



# Motivating Factors Driving India's Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to examine the philosophical, cultural and historical roots of India's foreign policy. It begins with providing a background to the emergence of India as an independent country amidst the global fraternity of nation states and goes on to shed a light on how various philosophical, cultural and historical factors intermingled with modern influences, such as the experience of colonial rule and other significant developments in global politics of the time, to shape the thinking of Indian leaders on matters of foreign policy.*

**Keywords:** British Rule, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Cold War, Non-Alignment

## Introduction: India Gains Independence

India emerged as an independent country on the world firmament on 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1947 after decades of struggle against the British colonial rule in South Asia. With this momentous development, started the process of India's engagement with the rest of the world in advancing its values and protecting its interests. This engagement collectively constitutes the domain and practice of India's foreign policy.

The process of India emerging as a political entity in the form of a modern nation state started during the colonial rule. The national identity of India as one country crystallized during the struggle of its people against the British rulers. In the course of resisting the British colonial occupation of India, 'the Indian people got formed into a nation or a people.' (Chandra 1988: 23) The people of the Indian subcontinent realized that they are one nation, that their destinies are intertwined. Before Britishers established their rule in India, there had been a number of big empires in the past such as the Mauryan empire and the Mughal empire, but none of these empires covered the entire length and breadth of the land mass of India. It was the British who, for the first time in the history of the Indian sub-continent, brought the whole of South Asia under one flag. For the first time, the entire landmass of South Asia was politically unified. This physical unification under the force and might of the British empire is followed by a struggle for political independence by the people of India. In this struggle for freedom against the might of the British empire, the consciousness of the people of India fused together and led to the emergence of a common consciousness, a common identity- the idea of India. This is the India which emerged as an independent nation-state in the August of 1947.

The national movement for India's independence started to strike roots soon after the Revolt of 1857. Till this point in time, the educated Indians of that period firmly believed in the idea that the British rule was in the overall interest of Indians and that over time, Indian society would become a modern society by its association with the British rulers. This myth is shattered when the Indian intelligentsia starts to explore the reasons for the revolt of 1857. If the British rule were for the welfare of Indians, then why did a large section of the population rise in revolt against this benevolent rule. In their efforts to find an answer to this question, the educated Indians of the period come face to face with the realities of the colonial exploitation of India at the hands of British rulers. The Britishers were not there in India for the benefit of Indians. They were there because of the economic gains that can be made for Britain through the economic and political subservience of India. This nascent effort gradually evolves over time into a firm outlook with regard to how India became a colony of the British and why it was necessary to shake of the clutches of colonial control for ensuring the wellbeing

of the people of India. The efforts made by the leaders of the national movement for understanding the processes of colonial exploitation also made them aware of the major undercurrents of global politics. They were clued into what was happening in the rest of the world and how the people of India should be responding to those developments. The writings of some of the prominent leaders in the newspapers of the time clearly illustrates that their world view was not limited to the shores of India and that they were keenly observing the way the situation was evolving in the global political arena and what should be the position of India in these matters. Thus, the people in India were very much familiar with the struggle of Gandhi in organizing Indians in South Africa long before he became an active part of Indian political scene.

While modern India became a sovereign national entity only after the British rulers left India, India as a cultural and sociological entity has been there on this *terra firma*, which is described as the Indian subcontinent, for a very long time. Indian civilization is counted along with the Egyptian and Chinese civilizations as being amongst the oldest civilizations known to the world. Furthermore, while the Egyptian civilization was lost in the sands of time, both the Indian and the Chinese civilizations enjoy the status of being the only two civilizations in the world with an unbroken past that flows into the modern period. This historical continuity and the unique richness of these civilizational streams makes them very special from the perspective of understanding the shaping of foreign policy. The ideas that define these civilizations have a deep impact on the foreign policy behaviour of these countries.

As a result of these historical processes, India had a certain national, cultural and sociological identity even before it became a political entity after gaining independence from the British. This ancient civilization came under colonial rule in the modern period of world history and emerged from the shadows of British colonial rule as an independent nation after the end of the Second World War. This past has played a very significant role in shaping the foreign policy of independent India. Hence it needs to be underlined that the processes which determine and mould India's policy towards the world beyond India's borders started a lot before we became an independent country. While most of our attitudes and orientations on how to deal with the complex world reality at the time of independence came to be defined during the colonial period of India's history, a no less important role in the shaping of foreign policy of India is played by its rich historical and cultural past. The modern day considerations and understanding of reality intermingle in a seamless fashion with the past when it comes to the shaping of Indian foreign policy.

