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Reflections on Indian Strategic Culture

Rajesh Basrur

SYNOPSIS

*India's potential as a "rising power" is being widely discussed. Not so clear is the question of what might be expected of its strategic behaviour. **RAJESH BASRUR** takes a close look at India's strategic culture to help identify sustained patterns.*

COMMENTARY

In recent months, influential media assessments in the [Economist](#), the [Financial Times](#), and the [New York Times](#), among others, have evinced considerable optimism about India's economic growth prospects. This sentiment is in tune with the expectation that India is well on the way to reaching the status of a "[leading](#)", if not yet a "great", power. Less clear is the question of what *kind* of a major power India will be. Will it be a proactive balancer, an interventionist state, or an innovative harmoniser, as its adherents claim? The conception of India's "strategic culture", which identifies long-term preferences, is useful in gauging longer-term propensities that a globally prominent India will exhibit.

Defining Strategic Culture

A much misunderstood term, strategic culture needs to be defined first by what it is *not*.

The periodic claim that strategic behaviour rests on the cultural traits of a society is usually made without systematic evidence. Occasionally, it reaches absurd lengths, such as George Tanham's notion that "the Indian belief in life cycles and repetitions, in particular, limits planning in the Western sense." The opposite view — that realpolitik

has always been embedded in Indian strategic thought — is also unhelpful since a standard realist analysis of any state's strategic behaviour is similar.

Strategic culture is essentially a compendium of ways in which nations *deviate* from this standard. As defined by the late Colin Gray, strategic culture is a society's "socially constructed and transmitted assumptions, habits of mind, traditions, and preferred methods of operations — that is, behaviour." In short, any understanding of strategic culture must be based on evidence of its distinctiveness over time.

A further refinement may be added here. While strategic culture is typically a long-term pattern, it cannot be viewed as unalterable. A set of preferences that is established over several decades but changes thereafter may still be classified as strategic culture, but it is more accurately qualified as "mutable". Shifts in the pattern may be sudden, usually owing to a shock, or gradual. More persistent patterns that are resistant to change over longer time frames can be classified as "deep". Facets of both types in the context of Indian strategy are highlighted in this essay.

Mutable Strategic Culture: From Coercion to Constraint

It is often said that, following the end of the Cold War, India shifted from moralistic preaching of universal peace and brotherhood to a new *realpolitik* in its foreign policy, the latter currently exemplified by its purchase of cheap oil from a Russia under sanctions. But the perception that Indian strategic behaviour was norm-driven earlier ignores a vital fact — that New Delhi's attitude towards its weaker neighbours in South Asia was very much a hard realist one.

On the global landscape, as a weak state, India emphasised principles of peace; at the regional level, as a strong power, it frequently projected coercive power. Vociferous in rejecting colonialism, it practised its own form of local dominance, signing unequal treaties with Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim (the last a protectorate that was ultimately incorporated into the Indian union). And, above all, India emphasised non-violence on a world scale, but as a regional big power it was inclined to employ force or coercion: it intervened in Pakistan to help create an independent Bangladesh (1971), sent an unwelcome peacekeeping force into Sri Lanka (1987), despatched an expeditionary force to defeat a coup in the Maldives (1988), and virtually blockaded Nepal for buying arms from China (1989).

By the late 1980s, it was not uncommon for critics to dub India a regional "supercop" or even an "imperial" power. One might justifiably have viewed both India's prickly attitude towards major powers as well as its willingness to intervene in its immediate neighbourhood as reflective of an overarching worldview: a hard realist strategic culture driven by a high level of insecurity.

