

Nehru's Legacy and Developments in India



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Organized by



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dictator? Was he as plain and honest as he seemed to be or was there something deep within him? He was many men in one, a thinker, a writer, a man of action, a political leader, a Prime Minister, but what lay behind it all? These questions demand an answer even now.

Jawaharlal's was a many-faceted personality: thinker, writer, statesman; endowed at once with the scientific temper and the capacity to dream of the future; active participant in the rough and tumble of daily politics and yet a visionary who could comprehend the grand sweep of human history; passionate lover of India, yet untrammelled by narrow nationalism and able to encompass the entire human race – Jawaharlal was a truly unique figure of this century. All the major elements of his world view can be seen to flow from his deep humanism.

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Nehru's Foreign Policy and its relevance to Look-East Policy

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The influence of a Foreign Minister varies widely from one state to another, depending on the form of government, the relations between the chief executive and his ministers in charge of external affairs, the personality of the Minister, the strength opposition parties and the like. The no another state doe's one man dominates foreign policy as does Nehru in India. Indeed so overwhelming is his influence that India's policy has come to mean in the minds of people everywhere the personal policy of Pandit Nehru and justifiably so far. Nehru is the philosopher, the architect, the engineer and the voice of his country's policy towards the outside world. This does not mean that he operates in a vacuum, for the aspirations discussed earlier provide the framework within which policy must be devised. Nor is he entirely free from the influence of individuals and institutions in India. It does mean, however, that he has impressed his personality and his view with such overpowering effect that foreign policy may properly be termed a private monopoly. The broad lines of policy were outlined as early as September 1946, in his first

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pronouncement as Member for External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations in the Interim Government¹. They have not changed over the years. The emphasis may have shifted but never the pillars of policy.

It was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who provided a rationale for India's approach to international politics since 1947. It was he who carried the philosophy of non-alignment to the world at large. And throughout this period he has dominated the policy-making process. No one in the Congress or the Government, not even Sardar Vallabhai Patel, ever challenged his control in this sphere. In the country as a whole the voices of criticism were few, though they have grown in number during recent years.

India's, Asian policy and the initiative for the Asian Relations Conferences in Delhi in 1947 and 1949 derive entirely from Nehru. So do the doctrine of peaceful coexistence (the Panch Shila) and India's policy towards China and the Soviet Union. It was Nehru, too, who intervened with an offer of mediation in both Korea and Indo-China². Even in the execution of policy his role has been decisive—through his widespread travels which have taken him to China (1954), Russia (1955), the United States (1949 and 1956), South-east Asia (1950 and 1955), Japan (1957), almost every country in Europe, and Great Britain (annually since 1948, usually for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference). He is, then, Minister, chief policy planner and roving Ambassador, a combination of roles which has no parallel anywhere, with the

possible exception of the United States in its Dulles Period.

Nehru's approach to foreign policy was cogently stated in a letter to the Presidents of the Provincial Congress Committees during the summer of 1954: 'A policy must be in keeping with the traditional background and temper of the country. It should be idealistic... and ... realistic. If it is not idealistic, it becomes one of sheer opportunism; if it is not realistic, then it is likely to be adventurist and wholly ineffective'.

Regarding the possibility of a threat to India, he said: 'I do not conceive of any kind of invasion or attack on India—not because of other countries' love of India, but because it will bring them no profit. India does not come into the picture. Any country attacking India merely adds to its troubles.' In case of attack, however, 'it is obvious that the people of India will fight that attack and defend themselves'. As for non-alignment, 'I would say that nonalignment is a policy which is nationally profitable for any country. But in some cases there is danger—because of its geographical position—that, whether it is aligned or non-aligned, it may suffer from the war.'

