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# India's Gandhian Foreign Policy

If foreign policy is the truest expression of a nation state's identity, the fierce debate around Indian diplomacy precludes any possibility of gauging the character and aims of the Indian state. That this is the result of intellectual disarray, rather than any confusion about India's identity, is illustrated by a curious paradox.

There is a national consensus that Mahatma Gandhi, the strategist who dominated the Indian political scene until his assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948, was the mentor of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who held office from independence in 1947 until his death in 1964. Nehru forged a unique foreign policy that expressed Gandhi's ideas. As he put it at the very end of his life, "the policies and philosophy which we seek to implement are the policies and philosophy taught to us by Gandhiji". But, inexplicably, the framework that Nehru made the bedrock of Indian diplomacy is eschewed by academics who uncritically use European categories to explain Indian foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> To understand India's policy, it is necessary to use a category coined by Gandhi – *satyagraha* – instead of thinking in terms of realism and liberalism.<sup>2</sup> These European categories continue to be parroted by some Indian diplomats, though their policy proposals are rejected by India's leaders as anathema to the intellectual fabric of the nation state.

It is only by jettisoning such imported assumptions and the conceptual frameworks they rely upon that we can obtain a glimpse of India's true identity and diplomatic intentions. The rationale for Indian foreign policy can be brought

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India–Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Satyagraha*, or "truth force", is the idea of converting the violent to non-violence (this is a facet of the "truth", in "truth force") without replicating the behaviour of the violent, i.e. violence.

into focus only by viewing it in terms of the most significant relationship in the state's history: that between Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi.

That relationship has been invested with a new impetus by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), who took office in 2014.

### *Non-violence in international politics*

Though it may seem paradoxical, the most prominent leader of the rival Congress Party, Gandhi is palpable in all that Modi does. He has unveiled statues of the Mahatma around the globe, paid rich tributes to him, and put into practice many Gandhian ideas such as the campaign to "Clean India". Regardless of the political party in power, Gandhi is inescapable. However, the true import of his ideas lies not in the realm of the explicit but at the level of the intellect, and is most obvious in the thinking behind India's foreign policy. In short, Nehru's "authentic Gandhian era" continues, but what exactly does it denote?

The answer lies in the lesson Nehru learnt from Gandhi – that the principle of non-violence is irrefutable, and that it demands an altogether new type of state.<sup>3</sup> For Gandhi, we live in an inextricably interlinked cosmos in which any form of violence is ultimately self-destructive. For the cosmologically minded, then, politics serves just one purpose: to erase violence. Gandhi pursued this precept within the confines of the British Empire, but his disciple's ambitions were greater. Nehru sought to apply his guru's practices not only within India but also in the realm of international politics.

In seeking to purge violence from the political entity he had inherited, Nehru extended the idea of sovereignty far beyond the old idea of survival for survival's sake. The Nehruvian state sought to eliminate violence, placing the calculus for action beyond history understood either as a Golden Age to be recovered, or as a series of humiliations to be avenged. Instead, action was to be calculated on the basis of present conditions, to eliminate violence now.

However, this ideal posed a significant challenge: how could India non-violently confront violence? The solution lay in Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*. This might itself seem violent because it challenged authority. Crucially, however, the practitioner of satyagraha was less violent than their opponent, and

<sup>3</sup> This claim is based on original research carried out by the author for India's Ministry of External Affairs, in *The Making of Indian Diplomacy: A Critique of Eurocentrism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

directed most of their violence inwards. Nehru made this his approach to foreign policy, and, though his country was impoverished, he did not hesitate to put it into practice. Most sensationally, in India's border regions he sought to free Indians from the everyday violence of poverty while simultaneously challenging Chinese aggression. This earliest application of *satyagraha* to international politics continues to shape India's military border policy.

### *Modi: In Nehru's mould?*

Though the Gandhi–Nehru rationale remains, 15 years of economic liberalisation have given New Delhi's foreign policy a new impetus. Modi's renewal of non-violence as a guiding principle in foreign policy is deeply significant. Its effects will cascade across the world, remaking the global system just as India's last prime minister, Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), rewrote the West's international nuclear architecture by negotiating the unique India–US deal. Although many accuse Modi of breaking with the past, he is resolutely faithful to his predecessors. The best example of this continuity is that Modi personally selected as foreign secretary the man whom Singh used to negotiate the India-US deal. The policies of engagement charted in the early years of India's independence continue, with the added vigour that prosperity – if only relative to Nehru's day – and parliamentary majority afford.

