



Democracy As Soft Power: India and Asean in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

India has maintained its long history of democratic rule in the post-colonial world despite a considerable diversity with respect to race, ethnicity, religion, language, etc. India has sustained constitutional governance through an independent judiciary system, regular elections and a pluralist social order. These democratic values have been reflected not only in India's domestic political institutions, but also in how India conducts itself externally, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. This research inspects whether democracy can serve as an influencing force for regional diplomacy without being coercive or using political intervention. The study observes the use of democratic values as a soft power in India-ASEAN relations, especially within a region that contain diverse political systems from electoral democracies to authoritarian regimes. The research questions motivating this study include: (1) What role does India diplomatically play as a democratic country with respect to ASEAN? (2) How far does democracy encourage political resilience and normative cooperation amongst the countries of Indo-Pacific? and (3) How can India promote democratic values within the ASEAN region while maintaining ASEAN's existing norm of non-interference? The primary objective is to evaluate how democracy can be used as a non-coercive tool in the pursuit of regional diplomacy for India. The paper follows a qualitative and analytical approach. It analyses policy documents, institutional cooperation frameworks, and diplomatic initiatives to study the normative nature of India-ASEAN relations. The key findings suggest that instead of being a political standard, democracy can be used as a normative resource for increasing trust and building cooperative relationships as India has used capacity-building, parliamentary exchanges and governance-related cooperation. Ultimately, the research concludes that using democratic values as a soft power diplomacy can build India's credibility as a stabilising partner.

Keywords: Democracy, India-ASEAN Relations, Indo-Pacific, Political Resilience, Pluralism, Soft Power

INTRODUCTION

The present-day international relations do not rely solely on military or economic power. Instead, there is an increased reliance on the ability to influence perceptions, preferences, and gain cooperation from other countries. The emergence of concept of Soft Power has allowed use of



persuasion and appeal instead of coercion (Nye, 2004). From this perspective, democracy has emerged as an important political value, providing legitimacy and thus a degree of influence through both regional and global diplomacy (Nye, 2011).

Democracy as soft power becomes relevant in regional contexts where there is interaction of diverse political systems. Indo-Pacific is one such region which has emerged as a strategically important area in world politics, due to its growing economies, emerging trade routes, and growing geopolitical rivalry among the major world powers (Ikenberry, 2011). The region has presence of fully functioning liberal democracies to authoritarian and hybrid regimes. In this complex environment, norms and values relevant to democratic governance have come to be of growing importance in establishing regional order and governance. As a result, democracy, as a means of governance characterized by inclusion, adherence to established constitutional processes, and obedience to the rule of law, has become increasingly important as a normative resource for utilizing in diplomatic relations occurring at the regional level (Acharya, 2014).

The historical interactions between India and Southeast Asia helps to understand the current regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. Long before the emergence of modern-day geopolitics, there were trade and cultural exchanges like transmission of religion and philosophy. They were the primary factors in shaping the nature of interactions between India and Southeast Asia. These interactions show how Indian culture, language, and institutions diffused throughout the region and helped creating a long-lasting civilizational connection between them. In contemporary terms, these long-standing legacies can be viewed as an early form of Indian soft power, whereby India exercised influence through exerting attraction, developing strong cultural ties and norms with the region rather than through coercion.

However, the interactions of Southeast Asia and India were largely disrupted through the colonial period, whereby the external power diminished both the traditional cultural and political ties between these two regions. This was exacerbated during the Cold War, where the world was divided between the United States (US), attempting to promote Capitalism and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), who was in favor of Socialist ideas, while the US was trying to curtail the spread of communism. These ideological divisions, as well as the different political alignments limited meaningful engagement. Furthermore, India's democratic non-aligned orientation was not conducive to the strategic orientation of a number of Southeast Asian states, thus limiting deeper political cooperation.

After the end of Cold war, interaction between India and the Indo-Pacific region grew substantially, especially through India's relationship with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India has worked to develop closer economic, political, and strategic relations in Southeast Asia through its initial Look East Policy of early 1990s, and the subsequent Act East Policy. Although India engages with ASEAN countries mostly through economic cooperation and security partnerships, less research has focused on the normative aspects of the India-ASEAN relationship (Acharya, 2017). India being a democratic nation, stands with a unique political identity among other Asian regional powers.

ASEAN was created in 1967 and became significant in creating a level of institutionalized regional cooperation in Southeast Asia against a backdrop of global and regional geopolitical developments that were complicated by Cold War pressures as well as the creation of nation states following colonialism. ASEAN was established by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand to support regional stability, economic growth and political dialogue between member states. At present there are 11 member countries- Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, Myanmar, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. Over its history, ASEAN has developed its own diplomatic style, known as “ASEAN Way,” which is characterized by principles of state sovereignty, non-interference, consensus building, and informal discussions.