Since Independence Nehru has held the External Affairs portfolio as well as the Prime Ministership. During the duumvirate with Patel from 1947 to the end of 1950 it was clearly understood that Nehru had exclusive jurisdiction over foreign affairs. Since that time no minister other than Krishna Menon has concerned himself with the political aspects of foreign affairs, except East,

and Azad and Pant on Hungary in 1956 and Menon has been Nehru's deputy for all practical purposes. In general it may be said that Nehru's word was and still is final in all Cabinet discussions on foreign policy. This is equally true of the Congress Party. Year after year the party passes resolutions, almost invariably framed by Nehru himself, which give full approval to the Government's i.e., Nehru, foreign policy.

Nehru has wielded supreme power over Indian foreign policy since 1947 is readily acknowledged by colleagues, critics and impartial observers. It should not be inferred, however, that he relies entirely on his own personal judgment of events. At different period and for different issues the advice of a few people has weighed heavily in his decisions.

A striking feature of this select group is the absence of a professional diplomat. Another is heterogeneity. It comprises two English aristocrats (Lord and Lady Mountbatten), a member of Nehru's family (Mme. Pandit), a Hindu philosopher (Dr. Radhakrishnan), a Muslim divine (Maulana Azad), a talented intellectual who devoted many years to the service of the Indian Princes (Sardar K.M. Panikkar), and a caustic, brilliant nationalist who spent half his life in Great Britain (V.K. Krishna Menon). Only one, Azad, was a Congress Politician of long standing.

Since independence, the eastern neighbours have constituted one of the priority areas in India's commitment to induce and enhance Asian resurgence. Nehru, the philosopher and architect of independent India's foreign policy,

particularly its Asia policy, articulated this commitment while underlining the rationale and significance of Asian resurgence in India's worldview. He said:

"We are of Asia and the peoples of Asia are nearer and closer to us than others. India is so situated that she is the pivot of western, southern and Southeast Asia. In the past her culture flowed to all these countries and they came to her in many ways. Those contacts are being renewed and the future is bound to see a closer union between India and Southeast Asia on the one side and Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab world on the west. To the furtherance of that close association of free countries, we must devote ourselves. India has followed with anxious interest the struggle of Indonesians for freedom and to them we send our good wishes."

Nehru's vision of a 'closer union' with the East was shaped by the strength of India's geographical proximity, similarity of historical experiences, cultural identities, economic interests and common strategic concerns in relation to the countries of the east.

Geographically, India has been central to Asia both in location and reach. A strategic dimension to this geographical fact was added by the British rulers who looked at India as the 'pivot' of their Asian imperial holdings, particularly so because India was also placed critically in the Indian Ocean which carried Asia's bulk commercial and strategic cargos. While emphasizing India's centrality, Nehru and other Indian leaders were acutely aware of India's geo-strategic importance for peace and stability in Asia.

Nehru was also acutely conscious of the fact that while making India's geographical location in Asia strategically vital, the 150 year old British imperial rule also eroded cultural and commercial contacts the flourished was keen to rebuild and reinforce these countries old rich and vibrant cultural links. The icons of these links are shining even today in their past glory and persisting relevance. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata remain engraved in the Angkor Wat in Siam Reap (Cambodia). Monuments like the Angkor Wat, Borobudur (Indonesia), Wat Phu and Linga Mountain (Laos), and many other such historical structures and icons of India's cultural imprint are scattered all over Southeast Asia, reminding every one of the Hindu empires that radiated in indo-china and rest of the region until 10th and 11th centuries AD. In the establishment of these Indian cultural imprints, no military expeditions but only cultural, commercial and intellectual contacts had played the decisive role. The Ramayana has also been absorbed in the cultural textures of Muslim Indonesia and Buddhist Thailand and Laos, and has acquired a sublime art form that is revered and adorned by the vast masses of this region. In recent years, we have also heard of the rich archaeological findings of Shivalingas in the Basin of Mekong River in Champasak, a burgeoning town of Laos which is contiguous with Cambodia and Vietnam. Not only Hinduism, but Buddhism and Islam also went to these countries through India, some directly and in some cases after detouring

through China. India's cultural impact is clearly discernible in these countries in their languages, dresses, festivities and life styles in diverse forms. And in India, Orissa celebrates every year the festival of 'Bali Jatra' that commemorates the adventures of innumerable spice traders who braved rough seas across the Bay of Bengal, Malacca Strait and South China Sea to carry commerce and culture to the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean. This underlines the fact that India had a look-east policy several centuries ago based on intense cultural and commercial engagement.

