

## Vishal Bharat and Global Dialogues: Civilizational Statecraft in Contemporary South Asia

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### Abstract:

Vishal Bharat is an idea which constitutes India as a civilizational space of common history, culture, and traditions of dialogue in South Asia. It is not specific to political boundaries but is indicative of historical and traditional cultural ties. This concept assists us in the present world where we are experiencing nuclear tensions, regional conflicts, and climate change, and the changing global power structures and this is the role of India in the regional and global discourse. The paper is concerned with the strategic involvement of India into the South Asian affairs since 1998, particularly with regard to Pakistan. In 1998, the security environment of the region was altered given that both of the countries had been declared nuclear powers as a result of their nuclear tests. Nevertheless, in spite of the confrontations and the tensions, some mechanisms like credible minimum deterrence, the No First Use policy, and the ability of the Indus Waters Treaty to operate depict that rivalry and dialogue co-exist. These illustrations indicate that India is attempting to strike a balance between national security and responsibility and restraint. The paper also elaborates how South Asia is related to the greater world discussions of nuclear stability, climate change and peace-building. The strategy of India is one of the attempts to be a responsible power but remain autonomous strategically. Thus, the situation with India-Pakistan relations after 1998 may be regarded not merely as the story of the conflict, but also a part of the global dialogue influenced by the history and security issues, as well as civilizational values.

**Keywords:** Civilizational State; Indus Waters Treaty; No First Use Policy; Regional Diplomacy; Vishal Bharat.

### Introduction

South Asia is said to be one of the most unstable areas in the globe that has been influenced by unresolved historical conflicts, nuclear competition, and other crises. However, in the context of such tensions, there is also a common civilizational heritage that the modern nation-states are not the predecessors of. This

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continuity goes deeper as the concept of Vishal Bharat attracts attention. It is not territorial but acknowledgement of the cultural, intellectual and historical networks that united the region even before the colonial boundaries were drawn.

A turning point in the South Asia security environment was in 1998 after the transformation of the environment. The nuclear tests conducted by India in Pokhran- II and the consequent tests conducted by Pakistan in Chagai brought the element of overt nuclear deterrence in the region. Ever since, the relationships between India and Pakistan have been characterized by paradox: despite crises, no war has yet been waged; despite hostility, the dialogue mechanism has not yet been eliminated. According to this article this approach to strategic behaviour by India in the post-1998 period is indicative of a larger civilizational statecraft. India tries to balance between deterrence and restraint, autonomy and responsibility and rivalry and dialogue. This can be seen beyond just the policy of security, but also in the way India has participated in issues of global concern like climate change, multilateral relations.

### **Objectives**

1. To explain the concept of Vishal Bharat as a civilizational space beyond political boundaries.
2. To analyse changes in South Asian security after the 1998 nuclear tests.
3. To examine the coexistence of conflict and dialogue in India–Pakistan relations.
4. To connect South Asia with broader global debates on nuclear stability, climate change, and peace-building.

### **Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources such as books, research articles, and policy documents. It uses a historical and case-study method to examine post-1998 India–Pakistan relations, nuclear doctrines, and the Indus Waters Treaty. The paper combines civilizational theory with strategic analysis to understand India’s contemporary statecraft in South Asia.

### **Conceptualizing Vishal Bharat: Civilizational Continuity Beyond Borders**

The concept of Vishal Bharat attracts attention to the historical connectedness of South Asia. The region has been connected by trade routes, religious movements, intellectual interactions and cultural interactions



for centuries. Buddhism was exported to Sri Lanka and Central Asia by the Gangetic plains. Sufi networks bridged communities in modern day India and Pakistan. The sea trade connected the western India to the Arabia and Southeast Asia. These networks demonstrate that, pre-modern South Asia was a tied civilizational ecosystem.

The territorial sovereignty was brought on board by modern political divisions, which were created by colonial domination and Partition in 1947. Nevertheless, the interdependences between cultures and ecologies continued. Boundaries are crossed by rivers; languages and traditions are mixed; common memories are used in politics. Vishal Bharat thus is a civilizational awareness which does not ignore historical richness and does not violate modern-day sovereignty. This paradigm is particularly applicable to the regional diplomacy. It promotes a discussion that is based on the past but not solely on geopolitical confrontation. It stresses on co-existence, multiple identities, and shared responsibility.