ASEAN represents a unique geopolitical grouping whose member states have significant political differences. It has countries that have constitutional monarchies, communist regimes, democratic systems, and military governed systems (Weatherbee, 2010). Despite the differences, ASEAN is considered an area of political stability because of its emphasis on consensus, respect for sovereignty, and policy of non-interference (Haacke, 2003). On one hand, these norms have facilitated the cooperation among the member nations, on the other it has also limited the promotion of democracy and human rights in the region.

In his regard, democracy becomes important as a soft power. Democracy works as an attraction and normative influence rather than a power that will be imposed from the outside (Nye, 2004). The democratic characteristics of India such as democratic institutions, pluralistic society, and constitutional framework provides India with an international image of a legitimate and stable state. This enhances India's credibility to be a partner in regional cooperation and capacity-building initiatives through dialogue and institutional engagement.

The purpose of this study is to examine the aspect of democracy as soft power in Indian-ASEAN relations, within the framework of the Indo-Pacific. More specifically, it evaluates how democratic values contribute to India's regional diplomacy without being in conflict with ASEAN's principles of sovereignty and non-interference. The argument is made that democracy serves as a normative influence rather than an interventionist strategy, allowing India to enhance its cooperation with ASEAN through the provision of good governance initiatives, capacity-building within institutions, and political dialogue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The non-material sources of power have become more important in international relations. Researchers believe that power in today's world comes not only from military or economic strength but also from attractiveness and influence through values, culture and institutions (Nye, 2004).

The development of the soft power concept is a result of research conducted by Joseph S. Nye, who defined soft power as using attractions to change the preferences of others (Nye, 2004). In later work, soft power was connected with support for democratic norms, rule of law and respect

for human rights, which were viewed as sources of a country's ability to create positive image and gain prestige at the world stage (Nye, 2011).

Constructivist theory further develops this theme by highlighting the importance of norms and identities in determining how states' behaviour will shape. From a constructivist perspective, democracy acts as a normative resource for influencing international relations by shaping expectations of legitimate authority (Acharya, 2014). According to Haacke (2003), norms are diffused gradually in non-coercive ways through socialization, dialogue, and engagement with institutions.

The regional context of ASEAN is relevant for understanding the limits of democratic norm diffusion due to the reason that the "ASEAN Way" is based upon the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making (Weatherbee, 2010). These principles have supported a climate of stability but have also inhibited the establishment of democracy and human rights as binding regional standards (Acharya, 2014).

Because many ASEAN member states have differing political regimes, scholars have concluded that this diversity inhibits the formation of a shared democratic identity among ASEAN countries (Haacke, 2003). Governance issues between countries are generally handled through dialogue and confidence-building mechanisms rather than through enforcing compliance with norms (ASEAN, 2008).

India is frequently described by scholars as a normative actor that supports its interests through diplomacy shaped by its democratic institutions and pluralistic political culture (Ikenberry, 2011). However, the majority of research on the relationship between India and ASEAN tends to focus on issues of economics, connectivity, and strategic cooperation as outlined in India's Act East Policy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). The literature on the Indo-Pacific region highlights an increasing significance of governance norms such as openness, accountability and a rules-based order in regional discussions (Kurlantzick, 2007).

RESEARCH GAP

Although much research has been done on soft power, the majority of studies examine Western countries and how they can exert influence over the rest of the world, leaving the non-Western democratic nations under-researched (Nye, 2004; Ikenberry, 2011). Similarly, the literature about ASEAN focuses almost entirely on economic cooperation and security arrangements, rather than the normative relationships between democratic nations in the ASEAN community (Acharya, 2014; Weatherbee, 2010).

Studies on India-ASEAN relations have tended to study the material aspects of this relationship like trade, strategic balancing, and have generally ignored both the importance of democratic values for the purposes of diplomacy, as well as the way these countries exchange diplomatic relations in accordance to the democratic rules (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). In addition, the tension between promoting democratic norms and maintaining ASEAN's principle of non-intervention remains under-explored in the literature (Haacke, 2003; Acharya, 2014).

This research fills these gaps by exploring the importance of democracy as a non-coercive source of influence in India-ASEAN relations, with emphasis on the Indo-Pacific.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has following objectives:

1. To examine whether democracy can function as a non-coercive source of influence in India's engagement with ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region.
2. To analyze the role of democratic values as soft power in shaping India-ASEAN relations in a politically diverse regional environment.
3. To assess how India can promote democratic norms among ASEAN nations while respecting their principle of non-interference.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DEMOCRACY AND SOFT POWER

Soft power provides an essential theoretical perspective for explaining value and norm-related phenomena in global society. The realist tradition has typically focused on military and economic resources as the primary source of state power. However, with the conclusion of the Cold War and the increased global interdependence, there is a growing recognition amongst scholars that ideational and cultural factors play an important role in influencing state behavior. Soft power is defined as a state's ability to affect others through its attraction, rather than by coercive means or material incentive (Nye, 2004). In the realm of soft power, states utilize cultural elements, political values, and foreign policy behaviors that are seen as legitimate and credible (Nye, 2011).

