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**Beyond Idealism:
Geopolitics of the Nehru Raj**

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Beyond Idealism: Geopolitics of the Nehru Raj*

C. Raja Mohan

Introduction

The international relations scholarship has largely held that India's foreign policy originated at the dawn of independence and was largely inspired by the vision of one man, Jawaharlal Nehru. There are few studies that have explored the roots of India's foreign policy in the two traditions that Delhi had inherited—one was the worldview of the national movement and the other was the foreign policy imperatives of the Government of India before independence. Further compounding this was the near universal interpretation of Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy vision as entirely idealist in its orientation. To be sure, a strong sense of liberal internationalism permeated Nehru's worldview and his articulation of India's foreign policy. Yet, Nehru's conduct of India's foreign policy also had a strong realistic tendency that is reflected most acutely in his approach to the neighbourhood and India's security role in the subcontinent and beyond. The one-dimensional characterization of Nehru's policy is also rooted in the lack of empirical studies of India's foreign policy record, the comprehensive neglect of Nehru's understanding of geopolitics, and an unwillingness to confront the great power aspirations that guided his foreign policy. The dominant view is also obsessed with the idea of non-alignment that deals with only one important aspect of independent India's foreign policy—of navigating the

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great power rivalries of the Cold War. Non-alignment as a concept could never explain India's regional policies, especially towards the neighbours. A closer look at Nehru's policies of security cooperation might offer insights into how India's future role, in contemporary parlance as a "net security provider", might emerge.

The paper has four parts. It begins with a review of the sources of continuity in the security policies in the neighbourhood of the British Raj and the Nehru era. In the second section, it offers an assessment of Nehru's efforts to sustain the security structure for the subcontinent inherited from the Raj, especially in the Himalayan region. The third section looks at Nehru's attempt to build security cooperation beyond the northern frontier. The fourth and concluding section of the paper offers a brief reflection on the legacy of Nehru's security diplomacy.

The Enduring Geopolitical Imperative

In a comparative study of the security policies of the British Raj and independent India to their geographic neighbourhood, Martin Wainwright pointed to the huge continuities across the great chasm of decolonization that separated them. "Although the two regimes differed markedly in their constitutional basis of power, their ethnic composition, and their long-term goals, the attitudes of their members toward South Asian security were remarkably similar."¹ While many of India's neighbours have seen India's regional policy as a determined effort to sustain Delhi's primacy in the post-Raj era, the nationalist discourse within India did not, unsurprisingly, feel comfortable with the notion of India pursuing a policy not very different from that of the colonial masters. The significant opposition of the Indian National Congress to many of British India's regional policies also meant the temptation to see a clear break from the colonial past was

¹ A. Martin Wainwright, "Regional Security and Paramount Powers: The British Raj and Independent India", in Chetan Kumar and Marvin Weinbaum, eds, *South Asia Approaches the Millennium* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1995), p. 43.

irresistible. Adding to the problem was the growing idolization of Nehru at home and the domestic and international perception of his foreign policy as being driven by his high-minded idealism. In the more recent period, the rule by the BJP-led coalition at the centre during 1998–2004 saw the polarization of the debate on Indian foreign policy amidst questions whether the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee was abandoning the founding principles articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru.² On the worship and demonization of India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, A.G. Noorani wrote in sharp polemic, "It has been Jawaharlal Nehru's lot, as that of any other great figure in history, to be subjected either to denigration or adulation. Informed, critical assessment, which recognizes both the sterling qualities and the grave flaws that belong to any mortal, is regarded as apologetics by traducers and belittlement by professional sycophants."³

If one looks beyond the contemporary political correctness and the domestic argumentation, the nature of continuity between the policies of the Raj and Nehru is not difficult to trace. One is the fact that both were paramount powers in the subcontinent.

The term *paramount* is historically appropriate because the Raj used the term, *paramountcy*, to describe its sovereignty over the princely states, and because the Indian National Congress objected when the British Parliament allowed the Indian government's paramountcy to lapse with the transfer of power. Independent India did not, of course, exercise paramountcy over Pakistan, but after 1947 India was by far the most powerful state in South Asia and therefore

² See, Chirs Ogden, "Norms, Indian Foreign Policy and the 1998–2004 National Democratic Alliance", *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 408, 2010, pp. 303–15; see also, Achin Vanaik, "Making India Strong: The BJP-led Government's Foreign Policy Perspectives", *South Asia: A Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2002, pp. 321–41.

