

Nehru's Dichotomy between the East & the West: A Critical Appraisal

By

Gowtham Devarapalli

Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Andhra University,
Visakhapatnam.

Abstract

When one speaks of Indian foreign policy, Nehru comes to one mind as a synonym. The legend of Nehru was such that the texts of Indian foreign policy were still filled with his ideas like non-alignment, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and close cooperation with Russia. Nehru's India has been impatient with the existing world order since its inception. In the world of real politic, India's attempt in changing it was met with a heavy hand in 1962. While Nehru's policies advocated neutrality in spirit, they are pro-Eastern in practice, making the US led Western World, a foe of India. His frequent anti-West rhetoric on the international forums like the UN alienated India. He was seen by the Western policy makers as sponsored by the Eastern Bloc. The Chinese aggression at the border alarmed him, forcing him to align with the West, first informally and then formally during the war. A new Alignment with Kennedy led America was formed to contain China. This paper examines and appraises the dichotomy of Nehru in choosing between the Eastern Bloc & the Western Bloc, his flip-flops between them and their implications.

Keywords: Nehru, the Eastern Bloc, the Western Bloc, the US, the Soviet Union, China, Neutrality, Kennedy.

Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru was the man behind the successes and the failures of the Indian foreign policy in its early days. His foundational ideas and idealisms continue to have their say in the present day policy making too. During his stay and study at Cambridge, he was influenced by Western liberalism and Fabien socialism. (Bandyopadhyaya, 2016: 221) In one of his first remarks on international politics he said, Bolshevism and Fascism are the waves of the West today. They are really alike and represent different phases off insensitive violence and intolerance. The choice, for us was between Lenin and Mussolini on the one side, and Gandhi on the other. (Bright, 1950: 11) He saw no difference in the two grand European theories of oppression; Bolshevism and Fascism. However in just four years by 1927, Nehru turned himself from a Bolshevik critic to a liberal Bolshevik. Nehru as the representative of the Indian National Congress to the League against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression at Brussels delivered his address in the Marxist jargon. (Prasad, 2013: 59) He continued this anti-West rhetoric all his life, only to be halted by the Chinese aggression at the borders from the late 1950's.

If we put both idealism and realism on the spectrum of views on national interest in international relations, they will each stand at the extreme ends of the spectrum. The idealists identify national interest as the international interest in making. They believe in universal institutions and universal brotherhood. The idealist school of thought in international relations was propagated and promoted by philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Woodrow Wilson and

Bertrand Russell. Nehru partially belongs to this school of thought. To quote himself, 'Realism leads to incessant conflict, whereas idealism is the realism of tomorrow.' (Nehru, 1961: 34)

In contrast, the realists believe that national interest is a domestic venture. They believe that the national capabilities like economy, military, human resource are sources of national interest. This realist school of thought in international relations was propagated by philosophers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Bismarck and Morgenthau. Again to quote Nehru, 'the internal policy and foreign policy of a country affects each other. They should broadly be in line with each other and have to be integrated. By and large there has been in India an attempt at this integration.' (ibid. 83) But in practice, Nehru's India adopted an idealistic utopian line in foreign policy making, much in contrast with its national interest. Arora and Appadorai (1975: 01) questions the Indian foreign policy makers thus; Was there any reference to the promotion of India's national interest as an objective of foreign policy? Why was this not mentioned? I believe it was taken for granted.

Works like the History of the Peloponnesian War (5th Century BC) and The Prince (16th Century AD) presents a realistic picture of the international politics and suggests different methods and ways on how the states should aggrandize their capabilities, justify all actions by reasons of state. Measheimer J (2003) defines International Relations as the recurring struggle for wealth & power, leading to security dilemmas and possible wars, with ultimate safety depending on becoming the most powerful state (or) hegemon in a region (or) global arena. The classical realists like E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz define National Interest in terms of increasing power and postulate rational choice by decision making mainly on the basis of a state's place in an anarchic international structure. In reality, no nation employs a pure idealistic or realistic model in spirit. Any policy will have a bend of both. As Carr says political through must be based on elements of both utopia and reality. (Carr, 1962: 93)

