

ISAS Insights

No. 115 – 19 November 2010

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Explaining Realignment

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Abstract

This paper explains how India's policymakers reacted to structural shifts in the global order at the Cold War's end and sought to realign India's foreign policy interests and priorities. It analyses these changes through the use of the level of analysis approach to the study of international politics.

The Cold War's End

India's foreign and economic international policies underwent a fundamental transformation at the end of the Cold War. This paper will attempt to briefly outline the changes through the use of a framework which is widely accepted in the study of international politics and is referred to as the level of analysis. It will show how changes in the global distribution of power (systemic changes), state-level factors (domestic imperatives) and decision-making issues (political leadership) contributed to the fundamental re-orientation of the India's foreign, economic and security policy orientations.²

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² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

Systemic Shifts

India had pursued an odd amalgam of ideational and instrumental policies for much of the Cold War especially after the death of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.³ The drastic shift in the structure of global power had a profound impact on India's policy orientation. India was forced to jettison its previous ideological and ideational commitments and drastically adjust itself to the changed structure of the international order. It had dissipated much of its energies during the Cold War on altering the structure of the international order, through voicing of concerns of the developing world in various international forums particularly through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). These efforts, however, yielded few meaningful results beyond India's initial successes and, by the 1980s India's efforts in the developing world had actually lost much of its moral force.⁴

Domestic Dimensions

The process of India's foreign policy realignment in the post-Cold War era also had a significant domestic component.⁵ The country had pursued a strategy of import-substituting industrialisation since independence. Though this strategy had contributed to an industrial base, it had also inhibited completion, innovation and efficiency.⁶ Worse still, the strategy, despite its socialist pretensions, had done little to alleviate abject poverty in India. The Soviet collapse coupled with an unprecedented fiscal crisis in 1991 virtually forced India to reconsider its strategy of economic development. Accordingly, India started to steadily abandon its statist approach to development and sought to replace it with new set of market oriented policies and also attempted to dispense it with its export pessimism. Not surprisingly, this new approach to economic development encountered significant domestic opposition on both ideological and instrumental grounds. Nevertheless, the policies were not reversed.

Leadership Choices

India's policymakers were ill-prepared to cope with the end of the Cold War and more specifically, the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1971, India had come to rely on the Soviet Union as a significant market for Indian goods. It had counted on a Soviet veto at the United Nations Security Council on the Kashmir question and had depended upon them to tie down a

³ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964).

⁴ Fouad Ajami, 'The Third World Challenge: The Fate of Nonalignment', in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.59, no.2 (Winter 1980/1981), pp.366-385.

⁵ Peter Gourevitch, 'The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics' in *International Organization*, Vol.32, no.4 (Autumn 1978), pp.881-912.

⁶ Jagdish N. Bhagwati and Padma Desai, *Planning for Industrialization: Industrialization and Trade Policies Since 1951* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

possibly revanchist People's Republic of China (PRC). Finally, India had relied on the Soviets to supply them with advanced weaponry at non-market prices.⁷ With the Soviet collapse, Indian policymakers quickly realised that the principal successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia, was neither able nor willing to play the same role that the Soviets had during the Cold War.⁸ Consequently, they felt compelled to attempt to improve relations with the sole surviving superpower, the United States (US) while also trying to drastically realign its relations with a host of other states. Fortunately, the two sides had made limited overtures toward each other in the waning days of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the prior lack of significant strategic, economic and cultural links made any rapid rapprochement all but impossible.⁹ As a consequence, differences in the relationship over global issues, such as non-proliferation and human rights, took on a disproportionate significance. Additionally, the initial Indian public insistence that they would prefer to see the emergence of a multipolar world order did little to endear the country to the US.

To their credit, India's policymakers sought to improve relations with key states that they had long neglected during the Cold War years. In order to do so, they upgraded their ties with Israel and embarked upon a quest to engage the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia. India had kept at an arm's length away from Southeast Asia after the initial flush of warmth in the wake of the Bandung Conference of 1955.¹⁰ Simultaneously, India persisted in their attempts to gradually improve the tenor of Sino-Indian relations, an effort that they had undertaken even before the Cold War had come to a close. In this endeavour, however, progress proved to move glacially slow due to the intractability of the Sino-Indian border dispute.¹¹

Finally, after long maintaining a nuclear weapons option and after scrubbing an initial plan to test nuclear weapons in 1995, its policymakers finally crossed the nuclear Rubicon in May 1998.¹² In its immediate aftermath, India was subjected to a spate of bilateral and multilateral sanctions but its policymakers steadfastly refused to roll back the nuclear weapons program.¹³

⁷ Robert Donaldson, *Soviet Policy Toward India: Ideology and Strategy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); Robert Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations: Issues and Influences* (New York: Praeger, 1982); S. Nihal Singh, 'Why India Goes to Moscow for Arms', *Asian Survey*, 24:7, July 1984, 707-720; Linda Racioppi, *Soviet Policy Toward South Asia Since 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁸ Andrew J. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: the United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁹ Sumit Ganguly, 'Introduction' in Sumit Ganguly, ed., *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Jonathan Holslag, *India and China: Prospects for Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Sumit Ganguly, 'India's Pathway to Pokhran II: The Sources and Prospects of India's Nuclear weapons Program,' in *International Security*, 23:4, Spring 1999, 148-177.

¹² Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2004).

¹³ Manmohan Singh as quoted in Indo-Asian News Service, 'Security situation has worsened, be prepared for all threats: PM', *The Hindustan Times* (20 April 2010).

