

ISAS Working Paper

No. 73 – Date: 13 July 2009

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The Making of Indian Foreign Policy: The Role of Scholarship and Public Opinion¹

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to explore the relationship between international relations scholarship, Indian public opinion and foreign policy making in India. The paper assumes that all large nations, democratic or otherwise, need solid domestic political support for the effective pursuit of interests abroad. The internal support for the conduct of external relations rests on the existence of an ‘establishment’ that sets the broad terms for the ‘mainstream’ discourse on foreign policy; facilitates continuous and productive interaction between the bureaucracies making the foreign policy, the academia that expands and reproduces knowledge and expertise on the subject, the media, and the political classes; rationalises external policies as well as promotes alternatives to them; and defines and redefines national political consensus on foreign policy amidst changing circumstances and unexpected opportunities. The need for such an establishment is far more critical in large democracies, where the governments must continuously cope with volatile public perceptions and the imperatives of popular legitimation.

In the older democracies the mechanisms for forging ‘elite consensus’ on foreign policy and the role of the mass media have come in for some trenchant criticism.³ It is not our purpose to join that debate on the alleged manipulative nature of elite consensus within a democracy. This paper merely assumes that elite consensus is critical for the conduct of state business in democracies and informal mechanisms do exist in most of them to shape and reshape national consensus on a range of issues, including foreign policy. The paper also believes that reformulating domestic consensus is especially important in periods of structural change at home or in the international system. There are some studies that help understand changing

¹ This is a revised version of the paper prepared for the workshop on “Upgrading International Studies in India” sponsored by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), Singapore, and the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, and held at the LKYSPP on 25 and 26 March 2009. The revised paper has been prepared for the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore.

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³ See, for example, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

domestic consensus on foreign policy in the United States.⁴ Given the absence of similar studies in India, this paper relies, to a large extent, on the author's own last three decades of experience navigating between think tanks, the media and the academia that focused on studies of foreign policy, national security and international relations. The paper concludes that it is difficult to discern the existence of such a 'permanent establishment' in India shaping the nation's foreign policy. What may exist instead is an informal network that is led by a small but shifting group of activists within and outside the government. In the following sections, the paper lays out the reasons for the absence of a significant permanent establishment and the prospects for one emerging in the near future, especially in the context of India's increasing weight in the international system and its emerging self-perception as a great power.

The Elusive Domestic Foreign Policy Consensus

The very existence of a credible foreign policy establishment presupposes a degree of agreement within the elite on the core objectives of external engagement and a grand strategy to achieve them. I would argue that there never was such a consensus in modern India on the ends and means of its foreign policy. I would suggest that this is one of the principal reasons for the absence of a permanent establishment that can mediate between decision makers, experts and the public at large. To be sure, there is the widespread belief within India and those outside who study its external relations that there was once a golden age of 'Nehruvian consensus' on foreign policy.⁵ That assertion might say something about the contemporary political contestations but reveals little about India's foreign policy history. As a charismatic and domineering political figure, Jawaharlal Nehru did have his way on defining the foreign policy of India in the early years of the Republic. That does not in any way imply there was a national consensus. During 1959-62, Nehru found himself utterly isolated when matters turned difficult with China, large sections of his own party and public opinion turned hostile, and bureaucratic structures came under stress.⁶

A dispassionate look at India's foreign policy record might suggest that there was no national consensus either before or after independence. Throughout the 20th century, the Indian political elite was at odds with itself on characterising the nature of external environment, setting a list of priorities, understanding the shifting dynamic among the great powers, defining a hierarchy of external threats, and identifying friends and enemies. The differences on how to address the grievances of the Muslims in the subcontinent and their relationship with the larger Islamic community have always been profound and continue to hobble India. Some writers have argued that the worldview of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were fundamentally divergent.⁷ In the pre-independence period, there were a range of issues that deeply divided the national movement. These included the preferred

⁴ Lawrence H. Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations & United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

⁵ The term 'Nehruvian consensus' is almost axiomatic in the literature on Indian foreign policy and is rarely contested. Part of the problem is that there are quite a number of political scientists writing on India's foreign policy, but few historians have devoted time to this subject. The unwillingness of the Indian government to release any documentation in turn makes it difficult for historians to access and assess the conduct of India's external relations.

⁶ For an analysis of India's management of the conflict with China from the perspective of bureaucratic and organisational politics, see Yaacov Vertzberger, "Bureaucratic Organisational Politics and Information Processing in a Developing State", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1, March 1984, pp. 69-95.

⁷ S. M. Burke, *Mainsprings of Indian and Pakistani Foreign Policies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).

