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## Contents

### Editorial

Thoughts on Violence: Conceptualizing the Means of Representation and Manipulation of Violence <b>Biju Lekshmanan and Dileep P. Chandran</b>	07
Legislative and Judicial Treatment of the Principle of Non-Refoulement in India: A Critical Analysis <b>Biju R.K.</b>	22
Maritime Security of India and China in the Indo-Pacific <b>Huo Wenle</b>	37
India's Foreign Policy: The Nehruvian Legacies <b>Nayani Melegoda</b>	51
Explicating the Contemporary Debates on the Anti-Defection Law in India <b>B. Poornima</b>	60
The Question of Tibetan Autonomy: Reflections on Strategic and Security Concerns of India and China <b>Rakhee Viswambharan</b>	75
Rise of China and US Response in the Indo-Pacific: Implications for India <b>Sajin Joseph and Josukutty C.A.</b>	86
Human Rights: Debating Approaches and Concepts <b>Sony Achamma Thomas</b>	99
Inter Provincial Hydro Politics in Pakistan <b>Sudhir Kumar Singh</b>	111
Rise and Fall of Democracy in Post- Mubarak Egypt: What Went Wrong with Morsi Government? <b>Unnikrishnan G.</b>	129
South China Sea disputes in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy-From the perspective of China <b>Maoyi Zhang</b>	143

# India's Foreign Policy: The Nehruvian Legacies

**Prof. Nayani Melegoda**

## **Abstract**

A consensus of opinion reflected in the scholarly literature is that Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India is the one who shaped and laid the foundation of India's foreign policy. India's foreign policy was built on three key pillars: nonalignment in the international arena; preservation of autonomy in domestic affairs; and solidarity among the developing nations, particularly those that had gained independence from the colonial powers. These pillars helped to shape India's foreign policy in the post independent years and for many decades thereafter. Therefore, this paper aims to revisit Nehruvian legacy in Indian foreign policy to assess how India travelled under Nehruvian directions in international relations. Though India has evolved tremendously in foreign policy making over the years, some of the key foreign policy directions laid by the late Prime Minister Nehru are still in practice.

**Keywords:** Nehru, Foreign Policy, NAM, Gandhi, U.S, Soviet Union

## **Introduction**

In the pre independent India, as a young man returning from his studies in the United Kingdom, Nehru was attracted to the Indian independence movement. According to Frank Moraes (2008)<sup>1</sup> Nehru had started his political career as an ardent disciple of Gandhi and therefore, Nehru was deeply influenced by the vision of Mahatma Gandhi (Moraes, 2008). However, without abandoning his own beliefs and principles Nehru seemed to have accepted the Gandhian philosophy of "understanding the universe to be an organic whole" (Murphy, 1991). The twin cardinal principles of Gandhian thought was truth and nonviolence and Nehru had imbibed it to a

great extent. Nehru's outspokenness and writing may have persuaded some western leaders to misconstrue and misjudge (for ex. Churchill) Nehru at the beginning. However, as time passed by, the same leaders were able to see and accept the Nehruvian philosophy.

In the aftermath of the World War II, when the world was split between eastern and western blocs, Nehru had emphasized in his speeches the need of peaceful co-existence between the countries which follow different political systems. As the first Prime Minister of India, Nehru had no other country in South Asia/Asia or Africa to learn from how to self - rule, how to legislate, and how to frame foreign policy. At the start of the postcolonial era, Nehru's gregarious engagement with such ethnic and religious diversities of India, was a challenging task. Nehru was never hesitant to make official visits to countries which were divided into eastern and western bloc during the cold war era. Throughout his tours, Nehru was articulate about India's 'special position' as an independent nation. He emphasized that India was not aligned with either side of the Cold War power blocs. This frame of mind began to influence other leaders as well in the newly decolonized countries in the 1960's. Yugoslavia President Marshal Tito and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser had met with Nehru in 1956 itself. These leaders are considered to be the founding fathers of Nonaligned Movement (NAM) along with President Sukarno of Indonesia, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Nehru's vision to become an ardent proponent of peace was realized when his *Panchsheel* vision was incorporated into the Ten Principles of International Peace and Cooperation which was a declaration issued in April 1955 at the Bandung Conference by 29 Afro-Asian countries. On December 11, 1957, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the universal relevance of *Panchsheel* envisaged by Nehru and incorporated it in the resolution on peaceful co-existence presented by India, Yugoslavia and Sweden.

