

Strategic Culture and IR Studies in India

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Speaking Notes

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Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to speak to your Third International Studies Conference. It has become an annual feature that we look forward to as an occasion to learn from the best minds in international relations (IR) studies in India.

It was suggested to me that I should speak to you about 'Strategic Culture in India'. I think my views on this are well known. There have been those, like George Tanham, who deny that India has a strategic culture. My view is that this is an impossibility for a self-conscious culture and civilisation such as ours, with our heritage and sense of our own importance and role. Just as saying one is apolitical is itself a political choice, saying that India has no strategic culture is only to say that it is different from the strategic cultures one is used to.

Sadly many Indians have picked up Tanham's refrain saying that India has no strategic culture. I think what most of them mean is that they do not see the long term thinking and patient planning that is often (rightly or wrongly) ascribed to other cultures.

This too seems untrue to me. India has shown remarkable consistency in the manner of her engagement with the world, across different stages of her development, under governments of divergent political persuasions, and in very varied international circumstances. The record has been remarkably consistent.

But why is there an argument about this at all? One reason may be the nature of IR studies in India. Let us be honest among ourselves. With a few individual exceptions, IR studies in India are yet to benchmark themselves to the best in the world or to carve out a place in IR studies globally. As an Indian, this pains me. As a practitioner, rather than indulge in a theoretical discussion, which you scholars are much better qualified to do, I would therefore like to speak today on "Strategic Culture and IR Studies in India" and to suggest some issues for our future work.

Issues

Preparing for this talk, the first question that struck me as a practitioner was whether what we do as India's diplomats is studied; whether we diplomats recognise the reality that we know and experience, or something like it, in the studies of Indian diplomacy and foreign policy that we see. My honest answer, after over forty years in the field, must be that there has actually been very little such scholarship. It is now beginning, as Srinath Raghavan's '1971', and his previous book show, but there is very little of that quality which is empirically based on the historical record and which suggests the real policy dilemmas that we face. We are fortunate in having a considerable body of memoirs, some of them like JN Dixit's 'Assignment Colombo' of very high quality indeed, but little that combines theoretical rigour with knowledge of the real world.

I suppose that what I am asking for is a combination of theory and practice that is rare, and difficult when we are so archivally challenged, to put it mildly. Even so, the exceptions prove that the effort can be made successfully. IR is and must be a primarily an empirical discipline, even though some of us are tempted by the 'quants' or by the desire to be 'scientific'.

To illustrate my point let me mention two issues in Indian foreign policy.

(i) India and her Neighbours: We are yet to find a paradigm to satisfactorily explain the paradox of India having more in common than most countries with her neighbours in terms of language, culture, economic complementarity, common history, and so on, but still having difficult or complex relations with each of them. Instead our studies concentrate on the day to day politics and compulsions that affect these relationships rather than their drivers or explanations of why they are as they are.

(ii) India and China: Similarly, a simple realist theory is insufficient to explain or even describe the complex course and state of India-China relations. If the balance of power were all that mattered, how do we explain the development of the relationship in the last twenty-five years?

When Rajiv Gandhi became the first Indian PM to visit China after Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954 we had a mono focal relationship. That is now transformed and it continues to change before our eyes. We lack a theoretical basis for understanding this change.

1. The Gap between Theory and Practice

Why is there this gap between theory and practice, between theoreticians and practitioners, between academics and diplomats in Indian IR studies? Let me suggest a few reasons that my experience suggests:

- (i) One reason is the post-modern emphasis on narrative and discourse. When I look at your agenda some words leap out: “reimagining”, “imagining”, “subaltern reading”, “binaries, silences and alternatives”, a view from nowhere”, “intellectual discourse”, “contending discourses” and so on. These are no doubt useful in their place and are academically fashionable concepts. It is useful to be self conscious. The media, public diplomacy and an entire industry have been built on these post-modern concepts that other disciplines borrowed from literary criticism. When it comes to dealing with international relations they are useful in explaining subjective perceptions, which do affect policy choices. Methodological refinement and improving the tools available to the discipline certainly have some value.
- (ii) But the fact is that this is talking about talking. While it is useful to be self conscious there must be something to be self conscious about, not just self consciousness itself. Process cannot substitute for substance. For the practitioner of international relations, it is outcomes, the policy choices, and the objective realities that underlie them that is of interest. The practitioner seeks theories that contribute to understanding them. The post-modern vocabulary and discourse does not offer that. In my experience what moves states and people who make decisions is not discourse but what they see as choices and risks in objective reality. In short, the diplomat seeks outcomes. These are not obtained in the real world by narratives and discourse though they can help. If IR studies want the satisfaction that comes from having changed or explained reality post-modern discourse does not provide it.
- (iii) The dominant discourse in IR studies, journalism and the world as a whole today is a Western metropolitan one. But that has not prevented the steady erosion of Western dominance, as the activation of the G-20 and its role after the 2007-8 financial crisis showed. (There will no doubt be push back as power seldom shifts smoothly from one set of hands to another in the international system.) That shift was based on actual changes in the global economy, with manufacturing and surpluses moving to the emerging world and China. Changes in discourse and narrative followed the objective shift, and will change again with push back.

- (iv) Besides, as IR studies concentrate more and more on less and less, they are less able to convey the complexity of the real world that we face, where what Game Theory calls “minimax” solutions and choices are the rule, and every choice involves risks.
- (v) Lastly, people are at the heart of what we diplomats do. Where science deals with grand unification at the same time as chemistry burrows down to the molecular and atomic level, IR studies today are so concerned with being seen as scientific that they do not seem to have room for the individual.