### **The 1998 Nuclearization of South Asia.**

The May 1998 nuclear tests by India were a watershed event in the security in South Asia. The move to announce nuclear capability was informed by the strategic issues, such as the regional security relations and the global power relationships. The next tests of Pakistan created a nuclear triad, introducing the official mutual deterrence. The process of nuclearization changed the strategic calculus of the region. The conventional war has become dangerous with the possibility of nuclear escalation. A new significance was gained by crisis management. The region was entering the period of deterrence stability and low-intensity tensions, which persisted.

The nuclear policy adopted by India focused on credible minimum deterrence and No First Use. Credible minimal deterrence suggests that one must have enough strength to prevent aggression without involve overbuilding of armaments. The No First Use pledge stresses on defence orientation and is an indication that nuclear weapons are meant to be used only as a deterrence. This theoretical framework shows how India tries to reconcile between the need of strategy and moral restraint. It tries to prevent arms races and at the same time maintain security. The more accommodative posture of Pakistan, such as that it is first used, is asymmetric, but deterrence logic works in both directions. The phenomenon of nuclearization, therefore, produced a paradox, which increased the stakes of confrontation and at the same time limited escalation. Since there is no example of full-scale war after 1998, it can be concluded that deterrence has created a sense of structural awareness in the bilateral relations.

### **Competition and Discourse: The Paradox of Co-existence.**

The new period after 1998 indicates that there is a case of restrained competition. The Kargil war of 1999 has shown that limited war may take place under the nuclear conditions. But there was containment of escalation. The diplomatic interaction has restarted with the Lahore Declaration and further negotiations. On the same note, tension would lead to a high level of 2001 after the Parliament attack and 2008 with the Mumbai attacks. But no all-out war was fought. There was no escalation into a long-term conflict even the Pulwama-Balakot incident in the year 2019, which involved aerial strikes.

This trend signifies that deterrence has brought prudence to the strategical calculations. Meanwhile, the mechanisms of dialogue persistence can be observed through backchannel diplomacy, ceasefire settlements across the Line of Control, and periodic confidence-building steps. The presence of competition and negotiation is a paradox in the structure. Nuclear weapons increase the stakes but they are also deterrent to total war. Civilizational statecraft works under this paradox by promoting restraint and maintaining deterrence.

### **The Indus Waters Treaty.**

One of the best cases of institutional durability in international relations is the Indus Waters Treaty (1960). The treaty signed under the mediation of the World Bank divided the waters of the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) between India, and the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) between Pakistan, but allowed some Indian usage under certain conditions. The thing about the treaty that makes it very interesting is not its technicality but its strength. It has endured three wars (1965, 1971, 1999), many diplomatic disintegrations and nuclearization in 1998, as well as frequent political crisis. Regular dialogue has been institutionalized in the treaty by the establishment of a permanent dialogue committee known as the Permanent Indus Commission which requires frequent meetings and exchange of data. These technical interactions have persisted even in times when the hostility was high. This continuum is a sign of acknowledgement of the fact on both sides that water security is not based on political hostility. The rivers fail to acknowledge sovereignty the same way that armies or borders do; they ecologically unify territories.

The treaty gains a new relevance in the context of the modern climate change. Through global warming, the Himalayan glaciers that supply the Indus basin are melting. Unpredictability in flow of rivers is caused by variability in monsoon patterns. Pressures of demand are augmented by population growth and agricultural dependency. In this case, unilateral moves might cause serious ecological and human effects.

In this way, collaboration is not a goodwill action but a need to coexist. Civilizational, historical settlement patterns and trade routes, as well as cultural exchange were historically influenced by shared river systems within South Asia. One of the oldest urban civilizations of the world took its roots in the Indus basin. In this respect, the water interdependence precedes the modern nation-states. The treaty transfers this interdependence to a contemporary legal system. The fact that it has lasted implies that functional cooperation will be able to endure ideological clash in case environmental survival is in question.

But the treaty has its own difficulties as well. Arbitration and the use of neutral experts have been necessitated by the controversies surrounding hydropower development projects like the ones with Kishanganga and Ratle. Occasionally political rhetoric is at risk of suspension. However, the very fact that the disputes are addressed in the context of the institutionalized processes instead of the military conflict highlights the stabilizing role of the treaty. It presents an example of how the convergence of civilizational memory, ecological interdependence, and pragmatic diplomacy are intersected in the process of developing regional stability.

