

Review Essay

New Delhi's New Outlook

Teresita C. Schaffer

Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy

Rajiv Sikri. New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2009. £35.00/\$39.95/Rs595. 318 pp.

India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension

S.D. Muni. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2009. £15.99/\$18.95/Rs495. 190 pp.

The Long View from Delhi: To Define the Indian Grand Strategy for Foreign Policy

Raja Menon and Rajiv Kumar. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2010. \$59.95/Rs990. 182 pp.

In the National Interest: A Strategic Foreign Policy for India

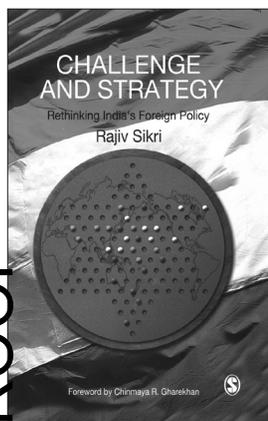
Rajiv Kumar and Santosh Kumar. New Delhi: Business Standard Books, 2010. Rs450. 184 pp.

The end of the Cold War and the rapid acceleration of India's economic growth starting in the early 1990s transformed India's foreign policy. The country's view of its own interests and of the world became more realistic (in the way that foreign-policy theorists use the term), more economically based, and less tethered to its immediate neighbourhood. Raja Mohan's *Crossing the Rubicon*, published in 2003, is the classic exposition of this policy. As he describes it, India's foreign policy post-1990 started with the major

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powers. The United States became India's most important external relationship, while China was its major strategic challenge. Pakistan appeared as more of a local problem rather than a fundamental challenge to India's position in the world. Expanded trade, markets, foreign investment and energy were the other major drivers. The Non-Aligned Movement, so central to India's Cold War-era foreign policy, had become a minor grace note.

Since Mohan's book came out, both India and the world have continued to change. In this fine crop of new books on Indian foreign policy, two schools of thought emerge: what one might call the 'twenty-first-century Nehruvians' and the 'great-power advocates'; and some new topics receive unaccustomed attention.



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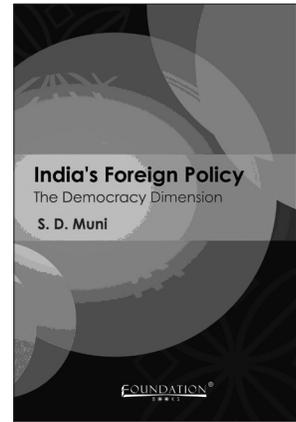
The new Nehruvianism

The most comprehensive account is by Rajiv Sikri, a retired Indian diplomat. His *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy* is the best statement of the latter-day Nehruvian approach. Unlike many Indian foreign-policy thinkers, he starts his analysis with Pakistan. This is one of the strong points of his book: it acknowledges, at least implicitly, that the continuing dispute with Pakistan is holding back India's integration into the world power structure, something that both Mohan and the great-power advocates prefer not to focus on. Sikri's approach to Pakistan combines support for democratic governance there with a call to use the leverage provided by Pakistan's need for water.

In discussing the world beyond South Asia, Sikri's intellectual framework and recommendations combine recognition of India's contemporary economic growth with a more Nehruvian drive to position India as a balancing factor to the United States. He sees India's post-1990 relationship with Washington as tactical rather than strategic, fatally wounded by its asymmetry and, it appears, by Sikri's scepticism about the United States. He downplays the strategic challenge from China, and holds out the possibility of India, Russia and China cooperating to dominate Asia. In his final chapters, he urges India to take the Third World as its 'natural constituency', and

to play a role as the 'conscience-keeper of the world'. This is the idiom of the Nehru era, with the significant difference that India has far more power to play these roles today, and does not face the burdens or the opportunities provided by the Cold War.

