

INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE: SHAPING THE SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

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Abstract

The transformation in global politics and India's rise have changed South Asia's security landscape and geopolitics. India's engagement with the US as the 'net security provider' against China and the Asia-Pacific littorals makes way for increased security dilemmas in South Asia. India has an offensive strategic culture based on realpolitik. It moves India for the power pursuit, hegemony, and hierarchy in the global order and places it as the most sacred and respectable unit of the international system. In light of the geopolitical realities, the study aims to discuss the Indian strategic culture through the lens of Strategic Culture Theory. It focuses on how India's geographical imperatives, historical evolution, and cultural values shape its national security policy and influence the regional dynamics in South Asia. The study finds that India's behaviour in geopolitical environments is motivated by its strategic culture, which has its roots in Indian scriptures, history, and geography.

Keywords: Sino-American Rivalry, Geopolitical, Strategic Culture, India, Historical Evolution, South Asia.

Introduction

Strategic culture can be defined as a sum of ideas, belief systems, norms, religious affiliations, and historical experiences that collectively determine the policy choices of a state.¹ All these variables function as independent variables that influence the conduct of a nation. Academicians recognise that strategic culture is pivotal in shaping a state's behaviour during peace and wartime. Their argument is highly contested by mainstream IR theorists who believe that cultural and historical variables of a state have zero or little impact on their policy choices.² In the context of South Asia – a region home to one-third of the world population –

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the prospects of peace and stability are dim primarily because of two nuclear adversaries, i.e. India and Pakistan. India, however, claims to be a secular state, and it has evolved more radically in the present times. Its strategic culture has evolved into a Hindu strategic culture³ rooted in the Hindu religious textbooks and Chanakya Kautiliya's political philosophy of Realpolitik. Both mentioned sources of Indian Strategic Culture (ISC) clearly demand the importance of the Hindu Religion, advocate for the formation and superiority of undivided India and regard the Machiavellian man: deceitful, rigid, warmonger as an exemplary leader. ISC, in addition, is offensive, based on realpolitik and moves India for the power pursuit, hegemony, and hierarchy in the global order and places the Hindu land as the most sacred and respectable unit of the international system.

For the last few years, India has explicitly asserted itself as the most emerging power and the hegemon of South Asia. Its military spending is continually growing. In 2021, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh unveiled a booklet of 20 reforms designed to make India a military-industry power.⁴ On the diplomatic front, New Delhi is hosting global summits to portray its diplomatic influence. India hosted G20 Summit in 2023 in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It is also bidding for the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) seat⁵ – the most privileged position in global governance. International morality is meaningless for India, the guiding principle and the yardstick of 21st-century governance. In 2019, India revoked the special status of Kashmir, which is a clear violation of International Law. The most belligerent and problematic aspect is the Indian thought of Akhand Bharat, which is based on expansionism and considers South Asia its particular sphere of influence.⁶ All these developments, as a result, are reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of the South Asian Region: prevailing radicalisation, intensifying geopolitical tensions, incentivising arms race and increasing the influence of extra-regional actors in the region.

Given India's increasing assertions in global politics and South Asia in particular, the existing literature either assesses India's behaviour about structural factors of the international system or through its adversarial relations with China. No cultural interpretation of New Delhi's behaviour exists in contemporary literature. This study is a significant contribution to the existing literature as it comprehensively studies India's geopolitical behaviour from a cultural view, a novel addition to South Asia's geopolitical and strategic studies. Therefore, the following research aims to analyse India's strategic culture to understand how it conducts international relations in South Asia. While analysing the ISC, the study

seeks to reveal that India's behaviour in geopolitical environments is motivated by its strategic culture, which has its roots in Indian scriptures, history and geography. This argument goes against some of the conventional wisdom that India lacks a proper strategic lineage and that structural factors of the international system shape its behaviour. The study has taken 'strategic culture' not as a terminology but as a theoretical approach that has its roots in the work of Jack Snyder and the subsequent three-generation theorists that take the geography, political and military texts, norms, values and traditions of a state as the independent variables that shape its behaviour. The debate is classified into two sections. Section one analyses the relevance of strategic culture theory in shaping a state's behaviour. The final section deals with ISC based on the assumptions of Strategic Culture Theory and its implications on the South Asian geopolitical dynamics.