³ A.G. Noorani, "Nehru: A Democratic Curzon?", *Frontline*, Vol. 17, No. 26, 23 December 2000 to 5 January 2001, available at <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1726/17260780.htm>

dominated matters pertaining to the region's security.⁴

Neither Nehru nor his successors employed the term paramountcy, which was entirely inappropriate to the post-colonial times that new India had inherited. Yet the notion of primacy has been a major impulse for independent India's regional policy and the importance of keeping other powers at bay from the region. Indira Gandhi's muscular approach to the region has often been described as the "Indira Doctrine" and Rajiv Gandhi's use of diplomatic and military force have been more explicit assertions of India's search for regional primacy.⁵ Undergirding the search for primacy has been the notion of the "strategic unity" of the subcontinent that many practitioners and observers of India's foreign policy have continuously used through the decades. As George Tanham put it, the Indian elites share a fundamental belief that "the unity of the subcontinent reflects the integrity and dreams of a people and constitutes an integral part of their social fabric".⁶

The commonplace understanding of India's foreign policy pre-1947 is that it was driven by British imperial interests rather than those of India itself. The nature of the continuity between the foreign policies of the two regimes becomes clearer when we recognize that the Raj had considerable autonomy from Great Britain and that it tended to reflect the geopolitical imperatives of India. An eminent historian of India, Ainslie Embree, argued that the Government of India, despite ultimate control by Great Britain, was responding to the needs and interests of the physical territory that it controlled in the subcontinent and that the "content and style" of the Raj diplomacy "was a formative legacy for modern India".⁷ Embree reinforces this conclusion by a number of propositions. First, the Government of India pursued policies

⁴ Wainwright, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁵ See Devin Hagerty, "India's Regional Security Doctrine", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 4, April 1991, pp. 351–63.

⁶ George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretative Essay* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1992).

⁷ Ainslie T. Embree, *Imagining India: Essays on Indian History*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 117–20.

in foreign affairs that “reflected the political, economic, and geographic realities of the Indian situation, with the impulse for these policies coming from within the structures of the bureaucracy of the Government of India, not of Great Britain”. Second, the foreign policies of the Raj “were the product of territorial control by a well-organized authority, and, given the fact of power, the alien origin of the ruling group is not decisive factor”. Third, Embree suggests that “any strong power” based in the subcontinent, “would have behaved much the same in relation to neighbouring states”.

Finally, Embree concludes that the British Raj sought to develop a “diplomacy of dependency” in its neighbourhood. Seeking to prevent rival powers from undermining its authority in India, the Raj was determined “not to permit any genuinely independent country to exist on its borders”. Although there was no explicit statement to this effect it reflects a deep rooted imperative in structuring India’s security. “The usual formulation of policy was that the government did not desire to control its neighbours; it did, however, insist on governments were not hostile (sic). The translation of this insistence on friendly neighbours into policy often led to outright conquest, as in the case of Burma, or as in the case of Afghanistan, a combination of military intervention and diplomatic pressures.” This diplomacy of dependency developed in the 19th century was not something that disappeared with the Raj. The system of protectorates and buffer states that were part of the ring fence erected by the Raj could not be simply discarded by the rulers of independent India. To be sure, the leaders of the national movement were critical of the British imperial expansionism and its relentless efforts to consolidate decisive influence across its claimed boundaries.⁸ Once in charge of India’s security, the geopolitical imperatives compelled Nehru and his successors to sustain the Raj legacy to the extent that they could and within the new limitations on its freedom of manoeuvre.

⁸For statements of the Indian National Congress on issues relating to British frontier policies see, Bimla Prasad, *The Origins of Indian Foreign Policy* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1962).

