NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series
69

A Nehruvian Foreign Policy Today

Shivshankar Menon
Currently Wilhelm Fellow at MIT, USA

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2015

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-69-9

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

A Nehruvian Foreign Policy Today*

S. Menon

It might be interesting to consider how a Nehruvian foreign policy would look today, to look at the resonances today of Nehru's view and practice of independent India's foreign policy in the first formative decades.

Of course the world today is different in both quality and quantity from the world in which India achieved an independent statehood. That was a world of fifty-one founder members of the United Nations (without Germany and Japan, mostly European and Latin American), soon divided by the Cold War. Incidentally, Nehru was one of the first to recognize the break-up of the wartime alliance between the USA and the Soviet Union and to describe the features of the Cold War, just as he was one of the first to see and act upon the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1950s. Nehru was constrained by the binary world of the late 1940s and 1950s, and by India's condition at independence (her limited economic resources, the aftermath of Partition, the demands of integrating the states, and multiple calls on his time welding the peoples and institutions of India into a modern nation state). But despite these constraints Nehru had a clear vision of India's place in the world and of the high stakes involved in foreign policy in the nuclear age.

Let us consider five aspects of Nehru's foreign policy practice and see how relevant they are in today's very different context.

---

* Paper presented at a conference titled 'Nehru's World', held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 19 April 2014.

(His China policy is intentionally left out of this reckoning, despite its multiple lessons for us, because it is being discussed in two full sessions by Chandrashekhar Dasgupta and Srinath Raghavan.)

Non-alignment

Speaking to the nation on 7 September 1946, just six days after the Interim Government took office, Nehru said that his international goal was to stay away from the power politics of groups. But in his mind this was no passive neutrality. "Too long have we been passive spectators of events, the playthings of others. The initiative comes to our people now and we shall make the history of our choice…". He saw non-alignment as a way of leveraging India's position and of maximizing India's power. When asked why he was so active on international issues, some of them so far away from India, he once said, "When the scales are balanced, even a little makes a difference." For the first time in history a large state, not a Sweden or Switzerland or Belgium, chose to seek its security through an active policy of non-alignment outside alliance systems and the existing political order. This took courage, when the prevailing Indian advice, from K.M. Pannikar and others, was to seek our security by being part of the British (later US) security system east of Suez.

Nor was Nehru's non-alignment pacifism or a retreat from the world of power politics, as classical European neutrality was. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru was never a pacifist. In the early years of the Republic, Nehru showed a willingness to use force for state goals (in J&K, Hyderabad, Goa etc.). He involved India in wide-ranging and unprecedented military peace-keeping missions (in Korea, Indo-China, the Congo, and elsewhere). And he signed defence cooperation agreements and entered into active military cooperation with a series of countries in our extended neighbourhood, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Ceylon, and others, while placing our relations with Nepal and Bhutan on a legal basis and a strong foundation of common defence. When we come to write the history of our defence diplomacy and cooperation, the

Nehru years will be seen to be among the most active ever before this last decade.

The first point of departure in this paper is therefore the sheer courage and audacity of Nehru's foreign policy vision and practice. We now take his ideas of non-alignment for granted. But when Nehru first spoke of it, it was a creative solution to a strategic dilemma. Nehru had no precedents and no inherited or established body of thought, except his own to draw on, in coming to this policy solution and devising non-alignment. He saw it not in idealistic or ideological terms, but in strategic terms.

For India, the quest for strategic autonomy that non-aligned policy represented, the ability to judge each issue by its merits and its effects on India's interests, is surely as valid today as ever before. Even if the blocs and alliances of the 1950s have morphed into new forms and structures, power politics and its workings in a new balance of forces continues to occupy the Indian foreign policy practitioner. We are reminded each day that the solution to India's unique challenges and dilemmas must be uniquely Indian and therefore arrived at and worked out autonomously.

Asia's Centrality

The second striking aspect is the centrality of Asia to what he said and did.

One of his first acts was to convene the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 where he spoke stirringly:

> For too long have we of Asia been petitioners in Western courts and chancelleries. That story must now belong to the past. We propose to stand on our own legs and to cooperate with all others who are prepared to cooperate with us. We do not intend to be the playthings of others.

