS A CIVILISATIONAL STATE?

A civilisational state when broadly understood refers to when a country identifies itself on the basis of peculiar socio-political circumstances over a geographical space. A civilisational state is different from a nation-state. A nation-state is a product of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the events thereafter, a civilisational state is the one where distinct socio-political character is larger than a nation-state. A nation-state is based on race, ethnicity or language, whereas a civilisational state is a state with distinct socio-political character. It has a peculiar political tradition, a distinct historical and cultural unity, derived from a continuous process of cultural syncretism. A civilisational state can have ethnic and cultural diversity, but it demonstrates an ethos of cultural unity. The unity exists despite displaying significant cultural diversity across centuries of history and a large geographical space. A civilisation state essentially denotes cultural continuity over centuries, but the culture of a civilisational state is claimed to be distinct. A civilisational state would emphasise on its historical continuity and cultural unity across a large geographic region. It is a country that aims to represent not just a historical territory, ethnolinguistic group or a body of governance, but a unique civilisation in its own right. Culture occupies a predominant place in a civilisational state. In such a state, its functioning and processes would be

governed by its culture and the conduct of its people. A civilisation state would argue for a bespoke political structure that is reflective of its distinct culture. In order to be categorised as a civilisational state, a country's culture and history has to be consistent across a particular geographic area. A civilisation state is the one that claims not just one language or a particular geographical area or ethnicity, but an entire, distinct civilisation(Hindustan Times 2024; Barabanov 2023; Buddhi 2021; Gurumurthy 2020; Jacques 2011; Singh 2016; Naumkin 2021; Vivekananda International Foundation New Delhi 2020). Civilisational states may display a unique world view or a moral vision. Some arguments of civilisational state (such as made by China as the 'Middle Kingdom') can claim moral superiority or higher standards or higher development than others(Florek, 2020; Seth, 2019; Sinha, 2021; United States–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

Critics argue that the civilisational states are fundamentally illiberal. This is because it is held that a civilisational state can challenge the existing order and norms such human rights or democratic political system(Rachman, 2019). Civilisations are founded on religion, ethnicity and language whereas liberalism seeks to transcend it to seek universal norms and values(Tharoor, 2023). Proponents of civilisational state would argue that the liberal criticism stems from the position of imagining a singular source of modernity. Modernity is generally understood as the product of Enlightenment in the West, whereas it is argued that modernity has multiple sources. The tendency to regard modernity as synonymous only with Western Enlightenment leads to view other sources of modernity as illiberal(Gurumurthy, 2023).

Samuel Huntington brought forth the role of culture and religion in international politics in the post-Cold War period, as a refutation of Fukuyama's treatise that claimed of the irreversibility of the liberal-Western world order. The emergence of the discourse on civilisational states reiterates Huntington's scholarship. It is also coming about in a period when the calls for reformation of the existing international order are getting louder.

India as a civilisational state- Insights on international relations.

In many ways, contemporary India is a historical continuity. The culture, faith, practices of contemporary India are continued across generations. Culture has always been a centrepiece in Indian public life. Mahatma Gandhi has described the freedom struggle against British in 'Hind Swaraj' as a civilisational struggle. In his article in Foreign Affairs in 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru had also described the freedom movement as cultural (Gurumurthy, 2023). Swami Vivekananda's famous speech at Chicago at the World Parliament of Religions in 1983 was a guide in how to avoid religious conflicts and a manual on how various nations, cultures and religions can coexist. His version believes in harmony in diversity, as against the popular dictum of unity in diversity for it is believed that 'unity' indicates essentially an opposition to something. On the other hand, harmony implies no opposition and the understanding that culturally diverse groups can coexist (Gurumurthy, 2020). The Indian knowledge systems were passed down across centuries through the 'Shrutis'. Indian philosophers, such as Mahatma Gandhi, have had a normative approach to society and politics.