The Himalayan Inner Ring

As it became a strong and expanding territorial entity in the subcontinent, the Raj constructed for itself a three-fold frontier.⁹ The first, the frontier of administration or the inner line, covered areas over which the Raj exercised full sovereignty, excluding of course the princely states that were under the indirect rule. The second, un-administered frontier or the outer line which covered regions where the British had strong relations with local ruling groups, provided them with subsidies and protection in return for helping defend the Raj but left them largely self-governing on internal affairs. The third was the frontier of influence, where the Raj created strong alliances with the local rulers that explicitly ruled out security ties with hostile powers beyond, initially France and West European rivals, and later Russia and China. The regions between first (inner) and the second (outer) lines is often described as the inner ring and included Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province, Kashmir, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, the North East Frontier Agency, and the tribal regions of Upper Burma. The buffer regions beyond the un-administered frontier are often described as the outer ring and included arrangements with the tribals of the British Somaliland, the alliances with Oman and the Trucial states of the Gulf, Persia, Afghanistan, Kashgharia (for a short while), Tibet, Siam, Malaya, the fully controlled Aden at the mouth of the Suez, and the Straits Settlements (Meleka, Penang, and Singapore) in the Malacca Straits.¹⁰

This extraordinary double ring-fence system structured to protect the Raj began to be modified well before decolonization. The separation of the Straits Settlement (1867), Burma (1935),

⁹For a comprehensive contemporary description, see Lord Curzon, "Frontiers", Romanes Lecture, 1907, available at <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/resources/links/curzon.pdf>

¹⁰For brief descriptions of this complex system, see, Peter John Brobst, *Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence and the Defence of Asia* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2005); James Onley, "The Raj Reconsidered: British India's Informal Empire and Spheres of Influence", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 2009, pp. 44–62.

and Aden (1937) ended the direct administration of these territories from India. Britain avoided making Nepal a fully controlled territory and restrained the Raj from turning Tibet into a protectorate after it opened the region and made it a buffer. If its rapid decline in the early 20th century was making it difficult for Great Britain to cope with its burdens around the world, it was equally challenging for independent India to sustain the security structures created by the Raj. Partition made India weaker but also relieved it of the burden of securing frontier regions in the inner ring or sustaining the special relationship with Afghanistan. But the British Parliament's decision to end the paramountcy of the Raj within the subcontinent put forth the great demand of reconsolidating the territorial sovereignty. The first task was to integrate the princely states—more than 550 of them which had covered nearly two-fifths of undivided India—into independent India. The dispute with Pakistan over the accession of Jammu & Kashmir would endure forever, complicating regional security. The second was to cope with the immediate and calamitous consequences of the Partition of Bengal and the Punjab and the creation of new frontiers in these states. The third and equally challenging was the question of independent India's future relationship with the Himalayan kingdoms. Addressing this challenge would remain an enduring one in India's security policy after independence.

For emerging India, two choices presented themselves in dealing with the new situation in relation to the Himalayan kingdoms. One was to sustain the old framework that bound these kingdoms to the Raj and the other was to simply annex them into the Republic and reduce any ambiguities about their status. Sardar Patel, who was the Home Minister, believed that the kingdoms must be treated as princely states brought into the Indian fold. Nehru, however, opted for a more complex policy that viewed as part of India's security perimeter and the calculus of frontier defence, avoided a forcible accession, but bound them into a stronger economic interdependence with the Republic.¹¹ This approach essentially meant sustaining the Raj framework of

¹¹ For a brief but critical review, see Srikant Dutt, "India and the Himalayan States", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 1, February 1980, pp. 71–81.

treating these kingdoms as allies and protectorates. There was some variation in the relations between the Raj and the three kingdoms. Nepal was treated as an independent country, Sikkim as a full protectorate of India, and Bhutan enjoyed a status in between. All three, however, were strongly bound into the security framework of the Raj through the treaties signed with Nepal in 1819 and 1923, Bhutan in 1865 and 1910, and Sikkim in 1817 and 1890.

After independence, Nehru curbed the temptations in the three kingdoms to separate themselves from India, and signed treaties with all of them during 1949–50, that largely followed the template of the earlier agreements signed by the Raj. The first to be signed was the agreement with Bhutan in 1949 under which India retained the right to guide the kingdom's foreign policy and promised not to interfere in its internal affairs. Under the agreement India also had a say in Bhutan's import of arms. The treaty did not have a strong defence clause, for the agreement was signed before the Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet in 1949. The agreements signed with Nepal and Sikkim in 1950 were more alive to the challenges that China's control of Tibet posed to the security of the subcontinent. The July 1950 Treaty with Nepal covered a wide range of aspects and included an article on mutual defence and another regulating arms transfers. Earlier in 1947, India signed a tripartite agreement with Nepal and Britain that allowed India to recruit soldiers from Nepal, a right that was limited to Britain until then. The December 1950 Treaty with Sikkim reaffirmed its status as a protectorate of India and gave Delhi the right to deploy troops on its territory.¹²