Democracy is considered one of the defining political values of a state because of its normative appeal. It is based upon the principles of popular sovereignty, rule of law and constitutional government. State legitimacy, accountability and institutional stability are all closely associated with democratic governance, and thus each of these characteristics contributes positively to a state's credibility in the global community and to its ability to improve diplomatic standing (Ikenberry, 2011). In this sense, democracy can serve as a source of soft power to the extent that it contributes to the moral authority of a state and the state's acceptance of legitimate claims on the basis of international law.

However, democratic systems have to be operating effectively and consistently in order to exert influence. Factors like election competition, protection of civil rights, and institutional monitoring of one another establish a perception of transparency and reliability with regard to a state's operation. When these factors are combined with peaceful foreign policy, democracy enhances the state's capacity to influence through persuasion instead of force. Therefore, democracy can serve both as a symbolic and practical asset for diplomacy. Theoretical perspectives like constructivist and normative theories of international relations allow to analyze democracy as a soft power. Constructivist theory states that international politics are created through both material interests and shared ideas, identities, and norms (Acharya, 2014).



Democracy serves as a commonly accepted political norm which helps to establish expectations for states to consult, act transparently, and interact based on rules.

In the broader Indo-Pacific region, where there is a wide range of governance systems, democracy does not serve as a prescriptive model of governance but provides a framework for interaction between individual countries, institutional cooperation, and peaceful regional engagement. This conceptual approach offers a basis for examining how democratic value will act as a norm for influencing India-ASEAN relationship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative and analytical approach to analyze democracy as a form of soft power within the context of India-ASEAN relationship in the Indo Pacific. Secondary data sources such as scholarly literature, policy documents, official statements and institutional reports are used to conduct this analysis. In order to understand how democratic values work as a normative resource for regional diplomacy, a descriptive-analytical approach as well as document analysis method are employed. This paper looks at India - ASEAN interactions like capacity building initiatives, and developing support that helps measure how democracy functions as a soft power among nations by promoting bilateral agreements and regional collaboration. The conclusion focuses on some of the constraints associated with utilizing secondary data gathered from published references as opposed to conducting field-based research.

India's Democratic Identity as Soft Power

Democracy is one of the most defining characteristics of India's political and diplomatic profile. India is the world's largest democracy and has a form of government that features electoral participation and constitutional governance, within a socially and culturally diverse society. This experience has contributed to how India perceives itself and how it presents itself to other countries as being a pluralistic and representative political order. In the context of regional diplomacy, India's democratic identity serves as a significant source of soft power by providing India with legitimacy and normative appeal in the eyes of its partners (Nye, 2004; Ikenberry, 2011).

The Indian constitution established on the principles that form the basis of democracy, including popular sovereignty, rule of law, separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental rights. These principles help ensure that India's government is able to maintain political continuity despite the social diversity and economic obstacles to development. The regular elections, a free media, and an independent judiciary all contribute to the perception of a stable institutional environment. Resilience in the area of international relations provides India with increased credibility in the eyes of other countries and, therefore, adds to the confidence of other countries in dealing with India as a responsible and durable partner (Ikenberry, 2011). After gaining independence in 1947, India used its status of newly formed democracy to support the anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa. Subsequently, during the Cold War, India advocated for

democratic sovereignty rather than aligning with power blocs. Because of this continued existence of democracy, India is able to present itself as a country governed by law rather than a personal authority.

Furthermore, the coexistence of various cultural practices in India produces a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and religions, which exist cohesively under one constitutional framework. This multi-religious, multi-linguistic, and multi-ethnic constitution produces a political model of inclusion that contrasts with homogeneous or authoritarian systems. This demonstrates greater tolerance and accommodation compared to centralized, homogeneous political systems, thus making it particularly relevant for Southeast Asia which is also characterized by multicultural and multiethnic societies (Weatherbee, 2010). The ability to accommodate multiple forms of government through democratization increases India's normative attractiveness to ASEAN member states while strengthening its relationship with ASEAN.

Historically, India's foreign policy has centered on sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and non-alignment. This creates an image linked to political notions of restraint and discussion rather than intervention through the lens of political values and democratic principles (Acharya, 2014). Compared to western models of promoting democracy linked to intervention or conditionality, India's model emphasizes cooperation and mutual respect as the basis of its democracy. This practice of using democratic values and principles in Indian diplomatic relations serves for establishing relationships with other nations.

