

# Indian strategic culture: the debate and its consequences

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## Introduction

Time and again, India's behaviour in the realm of foreign and security policy has confounded observers, deviating as it does from the 'norm' set by other major powers. Indian foreign and security policy has been deemed incoherent and inconsistent.<sup>1</sup> As India's weight has grown in the international system in recent years, there is a perception that India is on the cusp of achieving Great Power status. It is repeated *ad nauseum* in the Indian and often in global media, and India is already being asked to behave like one. In the past, non-alignment was the broader framework through which India had viewed its relationship with the outside world. The idea of retaining 'strategic autonomy' was seen as crucial by the Indian elites and non-alignment was an instrument towards that end.

Today, when India wants to shape the international system as opposed to being merely its referent object, it should be expected that its foreign policy will be anchored on a planned augmentation of the power of the nation as a whole. Some are indeed suggesting that after years of rejecting *power politics* and emphasizing the importance of international *norms*, India has now 'begun to lean towards greater strategic realism'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, much like in the past, Indian adversaries seem to have been successful in limiting India's strategic options even at a time when Indian capabilities—economic and military—seem to be at an all-time high. A state can promulgate law and pursue strategy once it has not only achieved a legitimate monopoly on violence but also when it is free of the coercive violence of other states.<sup>3</sup> This brings to the fore the issue of Indian strategic culture and its impact on shaping Indian foreign and security policy. This chapter examines the debate on Indian strategic culture and the consequences it has had on Indian foreign and security policies.

Scholars of international politics have increasingly focused on *culture* as an important variable determining state behaviour in the international realm. Culture is an amorphous concept and scholars using the term have often been blamed for resorting to a kitchen-sink approach because of the vagueness in defining the boundaries of this term. Culture can refer both to a set of evaluative standards, such as norms or values, and to cognitive standards, such as rules or models defining what entities and actors exist in a system and how they operate and inter-relate.<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that the cultural environment affects not only the incentives for different kinds of

state behaviour but also how states perceive themselves, what is called a state identity.<sup>5</sup> Cultural elements of a state's domestic environment, thereby, become an important factor shaping the national security interests and the security policies of states.

While critics have argued that culture does not matter in global politics and foreign policy, and cultural effects can be reduced to epiphenomena of the distribution of power and capabilities, one can surely examine culture as one of the variables shaping a state's foreign policy even if there are reasons to be cautious about using culture to explain political outcomes.

### Strategic culture deficit

India's ability to think strategically on issues of national security has been considered at best questionable. George Tanham, in his landmark study on Indian strategic thought, pointed out that Indian elites have shown little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about national strategy. He argued that this lack of long-term planning and strategy derives from India's historical and cultural developmental patterns. These include the Hindu view of life as largely unknowable, thereby being outside man's control, and the Hindu concept of time as eternal, thereby discouraging planning. As a consequence, Tanham argued that India has been on the strategic defensive throughout its history, reluctant to assert itself except within the subcontinent.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Sandy Gordon suggests that 'the hierarchical nature of caste naturally leads to a propensity towards compartmentalization and exclusivity', which 'undermines seriously coordination and planning'.<sup>7</sup>

India's former Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, also examined the evolution of strategic culture in Indian society and in its political decision-making class, with a particular reference to post-independence India. He considered the Indian political elites as not thinking strategically about foreign policy and defence issues; with his guns particularly trained on India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, he pointed to Nehru's 'idealistic romanticism' and his unwillingness to institutionalize strategic thinking, policy formulation and implementation.<sup>8</sup>

It is ironic, however, that even when Singh was himself Minister of External Affairs in 1998–2002, there was little evidence that anything of substance really changed in so far as the strategic dimension of India's foreign policy is concerned. For all the blame that Singh laid at Nehru's door, even he and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in which he served did not move towards the institutionalization of strategic thinking, policy formulation and implementation. Perhaps the Indian strategic culture became too powerful a constraint for even him to overcome?