Nehru's reconstruction of the security ties with the Himalayan kingdoms was not merely a replication of the treaties that the Raj had with them. For one he sought to accommodate many of the interests of the kingdoms as part of the effort to encourage them

¹² The full texts of the treaty are available on the website of the Legal Information Institute of India, www.liiofindia.org

to remain part of the structure of securing India's northern frontiers. Nehru, unlike the Raj, fully recognized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nepal and strongly affirmed India's commitment to Bhutan's internal autonomy. He increased the annual subsidies to these kingdoms and significantly expanded the economic and technical assistance to accelerate the economic development. He also offered territorial concessions to Bhutan which sought the return of some of the territory annexed by the Raj. Nehru invited the representatives of Nepal and Bhutan to participate in the First Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in early 1947, thereby facilitating the two isolated kingdoms to establish international contacts. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, also cut some slack for Nepal in putting the military relationship on a more equal footing. Nehru encouraged the establishment of ties between Nepal and China after Delhi signed an agreement with Beijing on Tibet in 1954. While he was generous in areas where he could with the Himalayan kingdoms there was no doubt in his mind about the centrality of the Himalayan kingdoms to India's defence of the northern frontiers. Speaking in the Constituent Assembly on 6 December 1950, Nehru declared abiding interests:

So far as the Himalayas are concerned, they lie on the other side of Nepal, not on this side. Therefore, the principal barrier to India lies on the other side of Nepal. We are not going to tolerate any person coming over that barrier. Therefore, much as we can appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot risk our own security by anything not done in Nepal which permits either that barrier to be crossed or otherwise leads to the weakening of our frontiers.¹³

The system of security treaties that Nehru erected in the Himalayan kingdoms, however, faced three important challenges—the internal orientation of these regimes, the steady expansion of the international profile of the kingdoms, and the emergence of China as a strong state across the Himalayan frontier in Tibet. It was relatively easy to operate the protectorate

¹³ Cited in Kavic, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

system between a powerful colonial patron, the British Raj, and the feudal rulers of the Himalayan kingdoms. The essential bargain involved in the treaties—security cooperation in return for internal autonomy—was not easy to sustain in the post-colonial era. Forces of democratization and modernization that began to emerge in the kingdoms were aligned closely with the Indian National Congress, and other political trends in India had a stake in changing the status quo rather than reinforcing it. Some of these forces sought an accession into India and others pressed Delhi to support political change in the kingdoms. India's security bargain, on the other hand, was with the rulers, whom Nehru was loathe to simply abandon. Yet as a nascent democracy whose main political classes had a deep solidarity with those seeking change, Delhi chose to adopt a middle path of gradual change that neither appeased the rulers of the kingdoms nor satisfied the popular aspirations for change.¹⁴ India could neither sustain the pretence about the internal autonomy of these kingdoms nor could it hold down the rulers to the naturally unequal terms of a protectorate. This resulted in unending instability in the relations between the Himalayan kingdoms, which in turn provided an opportunity for other powers to undermine India's primacy.

Amidst the general decolonization of the developing world, the growing international interest in the Himalayan frontier as part of the Cold War competition, and the emerging sense of national identity, it was inevitable that the ruling elites of the Himalayan kingdoms sought to end their traditional international isolation. Winning new partners, the rulers knew, would increase their autonomy vis à vis India and secure them greater room for play. The support of the external powers was also seen as critical for sustaining the feudal order within these kingdoms and fending off pressures for internal democratic change. Both China and the West encouraged, for different reasons, the attempts by these kingdoms to loosen their strategic bonds with India. The methods

¹⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the dynamics between Delhi and Kathmandu, see S.D. Muni, *India and Nepal: A Changing Relationship* (Delhi: Konark, 1992); see also Leo Rose, *Nepal: Strategy for Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).



that they employed included, “the establishment of diplomatic relations with other states, acceptance of external aid besides Indian, the use of events like coronations, the issue of postage stamps and attendance at international meetings”.¹⁵ While they sought to increase their international profile, the feudal rulers were acutely conscious of pushing India beyond a point. This set up a consistent brinkmanship with India in which more often than not saw India cede some room while trying to hold onto the relationship. Delhi in turn often used the threat of support to democratic forces to rein in the ambitions of the Himalayan rulers.