The emphasis on geography and culture in Nehru's early eastward policy was aimed at building Asian solidarity. He took into account the aspirations of the new, independent and resurgent Asia. Accordingly, he put India in the forefront of mobilizing international support on issues ranging from Indonesia's freedom struggle to Burma's internal security and stability, to that of peace and freedom of indo-China states. Delhi served as a host in 1947 and 1949, to the conferences on Asian Relations and Indonesia and Indian diplomats forcefully articulated the cause of decolonization and development of Asian countries in all possible international forums. The first Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 was the culmination of these early Indian initiatives and efforts to promote Asian resurgence.

Southeast Asia has been an area of comparative neglect in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. For nearly two decades after India's independence in 1947, relations with Southeast Asia

were looked after by the "Commonwealth Secretary," a relic of the old division of responsibilities in that Ministry. In general, during the best years of the Nehru era (1947-64), the foreign policy concentration was on major themes like anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and more importantly, promotion of global peace.

In Southeast Asia, Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia were regarded with some warmth because of their espousal of a policy of non-alignment under Nehru's leadership. In the bipolar politics of the fifties and early sixties, the pro-U.S. countries, notably Thailand and the Philippines, were regarded as *bête noire's*, stooges of neo-colonialism. Their membership of the U.S. - led SEATO countered the Indian policy initiative for peace based on Panchasheel and neutralization of Southeast Asia.

During the Nehru era (1947-1964) when he headed both the Indian government as well as the Ministry of External Affairs, Southeast Asia was important not because of itself but because it was one of the two most explosive areas threatening global peace. While it would be true to say that India's bilateral relations with the countries of the region did not consequently get proportionate attention, the concern with larger issues was not entirely a matter of Nehru's personal fancy, as is proved by the fact that Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, has remained in the forefront of international diplomacy over the last five decades.

In the post-World War II period, the binding force between India

and other Asian countries was that of nationalism. The leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, particularly Gandhi and Nehru, had projected the Indian struggle for freedom as a part of the wider struggle for the liberation of other Asian and African people from the colonial shackles. This was particularly evident in India's attitude toward the Dutch attack on the Indonesian Republic. Nehru warned: "No European country, whatever it may be, has any right to set its army in Asia against the people of Asia. The spirit of new Asia will not tolerate such things¹⁰." He tried to get the British government to mediate with the Dutch government. Failing in his efforts, he persuaded Australia to join India in sponsoring a ceasefire resolution in the Security Council, which offered its good offices for settlement of the dispute by arbitration and peaceful means¹¹. When the Dutch renewed their attacks in December 1958, an enraged Nehru, in a spectacular move, called a Conference on Indonesia to meet in New Delhi in the following month.

The Indian Government extended *de facto* recognition to the Indonesian Republic, which enabled her to characterize the Dutch action as an act of war against the Indonesian Republic. The Conference on Indonesia, attended by eighteen countries from Asia and Africa, Nehru launched a bitter and outspoken attack against western colonialism:

We meet today because the freedom of a sister country of ours has been imperiled and dying colonialism of the past has raised its head again and

challenged all the forces that are struggling to build up a new structure of the world. That challenge has a deeper significance that might appear on the surface, for it is a challenge to a newly awakened Asia which has so long suffered under various forms of colonialism.

