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Power & Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies during the Cold War

Zorawar Daulet Singh

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Given the huge effort that goes into any major doctoral dissertation, its later publication in book form makes it a formidable oeuvre. That is particularly true with Zorawar Daulet Singh's book. He is a published author and a reputed commentator on international affairs. He spares us the typical first chapter of a doctoral dissertation that examines the research question from a highly theoretical perspective. Instead, the author has skilfully blended theory into a powerful, readable introduction, providing this work's leit motif. The book is an intellectual tour de force, impressive on many counts.

Zorawar's central point: India's foreign policy under Nehru in the 1950s was that of a *peacemaker*. '...there is a dearth of serious work on Nehru's regional policy in the 1950s...interpretations of Nehru are either "hagiographic" or polemical critiques...' (p. 4). 'Nehru perceived traditional realism as "the tactical small stuff" and felt his role conception for India "was more strategic".' (p. 5). In the 1970s under Indira Gandhi, India became a *security seeker*, with a network conception of order and security. That produced change in the regional regional policy behaviour between Nehru and Indira Gandhi. He argues that among foreign policy analysts there has been excessive focus on nonalignment, and insufficient attention has been paid, especially in relation to the 1950s, to look beyond the India-China relationship. Many have tended retrofit into the narrative of actions in that first decade the 1962 India-China confrontation. This has underplayed Nehru's larger Asian and global conception. This is a key message in the first half of the book, while the second half looks at Indira Gandhi's policies.

Nehru asserted a unity between means and ends; that was for him a two way street. Nehru also evoked Kautilya's support in linking means to ends. Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel viewed the events very differently, which the author characterizes as 'ominous' terms — reflecting his own antipathy to Patel's conception of India's external interests (p. 74).

Zorawar devotes considerable attention to the East Pakistan crisis of 1950, which is an under studied event. Handling that crisis, while avoiding pressures from domestic realpolitik hawks, Nehru sought to mute the security dilemma, which he calls an 'an important function of India's peacemaker role'. For instance, in his parliament speech of 17 March 1950, when he was pressed for action, 'which was an euphemism for war', he stressed India's friendly relations with her neighbours (p. 75). Ultimately what pushed Pakistan and Western countries to

change their position was not so much the potential for escalation, but their fear that Nehru might lose control of foreign policy.

The thesis that Nehru's foreign policy was that of a peacemaker is interesting but incomplete. The major event not addressed in the book is the failure of Nehru's China policy, which originated in a misjudgement that goes back to 1950. That is also when Sardar Patel's advice that the border issue be taken up with China was spurned. Indian maps had hitherto shown the Western sector as undemarcated; new maps issued that year put forward the entire India-China border as unequivocally settled. That line of argument was extended into the 1954 negotiations over Tibet, when it was suggested that if China raised the border issue, 'we could walk out of the Conference and break off the negotiations'.¹ The 1950 posture that there was nothing to negotiate became a rigid doctrine that led India to reject compromise, notably in the Nehru-Zhou talks in Delhi of April 1960, and in subsequent dialogue, right up to the Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 talks with Deng Xiaoping. It also shaped Indian public perception, which has constrained the space for a settlement for succeeding governments. Did Nehru's peacemaker role conception lull him into a self-image, that in turn held back a national self-interest focused foreign policy?

How should we see Nehru's response to Pakistan entering into a military alliance with the US in 1954? A number of Indian foreign policy and defence officials advised that India should seek aid from the Soviet Union and that India should also build up its defence capabilities. This was rejected by Nehru on the ground that a competitive military buildup would be 'exceedingly wrong policy and would lead us in the wrong direction' (p. 112). The author concludes that for Nehru the US Pakistan pact 'could only be responded to effectively at this systemic and extra regional level', whatever that means. Nehru then chose to immerse himself in Indochina affairs (p. 115).