Strategic Culture Theory

In January 1974, the then US Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger, initiated American strategic strike policy adjustments to bolster deterrence and secure US allies.⁷ He emphasised the flexibility of launching limited nuclear strikes on the Soviet Union as against the previous American policy of massive retaliation on the adversary during the time of escalation.⁸ It was supposed to result in two possible outcomes: first, limited counterforce strikes by the US would prevent the Soviet counter-value strikes on major American urban centres; second, the strategic adjustment would force the Soviet foreign policy circles to respond in kind or do nothing.⁹ Against the expectations of the American foreign policy elite, the Soviet understanding of nuclear deterrence differed by large because of distinct attitudes and conceptions of the Soviets resulting from their unique socialisation.¹⁰ These diverging developments in the atomic understanding of the Cold War rivals initiated a 'cultural view' of state behaviour against the then prevalent thoughts, i.e., The Game Theory and Realism. Begun by Jack Snyder, it was the initial impetus that started debates on the role of strategic culture in foreign policy.

The literature on the strategic culture theory can be divided into three generations.¹¹ The first generation developed in the 1980s primarily looked at the different attitudes of the US and the Soviet Union towards nuclear deterrence. Taking refuge under Snyder's work, Colin Gray and David Jones argued that Cold War rivals' diverging attitudes towards nuclear strategy resulted from their different historical experiences, socialisations and macro-environmental factors

such as political culture, geography and values that developed in various scenarios.¹² It prevailed a thought in the US that massive retaliation against the Soviet Union would result in a gigantic human loss that could outweigh the advantages of nuclear victory. This thought was entrenched and developed from the American liberal values contrary to the Soviet understanding. Since the macro-environmental factors of both rivals were incompatible, it led to different strategic choices. David Jones enumerates three cultural factors that shape the strategic preferences of the states: first, the macro-environmental level, which encompasses ethnocultural characteristics and history; Second, the societal level that incorporates an economic and political culture of a state; and micro level that addresses the military institutions and civil-military relations.¹³ Hence, first-generation theorists focused mainly on historical experiences and values and the formation of distinct patterns as independent variables that determine state behaviour.

Bradley S. Klien, a second-generation theorist, defines strategic culture as almost like the line of first-generation. Near him, strategic culture does not originate from the pocket of the political and military elite, but it is an evolutionary process that raises its head explicitly from historical experience. Unlike the first-generation theorists, Klien is convinced that the states' experiences do not determine state behaviour but by the political elite or 'hegemonistic groups' that, for their self-interests, shape a state's preferences.¹⁴ Therefore, Klien focuses on the interpretations of the politico-military elite of the states as the primary variable of shaping the state's behaviour. If two states have different historical experiences, the leadership of the states socialise in various circumstances and interpret a situation quite differently, even kept in the same foreign policy scenario. The policy-making bodies may constrain cultural variables. However, their socialisation and psyche are not independent of the state's cultural variables and historical experiences.¹⁵

The third generation begins with the work of Alastair L. Johnston. His work is a critical appraisal of the past two generations. The third generation labels military culture, politico-military culture, historical texts and military doctrines as independent variables of shaping state behaviour. Like the past two generations, Johnston emphasises a society's evolutionary nature and link with the national strategy. Moreover, strategic choices by large are determined by values, norms and assumptions of the state, which are deep-rooted in the conceptual history of the

society. He challenges ahistorical explanations of state behaviour, primarily the Realist tower, and calls the conceptual domain of the state *Realpolitik*.¹⁶

The variables argued by all three generations present a novel discussion in studying state behaviour. These variables are against the mainstream theories of international politics, especially Political Realism and The Game Theory. Classical Realists emphasise the objective laws of human nature as the independent variable that forces a state to pursue power politics to ensure its survival in competitive scenarios and a situation that is pessimistically called 'war of all against all'.¹⁷ The Neo-realists diverge from the classics and emphasise structural factors such as international anarchy solely defining state behaviour.¹⁸ On the other hand, the Game Theorists define an international actor's behaviour in situations of strategic interdependence. Game theorists believe that states locked in a conflictual scenario make decisions purely based on relative gains due to the fear that the adversary would necessarily follow its self-interest while ignoring absolute gains. This fear from both sides incentivises both actors to follow the course of action that only suits their self-interests.¹⁹

