

Strategic Democracy: India's Democratic Values And Their Reflection In South Asian Diplomacy

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Abstract

The democratic values are brought into Indian foreign policy, especially in South Asia. It analyses the constitutional ideals, democratic heritage, and civilizational narratives that influence India's regional diplomacy. Employing a strategic democracy perspective, the analysis assesses India's governance support, electoral aid, and soft power outreach, particularly in complicated relationships with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. While differing with China's authoritarian template, internal fault lines undermine India's normative influence. Emerging arenas such as digital governance and climate diplomacy provide potential avenues in the future to enhance India's democratic credentials through constructive and non-coercive international activism.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, South Asian regionalism, normative diplomacy, geopolitical balancing, multilateral engagement

1. Introduction

India's democratic roots have been at the centre of defining its international identity and regional policy. South Asian countries with neighbourly military takeovers, autocratic regimes, or collapsed institutions, India has consistently had constitutionalism and electoral legitimacy. This democratic tradition has been an ideological lens through which India engages its region, with a tendency to posit moral legitimacy in regional affairs (Chitalkar and Malone, 2011). However, the region's geopolitics of instability, in the form of insurgencies, border disputes, and asymmetric power relations, has necessitated a fine balancing of values and policy (Aggarwal and Bhan, 2009). South Asia is an area of focus foreign policy for India not just proximity and history, but also shared cultural-political heritage and abiding security interests (Bhanot, 2012). In the words of Buzan (2002), India's rise as a regional power is a function of material capabilities and democratic legitimacy. An understanding of this duality is central to a judgment of its regional diplomacy. The phrase strategic democracy captures the states that utilise democratic identity not only for domestic legitimacy but as a foreign policy tool. In the case of India, democracy is not merely a constitutional guarantee but also a means of increasing its soft power, setting a regional agenda, and forging friendships across the world (Flemes, 2009). Alden and Vieira (2005) note that rising democracies like India have become bridges between the world's North and South, promoting multipolar cooperation in the name of shared values. As the world's largest democracy, India is able to stand out in a region that is otherwise loosely characterised as authoritarian and volatile. This thesis also finds resonance with Fioramonti's (2007) observation of the way in which India presents itself as a credible and reliable ally in international forums. The overlap between strategy and ideology is starkly apparent in the South Asian region, where India is prone to using democratic ideals to justify intervention even as advancing realistic goals (Ciorciari, 2009). India's foreign policy in South Asia has evolved from reticent leadership to assertive engagement, driven by compulsions of regional security on the one hand and the pursuit of national interest on the other. During the first few decades of freedom, India had focused on non-alignment and bilateral diplomacy, however, the transformation in the balance of world power and internal security concerns has altered this trend (Chattopadhyay, 2011). Buzan (2002) refers to the way increased economic and military capabilities have made India assertive in its approach, with contradictions. While India likes to project democracy, its policy towards the neighbourhood has at times been pragmatically driven by power considerations. Bailes (2007) refers to India's involvement in regional security architecture, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or bilateral military alliances, as an articulation of a combination of idealism and strategic realism. Aggarwal and Bhan (2009) argue that India's intervention in border states like Nepal and Sri Lanka reflects the complexity in balancing democratic values with security imperatives. This evolving policy orientation requires a two-level approach in interpreting India's regional diplomacy.

An earlier study provides a variety of readings of India's South Asian democratic diplomacy. Chitalkar and Malone (2011) provide a detailed reading of India's foreign policy in the context of domestic politics and democratic legitimacy. Flemes (2009) write about India's trilateralism and coalition building with other democratic powers such as Brazil and South Africa. Regionally, Bhanot (2012) analyses issues of security cooperation and pressures between normative and realist pulls. India's policy towards the neighbourhood, with its political history and asymmetry. Ciorciari (2009) provides a comparison by analysing the balancing of regional influence and democratic narratives by India in the context of external powers. Fioramonti (2007) contributes to the literature by analysing the India's democratic image is interpreted by civil society and political elites. Together, these authors provide a rich description of India's regional diplomacy but fall short of being complete in incorporating democratic values as a primary explanatory variable. There is an evident study gap in fully linking India's democratic identity to its regional foreign policy behaviour. While study explores India's strategic interests and multilateralism,