### **Philosophical and cultural roots of Indian foreign policy**

As pointed out earlier, Indian civilization is counted amongst the oldest human civilizations that flourished on earth. Indian civilization also has the distinction of being a living civilization with a past that continues into the present without any break. This rich and deep past has led to the creation of a vast trove of cultural memory comprising of philosophical moorings, historical developments and anecdotal knowledge that continues to grow and interact with the present. This cultural memory plays an important role in influencing the shaping of foreign policy of India.

A number of perspectives have been developed for looking at and understanding the behaviour of states in international politics. One of them is the Realist stream of thought which emphasizes that states need to identify and protect their interests vigorously and all actions aimed at protecting the national interests are justified. Even if it requires deviation from moral values or doing things which are deemed to be unethical, this school of thought argues that it is alright to do them because it is being done for protecting national interest. For realist writers, the principal tool for defending national interest is power. Hence all realist thinkers advocate that states must acquire power to protect their national interest. For realist thinkers, this is a self-help world. And only power and its continued acquisition can ensure the survival of state. Survival of the state is also described as the most primary national interest and it is the duty of every leader to protect this interest. For realist thinkers, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies. The only thing which is permanent is interests and categorization of friends and enemies changes as per the requirements and modalities of time. In the realist's world view, human beings are selfish and incapable of cooperation. It's not cooperation but competition which underlies the behaviour of states in international politics.

The other prominent line of thought that is used to understand and interpret the behaviour of states in international politics is Liberalism or Idealism. Liberal thinkers are of the view that national interest and its interpretation is not a zero-sum game and countries can cooperate with each other for their mutual benefit. It emphasizes on the value of peace and the importance of ethics in the conduct of international relations.

Both these prominent lines of thought that are found in global politics can be traced to be present in the Indian historical and cultural traditions and play a very important role in the shaping of Indian foreign policy. This cultural imprint operates in the sub-conscious minds of the policy makers and influences their decision-making in a very nuanced and subtle fashion.

The ideas on state craft enunciated in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' are in congruence with the modern day realist thinking on international politics. Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was the Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya who built a large pan India empire in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. According to legend, Kautilya was the brain behind the establishment and administration of this vast Mauryan empire. His philosophy, also known as Chanakya-Niti (the policy of Chanakya), emphasizes on the importance of protecting the interests of King and that of the State at all costs and morality should not be a hindrance in that endeavour. Like realists, Kautilya advocates acquisition of power and for him friends and enemies are determined by what is good for enhancing the security and strength of the state and the king.

In Indian mythology, there is the character of Shakuni, in the epic Mahabharata, who leans in favour of discarding moral values when it comes to achieving the objectives of the state. The central theme in Mahabharata is the contest for power between the Kaurava princes and the Pandava brothers. King Bharata has two sons Dhritrashtra and Pandu. Pandu, who is younger, succeeds his father to the throne because Dhritrashtra is born blind. Pandu dies young and Dhritrashtra is made the king to fill the vacuum. The hundred sons of Dhritrashtra are known as Kaurava and Pandu had five sons who are known as Pandavas. When the time comes to choose the crown prince, Dhritrashtra has to make a difficult choice between making his son his successor or passing the baton to the eldest of the Pandava brothers. Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers is seen by most as the legitimate heir to the throne of Hastinapur. However, Duryodhana, who is the eldest of the Kaurava brothers, sees himself as the rightful heir to the throne- he being the eldest son of the incumbent king. In this contest for power between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Shakuni, who is the maternal uncle of Duryodhana, is on the side of Kauravas. On a number of occasions, Shakuni advocates the use of deceit for securing the interests of Prince Duryodhana. He continuously plots and weaves a web of conspiracies for clearing the path of Duryodhana to the throne of Hastinapur. The choice of tactics adopted by him for achieving his goal explicitly exemplify the belief that ends justify means and morality and politics do not go together.

When Yudhishtira is made the crown prince instead of Duryodhana, Shakuni plans to kill the five Pandava brothers by inviting them to live in a palace made of lac- a highly inflammable material, and then setting the palace on fire. The Pandavas are saved with a little bit of gracious help from their dear friend and well-wisher, Lord Krishna.