The biggest challenge to Nehru’s Himalayan treaty system was the emergence of Communist China on its frontiers by its occupation of Tibet in 1950. The first half of the 20th century saw the expansion of the influence of the Raj into Tibet and the steady accretion of special rights in the kingdom which was treated as a buffer. The next half a century would see Tibet emerge as a major source of discord between India and China. The emergence of the communist threat in Tibet initially raised the stakes of the Himalayan kingdoms in a security partnership with independent India. Nehru’s policy of avoiding a conflict with China over Tibet was balanced by a determination to secure the Himalayan glacis in 1950. In return for accepting Chinese control of Tibet, Nehru hoped he could win Beijing’s acceptance of India’s primacy in the Himalayan kingdoms. Beijing, however, never really accepted this proposition and its charm diplomacy towards Nepal helped ease some of the concerns of the Himalayan kingdoms. Nepal, which established diplomatic relations with China under Nehru’s encouragement, was the principal target of Chinese overtures. Nepal steadily began to wriggle out of the tight framework of military cooperation it had agreed with India.

Nehru’s policy towards the Himalayan kingdoms after the Chinese occupation of Tibet has been summed as “politically discreet, diplomatically cautious, and projected over a long term”. Kavic argues that

¹⁵ Srikant Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

the overriding determinant of its policy was to avoid giving provocation to Peking at almost all costs and to continue the tranquility of the Himalayan region primarily by astute diplomacy. Prudence dictated that certain precautionary measures be taken to deter surreptitious Chinese intrusions of the long and difficult Himalayan frontiers—but these measures were modest in scope.¹⁶

Although the Chinese control of Tibet helped India reconstruct the security system of the Raj, sustaining it proved to be a great challenge. The perception of a defeat in the 1962 war with China tended to reduce India's prestige with Nepal as well as Delhi's leverage with Kathmandu. Writing about the concerns of the Himalayan kingdoms in the aftermath of the 1962 war between India and China, Leo Rose observed that

the fear of China is uppermost in their minds, but apprehensions over Indian policy can also be perceived, for it is feared that New Delhi, faced with overt Chinese aggression, may feel impelled to intervene in the border states to safeguard its own vital interests. The desire to be left alone by both their powerful neighbours is overwhelming. How realistic this attitude may be open to serious question.¹⁷

But there was no denying the shocks that were produced for the foreign policy assumptions of the kingdoms. They were caught between the temptation of neutrality and the need to stress cooperation with India and the treaty relations. While Nehru's treaty system would come under increasing strain after 1962, there was no way Delhi could simply abandon the security framework created by the first prime minister. Nor did the Himalayan kingdoms have the power to fully break the geopolitical umbilical cords with India.

¹⁶ Kavic, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ Leo Rose, "The Himalayan Border States: 'Buffers' in Transition", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February 1963, p. 116.



Beyond the Inner Ring

If Nehru's reinvention of the security framework of the Raj was not entirely successful, it nevertheless presents an important empirical counter to the general perceptions of Nehru as an idealist. He was deeply geopolitical and his attitudes to the Himalayan kingdoms underlined his vision of India as a major power that is prepared to defend its security interests, however cautiously and carefully. Nehru's interest in security diplomacy was not limited to the northern frontier. The early years of independence saw Nehru embark on significant cooperation with other neighbours, especially Burma (now Myanmar) and Indonesia. Writing before independence, K.M. Panikkar underlined the importance of Burma for India's security: "the defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending Burma".¹⁸ Panikkar was convinced that Burma was not in a position to defend herself and the country's domination by another power would be disastrous for India. Panikkar also understood that emerging nationalisms in the post-colonial period would make substantial defence cooperation between Delhi and Rangoon difficult. Yet, he was confident that the logic of a defence union will work itself out for Delhi and Rangoon. What emerged, however, was a more complex story of India-Burma defence cooperation after the Second World War.

The severe internal security threats faced by Burma in the immediate aftermath of independence provided the context for substantive Indian military assistance to Rangoon. Immediately after independence Rangoon confronted major insurrections by the Burmese Communist Party, ethnic Karens and other militias in 1949. Rangoon was under direct threat from the rebel forces. U Nu sought military assistance from India and other

¹⁸ K.M. Panikkar, *The Future of South East Asia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 45.