very few explore the democratic values shape or legitimise diplomatic action in South Asia. Scholars like Chattopadhyay (2011) refer to regional security dynamics, but without consideration of India's use of democracy as a normative tool in bilateral engagements. Moreover, inconsistencies between India's democratic self-perception and realpolitik responses to crises in Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Myanmar are not fully developed. Bhanot (2012) refers to security cooperation, but little study has been done on democratic rhetoric is mobilised in crises. Bridging this gap gives a more comprehensive picture of India's foreign policy, one that balances strategic calculation and normative posturing based on democratic values. Geographically, it covers India's interactions with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and India's engagement with SAARC and other similar multilateral organisations. Thematically, it covers democracy promotion, regional security, and normative discourse. This article uses the conceptual frameworks to build an analytical framework. As India attempts to lead the region with a combination of idealism and pragmatism, this study makes it easier to understand the process through which democratic identity is converted into a soft power asset as well as a strategic narrative. The aim of the study is to explore India's democratic values, constitutionalism, electoral legitimacy, and pluralism in informing its foreign policy behaviour among its South Asian neighbours. This involves exploring whether India's diplomatic behaviour and rhetoric are informed by its democratic values. The study seeks to explore the extent to which India is able to balance these normative values with its strategic interests in the region of geopolitical uncertainty and asymmetrical power relations. In exploring this duality, the study offers an analysis of the consistency, inconsistencies, and implications of India's regional diplomacy.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Concept of Strategic Democracy

The strategic democracy concept combines normative democratic ideals with realist strategic interests in foreign policy action. In the case of India, its constitutional democratic character enhances its international legitimacy along with being an instrument of soft power in a war-torn neighbourhood. Hall (2010) describes the Indian democratic identity as one of the sources of its exceptionalism as an emerging power, allowing it to enact both a normative example and a strategic actor. This dual function enables India to advance democratic norms selectively alongside advancing major national interests, especially where reconciling values with realpolitik becomes essential for regional influence and balance.

2.2 Democratic Values in Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy is a balancing act between democratic identity and strategic calculation. Hagerty and Hagerty (2005) believe that India's foreign policy behaviour typically resonates with legitimacy, the rule of law, and pluralism principles derived from its domestic political order. These democratic rules are, however, filtered through evolving regional imperatives and security interests. Hagerty (2007) argues that India's alignment with strategic partners, like the United States, is partially based on democratic models that exist between them, which underlines the normative dimension of its diplomacy. Even while democracy gives rhetorical bargaining leverage, India employs it pragmatically to construct narratives, build alliances, and legitimise its leadership position in the region.

2.3 Regional Diplomacy: South Asian Context

South Asia is a difficult context for democratic diplomacy with past tensions, power imbalance, and foreign interference. Gregory (2005) asserts that regional strategic stability is still tenuous, occasionally compelling India to balance security with idealism. Irrespective, India's democratic standing distinguishes regional diplomacy from hardline competitors. Goh (2005) continues that, as in Southeast Asia, neighbours of India must balance between the great powers; in such a context, India employs democratic legitimacy to build confidence and promote cooperative initiatives, as shown in Figure 1. Hall (2010) further contends that India's soft power appeal in the region is increasingly linked with stable democratic norms and growing global influence.

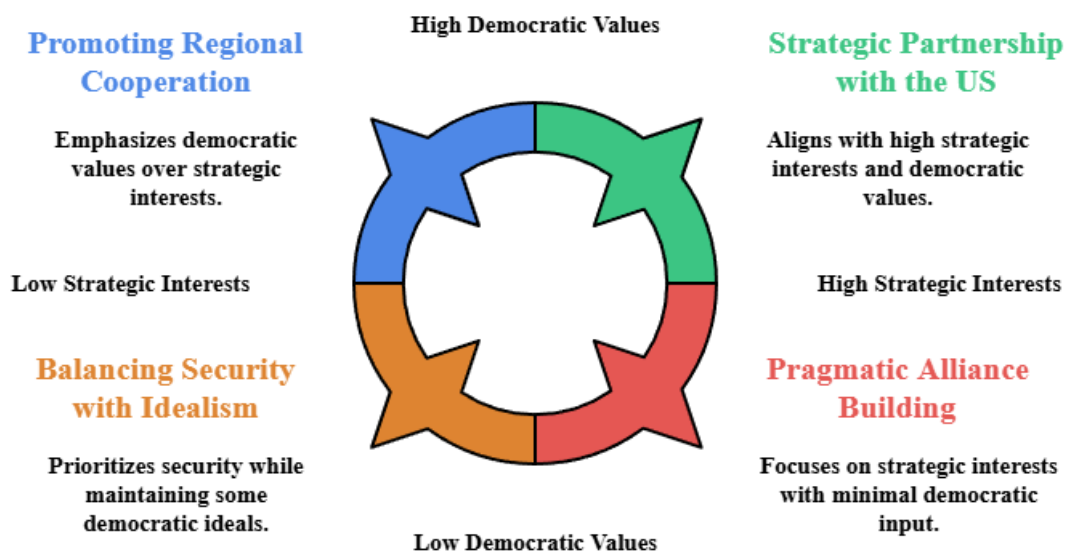


Figure 1: India's Strategic Democracy in Foreign Policy

3. India's Democratic Ethos

3.1 Historical Evolution of Democratic Ideals

India's democratic culture developed as a result of its anti-colonial movement and post-colonial dedication to pluralism and human rights. Unlike most postcolonial nations, India institutionalised democracy from the beginning, integrating it into national identity (Hayes, 2009). This heritage shapes both internal governance and foreign policy discourses. According to Sohn (2011), India's democratic growth has become a source of its soft power, enabling it to project stability and legitimacy in regional diplomacy.