### **India and Nuclear Discourse in the World.**

The strategic identity and global legitimacy of India have been the two imperatives that have determined its nuclear identity since 1998. Although India is not a signatory of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it has tried to be a part of global export control regimes including Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and Wassenaar Arrangement. The agreement on civil nuclear cooperation of 2008 was a milestone in the realization of the responsible nuclear behavior in India. The No First Use (NFU) policy of India is the focus of normative positioning of the country. India has differentiated its doctrine with less malleable or vague postures by making a commitment not to launch nuclear use. Despite the fact that sometimes there are discussions about the revisions of doctrines, the NFU commitment strengthens the Indian credentials as a restrained nuclear actor.

Meanwhile, India focuses on plausible minimum deterrence, as opposed to the arms race. The principle of minimum is active, and it changes along with technological and geopolitical developments but the mentioned goal is adequacy and not excellence. This is indicative of the attempt to balance deterrence and restraint. India is also active in the international discussions of disarmament and non-proliferation. It promotes non-discriminatory and universal disarmament, which focuses on asymmetries within current regimes. In this respect, India is interested in reform as opposed to rejection of international governance structures. Civilizational perspective of Indian nuclear behaviour tries to balance between reality and



morality. Deterrence recognizes the anarchic character of international politics; restraint is moral awareness based on historical experience. The combination of these factors enables India to be seen as a power in the region, as well as a competent international player.

### **Climate Change and Regional Responsibility.**

The shift in global security discourse in the twenty first century has not just been limited to the military threats but has spanned to the environmental and developmental issues. South Asia is among the most climate-exposure places in the world and is susceptible to systemic risks of climate change. The increase in sea level puts the populations in the coastal areas at risk, unpredictable monsoons interfere with agriculture and glacial melt interferes with long term water supply. The climate diplomacy of India is an expression of the compromise between environmental responsibility and development. India is a developing country whose energy requirements are high and it demands climate justice and the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). It is the principle that acknowledges the historical disparity in emissions and proposes equal sharing of the burden.

In the domestic scene, India has increased the production of renewable energy especially solar and wind power. Leaderships on climate governance can be seen in projects like the International Solar Alliance. India does not see climate action as a kind of environmental protection, but as an economic opportunity, and connects clean energy with job creation and technological development.

Climate cooperation is underdeveloped in the region though. South Asia does not have strong multilateral environmental coordination systems. There is a common ground in the form of flooding in the Indus and Ganges basins which shows the need to have such collaborative structures. Unless climate stress is dealt with in a collaborative manner, it may heighten political tensions. In this respect, the civic statecraft entails the ecological interdependence being perceived as a common fate. The environmental issues facing South Asia are beyond national boundaries and ideologies. A regional climate compact would serve as a confidence-building process, which would combine sustainability with peace-building.

### **Strategic Autonomy of India in a Multipolar World.**

The international system is being transformed to multipolarity. The comparative decrease in unipolar dominance, emergence of China and changing economic centres of power redefine geopolitical alignments. The foreign policy of India takes this situation through the multi-alignment and not an entanglement in alliance. Strategic autonomy is still central. In the Indo-Pacific security structures, India is open to the



United States, through the defence procurement processes, they collaborate with Russia, and they are in the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and they also have European partners. Such diversified involvement is the highest possible flexibility.

In South Asia, the balance between deterring security threats and outreach in India is maintained through strategic positioning, like regional development partnerships. Multi-alignment increases the bargaining position of India in terms of the regional crisis management since the world is aware of the stabilizing role played by India.

Civilizational statecraft promotes strategic independence by securing foreign policy on historical foundations, not on short-term alliances. It allows India to present itself as an independent pole of influence as opposed to a sub-unit that belongs to some bloc. Nonetheless, autonomy has to maneuver through tricky realities. It takes measured diplomacy to deal with competition with China and avoiding the worsening of relations with Pakistan. Interdependence at the economic level, supply chain changes, and competition on technologies are some of the additional complexities.

### **Difficulties and Future Perspectives**

The region is weak despite the structural deterrence and institutional resilience. There are still lack of trust between India and Pakistan. Homegrown political polarization may fuel intercontinental tensions. Unpredictability is brought in by non-state actors. There are also changes in technology such as cyber warfare and hypersonic, which make developments in the deterrence dynamics tricky. Underestimation during crisis cases is still a threat. The problem of climate stress and water shortage may increase instability in case the institutional structures become weak.

To achieve stability in future, it is necessary to consolidate the crisis communication systems, increase the scope of confidence-building efforts, and incorporate ecological cooperation into the diplomatic plans. Formal negotiations can be supplemented with track-two conversations and cultural interactions. The civilization statecraft proposes that there is a need to acknowledge similar vulnerabilities and substantiate sovereign interests to achieve long-term stability. Competition might exist, but it is necessary to coexist. The examples of the institutions like the Indus Waters Treaty show that even the opponents can join forces in a case when there is a shared survival at risk.



## **Conclusion**

The era since 1998 in South Asia has been characterized by a paradox that has still provided the framework which determines the stability in the region. Nuclearization was surely an escalation of the dangers of the India-Pakistan rivalry which brought the image of tragic escalation into the bilateral animosity. However, it was also true that at the same time, it introduced structural restraints that have counteracted the development of full-scale war. The availability of nuclear weapons was seen to change both sides' strategic calculations which made them to be cautious even in situations when faced with great crises. The Kargil, 200102 military standoffs, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and even the Pulwama Balakot confrontation have shown that at least there has not been any crossing of the escalation thresholds even though confrontation continues. In this regard, nuclear deterrence has brought about instability on the low levels of conflict and stability on the high levels of the war.

Credible minimum deterrence as expressed by India and declaration of the No First Use policy is an attempt to integrate restraint in deterrence. India has made its nuclear power defensive and limited instead of attempting to seek solutions in the arms race and coercive postures. This school of thought indicates a greater promise of the finding of the balance of strategic necessity and ethical responsibility. It is a pointer that even in the extreme geopolitics of the region, security cannot be dissociated with normative considerations. Although this matter of flexibility of doctrines has been argued every now and then, the overall stance is based on the fact that India attempts to strike a balance between power and restraint.

It is also significant that such institutional constructions like the Indus Waters Treaty stand the test. Through wars, diplomatic failures, as well as through nuclear competitions, the treaty has remained operational. This is confirmed with its strength in that even when the two parties are engaged in a battle, cooperation will still be possible since both will value the other as vulnerable. Shared ecological systems like transboundary rivers compel contact across the political enmity. It is in the age of climatic change that such institutional continuity is ever more significant. The water stress, the melting of glaciers and demographic pressures increase the necessity to engage in dialogue which is premised on ecological interdependence. The treaty is so indicative of a pragmatic consciousness that certain spheres of cooperation must transcend the competition on the strategic level.

Vishal Bharat conceptual view can be applied to India Pakistan relations to have a better comprehension of it since it is statutory and broad in concept. It puts current tensions within a more extended civilizational tradition characterized by the existence of mutual histories and cultural affiliations, and ecological



interdependency. This is not an idealistic view of the past nor does this model denounce the reality of war. Rather, it defines competition as a civilizational arena, where coexistence has always been considered as significant as struggle. It encourages the understanding of bilateral relations that is not merely episodic crises but a component of a long-term regional conversation that is anchored on the frameworks of the world.

Since 1998, the regional behaviour of India has been an effort to balance sovereignty and responsibility, deterrence and dialogue as well as regional security and international relations. Its foreign policy is still largely based on strategic autonomy but joined in multilateral institutions and world governance structures. The nuclear restraint, climatic diplomacy and payment of water sharing mechanisms by India all create an appearance of a state in search of legitimacy as well as power. That is the combination of realism and normative aspiration, which is what could be termed civilizational statecraft.

Meanwhile, there are still serious difficulties. The lack of trust, political pressures domestically, non-state actors, and technological threats of the new nature are still threatening the stability. Another uncertainty brought by climate change is that it may increase competition over resources. The effectiveness of deterrence and dialogue will rest on the institutional resiliency, crisis communication structures, and awareness of mutual vulnerability. The concept of civilizational consciousness does not solve the geopolitical conflicts but it can offer a normative basis to co-existence.

In conclusion, the Indian-Pakistan relations post-1998 are never going to be limited to a story of aggression. They symbolize an intricate mixture of deterrence, discourse, institutional endurance, ecological interdependencies and strategic computation. The stability of the regions will depend on the ability of balancing power with restraint in an ever-changing international system, which is characterized by multipolarity and transnational issues. The South Asian experience of 1998 indicates that, even with the spectre of the nuclear weapons, dialogue may continue, institutes may survive and competition may co-exist with wary collaboration. It is in this subtle balancing that the larger meaning of Vishal Bharat as a civilizational model of comprehending power, responsibility and co-existence attains long-term validity.

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