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Deepa Ollapally
International Studies 2011 48: 201
DOI: 10.1177/0020881713485009
The online version of this article can be found at:
http://isq.sagepub.com/content/48/3-4/201

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>> Version of Record - Aug 5, 2013
What is This?
India: The Ambivalent Power in Asia

Deepa Ollapally

Abstract
This article argues that India’s foreign policy preferences cannot be understood without referring to its state identity as it has evolved over time. The ambivalence that is evident throughout much of India’s post-Independence history lies in deep-seated identity sources—a unique mixture of post-colonial nationalism, civilizational exceptionalism and secular democracy. India’s identity has played out in foreign policy to place an inordinate amount of importance to strategic autonomy but with a normative aversion to power politics and use of force. This has led to an ambivalence that many observers find hard to understand. This orientation is now coming under increasing strain, because of the rise of a realist strand of thinking challenging the country’s traditional normatively driven foreign policy outlook. Realist thinking is posing as a distinct alternative that calls for a more proactive and power infused policy stance. The rise of China in India’s neighbourhood is giving greater weight to realist arguments. Although India’s core value of strategic autonomy is still in force in Indian foreign policy, the article suggests that it is taking on a different form that is more nuanced, more flexible and adaptable. As such, India may now be particularly well positioned to play the role of a ‘bridging power’ more effectively, matching its state identity with a new evolving international role. India’s membership in groups ranging from G-20 and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) to India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and its being a serious contender for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, gives India distinct opportunities and status to utilize a greater mix of soft and hard power options than in the past. India may well be at the moment of overcoming its historical ambivalence to power-driven policies and purposeful action.

Deepa Ollapally is Research Professor of International Affairs and Associate Director, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington DC, USA. E-mail: deepao@gwu.edu

The author wishes to thank the anonymous referees for their useful comments on the article, and acknowledges support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.
Deepa Ollapally

Keywords
Identity, autonomy, rising power, bridging power, realism, Indian foreign policy, India–Asia relations, state identity

India’s Ambivalence and Normative Identity

India’s new popular international image is that of a confident and purposive actor set to take its rightful place among the world’s major powers. This image is somewhat at odds with its behaviour on the world stage—for example, labelling itself a developing country at World Trade Organization negotiations while demanding a seat in the exclusive UN Security Council as a permanent member, exhorting its pluralist democracy model but unwilling to incorporate this value in its foreign policy and wearing the mantle of Asian leadership without offering any new ‘big ideas’ or committing resources to that end. Behind the audacious ‘India Everywhere’ charm offensive at the World Economic Forum in Davos, orchestrated by the India Brand Equity Foundation in 2006 and other marketing drives, lies a deep ambivalence about India’s sense of self vis-à-vis the external world. That this ambivalence persists despite India’s clearly rising military and economic profile suggests that its sources run deep.

This article tries to identify the sources of India’s ambivalence and what it means for Indian foreign policy in a rapidly changing Asia. It argues that the country’s policy ambivalence or equivocation is largely the result of having to balance conflicting and competing identities rooted in historical experience, its political culture and values and a long-standing mismatch between ambition and material capabilities. Post-independent India’s global identity has been mostly normatively driven as opposed to power driven. The article concludes that without a significant shift in India’s state identity, Indian policy in Asia is likely to remain modest and non-provocative, taking on the role more of a follower than a leader in the region. However, challenges to such a stand is increasing within India, and a major question to consider is what determines the conditions under which an identity shift away from normative values and ambivalent power to a more realist or hard-power perspective may occur.

Just what constitutes India’s ‘global identity’ is increasingly coming under question at home and abroad, with some pressure to define its role more clearly and definitively (Kumar, 2011, p. 1). I suggest that the identity that has best typified India internationally especially over the last two decades is that of a ‘bridging power’—a power that comfortably straddles different global power structures, engages multiple regions and audiences and promotes seemingly inconsistent normative values and practices, and importantly, offers itself as a successful negotiator between these worlds and ideas. Although this orientation has been most pronounced since the end of the Cold War in 1991, I argue that it cannot be understood as simply
driven by exogenous conditions. (Indeed, one can make the argument that a ‘bridging’ role characterized India even during the non-aligned era, but it tended to be an oppositional role rather than the more integrative role that we see India playing today.) The continuity seen in Indian foreign policy behaviour has much to do with persisting identity features despite the radically altered international environment. This also goes a long way in explaining why the seeming inconsistencies in Indian foreign policy has produced ambivalence rather than anxiety, and why a ‘bridging’ role is likely to be more appropriate than a ‘hyper-power’ role despite its rising economic and military profile and increasing pressure from realist arguments.

There has been no tradition of grand strategic theorizing in India that lays out what its long-term goals are and what strategies it is willing to use to get there in formal government documents or White Papers. At the same time, Indian policymakers and commentators have been amply loquacious about what principles should drive Indian foreign policy and what values should be promoted. Indeed, India’s foreign policy has been described by some as a ‘moralistic running commentary’ (Vasudevan, 2010). This article focuses mostly on ‘state identity’ since in the foreign policy arena, political elites (like elsewhere) have had a privileged position in defining India’s identity in international relations. This is not to deny that other national identities do not exist or that they are unimportant—just that they have not had sufficient policy impact.