Indian attitudes to the developments in the Middle East at the turn of the 20th century and the wisdom of the *Khilafat* movement.⁸ The massive expansion of the Indian armed forces to serve the British in the two world wars generated profound divisions within the Indian national movement about the appropriateness of their use abroad. So did the creation of the Indian National Army by Subhas Chandra Bose and his alignment with Japanese fascism in the Second World War.⁹ There were a range of other issues that were controversial, including the broader question of India's attitude to great power relations.¹⁰ These are just a few illustrative differences. The absence of a consensus within the national movement on these issues had a huge impact on the nature of the post-Partition territorial arrangements, the dynamics of war and peace in the subcontinent, and India's relationship with the Great Powers.¹¹

In the post-independence period, many of India's diplomatic initiatives and ideas that were later seen as representing the very essence of India's foreign policy did not come through a pre-existing national consensus. They were products of the existence of a strong leader like Nehru and his very definitive world view. In the 1950s the Indian communists, who later became a great champion of 'Nehruvian' consensus, rejected the principle of 'non-alignment' as 'immoral' neutrality between 'good' and 'evil'.¹² For them, Nehru was a 'running dog' of imperialists. It would take them three full decades before recognising the 'anti-imperialist' content of India's non-alignment. The conservatives in the Congress Party, many socialists, and the Hindu nationalists, on the other hand, saw non-alignment as part of Nehru's appeasement of international communism.¹³

Nehru's decisions to take the Kashmir question to the United Nations Security Council, join the British Commonwealth, reticence on the Soviet intervention in Hungary, and the emphasis on nuclear arms control rather than decolonisation at the first summit of the non-aligned movement were among the many controversies that led to deep national divisions on foreign policy during the Nehru years. Nothing, however, reveals the sharpness of those divisions and exposes the current myth that Nehru's policy was more 'anti-imperialist' than the controversies over his policy towards China. The vigorous national contestations of Nehru's positions on the two core territorial issues of independent India – the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan and the boundary dispute with China – makes one wonder what the 'Nehruvian consensus' was all about. My objective here is not to go into the merits or demerits of Nehru's world view or his stewardship of India's foreign policy. It is to simply note the profound differences within India in the early years of its interaction with the world and its management of relations with its neighbours.

⁸ M. Naeem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement 1918-24* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁹ Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also Stephen P. Cohen, "Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter 1963-64, pp. 411-29.

¹⁰ For a look at the pre-independence debates on foreign policy see the classic work of Bimal Prasad, *The Origins of Indian Foreign Policy* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1962); see also T. A. Keenlyside, "Prelude to Power: The Meaning of Non-Alignment Before Independence", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3, Autumn 1980, pp. 461-83.

¹¹ For a recent analysis of some of these issues, see Peter John Brobst, *Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's independence and the Defense of Asia* (Akron: University of Ohio Press, 2005)

¹² T. A. Nizami, *The Communist Party and India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1971).

¹³ For a broad discussion, see A. Appadorai, *The Domestic Roots of India's Foreign Policy, 1947-72* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Nehru's successors too had to constantly innovate on the diplomatic front and risk domestic opposition; they did not have the luxury of a pre-existing national consensus on foreign policy to guide them at any of their many critical moments. Indira Gandhi's reluctance to criticise Moscow for snuffing out the Prague Spring in 1968 resulted in the resignation of a cabinet minister, Ashok Mehta. Her decision to sign a security treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971 was derided by many centrist scholars in India as a departure from a 'strict' interpretation of non-alignment.¹⁴ The treaty was not the product of public discourse, scholarly input, and rigorous political scrutiny. It was a foreign policy coup, a brilliant one at that, presented to the nation as a *fait accompli* at a crucial moment in the effort to liberate East Pakistan. Until as late as the 1977 general elections, the Janata Party, which brought together the entire opposition to Indira Gandhi, was suspicious of the 'secret provisions' in the Indo-Soviet treaty and promised to restore what it called 'genuine non-alignment'.¹⁵

Mrs Gandhi's decision to test a nuclear device in 1974, Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's outreach to Israel during 1977, his visit to China in 1978, Rajiv Gandhi's reversal of India's positions on the border dispute with China (1988), Inder Kumar Gujral's good neighbourly policy (1996-98), Prime Minister Vajpayee's nuclear tests in 1998, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's civil nuclear initiative with the United States in 2005 were all foreign policy issues that deeply divided the political classes in India. None of those decisions emerged out of debates within the foreign policy community or stayed within the boundaries of a presumed mainstream national discourse on foreign policy. In most of these cases, broad based support for these decisions emerged only over an extended period of time. As argued by K. Subrahmanyam, "Indian foreign policy was always a leadership function and more often than not did not command a consensus. Non-alignment as a strategy (to be distinguished from non-alignment as an ideology with which Nehru had hardly anything to do), development of close relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, nuclear tests, strategic weapons programme, economic liberalisation and globalisation and the strategy of the balance of power were all initiatives of leaders – Nehru, Indira, Rajiv, Narasimha Rao, Vajpayee and now Dr Singh. Such initiatives, when they prove successful, become established national policies."¹⁶

The International Relations Community's Conformist Trap

The absence of an enduring domestic consensus on independent India's foreign policy was not surprising given the extraordinary diversity of the nation and the multiple intellectual strands that went into the making of its national movement. India's consciousness of international affairs and the relevance for its own independence began to grow rapidly after the First World War. But the breadth and depth of the interest, however, would remain limited. Only a few among the leaders of the national movement took consistent interest in international affairs and reflected on how India should react or take advantage of them. This trend line inevitably extended itself into the post-independence period, when Nehru had virtually a free hand in shaping new India's foreign policy. During the early years of independence, there were enough towering personalities with strong views within and outside

¹⁴ For a review of the debate, see M. S. Rajan, "The Indo-Soviet Treaty and India's Non-Alignment Policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 2, August 1972, pp. 204-15.