Nehru as a student of international relations since his student days, must have read all the works of these realistic thinkers, but have developed interest for idealistic school of thought propagated by thinkers like Plato and Kant. For some he was the 'Philosopher King' whom Plato mentioned in his Republic. (The Print, 2022) Nehru presented himself as a philosopher-politician, thinking as a philosopher and working as a politician. Nehru's schooling in these theoretical concepts are based on his extensive study and also from the influence of his friends like left leaning Labour Professor Harold Laski. Though theoretically an idealist, Nehru acted as any other benevolent dictators of the Third World countries in foreign policy making. He followed the self-aggrandizement model in which the leader acts on behalf of his interest. (Ghosh, 1993) The personalities are the ultimate decision makers; their sociological background, personal psychohistory, ideological predilections, and above all their need for personal political survival and growth, inevitably condition the final choice of ends and means. (Bandyopadhyaya, op. cit.: 02) Nehru was no exception to this.

Prime Minister Nehru, who held the additional charge as the Minister of External Affairs, is the man behind all the foreign affairs decisions from independent India's inception to his death. He promoted a strong personal role for himself. It resulted in the creation of a weak institutional structure. (Shah, 2017) He was the in-charge of the foreign affairs department of the Indian National Congress in pre-independence days. He was the mentor of Congress foreign policy. It was he who gave Congress and India, a precise scheme of thought with regards to their action in specific matters concerning international relations. (Raj, 1952: 02) In one way, Nehru's policies over International issues were a corollary of the politics of the Congress.

The Great Nehru Dilemma

With the curtains of the Second World War drawing down, it became evident that the British Empire is about to liquidize. The Atlee Government initiated the process to transfer power from the British Indian Government to the Congress party from the late 1945. Nehru was Gandhi's choice to lead independent India. This England educated patrician was schooled for performing post-independent India's administrative functions. First taking charge as the Vice President of the Governor General Executive Council in September 1946, he formally took charge as the Prime Minister in August 1947.

Around the same period, the foundations are being laid for the forthcoming World War, the Cold War. As the popular say goes; one war sows the seeds of the other, the Second World War sowed the seeds of the Cold War. India, as an independent nation entered the international arena in this phase of the world politics. The Second World War entered the next level with the arrival of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the United States in December 1941. Both these modern states are built on two different grand ideologies of the century, Communism and Capitalism. They won the war as the Allies. The War concluded with the emergence of these two nations as the new super powers. However the distance between the US and the Soviet Union continue to grow after the war. The Potsdam Conference of August 1945 resulted in breaking up Nazi Germany into four zones, to be occupied and distributed among the four policeman of the world, the US, the UK, France and the Soviet Union. (Beevor, 2003: 402) After knowing the intention of the Soviet Union to create a Marxist state in the areas under its control (East Germany), the US, Britain and France merged their territories into Trizone (West Germany) and promoted it as a capitalistic free market state with civil and political liberties. Thus the foundation for the Cold War was laid within months after the war. Europe was now divided into two ideological camps, one led by the US and the other by the Soviet Union. The Truman Doctrine of March 1947 made the Cold War official. President Truman declared that it must be the policy of the US to support free people who are resisting attempts of subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure. (Michael, 2006: 194-199) Thus the US which attempted to remain neutral from the European affairs for much of its time, now had to align with Western European nations to contain the spread of Communism by the Soviet Union.