Another instance of Shakuni's amoral and interest centric approach to politics is when he convinces Duryodhana to invite Pandavas, who were now rulers of Indraprastha, for a game of dice. In this game, Pandavas lose everything, including their kingdom, at the hands of Shakuni. Not stopping at this, through his deceit, he plots the humiliation of Draupadi- the queen of Pandava brothers- and finally manages to get the Pandavas banished to the forest for a period of 12 years. With Pandavas out of the way, he thought that he had secured the throne for the crown prince Duryodhana.

Glimpses of the liberal tradition of thought of contemporary international relations theory can be seen in the legend of the Mauryan King Ashoka. Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta and the Mauryan empire flourished under his reign. During the conquest of Kalinga, he was deeply moved by the brutality involved in warfare. Upon witnessing the scenes of destruction in the battlefield, Ashoka develops an aversion for violence as a tool of statecraft. He also converted to Buddhism- a religion which advocates non-violence. Asoka realized the futility of war in solving problems of human beings and spent his entire life in propagating the values of peace and non-violence and spreading the message of Lord Buddha.



The liberal tradition is also reflected in Indian mythology in both Ramayana and Mahabharata. In Ramayana, Ravana, the powerful king of Lanka abducts Sita, the wife of Lord Rama who is the king of Ayodhya. Ram first tries diplomacy to resolve the conflict with Ravana and tries to convince him to return Sita and avoid bloodshed which was inevitable if a war took place. He sends his emissary Hanuman, to Lanka to negotiate the release of Sita with Ravana. The talks failed as Ravana refused to see reason and budge from his position. War finally takes place as a tool of last resort to resolve the conflict.

In Mahabharata as well, Krishna goes as an ambassador of Pandavas and makes an effort to resolve the conflict between Kauravas and Pandavas first through peaceful means. First, Krishna proposes to divide the kingdom between Kauravas and Pandavas. When Duryodhana was reluctant, he finally makes the offer of land equivalent to five villages for the Pandava brothers to resolve the conflict. Duryodhana turns down even this offer and arrogantly says that he would not part with land equivalent to the point of a needle for the Pandava brothers. Talks between the two sides collapsed at this point and Krishna returns empty handed. It is only when talks fail that the famous war of Mahabharat takes place.

All these cultural and historical narratives run deep in the back of our minds and influence the decisions of our foreign policy makers. Hence it is important to have an understanding of these factors for a comprehensive understanding of Indian foreign policy.

### **Imprint of British colonial rule and India's struggle for independence.**

One can find the impression of colonial rule on almost every aspect of existence in independent India. Be it the police, civil administration, defence forces, education system and most important of all, the political system and the constitution of the Republic of India, they all carry an indelible mark of the British colonial past. It should therefore not come as a surprise that even the foreign policy of independent India is not untouched by the stamp mark of colonial rule. Apart from the British rule itself, the resistance to British colonial rule in India and the mass movement for India's independence also played a critical role in shaping the attitudes of independent India over critical foreign policy issues.

During British colonial rule, India was exploited economically, and vast quanta of wealth and resources were drained away from India. This resulted in India becoming a poor impoverished country during the British colonial occupation. This experience and understanding of history left a very strong impression on the minds of Indian leadership and anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism become important planks of Indian foreign policy after India gained independence. Indian foreign policy is also marked by a strong sense of solidarity and camaraderie with other former colonies. India identified with these countries and the impulse was to work collectively with other former colonies to improve their combined lot and wipe out the scars of colonialism.

Indian foreign policy, as a matter of principle, also supported the struggles of people against colonial rule everywhere and looked at activities of big powers with suspicion due to the proclivity to judge them through the lens of imperialist expansion.

There was also a very strong sense of Asian solidarity in the minds of the makers of Indian foreign policy. The Asian countries were long repressed by the yoke of colonialism and now it was their time in history to rise and shine. This goal could be achieved by bringing the Asian countries together. One of the first foreign policy actions of Nehru was to convene an Asian Relations Conference to push forward this agenda of Asian solidarity.

This deep-seated suspicion of imperialism and colonialism also had an important influence on India's economic and trade policy. At the time of independence and for a long time after that, Indian policy makers were of the firm belief that any economic interaction with the rest of the world is going to lead to economic exploitation and impoverishment of India and so it has to be kept to the bare minimal. The natural progression of this outlook was the adoption of an inward looking, import substitution economic model for almost four decades after independence. It is only in 1991 that Indian policy makers take the decision to open up Indian economy in a gradual manner to foreign goods and capital investments in return for enhanced access to foreign markets for Indian goods and services.