Critics of these views have argued that claims made by Tanham and others regarding India's lack of strategic culture can not only be refuted easily but such arguments also lack methodological rigour.<sup>9</sup> Others have suggested that Tanham is being ethnocentric in his claims about the impact of culture on Indian thinking.<sup>10</sup> In response to Tanham's argument that India lacks a tradition of strategic thinking, it has been suggested that 'India has had strategy and grand strategy, and one could distil these from Indian pronouncements and behaviour, but it cannot produce a canon of strategic thought of any great lineage, and certainly not comparable to Europe's'.<sup>11</sup> Others see bureaucratic inertia, political ineptitude and the state of civil-military relations as factors responsible for the absence of strategic thinking in India.<sup>12</sup>

However, contra Tanham, an analysis of the strategic behaviour of five pan-Indian powers spanning over two millennia—the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Mughals, British India and the Republic of India—suggests a remarkable continuity. These five powers, according to this argument, seem to have followed a similar grand strategic paradigm that includes a drive towards power maximization under the veneer of morality, striving for regional hegemony in

the sub-continent, use of war as part of the statecraft, a defensive strategic orientation against extra-regional states, and rapid adaptation to changing political and military trends.<sup>13</sup>

Yet with the exception of the *Arthashastra*, attributed to the ancient Indian scholar Kautilya, there is no major written text that has actually recorded Indian strategic thinking. Before India's emergence as a nation-state in 1947, Indian strategic culture was projected through Lord Wellesly's *Subsidiary Alliance* system, whereby various Indian rulers were prepared to outsource their security to the British Raj and live under its protection. Unlike China, which has a tradition of a strong central state dominating the lives of the people, in India Society has always been more important than the State. This was one of the reasons why India welcomed Queen Victoria's famous proclamation in 1858 that the British Raj would not interfere in the functioning of Indian society, disclaiming 'the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects'.

Jawaharlal Nehru dominated the Indian foreign and security policy landscape in the immediate aftermath of Indian independence till his death in 1964. It was his *worldview* that shaped Indian foreign policy priorities and Indian strategic culture can be viewed through the prism of Nehruvian predilections. Nehru was a strategic thinker and his non-alignment was a classic 'balance of power' policy in a bipolar world where the two superpowers could not go to war because of nuclear weapons. He was an internationalist. However, nonalignment was reduced to a dogma and an ideology after him and became in effect isolationism. India was forced to alter its economic and foreign policies because of the grave economic crisis in the early 1990s. Isolationism did not lead to a careful assessment of the dynamic international security situation and exploration of options for India.

For a long time there was a myth propagated by the political elites in the country that there was a general consensus across political parties on major foreign policy issues. Aside from the fact that such a consensus has been more a result of intellectual apathy than any real attempt to forge a coherent grand strategy that cuts across ideological barriers, this is most certainly an exaggeration, as until the early 1990s the Congress Party's dominance over the Indian political landscape was almost complete and there was no political organization of an equal capacity that could bring to bear its influence on foreign and security policy issues in the same measure. It was the rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP that gave India a significantly different voice on foreign policy, but more importantly it was the changes in the international environment that forced Indian policy-makers to challenge some of the assumptions underlying their approach to the outside world.

If we define *strategic culture* more narrowly in terms of its three basic components—political military culture (civil-military relations), domestic attitudes towards the use of force, and domestic political culture—then it becomes easier to identify how these three have shaped Indian foreign policy and security behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

## Marginalization of the military

Indian politicians after independence in 1947 viewed the Indian Army with suspicion as the last supporters of the British Raj and did their best to isolate the military from policy and influence. This attitude was further reinforced by the views of two giants of the Indian nationalist movement, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's ardent belief in non-violence (*ahimsa*) left little room for accepting the role of the use of force in an independent India. It also shaped the views on military and defence of the first generation of post-independence political leaders in India. More important, though, has been the legacy of Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who laid the institutional foundations for civil-military relations in India. His obsession with

economic development was only matched by his disdain and distrust of the military, resulting in the sidelining of defence planning in India.<sup>15</sup>