S.D. Muni's *India's Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension* does not attempt to cover all of Indian foreign policy, but rather to illuminate an aspect of Indian foreign policy that is rarely addressed. The thesis of this short and very thoughtful volume is that India has pursued democracy as a foreign-policy goal only intermittently, in its immediate neighbourhood – and only when this did not undercut India's more important security priorities. Professor Muni takes the 'democracy dimension' seriously, though he recognises its limits in Indian policy. This focus makes his book a useful counterpoint to the realist perspective that has been increasingly prominent in discussions of Indian foreign policy for the past two decades.



A strategic perspective

The Long View from Delhi and *In the National Interest: A Strategic Foreign Policy for India* are strong expositions of the great-power school of Indian policy analysis. Both fall into the tradition of strategic analysis – but that is what makes their foreign-policy description interesting. The first, co-authored by Raja Menon and Rajiv Kumar, relies on 'net assessment', a technique used by long-term forecasters to evaluate not just how their own country will perform, but the combined impact of different, seemingly unrelated forces in the world. It is significant that the authors are, respectively, a retired admiral from the Indian Navy and an economist.

The Long View from Delhi maps out India's strategic outlook in 11 chapters on specific countries, ten on particular global problems, and five integrated projections. As one might expect from a future-oriented analysis, the quality of the individual chapters is uneven and the topics selected for individual analysis overlap a bit. The overall thrust of the study, however, has impor-

tant strategic lessons. The authors argue persuasively that the relationships that will most profoundly affect India and the world are those with the United States and China. Menon and Kumar see economics and innovation as the forces that will determine India's future, even more than its military investment. The challenge from Pakistan revolves to a considerable degree around its internal governance and the future of Afghanistan. The discussion of climate change and failing states adds a dimension that is largely omitted from traditional analyses of Indian foreign policy, and even from as far-sighted an analysis as Raja Mohan's.

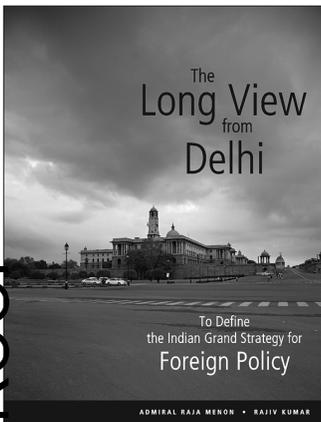
The scenarios with which the book concludes are driven predominantly by the behaviour, internal and external, of China and the United States. The most favourable scenario for India, from the authors' perspective, is one in which the United States 'reinvents itself' through a surge in domestic economic innovation and creativity; the worst has the United States and China forming a 'duopoly' from which India is excluded. In none of these scenarios do multilateral instruments of global governance play much of a role. All foresee the United States maintaining a

substantial degree of hegemony. The 'strong China' scenarios underplay the likelihood of US-China tensions arising independently of what India might be doing.

In the National Interest was commissioned by the Ministry of External Affairs as an independent study. This provenance, however, does not tether its conclusions to India's current policy. This study makes a nice companion piece to *The Long View from Delhi*. This is perhaps not surprising, since Rajiv Kumar participated in writing both (with retired diplomat Santosh Kumar as his co-author in the *National Interest* project). Much of *In the National Interest* is devoted to tactical recommendations for short-term policies that support the authors' strategic vision.

For an international reader, it is that vision that is most interesting. Once again, economics is in the driver's seat. The authors assume, on the basis of trends in China in particular, that India can look forward to a decade of

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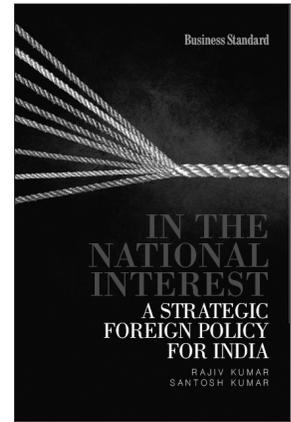