Along with anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, there also developed an aversion for big power politics and the games played by them. Leaders who took over the reins of Indian foreign policy at the time of independence believed that if India were to get entangled in these games, it would get distracted from its primary task of bringing about rapid economic development in order to bring out millions of its citizens from back breaking poverty. The decision to avoid entering into an exclusive relationship with any of the superpowers saved India from getting entangled in the politics of the Cold War which came to engulf global politics soon after the end of Second World War. This stance later crystalized into the shape of a policy of Non-Alignment.

The struggle against British rule in India was deeply rooted in the ethos of truth and non-violence. Almost all the leadership of the national movement was committed to these principles. In a continuation of these values into independent India, a key plank of Indian foreign policy was a staunch commitment to non-violence and peaceful resolution of disputes. It was this belief of Indian leadership which guided them to take the Kashmir dispute to the United Nations platform in 1948. India sincerely believed that UN mediation would be in favour of India as truth was on India's side. The world in general also respected and recognized this unique aspect of India's commitment to non-violence and peaceful resolution of disputes. An instance of this trust was India's participation in the negotiations to end the Korean war and the Indo-China war. This shows that India was trusted by all parties as a sincere mediator whose commitment to peace could not be disputed.

During British rule, Indian soldiers were always enlisted in the British Indian army and they were involved in many key battles abroad, fighting to uphold the flag of the British empire. This participation of Indian soldiers in conflicts all over the world led to the focusing of attention of Indians on the issues surrounding these conflicts. Why we are fighting and what are we fighting for became points of discussion among the Indian leadership and played a major role in the shaping of Indian opinion on these matters of global importance.

Another important influence on Indian foreign policy came from the experiences of Indians who went out to work in different countries as laborers during the British colonial rule. Be it South Africa, Canada, Fiji, Mauritius, West Indies, all these former British colonies saw Indians going there in search of work and also to seek a better life. While some of them returned, many went on to make these new lands their home. The biggest draw was the promise of becoming landowners after working for a number of years. The movement of these labourer's was accompanied by others seeking opportunities for economic growth such as the trading community. Life was not easy in these new habitats and the migrant Indians faced a multitude of problems in these new lands. The problems faced by these migrant Indians and their struggles aroused the interest and concerns of leaders back in India. These concerns and the efforts of Indian leaders to improve the conditions of these migrant Indians played an important role in shaping their outlook towards major world issues. Thus, Gandhi was a well-known figure in India when he returned in 1915 because of his leadership of the struggles of Indians in South Africa.

The bureaucracy tasked with shaping of foreign policy during the British colonial rule also played a very important role in ensuring the continuity of thinking on matters of foreign policy between British India and independent India. While the political leadership changed with independence, independent India inherited the bureaucratic apparatus of the British rule almost in its entirety. As a result, there is a strong dose of influence of British touch on the making of foreign policy in independent India. This touch of British thinking is evident the most in the shaping of foreign policy of post-independence India with regard to its South Asian neighbours. India seeking to manage the foreign policies of its neighbours such as Bhutan and Nepal was a hangover from its colonial past. Further, Indian foreign policy makers believed that independent India is the inheritor of British power in South Asia, because of this British bureaucratic lineage, and India paid a heavy price for this misconception in the form of its debacle in the 1962 conflict with China.

Many Indian leaders also went to UK and other European countries as well for studies and this also shaped their outlook and understanding of global politics. Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, were lawyers trained in UK. Other prominent leaders of the national movement such as Maulana Azad had exposure to education abroad. These leaders go on to assume prominent leadership positions in independent India and their outlook influenced their decisions on matters related to foreign policy.

British India was represented in prominent international forums. India was a founding member of both the League of Nations and the United Nations. This participation created awareness among Indian leadership about the issues involved and served to orient their thinking on matters of international importance.

### **Influence of prominent global events & trends of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The two world wars play an important part in the shaping of thinking of Indian leadership on issues of war as an instrument of state policy and the virtues of peace. They were aware that these wars were spawned by the desires of colonial greed and imperialist expansion. The fact that a large number of soldiers in the British army were derived from the sub-continent also leads to the focusing of Indian attention on these wars. Questions were raised as to why Indian blood was being shed to advance the interests of colonial rulers.

On the whole, Indian leadership cooperated with the British rulers during the First World War in the hope of making some progress towards self-governance once the war was over. When this did not happen, this issue, along with British repression in India and their treatment of Turkey created momentum for the start of the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920.

