

A Study of India's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of National Identity

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Abstract. This paper explores how a country's national identity shapes its foreign policy. India's foreign policy in South Asia is used as a case study to illustrate this. India sees itself as a dominant power in the region and has pursued a regional order with itself at the center. This has led to more coercion of neighboring powers and cooperation with external powers to contain their growth. Understanding a country's national identity is crucial to comprehending its foreign policy decisions.

Keywords: National identity, South Asian politics, Indian diplomacy, Indian centrism.

1. Introduction

India has constructed its national identity around Hindu nationalism, which places Hinduism at its core. This construction process has had a profound impact on India's political culture. In its interactions with other actors in the international system, particularly in the South Asian region, India's perception of itself as a regional power has been shaped by this identity construction. Through ongoing internal and external interactions, India has come to identify itself as a promoter of "South Asian hegemony and order maintenance".

This article attempts to answer how this national identity is constructed and how it influences India's foreign policy.

2. Existing Understanding of National Identity

In the current academic discourse, there are two distinct mainstream perspectives on the definition of identity. The first is essentialist, which posits that human beings possess a set of eternal and unchanging characteristic attributes, and therefore their own identity is internally stable. Essentialists regard certain fixed "traits" or "essences" as universal, defining characteristics that constitute the identity of a particular group of people. [1] In contrast, constructivist scholars have long held a dynamic view of identity, which posits that the development of identity is gradually formed and changed through continuous interaction with external factors. Therefore, "Identity has historical characteristics." [2]

In the field of international politics, American scholar Huntington provided a definition of "identity" in the context of international politics. In his definition, identity is "the self-conception of a person or group, which is a product of self-awareness. It is what makes me or us unique and different from you or them, based on certain distinctive qualities." [3] Huntington also believed that identity is a constructed concept.

The classic discourse on national identity was introduced to the study of international relations by the constructivist classicist Alexander Wendt. He argued that identity is "an attribute of intentional actors, capable of generating motives and behavior characteristics." [4] National identity, as an extension of the concept of identity in the study of the state, refers to the attributes of the state, as well as the motives and characteristics of state behavior.

The formation of national identity is influenced by both subjective and objective factors. In terms of the constituent elements of national identity, it includes both material and spiritual components. National identity is not only determined by the intrinsic attributes of a country, as described above, but is also reflected and formed in the process of interaction between states. In the course of

international interaction, there may be conflicts and inconsistencies between a state's self-perception and external perception, and the reshaping and adjustment of national identity is the process of resolving conflicts between self-perception and external role expectations.

A state must first clarify its national identity, and then define its specific national interests based on this identity, and formulate foreign policies guided by national interests. Based on an analysis of the relative relationship between itself and others in the international community, the state must design specific actions and further adjust and clarify its national identity.

3. The Construction of India's National Identity

India's basic self-perception is that of a regional hegemon. Hinduism and Indian cultural identity provide the ideological and cultural basis for India's national identity, while India's comprehensive national power serves as its material foundation. India's interactions with other countries have formed its perception and concerns regarding regional hegemony.

In the process of constructing national identity after India's independence, Hindu nationalism has played a crucial and irreplaceable role. It has become the ideological foundation and political philosophy behind India's contemporary ascent. Therefore, in the process of constructing national identity, the doctrines and worldview of Hinduism have inevitably influenced India's external decision-making thinking.

"Mandala" (मण्डल) originally a concept in Indian religion, is represented by a series of concentric circular diagrams in Sanskrit. In the original doctrine, it represents a hierarchical system, meaning "sacred space" or "miniature of the universe", with the aim of expressing a divine world order. The concept of Mandala was introduced into the political field by Chanakya's *"Arthashastra"*. The Mandala system he constructed is an international relations cognitive system formed by combining Indian religious concepts. [5] This important strategic thinking of India to construct national diplomatic relations is based on an international system centered on conquerors, where other countries are either allies or enemies in the conqueror's perspective. In such a system, "allies" and "neutrals" are only strategic temporary positions. This makes any subject not worthy of long-term trust.

