Nehruvianism in Indian Foreign Policy – Embedded in the Modi Doctrine?

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Key Points

- India’s foreign policy did not stem from an Indian International Relations School and, similarly, anomalies in India’s constitution, the drafting of which was also overseen by Nehru, continue to be of relevance.

- Modi’s bilateral engagements with regional and global leaders demonstrate his personal charisma and political agility. They speak of progression, rather than change, in a globalised world not all that far removed from the universal trade envisaged by Nehru.

- An adherence to non-alignment, the exclusion of alliance commitments, strategic partnerships, and “informal” and “natural” alliances are part and parcel of India’s less closely defined foreign policy.

- India’s past conflict and present competition with China, as well as New Delhi’s bilateral and multilateral responses, all show a continuing pattern.

Summary

This paper addresses a key question: whether non-alignment and the five principles of Panchsheel as the basis of Nehruvian foreign policy can be described as contiguous with, continuing and joining across time, with the foreign policy platform espoused by current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A debate has emerged, arguing on the one hand, that Nehru’s foreign policy has been superseded by a new approach while, on the other, evidence suggests that little has changed in principle. Research and argument guide the view that – despite Nehru’s failure to negotiate with China in 1962 and Modi’s superficially contrasting success in ending the standoff at Doklam in 2017 – non-alignment, Panchsheel
principles and the integration of foreign and economic policy – in essence, Nehruvian foreign policy – is being pursued, albeit in a different, globalised world.

Analysis

*Indian Foreign Policy and Constitutional Anomalies*

While Nehru’s domination of independent India’s foreign policy is undisputed, it has been argued that the frame from which Indian international relations theory emerged was a nationalist backlash during the later years of imperial rule. Early Commonwealth Institutes of International Affairs (IIAs) saw India’s IIIA founded in 1936. The IIIA became dysfunctional, limited by politics and conflict between the two main parties, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, rather than a springboard.

Conceptualising foreign policy in December 1946, a decade after the formation of the IIIA, Jawaharlal Nehru, as future Prime Minister, integrated from the start his foreign and economic policies, which were characterised by independent action and an idealistic faith, albeit tempered in realism, in goodwill and honesty between states that set India on two paths: non-alignment and the principles of Panchsheel (listed below).

As Chairman of the Indian Constitution’s Drafting Committee, Nehru moved that the Preamble to the Constitution be adopted (January 1947). The word “sovereign”, among others, was key to India’s direction. Although beyond the scope of this paper, despite Nehru’s commitment to a secular state, the 1947 Preamble omitted the word “secular”. The forty-second *Constitutional Amendment*, assented to in December 1976, changed the Nehruvian Preamble’s description of India as a “sovereign democratic republic” to a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic”, its present form.

This past glimmer of a possibly Hindu India, now constitutionally impossible, could be a subject of debate during Modi’s 2019 election campaign, bearing potential effects for domestic and foreign policy. Another Modi policy, the banning of cow slaughter, may also become relevant. The subject was contentious in 1947. The Constitution’s Drafting Committee included the prohibition of cow slaughter to guide states in such policy-making, but declared decisions non-binding. Deliberately omitting religious connotations as too contentious, Article 48, nonetheless, remained uncomfortable for Nehru. In Modi’s India, however, bans on cow slaughter where they exist, have penalised Muslims engaged in the cattle economy, arguably contravening the Panchsheel principle of equality and cooperation, and justice and equality as set out in the Preamble. Modi’s extrapolation of Article 48 is also a foreign policy issue: India was the largest exporter of beef in the world in 2015. As discussed below, foreign and economic policy are two sides of the same coin.

Whatever exploitable chinks one may find in the Constitution, Nehru led the process of building new institutions of democratic governance, a culture of parliamentary democracy, and successive platforms for the reconstruction of the backward economy. More importantly for this paper, he also established independent India’s relations with the rest of the world on principles of peaceful co-existence and non-alignment.
Nehru to Modi: Foundation, Direction and Definition

Assessments by IR scholars are explored briefly to view whether Modi’s realist foreign policy can be viewed as contiguous with Nehru’s practice, or has been transformed by a popular right-wing leader. Nehru’s and Modi’s over-riding policies, non-alignment and panchsheel, based on peaceful coexistence and respect for sovereignty are, at first glance, little changed, and will be examined in the context of shifting relations with China, allowing some conclusions and observations.