Kalidas Nag (1926) in 'Greater India' when writing about India and internationalism, draws a distinction between the historical evolution of India and that of China and Egypt and Babylon etc. to note that the Indian quest was always focused on the metaphysical, while the other civilisations were progressing on science, architecture, legal codes and astronomers. The Indian on the other hand was exploring the boundaries of human knowledge and human philosophy. This philosophical exploration led to a society that valued equity over economics, and ethics to politics and jurisprudence. This distinct socio-philosophical outcome was consolidated in the form of 'Rajdharm' and 'Dharmashastra' wherein the conceptual lynchpin was 'Dharma' (Nag, 1926). Further, Nag also refers to Sten Konow's work of 1921 titled 'The Aryan Gods of the Mittani' (where Varuna, Indra and Mitra the Vedic Gods were invoked during signing of a peace treaty between the two tribes at Cappadocia) and the inscription at Boghaz Keui to demonstrate that the Indian internationalism has historically been about peace making, as compared to the contemporary internationalism of exploitation of Phoenician or the compulsive imperialist internationalism of the Assyrians and Romans. The harmonious essence of the Indian internationalism was a product of deep philosophical wisdom accrued

over a long period of time (Nag, 1926). It is not that the Vedic Aryans did not face resistance from autochthonous people just as Egyptians and Assyrians and Dorians faced, but where the Vedic Aryans differed was how they responded to such resistance. Nag notes that Vedic Aryans not only understood that the opponents had to exist or co-exist, but that they were transformed from enemies into collaborators into building of civilisation. The Bhartiya civilisation is thus a product as such. The Aryan and Dravidian nations, both with different language, race and culture were synthesised, reproduced and thus lay the foundation of a great assimilative civilisation. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata are lessons that war is necessary and yet it is only the righteous that wins the war. And even after winning a war which is compared to a gamble, it is just like a defeat. The Shantiparva is about how peace is the only sublimation of war. Thus, underlying the idealism, the Indian international relations also has also been pragmatic (Nag, 1926).

In modern times, Indian leadership has showed solidarity with other nations such as when Mahatma Gandhi felt that unless African nations gain independence, India is not truly free. In fact, about twenty years before 1947, the Indian political leaders had linked the Indian national movement to the worldwide fight against colonisation. Likewise was the solidarity shown to the Vietnamese struggle through the slogan of ‘Tera naam, mera naam, Viet Nam’. The Panchsheel with China too carried the slogan of brotherhood as ‘Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai’ Thus, Indian world view or the feelings of solidarity have always remained broad, and not restricted to its territory. A natural sense of familiar bond or brotherhood was displayed by the Indian leadership all through its modern history. This solidarity is not merely a diplomatic gimmick but a passionate tendency of organic solidarity with the non-Western world.

INDO-PACIFIC ENGAGEMENT

The two distinct terms one hears in the foreign policy discourse these days are ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ and ‘Vishwaguru’. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam means that the world is one family. The Indian chairmanship of the G-20 in 2023 had Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One future as the theme. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speeches stated that

India's presidency has been inclusive where the developmental concerns of the Global South have been taken into account. He also stated that the G20 Summit will chart a new path in human-centric and inclusive development (Modi, 2023b). The Indian prime minister also wished for global economic growth to be inclusive, sustainable, strong and balanced. The Indian narrative sees the current order problematic at many levels and hence recommends for a change. The underlying view is that the existing order is exclusionary and Euro-centric and thus neglects the rest of the humanity of the world. There is also a criticism of the existing economic order which perpetuates inequality, hence the Indian view calls for a shift from GDP-centric to a human-centric growth (Modi, 2023a). The Indian presidency of the G20 was determined to make a difference and it attempted to do so by inclusion of the African Union into the G20. It was held that the Global South and the African continent has been marginalised and therefore India wanted to mainstream such marginalised aspirations. Under its G20 presidency, 125 nations participated under the 'Voice of Global South' summit (Modi, 2023a). Thus, when it got an opportunity to shape international relations, India, while perfectly acting in its national interest, also took a moral stance when it sought to give platform to the marginalised countries of the world.

