

Review article

Understanding change and continuity in India's foreign policy

ASEEMA SINHA

The US pivot and Indian foreign policy: Asia's evolving balance of power. By Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 164pp. £45.00. ISBN 978 1 13755 771 1. Available as e-book.

India at the global high table: the quest for regional primacy and strategic autonomy. By Tersita C. Schaffer and Howard B. Schaffer. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press. 2016. 350pp. £26.95. ISBN 978 0 81572 821 4. Available as e-book.

The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy. Edited by David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan and Srinath Raghavan. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. 768pp. £95.00. ISBN 978 0 19874 353 8. Available as e-book.

This article reviews a few recent books on India's foreign policy. All three books discussed here confront the task of understanding India's perspectives and foreign behaviour through the prism of change amid continuity. They offer an Indian perspective viewed from the inside. They also characterize the global changes and challenges, understood in the International Relations literature as the emergence of a multipolar world and the ongoing power transition,¹ in specific ways. They provide new concepts to help readers interpret India's strategies and actions, but most importantly they offer solid empirical foundations for understanding India's foreign policy-in-motion. These books should be read in conjunction with analysis that seeks to understand the rise of other similar powers, such as China, Brazil and South Africa.² They are evidence that the field of Indian foreign policy is rich and holds great promise and are only a small subset of the huge outpouring of the literature on the subject. They also highlight the need to be more theoretically self-conscious, empirically dense and methodologically rigorous. Current

¹ See A. F. K. Organski, *World politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds, *Parity and power* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Charles A. Kupchan, Emmanuel Adler, Jean-Marc Coicaud and Yuen Foong Khong, eds, *Power in transition: the peaceful change of international order* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2001); Christopher Layne, 'The waning of US hegemony—myth or reality?', *International Security* 34: 1, 2009, pp. 147–72; G. John Ikenberry, 'Power and liberal order: America's post war world order in transition', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5: 2, 2005, pp. 133–52.

² Paola Subacchi, 'New power centres and new power brokers: are they shaping a new economic order?', *International Affairs* 84: 3, 2008, pp. 485–98.

and future researchers can and should learn many of these lessons from these excellent books.

The three books should be recognized for numerous contributions to our understanding of India's ongoing challenges in a multipolar global world. I outline three major contributions: they provide new empirical details about India's behaviour and views; explore the reasons for this behaviour in a number of ways; and suggest lines of continuity and change that are evident in how India views the world. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the books reviewed here open the way for a much-needed new paradigm of foreign policy analysis. Although none move towards building a new framework for understanding India's changing orientation, they are suggestive of the need for one—I suggest some elements of what such a framework would look like at the end of this article.

This review article is organized in the following way. First, I summarize the main arguments of each of the books under discussion. Then, I engage in a more specific analysis of some important themes, paying special attention to what readers learn about larger questions of foreign policy. In the third part, I try to outline the elements of a new framework that allows us to place the key findings of the volumes in proper perspective. The study of Indian foreign policy is at a cusp and holds the potential for innovative theoretical work as well as rigorous empirical analysis of many issue areas, global institutions and key relationships.

The US pivot and Indian foreign policy

Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi's book is a pithy yet coherent volume on how Indian foreign policy elites are responding to the US's pivot towards Asia, initiated in 2011. It has a simple and powerful argument woven through its varied chapters on India–US, India–China and India–Japan relations, as well as on India's relations with other south-east Asian neighbours. The book argues that India is using a hedging strategy, rather than balancing or accommodating.³ This hedging strategy aims to 'recalibrate' its relationship with the US. Contrary to theoretical expectations, this recalibration does not amount to counterbalancing China, but rather to 'normalizing' its relationship with China. The third pillar of the hedging strategy is what Pant and Joshi call a 'localized form of balancing' (p. vii), whereby India aims to enhance its regional relations with the south-east and east Asian countries for insurance purposes. Each of these pillars is explained in detail in separate chapters.

³ The field of International Relations has developed many theories about what different powers may do when faced with a power transition. Some authors argue that rising powers are more likely to counterbalance or be accommodated by the global system. Some have suggested the concept of soft balancing. See Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 7–45; T. V. Paul, 'Soft balancing in the age of US primacy', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 46–71. Others argue that hedging or accommodating strategies may be more prevalent. See Rosemary Foot, 'Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, pp. 77–94.