Navnita Behera argued in Re-imagining IR in India that there was no early Indian School of International Relations and that assessment of Indian scholars’ (or practitioners’) contributions depended on what counted as “IR theory” and that “conceptualisations” of non-alignment could qualify as systemic IR theory, but were dependent on the criteria being used. Nonetheless, India’s ruling élite, she argued, believed its destiny was to play a major role internationally in keeping with its geography and power potential, fuelled by its colonial experience. Despite her caveats about India’s theoretical IR credibility, she is unequivocal in describing Nehru as the founding father of non-alignment, conceived both as a ‘principle’ of exercising autonomy in foreign policy and as a ‘mechanism’ to create a ‘third area of peace’ outside the then dominant power blocs.

Nehru’s ‘principle’ and ‘mechanism’ appear to hold good today, but he has also been described as an idealist, evident in his commitment to the United Nations, particularly India’s peacekeeping role, which is ongoing, and his drive for nuclear disarmament, which died in the “peaceful” nuclear tests of 1974 and the adherence of successive governments to a no-first-strike nuclear arsenal.

India continues to enjoy its reputation as a rising power, and it has been noted that Modi is ‘globalising and revolutionising India’s foreign policy like no other prime minister since Jawaharlal Nehru.’¹ That implies a period of continuance, although Modi’s domestic policy has also been described by Chaulia as ‘guided by the constant drive to reform and transform India, for [the] security and prosperity of all Indians.’ India’s priority is business and Modi’s economic diplomacy is driven by ‘a sense of India’s taking its position as a leading commercial power ….’ As Prime Minister, Modi’s “sharp business brain” with a grasp of monetary matters ‘redefined what it means to be “business-friendly” on a “transnational scale”’. Modi’s bilateral engagements with regional and global leaders, including President Trump and President Xi Jinping, clearly demonstrate his charismatic agility, but speak of progression in a globalised world, unknown to Nehru, rather than change.

Setting aside India’s non-alignment momentarily to address the alternate concepts of alignment and alliance, shows that they may be defined as formal associations between states, associated with the use (or non-use) of force such as the ANZUS and earlier SEATO agreements.

Nehru’s view was that the larger the bloc system, the greater the chance of war: ‘Hence, non-alignment is vital to peace’ and non-aligned countries can maintain ‘a link between the

hostile blocs’. To that end, India has played an active role in United Nations peacekeeping efforts, including at the termination of the Korean War. It gained political capital and international repute during the Suez Crisis by remaining neutral, despite its friendship with Egypt, and engaged again with UN peacekeeping, as it has continued to do.

Thus, through a Nehruvian lens, the re-convening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, described as a “grouping” by a former Indian High Commissioner to Australia, that will “reach out” to other Asian states to expand support for strategic and economic cooperation, and maintenance of the rule of law, arguably should be seen as an “informal” agreement rather than a move away from Nehru’s principle, while Modi’s newly-framed “natural alliance” with the US is not, in his view, an aligned stance.

Generally speaking, the terms of relations today between states that are either aligned or non-aligned are more flexible: India’s economic liberalisation, for example, and a consequent multiplicity of bilateral and multilateral agreements have greatly expanded India’s net of regional and global relations, merging foreign and economic policy. As an illustration, Modi was centre stage at the recent Davos World Economic Forum when he left to host the ASEAN Commemorative Summit held in New Delhi on 26 January 2018, India’s Republic Day. In 1960, at the celebrations marking the Republic’s first decade, Nehru’s chief guest was Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, a Soviet marshal. His next chief guest was Queen Elizabeth in 1961. Modi’s national day soft diplomacy is a continuing tradition from Nehru’s political toolbox.

A number of strategic partnerships are also in place and generally focus on a narrow set of desirable goals. India has strategic partnerships with, among others, the United States, Russia, China and Japan. Australia’s strategic partnership is undergoing a substantial reworking, led by Peter Varghese, former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. For the US and China, political parameters dominate, while defence technology and weapons supply is the dominant aspect of India’s strategic partnership with Russia. India’s strategic partnership with Japan well illustrates the generally collaborative state-to-state nature of such partnerships: Prime Ministers Modi and Abe in their Joint Statement in September 2017 looked forward to working to strengthen bilateral cooperation and reiterated their shared view that the partnership reflected a new level of mutual confidence in the cause of, for example, ‘clean energy, economic development and a peaceful and secure world.’ This is not novel; many countries now desire a similar relationship with India.

**Foreign Policy and Conflict with China**

The link between foreign and economic policy, as is clear today in Prime Minister Modi’s “Make in India” election platform, was equally clear to Nehru, who told the Constituent Assembly on 4 December 1947 that ‘Ultimately foreign policy is the outcome of economic policy ... the art of conducting the foreign affairs of a country lies in finding out what is most

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advantageous to the country ....." Interestingly, in drawing together his arguments for a Nehruvian continuum, Chaulia also deduced that it has outlived the BJP’s rhetorical and ideological challenge about shifting India's place in and attitude towards the world. The benchmarks set by Nehru at the time of freedom, Chaulia concluded, continue to inform the present Indian government’s foreign policy.