In contemporary times, India's democratic credentials have become more prominent in relation to both regional and global partners. As the Indo-Pacific region displays an increase in cooperative relations among member states, India has focused on suggesting to its partners shared beliefs in values such as institutional cooperation, rule-based order and openness for the region. The Act East Policy of India is working for strengthening partnerships like Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and upholding international laws like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)¹, ensuring safety and freedom of navigation. QUAD is an informal strategic partnership formed by the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, which supports a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific. These initiatives show that India's diplomatic narrative reinforces India as a normative actor rather than a coercive one (Kurlantzick, 2007).

India's democratic identity operates as a form of soft power through: first, providing legitimacy to the nation, second, projecting an image of a country that is both stable and pluralistic, and third, creating a normative basis for regional engagement. This type of influence occurs through example, dialogue, and institutional cooperation rather than coercion. It fits well with the political diversity and diplomatic standards that govern India-ASEAN relations.

ASEAN: Political Diversity and the Norm of Non-Interference

The countries of ASEAN have diverse political systems. There is presence of constitutional monarchies, single-party socialist regimes, countries with electoral democracies, and hybrid political arrangements influenced by military or bureaucratic authority (Weatherbee, 2010). For

instance, there is liberal democracy in Indonesia and Philippines, electoral or hybrid democracy in Malaysia and Singapore, hybrid constitutional monarchies in Thailand and Cambodia, One-party or communist states in Vietnam and Laos, and Authoritarian or military regimes in Myanmar and Brunei. This wide variety of political systems in ASEAN reflects the different historical paths each country has taken, including their colonial experiences, and building of their own nation. Even though the countries of ASEAN have many political differences, they have remained stable and unified as a region because they have shared traditions and values rather than a common political system (Acharya, 2014).

The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries is the foundation of ASEAN's regional identity. Non-interference developed early in the post-colonial period when newly independent nations wanted to protect their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime security (Acharya, 2014). It was developed to prevent foreign countries from interfering in Southeast Asian countries' internal affairs and to help manage the political differences among them. The cultural tradition of diplomatic practice with respect to non-interference developed in the ASEAN region over time, and slowly became a part of the "ASEAN Way" of conducting diplomacy (Haacke, 2003). The "ASEAN Way" refers to following the norms of consensus, informal communication, quiet diplomacy, and respect for domestic political arrangements.

Historically, ASEAN's principle of non-interference has facilitated cooperation among members with opposing political systems by mitigating violent ideological conflict. Rather than demanding that all its member nations adhere to a common political model, ASEAN has opted to focus its efforts on functional cooperation in areas like economic integration, security dialogue, and development cooperation (Weatherbee, 2010). This pragmatic viewpoint has allowed both authoritarian and democratic governments to participate in regional processes without facing political conditionality from fellow ASEAN members. Therefore, the cohesion within ASEAN has been preserved primarily by mutual commitments to sovereignty and regional stability rather than by mutual belief in political values (ASEAN, 2008).

The regional initiatives for promoting good governance and protecting human rights represent a gradual movement toward a generally accepted standard amongst nations in ASEAN under the existing principle of non-interference, as they are focused on dialogue, consultations, and capacity building instead of enforcement or sanctions. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) emphasizes on regional norms like good governance and rule of law. It is an inclusive, non-intrusive and development-oriented framework. Democracy is viewed as shared aspirations, rather than as a binding commitment.

The political diversity within ASEAN shapes the way in which external states interact with ASEAN states - they must respect the internal norms of ASEAN, and not impose political conditions. As a result, most countries promote democratic values through indirect or unobtrusive measures such as through technical assistance, institutional exchanges, and development.

Analytically, ASEAN's commitment to non-intervention and political diversity shape the scope for democracy as soft power. Democracy does not serve as a principle of action, rather its

influence acts indirectly through forms of governance, dialogue, and institutional learning on regional interaction (Kurlantzick, 2007). By doing so, ASEAN maintains its cohesion and provides a basis for its democratic partners to participate in gradual normative engagement with one another and collectively with ASEAN.

Indo-Pacific and Normative Diplomacy

The establishment of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region has changed how we perceived the regional order and cooperation. Unlike previous geographical or economic definitions, the Indo-Pacific now refers to bringing together the Indian and the Pacific Ocean as one strategic region. This new understanding reflects the greater interconnectivity between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean in terms of maritime trade, security concerns, and the political interactions between East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (Ikenberry, 2011). As the structure of the Indo-Pacific is evolving, the role of normative values is increasing alongside the material power and strategic competition (Acharya, 2014).

