



INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE DURING NARENDRA MODI REGIME: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The term strategic culture refers to the intrinsic traditions, ideas and preferences which delineate the path of the nation in its strategic orientation and decision-making. India being a civilizational state possesses a vast treasury of history, norms, values and culture. India's strategic culture is mosaic-like. There has been a contested debate going around since the last decade of the twentieth century regarding India's strategic culture. However, it is evolving along with the world order and is an important strategic tool for guiding policy-makers. The Narendra Modi regime reflects inherent elements of India's strategic culture. This paper will examine the changes induced during the Modi regime through the lens of strategic culture while highlighting the continuity in the foreign policy in contemporary geopolitics. This paper will also strive to know about the role of strategic culture in dealing with major challenges to national security.

Keywords: *Strategic Culture, India's Strategic Culture, Leadership, Decision-Making, India's Foreign Policy*

Introduction

The growing significance of strategic culture required its detailed analysis to understand the perspectives of the state in the changing international order. Strategic culture is an important tool to know and understand the state's approach and attitude to shape its behavior. It evolves out of civilizational traditions and philosophical learnings passing through generations to generation have been a guiding tool for carving out state's policies and in making strategies to deal with crucial situations. They are the repository of values, norms and intergenerational transmission of culture, simultaneously accommodating the changes induced in the state's behaviors and actions due to any given circumstances. There are varied roles of strategic culture, which has evolved in due course of time, ranging from decision-making, policy formulation, in dealing with complex situations as well as in carving out defense strategy and importantly in their execution. Given such an account, they are the frame of reference or framework that will lead to strategic decisions, not confined to only conflict but also to the extent peace concerned. It showcases the prowess of the state's power, position and perspective in the international sphere. There are several factors like historical legacy, scriptures, valuable practices, strategies and philosophical and religious learning that help out in developing strategic culture of a nation. Apart from this, there are some elements like— leadership, institutional frameworks, preferences, choices and ideology that influence the basic fabric of a nation's strategic culture.

Furthermore, it will undergo debate regarding India's strategic culture. In this paper, the position of India's strategic culture will be discussed within a certain time frame particularly, the first two terms of the Narendra Modi government. The scholar will analyze the initiatives undertaken with regard to foreign policy and highlight the change induced in this leadership. This paper will be divided into four sections. The first section deals with the strategic culture and its conceptual understanding along with its genesis and evolution. The second section is concerned with the India's strategic culture and associated debates. The third part of this paper will seek to understand the role of India's strategic culture specific to the Narendra Modi government and his decisions and policies reflecting the spices of India's strategic culture and its continuity as well as analyses the change prompted in this regime. Finally, concludes with major findings. The researcher has used qualitative methodology with regard to this paper and follows secondary data sources, which majorly includes journal articles, research papers, reports, monographs and books as far as primary data sources the researcher has gone through intensive government website searching and following the social media as well to have the sense of geopolitical flux.

The Conceptualization of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is an important analytical tool by which one can attain an in-depth understanding of a state's behaviour and its strategic outlook. It highlights the influence of culture on the preferences and choices a nation-state makes for their interest. Every nation-state has its own geopolitical behaviour which has been shaped by its geographical structures and restraints, civilizational attitude and cultural influences. It also represents enduring legacies of states in its strategic thinking. It basically helps in grasping idea of state perspective in dealing with the various issues and contestations and having the larger picture of it. The study of strategic culture, in the field of international relations and international security literature, came into picture in the late 1970s and along with started its conceptualization. It is a combination of cultural considerations, cumulative historical memories and military trends and their influence on the analysis of the state's security policies and international relations.

The word 'strategic culture' came into existence with the efforts of Jack L. Snyder, a RAND corporation analyst, who strived to understand and predict the nuclear strategy of Soviet Russia during the Cold War era. He was the first person to coin the term 'Strategic Culture' in his work "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations." He defined strategic culture in the following words "sum total of ideas, conditional emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that the members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy" (Snyder, 1977). Snyder viewed strategic culture particularly, from the perspective of military strategic vision contextualised in the form of state's nuclear behaviour. It throws light on the pattern of pursuing different responses by states on similar challenges imposed in vivid situations and examines how and why different states act differently to similar kind of strategic challenges. The term strategic culture evolved after the second world war precisely, during cold war.