¹⁵ For a perspective of the mainstream political parties opposing Indira Gandhi on the Indo-Soviet treaty, see Ajit Prasad Jain, *Shadow of the Bear: The Indo-Soviet Treaty* (New Delhi: P. K. Deo, 1971).

¹⁶ K. Subrahmanyam, "Forget the Consensus", *Times of India* (New Delhi), November 29, 2007; available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Forget_About_Consensus/articleshow/2579487.cms accessed on 6 March 2009.

the government who would question and criticise Nehru's approach to the world. It was inevitable though that debates on foreign policy would eventually conform to the broader political fault lines within the nation. As communists, socialists, conservatives, and a variety of regional formations unveiled their own separate attacks on Nehru's foreign policy, the discourse resonated among their supporters and sympathisers among the intellectual classes, the media and the academia. These criticisms were not always consequential in political terms, given the Congress party's dominance of the political system. They nevertheless provided an intellectual atmosphere in the 1950s that was open and vibrant.

The 1950s saw the attempt to structure a loose but foreign policy establishment that sought to bring together public intellectuals, bureaucrats, professionals, businessmen, scholars and journalists under the rubric of the Indian Council of World Affairs in New Delhi. Nehru took an active interest in promoting what we might now call a civil society initiative. The Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA) was soon complemented by the establishment of a School of International Studies across the road. The school that was eventually merged into the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi would become the main source of international scholarship over the next few decades.¹⁷ In the mid-1960s, the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), designed as an autonomous institution funded by the Ministry of Defence was co-located with the ICWA and the School of International Studies.¹⁸ New Delhi's India International Centre and its 'Saturday Club' provided a forum for the movers and shakers of the 'system' to thrash out a range of issues, including national security and foreign policy. Together they offered a nucleus around which a strong and influential community of international relations professionals might have been built. The discourse on international affairs was not limited to Delhi. Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Allahabad, Jaipur were all important centres of research and publication activity. The major national newspapers published across the nation took great interest in world affairs. The Indian elite was plugged into the international relations community around the world, published in international journals, and hosted research scholars from abroad. Given New Delhi's relative openness to both the East and West during the Nehru years, India became the biggest arena for competing ideological propaganda unleashed by Washington and Moscow. Whether it was effective or not, it added to the extraordinary dynamism of India's intellectual debate during the 1950s and 1960s.

India's public square began to lose some of its vitality and diversity from the late 1960s and down went the project of building a credible international relations community. As Indira Gandhi drifted towards left wing populism at home, moved closer towards the Soviet Union, and sharpened the rhetoric of third worldism, the domestic political discourse on foreign policy began to acquire a monochromatic hue. The biggest victim of this has been academia, especially its humanities divisions. The international relations community, given the close proximity of its subject to the conduct of national diplomacy, suffered even more. The hegemony of the pseudo-left radicalism over the media and the academia actively promoted by the Congress Party in the 1970s snuffed out much of intellectual dissent, both liberal and conservative. The centralisation of the academia in the 1970s disempowered the older centres of foreign policy discourse in the regions. Once 'politically correct' priorities were identified,

¹⁷ A. S. Hebbar, "SIS celebrates its Silver Jubilee: A Report", *International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, July 1982, pp. 137-44.; see also, M. S. Rajan, "Golden Jubilee of the School of International Studies: An Assessment", *International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3-4, 2005, pp.195-204.

¹⁸ K. Subrahmanyam, "The Birth of IDSA and the Early Years", in N. S. Sisodia and Sujit Dutta, eds., *Selected Articles from IDSA Journals, Vol.1, Strategic Thought: The Formative Years* (New Delhi: IDSA, 2005), pp. 1-38.

resources from the central government flew to such approved destinations as Soviet studies, resulting in the utter neglect of American and Chinese studies. The deep suspicion of the United States that took root in the 1970s steadily strangled the channels of discourse between the Indian international relations community and its counterparts in the West. As India turned its back on Asia in preference for the non-aligned stage, the academic and other contacts in Asia too dried up. The difficult relations with China and Pakistan also meant that the studies of India's neighbourhood got steadily eroded across the nation.

