

Ian Hall (ed.), *The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses*

(Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), pp. 224, ISBN: 9781626161412 (hbk), 9781626160866 (pbk)

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The story of India's foreign policy – its processes, institutional aspects, successes, failures and engagements – can be quite fascinating for any perceptive researcher, especially those with an aptitude for researching complex socio-political processes. The sources are many, despite the country's unhelpful declassification rules, the foreign policy dynamism in its capital is palpable, and the ever-growing foreign policy elite in the national capital is both opinionated, as it should be in a vibrant democracy, and well-informed. And yet, making sense of India's foreign policy can often be a herculean task, painful and frustrating. Thanks to its 'rising Power' status, there is today a great deal of focus on India's foreign policy, both within and outside the country. Volumes have been compiled on just how India makes its foreign policy and what its foreign and defence policy means for itself and the larger international system.

Indeed, a cursory analysis of India's foreign relations can often be misleading. To a novice observer of the South Asian giant's foreign policy, it might appear to be uncomplicated and straightforward, bereft of any inherent contradictions, institutionally-sanctioned ambiguities and deeply-entrenched double-talk. India's foreign policy, over the past seventy years, has undergone a number of transformations even as it jealously guards some of the foundational ideals running through these eventful decades. Contemporary India's foreign policy then is a constant negotiation between its founding principles based mostly on Nehruvian idealism, and its desire to be a 'normal' great Power. What do the other states in the international system think of a rising and ambitious India? What motivates them to engage India? And do the managers of the contemporary international system consider India to be a suitable candidate to contribute to global governance?

The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses edited by Ian Hall is a refreshing attempt to examine India's foreign policy through the eyes and agency of some of the key countries engaging India. The book correctly argues that Indian foreign policy achievements have been a mix of efforts by India and the circumstances in the international system (p. 2).

The book has ten chapters in all, including the introduction in which Ian Hall, the editor, discusses the what and why of the book, and a conclusion by Nick Bisley which does a great job of concluding the various insights offered by the contributors to the volume. Other than these two, there are three sets of chapters in the book. Daniel Twining, H.D.P. Envall, Lavina Lee, Harsh Pant and Ian Hall examine how the US,

Japan, Russia, China and Australia are engaging India. The second set of chapters by Louise Merrington and David Brewster explain how India engages Central Asia and Southeast Asia. An unrelated but extremely well-conceptualised chapter by Rajesh Basrur argues that India's foreign policy during the Cold War years was consistent with the tenets of offensive realism, and the post-Cold War Indian foreign policy is more in accord with the precepts of defensive realism.

New approach

The importance of this serious academic work comes from the fact that it is being released at a time when India's foreign policy is undergoing fundamental changes, despite major continuities, under the recently elected NDA regime in New Delhi. International Relations scholars and India specialists have been reflecting and speculating for at least two decades on what kind of a major Power India would be. We may perhaps have some tentative answers to this question over the next few years thanks to the importance the new government under Mr. Narendra Modi attaches to the country's foreign policy interests. So the question 'what kind of a major Power would India be?' is something that will resonate through the coming years.

Nick Bisley, in his concluding chapter, provides a tentative answer to this question. Bisley argues that even though the rise of India would test the resilience of the international system, what makes the rise of India unique is that 'India is a rising power without revisionist ambitions' (p. 196). That is an important qualification and correctly befits India's contemporary strategic behaviour. Having given up its 'revisionist past', India today is clearly promoting itself into the international system, but without seeking to reorder the system or rupturing it. It desires to enter the nuclear order or the UN Security Council as a permanent member with the help of the existing great Powers, not by overruling or challenging them. The book as a whole seems to be upbeat about the systemic changes and the accommodation of emerging Powers, including India, in the international system.

Some of the chapters in the volume are clearly outstanding. The chapters on Russia and Japan do a wonderful job of explaining how those countries are engaging India, and not how India is engaging them. The authors have managed to explain the Japanese and Russian motivations in engaging India from the perspective of those countries. Such refreshing analysis is not often seen in a book on India's foreign policy. Lee's lucidly written chapter on Russia usefully identifies five factors that have been instrumental in making its relationship with India a great success (p. 61).

Some shortcomings

There is a fundamental confusion in the book about what is meant by 'The engagement of India'. While the introduction is unclear about who is being engaged, the title tends to give the impression that India is the object of engagement. But then a number of chapters in the volume do no more than discuss India's relations with key states. Bisley's conclusion is clearer about the subject and object of engagement – the book is about the Engagement of and by India (p. 186). If that is indeed the approach, then at least half the book is no more than an attempt at chronicling India's

bilateral relations with key countries. This confusion about the subject and object of engagement complicates the conceptual framework of the book.

Moreover, the volume does not show clearly how it is different from a book on bilateral relations, even as it is possible to make a sharp distinction between India's engagement of other states and their engagement of India, something that the volume partly fails to do given that it has chapters discussing both the aspects. Moreover, while I do see the merit in looking at the engagement of India from the eyes of key countries and the system as whole, the volume provides no compelling rationale why this approach is better than the usual foreign policy approach especially when many of the chapters in the volume read like regular bilateral or foreign policy chapters.

The book also does not offer any discussion on how India's vibrant domestic politics has an impact on its foreign policy (diaspora linkages or subnational diplomacy) nor has it attempted to show how the international system engages India. For instance, it would have been useful to see how the global non-proliferation order is proactively engaging the country today.

Moreover, the volume seems to ignore the fact that India's presence abroad is also due to people-to-people, commercial, cultural and other private engagements. The Indian diaspora, invoked so cleverly by the new regime in New Delhi, is a key enabling factor in the country's global partnerships. The Indian diaspora has aided the pursuit of New Delhi's foreign policy goals and managed to invoke global interest in India. Can public diplomacy and the increasingly efficient soft power projection by New Delhi be ignored while analysing the engagement of India?

While discussing India's engagement of the system in the context of Chinese and Russian dismissal of the 'liberal international norms', Bisley argues that "India is potentially torn between its support for liberal principles and its unease about the institutional setting in which they reside at the international level" (p. 197). Bisley makes the argument to show how despite its support for liberal principles, India does have problems with the undemocratic and unrepresentative character of the international order.

And yet, I am afraid, this is a typical Western argument. There are multiple problems with this line of argumentation. For one, India has been of the opinion that the problem with the current order is not only an institutional one (and hence the need for institutional restructuring and the like); it has also argued in the past that the current system and the key states managing it have often exhibited 'illiberal principles'. Secondly, different stakeholders can interpret liberal principles differently. For the West, invading Iraq may have been in step with its liberal tradition; for New Delhi, it was an illiberal act.

That said, *The Engagement of India* is an eminently readable book, lucidly written, well-researched, and it attempts to make a partial departure from the usual foreign policy volumes on India, with some of the chapters analysing India's foreign policy from the perspective of the 'others'. One question that keeps coming up in the volume is about India's foreign policy attention span and that is an unavoidable question for policy makers and analysts alike. As Bisley argues in his chapter "The Western powers, led by the United States, believe that the existing order can accommodate India without too much damage to its underlying structures". But for India to be incorporated in the mainstream, it needs to be ready to assume more responsibilities in maintaining the global order. To do so, India needs to undertake a number of crucial reforms in its foreign policy and defence sectors, both institutionally and ideationally.