3.2 Constitutional Foundations and Foreign Relations

India's Constitution embeds secularism, republicanism, and participatory government, not only influencing domestic order but also foreign engagements. They inform their role as a responsible global player and shape their normative diplomacy (Huijgh, 2011). Hirst (2008) notes that India's diplomatic culture prefers dialogue and rules of law, mirroring the constitutional foundation. Consequently, democratic principles are used to rationalise India's positions in multilateral organisations and regional conflict management initiatives.

3.3 India's Civilizational and Moral Diplomacy Traditions

India's foreign policy is also influenced by narratives of civilisation that focus on ethical rule, non-violence, and universal worldviews. These values underpin India's moral diplomacy, particularly in the Global South (Iwata, 2012). Sohn (2011) contend that this identity enhances India's soft power appeal as shown in Table 1. India draws on cultural diplomacy and historical analogies to position itself as a normative actor, affirming democratic norms in addition to strategic interests in world affairs.

Table 1: Dimensions of India's Democratic Ethos and Foreign Policy Influence

S.No.	Theme	Constitutional Basis	Historical Root	Global Influence	Strategic Impact	Reference
1	Democratic Institutionalization	Secularism, Federalism, Republicanism	Anti-colonial struggle	Legitimacy in international diplomacy	Enhanced bilateral trust	Hayes (2009)
2	Soft Power Projection	Participatory governance	Post-independence democratic continuity	Symbol of democratic stability	Perceived as a credible partner	Sohn (2011)
3	Rule-Based Diplomatic Culture	Rule of Law, Constitutional Order	Constitutional design post-1950	Promotes multilateral engagement	Frames regional mediation narratives	Hirst (2008)
4	Normative Foreign Policy Justification	Sovereignty & Legalism	Gandhian ethics and Nehruvian ideals	Influence in SAARC and global forums	Legitimises interventions and dialogue	Huijgh (2011)
5	Moral and Civilizational Identity	Cultural Pluralism	Ancient ethical and philosophical values	Deepens influence in the Global South	Soft balancing against China	Iwata (2012)
6	Cultural Diplomacy	Civic Nationalism	Epics, religion, philosophy as diplomacy	Strengthens ties via heritage-based outreach	Enhances influence in postcolonial nations	Sohn (2011)
7	Ethical Strategic Narrative	Democratic Sovereignty	Non-alignment and Panchsheel	Builds moral authority in global governance	Dual use of values and interest in policy	Iwata (2012)

4. India's Strategic Engagement in South Asia

4.1 Bilateral Relations and Regional Diplomacy

India's bilateral diplomacy is shaped through the blending of democratic signalling and strategic depth. In promoting regional cooperation, India also has to deal with power competitions and the rising presence of China. Democratic identity is selectively used in India's diplomacy and chiefly enforced through development partnerships and narratives of the past (Kavalski, 2008). Scepticism remains, however, among the smaller neighbours, who view India's outreach as both normative and hegemonic (Kumar, 2008).

4.1.1 India–Nepal

India–Nepal relations are characterised by cultural affinity and strategic concerns. As India promotes democratic solidarity, tensions have followed due to alleged political interference and border issues (Karim, 2012). Nepal's interaction with China

further aggravates regional dynamics. India's dependency on infrastructure development and polling support reflects soft power diplomacy but also indicates the delicate nature of understanding between the two countries (Kher, 2012).

4.1.2 India–Bhutan

India's relationship with Bhutan is a relatively stable democratic partnership, underwritten by energy ties and military aid. India has assisted Bhutan's shift to parliamentary democracy, strengthening its soft power profile (Kumar, 2008). However, Bhutan's cautious overtures to China remind us that there needs to be continued engagement. Strategic reliance on India guarantees convergence, but Bhutan's aspiration to greater autonomy calls for more consultative diplomacy (Kavalski, 2008).

4.1.3 India–Sri Lanka

India's diplomacy towards Sri Lanka seeks to balance democratic values with ethnic sensitivities. In and after the civil war, India championed reconciliation, minority rights, and post-conflict reconstruction (Jones, 2008). However, its perceived ambivalence in promoting Tamil interests has invited domestic and regional criticism (Kronstadt *et al.*, 2011). China's infrastructure footprint has challenged traditional Indian influence, rendering democratic legitimacy an increasingly strategic skill in its diplomatic toolkit (Karim, 2012).