This sweeping damage to the community was compounded by a powerful new imperative of conformism that paralysed international studies and much of the humanities research across the nation. The only source of funding for research, conferences and travel were centralised government institutions, the University Grants Commission and the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Although there was space for independent research and critical studies of Indian foreign policy, there was no incentive in the academia or the media for such an approach. Criticism or original ideas largely came from political forces and journals on the margins rather than mainstream academic institutions. It is not that either Indira Gandhi or Rajiv Gandhi preferred a disempowered international relations community. In her second term, Mrs Gandhi was looking to break out of the ideological rigidities of the 1970s that were constraining Indian diplomacy. Rajiv Gandhi chose to depart from every presumed canon of the famed 'Nehruvian' consensus – on India's relations with the United States, China, Pakistan and Israel as well as on nuclear weapons policy, to name a few. Neither the contemporary media accounts nor the later academic analyses have fully explored the bold foreign policy innovations under Rajiv Gandhi. When the Congress governments in the 1980s were looking for new ideas on foreign policy in order to end India's growing marginalisation, the conformist academic and media communities were of no great help. They were good as cheerleaders for their preferred political leaders; but not as generators of new ideas or new stratagems for the conduct of foreign policy.

The one exception to the deadening conformism of the 1970s and the 1980s was the IDSA. (Disclosure: the author was on the IDSA staff from 1983-92) In one of the paradoxes of the Indian international relations story, the one bureaucrat who drifted into international relations research and stayed with it, Subrahmanyam was prepared to defy the presumed limits on the foreign policy discourse. As a consequence, the IDSA, under his leadership, was able to launch a national debate on nuclear policy at a time when the subject seemed so forbidding. For the next few decades, the IDSA would be at the forefront of the nuclear discourse in India.¹⁹ Under the leadership of Subrahmanyam, the IDSA also focused the elite's attention onto the security politics of the Indian Ocean after the British withdrawal from the East of Suez, and made the case for an interest-based foreign policy.²⁰ Subrahmanyam was also able to open the doors for what is now called 'policy-relevant research' and make it a goal worth pursuing for many younger researchers. Subrahmanyam also demonstrated the extraordinary possibilities for leveraging the power of the media not only in shaping the public discourse on

¹⁹ For Subrahmanyam's recollection of his personal role in the shaping of India's nuclear policy, see Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1999).

²⁰ For a first hand account of the early years of the IDSA, see K. Subrahmanyam, "The Birth of IDSA and the Early Years", in N. S. Sisodia and Sujit Dutta, eds., *India and the World: Selected Articles from IDSA Journals, Volume I: Strategic Thought: The Formative Years* (New Delhi: IDSA, 2005), pp. 1-38.

foreign policy, but also as a tool to mobilise pressure on the politicians and bureaucrats deciding foreign and national security affairs.²¹

In the 1980s, the IDSA was home to feverish activity by a small group led by Subrahmanyam that tried to simulate the activity of a full-blown foreign policy establishment. Writing foreign policy speeches for political leaders from the government and the opposition, developing public advocacy, running open media campaigns against certain decisions of the government, sending policy briefs on emerging issues to the highest levels of government, rationalising the government's diplomatic decisions, explaining Indian policies to international audiences, drawing in serving bureaucrats and soldiers to spend time researching at the IDSA,²² deputing IDSA staff to the Foreign Office and the news agencies, and bombarding the media with articles and features were some of the IDSA's many activities. There was no way that the intensity and depth of this campaign could be sustained by any organisation. The IDSA under Subrahmanyam, however, demonstrated the possibilities of constructing a permanent foreign policy establishment that did not owe its loyalty to any particular party or leader, was not tied down to one particular department or ministry in the government, was neither pro-West nor pro-East, neither left nor right, could argue on the basis of national interest, develop policy options without having to access governmental information, bring together serving and retired bureaucrats, political leaders, senior editors, reporters and businessmen, and create facilities for any one to develop the skill for gathering open source intelligence.

The Changing Institutional Balance

When Subrahmanyam started writing for newspapers as the director of IDSA in the 1960s, there was barely concealed condescension from the traditional international relations community. The prevailing view was that 'serious scholars don't write in newspapers'. While the Indian academic attitudes towards media might not have changed significantly over the last four decades, the power of the public forum has dramatically increased in the intervening period. As the Indian democracy matured, the media began to acquire greater visibility if not influence on policy making. The area of foreign and national security policies was no longer immune to the impact of the media.²³ One of the unintended consequences of Indira Gandhi's short-lived Emergency Rule during 1975-77 was a palpable increase in the power of the print media and its new self-assurance. That the rulers of Delhi could be overthrown in elections helped generate a more equal two-way relationship between the print media and the government. If the 1980s saw the steady accretion of the print media's power in the country, there has been a dramatic surge in the power of the private electronic media since the late 1990s. This in turn has had a significant impact on the national security and foreign policy discourse within India.²⁴

²¹ For an assessment of Subrahmanyam's influence on India's foreign policy discourse, see Inder Malhotra, "Introduction", in K. Subrahmanyam, *Shedding Shibboleths: India's Evolving Strategic Outlook* (New Delhi: Wordsmiths, 2005), pp. vii-xxxviii.

²² Meera Shankar, the current Indian ambassador to the United States, was among the first Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officers to do a stint at the IDSA in the early 1980s. Air Chief Marshal Tyagi, who was the Indian Air Chief in the early 2000s, spent some time at the IDSA in the 1990s.

²³ For a comprehensive review of the role of press on foreign policy, see Partha Pratim Basu, *The Press and Foreign Policy of India* (New Delhi: Lancers, 2003).