But this decades-long tendency rapidly faded in the post-Cold War period as India's insecurity declined with its economic growth and its acquisition of nuclear weapons. Since the early 1990s, India has in contrast eschewed military interventions and exercised strategic restraint. The new worldview and approach reflect a more tolerant attitude towards its neighbours' policies that are not in tune with Indian preference, such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka's openness to investments and arms supplies from China. The Indian government has also judiciously resisted domestic pressure to

coerce the Maldives into a less pro-China policy. Moreover, following its withdrawal of troops from Sri Lanka in 1989, India was circumspect in extending military aid to Colombo in the latter's continuing civil war with the Tamil Tigers. Likewise, its military assistance to a faltering pre-Taliban Afghanistan was insubstantial. Notably, too, India declined an American invitation in 2003 to send a peacekeeping force to Iraq.



The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota was built with substantial loans from China. Will India's current non-interventionist stance change, especially if Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean begins to exert pressure on India's national security interests? *Image from Wikimedia.*

The shift from an interventionist to a non-interventionist strategic culture tells us something about India's long-term preferences. Consistency over time does not mean permanence. The big change seems to have been caused by the confidence derived from economic growth and enhanced military capability.

Might there be a future shift back to interventionism? This admittedly unlikely change could be triggered by New Delhi's renewed perception of weakness and heightened insecurity, possibly if India is battered by serious economic crisis and domestic turbulence. Another possibility is that of a neighbour taking an extreme step such as providing a hostile power with a military base. But this is improbable as India's neighbours know what India can do if it really wants to.

Deep Strategic Culture: Strategic Autonomy

In the 75 years since it obtained independence, India has held fast to one central foreign policy principle: a preference for strategic autonomy. Conscious of the painful

experience of prolonged colonial rule, which had constrained India's potential, Nehru and his successors have rested their *Weltanschauung* on the self-image of a nation destined for greatness.

Accordingly, national strategy was initially embedded in the non-aligned movement (NAM) and Indian policy makers stayed away from alliances even under serious threat, although they made partial compromises such as obtaining defence assistance from the United States (briefly, in the aftermath of 1962) and the Soviet Union (more enduringly, from the early 1970s). Retaining autonomy in decision-making was, from this perspective, a necessity if India was not to play second fiddle to any major power — a priority essential to a nation conscious of its colonial past. Other benefits included the potential to attain a better bargaining position by playing off the Cold War big powers against one another — a fairly successful gambit as New Delhi was able to gain major economic assistance from Washington and substantial military supplies from Moscow.

Simultaneously, even as it remained relatively weak, India was able to project itself as a global leader in the making by means of an activist role among developing nations that involved promoting decolonisation, putting pressure on apartheid regimes, and building NAM and the Group of 77 developing countries (G77).

A rising India today has adopted fundamentally the same approach, though with upgraded expectations. Non-alignment has been replaced with “multi-alignment”, where bilateral security relations have been developed with the major powers (the United States, Japan, France, Russia and others). The G77 is more or less dead, and India's focus is now on the G20, of which it has recently assumed the presidency.

And, rather than being a Third World leader, India now demands a permanent place in the United Nations Security Council. Although there is periodic speculation that, following growing frictions with China, India may well enter into an alliance with the United States, New Delhi's preferred mode of linkage is the “strategic partnership”. This allows for obtaining defence transfers and conducting joint military exercises in addition to holding strategic consultations, but strictly avoids integrated defence planning or operations, which could make it a junior partner in an alliance with a great power. It also helps India avoid becoming entrapped in the conflicts of its partners and provides space for independent engagement with its adversaries.

Might this preference for strategic autonomy change? Not at all. India's self-image is cast in stone and its determination to become a great power, whatever the prospects of achieving such a rank, is unshakeable and largely unquestioned in the domestic realm. Any policy towards India must involve expectations and incentives to New Delhi that are shaped in this light. Other aspects of Indian strategic culture, for instance, the mutable nature of its willingness to integrate with the international economy and its more deep-rooted hankering for status through the acquisition of seats at major global institutional tables, need also to be borne in mind, but limitations of space preclude a consideration here. A proper grasp of the mutable and deep dimensions of Indian strategic culture is essential for optimising policy towards India.

Rajesh BASRUR is Senior Fellow in the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg