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RE-VISITING THE IDEA OF POWER THROUGH NEHRU'S IDEALS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY : A THEORETICAL ESTIMATE

Priyadarshini Ghosh

Abstract

The term Power has been one of the most contested concepts in political science. Disagreements on defining what constitutes power have been primarily with regard to the elements of power. Foreign policies of states have structured itself on both hard and soft elements of power. Even though the term soft power made its appearance within the literature of politics and international relations through Joseph S. Nye's writings, however, the concept itself predates Nye. For observers and students of Indian foreign policy, imprints of soft power were found in Gandhi's ideas of non-violence and Satyagraha and in the ideological underpinnings of Nehru's foreign policies. This article seeks to contextualise power in Nehru's foreign policy. What kind of power did Nehru visualise India to be? Drawing parallels with Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power this article will try and sketch out the contours of Nehru's foreign policy, as to how Nehru situated power within the domain of foreign policy per se. The ideals of India's foreign policy which Nehru so enthusiastically incorporated into our Constitution were based on the ideas of power that Nehru had. This is where this article's significance lies in making a critical theoretical estimate of Nehru's ideas on power and its implications for India's foreign policy.

Keywords : Foreign policy, Influence, Nehruvian Idealism, Power, Soft power.

Introduction

Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that India was destined to play an important and beneficent role in the comity of nations. As early as in 1948, he had declared that India had already become the fourth or fifth most influential country in the United Nations. India's foreign policy objectives owe much to the visions that an idealistic Nehru had in mind. He was undoubtedly the architect of independent India's foreign policy. However, his zeal for diplomacy was not backed by the necessity of military and economic hard power. Nehru and Indian foreign policy had high hopes on our moral high ground because as a nation we were collectively proud of the non-violent traditions crafted by Gandhi during the Indian war of independence. Over the past decades, the idealist strain or the so called 'Nehruvian idealism' has diminished and eventually disappeared altogether influenced by the exigencies of *realpolitik*, however, one cannot but argue that that much of the basic ideals of India's foreign policy still has the imprints that Nehru had drawn.

This paper will seek to draw an outline of the major characteristics of Nehruvian foreign policy which shaped India's foreign relations after independence, contrasting those ideals against the backdrop of the concept of soft power as conceptualized by Joseph S. Nye in the late 1990s. The paper will try to argue that the logic of co-option through political values, culture and foreign policy was deeply embedded in independent India's foreign policy discourse, which formed the basis of the constitutional heritage that we gave ourselves when the Constitution was adopted. The main objective of this paper is open a debate or a discourse that perceives the long cherished ideals of India's foreign policy to be pre-dated much before the term soft power gained prominence in national and international parlance.

Defining Power Dichotomies

The term power has been one of the most frequently used and also one of the most highly contested terms in the discourse of politics and international relations *per se*. For centuries, political theory visualized power as being centralized in a state apparatus or in a series of political institutions. In classical political theory,

power was embodied in the sovereign whereas in a monarchical society, power was invested symbolically in the body of the king, the incarnation of divine right. During the initial phase of the development of modern political science, Frederick Watson (1934) had said, 'The proper scope of political science is not the study of the State or any other specific institutional complex, but the investigation of all associations in so far as they can be shown to exemplify the problem of power' (Watson, 1934, p. 56).¹ Both traditional and modern thinkers alike have demonstrated the significance of power in politics, from Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche to Max Weber, Laswell, Kaplan, Morgenthau and others. It might not be wrong to conclude that there are probably as many conceptions of power as there are theorists.

