Interpretivism and the Analysis of India's Foreign Policy: Interpreting the Jaishankar Doctrine

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Abstract

Scholars of India's foreign policy generally prefer interpretive approaches and qualitative methods that explain actions in terms of the beliefs and theories of actors. Yet often, neither are well explained or justified. This article argues that more systematic engagement with recent work on interpretivism would generate better grounded analyses of India's foreign policy. Using the case of the Jaishankar doctrine—the theory and practice of foreign policy advanced by External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar—it shows how an approach derived from Mark Bevir's use of traditions and dilemmas offers one way forward. It examines how Jaishankar has crafted a philosophy, language and set of foreign policy practices premised on various intellectual inheritances in response to the international circumstances that India must navigate concerning China in the aftermath of the 2020–2021 Galwan crisis.

Keywords

India, Indian foreign policy, Jaishankar, China, interpretivism, interpretive theory

Several studies of India-based and India-focused scholarship on international relations observe that it displays a preference for interpretive approaches and qualitative analysis and a resistance to positivism and quantitative methods (Bajpai & Mallavarapu, 2005; Behera, 2013; Mallavarapu, 2010). Others lament what they see as a paucity of theory in the study of India's foreign policy or argue that the theories used are less well explained and justified than they might be (see, for example, Bajpai, 2009; Basrur, 2023; Blarel & Paliwal, 2019; Hansel et al., 2017; Mallavarapu, 2015; Pant, 2019). Some make recommendations for improving this situation, drawing on established or emerging qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods (see, for example, Alden & Brummer, 2019). This article shares that aim but argues that we need not jettison interpretivism nor concern for the role of ideas in international relations. Rather, it argues that interpretive analysis can supply robust causal explanations for changes in India's behaviour in international relations, beyond constitutive explanations (Norman, 2021) that supply accounts of background conditions, like national identity or diplomatic disposition (see, for example, Singh, 2013).

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To make the case, this article makes use of recent interpretivist work, employing the concepts of 'tradition' and 'dilemma' to help explain the change in India's China strategy after the Galwan clash in June 2020. It employs these concepts to analyse the public utterances of India's External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr S. Jaishankar, who took up that office in May 2019, having earlier served as Foreign Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) from January 2015 until January 2018. This article argues by interpreting these statements—or to be more specific, interpreting Jaishankar's narrative about India's changed circumstances and policy options—we can explain both the practice of New Delhi's new approach to managing relations with China. In short, it clarifies why India tilted to the West during the Galwan crisis (see Madan, 2022).

This argument is made in five parts. The first outlines theory and methods. The second describes the changes to India's China policy after the Galwan crisis of 2020–2021. The third analyses Jaishankar's realist worldview prior to that crisis. The fourth turns to his changed beliefs in the aftermath of Galwan and what his interpretation of India's situation might tell us about the reasons for India's new China policy. The fifth part analyses the evidence that Jaishankar's statements present for the impact of the Galwan crisis on the thinking of India's leaders and the likely reasons for the policy shift. The conclusion summarizes the argument and the case for using interpretivist approaches in the study of India's international relations.

Interpreting Political Action

Interpretivists hold that social behaviour and political practices are best explained by analysing the meaning that actions have for those who perform them (see Scott & Keates, 2001). They resist the view that political scientists can explain these actions solely by reference to social facts about actors—to their age, gender or income, for example (see Bevir & Blakely, 2018). They affirm a stronger account of human agency—albeit a 'situated agency'—and argue one can discern the beliefs of actors that inform their choices, even within governments, from what they say and how they act (see Sullivan, 2016). Thus, they focus on how actors interpret their social circumstances and behave according to their understanding of the meanings of actions (Reed, 2011, p. 11).

Interpretivists do this in different ways, depending on the accessibility of evidence (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). They might interview subjects and ask them to explain their actions (Soss, 2015). Alternatively, they might engage in ethnography or participant observation (see Rhodes, 2011). Often, however, they rely on texts—books, essays, speeches, interviews or unpublished papers—as well as biographies and other secondary literature that provide evidence of the worldviews of agents. These might include statements of beliefs from those agents or details of their education, socialization or influence that allow interpretivists to make reasonable inferences about their worldviews (Bevir & Rhodes, 2005, pp. 178–180).