By institutionalizing civilian supremacy over the country's military apparatus, Nehru also ensured that the experiences in neighbouring Pakistan, where military had become the dominant political force soon after independence, would not be repeated in India. The Indian civilian elite also did not want the emergence of a rival military elite with direct access to political leadership. Two significant changes immediately after independence that reduced the influence of the military and strengthened civilian control were the abolition of the post of Commander-in-Chief, which had hitherto been the main military adviser to the government, and the strengthening of the civilian-led Ministry of Defence.<sup>16</sup> Other organizational changes followed that further strengthened civilian hold over the armed forces. The Indian national security decision-making system was devised by Lord Ismay, Mountbatten's Chief of Staff during Partition in 1947, and handed over to a civilian government and military leaderships, both of which were amateurs in matters of national security. The Army, Navy and Air Force Acts passed during 1947–50 made those forces independent juridical entities outside the government, leading to the creation of a civilian Ministry of Defence with Armed Forces Commands staying outside the government. It has been argued that as a consequence, India is among only a handful of nations where civilian administrations wield so much power over the military.<sup>17</sup>

Along with Nehru, another civilian who left a lasting impact on the evolution of civil-military relations was V.K. Krishna Menon, India's Minister of Defence in 1957–62. During his tenure, which has been described as the most controversial stewardship of the Indian defence ministry, he heralded a number of organizational changes that were not very popular with the armed forces.<sup>18</sup> The first major civil-military clash in independent India also took place under his watch, when B.K. Thimayya, the then well-respected Chief of Army, decided to bypass Menon in 1959 and went straight to the Prime Minister with his litany of complaints, which included, among others, Menon's interference in the administration of the armed forces. The situation was so precarious that Thimayya even submitted his resignation to Nehru, which he was persuaded to withdraw later.<sup>19</sup> While this episode demonstrated that the strength of civil-military relations in India in so far as Thimayya used the due process to challenge his civilian superior, it also revealed the dangers of civilian intervention in matters that the military feels belong to its domain. The consequences of such civil-military friction was to be grave for India in the 1962 war with China.

Despite any military experience, Nehru and Menon were actively involved in operational-level planning before the outbreak of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. They 'directly supervised the placement of individual brigades, companies, and even platoons, as the Chinese and Indian forces engaged in mutual encirclement of isolated outposts'.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, when China won the war decisively, the blame was laid at the doors of Menon and Nehru. Menon resigned, while Nehru's reputation suffered lasting damage. It also made it clear, both to the civilians and the military, that purely operational matters were best left to the military. Some have argued that since then a convention has been established whereby while the operational directive is laid down by the political leadership, the actual planning of operations is left to the chiefs of staff.<sup>21</sup>

Stephen Rosen, in his study of the impact of societal structures on the military effectiveness of a state, argues that the separation of the Indian military from Indian society, while preserving the coherence of the Indian army, has led to a reduction in the effective military power of the Indian state.<sup>22</sup> While India has been successful in evolving a sustained tradition of strict civilian control over the military since its independence, unlike its immediate neighbours, India has

been unable to evolve institutions and procedures that would allow the military to substantially participate in the national security decision-making processes. This has significantly reduced the effectiveness with which India can wield its military as an instrument of national power.

### **Inability to use force effectively**

A nation's vital interests, in the ultimate analysis, can only be preserved and enhanced if the nation has sufficient power capabilities at its disposal. Not only must a nation possess such capabilities, there must also be a willingness to employ the required forms of power in pursuit of those interests. India's lack of an instinct for power is most palpable in the realm of the military, where, unlike other major global powers of the past and the present, India has failed to master the creation, deployment and use of its military instruments in support of its national objectives.<sup>23</sup> Nehru envisioned making India a global leader without any help from the nation's armed forces, arguing, 'the right approach to defence is to avoid having unfriendly relations with other countries—to put it differently, war today is, and ought to be, out of the question'.<sup>24</sup> War has been systematically factored out of Indian foreign policy and the national security matrix, with resulting ambiguity about India's ability to withstand major wars of the future. The modern state system, in fact the very nature of the state itself, has been determined to a significant degree by the changing demands of war and it has developed through a series of what Philip Bobbitt called 'Epochal Wars'.<sup>25</sup> A defining feature of any state is its ability to make war and keep peace.