You are familiar with his efforts at Bandung in 1955 and to bring peace to Indo-China, Korea, and during the Suez crisis.

Here again he proceeded from what he saw as India's interest and geopolitics: "India … is the pivot of Western, Southern and South-East Asia. We are of Asia which is nearer and closer to us than others." The centrality of Asia in his thinking was not the result of some sentimental attachment to a historical myth of Asian solidarity. Nehru rejected, at Bandung and elsewhere, the Chinese notion of Asian unity based on a sense of common victimhood. He was extremely sensitive and instinctively averse to anything that smacked of a hierarchical Asian order, whether it was modelled on 19th century European alliance systems (like SEATO and CENTO) or on a Sino-centric tributary system.

His approach to Asian issues was based on a clear and strategic view of events. Take the Peace Treaty with Japan in San Francisco in 1951, for instance. Nehru's arguments for not signing the San Francisco Treaty were not couched in sentiment but in practical political terms. His three main objections were:

- Any Treaty excluding China and Russia would be unstable over time. (Unlike Nehru's reasons, China and Russia did not sign because they wanted a punitive Treaty. They are still negotiating for one.)

- Leaving open and unsolved sovereignty issues regarding Formosa, the Kuriles, Sakhalin, the Senkakus, and the Ryukyu Islands including Okinawa would only lead to future conflict.

- Nehru opposed the agreement joined to the Treaty allowing US military bases in Japan and making Japan a subordinate military alliance partner of the US. This would keep Asia unstable and should have been done after Japan regained her sovereignty and not before, Nehru felt.

In other words, Nehru saw the Treaty in practical terms of its future effect on Asia, creating instability and tension. (In fact, Nehru could not avoid the suspicion that Dulles willed it so since tension and crises in Asia gave the US enhanced geopolitical leverage.)

Today Asia's economic success seems to be translating into making her the most militarized and most nuclearized continent. The phenomenal economic growth of the Asia-Pacific has given its countries the means for an arms race, resulted in the rise of nationalism and chauvinism, and has been followed by a resurfacing of territorial and historical disputes and animosities. It is therefore all the more necessary that we Indians take a clear-headed and practical view of developments in the region which is our home, and prolong to the extent possible the peaceful and open external environment which has been critical to our economic successes in recent decades. Once again, like Nehru, we in India see an open, rule-based, and democratic security architecture in Asia as being in our interest, rather than an Asia of confrontation and crisis divided into blocs and alliances. The difference is that in Nehru's time there were minimal economic links between the two blocs and two super powers. Today, it is her role in the US-led global economic system which is the source of Chinese power, and economic interdependence opens new options for the exercise of power.

Politics in Command

Nehru thought politically and strategically about international issues. He knew that problems and threats could not be dealt with by ideology, by economic or technical fixes, or by military means alone. He therefore thought politically, case by case, examining India's interests and options. And he consulted widely, with the physicist P.M.S. Blacket, with the strategist Basil Liddel-Hart, and others to find new means and ways forward.

Take India's nuclear programme for instance. A scientist by training, Nehru was among the earliest to realize both the dangers and the promise of nuclear energy. He was determined that India would benefit from this development. He gave unstinted support to the atomic energy programme and Dr. Homi Bhabha, at a time when conventional wisdom thought that this was an expensive luxury for a poor country like India. Indeed, as is well known, his support extended to the entire scientific enterprise in India

which he inspired. Within ten days of assuming office as Prime Minister in the midst of a communal orgy, Nehru found time to attend a meeting of the CSIR. And his early decisions have been vindicated by history.

Less recognized is the fact that no matter how passionately he felt about the threat of thermo-nuclear war and nuclear disarmament, he was realist enough to know that the then nuclear weapon states would only respond to power. He therefore kept India's nuclear option open, even when he was advised against it by several colleagues in politics and advisors. When his friend and colleague Homi Bhabha once suggested some unilateral disarmament steps by India that could have limited our future options, Nehru said, "You handle the physics, leave the politics to me"! If we have been able to create meaningful deterrence against nuclear threat and blackmail by testing nuclear weapons in 1998, the credit must also go to Nehru for his foresight in creating the means and making that possible.