Debate on India's Strategic Culture

One of the great ancient civilizations, 'Bharat' existed for thousands of years required to reveals the mystery or secret key of India's survivability which can be unraveled by digging deeper into the cultural ethos and its strategic thought and vision. There is immense to know about, grave into the treasury of knowledge that kept the civilization intact. Rodney W. Jones has correctly categorized India's strategic culture as 'mosaic-like rather than monolithic' (Jones, 2006). The culture, tradition and the philosophical roots can be traced from the norms, attitude, behavior, symbols, non-violence and practice of managing threats and the use of force. 'Strategic culture' is a phenomenon used to unravel the history of state's position and approach in the crucial time of war where needed strategic decision-making. Although implicitly it's presence can be acknowledged from the vivid sources of India's classics. Its inherent role in strategizing soft power for seeking national interests is also an important aspect of strategic culture. Indian strategic culture has also been labeled as an 'omniscient patrician' type reflecting Sanskrit phrase- 'Bharat Jagat Guru' (Jones, 2006). There are different views of scholars and military experts regarding the nature of strategic culture of India after independence. Some are of the view that it was continued with the regime while other views that after independence strategic culture was missing from the Nehruvian government. One of the prominent scholars of strategic studies Kanti Bajpai, in his book 'India's Grand Strategy' analysed evolution of strategic thinking leading to three schools as Nehruvianism, Neo-liberalism and Hyper-realism (Bajpai, Basit & Krishnappa, 2014). Shiv Shankar Menon is of the view that independent India possess some kind of strategy culture contrary to the opinion of George K. Tanham, having half-baked sense of Indian epics, referred to fatalistic and moral characteristics of Indian Strategic Culture, which lacks pragmatism.

The contested debate on Indian strategic culture came into vogue from the writings of George K. Tanham, "Indian Strategic thought: An interpretative essay, 1992," argued that 'there is a lack of coherent set of articulated beliefs or operating set of principles regarding Indian strategy.' In response to these futile claims; Indian scholars and academicians have revisited the rich treasury of Indian history and traced the roots reflecting strategic culture. Prominent analysts and subject experts have opined that "India has its own consistent tradition of strategic thinking." Now one important and debated question arises that is there any mark of strategic culture found in the Indian foreign Policy/ military strategy or in the strategic decision-making? To answer this, scholars argued that strategic culture has been deeply ingrained into India's strategic outlook be its foreign policy, military strategy and strategic decision-making. Indian foreign policy outstandingly displays strategic culture in its vision, which emphasizes on autonomy, multilateralism and peaceful co-existence etc.

Strategic Culture during Narendra Modi

The Narendra Modi regime has utterly reflected the nuanced view of strategic culture and has been sagaciously employed in the outlining of policy frameworks and also into decision-making. There is a significant change that can be underlined in India's strategic policy framework wherein the terms like multi-alignment, Neighbourhood First, Act East, Link West and Panchamrit found weightage than that of non-alignment (Pillai, 2023). It inherently, visible the pace of India's strategic orientation moving towards being more pragmatic and goal oriented. Having said that, it doesn't mean that it is aloof of its roots or getting estranged with its ideational features. Although, the nature and attitude with which things are occurring have definitely shown the shift in the decision making. In Narendra Modi's regime, India's foreign policy shows the amalgamation of traditional value and pragmatic strategies, has invigoratively elevated the stature of India in the global arena and employed approaches deal to arising international challenge. There are stances wherein the roots of strategic culture can be traced during the Modi regime. Here, it is important to note that leadership plays a constructive role in developing nation-states' foreign

policy. While examining the case of India's strategic culture, it can be observed that nation's soft power also played an important role in the strategic orientation of state at global stage, as in making Yoga as International Day of Celebration.

The significant contrast found in Modi Government's behavior, which has been influenced by its background and linkages from the Sangh Parivar, from that of Nehruvian socialist attitude. Nevertheless, there is one foundation aspect i.e. the vision to make the country representative in the world platform and as a significant power, found in common parlance (Pillai, 2023). The core of India's strategic policy defined by its global ambition to attain strategic autonomy and global leadership. The quest for power is the major guiding force to make policy and strategy for the world. It has been posited that the Indian strategic outlook was shaped by the yearlong civilizational history and legacy of 'Realism, Co-existence, Co-operation and Partnership.' The significant change can be observed from the policy framework i.e. the inclination from its defensive stand or idealism towards offensive realism with maintaining the continuity with time. Initially, India's approach regarding keeping strong military was dormant which gradually accelerated and turned into fiery mode. It is explicitly visible from the rapid military modernization. And making defense more combative and tech-sophisticated as Defense Minister Rajnath Singh launched 'twenty reforms' in 2020 across the defense sector. Along with creating the post Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) to ensure effectiveness and integration in defense sector (Subramanian, 2019; Choudhary, 2024).