India at the global high table

This volume is written by a husband and wife pair of American diplomats who have observed India through their professional practice. Their task is to stitch together a view of India through the various case-studies drawn from their experiences. Their analysis and perspective are unique in being objective but also empathetic. The first half of the book provides readers with a broad sweep of historical analysis, starting from pre-independence days, to the Nehruvian era, which lasted beyond Nehru, followed by an analysis of the post-Cold War era. The authors' focus is on highlighting how India's strategic vision and policy have changed across the past decades. Despite many radical transformations, Schaffer and Schaffer were struck by running threads and continuity in how India makes and pursues its foreign policy. They note that the principle of 'strategic autonomy' is essentially non-alignment adapted for the new age.

The core contribution of the book is to summarize and outline what the authors call 'the negotiating style of India' by providing detailed case-studies of many negotiating events and agreements through chapters seven to twelve. These case-studies are very valuable as they offer a detailed picture of the specific actors, their concerns and the negotiating outcomes. This section of the book gives a rare insight into many distinct policy dilemmas and issues, analysed historically. India's negotiations with Pakistan and China as well as its smaller neighbours are also analysed separately.

Some of the negotiations described suggest that successes have been achieved *despite* the constraints imposed by India's negotiating style. One of the intriguing findings is that the process and structure of negotiations have certain effects. This is in line with some International Relations research.⁴ The experience of the negotiation process creates 'tools they can use—if they have the determination and patience—to work through their inevitable problems' (p. 181). The chapters on defence negotiations, the nuclear deal and climate negotiations offer a fascinating overview of India's changing strategies and global responses. It should be very useful both for specialists in each of these areas and for those interested in evaluating the comparative sweep across institutions and global policy areas. One interesting implication of the authors' analysis worth exploring is whether the negotiating culture has shifted away from old styles given India's rising status and experiences. What would it take to change this negotiating style?

The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy

This is an edited volume with a wide scope common to a handbook format and structure. Its 50 chapters cover a very broad and comprehensive set of issues. All three editors have written other books on India's foreign actions and behav-

⁴ John Odell, ed., *Negotiating trade: developing countries in the WTO and NAFTA* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

ious, and they have produced serious contributions to the literature. Given its broad scope and the quality of the editors, this book will likely become the go-to compendium on foreign policy for years to come.

Its goals and aims are very different from the other two volumes under consideration here, but the handbook grapples with the same dilemma of understanding the changes in India's behaviour. The editors posit that 'the foreign policy of any country is shaped, powered, and constrained by three major factors: history, geography and capability'. To these they add 'leadership (both its presence and force, but also at times its absence)' (p. 7).

The editors do an excellent job of organizing the whole volume under the following themes: theories and debates, under an introductory section; the 'Evolution of Indian foreign policy', which grapples most directly with the theme of change and continuity; 'Institutions and actors', which is one of the most innovative and original sections of the book; 'Geography'; 'Key partnerships'; 'Multilateral diplomacy'; and 'Looking ahead'. Together, these sections review the foreign policy debates and outline how India is changing.

The section on the 'Evolution of Indian foreign policy' offers readers a historical overview from the time of the British Raj to post-1990s foreign policy, with specific attention to issue areas such as security policy, resources, India's development assistance and soft power. Special attention is paid to Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, while recent developments are analysed under the rubric of post-1990 policies. Partly for the sake of comprehensiveness, a separate chapter devoted to Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh would have enhanced the volume's strengths. Recent studies have revealed that Rao's contribution to foreign policy is much more significant than previously recognized.⁵ While Modi's tenure is too recent, specific attention to the different regimes during the decades of the 1990s and 2000s would have been possible. The volume addresses bilateral relationships in two distinct sections ('Geography' and 'Key partnerships') and in a section on India's 'Multilateral diplomacy', where India's relationship with the UN, financial institutions, trading system and climate change are analysed in specific chapters.

The big picture

Pant and Joshi's analysis is the most focused on India's strategy in Asia and their argument is sharp and clearly spelled out. Their discussion on hedging strategy makes sense and is intuitively plausible. Why does India pursue this hedging strategy? We cannot answer that question without considering the multiple analyses and issues explored in the other two volumes. From Pant and Joshi's account we also don't know if India's strategy is working, although they note that its attempt to normalize relations with China has been a failure. However, they

⁵ Sanjaya Baru, *1991: how P. V. Narasimha Rao made history* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016); Vinay Sitapati, *Half lion: how P. V. Narasimha Rao transformed India* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2016).

offer a clear and succinct analysis of India's responses to changing Asia's policy, which is analysed well and carefully.