This evidence is used to reconstruct a situated agent's 'web of belief' or 'web of meaning'[2]—the set of assumptions, accepted facts and theories they inform their understanding of what social actions are possible, advantageous or appropriate in a set of circumstances. This reconstruction requires not only the analysis of the narrative they tell but also knowledge of the 'traditions' of thought that likely shaped their world view (see Bevir & Rhodes, 2012). Yet interpretivists admit that this knowledge may be insufficient to explain behaviour, especially when it changes over time. Interpretivists recognize that webs of belief

[2] On 'webs of meaning', see Geertz (1973).

can and do change, as agents encounter new facts or new theories they accept as valid and require the modification of world views. For that reason, some argue we must also explain the 'dilemmas' that arise when agents acknowledge that new knowledge is inconsistent with their web of belief and in response amend their world view, their narratives and their actions. Dilemmas can prompt a small modification or a comprehensive rethinking, depending on how much reconstruction is needed to accommodate the new knowledge and restore the coherence of a worldview (Bevir, 1999, pp. 221–264).

The analysis of *narratives* and *traditions* permits interpretivists to assess in context an agent's understanding of their social circumstances at a given moment, the actions they might take and the appropriateness and effectiveness of those actions (Turnbull, 2011, p. 257–260). The analysis of *dilemmas* permits interpretivists to explain changes and apparent inconsistencies, focusing attention on new knowledge that prompts modifications to webs of belief and agent's understandings of appropriate and effective actions. Combining them, interpretivists seek to explain political action by reference to what actors say, what we can infer about their beliefs, and how these beliefs relate to their behaviour.

In what follows, I try to do this with regard to India's China policy in four stages. The first describes the observable change following the Galwan crisis—an event which provided India's elite with new knowledge about Chinese behaviour and generated a dilemma which demanded an adjustment of worldview. The second outlines Jaishankar's broadly 'realist' world view as laid out in *The India Way* (2020; TIW), which I take to be the authoritative account of his beliefs prior to Galwan. To interpret the meaning and policy implications of these beliefs, I employ a standard interpretivist method and place these ideas in the context of the mainstream traditions of Indian international thought and the set of social actions considered appropriate or effective in that intellectual milieu (see Bevir, 2011). The third turns to the much larger set of statements made by Jaishankar after he was appointed as EAM, including *Why Bharat Matters* (2024; *WBM*) and compares the tenets of the modified world view found in these texts with the earlier one in TIW. The fourth considers what these changes in worldview tell us about the reasons for India's new China policy after Galwan.[3]

The Galwan Effect

During the night of 15–16 June 2020, Indian troops skirmished with People's Liberation Army soldiers on the disputed frontier with China. Twenty Indians and an unknown number of Chinese troops died, many were wounded and others captured in the worst episode of violence on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since the mid-1970s (Jash, 2024, pp. 98–101). Over the next 18 months, there were further clashes, as both countries deployed large forces into the area (Curtis & Grossman, 2023).

These incidents brought China and India closer to war than they had been for half a century and led to a reorientation of India's diplomatic stance (Gokhale, 2021). Arguing that China had violated the 1993 and 1996 bilateral agreements that established a framework for the maintenance of peace on the LAC, New Delhi declared that India would consider both null and void until China reverted to the *status quo ante*. This signalled two things: first, that India no longer considered itself bound to abide by provisions regulating the deployment and behaviour of its military forces on the frontier, and second, that New Delhi would not adhere to the commitment to ring-fence the border dispute and engage in normal diplomatic interaction in other areas of the bilateral relationship (MEA, 2021).

[3] On reasons or motivations and causation, see Reed (2011, pp. 135–138).

In parallel, India deployed 50,000–60,000 reinforcements to the LAC (Jash, 2024, p. 104), acquired new weapons to plug capability gaps in the Indian military (Singh, 2023); and accelerated work to enhance civilian and defence infrastructure in the region (Swartz, 2023). Under the slogan *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, it began a push for greater economic self-reliance, including in the technology and defence sectors (Hall, 2021, p. 14). At the same time, New Delhi placed restrictions on Chinese investment and technology (Set & Pant, 2023, p. 146) and began to 'soft balance' Chinese initiatives in minilateral and multilateral forums (Kumar, 2022). Finally, India deepened cooperation on advanced technologies, critical minerals, information-sharing and supply chains with strategic partners in the West, including with India's fellow Quad members, Australia, Japan and the United States (Tarapore, 2023).

