

Harish Kapur

*Foreign Policies of India's Prime Ministers*

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Harish Kapur, emeritus professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, has written three recent books on Indian diplomacy: *India's Foreign Policy 1947-1992*, *Diplomacy of India: Then and Now*, and *Diplomatic Journey: Emerging India*. In this new book, he looks in detail at the role that the Prime Ministers of India have played in setting out the goals, the strategies, and the day-to-day execution of foreign policy. Each Prime Minister is discussed in chronological order, with Indira Gandhi and A.B. Vajpayee having two chapters each since they held the post twice.

As Harish Kapur notes “The personality factor is being increasingly recognised as a crucial dimension in foreign policy making, perhaps as crucial as the established institutions...It is thus increasingly argued that to understand the foreign policy of a nation, it is necessary to understand the decision maker, his background, his education, his perceptions, his biases and prejudices etc; for they all are, in many ways, vital inputs responsible for a decision.” Kapur combines a use of archival documentation with interviews of Prime Ministers, Foreign Secretaries, and high level officials of the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Secretariat.

India began its independent life with Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister — a man educated for leadership with wide experience in Europe in the 1930s where he met others active in the anti-colonial struggle and who were to play important roles in their countries. With his close friend Krishna Menon, who shared a similar background, Nehru had a vision of the high profile role that India could play in world politics. He had a free hand in setting foreign policy goals and in creating a diplomatic style. There was no counter-weight to Nehru's views neither in the Foreign Ministry nor in Parliament, and Nehru chose Ambassadors who carried out his wishes. It was only after the 1962 frontier conflict with China that critical voices were raised in Parliament and the press that Nehru had not been vigilant enough of the Chinese menace. Nehru died in 1964 before he could reverse this image of defeat for India.

Kapur deals for each Prime Minister with decision making on issues concerning the structures of world politics and the issues concerning the more visible neighbours — Pakistan, China, Bangladesh (after 1972) , Sri Lanka, Nepal and Burma. He also analyses the role in the decision-making process of the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Secretariat, informal but sometimes influential advisors, even household members such as Sanjay Gandhi during Indira Gandhi's first government.

There is always a broader world structure which has an impact on domestic politics regardless of the skills of a Prime Minister. There have been two major shifts in the world political structure since the independence of India, and thus two Prime Ministers had to set their policies against the background of major reordering of the world society. It is interesting to contrast the history and style of the two: Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964) and P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996).

Nehru faced the first violent clash of the USA-USSR Cold War with the 1950-1953 Korean War which many feared was the forerunner of a broader armed conflict, especially in Asia as the French-led conflict in Vietnam was underway at the same time. The Civil War in

China had just ended, but the future of the Chinese Nationalist government on Taiwan was unclear. The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 was a potentially destabilizing factor. The world situation called for neutral, non-aligned mediators for at the time no one could predict how stable the bi-polar world system was to become.

Nehru rose to the challenge, and India was able to play a mediator role in the Korean conflict, especially dealing with the contentious prisoner-of-war issue as well as proposing compromise formulas during the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indo-China . After the 1953 death of Stalin, the Soviet Union seemed more stable in its policies, and Nehru was able to play an important role in the creation of a non-aligned group of countries, a policy followed by his successors.

India during the 1950s played an important role in UN agencies and was considered “the voice of Asia” — all the more so that the communist government of China did not hold the China seat in the UN. Many people outside India looked to Nehru for leadership, and his physical bearing and sophistication enhanced his leadership image.

P.V. Narasimha Rao came to center stage as the Cold War bi-polar world ended with the break up of the Soviet Union, the end of Soviet influence in much of Eastern Europe and the end of the appeal of the Marxist-Communist ideology. Narasimha Rao came to power after the short-lived governments of V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar, neither of whom prepared India for a post Cold War world, although Singh had the advantage of having I.K. Gujral as his Foreign Minister. Gujral had earlier been Ambassador to Moscow and understood the changes taking place. However, as Kapur writes “Singh’s personality also did not lend itself to playing an assertive role. Though some have characterised him as ‘a sycophantic careerist’ and ‘the former courtier of the Gandhis’, he was generally perceived as a mild mannered, incorruptible and highly principled person who believed in governance by consensus, and who is known to have delegated authority and respected institutions that had been established.”

