

Foreign policy through a neoclassical lens



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

It is well known that domestic politics has had a direct bearing on India's foreign policy manoeuvring and posturing. This was most visible during the process of signing of the 123 nuclear deal with the United States and the Indian response to Sri Lanka's demand for weapons and support to fight the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*, Rajesh Basrur attempts to argue that the Indian foreign policy has been plagued by voluntary as well as involuntary drifts. By doing this, the author pitches a new perspective towards explaining the evolution of

Indian foreign policy. He argues that these drifts have a capacity to impact the long-term goals of Indian foreign policy. "Involuntary drift has been a constant domestic structural problem in a fragmented political system, where the distribution of domestic political power is such that the executive lacks sufficient control over the making of foreign policy," he writes.

To differentiate between voluntary and involuntary drifts, the author says "...the notion of control" is the essential factor here. He argues that involuntary drifts occur when leaders are "unable to exercise a substantial degree of control". Voluntary drifts occur when there are policy drifts "despite the absence of serious material constraints — that is, the structure of the domestic politics is not a significant factor" impacting policies.

With these definitions as the central theme, the book sets itself apart from the existing literature on Indian foreign policy-making or approaches by explaining four major events from the

purview of voluntary as well as involuntary drifts. These "instances range across diverse types of India's strategic relationships: The involuntary ones with two relatively friendly states, the United States and Sri Lanka; and the voluntary ones with major adversaries, China and Pakistan". The author attempts to explain "...why foreign policy outcomes deviating from the realist expectations of policymakers have occurred" and how "involuntary drift..... has been a constant phenomenon in India since the late 1980s".

Two major examples discussed to understand involuntary drift are the 123 nuclear deal and India-Sri Lanka relations. The 123 nuclear deal was a "pivotal moment in the bilateral relationship". Even when the benefits gained by signing the deal were obvious to the Indian leadership of the time, the deal faced several hurdles, the primary reason being the coalition government. Though the final outcome from the deal "was more favourable to India than it

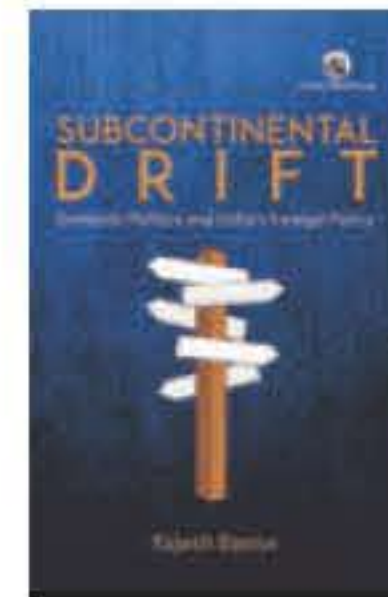
might have been" the reality of domestic policy resulted in involuntary drift.

The Indian government faced similar challenges with respect to its relations with Sri Lanka. Because of the demands of the coalition government and the sentiments of the Tamil Nadu state government, the central government was forced to undertake policies that were less conducive to India's regional policy goals.

"The structure of domestic politics can play an important role in producing outcomes that a leadership does not want ... when responding to systemic incentives," he writes.

To highlight the voluntary drift, "where the structure is not a significantly inhibiting factor" in Indian foreign policy-making, the author uses the

examples of India's nuclear test in 1998 and the handling of cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, especially the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008. When discussing India's nuclear policy and positioning, the author highlights the dichotomy of a mix of minimalist policy which has several maximalist agenda too. The contradiction has been juxtaposed



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well with respect to other approaches and goals of the Indian foreign policy.

The author uses interviews of people in prominent positions across military and civilian roles to underscore this point. He highlights the fact

that, "... India is ambivalent: maximalist on variety, and minimalist on numbers". In the case of the terrorist attacks, the domestic structure and "the Indian state was seriously wanting in meeting its responsibility". To highlight the voluntary drift, he asserts that external factors have played a more crucial role, so the Indian government has had limited options. With

the specific examples used in the book, it is Pakistan and China that have played an important role in the voluntary drift.

The book uses neoclassical realism as the basis to understand the challenges that Indian foreign policy makers experience. He writes, "... neoclassical realism, ... acknowledges the importance of the structure of the international system but brings in domestic politics as critical determinants of what states actually do". The author also concludes that "involuntary drift may possibly be temporary, but voluntary drift is a more debilitating long-term problem".

Subcontinental Drift is an essential read for anyone interested in understanding the existing challenges of Indian foreign policies. The author calls these challenges drifts also because they do not stall the progress of the policies but limit the force with which they move. The book brings a new theoretical lens and a fresh perspective to the study of Indian foreign policy-making.

The reviewer is assistant professor, O P Jindal Global University