The article is organized as follows. I first look at the concept of identity and suggest why it is worth analyzing in the context of Indian foreign policy. I then offer a number of competing and complementary identities that have influenced Indian foreign policy thinking over time and what may be viewed as the most consequential for India’s international relations. Next, I look at how and to what extent identity might influence India’s relations in Asia, and finally consider the policy implications for Asian regional cooperation or conflict.

**Why Identity Matters in Indian Foreign Policy**

**Identity as a Variable**

The literature on identity and international relations varies considerably and draws from numerous fields. From K.J. Holsti’s (1970) early ‘national role conception’ of states to Alexander Wendt’s (1992) more recent constructivist rendition of the state as ‘the immanent form of subjectivity in world politics’, identity issues have been the subject of continuing inquiry. Yet scholars seem no closer to consensus than before when it comes to questions like whether identity is a causal variable, whether it is a sociological or cognitive factor, or what the mechanisms are by which identity affects policy outcomes. Despite this confusion (or perhaps because of it), identity is often assumed or implicit in the works of international relations.
scholars. For the purposes of this article, I want to explicitly state my own assumptions, which draw on the basic convergences seen across the literature:

- Identity is a socially constructed phenomenon.
- It makes sense to talk in terms of state identity.
- Identity theory may be complementary to other theories—for example, with rational choice theory.
- Identity can be seen as one input into state policy-making which tends to have a constraining, if not determining, influence on foreign policy-making—it is an intervening variable.

In Wendt’s seminal work on theories of international politics, he argues that the basic structural variable of neorealism—anarchy—is itself socially constructed. He defines identities as ‘the basis of interests’. Actors do not have a ‘portfolio of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interest in the process of defining situations’ (Wendt, 1992, pp. 252–256). For Wendt, identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self. In thinking further about how to connect identity to policy choices, the notion of national role-conceptions is useful to some extent. Role theory is helpful in categorizing countries by so-called role types (for example, balancer, buffer, mediator) (Holsti, 1970, pp. 252–256), but there is a mechanistic quality to it that stems from seeing role in a functional fashion. I suggest that a country’s role is motivated by the type of state identity that it holds, which cannot be determined simply mechanistically or functionally.

**State Identity**

My focus in this article is on state identity in India although it could be challenged that in India, in particular, national identities abound and should be taken into account. But more generally, in international relations and foreign policy-making, states continue to be the strongest actor, with domestic audiences essentially ceding a pre-eminent role for the state in this arena. Even in Wendt’s approach, he acknowledges the importance of states:

States still are at the center of the international system, and as such, it makes no more sense to criticize a theory of international politics as ‘state-centric’, than it does to criticize a theory of forests for being ‘tree-centric’..., for critical IR theorists to eschew state-centric theorizing is to concede much of international politics to neorealism. (Wendt, 1999, pp. 9–11)

(The gist of this argument holds for this article even though I am concerned with narrower foreign policy and not the international system.)
We may see state identity as one type of identity that denotes a conception of what the state is and what it represents. In doing so, it is not necessary to view the state as a unitary actor with identity as a property of a state, rather, it can be seen “in the form of a concept perceived by individuals involved in foreign policy-making: i.e., what their country is and what it represents” (Ashizawa, 2008). Similar to individual identities, state identities are not static and may be modified over time through interactions with other states and international organizations as well as through its own cultural and domestic environments. State identity, therefore, is relational and social. How other states perceive a country may have to be taken into account too.

It is even possible to find some support for the notion of ‘state identity’ from more traditional international relations theory, in particular, Charles Glaser’s strategic choice strain of structural realism. The argument here is that in order to fully understand certain policy choices over others, it is important to take into account the kind of power a country is—what a country represents and what its preferences are. Glaser argues that structural realism’s exclusive attention to power is insufficient and that state motivations matter significantly. In his terminology, two important types of states are so-called greedy states and security-seeking states (Glaser, 2010). No matter what theoretical tradition the idea of identity is derived from, if we want to empirically apply identity to foreign policy, we have to allow a level of interpretive methodology such as discourse analysis, norms and values, which cannot be observed or empirically measured.

In this article, I take a middle path that sees the importance of structure, that is, distribution of power, but argue that it is under-determining in foreign policy analysis. Short of being directly attacked, a country’s international orientation will influence the way it responds to threats or opportunities in the international system. Identity may be complementary to other theories like rational choice: notions of state identity are likely to influence what a state wants and what its foreign policy preferences are. In other words, what you want or seek is determined in part by who you see yourself as. Some identities may make certain foreign policy means unacceptable via norms or values that are strongly held such as a taboo on alliances or use of nuclear weapons. Thus, identity can be seen as one input into a state’s decision-making calculus, and my working hypothesis is that it tends to be more constraining than determining in outcomes.

Sources of India’s State Identity

India is a country with a surplus of history, culture and values, all of which have shaped the way foreign policy decision-makers view the world. India’s state identity draws from a variety of sources:

- Notion of civilizational exceptionalism
- Post-colonial nationalism
- Partition trauma
To most observers, India’s foreign policy orientation after Independence reflects a strange mixture of ambition and restraint, defensiveness and arrogance, underdog and mentor mentality, and isolationism and internationalism. Despite these differing tendencies, the dominant narrative of post-colonial Indian foreign policy has been one of India as a world class leader of the normative kind, abjuring power politics and resisting global hierarchies. This type of seemingly contradictory tendencies is difficult to explain without taking into account India’s political culture and identity.