Power is frequently associated with the notions of control, coercion and influence. Although there are varied definitions and usages of the term power, yet it can be simplified to three connected but different approaches- (i) power as a resource; (ii) power as a strategy; and (iii) power as an outcome. As a resource, power refers to the sum total of capabilities an entity or a country has to influence the behaviour of another entity or a country respectively. However, defining power only in terms of possession of capabilities would be myopic. This was emphasized by Steven Lukes (2005) when he said, '...sociologists and strategy analysts, for example, equate power with power resources, the former with wealth and status, the latter with military forces and weaponry. But merely possessing or controlling the means of power is not the same as being powerful. As both France and the USA discovered in Vietnam, having military superiority is not the same as having power' (Lukes, 2005, p. 213)²

Power as an outcome, seek to understand the extent of an entity's capability not from the inputs that make it powerful or from the context within which its actions were undertaken, but rather from an assessment of whether the entity was able to attain its desired ends, the ends for which the exercise of power took place to begin with. The claim of power in this approach rests simply on whether the initiator was able to influence the targeted entity to act in the desired way, even if that entails undercutting the target's own interests. This in a sense conveys

the essence Robert Dahl's definition of power, which happens to be one of the most often, quoted definitions on power. Dahl (1957) defined power in terms of relation among people. He preferred to use the terms 'influence' and 'power' interchangeably. Dahl said that his 'intuitive idea' of power can be defined as, 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl, 1957, p. 207).³

When India became independent, the world outside was caught in the throes of the Cold War and great power competition. Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Nehru served simultaneously as the foreign Minister of India. This was but natural, for among the stalwarts of the Congress, he alone had a genuinely internationalist outlook and 'had always been fascinated by world trends and events' (Guha, 2007, p. 152).⁴ Nehru from the very beginning did not want India at that nascent stage of independence to get caught into the vortex of this great power politics. As he himself had put it, 'we lead ourselves' (Nehru, 1961, p. 3).⁵

In a letter written to K.P.S. Menon in January 1947, as the latter prepared to take up his assignment as India's first ambassador to China, Nehru articulated his vision of what came to be known as 'non-alignment':

Our general policy is to avoid entanglement in power politics and not join any group of powers as against any other group...We must be friendly to both and yet not join either. Both America and Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of each other as well as of other countries. This makes our path difficult and we may well be suspected by each other of leaning towards the other. This cannot be helped (Nanda, 1976, p. 134).⁶

It is clear from the above paragraphs that Nehru both as a statesman and as India's Prime Minister, wanted to keep India out of the power game being played in the international arena in the late 1940s. What becomes interesting is to consider how one conceptualizes power here. Are we talking here about hard power where military power is the only and the most pertinent indicator for assessing a country's power potential? Or, can power be operationalized by any other dimension?

Representative of Nehru's ideas was a speech he delivered on 'Peace and Empire' at Friends House, Euston in July 1938. This began by speaking of 'fascist aggression' but went on to see fascism as merely another variant of imperialism. In Nehru's mind there was little doubt that those who sought complete freedom for all the subject peoples of the world had to oppose both fascism and imperialism. In other words, he was against all forms of subjugation by means of military or hard power. Yet, at the same time he wanted India to play an important role in the global arena. And in order to play that role, Nehru banked upon India's moral currency, India's faith in international law, in bilateral and multilateral treaty agreements and in promoting world peace and freedom from the clutches of colonialism for the suppressed people.

This sentiment found its echoes in the debates of the Constituent Assembly while drafting our Constitution. When it came to the conduct of international relations, India's status as a country, morally opposed to military aggression and political domination found expression in the Constituent Assembly debates. A case in point is the Draft Article 40, the closing provision of the Directive Principles of State Policy, which was taken up for debate by the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1948. It said the State shall promote international peace and security by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations, by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among governments and by the maintenance of justice and respect for treaty obligations in the dealings of organized people with one another. It directed the State to adopt certain principles in its dealings with the world at large. An amendment was moved at the beginning of the debate that proposed to include a more succinct version of the Draft Article.

