

The Limits of Washington's Perspective on India

An Essay for Ananta Aspen Centre

By James Mann

The classic text on American perceptions of Asia, written more than a half-century ago, is called Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India. In it, Harold Isaacs, an MIT political scientist and former foreign correspondent, describes how American perceptions of China and India are formed on the basis of extremely limited information and are subject to wild swings, as one stereotype is replaced by another. Isaacs' title appears to treat China and India on an equal footing, in deference to the fact that in population, the two countries stand alongside one another and apart from the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, the truth is that for Americans, China has always "scratched" harder. Over the years, it has invariably garnered considerably more attention than India, both from the U.S. government and from the American public. For more than a century, India was a British colony:

Americans stood at one remove, while Britain controlled its trade as well as its government. In contrast, China held a special allure for Americans: Uncolonized, China loomed as the great untapped market for American products, the greatest number of unconverted souls for American missionaries. During the Cold War, Americans at first feared Communist China even more than the Soviet Union – but ultimately, for more than two decades, China became its close collaborator in strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union. India was never on the same footing, whether as partner or as adversary.

Isaacs himself reflected this skewed American perspective. He sought to write “Scratches” about both China and India, but he was, fundamentally, a China hand, a former newspaper editor in Shanghai, who as a journalist witnessed the early stages of China’s civil war and, two decades later sought to explain it. India was clearly of secondary interest.

A half-century later, I can claim to be no different: As an American journalist and author, I have reflected many of the same patterns, interests and imbalances as Isaacs did. For well over a decade, from 1987 to 2001, I

was the correspondent and columnist responsible for writing about Asia in the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times – yet in truth, it was invariably a China-centered Asia. Much like Isaacs, my interest and involvement with Asia began when I lived in and covered China. Over the years covering Asia from Washington, I visited China and Japan repeatedly, as well as Southeast Asia, Russia, South Korea and Australia, but I never set foot in India. In those days, even fifteen years ago, Asia meant East Asia.

When I visited India for two months this fall as the Avantha Fellow at the Ananta Aspen Center, I was trying as best I could in a short period of time to overcome this disparity. I wanted to talk with as many people as possible, to see the country, to get a sense of the issues India faces, particularly on foreign policy. I wanted to explore the perceptions Indians have of the United States, to reflect on the validity of assumptions Americans have about India, and also, finally, to examine the ideas both Indians and Americans have these days about China.

I was eager to test out the ideas about India that currently hold sway in the American foreign policy and think-tank communities. America's

specialists on India of course follow the country closely in detail. For the rest of us (that is, those in the United States who pay attention to foreign policy, but not specifically to India), a fairly simple story line about India has emerged. It goes something like this: *India has changed. In the past, America thought of India mostly in regional terms and in relationship to Pakistan, but those days are past: India is gradually becoming a confident global power, one that has moved beyond its intense Cold War mistrust of the United States. It has also moved beyond its preoccupation with Pakistan. Instead, India should enter America's strategic calculations mostly in relationship to the world beyond South Asia, notably China.*

(I should note that I am not quoting anyone here, but rather distilling what I think is a fair representation of Washington viewpoints on India over the past few years.)

The principal learning experience of my visit was to see how oversimplified this current Washington view of India is. In fact, it represents no more than another series of “scratches on our minds.” Viewed up close and on the ground, India looks far less changed than the Washington views of it. Indeed, if India is on its way to becoming a global power at all, it will do so extremely slowly. The country seems, in many ways, deeply parochial

in its outlook and uneasy about anything that seems like collaboration with the United States.

My own introduction to popular Indian ambivalence towards the United States came a little over a decade ago, when an Indian official then living in Washington showed to me, with amusement, a book that was then making the rounds in India. Written by Jairam Ramesh, it carried the provocative title “Yankee Go Home – And Take Me With You.” I thought often of those words while I was in India, because they captured well the country’s conflicted attitudes towards America.

The current, updated version of the slogan could be called, “Yankee, We’d Like To Become Closer Friends – But Why Are You Offering?” In interviews and in casual conversations during my stay in India, I found great uncertainty over the fact that the United States has been encouraging India to play a more active role in the world.

At one university event in which I participated at Jamia Millia Islamia, students voiced intense suspicions about statements by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the effect that India was a rising power and could be potentially helpful to American policy around the world. I had to ask, finally, whether the students might not have been even more upset if,

contrarily, Clinton (or some other American official) had characterized India as useless and going nowhere.

This sense of ambivalence towards the United States was not confined to students; I also found it among journalists, scholars and other intellectuals. On occasion, there was an underlying assumption that if the United States were seeking some objective overseas, it must necessarily be for some malevolent purpose. At other times, there seemed to be a fear that the United States might somehow be about to induce or trick India into doing things it should not want to do.

Above all, I was surprised by the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in India, both about American policy and about international affairs in general. Sometimes, the purported conspiracies were based on assumptions that were simply wrong or outdated. The United States was said to be pursuing policies in the Middle East or Central Asia primarily because of its interest in oil or pipelines – when, in fact, the truth is that, because of shale oil production, America is becoming ever less dependent on (and thus less interested in) importing oil from overseas.

Above all, the Indian misperceptions and conspiracy theories concern American policy towards Pakistan. I do not mean to minimize India's longstanding concerns about Pakistan itself. But in the imagination of quite a

few Indians, the United States' views of and policy towards Pakistan have remained a constant over the past half-century: the United States favors Pakistan in its policies and is enamored of its leaders. "The United States is now more dependent on Pakistan than at any other time," observed Suresh Prabhu, India's former minister of industry.

Coming from Washington, this was simply jarring: In my experience over the past decade, Americans, at both the popular and the official level, have come to view Pakistan these days with emotions ranging from deep mistrust to outright revulsion. At the top, U.S. government officials now regularly complain that Pakistani officials have lied to them in person and have been two-faced in their policies. For ordinary Americans, who do not follow foreign policy much, the simple fact that Osama bin Laden was found living comfortably inside Pakistan established a view of the country that will take decades to change.

To be sure, American policy did "tilt" towards Pakistan in the past, to use Henry Kissinger's phrase, in ways confirmed by countless historical studies. Yet India seems reluctant to recognize that American policy has changed and slow to adjust to those changes. This problem of failure to adapt is all the more true when it comes to larger questions about the American role in the world: Quite a few Indians, at least at the popular level,

cling to old fears about American dominance, when in fact the immediate problem confronting India foreign policy may well be a reduction of American power and influence in South Asia caused by the coming U.S. withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Once again, India's ambivalence is evident: I left Delhi uncertain whether Indians want America to be less assertive in the world or more so.

When it comes to China policy, I was not surprised to find that India is similarly torn. The United States, after all, has had for years its own internal disagreements about how to deal with China. The Obama administration took office determined to avoid conflicts with China; the new president was so solicitous of Beijing during his first year that he put off a meeting with the Dalai Lama and accepted tight restrictions on what he should do or say during his first visit to China. Starting in 2010, however, Obama began to shift ground and has pursued policies aimed at making sure that China does not reach a position of dominance in East Asia.

Among Indians who have spent their careers on foreign policy or in the military, ideas about China begin with a bit of envy. Chinese officials, I

was told several times, are much better at strategy than their Indian counterparts. China is by nature “hard-headed,” while India’s nature is “dreamy,” observed former foreign and defense minister Jaswant Singh. Coupled with the envy is a sense of admiration at China’s ability to use commercial and economic power as a tool in its foreign policy. Inside the Indian military there is a joke making the rounds: In the early Nehru era, before the 1962 war, India’s policy towards China was *bhai bhai*. In the years that followed, it was “bye-bye.” But today, India’s policy is “buy, buy.” The current reality, many Indians believe, is that China has become much more economically powerful than India, and will remain so for decades. The only way the situation would change, I was told, were if something would happen internally in China – ie, some sort of domestic upheaval that would weaken the country’s external position.