Strategic Culture Theory is a cultural interpretation of state behaviour encompassing various variables involving geography, values, norms, military texts, elites' interpretation and ethnocultural characteristics. It posits that since states have different cultures that evolved in other circumstances, they will inevitably have different policy choices. Structural factors such as anarchy, global power distribution or international regimes have minimum influence on state behaviour. Actors' policy choices are always historical, and every empirical development is tested against history.

Indian Strategic Culture: The Formation of National Security Policy and South Asian Regional Dynamics

ISC is getting prominence in the backdrop of the growing multipolar global order and New Delhi's assertions to exhibit itself as a fast-growing significant power. Commentators argue that India lacks a proper strategic lineage²⁰ - a fluctuating behaviour that has no link with India's long historical evolution. However, some believe India has a more coherent, composite and distinct strategic lineage and culture than most contemporary nation-states.²¹ Indian culture is said to be more assimilative and receptive to social changes, invasions and impacts of the other civilisations. In his report for Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concept Office, Rodney W. Jones

argues that Indian behaviour can be well perceived through cultural interpretations. In doing so, he enlists the traits of Indian culture influencing its strategic thinking:

- **India's Status is Given, not Earned:** Indian society lacks uniformity and equality in all social affairs. At the same time, Brahmins command colossal respect and monopoly on every walk of development legitimated by divine command. Since the Brahmins are the chosen ones and they lead India, Jones says, they see the status as objective and expect the world to line itself with Brahmin superiority. He adds that this trait is widely reflected in India's negotiations with the external world. India acts as a 'Big Brother' in South Asia while all smaller states line themselves with New Delhi's designs. For example, through treaties, Nepal and Bhutan cannot take any action that India disapproves. Similarly, with the help of a friendship treaty, India limits its freedom of action in Bangladesh.²² Only Pakistan does not comply with India's designs and does not compromise on its independence and sovereignty, which makes the former a hostile nation to the latter.
- **World Order is Hierarchical:** Like its society, India sees the world order as hierarchical and in the prism of material power. This hierarchical view is widely entrenched in Hindu mythologies and symbols. George Tanham opines that India sees the sub-continent as a strategic and hierarchical unit and places New Delhi on top of it.²³ India expects to be the undisputed master in the region, does not permit the rise of any state, and cannot tolerate the influence of extra-regional actors. Moreover, India considers South Asia its sphere of influence, and this view is prevalent across the Indian political spectrum²⁴. Therefore, New Delhi believes rising states (such as Pakistan and China) and extra-regional actors (the US, for example) are a threat to Indian designs.
- **Indian Identity is Sacred:** Indian strategic thinking evolves around 'Indian-ness', delineating that Indian identity is sacred and pure. It is because of the birth of Hinduism on this land and its different religious holy places, such as rivers like Ganga and the Brahmins, that live on the landmass of the subcontinent. The partition of 1947 and the formation of an Islamic state carved out from the sacred Hindu land is one of the pertinent factors of Indo-Pak rivalry as it

partitioned the Hindu land and violated the sacredness of India. Therefore, Pakistan will be considered a perpetual enemy of India as long as it is not merged in the Indian landmass. Additionally, the rise of minorities in India is making Indian-ness. The far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) atrocities on the Muslim community of India are the long chain of disdain from its minorities that has its roots in Indian thinking. Moreover, India's uncompromising diplomatic posture on Kashmir is also derived from this trait of ISC. East Kashmir is a part of the Himalayan chain where ancient Hindu holy places fall. Compromise on Kashmir means compromise on Hindu identity and transferring the control of sacred places to Muslims who are hostile. Rodney believes that this factor has influenced negotiations on Kashmir throughout the years.