Indian identity is characterized at the foundational level by what has been termed non-dualist or non-binary thinking—the tradition of allowing a fusion of divergent and often contradictory viewpoints. We can see this as stemming in large part from an enduring quest for balance in India’s highly pluralistic society. One finds it in the very ‘idea of India’ which is diffuse and fragmented, but inclusive. By extension, it could be argued that Indian foreign policy is infused with this type of ambiguity or accommodative mentality that causes little discomfort for policy-makers given their domestic political conditioning. One result could be an international outlook that appears inconsistent or ambivalent.

Key State Identities

While drawing on a variety of sources, I suggest that the primary conditioning for India’s state identity is three-fold: civilizational exceptionalism, post-colonial nationalism and secular democratic tradition. In the post-Independence period, this has led to two dominant representations of the state that may be called the ‘autonomous state’ from 1947 to 1991 and the ‘bridging state’ from 1991 onwards. I view both as largely normatively driven. These two conceptions are not entirely mutually exclusive: the autonomy value is a long cherished value that clearly persists and protecting the country’s autonomy has always been a way to demarcate India’s independent role in a hierarchical world system and gain respect from other developing countries and at least special recognition from developed countries. While it could be argued that India has always played a bridging role of sorts, I would point out that India’s dominant leadership role on non-alignment was in opposition to the developed world, a role that has weakened considerably since 1991 and the end of the Cold War. To call India a ‘bridge’ during that period would be a real stretch of the term. India’s normative impulse, however, continues to be influential as in the earlier period—this is reflected in official and unofficial discourse, to the chagrin of hard-power proponents or realists in India.
Realist discourse and strategic thinking has not been absent from Indian foreign policy traditions but it has been a weak alternative and never made much headway into state orientations until recently. Other competing impulses have also not made major gains and moreover are unlikely to do so. For example, partition led to two dynamics: one that saw the necessity of safeguarding democratic secularism to secure India’s political and territorial unity and the other that nurtured Hindu nationalism towards a reactionary and exclusivist state identity. The latter has reared its head in fits and starts since the mid-1990s, but tends to die down. Most recently, the idea of India as an unabashed great power is gaining ground in strategic discourse, bringing together (implicitly at least) conceptions of civilizational exceptionalism, inheritor of the British Raj and post-colonial hyper-nationalism. In the following section, the article focuses on civilizational exceptionalism, post-colonial nationalism and secular democratic tradition—the three sources of identity which I see as most significant.

**Civilizational Exceptionalism**

Much like China, India does not see itself only as a ‘normal nation state’ but rather, as a civilization as well. This seems to be a core value in the country’s identity and has been one of the touchstones in its relational identity with the rest of the world. In the early post-colonial period, there was significant re-writing of the British history of India by Indian authors who wanted to reclaim, and refocus on, India’s perceived past greatness. Indeed, one could say that India’s foreign policy after independence emerged from what many Westerners saw as India’s outsized sense of ‘self’, which was not defined by or limited to conventional ‘modern’ or Western military and economic terms. How the notion of civilization can affect foreign policy discourses in countries like India and China is well brought out by Priya Chacko (2011, p. 223) who observes that ‘Non-Western discourses transmit distinctive vernaculars centred on questions of identity and recognition, which makes them appear as discordant with the meta narrative of Western IR’. The idea of India’s civilizational exceptionalism has hardly vanished. In 2012, S.M. Krishna noted in a speech that

> Currently, India is under some criticism from the world media for not doing enough to derive economic growth through better governance and institutional changes. I must gently remind the critics that India is a civilizational entity and change occurs sometimes at a very slow pace. (Krishna, 2012)

From a purely civilizational reference point, there is a tendency towards the view that India is great simply by being India. Within this thinking is the idea of India as an exceptional power—too large and diverse and historically unique to fit into conventional notions of great powers. Implicitly at least, this narrative had considerable purchase well into the 1990s, shared by commentators and political
actors alike. (The exception would be those minority and ethnic groups who have resisted the Indian nation-building enterprise, especially those on the periphery of India’s territorial boundaries.)

India’s early post-colonial leadership sought to play a role well beyond what its material capacities would have dictated. It did so in large part by formulating an alternative view of international relations—in particular, non-alignment. This was a radical departure from prevailing international thinking and thus an enormous achievement for a weak country like India. The confidence to generate and articulate such a revolutionary break no doubt flowed in part from the idea of India as a great civilization, if not a modern great power.

The civilizational outlook is supported by a dominant historical narrative that sees India as being domestically tolerant and pluralistic and externally non-aggressive and non-interventionist, with its sphere of influence based on culture, values and, to some extent, trade. Indeed, there is a popular and widely accepted sense in the country that Indian ‘culture’ was strong enough to absorb (read tame) most outside conquerors in some fashion or the other.12

**Post-colonial Nationalism**

Transcending India’s colonial humiliation and experience has been a major pre-occupation of Indian leadership. To do so, post-colonial nationalism fused economic independence, strategic autonomy and normative foreign policy in a grand design to stake out a definitive international presence, as a deliberate oppositional force to Western powers. The highly touted Gandhian independence movement and the moral authority it provided India in the immediate 1947 period allowed a stronger basis for normative discourse in international relations than others. It allowed India, in particular through its articulate first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to draw attention to continuing post-colonial global hierarchy and the need to address issues of global equity, disarmament and power politics. Non-alignment may be viewed as the dominant political expression of this type of post-colonial nationalism. As the leading edge of a group of like-minded non-aligned developing countries, India gained international stature and sharpened its identity as a ‘developing’ state. This identity has both objective and subjective elements that have made it difficult to let go of it, even as India is perceived as joining the ranks of major powers in the world today.