A large section of the Assembly emphasized the importance of world peace. Members felt that India should not just play a role in effectuating world peace; one claimed that India was best placed to do so: peace, non-aggression and spirituality were key aspects on India history and culture. There was quite a bit of discussion around international law and its role in the world. Members viewed international law as playing a critical role in ensuring amicable relations between

nations. Members viewed the Draft Article as an expression of India's intention to pursue an independent foreign policy. It was argued that now, unlike before, India would not be dragged into the quarrels of other countries and would not align with power blocs.⁷ The Draft Article was adopted with an amendment which later found place in the Constitution under Article 51 which states that the State shall endeavour to —

- (a) Promote international peace and security;
- (b) Maintain just and honourable relations between nations;
- (c) Foster respect for international law and treaty obligations in the dealings of organized peoples with one another; and
- (d) Encourage settlement of international disputes by arbitration.

Power depends on the context in which the relationship exists. The best guarantee to measure how much power one exerts on the other is to understand the other's preferences. At times, desired outcomes are achieved without commanding, when the other believes that the objectives that a country is following are legitimate. In such a situation, the means of coercion becomes unnecessary, because the desired objective of co-option is achieved by the means of attraction.

A distinction has been made on the means adopted to achieve success in foreign policy decision-making. Hence we have two types of means- 'hard' means which includes military might and economic strength and 'soft' means which constitutes the means of attraction by 'co-option instead of coercion'. It was Joseph S. Nye who coined the term 'soft power' for the first time in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* published in 1991. Nye (2004) has differentiated between - (a) Command power- the ability to change what others do can rest on coercion or inducement; and (b) Co-optive power- the ability to shape what others want can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and political values.⁸

Although coercive power traditionally dominates realist literature, but another source of power is also widely discussed in the works of even classical

realists like E. H. Carr's 'power over opinion' and Hans Morgenthau's 'policy of prestige', both of which mirror the concept of soft power as suggested by Nye. Foreign policies that attract support, based on popular ideals serve the purpose of endowing these policies with an appearance of legitimacy.

Peter Van Ham (2010) in his book *Social Power in International Politics* offered us a constructivist notion of 'social power' that captures 'the ability to set standards, create norms and values that deemed legitimate and desirable without resorting to coercion or payment' (Ham, 2010, p. 21).⁹ Social power resides in such diverse practices as agenda-setting, issue or problem framing, public diplomacy, norm advocacy or discursive power. Van Ham also wrote that on the fringes of soft power several other concepts have flourished. Stephen D. Krasner's (1982) definition of a 'regime' as a set of explicit or implicit 'principles, norms, rules, or decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue area' is hence relevant to our debate.¹⁰ This was even recognized by E. H. Carr who argued in his book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* that the Anglo-Saxon control over ideas constitutes a major source of global power. The power of ideas and norms are hence, hardly new to the discourse. Since power is hardly ever an end in itself and is almost always a means to achieve other goals (from survival to reputation) so the study of power has therefore gone beyond realism.

Constructivism argues that ideas and discourse matter and that norms, values and identities heavily influences political life. Surely international politics still offers numerous relatively unchangeable constraints to state behaviour such as the balance of military power or the global market, yet ideas and discourse matter since they construct the socially agreed facts that cannot be wished away by individuals and inform the common knowledge that sustains legitimacy and authority. As Ted Hopf (1998) claimed, identities play an important role in society, since 'they tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are' (Hopf, 1998, p. 178).¹¹

Contrasting Nehruvian ideals and Soft Power

To the theory and practice of both politics and diplomacy, centrality of power in its various manifestations is difficult to overlook. There is no one universally

accepted definition of power, as a result of which its proper definition remains a matter of controversy. There is no denying the fact that nature of power has changed over the course of time, so much so that power is no longer judged by the barrel of the gun. Robert Jervis once observed that in international relations a desired image and reputation can often be 'of greater use than a significant increment of military or economic power'. Perhaps as a result of this change in the understanding of power, countries today, whether large and small, are keenly aware that reputation, image and nation branding can be critical strategic assets in world politics. The moot point is that there is a general agreement among scholars of how a country is perceived abroad being a crucial element in the symbolic domain of national power.