Besides enlisting the traits of ISC, Rodney W. Jones delves into another fascinating aspect of Indian strategic thinking: the concept of the enemy. Indian thinking conceptualises the enemy as the one who strives to deprive India of its sacred territory or subvert its society by undermining its civilisation. Based on this aspect, Muslims are the perpetual enemies of India. It is because Muslim rulers overthrew several Hindu dynasties, invited and made incentives for foreign invasions, introduced Muslim culture in India that subverted Hindu civilisation and, most importantly, carved out a Muslim state from the sacred Hindu land. The Indo-Pak rivalry and rise of far-right politics in India under the shadow of Hindutva find their roots in this principle. As compared to Muslim imperialism, Western colonialism is relatively considered a softer enemy in ISC. Rodney believes that it is because of the modern and scientific education they introduced in India and allowed the Indian elite to leverage the means for self-rule.

Historical Roots of Indian Strategic Thinking

Shrikant Pranpje, George Tanham and Rodney W. Jones all agree that India has a strategic lineage, the roots of which can be traced in India's long civilisational history. S. Pranjee remarks, 'Indian strategic worldview that seeks to ensure the security of the nation-state has historical roots, a tradition borne out of several centuries of civilisational consciousness'.²⁵ The study of different accounts on the history of ISC reveals two broad aspects: Indian history is the history of social stratification and internal disunity that continually worsened due to foreign interventions; second, India is a civilisational state with thousands of years of civilisational history.

S. Pranpje's account delineates that Indian history or its historical socialisation has established a complex society in India with four essential components: social stratification, cultural heterogeneity, cast hierarchy, and religious plurality. These components are the outcomes of the four historical events. First, the rise of the Indus Valley Civilization in the wake of Indo-Aryan migration from Indo-Iranian border lands gave birth to Hinduism – a socially hierarchical religion with divine legitimacy. Hindu Vedas mention four Vernas (casts): Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Among the four, the Brahmins dominated all sectors of social life, i.e., religion, economy, and statecraft.

The second event is the rise of protestant religions in ancient India (except for Sikhism) in response to the monopoly of Brahmins, including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The significant impact of the rise of protestant religions is the social stratification of the social fabric of Indian society. The third event is the advent of world religions in India. For example, the arrival of St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, to Kerala, Muslim traders to the Malabar Coast and the subsequent 11 centuries of Muslim rule in India with distinct culture and state machinery. The final event was the rule of the British Raj, which introduced 'modern Western culture' in India.

Social stratification and internal disunity in the wake of the four events in Indian history always incentivised foreign invasions on India. In 712 CE, the armies of Muhammad bin Qasim conquered the Kingdom of Sindh, followed by the 17 invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni and the long chain of Turko-Afghan dynasties. The problematic aspect of this stratification was the lack of a unified and centralised rule in India. The Indian princely states either owed non- or very minimum allegiance to the central authority and always conspired against one another based on diversity, which existed due to the above-given events in Indian history.

The fear of social stratification and internal disunity is embedded in contemporary Indian strategic thinking. Seeing the diversity and stratification in Indian society, successive governments in India try to unify the country on a single line to avert rebellion and foreign interference in the country. New Delhi, George Tanham notes, sees the Kashmir issue from the same perspective. They are convinced that the people of Kashmir are not confident about entering the Indian polity due to social stratification and declare Pakistan a foreign enemy, just like the medieval invaders of India that will violate the integrity of the sacred Hindu

land and undermine Indian civilisation. Therefore, the Indian government will use every means to integrate Kashmir into Indian polity and avert foreign interference. The revocation of Articles 35A and 370, which ensured the special status of Indian illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), draws its roots from this principle of ISC.

Another aspect that emerges from the historical socialisation is the notion of India as a civilisational state. This term conceptualises that Indian history predates the British Raj and Muslim Invasions and has a religion rooted in the Bronze Age, i.e., Hinduism. In his account, *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru writes, 'Ancient India like Ancient China was a world in itself; a culture and a civilisation which gave shape to all things'.²⁶ However, Gandhi and Nehru did not stick to the civilisational discourse of Indian history. Instead, they strived for a Westphalian order. On the contrary, the BJP, ruling India since 2014, is bringing civilisation to the forefront. Based on Hindu Nationalism, the BJP is aiming to revive the ancient Indian discourse.