The historical meta-narrative of colonial subjugation and the imperative to maintain Indian autonomy in the international system, even at considerable cost in terms of growth rates or military efficiency, has been largely unshakeable. Indeed, the desire for economic and strategic autonomy was near obsessive levels until the mid-1990s.

India’s normative stands in foreign policy since 1947 are well known and have been repeatedly commented upon. What is also striking in the foreign policy and strategic discourse is the self-conscious aversion to classic power politics among...
both policy-makers and analysts. Thus, it is difficult to find source material from a realist or neo-realist tradition directing Indian foreign policy. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1990s that, in the heat of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) debates in the country, the language of power politics began to be heard among some policy-makers and public intellectuals. Furthermore, it is only from today's vantage point (from around 2000 onwards) that we find a concerted effort on the part of some scholars to re-interpret Indian foreign policy along realist lines and to attribute to Nehru, motivations that flow from such an outlook. This historical revisionism seems to be occasioned mainly by a need to justify a more activist and security-driven foreign policy in the new domestic debate on Indian foreign policy. Even if we allow that non-alignment may have been a clever nationalist ploy to protect India's autonomy rather than any idealist notion, it served to delimit the manner in which India's strategic discourse could take place over an extended period of time.

Secular Democratic Tradition

In the context of state-building after the traumatic partition experience, India's secular democracy became an inviolate principle of Indian identity. As in the realm of foreign policy, it was once again a Nehruvian vision that became dominant in the domestic political sphere. He crafted a political definition of 'Indianness' that neither monopolized nor simplified it, and thus allowed the country to have a single political identity despite huge internal differences of religion, language, caste, regional culture and ethnicity. A stricter definition was seen as leaving the state open to challenge and social conflict.

This consensus on political identity was hard won in the 1930s and 1940s to form the dominant basis of modern political India. (The debate on India's secular democracy is extensive and highly polemical, especially since the 1980s, but it need not detain us here.) While susceptible to majoritarianism, Hindu cultural nationalism was trumped (Khilnani, 1997). It may be noted that, historically, two periods stand out for exceptional political unity and are instructive in political governance terms: under Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC, and under Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century. An important common element to both rulers was their exceptional tolerance of diversity; it is interesting that India's national symbol is an artefact from Ashokan times. Despite attempts from time to time, exclusivist national identities (based on majority Hindu conceptions) have been difficult to sustain in India. During the one period (1998–2004) when change was most likely under the historic rule of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the BJP ended up having to change itself to stay in power rather than the other way around.

This underlines an enduring aspect of India’s worldview: India’s leaders believe that they have to be continually alert to ensure the country’s territorial and political integrity through an accommodation of differences and diversities. One
key element is secular democracy, which then becomes critical not just for domestic ideological reasons but as justificatory foreign policy, most clearly exemplified in the Kashmir conflict and Indo-Pakistan relations. Secular democracy is also increasingly viewed as giving India soft power advantages in the current global system—a system that has been privileging democratic governance much more than in the past. (Whether the promotion of democracy is motivated or not is a different matter.)

The above-mentioned three factors have been critical features in India’s traditional foreign policy identity and remain relevant despite changing geopolitics and transformed economics, but as noted at the outset, a realist strain is making gains. With this development, India’s foreign policy choices are coming under greater questioning. Sceptics of India’s normative foreign policy legacy are now found increasingly inside the government and governing political classes and could thus signal a shift from the past.

Identity Inputs and India’s Foreign Policy Choices

Major Power Conception and Realist Inroads

Although there is much popular talk in recent years about India’s new identity on the global stage, the discussions tend to be fairly loose, and it flows almost entirely from India’s new economic and military capabilities. Identity seems to be conflated with capabilities—India’s much increased capabilities now make it a major power and hence, India needs to behave as a great power—there are constant exhortations for India to act like a great power, but then the discussion tends to boil down to different political viewpoints of the analyst or policy-maker. So if the well-known strategic analyst C. Raja Mohan calls on India to take up greater ‘global burden sharing’ with other great powers and the US, there are others who believe India should develop an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) to ensure it is a ‘comprehensive power’ rivalling the US and other great powers. Identity then can easily become a form of idiom to push for one political project over another.

On the other hand, the major power conception finds some resonance in the historical idea of India as the inheritor of the British Raj. This post-colonial construction of state identity for India would transcend colonial humiliation by arrogating it. Also in the Indian context, two deeper historical tendencies regarding power politics have often been termed the Ashokan model (non-violence and soft power projection) or the Kautilyan model (realpolitik strategy, military balancing)—both traditions harking back to ancient India during a time when India exercised influence using two quite different methods. The Kautilyan model, which had been dormant for most of India’s post-Independence history, has made something of a comeback in the security discourse of India. As Yashwant Sinha declared, ‘Those who decry the absence of a tradition of strategic thought in India would do well to
go through a 2300 year old Indian treatise called Arthashastra’ (Sinha, 2002). This break with the past can be marked most clearly with the nuclear tests of 1998. While these two ‘models’ are gross simplifications, they offer a legitimizing source for differing conceptions of current day India.