The Oxford handbook reveals the complexity of India's foreign policy agendas and legacies. India's foreign policy is shifting and changing in terms of its goals and priorities, but also its regional scope, moving beyond its immediate region to south-east and east Asia and the world. India moves like a slow elephant, attempting to straddle conflicting constraints of history, geography and its institutional deficiencies. New issue linkages between the economy and security, climate change and geo-economics, as well as India's domestic and global interactions, also make the pursuit of foreign policy more complex and multilayered. New actors have become more important and the old institutions—the Ministry of External Affairs—are being called on to implement new strategic visions and practices. The capacity of India's foreign policy-making institutions and agencies is fragmented and weak, especially relative to the new and complex challenges visible in the post-Cold War era.⁶

For Schaffer and Schaffer, the fulcrum of Indian foreign policy derives from its civilizational and large-country sensibility, as well as ideas of hierarchy and moral superiority. They put the emphasis on how historically specific ideas, such as non-alignment and the negotiating style of the foreign service, continue to shape foreign policy. Their analysis privileges the role of strategic culture and negotiating style and how these concepts change and take shape as India's role becomes more prominent in global, regional and bilateral relationships.

How do the books characterize global and regional change?

Pant and Joshi are most rigorous in defining systemic change as one of 'strategic flux' (p. 23). They define strategic flux as the emergence of the US as a unipolar power which is both pre-eminent and declining, combined with the rise of China. The emergence of China, and more generally the movement towards a multipolar world with a hegemon like the US, is also part of the equation of changing global power and a new emerging institutional architecture. The authors spend some time in delineating what the US aims to do (pp. 16–21). For C. Raja Mohan in the *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy*, the end of the Cold War is key to these global changes. This volume overall is somewhat weak in tracing the elements of the global power dynamics and transitions, except for the shorthand of 'post-Cold War' and rise of the US as a dominant pole. For Schaffer and Schaffer, the end of the Cold War led to a unique unipolar moment that has fundamentally shaped India's strategic policies and visions. These global factors coincided with domestic changes within India, such as economic reforms and the coalition non-Congress governments that began to unravel, but then reconstructed India's policy of non-alignment. In the more detailed case-study chapters, Schaffer and Schaffer find that the transformations across diverse institutional and global domains vary

⁶ The volume examines the role of the state (ch. 15 by Paul Staniland and Vipin Narang), parliament (ch. 16 by Rudra Chaudhuri) and the matrix of departments that handle foreign policy (ch. 17 by Tanvi Madan).

from the global economic and security structures, but in each case India must figure out how the world has changed and whether its historical legacies and foreign policy cultures allow it to seek security, power and status.

India's foreign policy visions and behaviour

For Pant and Joshi, India acts, thinks and behaves like a swing state. This is in line with other studies that characterize India as a link power.⁷ Pant and Joshi describe India's strategy as 'hedging'. The importance of this idea is that India's strategic choices reveal more room to manoeuvre than expected by the premises of the power transition theory. Counterbalancing is not the only option available to India. Similarly, Raja Mohan in *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy* talks of 'transformation through incremental adaptation', which is similar to the ideas developed by Schaffer and Schaffer, who find that despite change, there is a 'common core' in India's actions and visions (*India at the global high table*, pp. 60–81). For many authors in the handbook and for Schaffer and Schaffer, change and uncertainty at the global level lead India's foreign policy-making elite to rely even more on its past traditions and core values and ideas.

But those core ideas are also undergoing change. As Schaffer and Schaffer find, there are many *more* competing visions of India's role in the world. They describe three diverse groups: 'non-alignment firsters', 'broad power realists' and 'hard power hawks'. The fact that three broad views jostle for primacy suggests that the common core may be shifting. This is the paradox that needs to be analysed much more centrally in studies of Indian foreign policy.

How to study foreign policy: agents and institutions

Leaders occupy a disproportionately powerful role in studies of foreign policy. One of the key arguments of Schaffer and Schaffer relates to the role played by Nehru. They argue that Nehruvian vision affects even those who have argued for a transformed foreign policy, such as 'power realists'. A different position is adopted by Andrew Kennedy in *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy*, where he argues that Nehru embodied a combination of idealist and realist elements (chapter seven). Schaffer and Schaffer tend to lean towards identifying continuity rather than change in India's foreign policy.

Pant and Joshi discuss Modi's role in foreign policy.⁸ Will Modi's government be defined by some Nehruvian elements? This is an empirical question also addressed in the special issue of this journal. Pant and Joshi reflect on the commonality between Manmohan Singh's and Modi's governments' hedging strategy. The authors observe that Modi has followed a more aggressive and consistent hedging strategy, while the second United Progress Party government under

⁷ See Aseema Sinha, 'Partial accommodation without conflict: India as a rising link power', in T. V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating rising powers: past, present, and future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁸ Also see Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi's article in this issue of *International Affairs*, 'Indo-US relations under Modi: the strategic logic underlying the embrace', pp. 133–46.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used hedging but in a more inconsistent and unsure way.