Normative diplomacy in practice, refers to the use of values, principles, and norms of political conduct as instruments of foreign policy. It establishes an acceptable conduct by focusing on rule-based cooperation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and multilateralism in dialogues (Nye, 2004). With the existence of a large number of political systems and competing governance models in the Indo-Pacific, normative diplomacy has become more important. The Indo-Pacific Region does not have an overarching ideology or worldview and has a plurality of values and priorities, therefore, achieving direct political alignment between countries in the Indo-Pacific will not be possible, and this lack of direct political alignment increases the need for shared norms as the basis for cooperation.

In addition to being a system of regional norms, the Indo-Pacific is also the ground for competition between major powers like United States and China, to establish competing governance models that are "legitimate" or authoritative. The U.S., while supporting the international rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, is frequently attempting to dominate through military alliances and create strategic pressure to address the increasing influence of China in the region. On the other hand, the People's Republic of China (PRC) expands its influence through infrastructure investments and economic pressures often termed as debt-trap diplomacy², in addition to assertive actions in the South China Sea, including island disputes of islands like Spratly and Paracels, and militarization of the sea, indicating a centralized, state-controlled model. In this environment of competition, the use of soft power and normative appeal to influence the diplomatic behaviour of states has never been more important than today (Kurlantzick, 2007). States today are using the political values of democracy and related institutional practices to enhance their credibility and attract other nations. As such, democracy serves as a symbolic resource in support of claims to legitimacy and leadership.

The Act East Policy of India and ASEAN Outlook On Indo-Pacific support a rules-based and inclusive order for the Indo-Pacific. Both are grounded in principles of rule of law, freedom of navigation and respect for sovereignty that promote democracy. They also share an inclusive

approach to relations with other countries through focusing on ASEAN centrality, openness, non-exclusion, and avoiding regional decisions making based on bloc politics.

In the Indo-Pacific region, democracy has become an important value for countries participating in discussions. However, it is not considered a single global political standard, but rather part of a larger narrative that encompasses openness, transparency, and a rules-based order (Ikenberry, 2011). Those values have typically been discussed in conjunction with maritime security, economic governance and institutional cooperation among the countries in that region. Democracy, therefore, strengthens the regional normative environment by creating expectations for accountability and predictability with respect to state behaviour rather than dictating how domestic political systems should be designed.

On the whole, the Indo-Pacific framework represents an opportunity for India to enhance its democratic identity within the wider regional narrative while communicating with a broad range of political systems. Thus, democracy serves as a source of soft power for India and extends its influence on the development of norms and expectations.

India-ASEAN Relations and Democratic Cooperation

India and ASEAN have transitioned from limited Cold War engagement to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The Look East Policy of 1990s which was based on limited economic engagement, evolved into a more strategic Act East Policy under the Modi government. It reflects India's strengthened interaction with Southeast Asia across political, economic, and strategic dimensions (Acharya, 2017). While India-ASEAN relations continue to rely upon trade, connectivity, and security, the political and normative dimensions are a growing priority for both sides (Ikenberry, 2011).

The democratic cooperation between India and ASEAN is expressed through existing institutional frameworks. There are political dialogue forums, such as Asian Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS), that provide opportunities for discussions on governance, regional stability, and rule-based order (ASEAN, 2020). The discussions between India and ASEAN are undertaken in an inclusive manner to acknowledge each other's differing political orientations, while also recognizing that India and ASEAN have a common value system which acknowledges the importance of participatory and consultative decision-making (ASEAN, 2008).

The building of institutional capacity has become a key component of the democratic cooperation between India and ASEAN. Through various training programmes for civil servants, diplomats, and parliamentarians of the respective states, India has provided professional assistance in areas such as civil service delivery, legislative processes, and general administrative practices. These efforts do not impose a particular form of government, but instead encourage the adoption of standards of accountability, transparency, and professional behavior in government.

Parliamentary exchange provides additional examples of this normative approach. The exchange of information and experience between members of parliament and parliamentary committees

allows exchange of ideas on lawmaking, representation, and engaging with constituencies. These exchanges strengthen representative institutions without infringing on the political situation of individual countries (Nye, 2004). The exchanges in parliamentary committees also create relationship between individuals, providing basis to exert a lasting influence (Nye, 2011).

Development cooperation provides another mechanism for promoting democracy. India has created partnerships with ASEAN member states to promote inclusive growth, digital governance, and public sector reforms. They promote accessibility to services provided by government, responsiveness to the needs and concerns of citizens, and offer opportunities for citizens to participate in their government (Ikenberry, 2011).

In its entirety, India–ASEAN relations operate through democratic cooperation via dialogue, institutional interchange, and development partnerships as opposed to ideological promotion. Democratic values can affect regional diplomacy using soft power by engaging with one another, and permitting democratic values to interact with ASEAN’s unique diplomatic culture.