Realist viewpoints have significantly benefited from India’s fear of a rising China, especially China’s activities in South Asia. From a strategic perspective, one could make a plausible argument that China is encircling India with the Chinese construction of Pakistan’s Gwadar port and Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port, implementing energy and infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and building relations with Myanmar over the past several decades. These relationships are often referred to as the Chinese ‘string of pearls’. India is concerned about potential Chinese activism in Afghanistan as well (O’Reilly, 2012). After decades of being in the doldrums, realist thinking now stands a fairly good chance of penetrating official policy discourse, thanks in part to Chinese power projection and potential structural changes.

Persisting Importance of Strategic Autonomy

Despite the incursions being made by realism, I suggest that India’s longer standing normative identity features remain the most important in terms of being permissive or constraining for Indian foreign policy. While I am not prepared to argue that these identity dimensions have a determining quality, I would suggest that they serve as important inputs into the type of foreign policy choices that Indian decision-makers make. Overall, I argue that the key value that has motivated Indian foreign policy-makers over time has been the notion of ‘strategic autonomy’, which cannot be fully understood without placing it in the context of long-standing notions of state identity. This has not been driven simply by the exigencies of post-1945 international political structure but by India’s sense of self as defined through the identity dimensions outlined earlier.

The deep-seated nature of this orientation explains in large part why the foreign policy consensus around strategic autonomy continues to be strong despite fairly radical shifts in India’s regional and global power position. India continues to be an ‘autonomous power’. On the other hand, policy shifts have occurred, particularly since the end of the Cold War. These, however, continue to be circumscribed and conditioned by a commitment to maintaining India’s autonomy of action in international relations, even at some cost to security or global power. The value of autonomy as expressed years ago by a member of the Constituent Assembly remains relevant: ‘…With so small a military force at our disposal he [Nehru] has succeeded in making India respected out of all proportion to our military strength and today the world recognizes that we are really independent and that we follow an independent foreign policy’ (quoted in Schottli, 2012, pp. 134–135). What has changed perceptibly are some of the means by which India now seeks to achieve autonomy, even as it retains its long-standing mentality.
In considering foreign policy means generally, I suggest two major constraints amounting to ‘taboos’ that are unlikely to be crossed—not because of material incapacity or lack of structural imperative but rather because of the nature of India’s state identity as discussed earlier. These are:

- No formal alliance structure or the appearance of alliance
- No use of force to settle disputes or fulfil ambitions

These long-standing taboos deeply affect the kind of foreign policy choices India is making in Asia as well as vis-à-vis the US. Even the realists (except for hardliners who are more accurately described as hyper-nationalists) do not seem especially eager to cross these lines (Ollapally and Rajagopalan, 2011). The high value placed on autonomy makes India lean towards certain preferences over others.

India’s acute aversion to any type of ‘alliance’ politics gives it a preference for multi-polarity enhancing policies, diversification of partnerships, avoidance of containment type policies and avoidance of ‘entrapment’ via partnerships (for example, sending no troops in the Iraq war).

On the question of the use of force, India has been a reluctant actor and has been described as ‘skittish’ (Mehta, 2009, p. 230). This no use of force attitude inclines India towards discursive diplomacy, status symbols of power (which mesh well with civilizational exceptionalism coupled with colonial nationalism), deterrence through ambiguity and technology demonstrators, defensive sovereignty, self-restraint and cross-cutting institutional linkages and memberships in regional and international organizations.

Such proclivities on India’s part are likely to make it relatively easier for its foreign policy-making in Asia and more difficult for its relations with the US. The autonomy value’s impact on India’s foreign policy choices may be briefly illustrated with two examples relating to preferences for status and limits of soft power projection.

India has been an extremely status conscious power in the international system, looking for ways to project itself without necessarily projecting or using military or economic might (Ollapally, 2000). India’s world class achievements in science and technology were pursued with almost single-minded determination to reach the levels of Western powers. Until recently, various accomplishments including the Agni ballistic missile system were referred to as ‘technology demonstrators’, or a show of ability to the outside world. For long, India’s entire nuclear programme could be characterized thus, leading some analyst to argue the irony of India’s stand: drawing criticism from the US and other Western powers for retaining its nuclear ‘option’, but not getting any credit for its nuclear ‘restraint’ for 24 years.

India’s commitment to autonomy tends to circumscribe its ‘soft power’ policy option. In theory, India retains a strong potential to use ‘soft power’ as one of the means for its foreign policy, given its combination of civilizational heritage and historical influence, and its democratic pluralism that has managed to negotiate a
bewildering array of diversities, in contrast to most others. India’s aversion to the use of force should also make India more inclined to use soft power over hard power. A word on soft power: soft power is the ability to make others do what you want on the basis of how they see you, or in other words, acquire power through example. Soft power is less about what you own and more about what you represent. In behavioural terms, soft power is attractive power and is intangible. According to Joseph Nye, who coined the term soft power, India’s regime type has a real advantage over China’s. For soft power proponents, a country’s role in the international arena is being increasingly viewed as a reflection of its society.

It is often pointed out by Indian commentators that India’s rise is generally seen as being benign. For example, in 2008 at a global forum in New Delhi, speakers from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) hailed India’s rise as unique: one that does not evoke concern from other major powers. A critical reason is India’s regime type—an established democracy. This receptiveness is based on the so-called democratic peace theory, the idea that democracies do not go to war with each other (Subrahmanyam, 2010). Yet, India’s plural democracy, which forms a core value for the country, has not been actively deployed. This is in large part because it rubs against the autonomy value in India’s state identity.