Coping with Structural Changes

Changes at the level of the international system, without a doubt, finally made India's pursuit of an ideational and ideological foreign policy simply untenable. Thanks to its reliance on some ideological tenets and its refusal to accept the significance of the distribution of material power India had been mostly marginalised in the global order. India's eventual abandonment of its normative commitments and its willingness to gradually come to terms with the significance of material power in the global arena has given it a new standing in international politics. India's choices in a range of emergent global regimes will have a profound impact on their features and their evolution. Specifically, three regimes where India can play a critical role are those dealing with global climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and the international trading system. To do so, India will have to forge policies that are in accord with its new-found pragmatism and its belated recognition of the importance of material power in global politics.

Now that it has awakened to the realities of power and the utility of force in international relations, it will have to cope with additional critical challenges in the emergent world order. None are perhaps more significant than the dramatic rise of the PRC. Even though the PRC is loath to so concede, India will for the foreseeable future remain its principal peer competitor in Asia and possibly beyond. How India copes with the seemingly inexorable rise of the PRC remains an open and vital question for its future status in the international order. Thus far, India's policies, for the most part have been reactive. To effectively deal with the rise of the PRC, India will still have to formulate a national strategy that protects its vital interests while accommodating itself to its behemoth northern neighbour.

A More Pragmatic Foreign Policy

There is little question that, though India still espouses the cause of non-alignment, its foreign policy bespeaks of a new found pragmatism. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the principal intellectual architect of India's domestic and foreign economic policies in the post-Cold War period, has stated that India's new foreign policy is based upon 'enlightened self interest'.¹⁴ This was most manifestly on display as his government, despite substantial tendentious domestic opposition, managed to successfully negotiate the US-India civilian nuclear accord. In mid-2010, India demonstrated similar tenacity in crafting legislation designed to address the question of nuclear liability for foreign nuclear power producers in India. Once again, much of the

¹⁴ I am grateful to Rahul Mukherji of the South Asian Studies programme at the National University of Singapore for bringing this matter to my attention.

opposition to this bill is not based upon sound concerns but a mixture of fear and political opportunism.¹⁵

Moreover, India has demonstrated a growing capacity to leverage its economic strength in the global arena. India has become an active participant in a new trilateral developmental initiative involving Brazil and South Africa known by its acronym, IBSA.¹⁶ It is also one of the key players in a less formal organisation of major economic powers, Brazil, Russia and China, popularly referred to as the BRIC states. In large part, India's interest in these entities stems from two concerns. First, it hopes to diversify its ties with a number of significant emergent powers. Second, India's policymakers also believe that the pursuit of these relationships will enhance India's own autonomy in international affairs and avoid an inordinate dependence on any particular state.¹⁷

Finally, in the recent past, India has also demonstrated its ability to provide public goods in both strategic and humanitarian issue areas. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, Indian warships patrolled the Straits of Malacca in support of the US anti-terrorist operations. Later, in December 2004, the Indian Navy participated in an ad hoc coalition involving the US, Australia and Japan to provide relief and humanitarian assistance to Indonesia and Sri Lanka in the wake of an unprecedented tsunami which left much devastation in its wake.¹⁸

Question of Political Leadership

Key political leaders have been responsible for undertaking and sustaining these dramatic policy changes. Just about two decades ago when faced with the Soviet collapse and then an unprecedented fiscal crisis, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and his then Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, managed to set India on a new course. Despite significant differences on domestic policy issues, especially in the social and cultural realms, the successor Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led regime actually built upon the foundations that the Congress government had laid. Even Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's decision to carry out the nuclear tests of 1998, contrary to much uninformed and polemical commentary really reflected continuity rather

¹⁵ Caroline Vavro, 'Piracy, Terrorism and the Balance of Power in the Malacca Strait' in *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol.4, no.1 (Spring 2008), pp.13-17.

¹⁶ K. Subrahmanyam, 'Indian Nuclear Policy, 1964-98 (A Personal Recollection)', in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998), pp.26-53.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Rahul Mukherji of the South Asian Studies programme at the National University of Singapore for bringing this matter to my attention.

¹⁸ Caroline Vavro, 'Piracy, Terrorism and the Balance of Power in the Malacca Strait', in *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol.4, no.1 (Spring 2008), pp.13-17.

than a fundamental disjuncture in India's nuclear weapons policies.¹⁹ Despite its professed hostility toward Pakistan, the BJP regime actually made two important overtures. The first of such was in 1999 when Prime Minister Vajpayee travelled by bus to Lahore, the capital of Pakistani Punjab. Subsequently, despite the deep sense of betrayal that most Indians and certainly the BJP-led regime felt about the Kargil military incursions of 1999, Vajpayee hosted Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf at a summit in Agra, New Delhi in 2001. In turn, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government came to power, it did not markedly alter the policies that the BJP and its allies had pursued in the external realm. Indeed its leaders continued the process of improving relations with the US and went ahead to forge the US-India civilian nuclear accord.

Footsteps into the Future

The task before India and its policymakers is to forge a national strategy that enables the country to meet its legitimate national security interests, to create a milieu within its neighborhood that helps foster economic growth and to enable the country to influence and shape the structure and content of a series of critical global regimes. To achieve these ends, India will have to improve the efficacy of its public institutions, sustain economic policies that promote both growth and opportunity while ensuring that adequate resources are devoted to defense spending. Forging such a strategy in the context of India's chaotic and fractious democracy will neither be easy nor smooth. However, a failure to tackle these issues might lead to the squandering of the significant progress that the country has made since the realignment of its policies at the end of the Cold War.

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¹⁹ K. Subrahmanyam, 'Indian Nuclear Policy, 1964-98 (A Personal Recollection)', in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998), pp.26-53.