Joseph S. Nye, a Harvard Professor (and also an Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs during the Clinton Administration) extended E. H. Carr's notion of 'power over opinion' and developed the concept of 'soft power'. Nye is credited to have coined the term itself, which he defined in his book *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* as a 'country's ability to get what it wants through appeal and attraction'. Although Nye first used the term in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, he came out with a detailed discussion on the definition and variables of soft power in his 2004 book. Nye is of the opinion that soft power 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others'. It is, he says, 'getting others to want the outcomes that you want'; it 'co-opts people rather than coerces them' (Nye, 2004, p.3).¹² According to Nye, soft power of a country comprises of three variables namely, culture, values and foreign policy.

If we turn our gaze back to the issue under consideration in the beginning, we find that in the initial years of India's independence, Nehru carefully crafted India's image abroad as one such power that believed in the appeal of its civilization heritage that was premised on non-violence and political values which were based on institutionalizing the rule of law and a foreign policy based on these two pillars. Nehru attempted to prevent India's Balkanization and he found the solution in different policies, which were characterized by diverse ideologies as he wanted

India to have a leadership role in world affairs without aligning to the power blocs led by the US and the Soviet Union. Sumit Ganguly (2010) wrote that the main objectives of Nehru's foreign policy were, '....preservation of national interest, achievement of world peace, disarmament, [and] independence for Afro-Asian nations' (Ganguly, 2010, p. 65).¹³For the pursuit of these foreign policy objectives, Nehru moved ultimately to the founding of the Non-Alignment Movement.

Nehru believed in internationalism and tried to maintain honesty and goodwill in matters of international affairs. He wanted a cordial and mutually beneficial relationship with China and the *Panchsheel* (five principles) was initiated between New Delhi and Peking on 29th April 1954 for this purpose.¹⁴In Nehru's words:

India does not propose to join any camp or alliance. But we wish to cooperate with all in the quest for peace and security and human brotherhood....Peaceful coexistence is not a new idea for us in India. It has been our way of life and is as old as our thought and culture... We welcome association and friendship with all and the flow of thought and ideas of all kinds, but we reserve the right to choose our own path. That is the essence of *Panchsheel*. (Constitutional Assembly Debates, 1948)¹⁵

Nehru was opposed to the basic American policies of mutual security arrangements and military alliances, which were designed to contain the Soviet communism as the United States interpreted that Soviet expansionism was threat to peace, security, international trade and the human freedom. America focused on this agenda and both Presidents Truman and Eisenhower advocated it in the early years of the Cold War.¹⁶Partly as a result of such policies of aggression, *Panchsheel* was carefully formulated with features such as mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and finally peaceful co-existence.

Nehru's first trip to the United States took place two years after he assumed office as the Prime Minister, even though he had often been to Europe before

independence. The US had not figured large in Nehru's imagination. His *Glimpses of World History*, for example devotes far less space to U.S. than to China or Russia. Americans for their part had their own prejudices about India. They admired Gandhi and his non-violent struggle but their knowledge of the country itself was scant. Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State in 1949, wrote dismissively about Nehru and his visit to America in 1949. Acheson found Nehru, 'one of the most difficult men with whom I have ever had to deal'.¹⁷

A similar feeling was harboured by his successor John Foster Dulles. Dulles was 'the coldest of cold warriors whose foreign policy was dominated by his obsession with communism'. Dulles and Nehru disliked each other from the start. Dulles had claimed that 'the concept of neutrality is obsolete, immoral and short sighted' (Crocker, 1966, p. 114).¹⁸ Those who professed it, were in effect, 'crypto-communists' (Guha, 2007, p. 151).¹⁹ In making a succinct summary of the initial phase of India-US relations, Ramachandra Guha (2007), India's leading modern historian made an interesting observation. He wrote in his book *India After Gandhi*:

