

# Seeking The 'Rightful Place'

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**INDIA AT THE GLOBAL HIGH TABLE: THE QUEST FOR REGIONAL PRIMACY AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

By Teresita C. Schaffer and Howard B. Schaffer  
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This is a much-awaited work, a capstone opus by a

gifted couple that has devoted a lifetime, as professional American diplomats, working in South Asia and on India-US dossiers. Their friends and admirers, a small legion, will applaud the incisiveness with which the Schaffers have tackled their oeuvre.

The book's leitmotif has been extracted from the closing words of Jawaharlal Nehru's unforgettable *Tryst With Destiny* 1947 speech; Panditji dedicated himself 'to the service of India and her people to the end that this ancient land *attain her rightful place in the world* and make her full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and the welfare of mankind' (emphasis added by the authors). The Schaffers are right; Indians have an intuitive, even if rather inchoate, notion of that 'rightful place', as an overriding goal for a strong, resurgent India.

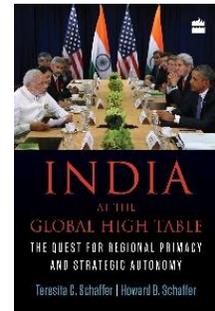
The book's structure is set out in a succinct two-page preface. The authors are interested in three key perspectives: the record of India's foreign policy, its global vision, and Indian practices in negotiations. The first five chapters look at the evolution of Indian external policy in terms of the pre-Independence legacy, and the period before and after the Cold War, as also to the country's strategic vision and its foreign policy institutions. The next seven chapters examine in depth the Indian negotiation rubric, which allows detailed examination of the key bilaterals, but in the optic of negotiation practice and style. This produces freshness of approach. The final chapter, 'India in a Changing World', looks to the future. The buyer thus gets a 'twofer', an insightful book on Indian foreign policy, and an authoritative, even rare, tutorial on the country's negotiation style.

The two chapters on India's foreign policy during the Cold War years and after are succinct. Yet in the description of the events of 1971, some old-think emerges; that short section is titled 'Geopolitics in 1971 and the Breakup of Pakistan: The Triumph of Realpolitik'—not the emergence of Bangladesh? The authors say: 'the role of the (Indo-Soviet) treaty in igniting the India-Pakistan War of December 1971 is

much disputed...'; yet Islamabad's atrocities in East

Pakistan, and the heroic efforts of US Consul General Archer Blood to get Washington DC to consider the ground realities, do not find mention (p. 35). One might also ask, is the word 'unexpectedly' an apt description of Indira Gandhi's March 1977 action to lift the emergency and hold the general elections, in which she

was soundly defeated (p. 39)? Does anyone believe that the Emergency would have continued indefinitely?



In 'Foreign Policy: The Post-Cold War World' the authors give broad-brush analysis of India's foreign policy after 1991. Pursuit of economic power became the third goal, besides regional preeminence and nonalignment, 'increasingly termed "strategic autonomy" in the post-Cold War world' (p. 43). This overlooks the nuances that have emerged with the May 2014 Modi government, where this somewhat defensive phrase has lost currency. India now unabashedly pursues national interests, framed in neat, proactive terms such as 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East'. The strong point of this all-too-brief chapter is its narrative of how the India-US relationship was transformed in that post-1991 unipolar phase, and how India's 1998 nuclear tests paradoxically deepened their mutual engagement.

Looking to India-China relations, the authors note that 'the two countries have largely insulated the rest of their expanding relationship from the intractable border issue'; they call China's support to Pakistan 'a strategic hedge against New Delhi' (p. 57). But they also note that there are limits to the extent to which China is willing to go to support Pakistan, so as not to drive India closer to the US or band together with ASEAN states. Such nuancing is usually not noted in India.

In its strategic vision, India throws up three competing schools in the judgment of the authors: the *Nonalignment Firsters*, who 'see India as the center of the developing world'; the *Broad Power Realists*, for whom 'India's relations with major powers and its growing economy are the critical assets'; and *Hard Power Hawks*, who 'regard military strength as its primary instrument of power' (pp. 60-1). Among them all 'there is deep consensus about the unique global importance and the value of India's civilization, and about the respect that is due to India as a result'; India is very sensitive to diplomatic arm-twisting on different international issues (p. 62). The authors hold that an expansive self-image of India coincides with an inward looking outlook, and consequently, there exists 'considerable ambivalence over how deeply India should involve itself in global governance and how far it

should go in developing international partnerships' (p. 65). This is not a flattering portrait, but it captures some essential truths. In what is perhaps the best chapter in the book, the authors closely examine the three dominant traits among Indian foreign policy analysts, i.e., the key protagonists and their reasoning. Looking to how that impacts on foreign policy, they broadly conclude that while the Indian foreign policy establishment consists overwhelmingly of people over sixty (it really is strange how much they dominate the public discourse), younger scholars do not show different traits, leaning towards the Broad Power Realists, acutely aware of the strategic challenge from China. They also observe that India is a revisionist power, in the sense that it seeks 'to revise a world order that gives primacy in its international institutions to a handful of powers ... and aims to take its place among those that are acknowledged to run the world' (p. 81).

The Schaffers next turn to Indian foreign policy institutions, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Foreign Service, and the actors that dominate external affairs decision-making. They cover well the national security adviser, parliament, the defence establishment and the new range of thinktanks and institutes, but have rather little to say about the intelligence agencies, R&AW and the Intelligence Bureau, both of which, unusually for a democracy, are under no form of legislative oversight.