This combination of confrontation, internal and external balancing, derisking and decoupling and diplomatic disengagement was distinct from India's pre-Galwan approach to managing China, employed by Manmohan Singh's Congress-led government and adopted by Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-led (BJP) coalition after 2014 (see Gokhale, 2021). That approach had involved 'selective cooperation, limited balancing, avoiding confrontation and upgrading military strategy from defence to conventional deterrence along the Himalayas' and had reflected New Delhi's appreciation of the power asymmetry between the two countries (Pardesi, 2022, p. 59; cf. Rajagopalan, 2020).

This new approach reflected a new assessment of India's position vis-à-vis China, I argue, prompted by the dilemma caused by the new knowledge of Chinese behaviour demonstrated in the Galwan crisis. And the reasons for this change can be traced in the different world views Jaishankar describes pre- and post-Galwan. Moreover, the analysis of these webs of belief suggests that Jaishankar played an important role in changing policy, as the new approach appears to reflect ideas that he expressed prior to becoming EAM, during the period in which he was out of government and less constrained by bureaucratic and political restrictions on his speech.

In focusing on Jaishankar's public statements, however, I do not claim that the EAM was the sole or even the most important architect of India's China policy. But foreign policymaking in India is an elite activity, concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office and MEA, with input from ministers and officials in a handful of other ministries (Madan, 2015). In this context, in both principle and practice, an EAM can play an important role in shaping policy, as well as presenting it to the public. Moreover, as ambassador to Washington, then head of the MEA, and finally as foreign minister, Jaishankar has been credited with broadening and deepening India's strategic partnership with the United States, establishing a more robust stance towards China, helping to resurrect the Indo-Pacific Quad, and formulating the idea of India as a 'leading power' in an emerging 'multipolar' order (Jaishankar, 2015; cf. Mishra, 2023; Tellis, 2021), as well taking on a high-profile role explaining the Modi government's foreign policy to public as well as official audiences (Iyengar, 2024).

I do not assume that India's foreign policy between 2014 and 2024 conformed to Jaishankar's personal beliefs, nor that he was the most important actor in defining China policy, nor that his claims or arguments should be taken at face value.[4] Further, I recognize that Jaishankar is a 'motivated' agent, in the sense of having reasons to present his thinking and his actions in a positive light or in a way that might appeal to putative supporters, as well as a crucial situated agent.[5] But nevertheless, I argue that analysing Jaishankar's public statements can provide us with a stronger explanation for the shift in India's China policy during and after the Galwan crisis.

[4] I follow Bevir (1999, pp. 128–129) in presuming stated beliefs are sincere unless there is evidence to demonstrate otherwise. On China, of course, the prime minister has the final say in this system and others, including the national security adviser and special envoy on China, Ajit Doval, have significant influence.

[5] Jaishankar's forthright statements have built him an enthusiastic following among BJP supporters (Agha, 2023).

A New Realism?

We do not, however, have much direct evidence for Jaishankar's web of belief prior to his retirement from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) early in 2018.[6] Before that point, he was subject to the normal constraints on officials regarding public statements. But we might infer some things about his likely beliefs from his background. It is reasonable to assume that the son of K. Subrahmanyam,[7] and an alumnus of both St Stephen's College at the University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of International Studies is well-versed in the main traditions of Indian international thought—Nehruvian, realist, socialist, liberal and Hindu nationalist—prior to joining the IFS.[8] And within that institution, he was likely socialized into the elitist and mostly realist nationalism, overlain with internationalist commitments to multilateralism and postcolonial moralism, that prevailed well into the post-Cold War period (Huju, 2022, pp. 426–427; cf. Ollapally & Rajagopalan, 2012, pp. 83–89).