Arguably, the civilisational discourse reveals the concept of Akhand Bharat or Greater India – a civilisation that considers the entire Sub-continent, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka part of the Hindu state. It is an ideology based on denial of the sovereignty of other modern nation-states of the Sub-continent. It is also based on Hindu supremacy over all other religions and races of the region. In contemporary geopolitics, New Delhi's behaviour under BJP's rule is more of a dominance over other states. They dominate Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan and carry cordial relations with Afghanistan, which they can infiltrate by wish. However, Pakistan remains an exception to that which leads to instability in the region whereby India, through several means (i.e., diplomatically isolating Pakistan, establishing Cold Start Doctrine, conducting false flag operations, and nuclearising South Asia, to name few), tries to undermine Pakistan, which it cannot.

Indian Geography

India's geography has influenced its culture, society, and strategic thinking. The landmass of the Indian Sub-continent has influenced its strategic thinking in three possible ways: one, it has given a sense of pride and confidence to Indians due to its crucial strategic location, natural resources, geographical insularity and sacred Hindu places; second, it has worked as a sense of insecurity and risk that the geography never worked as a barrier to stop foreign invasions on

India;²⁷ finally, although Indian landmass remained a land of invasions, yet its strategic thought has not evolved as a “defensive strategic thought or culture” due to internal disunity and power politics among the Indian states.

Former Viceroy of India during the British Raj, Lord Curzon, in his account of India ‘The Place of India in the Empire’ writes:

It is evident, indeed, that the master of India must, under modern conditions, be the most incredible power in the Asiatic Continent. Therefore, it may be added to the world. The central position of India, its magnificent resources, its teeming multitude of men, its excellent trading harbours, its reserve of military strength, supplying an army always in a high state of efficiency and capable of being hurled at a moment's notice upon any given point either of Asia and Africa- all there are assets of precious values. On the west, India must exercise a predominant influence over the destinies of Persia and Afghanistan; on the north, it can veto any rival in Tibet; on the north-east and east, it can exert tremendous pressure upon China, and it is one of the guardians of the autonomous existence of Siam. It commands the routes to Australia and the China Sea on the high seas.²⁸

The critiques of Nehruvian thinking blame the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, for not correctly leveraging the geography, especially the Indian Ocean, for the national strategy. However, under the rule of the BJP, India's strategic community has drastically changed their thinking of Indian geography and national strategy. Based on its pride in geography, New Delhi is effectively leveraging its territory, especially its coastlines, while engaging with the coastal, regional and extra-regional actors on the high seas to assert influence. For instance, New Delhi has signed several treaties with the US, such as LEMOA, BECA, DTTI and COMCASA, in the wake of renewed US-China Rivalry, which has created several defence and security challenges for Pakistan and China. These treaties have made strategic stability elusive between India and Pakistan and ushered in a new era of hostilities and instability between the two.

India's geographic insularity is also worth mentioning. The extended territory of India, its complex social structure and solid cultural tensions have helped it avoid long and ‘all-India’ rule by a single ruler for a more extended period.²⁹ Despite several invasions, Indian society exhibited adaptability and assimilation rather than extinction. Hence, pride prevails in Indian strategic thinking that the Indian landmass cannot overrun even my superpowers.

Besides, Hinduism raised its head from the Indian landmass, and it encompasses the evolutionary history of the religion. India's primary and most sacred Hindu sites of worship and pilgrimage include The Ganges, Himalayan Chota Char Dham, Varanasi, Gangotri, Ayodhya and Dwarka. Consequently, the presence of holy sites has bestowed Indian people with a sense of confidence and pride in their geography and, therefore, a sense of pro-activeness to secure the Indian land, for the existence of Hinduism is mainly contingent on the safety and security of Indian land.

Secondly, India's geography has remained a perpetual source of security and risk – a thought widely entrenched in India's strategic thinking. The geography of India never worked to stop invasions on the mainland, especially from the North-West. From the North-East, Japanese invaders threatened India to enter the mainland from Burma, and China invaded from the North-West and North-East in 1962. As a result, a sense of insecurity widely prevails in New Delhi's strategic thinking.