There is also needed the contextual analysis of these policies as non-alignment which was a result of bipolar world order. The neighbourhood first policy reflected the need of reinvigorating and reassessing its position for strengthening the regional ties with our neighbours as well as for the look east policy, and further nuclear policy shows the pragmatism, it was indeed a shocking moment for the world to accept such an unacceptable fact, although, the stand was taken firmly. In addition to the above, to have strategic interconnection the act east policy, link west was taken into consideration. Economically, it has elevated the stature of India with its neighbours and beyond. There is complementary relation between the strategy of foreign policy and domestic progress. There is a reflection of domestic growth in the international platform and formulates the world opinion. The Narendra Modi's approach for dealing with global and regional conundrums rely upon the 'Strategic Interconnectedness' or 'Multi-Vectored engagement' (Pillai, 2023). The contour of Modi regime's foreign policy is being outlined with the mixture of changing geopolitical globalization and its continued conventional 'realpolitik' (Vanaik, 2021). There is needed remodeling politico-strategic calculations to adjust itself in tandem with the shifting global order to remain consistent and relevant.

Elements of Strategic Culture during Narendra Modi Regime

There are some key foundational factors of strategic culture that helps in categorization of Narendra Modi regime are as given below:

Strategic Autonomy: Strategic Autonomy is the key element of strategic culture exercised in the foreign policy making. it has been the cornerstone of Indian Foreign Policy. There is a tradition of strategic autonomy can be seen from the non-alignment movement during the cold war. It was the bulwark against indulging into any military groupings. The independent status gained varied responses across the world indeed none of them was for India's selfless interests. At the same time, Strategic autonomy helps in maintaining the balanced ties with the major powers, on the same time without estranging the ties. It provides flexibility for parting the gap between the west and east congruent cycles in the decision-making.

Assertiveness in National Security Strategy Policy: Another element that has certainly exemplified in the Narendra Modi regime is its assertiveness in the decision-making as well as in the national security contexts. The successful carrying out of the surgical strikes in 2016 reflected the firmness in the decision-making and also in the part of military readiness. There is another aspect linked with this incident which shows the world India's caliber in its prompt and covert operations. Further, in Balakot airstrike as well stayed on its words to mark the new heights in its defense postures. These instances reveal the level assertiveness in the decision-making during the Modi regime which is not confined at superficial level but also in its execution. Moving further, in countering 'China threat' or the issues imposed by the Chinese premier Xi Jinping be it Doklam stalemate, Galwan Valley clash or on several other border disputes, have been aptly answered. As per the famous dictum of Chanakya in context of foreign policy- "enemy's friend is also enemy" acutely portrayed in the India-China-Pakistan triangle (Dar, 2021). It is also visible from China's massive infrastructural project 'Belt and Road Initiatives' (BRI), in the form of 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) deliberately passing through 'Pakistan Occupied Kashmir' (POK). None of the stone left unturned in making India's adversarial ties with its neighbors. Nevertheless, it is the long sightedness of Modi regime that took decision to revive its ties with our neighbors while initiating Neighborhood First policy and giving concession and locs to strengthen its ties because the strong neighborhood is considered to the 'first line of defensive wall.' Furthermore, focuses on boosting India's connectivity in the region and beyond with projects like Chabahar port and BBIN etc. For securing littoral sphere and keeping Indo-Pacific arena intact, launched Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative in 2015 (Ladwig, 2024). And also headed the free and open 'Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) movement (Saha & Mishra, 2020).

Strategic Partnership: During the tenure of Narendra Modi, there can be acknowledged a significant growth in the strategic partnership of India with states all around the world. As for in the recent visit of Narendra Modi, in December 2024, India and Kuwait elevated their relations to a strategic partnership ("India, Kuwait poised", 2024). Apart from that Poland, Greece, Italy, Australia, Canada, Egypt, UAE, Singapore, Malaysia, Mongolia, Oman, Seychelles, Japan Israel and United Kingdom etc. are the major countries with which India has elevated diplomatic ties into strategic partnership during Modi regime (2014-2024).

There are many mini-lateral groupings in which India has been one of the major members as in Quad, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, I2U2 etc. which shows the ‘multi-alignment’ strategic approach of India (Hall, 2016).