We do have some more direct evidence for Jaishankar's world view from the period between January 2018 and May 2019. During this period, he gave a series of speeches on international affairs, including a lecture at the University of Birmingham (Jaishankar, 2018) and an appearance at the Raisina Dialogue (Observer Research Foundation, 2019). Few of the recordings or transcripts of these are available but some—along with others given after Jaishankar joined Modi's cabinet (for example, Jaishankar, 2019)—were reworked into TIW.[9] However, that book cannot, however, be treated as a candid statement of personal beliefs. Much of the manuscript was written before May 2019 but was revised afterwards, and changes were likely made to fit political and diplomatic priorities. And we should note all his statements after January 2018 could have been shaped by a desire to cast his past contributions to India's foreign policymaking in a favourable light.[10] But the book deserves attention nonetheless, and I will return to the statements made while out of office, and how they differ from his later utterances, in a moment.

TIW outlines a coherent world view, rejecting the Nehruvian tradition but blending, as Jawaharlal Nehru did, realism and nationalism with internationalism (Jaffrelot, 2021a).[11] It recommends power political realism but cloaks it in language more familiar to the Hindu nationalist tradition that shapes the BJP's political agenda (see Jaffrelot, 2021b). The epitaph to TIW's epilogue, for example, quotes the proto-Hindu nationalist Swami Vivekananda's claim that '[t]he world is a great gymnasium where we come to make ourselves strong' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 201). Overall, the book urges India to adopt a 'stronger realpolitik' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 5) in a competitive world of resurgent nationalism. It argues that this is the 'dharma of a state' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 50) like it was the dharma of the warrior Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yet this worldview is not wholly amoral. It contains a streak of moralism—notably in the indignation at past Western perfidy (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 117) and the call for India to act as an 'ethical power' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 67)—familiar to both the Nehruvian and Hindu nationalist traditions (see Hall, 2017; Sullivan, 2014).

[6] We have statements delivered in diplomatic roles (see, for example, Jaishankar, 2014), but at best they only contain hints of personal beliefs.

[7] Subrahmanyam (1929–2011) was a leading strategist (Mukherjee, 2011).

[8] There is disagreement about how best to classify these traditions but see Ollapally and Rajagopalan (2012).

[9] See Jaishankar (2020, pp. xii–xiii) for a list of speeches.

[10] See, for example, Jaishankar's account of the Wuhan and Chennai summits between Modi and Xi Jinping, events promoted at the time as momentous, but which in hindsight look to have achieved little. Jaishankar (2020, p. 151) downplays them, arguing that while such meetings 'could well be a sign of a different future', '[w]hen shorn of their optics, both occasions were exercises in pure realism'.

[11] On Nehru's beliefs, see Rana (1976).

TIW calls on India to shed complacency and romanticism, to be bold and confident, to compete for power and advantage, to be self-interested and to balance China's power, because 'only a multipolar Asia that can lead to a multipolar world' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 11). Jaishankar urges India to treat the world as a 'transactional bazaar' and all major powers as 'frenemies', and base partnerships on interests, not idealism (Jaishankar, 2020, pp. 39 and 32). It must, he thinks, 'engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support' (Jaishankar 2020, p. 10). But above all, India must maximize its autonomy and not 'give any other nation a veto on its policy options' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 27).

Jaishankar thus outlines a hybrid realist-Hindu nationalist philosophy of foreign policy. It welcomes what he characterizes as a new dynamism in global politics brought about by the rise of major non-Western economies and the global resurgence of nationalism. It focuses on preserving and enhancing India's autonomy as the key to prosperity, security and influence. It advocates for an India positioned equidistantly from the major powers, 'multialigned', but willing to work with all.[12] This world view is qualified only with a thin internationalism, focused on establishing and adhering to agreed rules (Jaishankar, 2020, pp. 21–43).

This philosophy is presented as frank and unsentimental, but interestingly and significantly it is more circumspect about some issues than the public statements Jaishankar made during his brief time out of government. In the 2018 Birmingham speech, for instance, he is markedly more liberal and more forthright than anywhere in TIW, especially on India's relations with the West. Calling India the 'most Western society of Asia' he notes that the West has in the past favoured military regimes over India's democracy and 'kept India in play' while also keeping it 'in check', noting differences on trade and climate and Pakistan. Moreover, he criticizes what he calls the two 'strategic miscalculations' of recent Western policy: 'neglect of the threat of fundamentalist political Islam', exacerbated by an 'unnecessary war' in Iraq and an 'incompetent one' in Afghanistan, and the 'underestimation of China', as the West helped it rise while 'ignoring so many warning signals'. Yet at the same time, Jaishankar urges India to be clear-eyed about all that the West can offer India. He observes that the 'most impressive growth stories' in the world have all happened because of Western encouragement. For this reason, a 'strong partnership' with the West is in India's interests—and indeed those of the West. After all, Jaishankar argues, if India can successfully blend 'democratic politics' with 'high growth economics', it will 'establish that democratic values are global and not just Western' (Jaishankar 2018).