What should India do, particularly in the face of a new Chinese assertiveness in places like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh or in claims over water from the Brahmaputra River? Most Indians I interviewed believed that India’s policy towards China needed to become more assertive, if only in response to what China is doing.

B.J. Panda, a member of the Lok Sabha, began his discussion of China with a warning against what he called “gung-ho ism”: “It’s our

neighborhood, and unlike the United States, we can't leave our neighborhood," he cautioned. But he then went on to say: "A win-win with China cannot happen by India hesitating to speak out. 'Win-win means India becoming more assertive.'"

Some Indian leaders offer opinions considerably stronger than these. Former foreign secretary and ambassador to Washington Lalit Mansingh argued that China is turning into a direct threat to India's economic and military interests and its international standing. "In my view, Pakistan is yesterday's threat. The real threat to India's security comes from China," Mansingh said. Debunking China's claims that it is in favor of multipolarity, Mansingh said of Chinese leaders: "They want a multipolar world, but a unipolar Asia."

But then the obvious question arises: Should India seek a partnership with the United States (and/or with other nations in East Asia) to restrain Chinese power in the region? On that sensitive issue, views in India seem to differ widely. Here, India's longstanding conflicts about the United States come into play. Quite a few Indians would be happy for a stronger relationship with the United States. Other Indians, however, worry that India does not want to become America's "bulwark" against China; they fear that,

if they form too strong a relationship or partnership with the United States, America might somehow “use” India in ways that are not in India’s interests. So long as those sentiments persist, it seems unlikely that the leaders of the two countries will be able to form a close partnership to counterbalance increasing Chinese assertions of power in Asia. Instead, each government will have to deal with China largely on its own.

Over the course of two months, I obtained an on-the-ground sense for India, its people and its policies that I had lacked for decades as I wrote about foreign policy from Washington. I obviously did not become an expert, far from it. But I was able not merely to meet and talk with people, but to get a sense of some of the nuances of its history. (For example: Americans’ limited, scratches-on-our-minds view of the Indian independence movement starts and ends with Gandhi and Nehru, but during a visit to Kolkota, we became deeply immersed in and started to read up on the life of Subhas Chandra Bose.) I was able to get the sense of current life in India that comes through in the daily press – whether on issues that are serious (gang rapes, dengue fever) or ridiculous (soothsayers divining

hidden deposits of gold). I became wrapped up in the early stages of India's political campaign, and the controversies surrounding Narendra Modi. He figured even in my discussions of India and China: When I asked Indians what Modi might do, as prime minister, in dealing with China, the answers ran in two directions: Some predicted that, because of Modi's aggressive personality, India would become more confrontational in dealing with China, while others maintained that because of his authoritarian nature and strong interest in a "Singapore model" of economic growth, Modi would develop closer ties with China. In effect, the subject of Modi's intentions became a Rorschach test for looking at India's current uncertainties.

Yet all of these developments seemed to become, unfortunately, much more remote when I returned to Washington. As I tried to talk to friends and colleagues about Indian issues – the upcoming election, for example -- I found once again that America's knowledge of India is limited, as is the attention span for new information about the country. To take merely one example: I found that many of my American friends, outside of the realm of foreign policy, knew nothing at all about the Bush administration's nuclear agreement with India, and were surprised to hear that, because of it, George W. Bush is more popular in India than in most other countries.

Despite all the advances in communications and transportation over the past four decades, then, India remains too much in the category of “scratches on our minds” in the thinking of Washington’s foreign-policy elites, at least outside the small group of Americans who spent most of their time on India. I hope that gradually, over time, the situation will change, as India does more on the world stage and as Washington comes to recognize its importance.

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