The second half of the book delves into India's negotiation profile and experiences. The authors comprehensively set out their analytical framework, looking to characteristics, patterns, and the style. They note that the key institutions are thinly staffed and that the system 'rewards caution and "non-mistakes" rather than efficiency or risk-taking' (p. 108). A strong sense of civilizational identity, sparse material resources, and pride in a civil service tradition, makes for resistance to typical American frontal attacks that seek policy change; the Indian coordination process is cumbersome. Since negotiators are career officials not subject to a political process, this paradoxically makes them sensitive to deviation from the domestic public mainstream. Other key observations: major policy changes are often not written down; a strong oral tradition, especially on sensitive issues; close tracking of old files, i.e., strong institutional memory, much better than in the US (Stephen Cohen has made the same point in his *India: Emerging Power*); sound drafting finesse and mastery of detail; often seek in principle agreement before getting into detail; 'do not like being the ones to make a request'; pride in authorship of an idea or a text; usually unmoved by approaching deadlines; 'Indian diplomacy thrives on glittering occasions'; strong sense of group loyalties and hierarchy (pp. 110–122). The authors also provide a sensitive, dispassionate appraisal of the Devyani Khobragade

arrest contretemps of 2013.

Among these traits, India's reluctance to be a *demandeur* deserves attention. In the 1990s I encountered the same observation from a leading German Indologist. Whereas visiting Chinese dignitaries had no inhibition in asking Chancellor Helmut Kohl for more scholarships for their students, India would not do so. At a time when China had sought German help for expanding and modernizing its vocational training programmes, and also asking for technical assistance to upgrade their patents office, I saw that our efforts to prod New Delhi to do the same encountered resistance in New Delhi; we would not make a request. Hardheaded Germans took the position that without an authoritative demand, they would not rush forward; when I informally mentioned this to key officials they remarked that the concerned Indian authorities did not seem to share my keenness.

The next six chapters cover India's negotiation experiences in security issues, nuclear cooperation, economic and multilateral issues, as also negotiations with China and Pakistan, and with the smaller neighbour. This is a trove of carefully amassed data, valuable as much for scholars as practitioners. That said, the information on negotiations with countries other than the US comes from published data and impressions, rather than from direct sources. Highlights:

- Indians tend to be unrelenting in safeguarding core interests. The US views India as a 'sovereignty hawk' (p. 148).
- Thin staffing on the Indian side means that other than the most important issues, progress is slow on the less important issues. This is the familiar, and valid, refrain about limitations in MEA's diplomatic capacity.
- Negotiations over the civilian nuclear cooperation undertaken in 2005-08 (a 30-page account in Chapter 8), demanded deep involvement by the leaders of the two countries. 'The US-India relationship is high maintenance and craves high-level attention' (p. 179).
- Economic negotiations in India are foremost a domestic exercise.
- In the multilateral arena 'India has always been a "rule-taker" than a "rule-maker"' (pp. 213–4). On the question of India joining selective groups on the international scene the picture 'is one of considerable ambivalence—both on India's part and on the part of other countries'; APEC is one example (p. 244).
- The authors note 'major change in India's policy of strict bilateralism, introduced gradually and almost by stealth' in dealing with the smaller neighbours, including Bangladesh and Nepal, e.g., in river basin management (p. 274).
- 'Narendra Modi became Indian prime minister as an avowed hawk. His policy and negotiating style ... combines a fundamentally realist approach with a style that showcases more seduction than threat.' (p. 290)

In sum, this negotiating style is 'more defensive than offensive, and better at delaying or blocking unwanted action than it is at forging ahead' (p. 305).

In the final chapter, the Schaffers look to the future, particularly to the domestic growth oriented policies of the Modi government. A growing economy 'would pay off, not just at home, but also in India's foreign policy'. They underscore the importance of increasing the size of the Indian Foreign Service and the commercial and economic cadre. Government services need greater specialization and focus on managing India's international economic relations. They support 'a major increase in the budgets of the foreign affairs agencies' (p. 295). They endorse a need for India to engage more deeply with the global economy, rather than pursue a modest policy that carries less political risk. They might have mentioned also India's traditional inclination to opt out of international norm setting and even norm compliance, viewing both with suspicion. China offers a stark contrast, in that it is far less inhibited in complying with global standards, having decided long back to treat these as facilitating its internationalization. Beijing seems to find this easy, having long remained outside these systems.

How India defines and pursues primacy in South Asia remains a key question. The authors think that 'Pakistan continues to be a "wild card" in India's future' (p. 300). China will remain a security challenge and a significant economic partner, and a significant global partner as well. They quote from a 2015 speech by Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar that India wants to be a leading power, not just a balancing power, and that it is willing to make a contribution as expected from leaders. Some observers may hold that this still remains at the level of intentions.

The four drivers of Indian foreign policy have been 'exceptionalism' (a synthesis of civilizational history'), regional primacy, economic success and nonalignment, in its post 1991 incarnation characterized strategic autonomy. It is the last element that is 'harder to define for countries playing a major role in a globalized world'. The half-stated plea by the Schaffers is for India 'to systematically cultivate a larger group of countries that are prepared to work with it on a long-term basis across Asia—or indeed across the globe' (p. 306–9). While the pro-US lobby is stronger today in New Delhi than at anytime in the past, such a tilt is fundamentally anathema to most Indians; that advice will not be heeded.

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