A common weakness of most studies of foreign policies is that they accord too much importance to prime ministers and members of the executive. Even foreign ministers are given short shrift in the empirical analysis. This lacuna is not specific to analyses of India, but is apparent in foreign policy studies of many countries. The only volume to pay systematic attention to a wide range of diverse actors is the *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy*, notably in the chapters on the media (ch. 19 by Manoj Joshi), think-tanks (ch. 20 by Amitabh Mattoo and Rory Medcalf), the diaspora (ch. 21 by Latha Varadarajan), business (ch. 18 by Rajiv Kumar), scientists (ch. 23 by Jaideep Prabhu) and public opinion (ch. 22 by Devesh Kapur). Domestic institutions such as the parliament, the state and foreign policy institutions are also analysed.

Kumar finds that the private sector could play an important role given India's economic liberalization, but that it 'at this time is unable to exercise any tangible influence on foreign policy except in some instances where its stance converges with the official stance' (p. 248). Joshi suggests that the influence of the media on foreign policy is dependent upon access to information and the quality of reportage. Through different case-studies, this chapter assesses what it calls the limited role of media on Indian foreign policy and concludes that 'the extent to which the media influence government policy depends to a great degree on the government itself' (p. 269). Mattoo and Medcalf find that universities and think-tanks are less powerful than one would expect, given that India is a democracy (ch. 20). Varadarajan also accords a 'marginal' role to the Indian diaspora although she suggests that it played a 'facilitative' role in the US context, citing Devesh Kapur's work.⁹

In addition, we need to add a few layers of what should constitute foreign policy. I suggest that foreign policy should consist of policy preferences, practices and capacity. Any theory of foreign policy must distinguish between policy and strategy, actors and strategic effectiveness.¹⁰ In most cases, the analysis of institutional effectiveness is mentioned as an aside. It needs to be factored into the analysis in a more central way.

A methodological point may also be worth making. Currently, most foreign policy analysis relies on newspaper reports, interviews and policy documents. Very few writers conduct institutional analyses in India, which may involve observing how the Ministry of External Affairs and other institutions actually function and how they produce foreign policy. Such an analysis is much needed and it may also help the government make foreign policy in a more effective way. All three books note the institutional deficiencies of India's strategies and ideas. A more careful and self-conscious reflection about what it would take to reform and improve India's strategic capacity is still needed.

⁹ Devesh Kapur, *Diaspora, development and democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ I made a similar point in Sinha, 'Partial accommodation without conflict'.

The need for a new interactive framework and methodological innovativeness and rigour

The new scholarship on Indian foreign policy calls out for a new paradigm to interpret India's changing position and actions at the global, regional and domestic levels. While the literature surveyed here does not yet offer a new paradigm, some common findings suggest the need for a new approach—and possibly more than one approach. We also need to find and use new sources of data and seek ways to measure institutional effects in foreign policy. The task of measurement and theoretical modelling is made more challenging by the need to theorize linkages across levels and measure foreign policy variables in different countries simultaneously.

First, it is clear that Indian actors have been challenging old shibboleths of strategy and action, as the country's ambitions have grown and changed. We need more fine-grained case-studies of how Indian goals and strategic choices have shifted and changed in many different international relationships and issue areas. For example, Indian leaders are shaped not only by domestic ends but by regional and global aims—enhancing India's status at the United Nations Security Council for example—and global ambitions have been inserted into domestic leaders' priorities. We need more studies of how regional or global ambitions have become important for Indian leaders and agents.

The overlap of domestic and global concerns is also reflected in the interactions between economic and security concerns.¹¹ For example, the US–India nuclear deal had both security and geopolitical, and also economic or geo-economic effects. These twin overlaps (global–domestic and economics–security) create opportunities for many foreign policy leaders to develop new kinds of alliances and global–domestic linkages.¹² The new scholarship on Indian foreign policy must be more attentive to such overlapping or conflicting relationships. The books reviewed here go some way towards this, but more systematic attention needs to be paid to actors' new motivations and goals.