Commonwealth nations as well as the United States. Nehru responded with alacrity helping mobilize diplomatic, political and military assistance to Burma as well as extending direct bilateral assistance that was critical in preventing the fall of Rangoon to the rebels and included the supply of six Dakota transport aircraft to Burma.¹⁹ Nehru's valuable support to Burma was acknowledged with much grace by Nu once the situation was brought under control.²⁰ Speaking in the Indian Parliament in March 1950, Nehru declared that India's support to Burma was not about interfering in the internal affairs of its neighbour. "It is not our purpose and is not right for us to interfere in any way with other countries, but whenever possible, we give such help as we can to our friends, without any element of interference."²¹

Beyond immediate crisis management, Nehru and Nu sought to put the bilateral relationship on a firmer footing. Nu apparently wanted an explicit agreement for military cooperation but Nehru sought to keep the defence ties informal and flexible. The idea of defence and security cooperation, however, is hinted in the peace and friendship treaty that Nehru and Nu signed in July 1951. Article IV says: "The two States agree that their representatives shall meet from time to time and as often as occasion requires to exchange views on matters of common interest and to consider ways and means for mutual cooperation in such matters."²² Article II outlines a broader sentiment declaring that "there shall be everlasting peace and unalterable friendship between the two states who shall ever strive to strengthen and develop further cordial relations existing between the peoples of the two countries".

¹⁹ Soe Myint, *Burma File: A Question of Democracy* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish), p. 89.

²⁰ See Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 186.

²¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1974), pp. 292–93.

²² Text available at <http://www.commonlii.org/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1951/12.html>

Seen from the perspective of Delhi, the treaty would seem one of a piece with the kind of security treaties that Nehru had signed with Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim during 1949–50. The language of Article II in the friendship treaty with Burma is entirely similar to the one found in the other three treaties. Nehru understood that Myanmar is unlike the three Himalayan kingdoms and had to be approached very differently. Unlike the Himalayan kingdoms, towards whom Nehru adopted the British protectorate framework, the Burmese Republic was viewed as India's partner in articulating Asia's voice on the international stage. Therefore the security clauses were subtler.

It is important to note that the India-Burma friendship treaty was signed around the same time as both countries concluded similar agreements with Indonesia.²³ The three countries became the most vocal proponents of Asian identity in the early 1950s. While all three were votaries of non-alignment and opposition to the emerging military blocs in the East and the West, they also understood the importance of greater military cooperation among themselves. This aspect of the relationship has remained largely unexplored in contemporary discussion of Nehru's Asian policy. The context for this interesting defence diplomacy between Delhi and Jakarta was set by the extraordinary warmth between the nationalists of the two countries, especially Nehru and Sukarno. One important factor that contributed to the warmth was Delhi's mobilization of international support for Indonesian independence and Nehru's active opposition to the Dutch aggression against Indonesia in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Nehru also convened a conference of 18 governments to support the Indonesian Republic and its membership of the United Nations in 1949 generating a fund of good will for India.

The India-Indonesia Friendship Treaty signed in 1951 had virtually identical language with the one that would be signed a few months later with Burma. Article I had reference to the

²³ The India-Burma agreement was signed on 7 July 1951; India and Indonesia on 3 March 1951; and Indonesia and Burma on 31 March 1951.

standard template of “perpetual peace and unalterable friendship” between the two countries.²⁴ Article III had the provisions for consultations and provided the basis for security cooperation: “The two Governments agree that their representatives shall meet from time to time and as often as occasion requires to exchange views on matters of common interest and to consider ways and means for mutual cooperation in such matters.” The friendship treaty was followed by substantive cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries, under separate agreements between their respective navies (1956), air forces (1958), and armies (1960). The focus was on high level military exchanges, cross-attachment of officers, training, supply of equipment, and the grant of Indian loans to facilitate this.²⁵ Indonesia is the only country outside the Commonwealth that India conducted naval exercises with. India also helped Indonesia with military assistance to put down some of its internal revolts and secessionist movements in the 1950s.