For example, the post-Soviet Western norms of humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion (going against traditional Westphalian conceptions fashioned in part to seal Russian defeat) did not sit well with India. This was seen as a form of ‘soft interventionism’ that India feared (rightly or wrongly), given its vulnerabilities in Kashmir and possibly other minority issues, as an infringement of sovereignty.

**Indian Identity and Implications for Relations in Asia**

**The Long Gap**

As European imperialism was ending, Nehru believed that with the emergence of Asian nationalism, countries would rediscover their own identities. He even had a nascent idea of an India-centred Pan-Asianism. As he saw it, ‘India will… develop as the centre of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean area, in Southeast Asia, and right up to the Middle East’. Nehru envisioned a leading role for India in Asia’s revival and even went so far as to imagine two or three Asian federations (Pardesi, 2010, p. 112).

As Andre Gunder Frank notes in his book, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, between 1400 and 1700, the Indian subcontinent and China accounted for the lion’s share of world GDP, world trade flows and capital accumulation (Frank, 1998, pp. 52–165). Yet at Independence, India had little trade with Asia. Nehru put the blame for this lack of inter-Asia trade on colonial policies, intentional

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and otherwise. We get a sense of Nehru’s view in a speech to Indian businesses in 1946:

I wonder if you have realized that one of the major effects of the British occupation on India was the isolation of India from the rest of Asia. Until the British came here, India had many close contacts with her neighbouring countries, but the result of British rule... [was to] cut us off completely. (quoted in Kale, 2009, p. 54)

Given that India was the first Asian country to achieve independence, the Indian prime minister was looked upon by many, Southeast Asian nationalists in particular, as a natural leader in Asia. At the same time, there was another interpretation of India in Asian countries: that India had ambitions to replace the British Empire east of Bengal. Early on, delegates from Burma and Malaya to the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 had expressed worry that Chinese and Indian imperialism might follow European withdrawal.

There were indeed some Indian writers in the immediate post-Independence period who wrote about India as the inheritors of the British Raj—who would be the natural rulers of the Indian Ocean. This did not sit well with Southeast Asian nations in the 1950s and 1960s who viewed India suspiciously. Evocations of India’s historical cultural influences in places like Bali, Thailand and Cambodia came from the Indian side, not from Southeast Asia. But this type of Indian approach was limited to a small minority.

The more dominant impulse that ignited Indian foreign policy at the time was Nehru’s vision of a resurgent Asia working together to safeguard its autonomy after having thrown off Western colonial control. He believed that China and India as great Asian civilizations would be at the centre of this new era in Asia, and thus it is not surprising that he worked out the Panchsheel or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence with China first, seeing in them the prospects for a peaceful Asia. As international relations discourse of the time, this was path-breaking. It was Nehru who conceived and played host to the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 and the Bandung Conference in 1955. Nehru envisioned a united Asia, which would eventually replace the Atlantic community as the future politico-economic global centre (Muni and Yong, 2013, p. 21). In some sense, these were the earliest expressions of India’s Look East policy launched in 1991.

Between the Cold War and the Sino-Indian war of 1962, however, it has taken more than 30 years for the bridge between India and its eastward neighbours to get rebuilt. This time around, it was again India that took the lead, spurred by economic compulsions, but still animated in part by a desire to re-connect with broader Asia in the Nehruvian mould.

As elsewhere, India’s policy preferences in Asia are significantly informed by its core value of national autonomy. This is borne out in a number of ways in the Asian region—the discourse and policy action supporting multi-polarity in conjunction with China and Russia, the reluctance to engage in democracy promoting soft power, underlying resistance to an Asian form of ‘containment’ and the strong support for institutionalism in the region.
Looking East Again

India has steadily used its Look East policy since the early 1990s to re-enter Asia through multilateralism and key bilateral relationships such as those with Singapore, South Korea, China and Japan, along with re-energizing relations with Russia. India, China and Russia have been drawn together by a common worldview on the distribution of international power since 2005 in what amounts to an effort to stake a claim to multi-polarity (Ollapally, 2010, pp. 240–243). Led by the Russians, it began as a counter to perceived American ‘hyper-power’ under unipolarity, and has resulted in a continuing and growing trilateral dialogue. Each country has taken turns in hosting the discussions. All three share an aversion to American interventionism and unilateralism displayed so acutely by the Bush administration. All three are concerned about and opposed to any outside interference in separatist conflicts—Chechnya, Xinjiang and Kashmir. On this, India stands in particular opposition to the US and Europe.

At the same time, each one is concerned about the other’s cultivation of ties with the US and its implications for the regional and global order. As far as India is concerned, the relationship with the US is primary, in large part because it views the possibility of leveraging that relationship to further India’s foreign policy objectives, at least at this historical juncture. However, hard balancing with the US against China as a form of containment is not a serious policy consideration for India now or in the foreseeable future.

For India, China’s ‘acceptance’ of India’s standing on a par with itself has gone a long way in assuaging India’s long held mistrust. In the past, India believed that China resisted being drawn into negotiations that elevated India’s status such as including India in any non-South Asia nuclear dialogues in the 1990s. Thus, the reference by Chinese President Hu Jintao to civil nuclear energy cooperation with India in 2006 was viewed as a watershed in India. China has also shown increasing openness to Indian participation in regional organizations in which Beijing may have harboured hopes of exerting primacy such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (Ollapally, 2010).