²⁴ For one political view, see the address by Defence Minister George Fernandes, "National Security and the role of the media", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 22, No. 6, 1998, pp. 819-28.

That the Indian media could be treated as a hand maiden of the foreign office bureaucracy was a commonly held view within the South Block.²⁵ This perception might have been valid when a small but docile group of foreign office ‘beat’ correspondents would deferentially take dictation from mid-level bureaucrats in the foreign office. Those days, however, are long gone, as a number of factors have altered the equations between media and the officialdom. The class background, educational qualifications, and the pay of the media personnel has dramatically evolved during the 1990s, and they no longer have a reason to acknowledge the presumed superiority of the officer class, nor are the new generation of journalists dependent on a variety of favours dispensed by the state machinery. The media’s access to political leaders within and outside the government has become closer over the years and many journalists themselves have effortlessly moved into political parties and the parliament. The tabloidisation of the media meant it is constantly on the lookout for juicy human interest stories about the foreign office and the rest of the bureaucratic system; it could make or break personal reputations of senior officers. From being a one-sided relationship, the media-foreign office relationship is a two-way street of mutual give and take.

Even more significant was the weakening of New Delhi’s power structures after 1989. The replacement of one party or one family rule by weak coalition governments meant the political classes were less domineering and more eager to please the media. Just as a host of other institutions, including the judiciary and the election commission to name a few, asserted themselves in the last two decades, the fragmentation of political power in the centre strengthened the media’s clout. If the politicians needed good press, the bureaucrats were quick to adapt in the 1990s as they sought to leverage the press for their own individual advance or in winning policy battles within the government. The media scene in Delhi began to resemble that in Washington, where different sections of bureaucracy routinely leak information on a selective basis to shape public opinion.

Weak governments and strong media meant the press and television could whip up popular passion and utterly complicate the functioning of the government in such crisis situations as the hijacking of the Indian airliner IC814 at the end of 1999.²⁶ Even more significant was the fact that focused arguments in a section of the Indian English media turned the Indian government from an active supporter of the international negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) during 1993-95 into a ferocious opponent during 1995-96. Central to this turnaround was the massive mobilisation of the nationalist sentiment against the CTBT in India in a short period of time.²⁷ Since the turn of the millennium, the media has become the principal theatre for intellectual and policy contestation on the direction of Indian foreign policy. This was most visible in the passionate discourse on the Indo-US civil nuclear initiative that saw the left parties withdraw support from the Singh government, which in turn had to go to the floor of the parliament to demonstrate majority support in July 2008.²⁸ While

²⁵ For views from within South Block, see J.N. Dixit, *Indian Foreign Service: History and Challenge* (New Delhi: Konark, 2005), Chapter 13, pp.264-73; see also Navtej Sarna, “Media and Diplomacy”, in Atish Sinha, ed., *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007), pp. 1143-49.

²⁶ For a discussion, see Ajai K. Rai, “Diplomacy and the News Media: A Comment on the Indian Experience”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 27, No. 1, January-March 2003.

²⁷ See T. T. Poulouse, *The CTBT and the Rise of Nuclear Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Lancers, 1996).

²⁸ For views on the unprecedented domestic debate on the nuclear deal, see Dinshaw Mistry, “Diplomacy, Domestic Politics and the US-India Nuclear Agreement”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No.5, September/October 2006, pp. 678-698; see also, Zoya Hasan, “Bridging a Growing Divide: The Indian National Congress and Indian Democracy”, *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2006, pp. 473-88; see also, Prakash Karat, *Subordinate Ally: The Nuclear Deal and India-US Strategic Relations* (New Delhi: Leftword, 2007).

different sections of the media root for different directions of change, the media does not simply neutralise itself; it has become a potential brake on new initiatives as well as a facilitator of new moves by the government. This in turn has put a new premium on the political classes and the security establishment reaching out to the media and leveraging its influence.

The media is not the only new actor shaping India's foreign policy in the last two decades. As India moved towards a state-led socialist economic path, its business community too became marginal to the foreign policy of the nation. Although businessmen were occasionally employed for specific diplomatic purposes, Mrs Gandhi used the Hinduja to reach out to the Shah's Iran in the 1970s. Similarly, Vajpayee tapped the Hinduja to reach out to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of Pokharan nuclear tests of May 1998. The objective was to soften the reaction within the G-8 that Britain was chairing and facilitating meetings between the National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra and top officials of the Western nations.²⁹ Since the launch of the economic reforms, the business community has become an important influence in shaping relations with other nations as well as influencing the domestic public opinion and media on a range of political issues including those on foreign policy.³⁰ Large individual business houses like the Tatas and Ambanis, as well as business associations like the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) have become recognisably important in diplomacy as well as national discourse on foreign policy. The British businessman, Laxmi Mittal was tapped by New Delhi in this decade to facilitate India's search for equity oil around the world, especially in Central Asia. During his visits abroad, it has become customary for the Prime Minister to take with him large business delegations. Joint forums of Chief Executive Officers have become an important vehicle for moving crucial bilateral relations forward and pressure points for internal bureaucratic change. Given the weakness of the universities and the think tanks, the CII and FICCI have also appropriated some of their functions, for example developing Track Two and Track One and a Half dialogues and often acting as think tanks on specific policy issues. Some of these initiatives did become rather consequential. Initiated in early 2002, the CII-Aspen Indo-US strategic Dialogue has met every six months, brought together influential voices in both countries and cleared the ground for major new bilateral initiatives. One of its rounds in Jaipur in early 2005 helped generate a mutually acceptable framework for resuming civil nuclear cooperation. The essence of this understanding was reflected a few months later in the Bush-Singh nuclear deal. While some see this as a positive development, others see it negatively.³¹