As India was a part of the British Empire for nearly two hundred years, they had founded many political and non-political institutions like the Parliament, Executive Council, Supreme Court, Bureaucratic wing of ICS & IP, standard armed forces, and education system in the Westminster lines. By the time of its independence, India was a vibrant functional democracy. The Anglo-American policy makers assumed that new India will remain in their sphere of influence. More over India joined the Commonwealth of Nations in 1949. However India under Nehru had another plans. India under Nehru was of the view that the existing world order is against its interests. It had an alternative concept of world order with it. Nehru's fear for the American dominated world and his admiration for the Soviet Union economic & political model were exposed by himself at the Brussels Congress in 1927. (Prasad, op. cit.) This posture of Nehru at the Brussels Congress continued to have a say in his economic and foreign policy decisions. The economic conditions of Indian people made Nehru to enthusiastic converts to the view of Lenin, particularly after the success of 1917 revolution, that imperialism was the last stage of capitalism. Nehru was fascinated that the Soviet Union was a land free from capitalism and will remain free from imperialism. However the Soviet's version of imperialism also came into existence during the same period.

Nehruvian state emphasized on state sovereignty. For him any alignment in the on-going Cold War politics would only compromise India's independence. The Indian relationship with the US in 1950's is deeply related to the independence of decision making, says Bajpai. (2015: 23) It is to be noted that Nehru had a blue print of future Indian foreign policy in his mind much before its independence. India would remember the policies of the US and the Soviet Union, when it would formulate its policies towards the two countries, Nehru remarked in early 1940s. (Bright, 1950: 375) The CIA report of September 1947, immediately after Indian independence placed India and Pakistan in the fourth and last column, as areas important to American Security, after Western Europe, the Near and Middle East, and the Far East. (McMahon, 1994: 14) On its part dismissing his non alignment as meaningless, Moscow termed Nehru is little more than an Anglo-American stooge. (Miskovic, 2009: 186) However in reality both the blocs tried to win India into their respective camps.

Nehru wanted material benefits from both blocs for India. Nehru's outreach to the US was intended to secure material benefits like food aid and high technology. The US aided India in the fields like agriculture, education, health, science, space. India was the largest recipient of US developmental assistance in the world. (The Times of India, 2015) The Indian policy with the US under Nehru was better explained by Tellis as; Welcomes all meaningful American contribution towards enhancing its national power, but seeks to protect its freedom to part ways with the US whenever its other interests might so demand. (Malone, 2015: 491) The Soviet Union led Eastern Bloc aided India in the field like defense and space. (Naik, 1995: 129) In this way, Nehru's India benefited by securing aid from both blocs, even though the Western aid was times greater than the Eastern aid. A Polish economist observed this situation as 'a clever calf that sucks two cows.' (Kalecki, 1964: 10)

Nehru had his heart with the Soviet Union. His fascination for the Russians altered the Indian relation with the Western world. He admired Russian communism and its state led industrialization. He considered Russia as a non-colonial power, even though it occupied half of Europe and central Asia under the veil of establishing socialism. He viewed Russia as a counter weight to the West. When it became evident that Nehru's India is moving into the Red orbit, opposition political parties in the Indian Parliament from the Clean Right, Centre Right and Right warned Nehru against it. Scheduled Caste Federation, Swatantra Party, Bharitiya Jana Sangh were the important rightist parties during the early independence days. They insisted Nehru on 'Know Your Friend Policy' and to follow it. While the anti-Western pronouncements of Nehru had appeased the Leftists, they had irritated the Rightists. Answering the opposition parties in the Indian parliament in 1955, who accused him of romanticizing the Red World, Nehru remarked henceforth; with all respect to some honorable members opposite, we have no intentions to turn communists. At the same time, we have no intention of being dragooned in any other direction...out thinking and our approach do not fit in with this great crusade of communism or crusade of anti- communism. (Nehru, op. cit.: 69)