CASE STUDIES AND ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

There is a need to examine the areas in which democratic principles are implemented as part of the institutional actions, in order to comprehend the ability of democracy to serve as a soft power. This will provide evidence of the operational process of normative impact through dialogue, capacity development, and functional collaboration.

1. Parliamentary and Legislative Exchanges

Parliamentary engagement is essential for democratic cooperation between India and ASEAN. The exchange of parliamentarians between India and the member countries of ASEAN offer opportunities for conducting dialogues regarding legislative processes, representation, and accountability. In these instances, institutional experiences related to the law-making process and oversight are shared. The Delhi Dialogue is a Track 1.5 mechanism that involves leaders and officials of India and ASEAN to discuss on strengthening of democratic institutions and shared political norms (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). The emphasis is on effectiveness of institutions and transparency of procedures, which is supportive of ASEAN's preference for non-interference (ASEAN, 2008). For example, the ASEAN Inter-parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) is an inter-parliamentary dialogue that works for cooperation among member parliaments to pass resolutions and promote regional integration (ASEAN, 2023).

2. Capacity-Building and Governance Training

Additionally, the cooperation through institutional capacity building in governance and public administration is an area of importance. India has been involved in assisting ASEAN countries with training programs for ASEAN officials within areas such as administrative reform, digital governance, and service to the public. These initiatives focus on strengthening the efficiency of bureaucracies and their legal frameworks and the delivery of public policies without being focused on political reform. The ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) was established to organize training

programmes, workshops, and dialogues on diplomacy while facilitating sharing in public policy, institutional governance and enhancing diplomats' understanding of regional dynamics and institutions (MEA, 2013). There is a focus on good governance and innovation in civil service management and development between ASEAN Cooperation and Civil Service Matters (ACCSM) and India's counterpart (ASEAN, 2026). This promotes accountability, transparency, and rule-based administration (Ikenberry, 2011). India is trying to incorporate democratic norms into the governance process without disrupting established domestic political structures.

3. Development Cooperation and Inclusive Governance

Development cooperation is another means through which democracy functions as a soft power. Through India's development cooperation with ASEAN in areas such as education, digital connectivity and institutional reform, governance considerations are incorporated in developmental initiatives. The Action Plan for India-ASEAN Cooperation (2026-30) has vision for capacity building and digital transformation of education through India scholarship programmes, short-term training courses, as well as the exchanges of teachers, lecturers and researchers in collaboration with ASEAN University Network (AUN) (ASEAN, 2026). Additionally, India increases its engagement with the ASEAN Smart Cities Network in order to promote urban innovation, sustainable urban planning, and good governance in smart cities. There are efforts to improve transparency in service delivery, responsiveness, increased access to information, which supports inclusive governance practices. The linkage of development and governance demonstrates that India believes that the two are mutually reinforcing.

4. Multilateral Dialogue Platforms

Another major context in which India promotes the norms of democracy through diplomatic relations is through Indian participation in forums organized by ASEAN like ARF and EAS. In these engagements, India promotes and encourages the principles of rule-based cooperation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and institutional means of dialogue and cooperation (ASEAN, 2020). These principles promote rules-based order, maritime security under international law as well as provide a neutral dialogue space that balances the major-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, they establish a common area in which political values can be discussed in the context of the regional order rather than in terms of national regimes.

5. Analytical Implications

Overall, these examples demonstrate that the use of democracy as a means of soft power in India-ASEAN relations occurs through the use of institutional partnerships and other cooperative models. Rather than as a political objective of achieving democracy, democratic norms and values are integrated into existing frameworks of dialogue and development cooperation through means such as governance training and the implementation of development assistance projects. As such, this manner in which democratic values and norms are used to influence diplomatic outcomes in countries also complies with the norms of ASEAN, particularly the principles of non-interference and the recognition of political diversity among member states (ASEAN, 2008).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

There are several structural and practical barriers to the successful use of democracy as soft power in India-ASEAN relations, these are diverse regional political systems, increased strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, along with the domestic developments in India itself. This limits the consistent use of democratic values as an instrument for fostering regional influence (Nye, 2004; Acharya, 2014).

Another major concern is ASEAN's strong adherence to its principle of non-interference. Although this norm has provided grounds for cooperation among diverse governance structures, it has restricted open explicit engagement on democracy and human rights. During the 2021 Myanmar military coup, ASEAN refrained from direct intervening in the situation, rather it focused only on dialogues and non-confrontational engagement. This also limited the external actors like India to actively advocate for restoration of democracy in the country. Therefore, direct advocacy may be interpreted as interference that will undermine trust and regional solidarity. Democratic values must operate in a very indirect way as opposed to a direct way, thus diminishing their visibility as a diplomatic resource (Haacke, 2003).

