India’s Strategic Tools and Principles of Liberal Involvement in South Asia

Constantino Xavier, Carnegie India, New Delhi
constantino.xavier@gmail.com

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Abstract: Despite being a proud and exceptionalist democracy, India has recently refused to support liberal agendas such as the Responsibility to Protect and other efforts to coercively promote democracy or human rights in third countries. India is thus described as an outlier, averse to pursuing a more liberal foreign policy. This would present a puzzling anomaly to liberal theories of International Relations.

This paper contradicts this deeply entrenched narrative about India’s foreign policy by describing how New Delhi’s strategic assessments and response to regime crises in neighbouring countries are also influenced by liberal concerns. By focusing on case studies in Nepal and Sri Lanka in the 1950s, 1980s and 2000s, based on archival materials and interviews with decision-makers, the paper forwards the contours of an Indian strategic culture of regional involvement which recognizes that, at least in the long term, liberal regimes in the neighborhood foster Indian domestic and external security interests.

Given the unprecedented degrees of political freedom in South Asia today, this liberal legacy plays an important role to explain why India is currently expanding its democracy assistance efforts to neighboring regimes in transition. At the policy level, the paper also contributes to a greater understanding of the strategic assessments that shape India’s response and involvement to other regional crises. Finally, the paper is also driven by the theoretical mission to a) mitigate the interests vs. values binary affecting the study of foreign policy; b) advance the study of non-Western strategic cultures; and c) excavate the contours of an Indian realist school of thought and practice that reflects the country’s distinct political system, historical trajectory, and geostrategic environment.

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