None of this is wholly inconsistent with the worldview outlined in TIW, but there are important differences of emphasis. The Birmingham speech is more directly critical of the West but simultaneously clearer that India should work more closely with Western partners to advance mutual interests—and indeed common values. It diverges from TIW, but that speech anticipates arguments Jaishankar advances after Galwan, which are less confident, less realist and less enthusiastic about the disruptive effects of intensifying strategic rivalry and the return of assertive nationalism, more critical of China, but again, markedly more sympathetic to the West.

Reorientation

The frequency of Jaishankar's public utterances about international relations greatly increases after his appointment as EAM. The MEA records no fewer than 204 major speeches and statements made between

[12] On multialignment, see Hall (2016).

May 2019 and May 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024), and there are multiple significant interviews beyond these (including Lowy Institute, 2020; *India Today*, 2021; *Hindustan Times*, 2022; *The Print*, 2024). Moreover, interpreting them is not straightforward, for at least four reasons. First, these statements are drafted with the involvement of his office and vetted for consistency with past policy. Second, they must align with the broader political project of the Modi government. Third, we must recognize the audiences at which the arguments are directed. Whereas earlier, these mostly consisted of business- and policy-elites, after May 2019, they are more varied and include both BJP activists and the Indian public (see Agha, 2023). Indeed, significant parts of Jaishankar's second book, *WBM*, are self-consciously targeted at party supporters and ordinary voters, notably in the chapter titled 'Foreign Policy and You' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 10). Fourth, his statements are manifestly motivated: they are elements of a campaign to 'get the world to change its thinking about India' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. xviii).

Yet these considerations do not in themselves explain the differences in Jaishankar's avowed world views before and after Galwan. And these differences are substantive, as the opening lines of *WBM*, on the new fragility in international relations, suggest:

> The challenges of a global order in transition have been magnified by the back-to-back impact of the Covid pandemic, the Ukraine conflict and the fighting in West Asia. […] There is no question that this has now become a much tougher world. For India specifically, the going has been far from easy. […] Rising powers seek stability most of all; India must plan to rise amidst serious unpredictability.

TIW described a world where the rules were being challenged and renegotiated. By contrast, *WBM* presents one 'moving into uncharted territory' due to 'the pace of technological, economic and social change'. Our inherited 'world order' – now 'into its eighth decade' – has 'run its course' (Jaishankar 2024, pp. 29 and 60). Our collective future is 'insecure', Jaishankar argues, and characterized by the 'weaponization' of what was once 'benign' (Jaishankar, 2024, pp. 31 and 34).

In *TIW*, Jaishankar warned against 'strategic complacency' but argued that the world is returning to a 'natural state' of multipolarity, with limits on 'the application of power' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 12). The 'caution of markets and the unpredictability of conflicts', he argued, 'are constraining factors on extreme competition' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 28). But in *WBM*, Jaishankar implicitly admits that this assessment was flawed: 'we have', he acknowledges, 'the revival of all the negatives of global politics that were thought only recently were anachronistic' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 41). Today, 'interdependence, in itself, cannot always be an assured basis for international peace and security'. We have 'seen a sharp increase in risk-taking propensities' and 'sharp assertions of power' (Jaishankar, 2024, pp. 4, 163 and 60). Moreover, transnational transactions—'trade, tourism, connectivity or finance'—are being weaponized and as states are shedding their 'political agnosticism' about the movements of things, people data and capital (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 51). 'Corrosion is the new competition', Jaishankar writes, and 'nations now penetrate and influence' each other, using multiple instruments (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 158).

China's actions at Galwan, the broader shift in Chinese behaviour it indicated, and dilemma it generated in the minds of India's elite—shape this new assessment, along with COVID-19 and Russia's later invasion of Ukraine and all that went with them. Jaishankar acknowledges its effect in WBM and a series of earlier statements. In late 2020, he describes India's surprise at China's actions on the LAC and how they 'significantly damaged' the relationship and set aside long-standing agreements and understandings (Lowy Institute, 2020). A few months later, he goes further, characterizing China's behaviour as nothing less than pointing a 'gun' at India, to which India had to respond in kind (*India Today*, 2021).

