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India

The Persistence of Nehruvianism in India's Strategic Culture

Ian Hall

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter analyzes India's strategic culture in terms of the cultural resources on which its strategic elite draws, the main traditions of strategic thought, and their influence on India's behavior.

MAIN ARGUMENT
India's strategic culture is informed by ideas taken from Hindu texts, nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious revivalists, and modernist thinkers. These ideas shape three traditions of strategic thought: Nehruvianism, realpolitik, and Hindu nationalism. The Nehruvian tradition has been dominant since independence in 1947, underpinning a commitment to strategic restraint; the other two traditions are less influential on policy but important because of the potential alternatives they offer to Nehruvianism. Moreover, if the Hindu nationalist tradition did begin to assert greater influence over India's strategic culture, Indian behavior would likely remain restrained, as that tradition emphasizes achieving domestic social unity as a precondition for the international recognition of Indian greatness.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS
- Although India continues to grow in economic and military power, it remains wedded to strategic restraint, underpinned by the Nehruvian tradition of strategic thought and practice, which will continue to shape its approach not just to South Asia but also to China and the U.S.

- Given that India's strategic elite remains concerned with status-seeking and recognition of civilizational greatness, and remains skeptical about elements of the contemporary liberal international order, India is unlikely to align itself fully with Western policy agendas.

- The U.S. and other states will need to allow India time to further modernize its economy, develop its military capabilities, and finesse its approach to regional security. Policy and behavioral consistency will also be required to entrench the perception in the minds of India's strategic elite that the U.S. is a credible and reliable long-term strategic partner for India.

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India's elite is convinced that the modern state of India is the inheritor of a great and long-lived civilization, which should be accorded particular respect and status, regardless of modern India's economic or military power.[1] At the same time, this elite recognizes that the present international system is both hierarchical and anarchical, composed of a few rich and strong states and a larger group of poorer and weaker states, without an executive authority to enforce international law and deliver a modicum of international justice. It views the United Nations and the UN Charter as imperfect means of mitigating both the exploitation of the weak and the worse effects of anarchy. Yet it also looks forward to a "polycentric order" of a number of strong states, both Western and non-Western, that would boost the autonomy and lessen the dependence of all.[2]

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[1] For more on India's civilizational mindset, see Shrikant Paranjpe, *India's Strategic Culture: The Making of National Security Policy* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), 15; Rohan Mukherjee, "Statuspolitik as Foreign Policy: Strategic Culture and India's Nuclear Behavior" (unpublished manuscript), 6–7; and Baldev Raj Nayar and T.V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major-Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] The phrase "polycentric order" is frequently encountered. See its use, for example, in Krishnaswamy Subramanyam's introduction in Jaswant Singh, *Defending India* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), viii.

Since independence in 1947, India's elite has held conflicting attitudes about the acquisition and use of military power in international relations. On the one hand, it generally considers acquiring and using military power regrettable or even straightforwardly immoral; on the other hand, it argues that both are necessary for India's national security, within certain limits. Most of the elite also deprecate military alliances as means of managing security challenges and—at least until recently—deprecate regional institutions as alternative means. Both methods are considered contrary to the spirit of the UN Charter and risky in themselves, potentially entangling states in the conflicts of others. Slowly, however, these elite beliefs about alliances and regionalism appear to be changing as the influence of the postcolonial generation fades and a new one emerges with a different set of strategic concepts and approaches.[3]

To what extent these beliefs and arguments are functions of India's strategic culture is a question that has been hotly disputed by scholars and practitioners for 25 years. In 1992, in a seminal paper produced for the U.S. Department of Defense, George K. Tanham argued that India's strategic thought and practice were shaped by cultural influences and elite interpretations of the country's geography and history, especially the experience of British rule. Together, these factors shaped elite preferences for "strategic independence and autonomy," Tanham suggested, but also—along with severe resource constraints—limited India's capacity to construct a coherent plan to achieve these objectives.[4]

This argument prompted a number of other assessments of India's strategic culture, notably by Kanti Bajpai, Rajesh Basrur, Rodney W. Jones, Bharat Karnad, Subrata K. Misra, Shrikant Paranjpe, Rahul Sagar, and Jaswant Singh. These analysts are divided about Tanham's account, some arguing that it was "crude," and others endorsing or at least tacitly agreeing with his conclusion that India's elite struggles to think and act strategically as a result of the distinct set of ideas and practices that shape the culture of policymaking.[5] In particular, some worry that deep-seated and wrongheaded ideological convictions, as well the habits of *jugaad* (last-minute improvisation) and excessive secrecy, continue to prevent the emergence of sound strategy.[6]

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[3] Ian Hall, "Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi," *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 105, no. 3 (2016): 271–86.

[4] George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1992). The paper was summarized in George K. Tanham, "Indian Strategic Culture," *Washington Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1992): 129–42.

[5] Rajesh Basrur, "Nuclear Weapons and Indian Strategic Culture," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 2 (2001): 183. Among those in tacit agreement are Bharat Karnad and Jaswant Singh.

[6] On ideology, see Bharat Karnad, *Why India Is Not a Great Power (Yet)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015). On *jugaad*, see Sandy Gordon, *India's Rise to Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 5–6.

This chapter draws on, criticizes, and extends this literature. To assess the extent and nature of the influence of strategic culture over India's strategic thought and behavior, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first explores the sources of India's strategic culture, especially the texts, concepts, and arguments that India's elite has inherited from the country's ancient past and the anti-imperial struggle against British rule. The second section examines the three dominant traditions of thought about strategy that have emerged in India since independence. Each tradition is composed of sets of beliefs about international relations and India's role in the world, accounts of its national interests, and assessments of the threats that the country faces and the best means of countering those threats. The third section analyzes the impact of India's strategic culture on its strategic behavior, in particular the country's policies and practices regarding the acquisition and use of military power to further its interests or enhance its security. The conclusion argues that, since independence, India has seen shifts in foreign policy but consistency in strategic culture. This strategic culture emphasizes a desire for status and autonomy, on the one hand, and a perceived need for relative restraint concerning the acquisition and use of force in international relations, on the other.

Sources of Indian Strategic Culture

Indian strategic culture is shaped—as other states' strategic cultures are shaped—by the interpretations of India's geography and history of various scholars, sages, analysts, and practitioners, each making use of concepts and arguments derived from the country's extraordinarily rich and varied intellectual inheritance.[7] These interpretations generally acknowledge the unusual geographic context of South Asia, bounded by the Himalayas to the north, the Indian Ocean to the south, and hills and jungle to the east, which ought to provide security. They also highlight its historical experience of successive invasions, mainly from the northwest, via what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from the sea, that led to the conquest and domination of large parts of the subcontinent by outsiders.[8] They note that these successive

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[7] Alastair Iain Johnston rightly argues that explanations of strategic behavior that depend on strategic culture should describe the process of socialization in which an elite is acquainted with key ideas and dominant interpretations. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 32–64. In the Indian case, sadly, we do not yet have systematic accounts of the ideas taught to members of the Indian Foreign Service, Indian Administrative Service, or higher ranks of the military. For this reason, this chapter must infer the ideas that inform Indian strategic culture from texts produced by the strategic elite.

[8] It should be noted that France and Portugal also ruled significant territories in India. France held various towns, including Pondicherry (now Puducherry), Karaikal, Yanam, and Mahe, between 1668 and 1954; Portugal held Goa between 1510 and its forcible return to India in 1961.