

Anti-Colonial Discourse as Geopolitics: Expanding International Relations Theory

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Abstract

Scholars often view anti-colonialism as little more than moral rhetoric in which former colonised states question the West by employing narratives of historic victimisation and marginalisation. While this moral messaging has shaped aspects of post-colonial foreign policy, anti-colonialism is rarely appreciated as a tool of geopolitical practice. This article applies theories of critical geopolitics to argue that anti-colonialism was and is a unique geopolitical strategy allowing formerly colonized states to re-balance centers of political, economic, and military power from historically colonising states to the colonised states. Importantly, anti-colonialism is a geopolitical alternative to territorially defined, Westphalian concepts such as sovereignty and the anarchic international system of states. India has historically maintained a leading role in elucidating and employing anti-colonialism as a geopolitical framework and this article explores four sub-themes of this framework: autochthonous freedom, Pan-Asianism, non-violence, and non-alignment. Each of these sub-themes is explored by examining the geopolitical discourse of Indian leaders through the lens of critical geopolitics, which argues that geography is not objective fact but contested history. Through these sub-themes, Indian leaders have used anti-colonialism as a geopolitical tool to challenge existing power-territory structures to rebalance global power in favor of the formerly colonized world.

Keywords-Anti-colonialism; geopolitics; critical geopolitics; developing societies; India; post-colonialism; international relations theory.

Introduction

Contemporary discussion of geopolitics often favors a realist approach to studying the relationship between sovereign political states and geographic space. Such an approach prefers to focus on levels of state power, differentiating between great, middle, and small powers. It insists that 'the attributes of the sovereign state are readily discernible and can be objectively quantified,' (Pourmokhtari 2013, 1782)¹ and it often privileges military capacity as the most important of these objectively quantified elements determining the nature of state behavior. Such a view simultaneously demotes (or ignores entirely) subjective elements of state identity as important elements affecting state behavior, such as history, culture, and ideology. In opposition to this, post-positivist international relations scholarship criticises such geopolitical writing for its

¹ Pourmokhtari, Navid. 2013. "A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a 'West-centre' discipline." *Third World Quarterly*. 34, no. 10: 1767-1793.

assumption that the political structures and worldviews of Western states are universal and therefore apply to the rest of the international community. Post-colonial IR scholarship specifically argues that such views do not give adequate attention to the geopolitical practices of formerly colonised states nor to the alternate forms of sovereign power that have arisen in these states, and they criticize the 'poor and undifferentiated understanding of the specificity of modern forms of power, and more particularly the forms of sovereignty that developed around the colonial encounter' (Hansen & Stepputat 2006, 300).² This represents the classic tension in international relations theory between positivist (objective) and post-positivist (subjective) approaches.

This paper adds to post-colonial arguments by detailing the anti-colonial origins of the geopolitical action of post-colonial states, or what is often termed the Global South. While post-colonial studies do host post-positivist voices critiquing largely Western-centric theories about international state behavior,³ much of post-colonial scholarship tends to narrowly focus on the ways in which anti-colonial discourse shaped (or did not shape) the formation of nationalism in post-colonial societies. This paper moves beyond an examination of the constitutive elements of post-colonial state formation and argues that anti-colonialism also provided structure and focus to the geopolitical vision and foreign policy practice of such states.

In this respect, anti-colonialism also represented a geopolitical approach different from that of Western states, which traditionally utilised military means as a method to enforce control over distant space. By contrast, anti-colonialism sought to reclaim these and other forms of power from former colonial states by employing arguments of identity and moral goodness (Capan 2017).⁴ More importantly, it also sought to challenge elements taken as given in traditional Western (Westphalian) international relations theory, such as sovereignty, territorial inviolability, and the predominance of an anarchic international system of states, by exploring 'the uneven, unequal ways nation-states--understood as particular historical geo-political formations within a world system--are produced as similar yet distinct and separable' (Mongia 2007, 386).⁵ Of the many post-colonial states which have employed anti-colonial geopolitics, India presented particularly robust challenges to Western (Westphalian) conceptions of international sovereignty and statehood. These challenges are historically rooted in the discourse of anti-colonialism. That is, Indian leaders employed the narrative of colonisation to express preferences for non-Western intellectual and philosophical traditions which favor hyperlocalised narratives over meta-narratives, condemn

² Hansen, Thomas Blom & Finn Stepputat. 2006. "Sovereignty Revisited." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 35: 295-315. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25064926>