The new forces shaping public opinion and influencing foreign policy are not limited to the national theatre. There is no doubt that different regions of India had always had some influence on the nation's foreign policy towards some of the neighbouring and ethnically kindred countries. The influence of Tamil Nadu politics on India's policy towards Sri Lanka is well known.³² Equally significant has been the impact of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar political classes and the Indian feudals on New Delhi's ties with Nepal. The regional

²⁹ See Hasan Suroor, "High Level Links", *Frontline*, Vol. 18, No. 11, 26 May-11 June 2001; available at <http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl1811/18110340.htm> accessed on March 7, 2009.

³⁰ For a recent analysis of the role of business and media on Indian Foreign Policy, see Sanjaya Baru, "The Growing Influence of Business and Media on India Foreign Policy", *ISAS Insights*, No. 49 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, February 2009).

³¹ Siddharth Varadarajan, "Indian Capital, Foreign Policy", *The Hindu*, 15 August 2007, available at <http://www.hindu.com/af/india60/stories/2007081550541500.htm> accessed on 10 June 2009.

³² See Ganapathy Palanithurai and K. Mohanasundaram, *Dynamics of Tamil Nadu politics in Sri Lankan ethnicity* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1993).

influences on the making of foreign policy, traditionally a 'national endeavour', have steadily increased during the last two years thanks to the emergence of coalition rule at the centre, in which regional parties have become critical components. This 'municipalisation' of foreign policy, interestingly, has not always led to the 'regional' prevailing over the 'national', as the local forces acquired high stakes in federal power structures. Nevertheless, the growing impact of local interests on India's foreign policy in recent years could be seen as the successful result of a campaign of the Sikkim government in New Delhi to open up trade with Tibet. Equally important has been the growing contact between the chief ministers of the two Punjabs across the Radcliffe line and the attempt to promote the shared cultural identity of 'Panjabiyat'.³³

Among the other forces that have emerged in recent years has been the military. After years of enduring the jack-boots of civilian control, the armed forces have begun to find their voice on national security. Organisations such as the United Services Institute have been revived, many retired members of the armed forces are now a regular fixture in the public discourse and have joined political parties. All three Indian services have now established their own think tanks that have begun to develop capabilities for research on foreign and national security issues and intervene in the public debates. Equally important has been the rise of what might be called the Track Three that has sought to mobilise activist groups across the nation on critical foreign policy issues. Unlike the Track Two process that involves experts and retired diplomats and soldiers, Track Three reaches out into the wider civil society and has been fairly effective in making points on war and peace issues in the region. Civil society leaders like Nirmala Deshpande, not generally known to take an interest in foreign affairs, played a key role in promoting Indo-Pak dialogue and reconciliation in the post Kargil phase.³⁴

Meanwhile, the strongest force in the making of Indian foreign policy, the bureaucracy, has had to adapt to the rising power and influence of the new institutions. In all those democracies that feature a permanent bureaucracy, universities and think tanks tended to be relatively less important in shaping foreign policy. In Britain and France, small collegial bureaucratic elites have dominated the making of foreign policy and selling it to the political classes as well as the public. The absence of such a bureaucracy in Washington and the ease of moving in and out of government have allowed the emergence of a wide and deep foreign policy establishment in the United States. It was but natural that the Indian model would look a lot similar to that of Britain and France in this respect. Given the extraordinary task of managing a large and diverse country, the weight of the permanent bureaucracy in making national security policies seemed to steadily increase. The Indian Foreign Service did inherit some of the finest traditions of its precursor, the Indian Political Service.³⁵ Many of the early civil servants retiring from the Foreign Service made their reputation as scholars and publicists profoundly influencing the national discourse on foreign policy. The writings of Sardar K. M. Panikkar and K. P. S. Menon Sr. readily come to mind. With his prolific writing after his retirement in the early 1990s, J. N. Dixit seemed to carry on that tradition until his death in 2005.

³³ Tridivesh Singh Maini, *South Asian Cooperation & the Role of the Punjabs* (New Delhi: Siddharth Publications, 2007).

³⁴ For an assessment, see Manjari Sewak, *Multi-track Diplomacy between India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2005).

³⁵ For an excellent introduction to an elite cadre that was the predecessor to the IFS, see Terence Creagh Coen, *The Indian Political Service: A Study in Indirect Rule* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971).