Second, the books surveyed here, as well as many other writings, find that global factors and global institutions, as well as the actions of supranational groups—such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the World Trade Organization

¹¹ These issues have created the need to think about *geo-economic* factors that shape a country's rise and changing international behaviours. Geo-economics is emerging as a distinct set of questions and issues that need to be thought of in analysing a country's place in the world. See columns by Mukul Asher and Gulpreet Singh Bhatia, 'Establishing IAPD is consistent with geo-economic initiatives', *Daily News and Analysis*, 31 August 2011, http://www.dnaindia.com/money/comment_establishing-iapd-is-consistent-with-geo-economic-initiatives_1581787 (unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 30 Nov. 2016); Mukul Asher, 'Growing importance of geo-economic approach for India', *Daily News and Analysis*, 2 March 2011, http://www.dnaindia.com/money/comment_growing-importance-of-geo-economics-approach-for-india_1514295. See also Sanjaya Baru, 'Understanding geo-economics and strategy', in *A new era of geo-economics: assessing the interplay of economic and political risk*, IISS Seminar, 23–25 March 2012; and Ana Martingui and Richard Youngs, eds, *Challenges for European foreign policy in 2012: what kind of geo-economic Europe?* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2011).

¹² Tricia Olsen and I explore some of these linkages in the field of global public health in Tricia Olsen and Aseema Sinha, 'Linkage politics and the persistence of national policy autonomy in emerging powers: patents, profits, and patients in the context of TRIPS compliance', *Business and Politics* 15: 3, 2013, pp. 323–35.

and the International Monetary Fund—are both shaping and also being shaped by Indian actions. Such external lines of effect operate through diverse mechanisms, but the interaction between the extranational and global levels cannot be ignored and must be systematically described, modelled and analysed.

These two key findings, strewn in a haphazard manner through the books under review here, point towards the need to deploy an interdependence approach in studies of foreign policy.¹³ Broadly, this approach challenges the idea that the priorities of Indian domestic institutions responsible for foreign policy-making are static or exogenous. In line with recent scholarship, I argue that we have to start conceptualizing India not as a closed system of 'foreign policy' governance but as an open system.¹⁴

Such a research programme should aim to achieve three things. First, the economic and security aspects of India's foreign policy must be integrated. Many of the contributors to the books reviewed here observe such a linkage, but it needs more systematic attention, especially on the mechanisms and ways in which pure security and economic logics interact and shape each other. Second, any analysis of foreign policy and foreign relations must broaden the range of relevant actors and institutions, for example non-state actors. Third, we need to build frameworks to understand the 'systemic level' but also how domestic changes and the global level shape (not impact) domestic-level priorities and foreign policy interests. Foreign policy can no longer be understood only within a national frame of reference; rather than assume unit independence, it may be better to focus on the mechanisms of domestic and global influence. I can suggest three such mechanisms: diffusion, pressure and persuasion—but we need more conceptual thinking and empirical analysis of how the global factors interact with domestic changes and ideas. Importantly, such an interactive framework should use and deploy new sources of information about foreign policy as suggested by Kanti Bajpai. Bajpai notes that 'with the opening up of official archives particularly in the West but also in China, and to a lesser extent with access to oral records and documents in India, it may be possible to produce detailed and careful histories of the three relationships which would help settle the interpretive question' (*The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy*, pp. 31–2).

The current state of knowledge about Indian foreign policy, with the emergence of new empirical studies and possible data sources, calls out for new concepts, ideas and frameworks which must go beyond an insider or national frame of reference and deploy an interdependence approach. These new frameworks must be conceptually innovative, but also focus more on bringing the study of foreign policy in tune with new research questions and concepts without sacrificing methodological rigour.

¹³ This approach was articulated by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, 'Domestic institutions beyond the nation-state: charting the new interdependence approach', *World Politics* 66: 2, April 2014, pp. 331–63.

¹⁴ I elaborate this approach with reference to India's political economy in Sinha, *Globalizing India: how global rules and markets are shaping India's rise to power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Conclusion

Resonating with Bajpai's reflections in the *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy* that India's international relations have been under-theorized, I have argued in this review article that we are reaching a stage where such theorization has become possible and even necessary. Changes at the global, regional and domestic levels call out for new concepts and new frameworks. We need to build more sophisticated theories of the systemic level to account for the complexity of the international system. Even more important, we need more theoretical analysis of the interaction between the global and domestic levels. This call for theoretical work cannot, however, proceed alone without more careful empirical studies of specific relationships and issue areas. In fact, theory development and careful empirical analysis must go together. Such analysis must figure out how to collect data on perceptions as well as on more objective indicators—such as institutional analyses—of foreign policy. We need to think about how to measure foreign policy preferences—strategy as well as the institutional capacity—and then build new theories and models. The subfield is calling out for new research and both empirical and theoretical development across a wide range of questions and hypotheses. The books reviewed here reflect a small, but important, slice of what good foreign policy analysis looks like, but they also highlight the current weaknesses of the field. It is an exciting time to be reading about and contributing to India's foreign policy analysis.