Political diversity in ASEAN also complicates normative engagement in the region. The variety of political systems represented in the region create differing opinions on many defining issues associated with governance structures, legitimacy, and accountability. For instance, the proposals on election reforms or human rights standards in regional forums often face resistance from authoritarian members, who considers these as external interference. As a result, the possibility of developing common political standards will be difficult, and democracy will not become a normative characteristic of the region but rather remain a contextual reference based upon prevailing domestic political conditions of individual member states (Acharya, 2017).

Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific impacts the ability of countries to exert soft power through democracy. Countries competing for global domination will promote their own form of governance. These competing forms of governance can create political conflict around the promotion of democratic values, thereby linking those values to regional geopolitical alignments. Given this context, countries may be more focused on gaining strategic independence and achieving economic gains as opposed to normative considerations (Nye, 2011).

India's own internal political developments affect how credible India is as a country that can use its commitment to democracy as a source of soft power. The use of norms to influence people depends on whether the values promoted by a country matches with that country's actual behavior (Nye, 2004). If there is ever any question about the existence or application of democratic institutions or civil liberties in India, the persuasive appeal of using democratic values will be weakened.

In summary, the international scene suggests that the use of democracy as a means of using soft power to influence the way ASEAN nations relate to India will continue to be limited and will develop slowly over time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Examining the relationship between India and ASEAN through a democracy-based framework highlights key insights about how political values affect regional diplomatic relations. While democracy is not an explicitly stated or institutionalized principle within ASEAN, it is still shaping the way nations engage with one another diplomatically, even if indirectly. In addition to being treated as an actual prescriptive political model, democracy emerges as a normative context in which states operate through a framework of dialogue, cooperation, and legitimacy (Acharya, 2014).

The principle conclusion from this analysis shows that democracy functions mostly as a source of attraction, rather than a tool for persuading others to act in accordance. India being a democracy, is viewed as a credible and dependable partner in multilateral settings where participants value consultation and interaction based on established rules. India's attractiveness as a democratic partner does not necessarily promote political alignment but rather facilitates building trust and establishing long-term cooperative relationships with other states. Thus, nations can rely on a "democratic" approach to their diplomatic relations with other countries. This will help in the development of a mutual diplomatic framework, but will not necessarily serve as a primary policy goal.

This analysis further demonstrates that the influence of democracy as a value is, to some degree, moderated by ASEAN's principle of "non-interference". This principle places limitations on the extent to which nations can express a desire to advance democracy through their diplomatic efforts. Consequently, democracy as a set of standards, is woven into the areas of cooperation related to governance, parliamentary exchanges and development partnerships.

Another finding suggests that there is a relationship between democracy and regional order in the Indo-Pacific region. The region's political heterogeneity and strategic rivalries necessitate a diplomatic strategy grounded in values and the aspiration to cultivate an inclusive and flexible regional framework (Ikenberry, 2011). Within this framework, democracy amplifies the efficacy of normative diplomacy by upholding principles like consultation, transparency, and adherence to established rules. This underscores the difference between democracy as a system of governance and democracy as a diplomatic instrument.

This analysis supports the idea that a country's ability to use soft power to promote democracy is closely linked to its credibility and consistency in its efforts (Nye, 2004). Specifically, India's ability to present itself as a supporter of democratic values depends on how well its internal political actions match its external diplomatic statements. The effectiveness of democratic principles in influencing others is closely tied to the inclusivity and stability of its domestic governance. Conversely, internal political challenges will diminish the extent to which democratic values can influence external outcomes.

In addition, the process of norm diffusion describes the gradual accumulation of social norms through repeated interaction, institutional exchanges, and cooperative initiatives. Parliamentary

dialogues and capacity-building initiatives are some of the examples of gradual development of shared understandings of governance and accountability among the states. This gradual shift from parliamentary institutions to shared understandings reflects ASEAN's preference for gradual evolutionary approaches, rather than immediate political transformation (Acharya, 2014).

The findings from this exploratory research show how democracy contributes to the soft power of India in its relations with ASEAN but does so through indirect and contextual forms of influence. The effects of democracy upon the use or availability of soft power are dependent on regional norms, institutional arrangements, and the credibility of domestic democratic practices. Democracy serves as a trusted and successful vehicle for building trust and reinforcing rules of consultation and rule-based interaction within the existing regime framework for regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific.

CONCLUSION

The research has looked into how democracy can act as a sort of soft power in the realm of India-ASEAN relations, utilizing the larger Indo-Pacific framework. Particularly, it has shown how democracy does not act as a mere imposition on the region through a political model, but rather it is a source of normative power influencing the patterns of cooperation, legitimacy and trust.