In this more dangerous world, Jaishankar argues in WBM, India must be vigilant, resilient, unified and strong; strengthen and defend the rules-based order; and lean into its partnerships with Western

states (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 174). The second and third of these recommendations are new. In *TIW*, drawing on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jaishankar urged India to accept its *dharma*, pursuits its interests, fight its battles and achieve its ambitions within the rules, but without claiming any particular responsibility for them. But in *WBM*, he argues India should look more to the *Ramayana*, which he argues tells the story of a 'quest for the observance of rules and norms' and 'a saga of a divine force'—Lord Rama—who seeks 'to cleanse the world of evil'. Rama aims to establish *Ram Rajya* (loosely, the 'rule of Ram') which Jaishankar characterizes as 'the epitome of a rules-based order' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 8). Indeed, he argues, 'the story of Lord Rama is an account of a rising power that is able to harmonize its particular interests with a commitment to doing global good' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 9). This is the revised role Jaishankar imagines for India: a strong state pursuing its interests, but also taking a lead in doing good, notably as an advocate of 'a rules-based order' (Embassy of India, Bangkok, 2022). This role is in keeping, he suggests, with India's 'tradition of global service' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 209). It is not inconsistent with a 'stronger nationalism at home', since that 'coexists traditionally with enthusiastic internationalism abroad' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 211). This internationalism is manifest, he suggests, in India's vaccine programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic and in New Delhi's embrace of 'South–South cooperation' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 212).

Significantly, Jaishankar also claims (2024, pp. 215–216) that this internationalism is clear in India's insistence on support for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and on transparency and equality in connectivity initiatives. These are telling examples, both concerning China—the first regarding its claims in the South China Sea and the second regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). They point the reader back to earlier passages in WBM on the challenge China poses to India. And there, the challenge is cast in much starker terms than it was in *TIW*, where China is presented as a force that 'may determine the direction of contemporary politics' but one with which India may be able to 'work together' to 'determine the Asian century', if both countries show 'maturity of leadership' and apply 'systemic skills of diplomacy' (Jaishankar, 2020, pp. 3, 133 and 149).

Jaishankar's narrative about China is revised in stages after Galwan, beginning in late 2020 and early 2021 with observations about the 'nationalistic' tendencies of Xi's China (Lowy Institute 2020), and on to multiple complaints about China's conduct towards India, not just on the LAC, but in actions like its opposition to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (Mohan, 2021), and then to discussions of the dangers involved in relying too greatly on the Chinese economy (Hindustan Times, 2022). By the time we reach WBM—still without a disengagement of forces on the LAC and the restoration of the status quo ante Galwan—Jaishankar arrives at characterizing China as a 'multidimensional challenge to Indian foreign policy' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 140). Implicitly, China is compared to the demon-king Ravana of Lanka, made invincible by the thoughtlessness of Brahma,[13] who embarks on an 'endless quest, powered by a sense of entitlement and absence of restraint' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 139). If states act like this and 'do not honour agreements and adhere to obligations', Jaishankar warns (2024, p. 139), 'they must weigh any tactical gains against the larger damage that they have done to their reputations'. He implies that this is exactly what China has done: in 2020 on the LAC, Beijing showed a 'disregard for established agreements' and for its obligations (Jaishankar, 2024, pp. 140–141; cf. MEA, 2021).

In this context, Jaishankar justifies the development of closer ties between India and the West (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 151). The book makes it readily apparent that mounting Indian concern about

[13] Here Brahma likely stands for the West, which thoughtlessly engaged Beijing and made it stronger, without care for the consequences. See Jaishankar (2024, pp. 150–151).

China's behaviour has shaped, at least in part, the development of strategic partnerships with Western states. Jaishankar argues that these are needed because interdependence is insufficient for peace and security and because contemporary multilateralism has too many 'frailties and shortcomings' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 55). Neither can effectively restrain a resurgent China. India must approach the future with 'a mindset of fierce independence' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 78), but it needs bilateral and plurilateral partnerships, including with Western states, to secure itself and its interests.