The Mandala system is a stateless system, and the conqueror and its neighboring countries are in a state of security dilemma. The basic deduction logic of the relationships between countries is: the conqueror's neighboring countries are its potential or real enemies; the countries bordering the friendly countries of the conqueror are also friendly countries; the countries adjacent to the friendly countries of the enemy country will be friendly countries of the enemy. [6] This cognitive system of confrontation and distrust in the international system makes India very distrustful of neighboring countries.

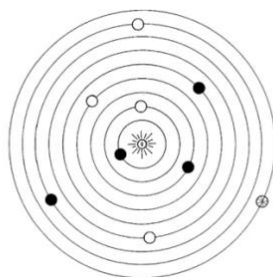


Fig 1. The schematic diagram of the Mandala International System [7]

"The sun represents the "conqueror", the black ball represents the "enemy", the white ball represents the "ally", and the flower ball represents the "neutral".

This doctrine begins with the perspective of the "conqueror" and analyzes the world situation from the perspective of "India" as the "conqueror", with a strong Indian-centric view. The Mandala system also endows Indians with the idea of a "destined great power", which is deeply rooted in India regardless of whether other countries accept it or not. Almost every member of the Indian strategic community regards this inherited idea of a great power as a valuable asset of Indian diplomacy. [8]

4. The Result of International Interaction

The perception of India as a regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region is a result of international interactions. India's long-term interactions with South Asian countries have led to its self-perception as a regional hegemony. Since its independence, India has continuously expanded its territory, suppressed and controlled neighboring countries in the region, and received tacit approval from the international community. This has gradually confirmed India's hegemonic status in South Asia.

In the face of Pakistan, India has repeatedly gained strategic initiative and military victories. In the first few months after independence, India controlled Junagadh, Jammu and Kashmir through military means. India fought three Indo-Pakistani wars and intervened militarily in the East Pakistan conflict in 1971, which led to the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan and the dismemberment of Pakistan. In 1984, India occupied the Siachen Glacier and the main mountain pass, which it still holds.

When intervening in Sri Lanka's internal ethnic conflicts, Indira Gandhi explicitly told Sri Lankan leader Jayawardene that India was not just a "foreign country" when it came to Tamil issues. In 1987, India sent troops to Sri Lanka to participate in the long-term fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since then, India has long interfered in Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign affairs. Regarding Bangladesh, India has repeatedly interfered in river water resources, territorial issues, and numerous diplomatic and domestic issues. India's annexation of Sikkim, armed control of Bhutan, and armed intervention in the Maldives rebellion have also not been widely or strongly condemned by the international community. [9]

These tough interventions have been tacitly approved, and even supported, by the international community. This has further deepened India's perception of its regional hegemony. India believes that the international community has universally recognized that the Indian subcontinent is "India's subcontinent."

5. Indian Identity And Security Anxiety

Despite the perception of regional hegemony, India still faces numerous concerns and pressures. Within the country, India's loosely divided geography has created ethnic fragmentation. Within the South Asian region, Pakistan poses a significant threat to India's security. Externally, international interference in the Indian Ocean and China's geopolitical advantage in South Asia are also concerns.

5.1. Asymmetric nuclear deterrence in the Region - Pakistan

Despite India's status as the dominant power in South Asia, it still has many concerns due to its geopolitical position and unique political culture. Pakistan's nuclear power quickly developed, which was tacitly accepted by other nuclear-armed countries.

Asymmetric nuclear deterrence refers to a situation where two countries with very different military capabilities possess nuclear weapons. This makes the stronger country feel less threatened by the weaker country's nuclear capabilities, creating an imbalance of military power between the two countries. However, the weaker country may still use their nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence, as even a simple and backward nuclear weapon and its attack could cause significant damage to the stronger country. This deterrence creates a complex and potentially unstable situation where both countries must carefully consider their actions and responses to avoid a nuclear conflict. [10]

To a certain extent, this allowed Pakistan, which was already at a disadvantage, to maintain a strategic balance with India through nuclear deterrence. Therefore, Pakistan is seen by India as a continued internal challenge to its regional hegemony.