³ For this paper, I define anti-colonialism as the active practice of resisting colonial influence either before the fact or after being subject to colonisation. This paper also incorporates the following definition of anti-colonialism: '...forms of ideology critique that expose as false the colonizer's claim that colonial values are properly enlightened or universal.' See: Krishnan, Sanjay. 2009. "The Place of India in Postcolonial Studies: Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Spivak." *New Literary History*. 40, no. 2. Spring: 265-280. 265. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27760258>

⁴ Capan, Zeynep Gulsah. 2017. "Decolonising International Relations?" *Third World Quarterly*. 38, issue 1: 1-15. Available from: DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2016.1245100

⁵ Mongia, Radhika. 2007. "Historicizing State Sovereignty: Inequality and the Form of Equivalence." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 49, no. 2. April: 384-411.

structural inequalities in (Western-built and Western-led) international institutions, criticise the tension caused by Westphalian borders, and emphasise alternatives to Western-created security, economic, and political norms. Nair, for example, emphasises that post-colonial international relations frameworks are ‘concerned with the disparities in global power and wealth accumulation and why some states and groups exercise so much power over others’ (Nair 2017, 69).⁶ Taken together, these challenges present alternative geopolitical definitions to how space and place have traditionally been viewed in the West.

In India particularly, prime ministers have often captured themes of this anti-colonial geopolitical arc by incorporating into their discourse important focus areas. This article focuses on four of these areas: autochthonous freedom, pan-Asianism, non-violence, and non-alignment. All four of these capture varying degrees of geopolitical intent to refocus global discourse away from the military and economic preponderance of established Western powers and relocate it in the Global South (or East), thereby increasing the weight of India’s (and others’) contributions. It adopts the predominant theory of critical geopolitics, which argues that ‘the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space’ (Toal 1996, 1).⁷ This logic sought to overturn consensus that assumed geography as static and objective features. In doing so, it foregrounded the importance of ‘*an active writing of the earth by an expanding, centralizing imperial state*.’⁸

Autochthonous Freedom

Webster defines ‘autochthonous’ as ‘formed or originating in the place where found’ (Merriam Webster n.d.).⁹ This definition is particularly important when we assess how terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ are employed by colonised states, and in the geopolitical discourse of Indian prime ministers in particular. Anti-colonial discourse emphasised a rejection of Western attempts to coopt narratives of freedom, independence, and self-governance and instead sought to highlight indigenous ownership of independence movements precisely ‘in the place where found.’ Capan notes how ‘The alterity that was established with the “discovery” [of the New World] established a “geo-cultural division of knowledge production” both spatially and temporally. These differences and binary oppositions posit the West in a “flexible positional superiority” of being the knower, of being human, of being civilised. What is written for the ‘others’ is always a story of a lack and a story of catching up’ (Capan 2017, 3).¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee much earlier echoed the same sentiment in his treatise

⁶ Nair, Sheila. 2017. “Postcolonialism.” in *International Relations Theory*. eds. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Waters & Christian Scheinplflug. Bristol, England: E-International Relations. 69-75.

⁷ Toal, Gerard. 1996. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Merriam-Webster. n.d. Autochthonous. In *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved on April 25, 2022. Available from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autochthonous>

¹⁰ In this quote, Capan also cites: Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York. Vintage Books. 7; Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World when he compared “Western” and “Eastern” forms of nationalism and the prevailing Western sense that “Eastern” nationalism lacked the means to reach Western ‘standards of progress’ (Chatterjee 1986, 1-2).¹¹

The specific geopolitics of demanding autochthonous freedom manifested as a rejection of colonising (foreign) governing and military communities from territorially delimited regions. By arguing that such regions had a history of governance that preceded colonial presence, it delegitimised the governing authority of colonising powers and thus their physical presence in the country (Nehru 1985, 52).¹² It emphasised the right of indigenous people to own their inherent freedom rather than receive that freedom as the result of the ostensible good intentions of colonising states. To this effect, it rejected a definition of freedom which embraced a ‘dichotomous distinction between modern and traditional societies [which] meant that postcolonial states had to undergo economic development as a condition for sovereignty and to achieve socio-political progress’ (Pourmokhtari 2013, 1778).¹³