When it came to the making of foreign policy, however, the South Block was a closed shop. Thanks to Nehru's leadership of the Ministry of External Affairs in the first years of the Republic and the sustained interest in foreign affairs demonstrated by Indira and Rajiv, the Indian Foreign Service also enjoyed a measure of autonomy from the growing dominance of the Indian Administrative Service. While outside experts made inroads into the economic and technical ministries, the national security ministries remained thoroughly insulated from external 'penetration'. The Indian Foreign Service would not even make room for other services let alone outside experts, even on a temporary basis, into its fold. The monopoly on information on world affairs, and the development of sophisticated cadres in Russian and Chinese affairs reinforced the condescension in South Block that they have little to learn from outsiders. But nearly two decades of globalisation, the emphasis on commercial diplomacy, the information revolution, an irreverent print and electronic media, the emergence of Track Two and Track Three formations, and above all the fragmented structure of power in New Delhi have meant the South Block had to cope with a very different template. If the imperative of adjustment has been relentless, not all in the Foreign Office and diplomatic corps have managed to adapt. Those who did have been far more effective in driving Indian foreign policy in new directions.

The Foreign Policy Vanguard

The marginalisation of the international relations scholarship and the underdeveloped potential of the foreign affairs think tanks did not in any way mean that history would stop for India's international relations. Ever since India embarked on the path of globalisation nearly two decades ago, New Delhi has found many new opportunities for improving its standing in the regional and global stage. Nor can there be any doubt that Indian diplomacy had demonstrated significant strategic imagination in recent decades. Among the many achievements on the foreign policy front were the Look East policy that was launched in the early 1990s, the post-Pokharan diplomacy that limited the costs of the nation's nuclear defiance in 1998, the negotiation of the civil nuclear initiative with the United States and the mobilisation of international support for it during 2005-08, and the attempts, not entirely successful, to restructure relations with both China and Pakistan. With neither the benefit of distilled academic wisdom nor of an insightful policy road map, India has constantly surprised itself and the world with its capacity for thinking on the run and generating major unexpected breakthroughs. I would argue that this was possible because of the existence of tiny, informal and consequential networks spanning the full spectrum of the Indian elite opinion and acting as the vanguard of India's new foreign policy. Some of the examples below illustrate the impact of this vanguard.

One, a sustained campaign by a handful of columnists in alliance with a few decision-makers forced a significant turn-around in India's official position on the CTBT from a long-standing supporter to a vehement critic during 1994-96. A similar attempt to reverse the governmental position on the CTBT after the nuclear tests of 1998 in order to dampen the nuclear disputes with Washington, however, was unsuccessful. (The author was part of both the campaigns.) If the United States Supreme Court had ruled in favour of Al Gore at the end of 2000, the second campaign, in favour of the CTBT, might have had a longer life. Although the vanguard did not always win, its readiness to walk the roads not previously travelled challenged the conventional thinking and created space for those political leaders who were willing to take risks.

Two, as the foreign minister of India during 1996-97 and Prime Minister during 1997-98, Gujral invested what little political capital he had in redefining India's relations with her neighbours. While he acted out of conviction, his attempt faced fierce resistance within the bureaucracy, the political class and the media. Yet a small section of the foreign office leadership was prepared to flesh out Gujral's convictions into policy. This paid off in settling the Ganges water dispute with Bangladesh. While the criticism of Gujral was indeed vicious, he did get vocal support from a small but influential section of the media. The "Gujral Doctrine" was controversial when it was first unveiled but became the basis for neighbourhood policies of those who followed him – Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr Singh. Realists in the Foreign Office did not take long to recognise the many good uses that the Gujral Doctrine could be put to. That New Delhi must act non-reciprocally towards its neighbours and create stakes for its neighbours in the success of India, in the name of promoting a 'peaceful periphery' has now become the reigning doctrine in the South Block. Foreign policy consensus could always be created in India if a credible new path could be cleared by the vanguard.

Three, on the three most important accounts of Indian foreign policy, Pakistan, China and the United States, the vanguard signalled not only intellectual boldness but also the capacity to persist with lines of action that few scholars either suggested or predicted. Much of the credit for this goes to the political leadership – in two widely different governments – which eagerly explored solutions to the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan, signed onto a new framework for the resolution of the boundary dispute with China, and defied all conventional wisdom in seeking a strategic partnership with the United States. This could not have been done without the self-assurance of a handful of senior bureaucrats who had to throw out much of what they learnt during the long careers in the Foreign Office in grabbing the new opportunities to resolve India's long-standing strategic problems. The inevitable political risks involved in this policy enterprise could be insured only by a vigorous and credible intellectual defence in the public square – which brought in another element of the vanguard, the opinion-makers. A mere manipulation of the mass media was not possible because all sides of the debate had unlimited access to the public ear. The structuring of a new consensus also demanded an effective alignment of key constituencies like the corporate sector and the neutralisation of powerful voices in the opposition.