Nehru sent the Conference speeches, resolutions and recommendations to the Security Council, which adopted a resolution five days later urging cease-fire, release of political prisoners and re-establishment of the Republican government in Jogjakarta. These recommendations were substantially identical with the demands made by the Delhi Conference. It is notable that in all these efforts, India and the United States were on the same side. In fact, the negotiations that followed between the Netherlands government and Indonesian leaders with U.S. mediation led to the ultimate transfer of sovereignty to Indonesian hands on December 27, 1949.

The communist leadership of the Vietnamese nationalist movement must have made for some difference in the Indian attitude at that time. Yet, the Indian antipathy to communism did not conform to the western and U.S. dichotomy between the "free" and communist worlds. As Nehru, he was to say later to the Institute of Pacific Relations in Lucknow in October 1950:

No argument in any country of Asia is going to have weight if it goes counter to the nationalist support of the country, communism or no communism. That has to be understood.

Nehru's attitude towards communist nationalism and nationalism impeded by communist elements deserves analysis. In 1948, the Home ministry of the Indian government found conclusive evidence that the communist rebellions that took place in that year in Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and Telangana had been hatched at the apparently innocent Calcutta Conference of the Southeast Asian Youth in February 1948. The communist uprising in Telangana was effectively crushed and communists were arrested and detained on a large scale in India. Nehru openly denounced Indian communist in February 1949, for their program of "murders, arson, and looting, as well as acts of sabotage" and for their determination to "create a chaotic state in the country." The Communist Party itself was banned in a number of states like West Bengal, Mysore, Madras, Hyderabad and Travancore-Cochin. While Nehru directly or indirectly helped in the suppression of communists in Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and India, he recognized that the situation in Vietnam was different. The communists in Vietnam were genuine nationalists and there was no other comparable nationalist rival rallying point for people's aspirations in that country. Even if Nehru did not like the communist leadership of that movement, he could not bring himself to condemn it as long as it was anti-colonial.

India's attitude toward the Ho Chi Minh-led movement became even more circumspect after the

establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. In November, some Vietnamese communists attended the famous Beijing meeting of the World Federation of Trade Unions of Asia and Australia, at which Liu Shao-Chi exhorted the colonial countries to adopt the Chinese path in their struggle for national independence and people's democracy. He described countries like India, Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia as "semi-colonies," which must be freed from the stranglehold of western imperialism.

Nehru called for an immediate cease-fire in Indochina on 1954. He attempted to secure for India representation at the Geneva Conference on Indochina, on the plea that this was Asian question which should not be decided by non-Asians in Europe. As Nehru said in the Indian Parliament:

Indochina is an Asian country and a proximate area... The crisis in respect of Indochina therefore moves us deeply and calls from us our best thoughts and efforts to avert the trends of this conflict towards its extension and intensification and to promote the trends that might lead to a settlement.

Nehru used the forum of the Colombo Conference of five Asian Powers on 10th April 1954 to discuss his six-point proposal for a settlement and sent his emissary, V.K. Krishna Menon, to Geneva to explain the Asian point of view to the powers assembled there. The Indian peripheral participation at Geneva was so considerable as to lead the French premier, Pierre Mendes-

France to speak of the Conference as "this ten-power conference – nine at the table – and India."²⁰ Throughout the period of the Geneva talks, New Delhi proved to be one of the few world capitals in which the future of Indochina was being decided.

Indian diplomacy geared itself in 1954 to preventing further internationalization of the Indo-Chinese conflict by forestalling Chinese military intervention on behalf of the Vietminh and preventing the Americans from upgrading their assistance to the French military effort to the point of using nuclear weapons. In the behind-the-scenes parleys at Geneva, India secured from Great Britain and France promises to China not to let the Americans have bases in Laos and Cambodia. On the other hand, Nehru secured Chinese assurance to guarantee the neutralization of Laos and Cambodia. Such assurances between the East and the West obtained through Indian mediation were vital footnotes to the Geneva Agreements. Further at China's suggestion, India was appointed Chairman of the International Control Commission (ICC), whose tasks included supervision of imports of foreign armaments (including those of Chinese origin) into Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It was further indicative of the new Chinese confidence in Indian friendship for it virtually entrusted India with policing China's southern frontier in Laos and Vietnam. To reinforce such unwritten clauses of the Geneva settlement, Nehru arranged meetings of Cambodian, Laotian, North Vietnamese and Chinese premiers at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung at which Chou

En-lai and Pham Van Dong gave promises of non-interference in Laos and Cambodia. The Geneva Agreements, read in the context of the Panchasheel pledges, constituted in Indian eyes, a non-military defense system for Southeast Asia.

