

**POWER AND DIPLOMACY:  
INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICIES DURING THE COLD WAR**

Zorawar Daulet Singh

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LYDIA KULIK

As India rediscovers its economic and political strength, there probably has never been greater demand both within the country as well as outside for comprehensive and unbiased analyses of its historical foundations, including the origin and evolution of its foreign policy. Although the number of volumes on these subjects has been growing, every new book on the history of India is welcomed with interest, as experts seek answers to the acute questions of the day in the unfolding interpretations of India's past. In his recently published thought provoking research, *Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies during the Cold War*, Zorawar Daulet Singh offers interesting elements and viewpoints to the infinitely multifaceted history of India's post-independence foreign policy, which otherwise regrettably has been confined

by most earlier published history books to a rather flat, static and monochrome structure. His work is also relevant to India's present-day priorities—responding to the new dynamics of international relations in Asia in the twenty-first century requires revisiting and re-evaluating the developments of preceding decades.

The title is somewhat misleading, as the author covers a narrower timeframe than what is suggested by it. He concentrates on the tenures of two prime ministers—Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi. The book consists of two parts—entitled “The Peacemakers”, which describes several episodes from the formative years of the Nehru era (1950–55) and “The Security Seekers”, which contains a similarly scrupulous account of the important events of Indira Gandhi's first tenure as prime minister (1966–

75). Through a careful examination of the details around the decision-making process at the times of crises during these years, the author dismantles the prevailing perception about a lack of deep strategic thinking by Indian leaders in the post-independence years. Not being able to account for India on either side of the Cold War power game, many historians from Western as well as Soviet traditions, while praising India's role in the Nonaligned Movement, neglected and downplayed Indian leaders' motives and worldviews or ideas and beliefs, as Daulet Singh calls them. This deprived Indian foreign policy not just of its roots and foundations but also ignored its intricate nuancing and ultimately denied its diplomacy altogether.

Recreating the Indian decision-making process requires much persistence. However, it is rewarding both for the historian involved as well as the reader. Legendary political giants come alive, past and present thinking is bridged and becomes clearer and more vivid. The work requires some amount of luck as well, as it is investigative in nature but available archival records are patchy and vast amounts of documents remain classified and inaccessible. Undeterred by such difficulties, a historian-investigator compensates for missing details by researching alternative sources. In the

case of Daulet Singh's work, the lack of access to Indira Gandhi's records is made up for by in-depth analysis of the records of the prime minister's closest advisors, including PN Haksar and TN Kaul.

Another element for which the author deserves praise is the list of interviews conducted in preparation for the book. Conversations with fourteen officials, including Indian ambassadors, foreign secretaries, intelligence officials and security advisors helped Daulet Singh fine-tune the interpretations of documentary material and receive first-hand accounts of events. Most importantly, they enabled him to uncover behind-the-scenes mechanisms of decision-making and shed light on the logic and motivation supporting some of the key actions that shaped Indian policy in the Cold War era. Needless to say, with time moving forward inexorably, every opportunity to interview the officials of this calibre both on strategy as well as tactics of Indian foreign policy is invaluable. They were not only witnesses to an era but were also instrumental figures of the time. In search of the mental map of India during the Cold War, the author saw talking to people like Shiv Shankar Menon, Shyam Saran, Prabhat Shukla, Avtar Singh Bhasin, to mention a few, as central to his

research. These conversations were key to garnering information on the depth of thinking behind the arid archival records, something missing from most other history books.

Daulet Singh is certainly not the first historian who tries to explain the transformation in Indian geopolitics during the Cold War. Far too often however, this complex process is portrayed as a shift from naïve, idealistic Jawaharlal Nehru to insecure Indira Gandhi, while the reasoning and motivation behind the change from one distinct period to another is not evaluated in detail. The author traces the transformation of conceptual perceptions of notions, such as order and security among the Indian leadership in trying to understand why India's role contracted from an extra-regional peacemaker actively involved in world politics during the Nehru period, to that of a largely subcontinental security seeker, withdrawn from conflicts external to its immediate national interests in Indira Gandhi's years in power.

Daulet Singh argues that Indian foreign policy during the Cold War was characterised as much by continuity as by change. To illustrate this he highlights six major developments of the three-decade period—the first crisis in East Bengal (1950), the Indochina crisis (1954), the Formosa crisis

(1955), the war in Vietnam (1965–66), the second East Bengal crisis (1971) and the events around Sikkim (1970–75). Through this prism, he analyses the evolution of India's strategic outlook, the perception of its regional priorities, the world order and matters of international security, the country's national interests, goals, functions and resultant policies. The selection of events makes the book resonate with India's contemporary dilemmas—be it the equation with great powers, developing a coherent policy towards neighbours including Pakistan, relations with China and issues of regional security.

Despite the recent wave of eclectic scholarship, especially on the Nehru years, India's regional policies have been relatively neglected. However, each case in international relations analysed in the book under review, resembles a ganglion with countless connections relating to numerous other players, reacting to various factors and producing impulses influencing other knots in the fabric of international relations around India as well as in its domestic affairs. This adds an important element to history and needs to be mapped with other research on the subject of India's foreign policy post-1947.

Daulet Singh adds depth to the otherwise oversimplified description

of Indian foreign policy as a procession from Jawaharlal Nehru's idealism to Indira Gandhi's realism. India's foreign policy during the Cold War period from the 1950s to the 1970s was not a mere exercise in the preservation of its strategic independence. For Indian leaders, nonalignment, while providing indispensable strategic autonomy also implied endless possibilities for action according to circumstances with national interests in mind. India's rise today is the result, among other things, of decades of persistent pursuit of its interests and strategic flexibility developed under the umbrella of nonalignment. The combination of idealism and pragmatism and in Nehru's words a "healing touch to the world", together with assertive statecraft not willing to be the plaything of others and intent on preserving its unique individuality were the distinctive features of India's

foreign policy that resulted in a sophisticated decades-long diplomatic dance that no doubt deserves proper attention.

One cannot but agree with the author when he notes that there has never been a more conducive time to engage with India's diplomatic and strategic history. This is the right moment to return to the formative years of the country's foreign policy and understand how leaders and strategists navigated the complex international environment of the second half of the twentieth century. The Cold War period offers a rich and relatively untapped reserve of insights that provide much needed depth in evaluating Indian strategic thought and geopolitical practices. Many lessons on how to craft a sustainable role for India in the future will be drawn in the process. ❧