We today have a problem of plenty. Scholars are under pressure to publish books and articles in journals and newsmagazines, to comment on daily events, write blogs, tweet, appear on TV, attend conferences, seminars and to teach. Frankly, I am amazed at the multitasking skills of my academic friends. But many of them secretly admit that quality suffers from this inflation of media and that the supply of ideas has not kept up with the demand.

What is the answer to the gap between theory and practice?

IR has been most effective where there is an interchange between academia and government. (I say government only because for most recent history international relations and diplomacy have been the province of states. Now they involve governments, supra-governmental organisations, quasi-governmental and non-governmental organisations.) But that does not affect the argument that it is the interchange between academia and these institutions that make policy, still largely government. That is the key to both being more effective. Both academia and policy formulation benefit from such interchange. Some of the best academic work in India on our foreign policy was done by those like S Gopal who had experience of both. When we had a Historical Division in MEA it was possible for scholars to work in Government of India and make these transitions. We started these conferences because we wanted to create precisely this interchange in India, which has sadly become rarer over time. And Government is the poorer for not having the benefit of grounded academic advice.

I want to make it clear that I am speaking about IR studies in India, though some or parts of this might apply elsewhere. What I am suggesting is that we try to build links between academia and policy, and that this conference is a good place to start.

2. India's Role in the World

My other suggestion would be for Indian IR scholars to look at the remarkable consistency of the role that India has sought to play in the world, under governments of different political persuasions and composition. India's non-alignment, chosen levels of engagement, the balance between multilateralism and bilateralism, and the demands we place upon our negotiators are all unique.

All in all, our diplomatic engagement has been marked by circumspection, which may not be what an age of 24X7 media and celebrity culture demands, but judged by outcomes it has served us well. The modesty and patience that have marked Indian diplomacy so far have resulted in India making quiet but substantive contributions to the world in many ways.

India's Diplomatic Style

This consistency is also a feature of India's diplomatic style.

Since independence India has been an independent actor on the international stage with a role, a diplomatic style, and a unique and recognisable personality all her own. Let me mention some ways in which this is so.

1. For one, we have practiced the most frugal diplomacy that I know. We expect a small band of professional diplomats with minimum means to deliver all and more than much larger, better equipped and well funded foreign services do. Judged by international standards we have delivered. But as India's interests abroad expand it will no longer be possible to improvise and extemporise with what little we have.
2. We seem to use multilateralism for our values and bilateralism for our interests. We were among the first and most persistent to raise decolonisation issues, apartheid in South Africa, and nuclear disarmament in the UN. In the early years of the UN India played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other fundamental human rights Covenants and Conventions. And India is a major contributor to UN peacekeeping operations. But our experience of the UN's reactions to Pakistani aggression in Kashmir, the genocide in East Pakistan in 1971, and other cases taught us to rely on our own resources when it came to defending our core interests.
3. India has shown a willingness to use force for clearly defined political ends when the cause is just, once it is clear that diplomacy's potential is exhausted, internally in Goa and Hyderabad and externally in 1971, in Sri Lanka and the Maldives at the request of their governments.
4. In the choice between the imperatives of domestic politics and the demands of external engagement we have normally struck a balance which has stood the

test of time. Think of our international dealings on the Kashmir issue, or those with Sri Lanka on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue.

5. Others tell us that the articulation of our policies is normative, moralistic and academic, even in explaining acts of *real politik*. We have even been called 'preachy'! This has not changed much over time and seems to be a continuing cultural trait.

3. The Uses and Limits of Power

All strategic thinkers through the ages, whether Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli or others, have sought answers to similar questions: how to win without battle; how to deal with a stronger power; how to choose between the risks associated with any course of action (since every course of action in IR involves risks); and so on. And they have chosen to do so empirically not normatively.

India has been very economical in its foreign entanglements but not engagements. We have so far resisted siren calls for us to do what others want us to, in the name of being "responsible" or "stepping up to the plate". This shows an acute awareness on our part, but not others, of the extent and limits of India's power and its potential uses, and a clear prioritisation between our interests and between our goals.

My own feeling is that the key to understanding India's foreign policy practice so far is the Indian understanding of the uses, limits and nature of power. But this is a proposition that must be tested and proven with some academic rigour by you scholars. What we practitioners can bring to the exercise is some experience and anecdotal evidence.

4. An Indian Theory

Which brings me to the last issue that I would like to raise. If India's practice and style of foreign policy is so recognisably and so uniquely Indian why is there not an Indian theory to explain it?

One way of developing such a theory is to look back. Chinese scholars have done this for some time, like Yan Xuetong, reinterpreting and mining their own past to produce what they see as a Chinese theory of international relations. In India too some people have started this exercise. The IDSA has been sponsoring some truly valuable work on Kautilya and the Arthashastra. It is interesting in showing how

central the state was to strategic thinking in India as early as the third century BC, long before other cultures stopped speaking of a mysterious God and his ways as central to strategy.

This is extremely useful work, if nothing else to break the mental shackles of academic and linguistic conditioning. But it has its limits.

The other way is to look forward and at the present. If India is to deal with the new issues of the twenty first century, it is essential that we further elaborate our own culture and tradition of strategic thought and build on it. To the extent that India's situation and needs are unique, we need our own ways of looking at developments, and our own strategic vocabulary and doctrines. Fortunately for us, there is no isolationist streak in our strategic thought, and we have a rich tradition to draw on. As India grows and gathers capabilities, the more we need the world and are integrated into it.

Conclusion

So there is plenty to be done to link our studies with our practice, to study ourselves and our own practice and experience, and to elaborate an Indian approach to IR studies for the twenty-first century. I would also conclude that the mere fact that we can set out such an agenda for ourselves suggests that there is a strong strategic culture at work in India.

My apologies for raising more questions than I have answers. I do hope they serve the intended purpose of provoking a discussion and some work on these issues in the future.