In 1947, Nehru wrote to his sister diplomat Vijaya Lakshmi that both the US and Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of each other as well as of other countries. 'This is making India's path difficult. We may well be suspected by each of leaning towards the other.' (Gopal, op. cit.: Vol.-1,576) Nehru employed anti-West rhetoric since his early prime ministerial days. His linking of imperialism and colonialism with the Western Bloc promoted free market capitalism laid foundations for this rhetoric. He often irritated his Western counterparts with his active anti-west campaign on international forums. His non alignment posture and often anti-American rhetoric both inside and outside the United Nations appeasing the Eastern as well as the Third World counterparts. (Malone, op. cit.: 14) When the Soviet Union clearly took an imperialistic policy in the Eastern Europe, India was at the crossroads. Lenin's war cry that

imperialism is the last stage of capitalism withered away and presented a clear picture that imperialism have nothing to do with capitalism or communism. It is the national interest which drives a country to follow imperialistic policy and imperialism is not a capitalist monopoly. But Nehru's India tried to ignore Soviet Union's imperialism terming it to be born out of the fear of being encircled by the western powers. (Prasad, op. cit.: 196)

In spite of his rhetoric, Nehru remained the preeminent voice of the so called progressive international. He was courted by all sides in the Cold War. His grand receptions in Beijing (1954), Moscow (1955) and Washington (1956) serves as the witness of his valour. On his US visit in 1956, The New York Times remarked that Jawaharlal Nehru is one of the great figures of our times and it is a time of giants. (The New York Times, 1956) Nehru visited the US thrice, in 1949, 1956 and 1961. President Truman and President Kennedy broke the protocol by receiving him at the airport. During his 1956 visit, he was received by Vice President Nixon at the airport. (The Economic Times, 2019) However he never got the same degree of honor either in Moscow or in Beijing.

The Challenged Nehru & His New Alignment

What forced Nehru to curtail his anti-West rhetoric and to employ a rational realistic approach in foreign policy were the imperialistic advancements of Communist China at the Indian borders. At the times of Indian independence, the Communist Party of China and its leader Mao Zedong refused to accept India as an independent country and called for a Communist revolution in India. They termed Nehru as a lackey and a running dog of Anglo-American imperialism. (Bandyopadhyaya, op. cit.: 232) Suspicions were generated in India, when China consolidated its hold on the autonomous Tibet in 1950. In one way, Nehru opened the backdoors of India by allowing China to take over Tibet without any preconditions. The new Indian Government under Nehru has loosened its hold over Tibet, which was strategically cultivated by the British Indian Government over years. (Mckay, 2012: 05-25) Within six months after winning power over the Kuomintang (KMT), the Chinese under Mao were at the borders of India, which the British prevented from happening during their era. Suspicions were generated in China, when the Dalai Lama requested political asylum in India, during his 1956 visit to participate in the 2500th birth anniversary of Lord Buddha. First refusing to grant visa for Dalai Lama, the Chinese granted visa to him strategically, to know the real intentions of Nehru. The sound Nehru carefully played this trap, by convincing the Dalai Lama to return back to his homeland. However when the Dalai Lama again requested political asylum in India following the Tibetan uprising in 1959, Nehru granted it. The Indian kinship towards the Tibetan refugees and its engagement with the Dalai Lama is viewed with suspicion in China. Hosting the Dalai Lama and his followers is a form of intervention in the affairs of China. (Garver, 2001: 32-78) Thus India employed an asymmetric strategy against the Chinese by hosting Dalai Lama in India.

By 1957, the upcoming rivalry between India and China became evident. With China building a road through Aksai Chin, connecting Tibet and Xinjiang, India had to start playing a realist. On becoming the same, Nehru entered into an informal deal with the Eisenhower Administration to secure India from any Chinese invasion. The US had started a program of intelligence sharing and co-operation with India. Under this program, the aircrafts of the US Air Force, under the disguise of Indian Air force, to avoid detection by the Chinese intelligence flew out from the IAF bases in Orissa to collect intelligence from the Tibet. (Kohli, M S and K Conboy, 2002: 15) After the Chinese-Indian border skirmishes were made public in 1959, the Nehru Government had to face heat in the Parliament. Nehru himself had to offer apologetic

explanation about the ground reality to the opposition. During and before the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai visit to Delhi in 1960 to sort out the border dispute, huge rallies were organized by the Swatantra party and the Jana Sangh in protest of his visit. (The Print, 2018)