When the Indo-Pacific construct was being shaped, and it was essentially a US-led view that was designed to face its bilateral challenge with respect to China, India's policy called for Indo-Pacific to be inclusive. It was signalling against escalation of tensions and avoidance of yet another division that may spur blocs. India's view was shared by all of Southeast Asian nations, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific bears remarkable similarity to the Indian view. The Indian position should not be construed as oblivious to the geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific, but that while duly acknowledging the challenges, the Indian policy endorsed a measured, incremental approach where regional peace and prosperity must be the priority (Modi, 2018).

The Indo-Pacific is also a strategic geography and it is essentially maritime. While the concept was commonly used in environmental sciences, it was adopted in the geopolitical parlance to imagine a seamless continuity of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, evoking cultural and economic ties over

centuries. It was also a revision in regionalism that wanted to accommodate India, which was left out of the Asia-Pacific construct and always imagined in the South Asian region primarily. India's rising international profile caused by sustained economic growth and a large military force were noticed and therefore it was no longer a power that could be ignored. Likewise, India's own aspirations were expanding and it sought to play a larger role in the world, with primary focus into its immediate and extended neighbourhood. The views from the US and Japan (particularly Abe Shinzo) called for greater Indian involvement in the region, although such views were unsurprisingly based out of respective national interests. However, the calls for greater Indian attention in Southeast Asia were made by the late Lee Kuan Yew, who saw value in India's role as a moderator in this geopolitically sensitive region. It is a well-known story that Southeast Asian nations have desired greater and sustained Indian presence for they view India as a potential 'balancer' to great power contestations. But it also stems from India's benign image. India has not had historical baggage of colonisation, conquest or exploitation as is with most of the Western countries in Asia and Africa. India's legacy as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement and its continued ethos even in the present times under the concept of 'Strategic Autonomy' and 'Multi-Alignment' has had diplomatic dividends in the Global South. This is to be seen in the level of trust and faith and goodwill that India generally enjoys in these countries. There is thus a perception that India can potentially be a 'Third Pole' (Mahbubani, 2023).

Considering the level of expectations and optimism about India's rising role in regional security, how has India responded? A normal course would entail a country utilising its power to threaten or exploit the weaker countries, as has been generally the history of modern international relations. However, India has, in continuity of its civilisational ethos, has utilised its position to empower other nations of the Global South. It has, as mentioned earlier, sought to represent the marginalised nations of Asia and Africa at the G20 as also in the UN. This position and the underlying moral position is not be misunderstood as a lack of cognisance over *realpolitik*. But that even as New Delhi is well aware of geopolitical challenges and security threats, it has consciously stived to respond to these challenges without losing its moral

foundations. A study of Indian diplomacy in the past ten years shows that India is proposing an alternative model of security and international relations, wherein 'Danda' is also displayed (Pakistan after Uri, Pathankot and Pulwama; China during Galwan clash) when crucial, but also that military successes have not translated into belligerent tendencies.

New Delhi's two major initiatives in the Indo-Pacific would be Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI). SAGAR is India's security policy aimed at maritime security. This is realised through regular presence of the Indian naval forces, bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, and capacity building of regional countries. India is a resident naval power in the region which has serious traditional security threats in the form of Pakistan and security challenge in the form of China, as also the persistent non-traditional security threats. It is common to make alliances in such circumstances, but India has not. It is because of its policy of strategic autonomy but also because most of the regional countries are also uncomfortable with military alliances. When it comes to the Indian Ocean Region, most of the strategic countries are small island-states. When big fish eats the small fish is the common practice in international politics, India has been an exception where it has respected the policy choices of the small-island states. While no sight is lost on its strategic and security objectives, India has chosen the path of capacity building so that these nations are equipped to face maritime security threats and challenges. Thus, the primary actor in that particular sub-region or in its territory remains that particular country. When nations neglect security of its territory (particularly so in the maritime domain), it can quickly turn into a frontier zone and thereby open for competition. A power vacuum, often a product of inability of small maritime states to enforce its jurisdiction; leads to an extra-regional or a powerful navy filling in, as has been seen in the case of China in the South China Sea as also in the Indian Ocean. By investing in the capacity building by way of offering defence lines of credits or supplying patrol crafts and surveillance aircrafts, India is empowering the regional island-states. It could have had the alternative of establishing maritime hegemony, and compel the island-states to bandwagon or ally, but it has chosen not to do so.