Nehru fought against imperialism with all his might. His leadership and vision had an influence even on the Britishers (Nanda, 1996). The position Nehru held in the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) and the Commonwealth were perfect examples of Nehru's dedication and commitment to the cause he stood for. In order to fulfill his vision about India he believed that his country needs to be in the leadership position as well as be engaged in peaceful conduct of international relations. Frank Moraes in his book '*Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography*' describes the unusual relationship Nehru had shared with Gandhi. According to Moraes, young Nehru was adamant on the values and principles that he had believed in. For example, young Nehru could not be persuaded to give his absolute allegiance to the doctrine of non-violence. Yet, he accepted it as a worthy means to a worthy end. Nehru's father Motilal Nehru was also an admirer of Gandhi, for Gandhi had

shown India how to shed fear” (Moraes, 2008:10). Nehru, at the same time, without abandoning his principles seemed to have thrived on subordinating his ideas to those of Gandhi. If Gandhi made India aware of herself, Nehru made Indians aware of others, writes Frank Moraes.

The overall literature on Jawaharlal Nehru unanimously agree that the Prime Minister Nehru had shaped India to become the shining star of democracy and to be the role model for South and South East Asia. Apart from his education and training in the United Kingdom, his life learning was deep rooted in the years that he spent in the prisons in India. Nehru spent more than nine years in imprisonment during the independence struggle where he took time to read on world history. He then wrote his own analysis of the history of the world critically examining the major world affairs at that time. This is reflected in the series of letters that he wrote to his daughter Indira from the prison. The readings, analysis and articulation shaped his thoughts and gave a vision about what is best for a newly independent nation. The administrative experience came to him naturally when he first held the charge of External Affairs in 1946. Moreover, prior to independence, Nehru was also the President of Indian National Congress party three times (1929, 1936, and 1937). His education from Great Britain, his passion for reading, enthusiasm for world history and politics have contributed greatly to forge international friendships and alliances in both eastern and the western blocs of post - World War II bipolar power centers.

As the first Prime Minister of India in 1947, Nehru had no other country to learn from on self -government. Nehru alone was entrusted to frame the norms of governance and conduct international relations. His ability to lead the country at a crucial transitional period, colonial to the post-colonial period, holding onto power for about 17 years by winning the general elections three times (1952, 1957, 1961), resulted in giving India its unique status among the world nations at that time. India's success in establishing and maintaining a democracy is attributed to Nehru. Whatever personal beliefs he held, Nehru put what is most advantageous for his country first when making domestic and foreign policy. In an address to the Constituent Assembly December 4, 1947 on “Our Foreign Policy: India's emergence in World Affairs” Nehru stated the following:

“Whatever policy you may lay down, the art of conducting the foreign affairs of a country lies in finding out what is most advantageous to the country. We may talk about peace and freedom and earnestly mean what we say. But in the ultimate analysis, a government functions for the good of the country it governs and no government dare to do anything which in the short and long run is manifestly to the disadvantage of that country. Therefore, whether a country is imperialistic or socialist or communist, its Foreign Minister thinks

primarily of the interests of that country”(Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1949).

The literature consulted also is in agreement that Nehru was the ideal Prime Ministerial candidate for the newly independent transitional nation. He was the most cosmopolitan of all members in the Indian National Congress at that time. Nehru’s frequent visit to the foreign countries, helped India to enhance its international image.