Military power, more often than not, affects the success with which other instruments of statecraft are employed, as it always lurks in the background of inter-state relations, even when nations are at peace with each other. Military power remains central to the course of international politics as force retains its role as the final arbiter among states in an anarchical international system.<sup>26</sup> States may not always need to resort to the actual use of force, but military power vitally affects the manner in which states deal with each other even during peace time, despite what the protagonists of globalization and liberal institutionalism might claim. A state's diplomatic posture will lack effectiveness if it is not backed by a credible military posture. In the words of Thomas Schelling, 'like the threat of a strike in industrial relations, the threat of divorce in a family dispute, or the threat of bolting the party at a political convention, the threat of violence continuously circumscribes international politics'.<sup>27</sup> Even in the age of nuclear weapons, contrary to suggestions in some quarters that the utility of force has declined, military strategy has merely morphed into the art of coercion, of intimidation, a contest of nerves and risk-taking and what has been termed 'the diplomacy of violence'.

Few nations face the kind of security challenges that confront India. Yet, since independence military was never seen as a central instrument in the achievement of Indian national priorities, with the tendency of Indian political elites being to downplay the importance of military power. India ignored the defence sector after independence and paid inadequate attention to its defence needs. Even though the policy-makers themselves had little knowledge of critical defence issues, the defence forces had little or no role in the formulation of defence policy until 1962.<sup>28</sup> Divorcing foreign policy from military power was a recipe for disaster, as India realized in 1962 when even Nehru was forced to concede that 'military weakness has been a temptation, and a little military strength may be a deterrent'.<sup>29</sup> In recent times, this phenomenon was exemplified when after the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, India found that it no longer had the capability of imposing quick and effective retribution on Pakistan and that it no longer enjoyed the kind of conventional superiority vis-à-vis its regional adversary that it had enjoyed for the past five decades.<sup>30</sup> This was a surprising conclusion for a nation that the

international community regarded as a major global economic and military power, pursuing a defence modernization programme estimated at over US \$50,000m. over the next five years.

A state's legitimacy is tied to its ability to monopolize the use of force and operate effectively in an international strategic environment, and India had lacked clarity on this relationship between the use of force and its foreign policy priorities.

### **Discomfort with power**

A fundamental quandary that has long dogged India in the realm of foreign affairs, which has become even more acute with India's ascent in the international order, is the need, as Sunil Khilnani put it, to 'instruct ourselves on the new necessities and responsibilities of world power—to instil in our elites an instinct for power'.<sup>31</sup> Power lies at the heart of international politics. It affects the influence that states exert over one another, thereby shaping political outcomes. The success and failure of a nation's foreign policy is largely a function of its power and the manner in which that power is wielded. The exercise of power can be shocking and at times corrupting, but power is absolutely necessary to fight the battles that must be fought. India's ambivalence about power and its use has resulted in a situation where even as India's economic and military capabilities have gradually expanded, it has failed to evolve a commensurate strategic agenda and requisite institutions so as to be able to mobilize and use its resources optimally.

Hans Morgenthau, the arch advocate of International Relations (IR) *realism*, once famously wrote, 'The prestige of a nation is its reputation for power. That reputation, the reflection of the reality of power in the mind of the observers, can be as important as the reality of power itself. What others think about us is as important as what we actually are'.<sup>32</sup> India faces a unique conundrum: its political elites desperately want global recognition for India as a major power and all the prestige and authority associated with it. Yet, they continue to be reticent about the acquisition and use of power in foreign affairs. Most recently, this ambivalence was expressed by the Indian Minister of Commerce in a speech when he suggested that, 'this word power often makes me uncomfortable'.<sup>33</sup> Though he was talking about the economic rise of India and the challenges that India faced as it continued to strive for sustained economic growth, his discomfort with the notion of India as a rising power was indicative of a larger reality in Indian polity. This ambivalence about the use of power in international relations, where 'any prestige or authority eventually rely upon traditional measures of power, whether military or economic', is curious, as the Indian political elites have rarely shied away from the maximization of power in the realm of domestic politics, thereby corroding the institutional fabric of liberal democracy in the country.<sup>34</sup>

In what has been diagnosed as a 'mini state syndrome', those states that do not have the material capabilities to make a difference to the outcomes at the international level often denounce the concept of power in foreign policy-making.<sup>35</sup> India had long been one such state, viewing itself as an object of the foreign policies of a small majority of powerful nations. As a consequence, the Indian political and strategic elite developed a suspicion of power politics, with the word 'power' itself acquiring a pejorative connotation in so far as foreign policy was concerned. The relationship between power and foreign policy was never fully understood, leading to a progressive loss in India's ability to wield power effectively in the international realm.