A much richer response of the Indian leadership towards the question of war can be observed at the time of the onset of Second World War. At one end of the spectrum were leaders like Gandhi and Nehru who in spite of being opposed to this war of colonial powers were in favour of India supporting the British war effort. They believed that the loss of Britain would mean the victory of the fascist forces and this was an option not acceptable to this segment of leaders. Between the two evils of colonialism and fascism, this line of thinking was in favour aiding the British war effort against German fascist forces. This choice of preferring democratic Britain over fascist Germany appears to be derived from the democratic nature of the whole Indian national movement. The Gandhian notion that only right means lead to the right end also seems to guide this particular decision. Democracy and freedom could not be won for India by siding with the fascist forces.

The other end of the spectrum was occupied by leaders such as Subhash Chandra Bose, who were of the opinion that the Second World War is the perfect opportunity to remove Britishers from India. They reasoned that the Britishers are weak due to the war effort and this weakness should be exploited to expel British rulers from India. If a coordinated effort is made at this juncture, United Kingdom would not be able to do much to protect its hold on India as it is preoccupied with ensuring its own survival from the German challenge. This segment of leadership of the national movement was also in favour of taking help from the fascist powers if it were to prove useful for pushing the British out from India and securing India's independence. They did not have any problem in joining hands with undemocratic forces if it were to serve the cause of Indian independence. The guiding principle here was that it is the ends which justify the choice of means. When Bose is unable to bring around the other side to appreciate his point of view, he parts ways with the mainstream national movement and later goes on to form the Indian National Army with the cooperation of Japanese forces in Singapore.

There was also a third line of thinking on the issue which was primarily advocated by the Indian Communist leaders. This group changed its opinion depending on the stance of the Soviet Union. When Germany signed a non-aggression pact with Soviet Union right before the start of the Second World War in 1939, these leaders stopped being critical of fascism and its brutal nature. Later, when Soviet Union joined the allied powers, the communist inclined segment of leadership adopted a position in favour of aiding the British war effort to defeat the forces of fascism.

The entire experience of the Second World War exposed the Indian leadership to a range of issues in world politics and played a vital role in crystallizing their opinions on how to deal with the rest of the world once they were running the country after independence.

Apart from the two world wars, a number of other important developments of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century play a very important role in the shaping of attitudes of Indian foreign policy makers.

The establishment of a Communist state in Russia in 1917 had a tremendous influence on the Indian political scene. A number of Indian leaders including Nehru were deeply influenced by the Marxist vision and the progress which Soviet Union had made in the short period after becoming a communist country. The impact

of this Marxist influence is visible in the making of Indian foreign policy, in the form of a sub conscious effort aimed at trying to build better relations with communist leaning countries and a general suspicion of capitalist countries. This pro-communist orientation is also revealed in the adoption of economic and trade policies which are reflective of a lack of faith in the liberal economic model espoused by the Western Block.

Indian leaders were also deeply troubled by the practice of apartheid. As a result, independent India has always adopted a tough stance against the policies of racial discrimination. We did not establish diplomatic relations with apartheid South Africa, and this also explains our support for the Palestinian cause. Likewise, Indian leadership was also extremely critical of the atrocities being perpetrated on the Jews in fascist Germany.

Indian leaders were also clued into the progress made in deepening of democratic institutions the world over. This probably explains why we had no hesitation in adopting universal adult franchise and we also advocated the cause of democracy the world over. As a matter of fact, a very popular stance of Indian foreign policy has been maintaining a distance from dictators and that has sometimes not gone well with the cause of protecting the interests of India in these countries. A case in point would be that of Myanmar where we stood by the National League for Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi and refused to deal with the military regime in Myanmar in the hope of creating moral pressure on the Generals to abdicate power. While the Generals remained unaffected by this moral stance of ours, China utilized this situation to create a firm foothold in Myanmar by extending its no strings attached support to the Generals in power.

In consonance with their thinking on the virtues of democratic rule, Indian leaders were critical of the fascist rule in Germany, Japan and Italy and openly voiced their opinions against the atrocities being perpetrated under fascism.

## Conclusion

The formulation of foreign policy of a country does not take place in a vacuum. There is nothing like a clean slate from where you start writing a fresh story. The architects of a country's foreign policy get influenced by what lies in the past. This gets combined with an interplay of global level, regional level and individual level variables. These cultural and historical influences run deep in the sub conscious mind of the policy-makers and can be discerned by analysing and evaluating their foreign policy choices. In the case of India, its rich historical and cultural past and the experience of British colonial rule play an important part in shaping the thinking of India's foreign policy wizards.

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