This new emphasis on the value of the West for India, arising after Galwan, and persisting despite disagreements over the war in Ukraine, echoes Jaishankar's earlier remarks made prior to becoming EAM. At no point in WBM does he suggest, as he did in Birmingham in 2018, that India is the 'most Western society in Asia', but his descriptions of India as 'non-West and not anti-West' signal a shift away from the notion of a multialigned India, equidistant from all major powers and groupings, described in TIW. Indeed, Jaishankar urges in WBM Indians not to view the world 'exclusively through an anti-Western prism' (Jaishankar, 2024, 57). He argues that Western states will continue to play constructive roles in maintaining order, generating growth and providing security. 'In the discourses of Delhi', he argues (2024, p. 98), 'the term "strategic autonomy" is usually defined as keeping a distance from the West, especially the US'. But the 'irony is that this has led us instead to develop deep dependencies elsewhere'.

India needs to recognize, Jaishankar goes on, that an 'objective evaluation' of the West shows that 'this group is a natural partner because its members share the attributes of a pluralistic society, democratic polity and market economy' despite their 'excessive advocacy of their particular practices and convictions' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 97). In that light, 'Indians must ask themselves which geographies give better access to their products and talents'. After all, 'India may be non-West', he reiterates, but 'there is little profit in being anti-West' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 98).

This discussion prefigures a long consideration of the Quad, which Jaishankar describes (2024, p. 107) as 'a gathering key to national interests'. Its inclusion and its tone are striking. Where *TIW* mentioned the Quad just five times—all in passing[14]—WBM devotes an enthusiastic chapter. The four members are compared to Lord Rama and his brothers Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrugana, whose 'visible affection' and 'collective solidarity' enabled *Ram Rajya* (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 108). The Quad is discussed in frank terms as a response to the declining relative power of the United States and the 'enormous expansion of Chinese capabilities' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 112), as well as India's move to reconnect itself with East Asia. Its work to further cooperation and provide public goods in critical emerging technologies, semiconductors, climate action, infrastructure financing, vaccines, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime domain awareness, counterterrorism and other areas is laid out in some detail. The argument that it is a 'purely transactional arrangement' (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 132) is rebutted—the Quad concerns shared values as well as interests.

In all this, Jaishankar shifts from the hybrid realist-Hindu nationalist worldview described in TIW, to one that retains elements of realism and nationalism, but integrates more of what Ollapally and Rajagopalan (2012, pp. 96–99) call the 'liberal globalist' worldview. This world view favours pragmatic engagement with the West on the grounds that it best serves India's economic and security interests, arguing that accessing Western markets and Western know-how and technology is the best means of driving growth and development.

[14] See Jaishankar (2020, pp. 11, 14, 100, 166 and 172).

Dilemma and Decision

Comparing Jaishankar's pre-Galwan statements with post-Galwan statements and placing them in the broader context of the traditions of thought and practice that shape India's foreign policy tells us, I suggest, three things. First, we can see how the crisis generated a dilemma in the mind of at least one significant Indian policymaker that demanded a rethinking of his worldview or, at least, a revision of his public account of his world view. This dilemma arose from the recognition of (a) China's turn to much more assertive behaviour on the LAC during 2020 and 2021; (b) Beijing's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the manipulation of information and trade, especially in medical supplies; (c) India's ever-growing social, economic, political and military dependence on advanced technologies, including those that can be used for disruptive effect and (d) Russia's greater appetite for risk-taking, demonstrated by the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The changes in a world view that this dilemma prompted are clear, I have argued, in the differences between the confident realism of *TIW* and its portrayal of a robust, autonomous, multialigned but independent India and the more anxious story told by WBM about an unpredictable and increasingly disordered world, in which India needs to find 'friends', especially in the West (Jaishankar, 2024, pp. 84–106), and not just do deals with 'frenemies' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 32).