### **India-U.S. Relations during the Nehruvian Era**

Sir Winston Churchill in 1937 called Jawaharlal Nehru a “communist, revolutionary, most capable and most implacable of the enemies of the British connection with India” (Churchill, 1939). Along with many others at that time, Churchill also had held the view that the Indian subcontinent was not ready for independence. Among those who supported Nehru, in this backdrop, for an independent India was U. S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Soon after becoming the Prime Minister, he visited the U.S in 1949. On October 13, 1949 Prime Minister Nehru addressed a reception hosted by the House of Representatives (he holds the record of being the first Prime Minister to have addressed the House of Representatives, US) where he explained that India wanted peace, but not peace at any price. Nehru stated:

“We have to achieve freedom and defend it. We have to meet aggression and to resist it and the force employed must be adequate to the purpose. But even when preparing to resist aggression, the ultimate objective, the objective of peace and reconciliation, must never be lost sight of, and heart and mind must be attuned to this supreme aim, and not swayed or clouded by hatred or fear. This is the basis and the goal of our foreign policy. We are neither blind to reality nor do we propose to acquiesce in any challenge to man’s freedom, from whatever quarter it may come. Where freedom is menaced, or justice threatened, or where aggression takes place, we cannot be and shall not be neutral. What we plead for, and endeavor to practice in our own important way, is a binding faith in peace, and an unflinching endeavor of thought and action to ensure it. The great democracy of the United States America will, I feel sure, understand and appreciate our approach to life’s problems because it could not have any other aim or a different ideal. Friendship and co-operation between our two countries are, therefore, natural. I stand here to offer both in the pursuit of justice, liberty and peace” (Moraes, 2008:472).

Since this first visit where Nehru spent three weeks travelling across the country, he developed cordial relations with the U.S. In 1959, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower while writing to Nehru raised his concerns over the

Chinese border incursions in India and expressed his distress in learning the problems faced by India (LaFantasie, 2000). When Nehru visited US earlier in 1956, China was a major topic of their discussion at their retreat in Gettysburg (Brookings, 1998:7). This exercise led Nehru and Eisenhower for building a healthy rapport between each other. In the next few years, the Eisenhower administration doubled the economic aid to India which was also followed by President Eisenhower's highly successful visit to India in 1959. In 1961, Nehru visited the US. The United States Information Service produced a motion picture covering the official state visit of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Prime Minister Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi visited Washington DC, with visits to the White House for meetings with then President John F. Kennedy, New York City and the United Nations (UN) headquarters, and Los Angeles, California (JFK Library archives). Nehru's frequent U.S. visits have helped India to get more financial aid from the U.S..

### **India's Relation with Soviet Union during Nehruvian Years**

In the midst of the Cold War and in the aftermath of the first 'hot war' in the Cold War that is the Korean War in 1955, PM Nehru conducted his first official visit to the Soviet Union as India's first Prime Minister. According to the *Hindu*, PM Nehru's Soviet trip (June 7-23, 1955) wasn't just remarkable for the depth of goodwill, but it was also noted for its length (16 days) and breadth as he travelled throughout many of the Soviet republics that is from Ukraine to Turkmenistan (Haidar, 2015). Nehru's visit to Soviet Union became a historic occasion as that was his first visit. Soviet Premier Marshal Bulganin and the entire Politburo of Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were present at the airport to greet him. This was the first time in the Soviet history that Soviet leaders and the visiting dignitary travelled in open limousine on roads leading to Kremlin. "Nehru's visit became an important geopolitical turning point," on the back of the Sino-Indian agreement on Tibet of 1954. The effect of Nehru's visit was very clear. His 1955 summer tour notes ran into 28 typed foolscap pages, in which he discussed the world politics, as well as the social and economic issues (Haidar, 2015). India grew closer to the Soviet Union especially during the 1962 Indo - China war period when USSR remained as a neutral entity. Nehru's insistence on peaceful co-existence between countries with different political systems was reflected in India-Soviet Union relations.. The 20<sup>th</sup> congress of CPSU in Soviet Union had declared the concept of 'peaceful co-existence' as the central element of soviet foreign policy.