relative peace, and must use that time to accelerate its economic growth, sustaining 8–10% per year for a couple of decades. They believe that only an intensification of India's international economic footprint can deliver the needed growth. Unlike most of what has been written in India, the authors argue for a serious effort to expand trade through a successful Doha round. They argue that 'war is not an option' for Pakistan – sliding perhaps a bit too quickly over the problem of spoilers who could embroil India and Pakistan in a war both might prefer to avoid. They argue for a major domestically focused effort to address alienation in the parts of Jammu and Kashmir administered by India. And unlike virtually all those who have written about Indian foreign policy in recent years, they downplay the importance of a permanent Indian seat on the UN Security Council, preferring a vital Indian role in the G20 or, better yet, the expansion of the G8 to incorporate the five major developing countries (including India) that have been regular guests at gatherings of the eight.

Sikri's book and *In the National Interest* both argue that the resources India devotes to foreign policy are insufficient and misallocated. This is an important issue, and one rarely discussed in writings on Indian foreign policy. Sikri urges the Ministry of External Affairs to beef up its headquarters staffing to 33% of the total Foreign Service, up from the current 20–25%. *In the National Interest*, by contrast, focuses on the gap in economic expertise, one that the Indian government has recognised in principle but has yet to fill. They are both right.

The national interest

A few elements are common to all these snapshots of India's foreign policy. The first is India's desire to dominate its immediate neighbourhood. How it interprets the requirement for continued primacy has changed, seen most notably in the conclusion that a regular American presence in the Indian Ocean serves India's interests (a conclusion Sikri might question). But whether or not an author places the troubled relationship with Pakistan at



the top of India's foreign-policy challenges, in all four studies, India's determination to retain great-power status in South Asia is not open to serious question.

The second common ingredient is economics. India's expanding economy has opened the way to both a larger global role and a transformed relationship with the United States. *The Long View from Delhi* and *In the National Interest* interpret this economic primacy more radically than does Sikri, putting the accent on innovation. Sikri's emphasis is on trade and energy, a different but decisive shift from the economic centre of gravity in the pre-1990 years.

Thirdly, perhaps the biggest surprise is the limited emphasis given to global governance. Sikri argues for a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council, but this comes in fairly briefly at the end of the book; *In the National Interest* downplays this; and none of these studies places much stress on India's formal role in global institutions. This is perhaps the only area where all four deviate from India's declared policy.

The fourth element that appears in all these studies is India's commitment to 'strategic autonomy' – the belief that India must retain full freedom to orient and re-orient its foreign policy, rather than entering into any kind of permanent association. Strategic autonomy coexists, in its twenty-first-century form, with a transformed and vitally important relationship with the United States – one that Sikri regards with some concern; that *The Long View from Delhi* and *In the National Interest* see as a source of dynamism and innovation; and that Muni sees as part of a global landscape for democracy in which India has carved out a limited but interesting role.

The logic of strategic autonomy leads to another common element: the preference of most of these authors for a hedging strategy to preserve India's interests. At least three kinds of hedging strategies find some expression in these studies: against a more aggressive China (with the United States); against being taken for granted by China and the United States (with Russia or a group of smaller powers); and against an excessively dominant United States (with Russia and China). All acknowledge the possibility that the United States will lose relative power as China rises, but Sikri is the only author who tries to find a hedge against this contingency, and his choice,

leadership in the Third World, had only limited impact when it was first used during the Cold War years.

The emphasis on hedging and on 'strategic autonomy' carries a sobering message for India's friends. It is widely agreed that the world will have difficulty dealing with big, systemic issues unless India becomes part of the solution. But given the way most Indian analysts interpret the requirements of 'strategic autonomy', creating partnerships with India or global solutions that include India will involve constant efforts at reinvention. For American policymakers in particular, the familiar model of working with a much weaker 'junior partner' will not work.

But there is an even more important message for India in these studies, arising from the view widely shared in India and among its foreign friends, that India's role in the world reflects its economic fortunes. That means that India's domestic economic policy has become, for better or for worse, the primary tool for shaping its international affairs.

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