In practice, this means widening the definition of violence and seeking it out for eradication with greater confidence, both domestically and externally. Modi did precisely this when he spoke of India's shortage of toilets. In other words, the belief is that India's focus on the quotidian, if successful, will transform the country. Indian diplomacy is firmly geared towards relieving Indians of such unspectacular, everyday suffering by attracting investment for basic infrastructure – hence New Delhi's concerted efforts at harvesting unconventional investors, including its supposed arch-rival China. By seeking a pragmatic alliance with Beijing, New Delhi demonstrates that not only has it overcome fears of Chinese subversion but that it is remaking the world order. An early fruit of New Delhi's labours is membership, with the second largest stake, in China's proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). New Delhi supports this project because it hopes that Beijing will invest in projects that the Japanese and US-led Asian Development Bank and Bretton Woods institutions will not. These include coal power plants, which India sees as essential to its development, but that run counter to environmental objectives.

It would be an abdication of the principle of non-violence if India tolerated violence from abroad to reduce it at home. Hence, there has been no let-up in Singh's Nehruvian policy of building infrastructure, including roads, along the border with China, the purpose being to counter China's perceived international aggression. Moreover, Modi has injected new momentum into the "Look East" policy of former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991–1996), converting engagement into action. Modi's "Act East" policy represents more than a mere change in nomenclature; it expresses a new resolve to engage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) both economically and militarily. Negotiations are underway to deepen economic and strategic links across various spheres, and to project Indian influence into East Asia and beyond.

What makes all of this *satyagraha* is that, compared to China, India is a non-violent state. This is best explained in terms of India's nuclear policy, which approaches the possibility of total annihilation from a pacific stance. Instead of replicating the logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and outdoing challengers by building arsenals, India became the first country whose "no-first-use" pledge was taken seriously by the comity of nations. In 2010, India moved towards the concept of Credible Minimum Deterrence, limiting the "no-first-use" pledge to non-nuclear states.<sup>4</sup> This ability to defend oneself without replicating violence inspires other foreign policy initiatives that merit the Western world's attention, both for the possibilities they offer and the challenges they pose.

As Sino-Indian relations develop new facets, it is paramount that Europe and North America reconsider their policies, which have amounted to a withdrawal from India. Western investments have been shrinking, and though the responsibility undoubtedly lies primarily with New Delhi, where Modi must find the political will to create a business-friendly climate, the West cannot withdraw in the face of a rising China. By welcoming China as a major trading partner, India is playing a dangerous game – one that needs balancing by Europe. The West needs to show some sign of faith. This could take the form of concessions to make the India-EU Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement a reality. The costs would be minor in comparison to the heavy global price of China becoming the primary means of meeting India's desperate developmental needs, leading to Indian economic dependence on China. Modi campaigned on the issue of growth, and this is demanded by more than a billion Indians. If the West doesn't respond, it will be providing succour to authoritarian tendencies

<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, minimal deterrence was espoused but not followed by Beijing. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," *International Security*, Volume 20, Number 3, 1995.

among Indians, who marvel at non-democratic China forging ahead while the world's largest democracy falters.

At stake is the nature of India's development, as well as global security and the norms the West holds dear – which matter because they shape the course of development. The West remains the bedrock of innovation and technology. Working in unison, it can ensure that India effectively meets its primary goal of poverty eradication in a “clean” manner that does not risk planetary survival. This is especially important because of the threat from self-styled Maoist rebels who have already seized control of vast swathes of territory in India's geographical heartland. Their terrorism threatens the very existence of the Indian state and, in turn, regional and global stability.

India's foreign policy is constructed around the principle of non-violence. If this has not always been apparent, it isn't because of any dissimulation on the part of India's politicians and diplomats. The greatest stumbling block is that India's actions are so often misread. India's identity was never concealed, even if observers were incapable of understanding what they saw. It is necessary, therefore, to reach a new understanding of India. But this will not happen through the assiduous collection of new facts and figures alone if they continue to be misinterpreted. The West must adopt an entirely new analytical framework that can encompass Gandhi's mission and his abiding influence. That alone can reveal India's foreign policy for what it is.