The bilateral security cooperation between the three self-proclaimed non-aligned countries did not last, notwithstanding the proclamations about “perpetual” and “unalterable” friendship. The focus with their internal troubles, distractions from other regional conflicts, and the divisive impact of the Cold War increasingly reduced the salience of India’s security cooperation with old and new friends beyond the inner ring. If there was one single factor that had the biggest impact on the prospects for security cooperation was the rise of China and the border conflict between Delhi and Beijing. The emergence of Communist China generated deep anxieties all across Asia; Delhi, Rangoon, and Jakarta were no exception. At the same time, Nehru, Nu, and Sukarno had to come to terms with the fact that China is a giant Asian neighbour with which they must actively seek a working relationship. The two also concurred on the proposition that they

²⁴Text of the treaty is available at <http://www.commonlii.org/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1951/7.html>

²⁵ See Pankaj K. Jha, “India-Indonesia: Emerging Strategic Confluence in the Indian Ocean Region”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 3, May 2008, pp. 443–44.

had no interest in supporting Western efforts to isolate China. All three believed that integrating China into the regional international relations could mitigate many of the potential dangers from the emergence of Communist China.

Beijing's charm diplomacy towards Southeast Asia in the 1950s and the worsening Sino-Indian relations at the turn of the 1960s complicated the prospect for deepening strategic cooperation between Delhi on the one hand and Rangoon and Jakarta on the other. As tensions on the border with India rose, China signed a boundary settlement with Burma in 1960 that generated much unhappiness in Delhi. Rangoon sought to placate Nehru, but it irritated him by suggesting India should emulate Burma in resolving the boundary dispute with China. Of special concern for Nehru was the map attached to the agreement that conformed to Chinese territorial claims against India on the tri-junction with Burma.²⁶ Burma's neutrality during the Sino-Indian border clashes of 1962 also shocked the political classes in Delhi that had gone out of the way to support Burma in the preceding years. As India turned angry at what it saw as China's "betrayal" of Nehru, for Sukarno, Peking remained an anti-imperialist progressive power with whom it was worth cooperating. As an Indian diplomat concluded, "The differing images of China began to cause serious misunderstanding between India and Indonesia. The Indonesians were dismayed by India's persistence in clinging to the British-made frontiers and refusing to understand Peking's viewpoint. This in turn led India to question Jakarta's friendship."²⁷ The differences between Nehru and Sukarno boiled over at the first summit of the non-aligned nations, where the former sought moderation and the latter demanded a radical approach to global issues.

Nehru's security diplomacy was not limited to the east. He signed a series of friendship treaties with key countries to the

²⁶ Uma Shankar Singh, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–79.

²⁷ L.P. Singh, "Dynamics of Indian-Indonesian Relations", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No. 9, September 1967, p. 657.

West that were once part of India's frontier of influence. The first treaties of peace and friendship to be signed were with the Royal Government of Afghanistan (January 1950)²⁸ and the Imperial Government of Iran (March 1950),²⁹ both of which were central to the evolution of India's regional policy, defined by the metaphor of the Great Game, from the early nineteenth century. Both treaties underline "perpetual" or "everlasting" peace and friendship between the two countries and unlike the treaties of the Raj; they note the "ancient ties" between India on the one hand and Afghanistan and Iran on the other. Neither treaty has an explicit or implicit reference to security cooperation and focus on consular affairs and treatment of respective nationals. Yet, having lost the frontiers with both Afghanistan and Iran after the Partition, Nehru's India was underlining the enduring significance of the two countries in its strategic calculus. In March 1953, India signed a treaty of friendship and commerce with the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, with special emphasis on cooperation on navigation by sea and air.³⁰ India also negotiated but could not conclude a friendship treaty with Yemen. Further afield, the Nehru Raj signed treaties of peace and friendship with Turkey (December 1951), Syria (February 1952), and Egypt (April 1955).

Many of these agreements did not turn out to be consequential, but were a reflection of India's search for establishing a new basis for strong engagement in its extended neighbourhood that was part of Raj's frontier of influence. But one of them saw the development of interesting defence cooperation between India and Egypt from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. India, participated in the development of a jet fighter and jet engine in Egypt. Nehru saw as a complementary to India's own efforts to develop an

²⁸ The text of the treaty is available at <http://www.liiofindia.org/cgi-bin/disp.pl/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1950/3.html?query=india%20afghanistan%20friendship%20treaty>

²⁹ The text of the treaty is available at <http://www.commonlii.org/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1950/7.html>

³⁰ Text of the treaty available at <http://www.commonlii.org/in/other/treaties/INTSer/1953/3.html>

indigenous aerospace industry. According to one account, Nehru's India

participated in Egypt's Helwan HA-300 jet fighter program and sent various professionals from its aeronautics industry and the Indian Air Force on detached service to Egypt, where they joined the local aircraft project. India also participated, with contributions of money, experts and equipment, in Egypt's attempt to produce an indigenous jet turbine engine, the Brandner E-300. Critically, India assured that this engine would have a viable market by pledging to power its own indigenous jet fighter, the HAL HF-24 'Marut', with the Egyptian engine.³¹

Although the projects did not succeed, they underlined Nehru's deep interest in defence collaboration with friends and political partners, not withstanding his opposition to military alliances.