### **Lack of institutionalization**

A major consequence of this lack of an Indian strategic culture has been a perceptible lack of institutionalization of the foreign policy-making in India. At its very foundation, Indian

democracy is sustained by a range of institutions from the more formal ones of the executive, legislative and judiciary, to the less formal ones of broader civil society. It is these institutions that in large measure have allowed Indian democracy to thrive and flourish for more than 50 years now, despite a number of constraints that have led to the failure of democracy in many other societies. However, in the realm of foreign policy it is the lack of institutionalization that has allowed a drift to set in without any long-term orientation.

Some have laid the blame on Nehru for his unwillingness to construct strategic planning architecture because he single-handedly shaped Indian foreign policy during his tenure.<sup>36</sup> Even his successors, however, have failed to pursue institutionalization in a consistent manner. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 1999 promising that it would establish a National Security Council (NSC) to analyse the military, economic and political threats to the nation and to advise the government on meeting these challenges effectively. While it did set up the NSC in the late 1990s and defined its role in policy formulation, the BJP neglected the institutionalization of the NSC and the building up of its capabilities to play the role assigned to it, thereby failing to underpin national security by structural and systematic institutional arrangements. Important national security decisions were taken in an ad hoc manner without utilizing the Cabinet Committee on Security, the Strategic Policy Group (comprising key secretaries, service chiefs and heads of intelligence agencies), and officials of the National Security Advisory Board. Moreover, as has been rightly pointed out, the way the NSC is structured makes long-term planning impossible, thereby negating the very purpose of its formation, and its effectiveness remains hostage to the weight of the National Security Adviser (NSA) in national politics.<sup>37</sup> The NSA has become the most powerful authority on national security, sidelining the institution of the NSC.

While the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance came to power in 2004 promising that it would make the NSC a professional and effective institution and blaming the NDA for making only cosmetic changes in the institutional arrangements, it has so far failed to make it work in an optimal manner whereby the NSC anticipates national security threats, co-ordinates the management of national security, and engenders long-term planning by generating new and bold ideas. An effective foreign policy institutional framework would not only identify the challenges, but would also develop a coherent strategy to deal with it, organize and motivate the bureaucracy, and persuade and inform the public. The NSC, by itself, is not a panacea, particularly in light of the inability of the NSC in the USA to successfully mediate in the bureaucratic wars and effectively co-ordinate policy. However, the lack of an effective NSC in India is reflective of India's ad hoc decision-making process in the realm of foreign policy. If there is any continuity in India's approach to foreign policy and national security, it is the inability and unwillingness of policy-makers across political ideologies to give a strategic vision to their nation's foreign policy priorities.

## Conclusions

There is clearly an appreciation in Indian policy-making circles of India's rising capabilities. It is reflected in a gradual expansion of Indian foreign policy activity in recent years, in India's attempt to reshape its defence forces, in its desire to seek greater global influence. As India has risen in the global inter-state hierarchy in recent years, three different streams of thinking have been identified in the Indian strategic discourse: Nehruvianism, neoliberalism and hyper-realism.<sup>38</sup> It is not entirely clear if these three 'schools' of Indian strategic thinking can generate long-term direction for the country. Indian grand strategy continues to be marked by its absence.

Since foreign policy issues do not tend to win votes, there is little incentive for political parties to devote serious attention to them and the result is ad hoc responses to various crises as they emerge. It is possible that with faster economic growth and increased interaction with the international community, Indian strategic culture will undergo a change in the coming years. If the past is any guide, then this process might take much longer than expected.

## Notes

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