To secure its mainland and assert its influence, India has advanced a new offensive geography strategy known as the Mandala (Circles) Strategy that divides the world into five circles. The first and centre of all circles depict India as a regional core. The second circle encompasses New Delhi's contagious neighbours, i.e., Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Unlike Pakistan, New Delhi's contagious states do not pose security challenges. However, India considers its smaller neighbours a threat. George Tanham believes it is because, except Sri Lanka, all the contagious countries are ruled by non-democratic forces; these countries have communal problems that can spill over to India, such as the Tamil problem with Sri Lanka; these states often seek aid from extra-regional actors, for instance, Sri Lanka's engagement with the US and Bangladesh and Nepal's opening for China. Therefore, the strategy suggests that India must not allow contagious countries to take any action adverse to Indian threats in the region and must not allow foreign governments to establish relations with unfriendly nations.³⁰

The third circle defines Pakistan and China, the arch-rivals of India and Russia. Pakistan, as per the strategy, is declared a regional destabiliser' – a country that has violated the unity of the subcontinent and undermined the sacredness of Indian civilisation. More severely, Pakistan has highly developed anti-Indian relative strength and challenges Indian preeminence in the region. Finally, Pakistan allowed throughout its history the extra-regional actors in the area, such

as the US during the Cold War and China in recent history, to violate the strategic unity of South Asia. In China, the strategy declares Beijing the 'major rival' due to its landmass, technological development and a long contiguous border. The Indian Ocean lies in the fourth ring, while the last circles include the distant significant powers.

India is highly insecure as far as its geography is concerned. The roots of this insecurity lie in its long evolutionary history, which has remained a history of invasions and foreign rule. Due to these reasons, India sees its neighbours and even smaller powers as a significant threat to its interests and seeks refuge in 'offence as defence'.

Finally, it is also widely held that since the subcontinent always remained an easy target for foreign invaders, it always remained defensive. Thus, defensive strategic thinking is highly entrenched in the Indian strategic outlook. This argument loses legitimacy in the light of several political entities that existed at different times and exerted influence on ISC. For instance, the Cholan Dynasty introduced overseas military conquests in ISC while invading Indonesia. Similarly, Kalingana's rule and its expedition to Malaysia through the Bay of Bengal, power politics among Marathas and Moguls, to name a few, display the offensive nature of Indian strategic thinking.³¹ India is asserting influence to leverage the growing multipolar international structure in the contemporary global geopolitical landscape and South Asia. It is offensively looking at the Indian Ocean Region, competing with China and suppressing Pakistan diplomatically and pressurising it through high investments in its relative strength. Henceforth, given India's offensive strategic outlook, India will remain a regional destabiliser in South Asia.

Relevance of the Strategic Thought of Chanakya Kautilya in Indian Strategic Culture

The Mauryan legacy in Indian history is said to be a profound event as it gave birth to the philosophy of Chanakya³², an ancient Indian strategist, philosopher and diplomat who wrote a realist account of the conduct of statecraft. The basis of Indian strategic thinking is widely entrenched in the scripture of Kautilya known as Arthashastra, and is called the most critical work in Hindu politics. The relevance of the Chanakya in Indian foreign policy circles can also be seen through the establishment of Chanakya-pura – a diplomatic enclave that hosts major embassies in New Delhi. Compared to other scriptures of ancient

Indian society, such as Mahabharat, Agnipuran, and Shukraniti, the Arthashastra wields enormous influence on Indian strategy.

Chanakya envisions a highly realist nature of statecraft based on *Realpolitik*, where power is considered a means to achieve ends.³³ Near Chanakya, in the zero-sum world, the power must be prudently maximised and preferred over cooperation. Since Chanakya envisions a world of relative competition, it advises the kings to be wary of their contagious neighbours as the greatest threat can emanate from there. To bolster the defence, he formed a strategy of rings, the Mandala Strategy, in which he declared the neighbours and adversaries and suggested ways to counter them. India adopts this strategy tacitly³⁴ and counts even the smaller South Asian nations as competitors, let alone Pakistan. This instinct of Indian strategic thinking shapes Indian attitudes towards its neighbours and the world in a highly hostile way and works as a destabiliser.