Nehruvian foreign policy was built on non-alignment and equally firmly on the five principles of peaceful co-existence, known as Panchsheel, which are generally observed by India today.

Agreed between Nehru and China’s President Chou En Lai at their first meeting in Delhi in June 1954, Panchsheel was formally adopted at the Indian-organised, Indonesia-hosted Bandung Conference in April 1955. The original terms – respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in a State’s internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence – were augmented in the Conference Joint Communiqué, adding respect for human rights and the principles of the UN Charter.

China’s (and Pakistan’s) wars and border skirmishes with India best illustrate breaches of the Panchsheel principles of sovereignty and peaceful co-existence.

The 1962 war, fought on China’s western and India’s eastern fronts, was started by Chinese attacks in October that year over border disputes in the Aksai Chin region, claimed by both countries, and China’s simultaneous attack on the tri-junction between Tibet, Bhutan and India.

On that western front more than fifty years later, Aksai Chin is now integral to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China’s present-day Highway 219, also known as the Aksai Chin Road, cuts across still-disputed land in Ladakh, located in the north-east of Jammu and Kashmir. Notably, Ladakh’s Scouts played a significant role for India in the 1965 and 1971 wars, and the Kargil conflict of 1999.

To the east, the recent Doklam confrontation is reminiscent of the 1962 Chinese attack in the tri-junction border area. The Modi Government, in August 2017, succeeded with a combination of military bluster, threat of conflict and robust diplomacy, in protecting Bhutan, with which India has a special relationship, against China’s road-building plans in the disputed territory, again to integrate with its “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) push westwards. China and India mutually agreed to withdraw.

It was a very different situation in 1962 in the same geographical area. That might have been resolved in 1960 had Nehru not declined Chou En Lai’s offered to recognise the McMahon Line in the east (India and China’s notional border) in return for agreement to China’s desired line of control in Ladakh. The outcome was war.

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It may be argued speculatively that the defence of India then rested on Nehruvian diplomacy and, although China offered a ceasefire and talks, albeit from a position of strength, Nehru declined to negotiate, his reasoning being analysed in subsequent scholarly argument. In further speculation, the legacy of India’s 1940s struggle for independence, however hostile, left respect for negotiation. Nehru, however, had not espoused the realpolitik that independence demanded, and had not put in place the infrastructure or military capacity to back negotiations with hard power. While it has been argued that that is still the case today, Modi has demonstrated that China is not “unstoppable”.

**Future Indo-Chinese Relations: A Nehruvian Conclusion**

China has surrounded India, both terrestrially and with its network of ports across the Indian Ocean, confining India in a “peaceful embrace” within China’s greater ambitions, affecting India’s South Asian relationships and, significantly, its exclusion from full membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

That “peaceful embrace” has, however, also seen an affirmation of shared values, the launch by India and China of their Year of Friendship in Beijing in January 2014, the Chinese Vice-President acknowledging the sixtieth anniversary of the Panchsheel agreement, and Xi Jinping, in 2015, expressing his intention to incorporate their Leaders’ 1954 agreement into their bilateral relations. Although the path has not been continuously smooth, there was a negotiating opportunity that culminated with the ending of the Doklam standoff, and India has a network of relationships that draw on and extend the Nehruvian linking of foreign and economic policy, and peaceful co-existence.

In a region where trade options opened up in the post-Cold War globalising world, a situation unknown to Nehru, Indian prime ministers preceding and including Modi have moved Nehruvian foreign and economic policy forwards where bilateral and multilateral relationships presented opportunity and peaceful development. India is a member of organisations from the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth of Nations and the United Nations from Nehru’s day, to many others including the G-20, the Asia Co-operation Dialogue, incorporating the re-vamped “Act East” policy, BRICS, BIMSTEC, the East Asia Summit, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and, most local to India, the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). Under Modi’s foreign policy platform – the “Modi Doctrine” – further improving relations with India’s neighbours will continue to be his priority because “peace and tranquillity” are essential to India’s development agenda.

The Brookings Institute, across a range of essays, argues that Modi’s economic engagement is, as seen, a vital thrust of his foreign policy, memorably describing his multiple overseas visits as “great-power speed-dating”, but noting that an overall frame linking his initiatives is yet to be developed. That may well be seen in his 2019 Election Manifesto.

While Nehru could not be described in quite the same way in his circumscribed world, he, too, was a charismatic, well-travelled leader. Although differing in caste and education, projecting his vision forward, his foreign, economic and peaceful trajectory benchmarks set at Indian independence, continue to inform the present government’s foreign policy.
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