The Legacy of the Nehru Raj

The traditional discourse on Nehru's foreign policy and its determination of its roots in idealism is focused on his response to the emergence of the Cold War, his activism in favour of international peace, and his search for Afro-Asian solidarity. Our review of Nehru's treaty diplomacy underlines the very different universe that independent India had to contend with. The logic of India's security was bound to the nature of its territoriality that was constructed under the Raj and a measure of continuity in the security politics was inevitable. Nehru sought to reconstruct it in the Himalayan inner ring on a modified basis showing accommodation, where possible, to the interests to the smaller neighbours, but making it absolutely clear that they were an integral part of India's defence system. The significant Indian prestige in the international system and the recognition of its

³¹ See Gil Feiler, "India's Economic Relations with Israel and the Arabs", *Middle East Security and Policy Studies*, No. 96 (Ramat Gan: The Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, 2011), p. 16.

military weight also saw other countries, small and large, seek security cooperation with it. Unlike the “Nehruvians”, India’s first prime minister did not conflate the logic of strategic autonomy and non-alignment with the imperatives of pursuing India’s security interests with whatever means possible. This necessarily included the reordering of the Himalayan glacis as well as extending security cooperation to friendly countries that sought them, especially Burma, Indonesia, and Egypt. Nehru’s ability to construct and maintain the inherited security system was constrained by a number of factors, including the emergence of a unified and powerful China on its northern frontiers. While the perceived threat from China initially created the conditions for stronger security cooperation, China’s determined quest to improve relations with India’s neighbours and the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations began to test the limits of India’s regional security strategy. China would remain an important factor in strengthening the essence of India’s Himalayan policy in the following decades, while its articulation had to be continuously adjusted.

If Nehru had difficulties managing this new dynamics in the inner ring of the Himalayas, his successors struggled continually to adapt and offer concessions to the neighbours, but never agreed to undo the framework that he had put in place. While this is not the place to go into a detailed discussion, Indira Gandhi absorbed Sikkim into the Indian Union and revitalized the engagement with Nepal and Bhutan. Rajiv Gandhi made NEFA into a full-fledged state of the Indian Union, and embarked on coercive diplomacy against Nepal when it sought to break the terms on importing arms. Both Indira and Rajiv reaffirmed India’s right to shaping its immediate security environment. The former intervened in Bangladesh in 1971 and followed it up with a friendship treaty with Dhaka in 1972 with an explicit article on security cooperation. Indira Gandhi also put in place measures to assist Mauritius in coping with its internal security problems and signed an agreement on defence cooperation with Oman. Rajiv Gandhi intervened to promote ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka (1987) on the basis of a bilateral agreement to establish peace and

normalcy. He also helped secure the legitimate regime in Maldives against a coup in 1988. In the more recent period, the Manmohan Singh government revised the 1949 treaty with Bhutan in 2007 to put the bilateral partnership on a stronger foundation and in tune with contemporary reality. It signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, agreements for comprehensive cooperation with Bangladesh and Maldives, and put in place trilateral cooperation on maritime security with Colombo and Male, all in 2011. As India's economic strength and military capabilities grew and interests became prominent once again in its historic frontiers of influence, in the post-reform era, Delhi dramatically expanded security cooperation in its extended neighbourhood stretching from Japan and Vietnam in East Asia to Qatar and Oman in the Arabian Peninsula, and Seychelles and South Africa in the western Indian Ocean.

Underlying this intensive security diplomacy in recent years are propositions that Nehru had laid down clearly—that Delhi had interests beyond its borders—Aden to Malacca or Suez to South China Sea. As a large geopolitical unit, Nehru believed, India had the responsibility to assist friends and partners in the military domain. Nehru's sights were not limited to promoting narrowly defined national interests of India. He recognized that India must contribute to international peace and security and took the initiative to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations. It was a legacy that his successors would pursue despite deepening military challenges on India's frontiers. They would make its armed forces one of the largest contributors to international peace operations and invite the characterization that India is a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond.