



## The study of Indian foreign policy: Emerging trends and arrested directions

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## REVIEW ESSAY

### The study of Indian foreign policy: Emerging trends and arrested directions

Zorawar Daulet Singh, *Power and diplomacy: India's foreign policies during the Cold War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, ISBN 0199489645, 415 pp.

Alyssa Ayres, *Our time has come: How India is making its place in the world*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, ISBN 9780190494520, 360 pp.

Rajesh M. Basrur and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, *Rising India: Status and power*, London, Routledge, 2017, ISBN 9780415786317, 148 pp.

A default great power by certain conventional metrics yet a developing state of the Global South, a young state with a legacy of an ancient civilization, one of the top ten economies yet home to the world's largest number of poor people, and so on—these complexities and tensions inform India's behaviour on the world stage which can range from the idiosyncratic to the iconoclastic. Three recent works on Indian foreign policy situate themselves along these lines and aim to address these puzzles. In doing so, they advance refreshingly novel perspectives on Indian foreign policy. Z. D. Singh's *Power and Diplomacy* connects role conceptions to foreign policy outcomes during the early Cold War era and interrogates puzzles like why the Indian response to humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan in 1950 was marked distinctively from its response to similar crisis in the late 1960s. Alyssa Ayres provides a comprehensive account of India as an emerging power—with its pitfalls and potentials—through the prism of India-US relations with a contemporaneous accent. Rajesh Basrur and Kate Sullivan de Estrada undertake a grand historical sociological examination of India's foreign policy behaviour over seven decades from 1947 till 2016. Observing that India gained status on the world stage in the 1950s in spite of nominal material capabilities, Basrur and de Estrada explore why the country witnessed a policy shift towards acquisition of material power since then.

A nascent burgeoning of literature (mostly propelled by India's rising profile) notwithstanding, the study of Indian foreign policy presents daunting challenges and exciting opportunities in the same breath. Limited archival resources present a severely constricted source of data, while India as a

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country defies conventional theoretical assumptions on account of its size, complexity, and external orientation. Studies of Indian foreign policy often inadvertently fall prey to binary oppositions—for example, pragmatism versus idealism, static versus dynamic—or linear explanations like Non-Alignment; and at best explain variations entirely through the role of the executive leadership. *Power and Diplomacy* transcends these limitations and sets a new mark as Singh persuasively posits: ‘The central argument of this book is that this change in Indian statecraft resulted from a change in regional role conceptions from the Nehru to Indira Gandhi periods’ (2). Delving into extensive archival research and expert interviews to conduct in-depth case studies of six key junctures of Indian foreign policy under the premierships of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the author’s conceptual framing and methodological finesse reveal an unparalleled analytical incisiveness—this along with the novelty of the argument makes *Power and Diplomacy* a stellar classic in the shelves of Diplomatic History and Foreign Policy Analysis.

With lucid prose and vivid details, Singh’s narrative gracefully meanders from the early days of the Indian republic to the height of its glory in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The contrast between the personalities of the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and their close advisors are starkly revealed—while the crucial role played by the latter group is an invaluable contribution to the study of Indian foreign policy in itself, this ‘leader-advisor’ equation suggests potential lines of enquiry in foreign policy research elsewhere too. The policy choices reveal Nehru’s role as a ‘peacemaker’, procedurally striving for conflict resolution through collaboration and dialogue where stability in the Indian subcontinent is the function of peace and cooperation in the broader landscape of Asia in the first section. Thus, Nehruvian India grappled with a humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan in 1950, was discomfited in 1954 with the entry of an extra-regional power (the United States) in the Indian subcontinent through Cold War alliance politics, and made earnest attempts to resolve a crisis between United States and China over Taiwan in 1955. In contrast, the second section portrays Indira Gandhi as a ‘security-seeker’ entertaining ‘a competing approach where the idea of force had been shorn of much of its moral and ethical injunctions’, wherein security in the subcontinent assumed primacy and ‘further reinforced the growing importance of coercive power in Indira Gandhi’s preferred modes of behaviour’ (221). Accordingly, India under Indira walked the tightrope of Cold War politics during the Vietnam war to maintain an independent posture with credibility, but didn’t shy away from an uncharacteristically hard-headed approach as demonstrated through the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the accession of the Himalayan protectorate of Sikkim into India in 1975.