Thus it fell to Narasimha Rao to deal with the new world structure at the same time as he faced a difficult domestic socio-economic situation and did not have the domestic political support that Nehru had enjoyed. Fortunately, as Kapur points out “He was one of those few Prime Ministers who was savvy in international affairs since he had often held posts of Foreign Minister under the Gandhis even if they did not use him optimally.” In the new world structure, India faced very real difficulties. India’s non-alignment had become dependent on the Soviet Union, and the new Russian leadership, especially Boris Yeltsin was much more concerned with relations toward Western Europe and the USA. As Kapur writes “India’s other relations were also on the decline: the interaction with the non-aligned world had become disarranged, the north-south negotiations had virtually stopped, and the wax and waning Indo-US relations were in a state of flux with Rao apprehensive of how Washington was going to react, now that it was virtually on the top of the world, and was busy reflecting on the post-war configuration of international forces.”

Narasimha Rao undertook to restructure India in three fundamental ways. The first was economically. As Kapur notes “ During the five years of his mandate, he deregulated the economy, loosened state control autarkic system, opened up to the world economically, and encouraged the private economy to go forward.” In this he could depend on the support and leadership of his Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, who had an important role in both domestic and international economic affairs.

The second lasting re-structuring concerned relations with the major external powers: Russia, China, USA and the European Union. The European countries had never figured in an important way in India's foreign policy considerations. However, with the new open economic policy, issues of trade, technology and investments with Europe became important aspects of foreign policy.

The third re-structuring concerned the nuclear sector. Kapur writes "Rao was indeed faced with a difficult and troublesome international environment when he became Prime Minister. The defacto strategic alliance with Moscow, that had hitherto guaranteed India's security, was in shambles. The Indo-Soviet link, for long perceived as central to Indian diplomatic behaviour, had become history. And, China, its big neighbour, had gained nuclear superpower status, with implicit US acceptance, thus generating deep Indian resentment that China was taken more seriously than India. Worse were Pakistani pretensions, which had been claiming — unofficially since 1987 and officially since 1992 — that it possessed all the components of a nuclear bomb, and the knowhow to assemble one... Though Rao never conducted the nuclear test, there appears to exist a general consensus of opinion that it was he who had really operationalised the nuclear programme. Vajpayee, who carried out the nuclear test, declared after Rao's death, that it was Rao who was really the father of the country's nuclear programme."

As Nehru had developed a diplomatic policy to respond to the world structure being put into place in the late 1940s, so Narasimha Rao responded to the new challenges. Nehru's policies were largely followed by his successors though their personalities differed and the administrative structures to carry out the policies were more institutionalized. Likewise the foreign policies of Rao have been carried on by Atal Behari Vajpayee, Inder Kumar Gujral and Manmohan Singh.

As Harish Kapur sums up "The main thrust of this study is that the decisional process is contingent on two factors: the dimension of the Prime Minister's intellectual interest in foreign affairs, and the nature of his real power within the political system. Prime Ministers, who have personal interest and fascination for international affairs, and who have not been sapped by coalition politics, have invariably arrogated to themselves the whole process, ably supported by their advisers centred in and around the Prime Minister's Secretariat... On the other hand, in the case of Prime Ministers, who have no intellectual interest in foreign affairs, and who are politically debilitated by coalition politics, the whole decisional process results in decentralisation, and in the diffusion of the whole process, with different institutions having a greater role to play."

Fortunately for India, at the two moments when the world society was at the start of major structural changes, there were Prime Ministers who saw the challenges and responded appropriately.

Rene Wadlow