It is interesting how the same facts can be presented in different ways. In 1955 Indian Ambassador Tyabji and Commonwealth Secretary Dutt urged that India should offer military and material assistance to Indonesia. The author approvingly describes Nehru's rejection of these suggestions as 'undesirable', and which might result in India getting 'hopelessly entangled' (p. 127). But in fact India's long-persisting indifference towards Indonesia – despite all the help that Nehru had extended to Soekarno in the period 1946-50 when Indonesia faced a desperate struggle against residual Dutch domination efforts – seriously damaged an important relationship. The India-Indonesia relationship has received too little attention from our scholars.

In the book's second half, Indira Gandhi's role conception as a security seeker is defined in terms of three elements: first, a narrow definition of India's interests, centred on the subcontinent, rather than any Asian space; second, a divisible conception of security and an inclination to leverage balance of power; third, an inclination to employ coercive means to pursue geopolitical aims in South Asia,

rather than accommodation. Zorawar asserts that Indira Gandhi had an ‘instinctive approach to power politics’. (p. 219). Her efforts in Vietnam in 1966 were conditioned not by peacemaking, but by ‘an emerging security seeker role’ in order to shape events to India’s advantage (p. 257). A deeper question remains. If the leader of the country, whose predecessor had been a peacemaker, shifts to the role concept of a security seeker, does that not represent a failure of the peacemaker’s policies? Should not that acid question be faced?

A major chapter on the Bangladesh war is studded with references. The book notes that visiting India in July 1971, immediately prior to his secret journey to Beijing via Pakistan, Kissinger warned PN Haksar that in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict ‘China would certainly react’ and...while that would lead India to rely on Soviet assistance...(that) will cause complications for us in the US’ (p.290). Zorawar does not mention that in talks with Premier Zhou Enlai a week later, Kissinger did his best to wind up Zhou, indirectly urging China to intervene in a possible an India-Pakistan conflict. This emerges from the near-verbatim records of the Kissinger-Zhou discussions, of July and October 1971, available at the US National Archives. Reporting to President Nixon on 11 November 1971, he covered the Bangladesh crisis: ‘Indeed the Chinese seemed more sober about the dangers than they did in July...while China clearly stands behind Pakistan, I detected less passion and more caution from Chou than I had in July...Chou, despite his promise never came back to this subject...’² The new element was of course the Indo-Soviet Treaty.

The penultimate chapter narrates Sikkim developments in 1971-75, culminating in its integration with India. With meticulous research and interviews with key officials, Zorawar gives detailed insight, including access to KS Bajpai’s personal papers, perhaps a first for a scholar. That chapter ends with Indira Gandhi’s comment on neighborhood policy that I supplied to the author (p. 342). That came at a Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs in August 1974, just before the first Chukha Agreement was signed with Bhutan. In fact, that evening at a celebratory dinner with the Bhutan delegation, I asked Cabinet Secretary Krishnaswami Rao Saheb if PM’s trenchant remarks, representing a rare policy directive, might be circulated to all ministries as a guideline; he reacted with a brief laugh and changed the subject. The Indian system does not favor clear or explicit policy statements.

The concluding chapter summarizes the narrative. Nehru and his advisers ‘were not insensitive to or uninterested in India’s immediate neighbourhood... (for them) prioritizing India’s role in the subcontinent was narrow, short-sighted and ultimately irrelevant if the systemic and regional order issues remained unaddressed’. Indira Gandhi sought ‘to buttress India’s geopolitical position in the subcontinent...Nehru’s geopolitics no longer found resonance with Indira Gandhi and her advisers’ (p. 347-8). And yet, for both peacemaker Nehru and realist Indira Gandhi, building relationships with Asian countries was never a real priority. That, and a ‘Look East’ Asia policy awaited Narasimha Rao.

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¹ Ministry of External Affairs note of 3 December 1953 on ‘the strategy for discussions with China on Tibet’, AS Bhasin *India-China Relations 1947-2000: A Documentary Study*, Vol. II p.973.

² Kissinger memorandum to Nixon, 11 November 2071, *My October China Visit: Discussion of the Issues*, pp. 5 and 20, US National Archives.