4.1.4 India–Bangladesh

India–Bangladesh relations demonstrate successful collaboration based on common democratic paths and pragmatic interests. Water sharing, border management, and energy trade are the core themes (Kraska, 2003). Despite periodic friction on the issue of migration and river conflicts, both nations have maintained high-level political interaction. Indian promotion of democratic values in Bangladesh has bolstered goodwill, while its soft power initiatives ensure long-term bilateral confidence.

4.1.5 India–Maldives

India's actions in the Maldives mirror democratic commitment and strategic concern. Political crisis and growing Chinese presence led to India's intervention in times of constitutional crisis (Kumar, 2012). India has encouraged governance support, civil society relations, and defence cooperation to further enhance its regional influence (Kavalski, 2008). Internal Maldivian domestic politics at times construct India's activities as intrusive, highlighting the fine line between democratic commitment and strategic projection.

4.1.6 India–Pakistan

India–Pakistan relations are characterised by long-term strategic competition and reciprocal suspicion. Even with democratic institutions, the dialogue remains tenuous owing to terrorism and past hostility. India presents itself as a status quo power embracing democratic restraint, while characterising Pakistan's military hegemony as destabilising (Jones, 2008). Democratic peace theory is not very useful in this case, as security dilemmas always take precedence over diplomatic normalisation.

4.1.7 India–Afghanistan

India's Afghan diplomacy combines democratic state-building and strategic hedging. Investments in education, infrastructure, and civic institutions raise India's normative attractiveness (Kumar, 2008). The re-emergence of the Taliban and competition in the region with Pakistan, however, pose sophisticated security issues (James, 2004). India has a development-first strategy, but its omission from direct talks weakens its position, demonstrating the limitations of normative diplomacy during periods of geopolitical transition.

4.2 SAARC and Multilateral Regionalism

India's SAARC leadership is bound by political competition and institutional lethargy. Even while it has been a major proponent of economic integration and democratic cooperation, Pakistan's opposition and China's inroads in the region have undermined SAARC's effectiveness. India prefers other platforms, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), where it encounters fewer strategic obstacles (Karim, 2012). Multilateral diplomacy continues to be relevant, but India's democratic orientation continuously clashes with regional suspicion and asymmetrical expectations.

4.3 India's Role in Mediating Crises and Resolving Conflicts

India has been situating itself as a democratic broker in intra-regional conflicts, providing support in political transitions and peace talks. Whether in the Nepalese constitutional transition or the Maldives' succession crises, India prioritised electoral processes and institutional legitimacy as shown in Figure 2. Nonetheless, self-interest perceptions abound, particularly where India's role converges with its security calculus (Laksmana, 2011). This ambiguity complicates India's normative image in South Asia.

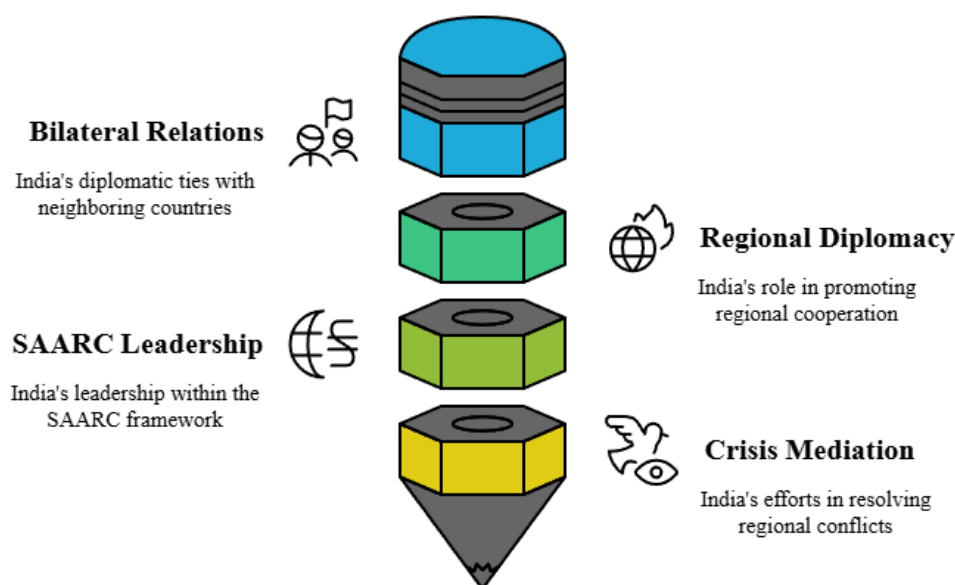


Figure 2: India's Strategic Engagement in South Asia

5. Democracy Promotion as Strategy

5.1 India's Normative Power and Soft Diplomacy

India uses its democratic self to exert normative power throughout South Asia. Based on its institutional stability and pluralistic culture, it stands as a vision for an alternative to regional authoritarian influence (Mazumdar, 2011). India's deployment of cultural diplomacy and regional media is in accord with Melissen's (2011) conception of soft power as attraction through influence. Although based on values, India's practice remains pragmatic and frequently determined by strategic interests and geopolitical calculation (Mahadevan, 2012).