Likewise, it is not surprising that the idea of a ‘concert of democracies’ in Asia floated in 2007 to include India, Japan, Australia and US did not get off the ground (Mehta, 2009). In addition to the fear of infringement on its sovereignty, other reasons militate against such a policy in Asia for India—immediate security concerns demand that it continue to do business with authoritarian regimes; India may well be attuned to the idea that democracy is simply too difficult to promote; and may hold the belief that it is unwise to have another two-tier system of power. More pointedly, New Delhi is said to have dropped the idea after coming under severe diplomatic pressure from China which perceived the potential grouping as a thinly disguised ‘Asian NATO’.

Most importantly, India has made much headway in key Asian regional organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and the Asia-Europe Meeting. Having been invited to the inaugural meeting of the East Asian
Summit in 2004, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced his intention to pursue ‘the eventual creation of Asian Economic Community, or the “arc of prosperity” that I envisage to become a reality in the early part of the 21st century’. He reaffirmed this offer subsequently. This willingness to integrate with the rest of Asia economically has been made possible by a revision of India’s autarkic economic policies and adoption of globalization since 1991.

The realization that India has been a net beneficiary of globalization, contrary to long-standing fears, has led to some redefinition of India’s economic identity—now attaching greater value to regional and global interdependence. While India has historically been a ‘sovereignty hawk’ in strategic and economic affairs, it is gradually shifting its worldview. There is growing acceptance that India has been confusing ‘autonomy with autarky, sovereignty with power, and interdependence with a lack of independence’ (Mehta, 2007, p. 186). Still, what is also remarkable is India’s continuing ‘autonomy’ strategy in international negotiations (Narlikar, 2006, p. 60). This has led to disappointment in some ASEAN quarters about the lack of bold initiatives or ideas originating from India for the Asian region in both the security and economic realms.

The introduction of a broader Asian economic concept also seemed to show new strategic sensibilities and a measure of India’s desire to stay firmly involved in the East Asian economic integrative process in case India is outmanoeuvred by a parallel process known as ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and Korea). India has stepped up its pursuit of ASEAN states, which New Delhi sees as the springboard to the rest of Asia, with former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, for example, offering a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) right after China’s offer of a FTA, surprising Indian bureaucrats who were caught off guard. Both India’s and China’s FTA with ASEAN came into force in January 2010. From the 1990s or so, India’s focus in Asia was to strengthen ties with ASEAN. India is now in what New Delhi has called the Phase II of the Look East policy—that is, relationships with East Asia. However, ASEAN is likely to remain the anchor for India in Asia as India is averse to either a China-led or US-led dynamic region and prefers ASEAN to have a large role. Prime Minister Singh has repeatedly cited ASEAN’s importance to India. At the ASEAN Summit in Bali in November 2011, he stated, ‘Our partnership with ASEAN is one of the cornerstones of our foreign policy, and the foundation of our “Look East” policy’ (quoted in Muni and Mun, 2012, p. 3).

The multilateral option for Asian security is likely to be seen by India as the lowest cost and least provocative method to deal with China. It has the greatest traction because it is the most consistent with India’s normative preferences. For example, India’s decision in 2012 to uncharacteristically accept the invitation to join the ADMM+8 (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) was defended with an explanation echoing such policy preferences. One observer noted, ‘Despite India’s hitherto aversion to be part of any multilateral security alliance, it decided to join the ADMM+8 partly because it was primarily ASEAN-driven, and partly because it was only a co-operative security forum that poses no threat to any major power’ (ibid., p. 11). This kind of thinking is evident even in the case of India–China
border controversies. For example, when the government faced criticism for what one Member of Parliament (MP) claimed was the ‘over-eagerness of this Government not to ruffle Chinese sensibilities even after provocative Chinese statements regarding Arunachal Pradesh’, another MP retorted that ‘When Barack Obama feared to meet Dalai Lama, we gave assent to Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh. What does it speak of? It speaks of the autonomy of our foreign policy’ (Mahtab and Chowdhury, 2010). The assertion of ‘autonomy’ was viewed in this case as equivalent to or as even better than any hard-line response to China, attesting to the strong hold of the autonomy value.

However, evidence of a possible policy shift comes from the fact that increasing numbers of traditional Nehruvians are themselves issuing warnings about China and Asian security in realist terms. As one Congress MP put it: ‘It is a matter of great concern that our neighbour China…is adopting a “String of Pearls” strategy… Naturally in the coming years, it is our duty to secure the Indian Ocean region’ (Chaudhary, 2009). Similarly, India’s Ministry of External Affairs, long noted for its traditional views, chose to rebuff China’s informal request made to the Indian Navy to be given observer or associate member status in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) led by India. Apparently, the ministry did not see any rationale in involving China in the Indian Ocean (Kumar, 2011, p. 53).

Conclusions

Beyond the much observed convergence of economic growth and development as a key national objective of most Asian countries, I summarize a number of other policy preferences held by India that finds resonance in the region, and which could contribute towards regional cooperation:

- Preference for a multi-polar world
- Strong norm against alliances
- Favours soft security architecture for the region
- Non-intervention—soft or otherwise
- Discursive diplomacy—dialogue over legalistic contracts
- Favours multilateralism to embed state into the region, but favours selective multilateralism globally

India’s preferences cannot be understood without referring to its state identity as it has evolved over time. While its core value of strategic autonomy is still in force in Indian foreign policy, it has taken on a different form that is more nuanced, more flexible and adaptable. Until the 1990s, India exercised its autonomy largely in a negative mode: refusing to participate in alignments, treaties and markets viewed as skewed towards Western powers (Khilnani, 2005, p. 8). There seems to be a growing willingness to trade off a measure of sovereignty for perceived

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benefits. India has also not been immune to the changing balance of power in Asia and its past aversion to power politics may be weakening, beginning most pointedly with the 1998 nuclear tests. In its relations with China, for example, India is forging a complex policy of China as a partner, rival and model. How successful India and China are in managing their relationship will keenly affect the extent to which India can continue to hold on to its traditional normatively driven foreign policy. The realist impulse is becoming a distinct alternative in Indian foreign policy discourse like never before.