In Cambodia, Sihanok's government alleged pressures from the CIA as well as from border disputes with the American-backed traditional enemies of Cambodia, namely, Thailand and South Vietnam. In July 1958, the Laos government asked the ICC to fold up its activities in the country. With that, the Indian influence in Laos was practically reduced to nothing because since the very beginning of Indian diplomatic relations with that country, the ICC had been made the principal instrumentality for pursuit of Indian foreign policy aims in Laos.

In this test of the neutrality of Laos and Cambodia, the limits of India's policy of non-alignment were sorely tried. Whereas Laos moved closer to the west, Cambodia strengthened its ties with communist China. As a non-aligned country, she had considerable influence with the super-powers to resolve major crises international affairs. Yet, she lacked adequate leverage with minor pro-west states, even less so in disputes between a non-aligned country and a member of either bloc. On the diplomatic plane, India was unable to do much to help Cambodia. Indian efforts to sponsor investigations of the Khmer-Vietnamese border dispute by the ICC proved vain in the face of Canadian delegation's refusal to cooperate. On the other hand, China offered Cambodia

moral and material support in the dispute with Thailand and South Vietnam.

If after mid-1958, Indian achievements in Laos and Cambodia had been seriously compromised by American policies by the middle of 1959 the very basis of Indian foreign policy in the region was undermined by China. The simultaneous occurrence of hostilities on the Sino-Indian border on the Himalayan heights and in Laos in 1959 did the Panchasheel and the Geneva Agreements impose manifestations of the abandonment by China and the DRV of the restraints. Some critics have accused Nehru of naiveté in believing that the Panchasheel would provide a permanent pedestal upon which to build the edifice of foreign policy. To him, as to most observers, the Chinese behavior was incomprehensible. Some Indian leaders ascribed it to India's granting asylum to the Dalai Lama. In 1959 they thought it was a temporary aberration of and otherwise well-based relationship. Nehru refused to put Indian foreign policy in the melting pot simply because the Chinese had violated the Panchasheel. In the background, there still lingered a hope of reconciliation and the revival of better relations with China.

In the last two years of Nehru's stewardship of Indian affairs, the policy of non-alignment had lost part of its former strength, morale and initiative. Non-alignment did not help India to avert humiliation at China's hands in 1962. It could not, therefore, inspire the

weaker states of Southeast Asia to look to India for protection and leadership.

India did not completely give up on its eastward orientation. Very few people know or remember that India under Mrs. Gandhi also associated itself with the process of formation of ASEAN during 1966-67. It intensely worked for evolving a broad based regional organization of cooperation which did not identify itself with any strategic and the Cold war oriented interests. However, this was not acceptable to the powers that be, involved in establishing ASEAN against a strategic backdrop of the messy Vietnam War. The result was that India was pushed out of the ASEAN process.

India missed its second chance with the ASEAN in 1980 when it vitiated the offer of full dialogue partnership by defying the ASEAN collective will on Cambodia. Because India recognized the Vietnam backed Hang Samarin regime of Cambodia weeks before it was scheduled to participate in the ASEAN meeting. Finally India took almost ten years after this setback to pick up the threads of its policy towards ASEAN.

Today India is not only a full dialogue partner of ASEAN but also it is one of the members in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) a security arrangement of ASEAN. And to the other extend in 2005 India has been included in the East Asia Community. As mentioned earlier, no doubt the ideology of "Asian Solidarity" of Nehru has become true today.

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