While there has been an increase in economic and cultural exchanges between the two nations, political trust between them remains low, and the border area continues to remain in a state of standoff. This confrontation is unlikely to disappear in the short term.

5.2. External Pressure - China

Based on the political culture and concerns in India towards neighboring and enemy countries' allies, China, on one hand, as a northern power, and on the other hand, as Pakistan's friendly partner, poses a great threat to India.

As a northern power, China has the geographical advantage of overlooking the South Asian subcontinent from the top-down on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, naturally grasping the strategic initiative of South Asia. In terms of military affairs, the advantage of geography cannot be ignored. When China overlooks India from the top-down on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, it naturally creates significant security pressure on India.

At the same time, India is extremely concerned about China's continuously strengthening influence in South Asia and is cautious about China's development of relations with neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This attention deepens India's perception of the threat posed by China and also deepens its insecurity in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions. The threat from China undermines India's national security, weakens its status as a major power, and reduces its regional influence. [11]

India disagrees with this view. For Indian strategists, this growing Chinese influence poses a threat to India's dominant position in South Asia to some extent. Taking the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an example, although China fully respects India's regional leadership status when advocating the Maritime Silk Road Economic Belt initiative and cautiously developing relations with South Asian countries, the launch and implementation of the BRI still cause India to maintain a significant level of distrust towards China's diplomatic strategy. [12]

On May 14, 2017, India was the only major country along the "Belt and Road" that did not participate in the International Cooperation Summit Forum, which was held in Beijing. This was a gesture of disapproval towards China by India. From the governmental to the civil level, India has adopted a stance of boycott and opposition towards the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Before the International Cooperation Summit Forum on the "Belt and Road" initiative in Beijing in May 2017, a spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly expressed India's concerns about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, emphasizing that India cannot accept projects that "ignore its sovereignty and territorial integrity" and officially expressed India's rejection of the "Belt and Road" initiative. India also publicly stated that "interconnectivity projects should be based on internationally recognized norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency, and equality," implying that China's proposed "Belt and Road" initiative has deficiencies in these aspects and is a strategy based on its own interests, without consulting and deciding with other countries, and lacks transparency. Therefore, India and its policy-guiding country Bhutan did not participate in the "Belt and Road" summit.

5.3. Extraterritorial forces exist in the Indian Ocean

India regards the Indian Ocean as a natural strategic area and has long sought to control it in order to enhance its influence and achieve its ideal of becoming a world power. However, the Indian Ocean is the busiest and most important ocean for world trade, with a large amount of oil and Eurasian trade passing through it. Globalization relies on container shipping, and container shipping in the Indian Ocean accounts for half of the world's total. Moreover, the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean provide 70% of the world's petroleum product transportation. [13] Therefore, other countries are bound to intervene and participate in the construction of the order in the Indian Ocean.

Entering the new century, with the need for the United States to contain the rise of emerging countries around the Indian Ocean, the strategic focus of the United States has shifted to the Indo-Pacific region. The United States has strengthened its presence in the Indian Ocean region and has repeatedly participated in the strategic rebalancing and construction of a US-led security order in the Indo-Pacific region. Under the leadership of the United States, countries such as Japan and Australia have begun to radiate their influence towards South Asia. This is obviously in conflict with India's intention to exclude the influence of other major powers in the Indian Ocean region.

The competition between the United States and India in the Indian Ocean region has intensified, and the two countries have different strategic interests and security concerns in the region. The United States regards the Indian Ocean as an important strategic area and aims to maintain its maritime dominance and prevent China's rise in the region. Therefore, while both sides recognize the importance of cooperation, they also pursue their national interests and security concerns, which has led to a complex and dynamic relationship between the United States and India in the Indian Ocean region.