5.2 Electoral Support and Building Governance Capacity

India's democratic promotion involves providing electoral support and administrative capacity-building to neighbouring countries. India extends its institutional experience through activities such as election observation, e-governance transfer, and parliamentary debates to weak democracies. Such practice is an expression of Melvin's (2012) values-based realism, where normative objectives are pursued in conjunction with foreign policy interests. While less institutionalised than its Western counterparts, India's democratic engagement prioritises sovereignty and mutual respect in regional governance initiatives.

5.3 Education, Cultural Exchange, and Development Diplomacy

India seeks to advance democracy through educational scholarships, academic exchange, and development cooperation in South Asia. These initiatives support long-term democratic stability and regionally friendly relations (Melissen, 2011). Based on Cold War alliances emphasising ideological congruence (Mastny, 2010), Indian outreach today accommodates a new focus on people-to-people diplomacy as shown in Table 2. As Mahadevan (2012) suggests, these instruments are strengthening India's strategic profile while consolidating its reputation as a benign values-based regional power.

Table 2: India's Democracy Promotion Strategies in South Asia

S.No.	Strategy Area	Mechanism Used	Normative Foundation	Strategic Objective	Regional Impact	Reference
1	Normative Soft Power	Cultural diplomacy, regional media	Democratic pluralism	Counterbalance authoritarian influence	Promotes India as a normative model	Mazumdar (2011)
2	Public Diplomacy	Narratives, media framing, storytelling	Attraction-based diplomacy	Shape public opinion in neighboring countries	Enhances India's regional image	Melissen (2011)
3	Pragmatic Value Projection	Dual-track diplomacy	Constitutional liberalism	Advance national interests alongside ideals	Legitimizes India's strategic postures	Mahadevan (2012)
4	Electoral Assistance	Election observation, technical advice	Democratic participation	Foster political legitimacy in fragile states	Improves regional democratic infrastructure	Mazumdar (2011)

5	Governance Capacity Building	E-governance, legislative dialogue	Administrative transparency	Institutional learning for political stability	Builds long-term democratic resilience	Melvin (2012)
6	Education & Cultural Exchange	Scholarships, academic mobility	People-to-people connectivity	Expand influence through intellectual capital	Cultivates pro-India leadership networks	Melissen (2011)
7	Development Diplomacy	Infrastructure aid, technical training	Ideological continuity from Cold War	Reinforce India's image as a benign power	Strengthens bilateral goodwill and soft power	Mastny (2010)

6. Realpolitik vs Idealism

6.1 Strategic Interests vs Democratic Values

India's foreign policy is characterised by a chronic struggle between its democratic values and geopolitical interests. According to Mohan (2007), India tends to neglect the promotion of democracy when national security or energy concerns are involved. Ollapally (2011) also notes that India's foreign behaviour is more influenced by pragmatism than ideology. While democracy informs its international reputation, India tends to put aside normative obligations to preserve strategic autonomy and regional prominence.

6.2 Military Cooperation and Security Concerns

India's strategic alliances tend to emphasise security collaboration over norm alignment. Racine (2002) points out the India's defence partnerships, for example, with France, are premised on common interests and not democratic values. In troubled parts of the world, such as South Asia, India focuses on stability and deterrence, even if this involves dealing with undemocratic regimes (Nathan, 2010). These military alliances highlight the realist reasoning within Indian diplomacy, where hard power takes precedence over idealistic consistency.

6.3 Balancing Act in Authoritarian Neighbourhoods

India's regional context includes a number of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states, making democratic diplomacy challenging. Mohan (2009) clarifies that India has working relations with countries like Myanmar, even where there is ideological difference. Ollapally (2011) points out that this ambivalence stems from India's strategic imperative to balance Chinese pressure and regional security as shown in Figure 3. Although India sometimes appeals to democratic values, its approach is pragmatic, opting for engagement rather than confrontation in dealing with non-democratic regimes.