If SAGAR is the national vision, India's collaborative, international

instrument for regional security is through the IPOI. The IPOI is aimed at joint efforts to realise a sustainable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Under this, various areas of cooperation are included, that are largely in the non-traditional security realm. These include blue economy, environmental issues and climate change, sustainable fishing, urban planning, oceanic sciences, and trade and connectivity. These transnational issues can only be managed through regional and international cooperation. In order for countries to come together, a sense of common identity or solidarity is essential, which the IPOI envisions by tying it to the Indo-Pacific region. Indian vision of IPOI is based on the principles of openness and inclusivity. Usually, regional security mechanisms are exclusionary but the IPOI is not a closed club. India has also encouraged participation from European nations in this endeavour. Experiences in regionalism show that it is not easy to institutionalise cooperation in geographically huge and/or culturally diverse region. Therefore, the IPOI is a non-treaty based, non-binding initiative, wherein each stakeholder has the choice and can contribute where its strength lie. Thus, IPOI can be imagined as an aggregate of national strengths to shape a stable and prosperous regional order.

During the Covid-19 pandemic while the Western nations were withholding supplies of vaccines and essential drugs to prioritise its citizens at home, India's 'Vaccine Maitri' supplied covid vaccines and humanitarian aid to 101 countries, the majority of which were poorer nations of Indo-Pacific, Africa, Latin America, Western Pacific Islands and the Caribbean. It is to be noted that the supply and aid continued even as India was battling a severe second wave. While it was natural and understandable for a country to safeguard its own population first, the Indian exception evinces that its civilisational morality does not permit it to secure itself at the cost of suffering of others during a humanitarian crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic. The Bhartiya culture that accords sacrifice as the highest virtue ('Daan'), the culture where even the poorest of hosts share their meagre bread with guests, not disrupting aid and vaccines was a natural policy choice.

The Western Pacific Island region has gained strategic significance following the salience of the Pacific Ocean, but largely due to China's

growing footprint and influence in the region. The AUKUS treaty, much to the discomfort of the island-states in the Western Pacific; is the most significant security mechanism in this region. US-China contestation is unfolding in this region. As small island-states so remotely located, the primary security concern of these countries is climate change and development. But great powers tend to view their utility only in military terms, and often neglect their aspirations and needs. India has been engaging with these island-states actively since 2014. At the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) meeting in Jaipur in 2015, the prime minister spoke of partnering with regional states in their quest for inclusive growth and sustained economic development. India has also provided HADR assistance to Fiji, Toga and Vanuatu. The prime minister also mentioned about capacity building in HADR and provision of technical assistance for early warning systems(Pandey, 2018). Thus, the Indian policy is about understanding the needs of the host country and responding, rather than push down its own vision upon them.

During the evacuation from Yemen, Ukraine and Libya, India's capacities and capabilities were demonstrated to the world. Even during these operations, India did not restrict these capacities to itself, but also evacuated foreign nationals. During evacuation in Afghanistan after US's withdrawal, India also carried back its K9 forces, (military canine force) a sharp distinction from the retreating American forces that left back its K9s locked in cages to their fate.

CONCLUSION

Critics view the civilisational state as illiberal, exclusionary and at odds with modern state. While the epistemologies can be debated, as also as to who is the best judge on these concepts, it is hereby argued that painting all claims of civilisational states with one stroke lacks intellectual rigor. The Indian experience denotes a unique picture, and in fact is essentially in tune with modern conceptions of liberalism, although such ethos was intrinsic to the Indian civilisation all along. Even if one argues that the Indian statecraft is pursuing its national interest like any other state, and one can hardly disagree, yet, what constitutes the Indian national interests (which is so often global in

its essence) and the means to achieve those is what sets the Indian civilisation apart. The philosophical maturity of understanding and accepting diversity in all its forms and co-existing harmoniously, is a trait that is carried over across centuries is still exhibited in present times.

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