Mao-Khrushchev split, the disastrous outcome of the Great Leap Forward (1958-62), growing collaboration between the US and India, asylum to the Dalai Lama and India's offence in Goa has pushed China to checkmate India through a border war. India was now left with two options. Subjugation by China and silence by the Soviet Union on one hand or to formally engage with the US. India choose the later. From the late 1961, India embarked on a proactive policy to set up its posts in what it considered its territory, but were north of the Chinese posts. China responded swiftly. They successfully pushed back the Indian troops south of the McMahon line in the East, seized control of Aksai Chin in the West. (Malone op. cit.: 359) This border war ran in parallel with the Cuban missile crisis. To face the war hardened Chinese army, Nehru had to solicit military assistance from the US. The Kennedy Administration was kind enough to extend sympathy as well as support. They aided India with military equipment. (Neville Maxwell, 1970: 270) When the Chinese Administration analyzed the possible outcome in the form of an American air intervention, they strategically declared a ceasefire on 21 November 1962, withdrawing from east Indian territories it acquired and holding the territories it gained in the west, the Aksai Chin. This border war which resulted in a surprise and humiliating lost, undermined the Nehru's authority on both domestic and foreign affairs in India. This is observed by Dennis Kux as 'The Indian leader never recovered from the staggering blow. Until mid-October 1962, Nehru although aging was still a towering international figure. A month later, Nehru was a beaten old man, his country seemingly dependent on the military support of the United States, his policy of non-Alignment in shreds. (Dennis Kux, 1992: 208)

From the late fifties, though Nehru's India informally engaged with the US to contain China and formally it led the Non-Aligned Movement. Together with Egypt, Yugoslavia, Indonesia and Ghana, India presented the NAM as an alternative way before the Third World. Its first summit in 1961 at Belgrade was attended by twenty five nations. Only three responded in favor of India's request to label China as an aggressor. India which fought against the labeling China as an aggressor against the West in the Korean crisis of 1953 now have to appeal the world to declare China as an aggressor.

Conclusion

Whatever may be the end result of the Nehruvian foreign policy, India had played a significant role in the international politics, mostly unmatched with its national capabilities. India has managed itself as an international actor, representing the Third World. The first and foremost thing India has done after the transfer of power is to dismantle the power structures with neighbors which the British build for years. It ignored that it is the natural legatee of British's role for peace, stability and hegemony in South Asia. With Nehru's India refusing to step into the shoes of the British hegemony over Asia in the name of idealism, Mao's China seized this political vacuum. Thus the Asian balance of power shifted from British India to the Communist China.

Nehru's high profile campaign against the West is viewed as East sponsored and East appealing. It complicated India's relations with the US. By repeatedly declining the invitation to join the Western Bloc, Nehru undermined the power of an open society. Indian political culture had a distinctly anti-American tinge. The ruling dispensation under the Congress

strategically cultivated this American phobia, to serve its domestic needs. What may have also shaped the Indian public opinion about the US and the Soviet Union is the way they used their aid programs. While the US aid programs are mostly food aid which supplement India's food needs at the time India invested all its money in the secondary sector, the Soviet Union was fortunate enough to use their aid in this secondary sector's highly visible projects like the Bhilai steel plant. Most of the general public are not aware of the food aid program of the US which saved India from huge food grain crisis, while the Soviet's aid in Indian industrialization was much publicized. The New Alignment of Nehru and Kennedy against China tried to halt this public opinion for some years.

What India missed was a Nixon (Kissinger) - Mao movement. Though Kennedy and Nehru attempted to do so years before, the assassination of Kennedy and the demise of Nehru within a span of one year halted the new alignment. Their successors are not much interested in this new alignment. The American policy makers in Johnson Administration are of the opinion that to antagonise both the Communist powers, the USSR and China at the same time was not in the American interest. And more over the global rival for the US was with the Soviet Union, while it is with China for India. The successors of Nehru, Lal Bahadur Sastri and Indira Gandhi are from the traditional Anglophobic school of thought. After the demise of Nehru, India went back to its original position, the anti-West rhetoric. It took decades for India to come out of this framework. Though the fall of Berlin Wall laid foundations for a new start; the real start was the movement when the Bush-Rice Administration took decision to work in cooperation with India. This was the Kissinger movement in Indo-US relations.