India's diplomatic struggles and cooperation with the West are based on its strategic culture of "India-centricity". Its relationship with the United States is no exception. The current trend of cooperation in India-US relations is partly due to the US partially recognizing India's hegemonic and international status in the Indian Ocean region.

The national identity positioning of a regional hegemon, coupled with an independent and autonomous diplomatic tradition, has made India reluctant to become a follower of Western countries' containment strategy. However, India still hopes to assume more security responsibilities in the "Indo-Pacific" region, particularly in the Indian Ocean region, and become a leader and influencer. India actively participates in the construction of the Western military and economic alliance in the Indo-Pacific region, seeking to deepen its integration into Western strategies in the region and thereby increase its influence in regional affairs. [14]

In the Indo-Pacific region, the three triangular relationships of U.S.-Japan-India, U.S.-India-Australia, and Japan-India-Australia, as well as the quadrilateral relationship of U.S.-Japan-India-Australia, have basically taken shape. Among these multilateral relationships, India relies on its own geopolitical advantages to become an equal participant rather than a passive follower of other major countries.

6. India's Regional Action

Despite being a regionally exclusive power, India seeks to counter its current adversary, China, by uniting with potential Western allies. On May 23, 2022, during his visit to Japan, President Biden announced the launch of the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" with India as one of the founding members. On May 24, 2022, the leaders of the US, Japan, India, and Australia held the "Quad summit" in the Prime Minister's official residence in Tokyo, Japan. While India actively engages in strategic games with the West to ensure that it retains control over matters related to the Indian Ocean, it also seeks to encircle China with the help of the West, in an effort to disperse China's power and alleviate the pressure in India's northern region. Overall, India's efforts to ally with Western powers underscores its strategic approach to managing regional dynamics and balancing national interests against external threats.

In addition, as a regional hegemon, India not only has dominance and control but also to a certain extent undertakes the responsibility of providing public goods to the region and conducting regional governance, existing as a regional governor.

In the field of regional multilateral mechanisms and regional governance, India actively participates in regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), to promote the liberalization and facilitation of regional trade and investment. India has also played an important role in regional trade agreements such as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA).

In the field of infrastructure investment, India is actively promoting the interconnection of the energy networks in South Asia. [15] Around 2005, India began investing in hydropower in countries such as Bhutan. [16] In 2014, India proposed the South Asian Regional Power Hub project, aiming to establish a regional power grid connecting Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Nepal, to transmit hydroelectric power resources from India's Northeast, offshore wind resources from Sri Lanka, and hydropower resources from Nepal and Bhutan within the region, in order to

address the issue of existing energy dependence on imports in the region. [17] India is also actively promoting energy cooperation under the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework. [18]

In responding to sudden disasters in the region, India also actively provides support to South Asian countries. Especially after the outbreak of COVID-19, India has provided a series of assistance to countries in the region [19] In March 2020, Modi convened and chaired a video summit of leaders from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, except for Pakistan. At the summit, Modi proposed the creation of an emergency fund to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic under the SAARC framework and pledged to donate \$10 million to the fund. [20]The summit also established a comprehensive disease surveillance portal and a joint research platform and discussed how to coordinate South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries' efforts to fight the pandemic. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) was used to create a COVID-19 website that provides real-time updates on the number of confirmed cases in each country, tracks changes in policy, summarizes daily reports from the World Health Organization, and shares policies and experiences published by governments worldwide. [21]

It can be seen that India, to some extent, involves itself in international political struggles as a representative and "hegemon" of the South Asian region.

7. Conclusion

Overall, India's "South Asian and Indian Ocean Hegemon" state identity is shaped by both historical and contemporary factors. On the one hand, India's unique history and political culture have shaped its "order view" and "India-centric view"; on the other hand, India's material, political, and geographic foundation has endowed it with considerable power, which ensures that the state can fulfill the national responsibilities required by its existing cognition.

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