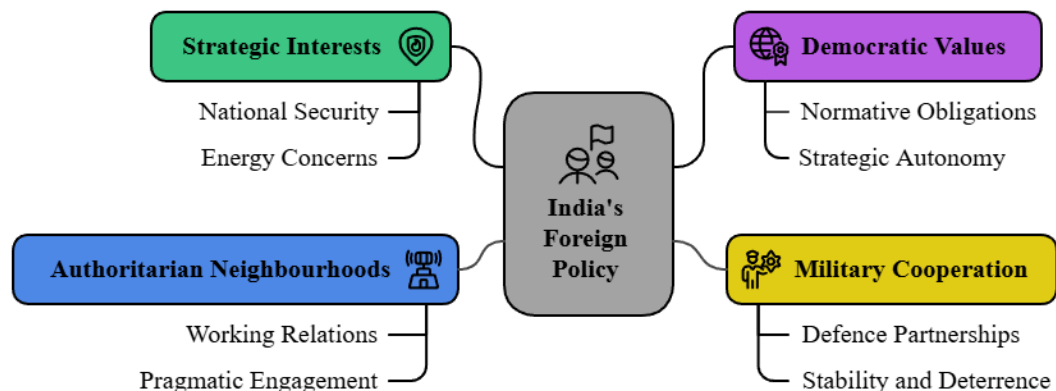


Figure 3: India's Foreign Policy: Realpolitik vs Idealism

7. Case Studies

7.1 India's Involvement in Nepal's Constitutional Process

India was instrumental in Nepal's democratic shift and constitutional development, frequently posing as a democratic broker. Its participation, however, was criticised for interference and weakening sovereignty at the local level (Singh, 2011). India advocated normative alignment with democratic consolidation, though. Regional sentiments were different. As Reiterer (2006) argues, strategic bilateralism tended to dominate multilateral ideals as a result of India's preference for restricted engagement in fragile democratic settings near its borders.

7.2 India's Role during the Rohingya Crisis and Myanmar's Military Coup

India's reaction to the Rohingya crisis and Myanmar's military coup demonstrated pragmatic deviation from democratic solidarity. While having promoted democratic transition, India avoided criticising the junta out of fear of security and connectivity imperatives (Saul *et al.*, 2011). Its focus on regional stability at the expense of regional human rights frameworks indicates resistance to multilateral normative obligations. India's silent diplomacy in the crisis consorts with regional exceptionalism, which prefers strategic depth to moral clarity (Singh, 2011).

7.3 Indian Democracy and the Solution to the Sri Lankan Civil War

India's response to the Sri Lankan internal war was influenced by conflicting domestic and strategic imperatives as shown in Table 3. Protagonizing Tamil rights and post-war reconciliation, India eschewed direct intervention in favour of stability over democratic engagement (Shrivastava, 2008). This equivocation demonstrates the conundrum of regional powers tempering soft power with geopolitical expediency (Shaw *et al.*, 2009). India's strategic selectivity legitimised criticism of democratic incoherence in multidimensional intrastate conflicts (Saul *et al.*, 2011).

Table 3: India's Democratic Engagement in Fragile South Asian Contexts

S.No.	Case Study	Democratic Posture	Strategic Rationale	Normative Claim	Critical Response	Reference
1	Nepal's Constitutional Transition	Democratic facilitator and broker	Influence over constitutional alignment	Supporting federalism and inclusive governance	Perceived as intrusive and hegemonic	Singh (2011)
2	Myanmar (Rohingya and Military Coup)	Silent diplomacy, avoided open condemnation	Border security and connectivity priorities	Stability through quiet engagement	Accused of sidelining human rights concerns	Saul <i>et al.</i> (2011)
3	Sri Lankan Civil War	Advocate of reconciliation, non-interventionist	Domestic Tamil politics, anti-terror priority	Support for post-war democracy and unity	Criticised for inconsistency and passivity	Shrivastava (2008)
4	India's Strategic Ambiguity	Mixed normative-realpolitik approach	Regional dominance and strategic depth	Democratic credentials with regional leadership	Viewed as selectively democratic	Shaw <i>et al.</i> (2009)
5	Regional Multilateralism	Undersupported during crises	Preference for bilateralism	Sovereignty-sensitive democracy promotion	Weak SAARC alignment on normative grounds	Reiterer (2006)
6	Human Rights Diplomacy	Passive in high-risk environments	Fear of losing influence	Advocacy of regional peace and order	Inconsistent with global democratic image	Saul <i>et al.</i> (2011)
7	Normative Legitimacy vs Expediency	Flexible interpretation of democracy abroad	Balancing values and realism	Strategic democracy as dual-function diplomacy	Legitimacy deficit in fragile state engagements	Shaw <i>et al.</i> (2009)

8. Challenges and Critiques

8.1 Accusations of Democratic Exceptionalism

India's ideal projection of democratic values has invited charges of exceptionalism, where its democratic identity appears selectively applied and not universally maintained. Srebrnik (2004) observes that such exceptionalism, particularly in the case of small states, disqualifies authentic normative influence. Thompson (2001) condemns Asian democracies for invoking culture or context to rationalise double standards. India's refusal to enable uniform democratic norms elsewhere goes against its moral leadership role in the region.

8.2 South Asian Perceived Hegemony

Democratic reputation, India is frequently considered a hegemon in the eyes of its neighbours. Wilkins (2011) believes that India's strategic alliances are seen as attempts to shape regional discourses and dominate them. Thapa and Sharma (2009) also point to similar feelings in Nepal, with India's intervention in peace-building being perceived as intrusive. This contradiction between soft power discourse and strategic aspirations makes India's regional diplomacy more complicated, breeding mistrust despite its democratic stance.