In a region characterized by political diversity and competing governance structures, democracy will be most effective through dialogues, institutional cooperation and partnerships.

India's democratic identity enhances India's position as a stable and predictable partner in Southeast Asia through the adoption of tools such as parliamentary exchanges with ASEAN countries, capacity building programs and development cooperation, which instill democratic values into the regional partnerships. This has allowed India to promote the use of democratic norms and principles by adhering to ASEAN's non-interference, thereby allowing it to operate through its "ASEAN Way". Therefore, democracy has been a foundation upon which Indian diplomacy is based and it provides context for the diplomatic engagement of India with countries in the ASEAN region.

This research also emphasizes the significance of the Indo-Pacific as both a strategic and normative area where values-based diplomacy and geopolitical competition co-exist. The idea of democracy informs a paradigm of open, consultative, and rules-based interactions in an environment where political values are being used as soft power through indirect or gradual actions to shape the conduct. This also reinforces the belief that political values in diplomacy can be of greatest value to support cooperative and stable relationships rather than creating divisions or opposition.

However, some of the limitations of using democracy as a soft power are regional norms, domestic legitimacy, and strategic context. For example, the commitment of ASEAN member states to sovereignty and consensus limits their ability to directly engage on issues of democracy politically. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific could negate or politicize values and lessen their appeal. Taken together, these findings suggest that democracy must function in conjunction

with the economic-strategic-institutional aspects of a nation's foreign policy in order to contribute to the establishment of a regional order.

In summary, democracy functions as soft power in the context of India's relations with ASEAN based upon dialogue and institutional engagement. Rather than seeking to create uniform political systems, democracy continues to reinforce the basic principles of consultations, accountability and peaceful cooperation. By incorporating democratic values into the normative framework of ASEAN, India illustrates how political norms can be incorporated into regional diplomacy without undermining sovereignty and diversity. Thus, this study provides an understanding of the normative aspects of the Indo-Pacific while demonstrating the potential use of democracy as an indirect but influential diplomatic tool in contemporary regional relations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of using democracy as a form of soft power through the lens of the Indo-Pacific framework and India's relationship with ASEAN, following policy recommendations are suggested. These include approaches to improve the normative diplomacy while respecting local cultures and sovereignty.

1. India should work on developing stronger institutional cooperation with ASEAN within the areas of governance like public administration, digital governance, and legislative practices, in order to establish technical and developmental exchanges that will ultimately lead to increased efficiency and transparency of ASEAN member governments through the application of democratic norms within functional aspects of cooperation, but in accordance with ASEAN's commitment to the principle of non-interference.
2. India should increase the number of annual exchanges of representatives from each of the ASEAN member state parliaments as well as individuals from each of the ASEAN countries. Continued regular dialogue between legislators, civil society, and academia will lead to long-term normative change and mutual benefit and learning through the reinforcement of norms of consultation and representation.
3. India should incorporate democratic values within its development cooperation framework with ASEAN. Projects that support education, digital connectivity, and delivery of public services need to promote inclusiveness and accessibility of citizens. In doing so, India can promote democratic practices indirectly and at the same time support the development priorities of ASEAN.
4. India should continue to evolve democracy based on the higher-level discourse of a rules-based order and multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, democracy should not be viewed as an ideological benchmark but as an additional supporting norm for resolving disputes in a peaceful manner by promoting transparency and cooperation.
5. India should increase collaboration with the ASEAN-led Institutions and regional forums in the promotion of norms of consultation and legal process. Rather than through bilateral



diplomatic pressure, India's normative engagement should be aligned to ASEAN's diplomatic practice of achieving consensus through cooperation.

6. India should also ensure that it has an internal democratic process, which is consistent with the external democratic advocacy. The effectiveness of democracy as a form of soft power is based on the degree of consistency between India's domestic government and its external advocacy for democracy.

In conclusion, India ought to take a long-term, incremental approach toward normative engagement with ASEAN and pursue democracy as a source of soft power through sustained diplomacy, supported by education, training, and institutional cooperation. Through this approach, the ASEAN's emphasis on consensus will be recognized, and at the same time, the use of democratic values will be given more effectiveness and legitimacy.

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Footnotes

¹United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was adopted by the United Nations in 1982 to create a complete legal framework for all the rules of law governing maritime rights, territorial waters, exclusive economic zones and peacefully resolving disagreements or disputes regarding activities that take place at sea or within the ocean.

²Debt-trap diplomacy is a type of tactic used by one country that lends excessive loans to another country, and the latter becomes dependent on the former for support. When the borrowing nation is unable to pay back its loans, the lender may use those loans as leverage and receive political or strategic favours from the borrower.