Chanakya also advances a strategy of alliance formation, which can also be observed in Indian behaviour. Chanakya believes the king must temporarily engage with another state but maintain its strategic autonomy³⁵. During the Cold War, New Delhi remained non-aligned and exercised strategic autonomy while refusing allegiance to both blocks, i.e., the US and the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era and the epoch of China's rise, although India is engaging with the US to counter China's influence, it demands strategic autonomy from the US in a rigorous manner. In a Foreign Affairs article, Ashley J. Tellis, an Indian diaspora at Carnegie Endowment, remarks that India will leverage Washington's plan to bolster India's defence against China; it will not side totally with Washington against Beijing³⁶.

The strategy of Samadhi, or making peace in Kautilya, is also highly relevant to Indian foreign policy. A plan that delineates that a king must only enter into peace agreements if he finds his enemy stronger but abstain from making peace if it is declining and thus use relative strength to subdue it. India religiously follows this strategy in its relationship with China and Pakistan. Due to territorial issues, China, a prosperous and developed country with state-of-the-art facilities in every sphere, is at odds with India. India also faced defeat in 1962 by China on its territorial claims. Yet, India faces Chinese assertion with restraints. In the case of Pakistan, India's behaviour changed drastically. New Delhi believes that Pakistan, as compared to China, is relatively less aggressive. Therefore, New Delhi must assert its influence on Pakistan in every domain of statecraft. Under

this thinking, in 2019, India revoked articles 370 and 35A in its constitution that ended Kashmir's special status in the Indian Union, an act that challenged Pakistan's diplomatic mission in Kashmir. In addition, despite having credible nuclear deterrence, New Delhi is poised to make a hydrogen bomb that has severe impacts on the strategic stability of South Asia.

Indian Culture

In its long civilisational history, Indian culture occasionally evolved while assimilating several salient features. Starting from the rise of Hinduism in the wake of the arrival of Indo-Aryans, Indian culture assimilated the effects of Hinduism and its scriptures. In the Mauryan era, the non-violence of Ashoka or Buddhist Panchsheel influenced Indian society. Muslim rule and the British Raj further secularised, modernised and pluralised Indian culture. Gandhi's non-violence ideology during colonial times and Nehru's non-alignment rhetoric of strategic autonomy in post-colonial times are also salient tenets of Indian culture. However, the caste system of Indian society that has roots in Hinduism wields enormous influence on Indian strategic thinking.

The hierarchical caste system in India is so built-in in Indian society that Indian political elites see the world through the same prism. They believe that the world is hierarchical, and countries with huge populations, vast territory, and a long civilisational history must be counted as the top tiers of global governance. Since India has all these traits of qualifying for a top-tiered state, it must also be declared a great power in global politics. India's Minister for External Affairs, S. Jaishankar's book *Why Bharat Matters*, underscores India's importance in international affairs due to its historical significance and cultural diversity.³⁷ Therefore, a hegemonic mindset can be observed in Indian conduct of foreign policy, especially in South Asia, to which India declares its particular sphere of influence.

Conclusion

Pessimism prevails in South Asia's geopolitical dynamics as India's strategic culture will remain the perpetual source of instability in the region. New Delhi remains poised to see the region's hierarchical and geopolitical backyard, which Pakistan will challenge on every front. Security dilemma and strategic instability, in addition, will dominate the balance of power since New Delhi continues to leverage its privileged position as the 'net security provider' in the American grand strategy against China. Regional Restraint Regime (RRR)

prospects also seem dim in the region. Seeing the Kutaliyan conduct of India, New Delhi may not compromise its position, which it has appeared to have gained in the backdrop of the current geopolitical landscape. Moreover, Hindutva ideology will prevail over secularism in India, and the region will see its spillover effects under the rule of the BJP. As part of the Kashmir issue, the deadlock will linger, for no international pressure might be built on India due to its privileged position in the American grand strategy against China. Hence, there must be evolution and transformation in the ISC for regional peace. It can happen in two ways: by the natural course of evolution or by some drastic and lethal events. Therefore, international pressure on India to restrain, promote regional co-existence, and promote equality can ensure stability in the South Asian region.

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