8.3 Domestic Democratic Struggles and Foreign Policy Credibility

Domestic democratic inconsistency undermines India's foreign policy credibility. Sukma (2011) argues that young democracies should show internal cohesion to exhibit credible external values. Democratic regression, minority rights concerns, and institutional pressure in India undermine its normative attractiveness as shown in Figure 4. Thompson (2001) also argues that Asian democracies tend to lack compatibility between domestic political unrest and external democratic diplomacy, inducing reputational dissonance between practice and image.

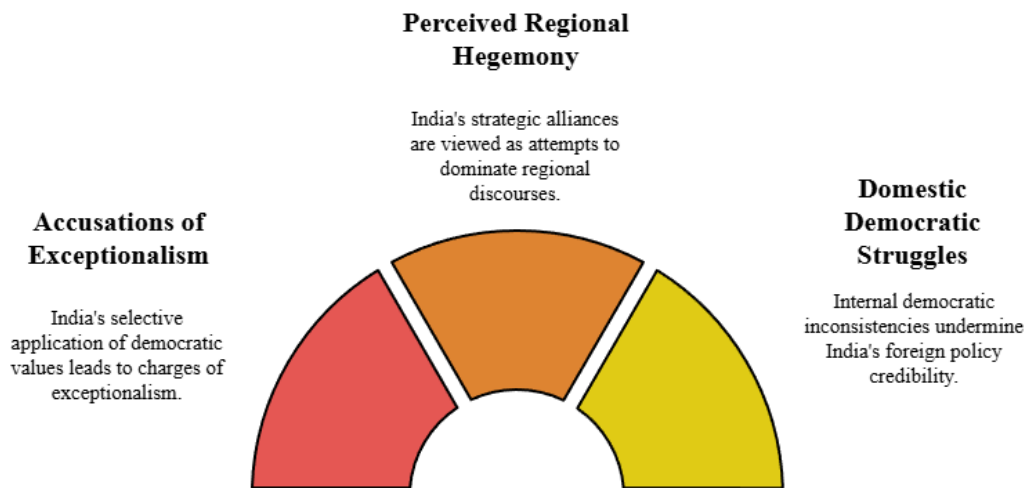


Figure 4: India's Democratic Challenges

9. Comparative Perspectives

9.1 India vs China: Competing Models in South Asia

India and China offer South Asia two different models of governance democratic pluralism and authoritarian developmentalism. Normative leadership is highlighted by India, whereas China provides infrastructure-driven influence without any political strings attached (Jetly, 2003). Banerjee (2000) believes that India's rights-based approach to diplomacy is a stark contrast to China's strategic pragmatism. However, India's uneven democratic practice dilutes its advantage. Rubinoff (2000) points out that domestic discord frequently causes India to prioritise stability at the expense of democratic uniformity, making this contrast harder to draw.

9.2 India's Strategic Democracy in the Global South Context

India's Global South democracy promotion is a combination of solidarity and strategic alignment. According to Landsberg (2012), India aligns itself with postcolonial democracies such as South Africa to push for equitable global rule. Starr (2005) further contributes that in areas such as Central Asia, India combines democratic values with counter-extremism goals, as shown in Table 4. This combination of values and interests seeks to balance, and India can exercise influence without seeming prescriptive or interventionist in weakly governed areas.

Table 4: Comparative Dimensions of India's Strategic Democracy in South-South Relations

S.No.	Comparative Context	India's Approach	China's Approach	Strength/Advantage for India	Limitation/Critique	Reference
1	Governance Model in South Asia	Democratic pluralism	Authoritarian developmentalism	Normative leadership and electoral legitimacy	Inconsistent democratic application	Jetly (2003)
2	Rights-Based Diplomacy	Emphasises human rights and political freedoms	Ignores the internal politics of partner states	Ethical foreign policy narrative	Values are often sidelined by realpolitik	Banerjee (2000)
3	Domestic Constraints	Internal dissent and pluralistic debate	Centralised, top-down control	Public accountability and constitutional checks	Slows decisive foreign policy action	Rubinoff (2000)
4	Global South Partnerships	Coalition with postcolonial democracies	Selective bilateralism based on resources	Moral alignment and historical solidarity	Occasional strategic drift	Landsberg (2012)
5	Central Asia Diplomacy	Democratic goals plus security cooperation	Infrastructure-led expansion	Balanced values-security outreach	Limited political leverage in authoritarian contexts	Starr (2005)
6	Non-Prescriptive Engagement	Values promoted without coercion	Strategic interests prioritised	Soft power appeal through non-interventionism	Risk of weak normative enforcement	Starr (2005)
7	Perceived Legitimacy	Normative legitimacy through democracy	Development legitimacy through delivery	Appeals to democratic constituencies	Strategic ambiguity undermines clarity	Banerjee (2000)

10. Future Outlook

10.1 Recalibrating Democracy in Geopolitical Strategy

India must recalibrate its democratic narrative within a shifting global order. As Cullather (2007) notes, its Cold War significance stemmed from ideological neutrality and developmental capacity. Today, India must articulate a cohesive strategy that aligns democratic values with evolving security demands. Coates (2008) highlights India's unique blend of principled non-violence and strategic assertion traits that it can refine to strengthen its geopolitical posture in a multipolar, contested Asia.