Global Leadership and Support for Multilateralism: India’s view of global security and prosperity can be traced from its spirit of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ (Overview of India). In this flux of geopolitical conundrum, the race for world leadership remains the vision for the world’s leader. There is a constant element of India’s strategic culture that has guided the foreign policy makers is the need for having global leadership and influence. One of the ambitious long-term goals of Indian foreign policy are to attain the status of global leadership since dawn of it. Bharat Karnad has underlined the significant change in India’s foreign policy as well as in politics with the new leadership of Narendra Modi. Emphasized the need for making ties with the countries going beyond the existing bonds (Karnad, 2018). Both at the international and in the domestic level aspirations for becoming world leadership is at the zenith as informed with the slogan for ‘Vishwa guru-the leader of the world’. There are several instances wherein the strong case for India’s leadership found as in dealing with COVID-19 pandemics, on the issue of environment, advocacy for the global south and the successful execution of G-20 are among of them. Along with this, in several UN peacekeeping operations and in dealing with the emerging global crisis like terrorism and climate change. With closure inspection, it’s evident that Modi government has employed ‘multi-alignment’ rather than sticking to non-alignment (Hall, 2016). There are various multilateral groupings like International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), and Global Biofuel Alliance (GBA) which came during G-20 summit in 2023, etc. wherein India plays an important part. Furthermore, collaborated with world leaders in coping with uncertainty rising out of activities taking place by aggressive power in the Indo-Pacific region in facilitating hassle free navigation in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2024).

Reinvigoration of Civilizational Legacy: The present government’s ideology has semblances with the years-long norms of Sanatan Dharm. The richness of ancient civilization seems taking place in some way of the other, scholars have variedly observed these developments. These developments are both within and outside the boundary-line. Any change happen inside the border shows greater influence outside at par distance.

In the regime of Modi, India has been on the front of reviving the ethos of traditions and infuse with the teachings of great civilization in his foreign policy. Ian Hall has closely observed the developments taking place during Narendra Modi’s first tenure in his book *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, where he argued that Indian foreign policy was deeply ideological and based on vision of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva philosophy. During the regime the establishment of Lord Rama temple and reviving thousand years old tradition of transferring Sengol– meaning ‘raj-danda’ or the ‘scepter of righteousness’ in the new parliament building and restoring several antique and ancient treasuries of India assured the resurgence of old heritage, national pride and cultural regeneration (Sinha, 2023; Chauhan, 2024). Even the architecture that are being built showcases the reminiscent of ancient India’s art and culture as for example the new parliament building which prime minister Narendra Modi posited that it’s not merely a building– it signifies transcendental spirit of incredible Indian civilization. It shows the new Indian perspective of politics eschewing colonial past, also Bharat Mandapam reflecting the notion– “Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat.”

Conclusion

The infused change in the flowing wave of strategic culture has been evident under the stewardship of the Modi regime. It shows the remarkable shift in the approach of the government by reviving the traditional ethos of Indian civilization and inculcating cultural practices into the decision–making, policy formulation and in strategic orientation. The significant influence of strategic culture is visible from both inside and outside of the country. The ideology of the present regime is reflected in his foreign policy making and also showcases the distinct leadership style with the ‘Modi effect.’ The researcher has highlighted some important tenets around which foreign policy revolves. Firstly, India needed to be ‘a leading power’ rather than a mere ‘balancing power.’ Secondly, required to accelerate the nation’s strategic politico-socio-economic transformation. Thirdly, the calculated use of its abundant soft power while strategically employing hard power and calibrating its defence capabilities and finally, nurturing and strengthening its regional and foreign ties. It is crucial to acknowledge India’s rise on the global stage as a formidable player. During Modi’s regime, observed assertiveness in India’s decision-making as well as policy-making and implementation. It has also shown Modi’s stalwart leadership in dealing with foreign affairs while observing ‘strategic realpolitik.’

The role of strategic culture has been significantly inculcated, reflected in the attitude of the government which follows pragmatism rolled with ideational factors and centred around the principle of making a ‘self-reliant India.’ The resurgence of national ideals and cultural heritage reinvigorated India vigour nationally and also attracted global attention be it from ‘Yoga’, ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ or ‘Vaccine Maitri.’ India’s ‘calculated alignment’ with allies and ‘gauged estrangement’ with adversaries has shown its decisive acuteness and presents it as a strong and balanced power to associate with in making the world a peaceful heaven while opening the aperture to explore a lot into evolving ‘organic’ civilisation in the contemporary geopolitical conundrums.

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