Four, the vanguard has also had some impact on the vocabulary and concepts of mainstream foreign policy discourse within the nation. A handful of bureaucrats, speech writers, and journalists have begun to inject concepts and notions that were not part of India's foreign articulation for decades. Although the Foreign Office had become the very repository of cynicism in external affairs, the speeches it wrote for the leaders tended to be full of high principles and normative rhetoric. While balancing was an important element of Indian diplomacy from the very beginning, the concept of 'balance of power' would never figure in the speeches except in its denunciation. During the last few years, we have seen senior officials increasingly referring to balance of power in positive terms, openly acknowledging India's interest in a "multipolar Asia". Similarly, Dr Singh's speeches began to push 'democracy' as one of the major identities of India in world affairs. We have also seen increasing references to India's 'responsibilities' as a rising power as opposed to the traditional objections to the domination by the rich and powerful. We have seen the Indian emphasis in the nuclear debate shift from vehement denunciations of a discriminatory non-proliferation regime to claims of India's 'impeccable' non-proliferation credentials. Much of the new usage has been promoted by the columnists in the media and found its way into official speeches by ministers.

Beyond a 'Few Good Men'

That a small group of individuals have had extraordinary influence reshaping the national debate on India's new foreign policy in recent years is not in doubt. What is clearly in question is whether the reliance on a vanguard, however clever it might be, is good enough for India. An emerging great power with the potential to shape international relations in the 21st century surely cannot afford to rely on a narrow and thin base of thinking and decision-making. Although the vanguard's triumph in engineering fundamental changes in India's nuclear policy and transforming its entrenched hostility towards the United States is impressive, the domestic debate on the civil nuclear initiative has also revealed its many limitations. As it seized an opportune moment in 2005 to fast forward Indo-US relations, it inevitably confronted an unprecedented resistance to a foreign policy initiative. The boldness of the political leadership, the creativity of its foreign policy aides, the muscular support from a section of the media, and the clear interest of the business community was not enough to stop the domestic debate on the civil nuclear initiative drifting into the biggest political crisis ever on a foreign policy issue in the nation's history. The murky parliamentary vote of confidence in the Singh government in mid-2008 marked the culmination of a debate that divided all major agencies involved in the formulation of national security policy and the political parties that had to eventually take sides.

Reflecting on how the nuclear initiative was negotiated and implemented, one wonders if a more vibrant international relations community, a better informed media, and a reformed security sector could have helped India avoid spending so much time examining a gift horse in its mouth. A good international relations infrastructure was never going to be enough to convince the Indian communists or persuade the Muslim community of the virtues of a strategic partnership with the United States. Not any amount of sophisticated reasoning would have made it easier for the Department of Atomic Energy to recognise that President Bush might be representing a very different political tendency in the United States to the offensive non-proliferation bureaucracy in Washington they had dealt with for decades. These were political and institutional realities that inevitably paralysed the Congress Party and the Singh government. It was also quite clear that a more widely based foreign policy establishment could not have stopped the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from its absolutely opportunistic opposition to the nuclear deal with the United States that it had initiated. Consider the example of Brajesh Mishra, the powerful national security adviser to Vajpayee who played a key role in the decision to conduct the nuclear tests and in the post-Pokharan negotiations with the international community. His eventual support for the nuclear deal after expressing initial reservations revealed two important things. One, there is indeed a basis for a bipartisan foreign policy establishment built around the networks of the permanent bureaucracy. The other was that 'expert consensus' made no difference to political calculus as the BJP simply disowned Mishra in 2008.

The existence of a wide and deep foreign policy establishment cutting across party lines in itself could not have short circuited the tortuous political evolution of India's foreign policy. Nevertheless it would seem entirely reasonable to posit that the existence of such an establishment, with all its different elements in full flow, would make it a lot easier for India to put to rest the many demons in its worldview. The reformation of India's security sector, the upgrade of its international relations studies, the modernisation of its think tanks, and the globalisation of its media are all urgent and worthwhile tasks in themselves. When done, they will all contribute to India's greater awareness and more effective engagement of the world. It is important, however, to note that such a reformation would be led by New Delhi. The

Chinese Communist Party has the power to decree such reforms, create new institutions that could serve as adjuncts to its emerging status in the international arena, and articulate a coherent doctrine on its rise. It would be extravagantly unrealistic to expect India to do the same.

The expansion and modernisation of India's intellectual infrastructure on international relations studies is more likely to resemble the American experience in some important aspects. As in the United States, so in India, the building of foreign policy software is likely to follow rather than precede the nation's emergence as a great power. The private sector and civil society initiatives are likely to play a larger role in India in the eventual creation of a world class international relations infrastructure. The permanent bureaucracy of the security sector will not reform itself except under extreme political pressure. The university system, which is critical to the modernisation of international relations studies, has withered under the dominance of a Human Resources Development ministry mired in the statism of the 1970s. The changed environment in India, however, offers room to challenge many of the old governmental controls on the academia, skirts them by expanding the private sector research, and above all demands more openness within India and a rediscovery of India's fearless internationalism. When it does eventually acquire a tangible shape, India's permanent foreign policy establishment is bound to reflect the nation's historical inheritance, its internal diversity, cultural specificity and the unique regional context.

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