10.2 Increasing Regional Trust and Multilateralism

India's strategic democracy would gain from increased regional building of trust and more intensive multilateral engagement. According to Sinha and Mohta (2007), India's leadership aspirations rely on inclusive diplomacy in place of bilateral predominance. Trust building through SAARC alternatives and regional economic frameworks is essential. Bendiek and Kramer (2010) postulate that implementing clearer normative structures akin to EU procedures may diminish uncertainty in India's role, allowing it to reconcile strategic authority with collective legitimacy.

10.3 Opportunities in Digital and Climate Diplomacy

New areas such as digital governance and climate change present India with the chance to redefine its democratic leadership. Mishra (2008) observes that boundary sensitivities can now reach cyber and ecological borders, requiring cooperative governance. As a climate-exposed and technologically advanced democracy, India can lead inclusive digital access and sustainable transitions, as shown in Figure 5. This extension of soft power areas reinforces classical diplomacy and asserts India's credibility as a values-led regional and global actor.

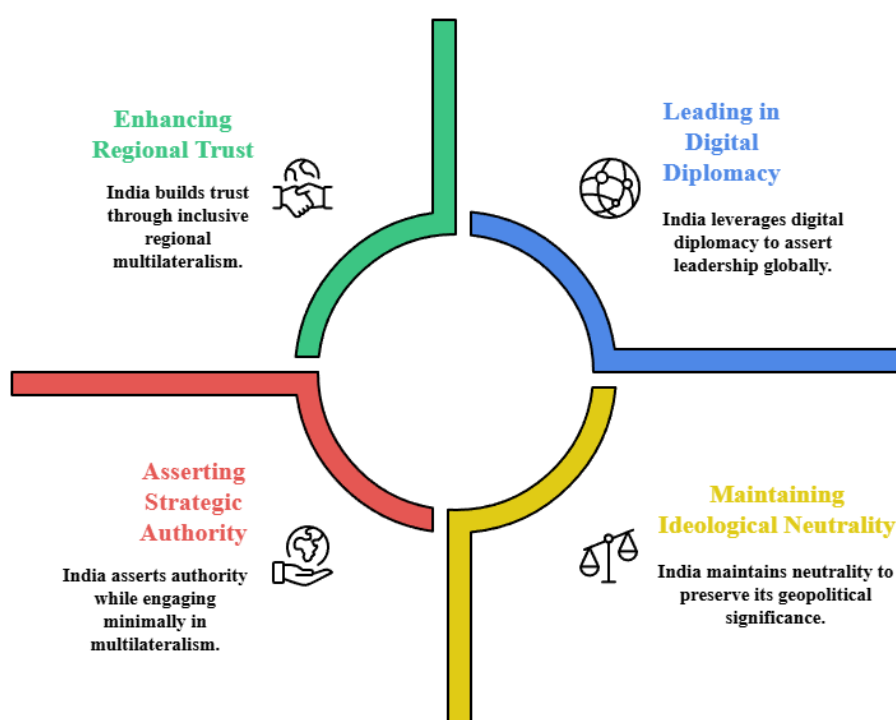


Figure 5: India's Strategic Geopolitical Strategy

11. Conclusion

India's strategic democracy provides an interesting synthesis of normative identity and geopolitical pragmatism, placing it singularly in the South Asian regional order. In this study, it has been demonstrated that India extends democratic values through bilateral relations, multilateral institutions, and soft power tools like education, development cooperation, and electoral assistance. However, these values are often undercut by strategic imperatives, regional suspicion, and domestic democratic anomalies. India's interactions with neighbours such as Nepal, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka disclose the contradiction between its democratic reputation and realpolitik actions. In comparison with China's authoritarian diplomacy, India's model presents the subregion with a normative choice, albeit one fraught with contradictions. Leadership for South Asian geopolitics depends as much on India's material strength as on normative legitimacy. As democratic erosion and competition among great powers increase, India needs to anchor trust through inclusive, rule-based regionalism. In the future, it will be necessary to align domestic democratic strength with foreign policy discourses. India can also benefit by extending its leadership into global digital governance and climate diplomacy. These fields offer avenues to operationalise democracy as a moral anchor and strategic asset. By recalibrating its foreign policy, India can mould a South Asian order that embodies both a power balance and a common democratic desire.

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