Global Order

Throughout his eighteen years as Prime Minister, Nehru had to deal with the asymmetries of power in a post-War global order arranged by the West, and to find ways of rearranging it short of conflict and war—war, which he repeatedly said had become unthinkable in the nuclear age. He was not anti-Western in a cultural or ideological sense, as some subsequent self-proclaimed Nehruvians have been. In fact, Nehru consistently accepted the liberal principles which the West professed (democracy, liberty, equality, sovereignty, and so on). But he sought to hold all states, including the West, to those principles. It is useful to remember the active and leading role that India played under his leadership in the drafting of the main UN Conventions on Human Rights in the 1950s. This was done not out of woolly-headed idealism but out of a conviction that a fairer international order would help to mitigate the asymmetry of power that had formed the post-War order, and thus serve India's needs.

We are again at a moment in international relations like the one that Nehru saw in the late 1940s and 1950s, when a new order is being born out of a fundamental shift in the balance of power. The geopolitical and economic centre of gravity is shifting to Asia and we are groping to create the habits, structures, and institutions that will enable us to manage the international system. Global finance is increasingly managed and determined outside the Bretton Woods institutions, and in international politics the UN Security Council's role is peripheral to most issues and crises. New arrangements are attempted in crisis, like the G-20, but existing power-holders find it hard to bring themselves to transfer real power to them, or even to implement the agreed quota reform in the World Bank. It is still hard to see how the diffusion of power in the international system and the tendency towards multipolarity will be institutionalized in the absence of the sort of ideological homogeneity that underpinned the post-War order. But one can certainly say that we are once more, like Nehru, India, and the world in the late 1940s, at another moment of creation.

India's Role

Nehru chose an activist and independent role for India on major international issues, whether in resolving Korean War issues, in Indo-China in the ICC, during the Suez crisis, and several other instances. He also set the international agenda, making disarmament, and de-colonization, central to multilateral effort at the UN.

We are today at another transformative moment in the global order, as Nehru was in the immediate post-War period. We face many of the dilemmas that he did as we look outwards, seeking to define India's place in the world, and trying to create an enabling external environment for India's development.

As in Nehru's time, India is making a difference, particularly in our neighbourhood, though not always in the ways preferred by our international partners and the major powers.

S. Gopal makes an interesting point in his assessment of Nehru's legacy in his definitive biography. He says that Nehru's successes were global—to resist imperialism, denounce fascism, promote the emergence of Africa, and work for anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and disarmament. His failures—to stabilize relations with Pakistan, deteriorating relations with China—were national.

Conclusion

In sum, Nehru's legacy, of both successes and failures, has much to teach us today. Whether it is the quest for strategic autonomy, the centrality of Asia, the use of new technologies for our security, our approach to the global order, or, more generally, India's role in the world, much of what Nehru practiced and said remains relevant. But most of all it is the attitude of mind that Nehru brought to thinking about Indian foreign policy, the outlook and the practice that he established, of India as an independent rational voice in international affairs, thinking and acting for itself, that is of long-term relevance to the conduct of our foreign policy. That is why one could go further and say that, in general terms, a Nehruvian foreign policy is still relevant in today's circumstances.

Why are these aspects of Nehru's foreign policy still relevant today? The answer is simple. Nehru thought deeply about India's condition and place in the world. Because he thought and acted case by case, from an examination of India's interests, and always keeping in mind the overriding goal of building the India of his dreams, he proceeded in most cases from geopolitical realities and India's capabilities. Where he did so, he succeeded. Where he did not, he failed. Many of those verities and realities remain true today, though somewhat altered, even if they play themselves out in a different manner.

So long as our overriding priority and goal remains the elimination of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and disease, so as to build a secure and prosperous India, in which every citizen can realize his full potential, we will grapple with the issues that

Nehru did, and will find much to learn from his foreign policy practice and experience.