Yet to attribute changes in foreign policy mechanically to the Prime Ministers and key policymakers would be simplistic. The author to his credit unpacks the complexities of foreign policy decision-making and acknowledges the diversity of ideational and material factors through appropriate contextualization. Hence, Singh notes, ‘The perceived lessons of 1962 (Sino-Indian war) and 1965 (Indo-Pak war) led to fundamentally altering the image of the regional environment. Nehru’s construction of a benign image despite an uncertain regional security environment was displaced by an image emphasizing “caution” and “toughness”’ (221). *Power and Diplomacy* gives greater

attention to the process and drivers of India's external behaviour, historicizes the evolution of Indian strategic thought and practise, and offers crucial lessons for contemporary challenges. Future research can focus on episodes like the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the 1965 India-Pak war and the 1974 Peaceful Nuclear Explosion. While the use of rare archival sources and the innovative research design by itself are commendable, the originality of the insights makes it a classic beyond a specific country. For instance, the behaviour of a state under similar material conditions may be derived from India, but is universal in application: 'We cannot deduce a state's strategic inclinations and preferences from material power balances alone. Only a focus on the policy-makers' formative experiences and beliefs can reveal their role conception, and the purposes and functions that they envision for their state's foreign policy' (350).

Ayres's *Our Time Has Come* bears a greater thrust towards the contemporary period. The author first set foot in India in 1990 as a young student on a semester abroad program, and has since then been engaged with India both as a scholar and practitioner of diplomacy. *Our Time Has Come* charts India's evolution from the end of Cold War to the current era—this period encapsulates more than a quarter-century of rapid economic growth initiated through the liberalization of 1991, the emergence of India as a nuclear power in 1998, and a reconfiguration of India's relations with great powers. Ayres adds a unique context due to her role in the process initially as a ring-side spectator in the American research and think-tank community and then as an insider in the Obama administration. Although the volume doesn't provide ground-breaking revelations, it stands out for weaving a coherent narrative on the steady ascendancy of India in the global comity of nations and situating India-US engagement in a broader historical context. Divided into three sections following a chronological template, 'Looking Back' provides the background to Indian economic reforms of 1991, 'Transition' deals in detail the momentous changes since then and 'Looking Forward' sets the course for the onward trajectory of India in the world.

Meticulously researched with an eye for uncanny detail, Ayres weaves together disparate strands from Kautilya's Arthashastra (37–38) to cricket (179–181) to explain the ideas and practices shaping Indian behaviour at the world stage in lucid and accessible prose. Ayres finds great power aspirations as the primary factor driving Indian external behaviour, although the country continues to be sensitive to its internal developmental challenges. An attention to the influence of the domestic political milieu for US-India relations and the role of political economy and political parties marks a notable contribution of the book. The role of business in shaping the India-US engagement is a crucial takeaway with interviews and anecdotal evidence from industrialists and economic policymakers adding a refreshing touch. Ayres notes the emergence of global Indian businesses and offers unstinted support to the economic drivers of India-US relations and advocates greater market access and economic reforms in India—this may touch many a raw nerve among the Indian domestic audience, but this reviewer readily acknowledges the authors' argument here inasmuch as commerce has emerged as a crucial driver in bilateral ties. The final chapter, 'How the United States Should Work with a Rising India' is instructive as the author reviews the problems and prospects of US-India

bilateral relations and offers innovative policy recommendations. She notes the areas of convergences and suggests deepening trade and strategic partnerships, democratic collaborations, and facilitating Indian entry in arenas of global governance. Simultaneously she advises US to treat India as a 'Joint Venture Partner' (216) rather than an ally on account of India's postcolonial sensibilities and wisely counsels that despite an avowed strategic partnership, recognition of convergence of mutual interests by Indian policymakers shouldn't be conflated as default support for 'American strategic objectives' (224).

Broadly optimistic in tone, Ayres however ends the volume alarmed by the narrow foundation of academic engagement with India in American universities, as reflected through severely limited area studies and language programs. *Our Time Has Come* stands out as a timely, comprehensive and accessible account of India's rise in the world order, through the eyes of one of its well-wishers who has been an active participant in the process. Ayres shows a particular sensitivity to Indian concerns and is forthcoming with limitations on the American side as well. While one wishes for greater attention to the key episodes in India-US relations like the India-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement and the pressure emanating from a rising China, the volume represents impeccable research presented with a remarkable clarity and lucidity. Since the publication of *Our Time Has Come*, the advent of dark clouds of domestic populism and protectionist sentiments over the horizon of India-US relations can potentially cast its spell on the specific modes of cooperation in India-US relations (without necessarily impinging the broader bilateral relation). Nevertheless, the volume emerges as a valuable addition to the shelves of Indian foreign policy and is particularly noteworthy for bridging academic and policy scholarship. At the heart of the issue is what primarily drives the US-India relation—a necessary alignment of mutual interests would render it a transactional dimension whereas a convergence of fundamental values indicates a cohesive coalition. This can only be revealed with the passage of time.

The notion of status is understudied in international relations despite its recurring salience. How does India conceive of status, and what explains the variations in its approach towards it? Rajesh Basrur and Kate Sullivan de Estrada investigate this by deconstructing the notions of status in international relations and contesting the assumed interlinkage between material power and status. The authors find manifestation of this complexity in India's foreign policy behaviour. Interestingly, the authors take recourse to sociology 'to bring greater analytical clarity to the question of the sources of status' (10) and take Milner's theory of status relation as their ideational anchor to subdivide status into 'associational' and 'normative' categories. A concise volume of 139 pages, *Rising India* packs a punch above its weight and is notable for its immaculate research design and the novelty of the argument. The authors intend to 'offer a fresh interpretation of India's now seven decades-old search for higher status' and highlight 'not simply the material but also the social dimensions of status in world politics' (1). Unlike other volumes, this book treats India as a case study to make broader theoretical arguments in International Relations, namely the relation between power and status and state response thereof. Segregating Indian foreign policy into three major temporal phases—Nehruvian era (1947–64), post-Nehruvian era (1964–1991), and the post-Cold War era (1991 onwards)—the status-seeking approaches of each of these

periods is weighed with extant capabilities and examined against two key global norms, viz. the liberal economic order and nuclear non-proliferation. The different eras under consideration facilitate 'temporal variation in both India's status-seeking strategies and in the dominant systemic norms that typically determine the sources of status' (13).

The empirical findings suggest that the Nehruvian phase illustrated a temporary rise in status, which eventually was circumscribed by a lack of attendant material capabilities (exemplified by the 1962 Sino-Indian War). The second phase demonstrated 'incipient power, limited status', as India resorted to norm innovation and norm contestation by 'ultimately carving out an innovative status for India as a nuclear-capable power but not a nuclear-armed power' as it conducted Peaceful Nuclear Explosion in 1974 and refused to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime despite voluntary adherence to NPT guidelines. In the final phase, 'India's search for higher status has led it to change tack from a fearful rejection of the power structures of international society to a more confident engagement with these' as India liberalized its economy, forged closer links with great powers and was progressively accommodated within the non-proliferation architecture. An intriguing question remains whether India's temporary rise in status in early years was driven by the role of individual (PM Nehru), ideational factors (Non-Alignment), or the global context (advent of decolonization); the limited scope of the Routledge Focus series probably prevented the authors from exploring this further. The volume concludes that although 'power is not the sole requisite for status', the latter 'is always subject to the power test'. Hence 'combination of material power and adherence to norms', possibly supplemented by norm creation, is suggested as the main route to higher status. The findings bear potential for further theoretical development as well as empirical examination across states, and is instructive for 'disentangling security-seeking behaviour and status-seeking behaviour' (115). Its slim volume compensated by methodological and theoretical rigour, *Rising India* makes a provocative point with logical congruency and systematic analysis, and opens up a new avenue of research into Indian foreign policy and International Relations.

All three volumes unpack the Indian state and foreign policymaking at various levels and are in sync with the growing trend of research in International Relations which turns the spotlight on domestic factors. These works supplement the growing corpus of literature on Indian foreign policy which explores uncharted areas and is inclined for conceptual and methodological novelties like Wojczewski (2018), Pant (2018), and Chatterjee (2019), or examines emerging historical sources to offer fresh perspectives like Madan (2020); and shall hopefully engender a cohesive research program. These volumes combine systematic research and engagement with the policy domain in varying degrees—differing timelines and orientation notwithstanding—and thus speak to policy at various levels without losing the scholastic mooring. They collectively represent an encouraging turn towards diverse disciplines and sources and a greater appetite to discern India with its attendant complexities through a certain historical and sociological appreciation. Two lacunae continue to afflict academic engagement with Indian foreign policy: firstly, an empirical assessment on the relative role of global versus domestic factors in foreign policy decision-making, and secondly, understanding why India

behaves in the way it does. A welcome attempt towards addressing these issues, these books represent first steps in a journey of a thousand miles—for undertheorizing of the state is a pervasive shortcoming in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis itself; and even sustained academic engagement pertaining to the nature of the Indian state is conspicuously absent in the broader social science discourse. The authors deserve applause for not just enriching the study of Indian foreign policy with novel analytical and methodological tools, but also for broadening and widening the largely Western template of Foreign Policy Analysis. In doing so, they have paved the way for further topical research in multiple dimensions.

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### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Notes on contributor**

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