Second, we can see some of the political effects of this rethinking. Jaishankar's assessment of the balance between risk and opportunity in the current world, as the power of the West wanes, and others rise, changes in response to Galwan, and indeed to COVID-19 and the Ukraine war. But what also changes are the stories Jaishankar tells about the West and India's relationship with the West, which together lead to a distinctly different philosophy than the hybrid realist-Hindu nationalism of *TIW*. His characterization of the West as a 'natural partner' to India and his insistence that India should not be 'anti-West' depart from the worldview of *TIW*. Interestingly—and I think significantly—they link back to his earlier assessment of the relationship between the two, notably in the Birmingham speech in October 2018, delivered after his retirement from IFS and before his elevation to EAM. They suggest that Jaishankar's less enthusiastic discussion of the West in *TIW* might have been shaped more by political expedience—by the need to align a public description of a worldview with a broader BJP scepticism about the West and preference that India should keep some distance from the United States and its allies (see, for example, Madhav, 2021)—than by his personal web of beliefs.

Third, Jaishankar's statements suggest that the Galwan crisis and the dilemma it generated tipped the balance of power within the Modi government towards those—including the EAM—who are both sceptical about China's intentions and more enthusiastic about stronger ties with the West. In *WBM*, China is no longer characterized as a state with which India can 'work together' to 'determine the Asian century' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 3), at least until Beijing provides a 'credible explanation' of its actions in 2020 on the LAC (Jaishankar, 2024, p. 144). And even then, Jaishankar argues that China's attempts to dominate critical technologies and supply chains, as well as to create a China-centric Asian economy using the BRI, are threats to India's interests. 'Events in 2020', he writes (2024, pp. 34–35), 'sharpened awareness in India of an exposure that had been built up over decades'. Importantly too, they highlighted to him the value of the West, which Jaishankar appreciated well before Galwan, given his statements of belief prior to becoming EAM, but which he downplayed in TIW, likely for political reasons.

Given what we know about these long-standing beliefs, it is unlikely that this assessment will change in the absence of some radical exogenously imposed shift in India's ties with United States and its allies and partners. Nor it is likely that New Delhi will instigate such a change, despite recent efforts to stabilize

the relationship with Beijing and to disengage frontline forces on the LAC around Galwan (Joshi, 2024). India has not yet publicly signalled that it considers the 1993 and 1996 agreements designed to manage the border areas are back in force, nor that it will substantially draw down forces deployed close to the LAC since 2020 (Madan, 2024). Jaishankar himself has commented (PTI, 2024) that while 'some progress' has been made, further 'steps' will need to be taken to restore some trust in China–India ties, which remain disturbed. And there has been no suggestion from New Delhi that these steps to stabilize the relationship nor other shifts in global politics might prompt the unwinding of arrangements with Western states made pre- or post-Galwan. Indeed, the news that Donald J. Trump will once again be US President and indications that his administration will pursue a hardline China strategy has been welcomed in India, including by the EAM, which has indicated that further opportunities for cooperation might arise (*Times of India*, 2024).

Conclusion

Interpretivism offers one pathway, I have argued, for scholars of India's international relations to retain a commitment to qualitative research and a concern with the role of ideas in political analysis. It can generate robust explanations for changes in foreign policy behaviour. In this case, interrogating the textual evidence we have for a prominent agent's world views allows us to reconstruct not just the impact that an unforeseen event can have on the thinking of a foreign policy elite, but also the policy outcomes that can result.

Interpretivism is not, however, a panacea for qualitative researchers. It depends on the availability of extensive evidence for the web of belief of an actor or actors—evidence of prior intellectual influences, traditions of thought to which they have been exposed, new information or ideas encountered immediately prior to a decision, and their understandings of the effectiveness and appropriateness of certain actions. In the case of India's new China strategy, we are fortunate to have such evidence, thanks largely to Jaishankar's relative openness and the large number of public statements he has made before and after becoming EAM. It would be more difficult to reconstruct the web of belief of a foreign minister—such as his predecessor, Sushma Swaraj—whose public utterances were less frequent and more determined by ministerial speechwriters. But it would be possible, by piecing together statements from interviews, for example, by soliciting information from those who worked with her or knew her well, and by parsing this evidence to assess the traditions and dilemmas that shaped her decision-making and her actions.

Finally, interpretivism offers not just a useful approach to explaining political behaviour but one that allows us to more accurately represent the role of human agents in government. To be sure, the webs of belief of these agents are shaped by established traditions of thought and these agents commonly find themselves in situations not of their own making. But neither the webs of belief nor the circumstances imprison agents or determine their actions. As the Jaishankar doctrine shows, they change and policies can change with them, and as political scientists, we need theories like interpretivism to help us explain why, how and when this occurs.

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