India and the United States did seem to have much in common –the democratic way of life, a commitment to cultural pluralism and a nationalist origin myth that stressed struggle against the British oppressor. But on questions on international politics they resolutely differed. America thought India soft on communism; India thought America soft on colonialism. In the end, that which divided seemed to overwhelm that which united; in part because of the personal chemistry – or rather, lack thereof- between the key players on either side (Guha, 2007, p. 152).²⁰

Contrasting this with Nehru's impressions of erstwhile Soviet Union was more friendly and cordial. Soviet economic system appealed to Nehru most. As a progressive intellectual of his time, he thought state ownership more just than private property, state planning more efficient than the market. *Glimpses of World History* contains an admiring account of the Soviet five-year plans. But Nehru was not attracted by the Soviet model of armed revolution or by one-party state. His training under Gandhi made him inclined towards non-violence and his schooling

in Western liberalism made him an enthusiastic champion for electoral democracy and a vehement supporter of free press. All these were positive influences that found its expression in the Constitution that independent India made for itself to guide the nascent country to establish the rule of law in the domain of national politics.

Conclusion

For Nehru, foreign policy was a means of making India's presence felt in the world. While commenting on the emergence of newly independent India in the global scene, Nehru wrote:

...prestige of India has greatly increased...we have always avoided playing a flashy role in international affairs...Gradually; an appreciation has grown in other countries of our own sincerity of purpose even though there has been disagreement (Gundevia, 1984, pp.18-19).²¹

C. Rajagopalari (1950) wrote in this connection, '...a country without material, men or money –the three means of power- was now fast coming to be recognized as the biggest moral power in the civilized world...her word listened to with respect in the councils of the great'.²²Politicians on the other side of the political divide also appreciated Nehru's contribution in building India's image abroad. Non-alignment was an application of the Gandhian principles to world politics. As a result of the belief in the potential of India's moral powers, India was called upon to play an important mediatory role in the conflicts and civil wars of the time. There in lay India's soft power. The attractiveness of India's culture, the appeal of the political values that the country stood for like democracy, anti-colonialism, socialism, secularism and the principles of non-interference in the domestic policies of other states, made India an acceptable stakeholder in the geo-political chessboard. This form of power that India exhibited was in sharp contrast to imperialistic, hegemonic game play that was prevalent when India gained her independence. And over the years, this has been our constitutional heritage in the domain of foreign policy.

What is interesting to note is that, long before scholars Joseph. S. Nye propounded his idea of soft power; India had long championed the values of Third World solidarity, anti-racialism, democracy and freedom. These are values that have formed the core of India's foreign policy. Gandhi's use of non-violence and *satyagraha* both in South Africa and later during India's independence movement exemplified the classic use of soft power historically. Sreeram Chaulia (2007) in his article 'India's Soft Power: Lessons from Nehru' mentioned in this context, 'Nehruvian peace initiatives of the 1950s stand out for their image-burnishing value'.²³ Even a realist like C. Raja Mohan (2003) pointed out in one of his articles, 'India could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power. Thanks to the spread of religion and culture from India to the neighbouring regions over the millennia, India has exercised a measure of soft power'.²⁴

Reams have been written about the irrelevance of non-alignment in the contemporary global scenario. Non-alignment when understood to mean an independent foreign policy, can very well be said to hold meaning in the days of de-hyphenated relations and in the age of strategic partnerships. There is a growing awareness in the academic circles that in the past decade, India's foreign policy has tilted quite a lot towards the US thereby jeopardizing our age old warm relations with Russia. However, India's foreign policy haven't fully tip toed the hegemonic ambitions of the US, because India's foreign policy is not built upon the pillars of hegemonic power ambitions. Therein lay India's popularity and recognition as a moral power in the emerging power politics. And therein lay the fulfillment of the constitutional heritage that the makers of our Constitution envisioned for this country.²⁴

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