### **The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**

After travelling to Soviet Union in June and July of 1955, Nehru had also visited Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Italy and Egypt



among others. Throughout his tours between UK, USA and other Asian and Central Asian nations, Nehru had espoused on India's 'special position' as an independent nation. He had emphasized that India was not aligned with either side of the Cold War power blocs. Yugoslav President Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nassaretc were profoundly impressed by the Nehruvian ideals. They are considered to be foremost among the founding fathers of Non - aligned Movement along with President Achmad Sukarno of Indonesia, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. In 1961, NAM's first summit was held in Belgrade, in the Yugoslav capital with President Tito as the host.

In October 1954 Prime Minister Nehru made his first official visit to China. According to the *New York Times*, it was the first visit by a non-communist head of a state since the creation of the People's Republic of China. Nehru met Chairman Mao Zedong, held talks with the first Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and visited Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou. Indira Gandhi also had accompanied him on this trip. Earlier that year, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, the two countries agreed to adopt *Panchsheel*<sup>2</sup>, or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It was an agreement about dealing with the Tibet region of China and India. Nehru's vision to become a world proponent for peace was realized when this *Panchsheel* vision was incorporated into the Ten Principles of International Peace and Cooperation. This declaration was issued in April 1955 Bandung Conference which was attended by 29 Afro-Asian countries. On September 15<sup>th</sup> 1955, while speaking in the Lok Sabha Nehru further expanded on his vision:

"It is in no spirit of pride or arrogance that we pursue our own independent policy. We would not do otherwise unless we are false to everything India has stood for in the past and stands for today. We welcome association and friendship with all and the flow of thought and ideas of all kind, but we reserve the right to choose our own path. That is the essence of *Panchsheel*" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

On December 11<sup>th</sup> 1957, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the universal relevance of *Panchsheel* and its tenets were incorporated in a resolution on peaceful co-existence presented by India, Yugoslavia and Sweden. In 1961, the Nonaligned Movement nations that met at Belgrade also accepted *Panchsheel* as the principled core of the NAM.

### **Nehru and the Indonesian Question**

Independence movements were rising all across Asia, when Nehru hosted the first Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, March-April 1947. Nehru's aim to hold India in a leadership position for the entire region

was looked upon favorably when many leaders showed up at the conference to forge an Asian unity. The conference was held to discuss the Indonesian problem. In January 1949 Nehru hosted the Indonesia Conference to discuss the Dutch aggression. In June 1950, First President of Indonesia Sukarno received Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi in Indonesia. Both leaders sought friendship, cooperation and improved bilateral relations between their countries. Their friendship and the Asian conferences made way for Indonesia to host the 1955 Bandung Conference. There, both leaders invoked the "Spirit of Asia" and laid the foundation for the Nonaligned Movement. It is indeed the foresight of Nehru, his ambition to do what is best for India that resulted in building not only peaceful ties but also regional trade partners. This meeting of the two leaders is quite significant when we take into consideration that today Indonesia is India's second-largest tradepartner within ASEAN. India is Indonesia's 4<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner according to the 2017 statistics (Workman, 2019).

### **Sri Lanka – India Relations during the Nehruvian Years**

Sri Lanka's relations with India goes back to centuries. India-Sri Lanka relation is built on deep understanding of shared cultures, religion, linguistic commonalities, family linkages, economic relations, political understanding between two democracies and much more. Nehru, speaking at the press conference in New Delhi in May 1949 had stated that:

We are quite happy that Ceylon is a completely independent entity. However, we do not desire any closer association with Ceylon than what exists today. I want to make this perfectly clear, because there has been some misapprehension in the minds of the people and the government of Ceylon that we have some designs upon them. We have no designs at all (Sydeney, 1962).