Meanwhile, I suggest that India may now be particularly well positioned to play the role of a ‘bridging power’ more effectively, matching its state identity with a new evolving international role. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described India as a ‘bridging power’ on multiple occasions. India’s membership in groups ranging from G-20 and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), to India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as well as its serious claim to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, gives India distinct opportunities and status to utilize a greater mix of soft and hard power options than in the past. However, the extent to which India can play a bridge role in Asia will also be conditioned by the structural balance of power in the region and how well India’s long-standing preferences can withstand the inevitable challenge from realist quarters.

Notes

1. This term has been used by both scholars and policy-makers including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It has been best enunciated by Khilnani (2005).
2. Since the 1980s, many Indian analysts have been commenting on this gap. The first commentator to argue forcefully that India lacked a strategic culture was American author George Tanham (1992), leading to a sudden brief burst of writings by Indian analysts, many pointing to India’s discursive diplomacy versus Western legalistic approaches, which outsiders did not grasp. This initiative has not produce much enduring work. However, a good compendium of writings on India’s strategic culture is by Bajpai and Mattoo (1996). See also Ollapally (2000) and Cohen and Dasgupta (2010).
3. For a good overview, see Abdelal et al. (2006, pp. 675–711). One of the book length studies of operationalizing identity is by Abdelal et al. (2009).
5. For an excellent early discussion of the state and levels of analysis, see Ikenberry et al. (1988). For a classic work on the importance and independence of the state in foreign policy, see Skocpol (1985).
6. Ashizawa (2008) offers a good recent application of identity theory to foreign policy and this section draws on his approach.
7. See, for example, Narlikar (2006).
8. For one take on India’s non-dualism, see Upadhyaya (2009).
9. It could be countered that this ambiguity provides policy-makers greater room for policy rationalizations or avoiding hard decisions.

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10. For a discussion on rising challenges to traditional Indian foreign policy thinking, see Ollapally and Rajagopalan (2011, 2012).
11. Yashwant Sinha (2002) is a prominent politician who has forcefully argued otherwise. Mohan (2004) is often seen as India’s most articulate ‘realist’, who describes India’s policy shift towards greater pragmatism and realism.
12. For a perspective that is critical of India’s culture in this connection, see Singh (1998).
13. For divergent views on Nehru’s legacy, see, for example, Mehta (2009) and Karnad (2012). For a classic work on Nehru’s views, see Rana (1969).
14. For a good discussion focusing primarily on Indian secularism, see Khilnani (1979, p. 179).
15. For good discussions, see Bhargava (1998).
16. For a discussion of India’s reconciliation of diverse identities historically, see Ollapally (2008, pp. 25–52).
17. For example, the BJP’s political platform had called for change in India’s Constitution that gives special rights to minorities and the state of Kashmir.
18. For an outline distinguishing realism from nationalism and other worldviews, see Nau and Ollapally (2012, pp. 210–226).
19. Sri Lanka is a good example of how India is unable to outplay China even diplomatically: with Sri Lanka holding a ‘China card’, it looks like India is having to accommodate Sri Lankan position on the democratic rights of Tamils over which India has leverage, rather than the other way around. See The Guardian (Sri Lanka), 6 November 2012 (www.srilankaguardian.org/2012/11/upr-sri-lanka-india-does-summersault-is.html).
20. I am not saying something particularly new about strategic autonomy, but want to contextualize strategic autonomy in identity terms.
21. On the question of whether to contribute Indian troops in Iraq, something that the US Pentagon had been heavily banking on, some retired military brass like Lt. General Satish Nambiar (2003, p. 37) said that sending a force would give India a chance to be a major player ‘in considerations of realpolitik’, and Admiral Raja Menon (2003) charged that India ‘would be timid…if opportunity is wasted’. India ultimately decided against sending troops despite the BJP government holding power.
22. For those who would point to Goa, Sikkim and Sri Lanka as examples of use of force, each one is more remarkable for its uniqueness than a generalization. Goa was clearly a post-colonial nation-building effort and the last one is most notable for the lesson learned against intervention. Sikkim is more questionable.
23. For a discussion of India’s power by example, see Mehta (2009). For a detailed discussion of India’s soft power, see Hymans (2009).
24. A leading proponent is Tharoor (2007), a former high ranking UN official and more recently, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs.
26. See, for example, Anderson (2010) and Pant (2010). For a view that India’s Look East Asianization is a combination of anti-Western nationalism and Hindu nationalism, see Jaffrelot (2003, pp. 55–61).
27. See, for example, Mahbubani (2011) on why India should not fall into the ‘trap’ of US containment of China by proxy.
28. Garver (2001) has described this asymmetry of interest between China and India, with the Chinese not taking India seriously for an extended period of time. See also Shambaugh (2006).
29. Interview with a high level Indian official, New Delhi, January 2010.
31. Interviews with ASEAN policy analysts, September 2011.

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First submission: June 2012
Final submission: December 2012