On a positive note, the Chinese debacle opened up India to the world of strategic choices. India started to realize that there is no place for politics based on flimsy notions of fellowship with the Third World. India's international universe collapsed freeing India to reinvent itself. The Indian utopia of the spiritual conquest of the world in order to save humanity has to be dismissed. To conclude Nehru's foreign policy in one sentence; Nehru started his foreign policy journey at a higher plane of idealism and had to land at a lower plane of realism. As Victor Hugo said, there is nothing like a dream to create the future. Utopia today, flesh and blood tomorrow.

References

- Arora and Appadorai (1975) *India in World Affairs*; Sterling Publishers: New Delhi
- Bandyopadhyaya J (2016) *The Making of Indian Foreign Policy: Determinants, Institutions, Processes and Personalities*; Allied Publishers: New Delhi
- Beevor Antony (2003) *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*; Penguin Books: London
- Bright J S (1950) *Before and After Independence: Collection of Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1922-50*; Indian Printing Works: New Delhi
- Carr E H (1962) *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*; Macmillan: London
- Dennis Kux (1992) *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991*; National Defense University Press: Washington DC
- Garver J (2001) *Protracted contest: Sino- Indian rivalry in the twentieth century*; University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA
- Ghosh Shankar (1993) *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*; Allied Publications: New Delhi
- Gopal S (ed.) (1984) *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series*; Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund: New Delhi

- Kalecki M ((1964)1993) Observations on Social and Economic Aspects of “Intermediate Regimes”, in J. Osiatynski (ed.), Collected Works for Michal Kalecki, Vol. V: Developing Economies; Clarendon Press: Oxford
- Kohli M S and K Conboy (2002) Spies in the Himalayas: Secret Missions and Perilous Climbs; University of Kansas Press: Lawrence
- Malone, M., Raja Mohan, C. and Raghavan, S. (ed.) (2015) The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy; Oxford University Press: Oxford
- Mckay, Alex (2012) The British Invasion of Tibet, 1903-04; Inner Asia Vol. 14, No. 1, Special Issue
- McMahon R J (1994) The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan; Colombia University Press: New York
- Measheimer, J (2003) The Tragedy of Great Power Politics; W. W. Norton: New York
- Michael, Beschloss (2006) Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives; Oxford University Press: Oxford
- Miskovic Natasa (2009) The Pre-History of the Non-Aligned Movement: India’s First Contact with the Communist Yugoslavia, 1948-50; India Quaterly: Sage Publications Ltd., Vol.-65, No.-02, April-June
- Naik J A (1995) Russia’s Policy Towards India: From Stalin to Yeltsin; M D Publications: New Delhi
- Nehru Jawaharlal (1961) India’s Foreign Policy; Publications Division, Government of India: New Delhi
- Neville Maxwell (1970) India’s China War; Natras Publishers: DehraDun
- Prasad Bimla (2013) The Making of India’s Foreign Policy: The Indian National Congress and World Affairs, 1885-1947; Vitasta Publishing: New Delhi
- Raj Kumar, N N (1952) The Background of India’s Foreign Policy; All India Congress Committee: New Delhi
- Shah S K (2017) Indian Foreign Policy: Past, Present and Ties with the world; Alpha Publications: New Delhi
- The Economic Times (2019) ‘Jawaharlal Nehru only Indian PM to be greeted on arrival at the airport by US Prez’, 25 September
- The New York Times (1956) ‘A Red Carpet for Nehru’, 16 December
- The Print (2022) ‘Nehru the ‘philosopher king’, 27 July
- _____ (2018) ‘Vajpayee’s guidelines still remains India’s best hope of solving border dispute with China’, 21 August
- The Times of India (2015) ‘India top recipient of US economic aid’, 16 July