Nehru visited Sri Lanka to attend the first Commonwealth Foreign Ministers conference in Colombo from January 9 to 14, 1950. Sri Lanka's newly elected Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike attended the inaugural NAM Summit in 1961, stepping on to the world stage as the world's first woman Prime Minister. She attended the second Summit held in Cairo in 1964 and the Bandranaike family maintained close friendship with Nehru – Indira Gandhi family that went beyond politics of both countries.

### **The Commonwealth of Nations**

When the prime ministers of Commonwealth nations met in 1946, it was still a very British affair. With India gaining independence in 1947, and Pakistan and Ceylon soon thereafter, and their desire to retain the membership

in the Commonwealth was natural. In April 1949, as per Nehru's call, the 'London Declaration' was adopted. It was Jawaharlal Nehru who put forth the proposal, borrowing a formula originally devised by Eamon De Valera, the Irish Prime Minister. The criteria was amended for membership. Each member country was allowed to have its own head of state but all were to recognize the King as the "symbol of their free association" and "as such Head of the Commonwealth" (Wheare, 1953)." Under Nehru's guidance India joined the Commonwealth on terms laid down by Nehru himself. He also paved way not only for Asia but also for all former colonies of Britain to follow the suit. However, in 1952, with the death of the king, the London Declaration faced its first test. Prime Minister Nehru's telegram to Queen Elizabeth II congratulating her on succeeding her father as monarch of Great Britain & Northern Ireland as well as head of the Commonwealth was accepted without any contest by other commonwealth nations. Most countries of the former empire also chose to retain their links with Britain. Lee Kuan Yew, in 1970s described the Commonwealth Heads of Governments meetings (CHOGM) as 'seminars of the statesmen' (Mole, 2004).Nehru's position on Commonwealth, the NAM and CHOGM were perfect examples of Nehru's dedication to do what was best for India, and achieve his aim for India to be in a leadership position in the region and also to engage in peaceful international relations. Nehru's international reputation and image was reflected from the numerous mails that were sent to India at the demise of Nehru in 1964.

## Conclusion

Building the strong pillars of democracy by Nehru have indeed benefitted India in the long run. India under Nehru's guidance was not hesitant in giving full voting rights to all adults. This shows Nehru's unparalleled dedication to the democratic ethos that he cherishes. At the time of Nehru, given India's poverty, illiteracy, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity and rising conflicts, most of the foreign leaders had not believed that India would be able to self-govern. While safeguarding democracy Nehru showed the rest of the world how India can self-govern and also paved the stepping stone for new democracies. By taking charge of the Ministry of Scientific Research, Nehru built scientific research laboratories across the country. Nehru prepared the path for India to be among the technologically advanced nations of the world today. It is due to his legacy that Indian Space Research Organization entered the orbit of Mars their own. With his vast readings and understanding of history Nehru framed a unique foreign policy for India. His foreign policy was constructivist and applied neoclassical realist thinking. Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy vision was echoed in Nehru's radio address to the nation on 7 September 1946 which is widely considered

as the foundational text of India's foreign policy making. Three key features mentioned in the speech formed the foundation of India's foreign policy for the next two decades: first, a policy of keeping away from power groups yet being an active, independent participant of world deliberations (non-alignment); second reconciliatory attitude towards the West however a frantic opposition to anti-colonialism and anti-racism; and finally, working towards world peace and one world through generation of solidarities across societies starting with harnessing such solidarities in Asia. Nehru will be remembered forever in history due to his unique contributions to international relations.

## Notes

- 1 Francis Robert "Frank" Moraes was the Editor of many prominent newspapers in post-Independence India, including *The Times of India* and *The Indian Express*. He lived through the pre-independence era, independence struggle and died in early 1970's.
- 2 ) *Panchsheel* principles include (i) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty (ii) Mutual non-aggression, (iii) Mutual non-interference (iv) Equality and mutual benefit, and (v) Peaceful co-existence.
- 3 Adress by External Affairs Minister Sri Natwar Singh at the International Seminar of 50 Years of Panchsheel Towards a New International Order based on Genuine Multilateralism organised by ICWA at VigyanBhawan, New Delhi

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