It also insisted that freedom was inherently just and did not need further advancement or defense from Western states applying Western liberal principles to non-Western societies, and it rejected the West’s ownership of sovereignty, which rested in ‘the notion that the key to understanding the politics of peoples who are neither modern nor civilised lies in interpreting their culture’ (Pourmokhtari 2013, 1777).¹⁴ In this context, India’s prime ministers and early freedom advocates more often narrowly focused on India’s own freedom struggle against colonial oppression to convey India’s early geopolitical voice. Thus Nehru asserted in 1949 that ‘Freedom cannot exist on the strength of other people. It can only be based on one’s own strength and self-reliance’ (Nehru 1949, 5)¹⁵ and he wrote that ‘For any subject country national freedom must be the first and dominant urge; for India, with her intense sense of individuality and a past heritage, it was doubly so’ (Nehru 1985, 52).¹⁶ Specifically to the Indian experience, the British Raj ‘was a state run for Britain, by Britons who...never made their home in India, never assimilated, and were never committed to India’s interests before Britain’s imperial interests’ (Menon 2021, 34).¹⁷ The underlying geopolitical argument here was that distant political rulers could not justly govern distant land. Colonial rule could never embrace the wellbeing of the colonised and the ruled. Some have noted the role of the 1877 famine in birthing the creation of the Indian National Congress, when Lord

¹¹ Chatterjee, Partha. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. New York: United Nations University.

¹² Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1985. *The Discovery of India Centenary Edition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Pourmokhtari. 2013.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1949. “Translation of speech delivered by the Prime Minister at the Red Fort in Delhi on the morning of the 15th August, 1949.” *Press Information Bureau of India Archives (1947-2001)*. Available from: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/phase2/archiveyear.aspx?mincode=PRIME%20MINISTER>

¹⁶ Nehru. 1985.

¹⁷ Menon, Shivshankar. 2021. *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd.

Lytton 'spent extravagantly on the Delhi Durbar of 1877' (Sanyal 2012, 250).¹⁸ After this British rule rapidly lost whatever moral authority it may have had, its popularity declined, and anti-colonial sentiment peaked. This suffering was another 'freedom' on which Indian leaders placed emphasis: the freedom from poverty and underdevelopment, also described as dignity. Take, for example, the 1949 Independence Day speech of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in which he sought not only 'national freedom but of the freedom from poverty and distress' (Nehru 1959).¹⁹ Freedom is discussed here in the context of national development and human dignity for Indian citizens, and for Nehru this meant 'change in the status and conditions of life of the peasant' (Nehru 1985, 407).²⁰

From all of this, a thread arises in Nehru's geopolitical vision which emphasised 'the desire, common to all men, to resist another's domination' and expressed his frustration that India 'should be bound hand and foot to a far-away island which imposed its will upon her' (Nehru 1985, 49).²¹ Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, too, repeatedly used the term 'freedom' to highlight the autochthonous nature of India's definition of 'freedom,' rather than the more universal application seen in Western, Lockean political philosophy. Across her Independence Day speeches in 1966, 1968, 1980, 1981, 1982, and 1983, she referred to India's 'freedom struggle,' its 'struggle for fight,' the 'freedom struggle,' the 'freedom movement,' the 'freedom fighters,' etc.²² These terms highlighted India (and Indians) as the victimised party and emphasised the right of their inherent freedom over the immoral acts of their colonial oppressors.

Autochthonous freedom did, at times, insist on new geopolitical visions for other countries. Indira Gandhi, during her Independence Day address in 1966, for example, said 'Our sympathies are with the victims of colonialism. We will continue to raise our voice against injustice and war everywhere. We reiterate that our sympathies will always be with the victims of injustice...We also want the subject people, the victims of oppression, everywhere in the world to breathe free air and to have full opportunities to progress' (Gandhi 1966, 8).²³ This projected the geopolitics of India's anti-colonial moral compass onto a colonised map, a map which India and other colonised states critiqued for its Western-constructed borders, which were viewed as illegitimate, false constructs of colonial (and often Western) interests. Contemporary Indian geopolitical actors continue to argue that 'for much of the developing world, especially nations that have regained independence from colonial rule, nationalism is synonymous with asserting

¹⁸ Sanyal, Sanjeev. 2012. *Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India's Geography*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd.

¹⁹ Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1959. "Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru : Border Situation. (August 28, 1959)" *Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Lok Sabha. Available from: https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/809065/1/pms_02_08_28-08-1959.pdf

²⁰ Nehru. 1985.

²¹ Nehru. 1985.

²² These speeches are available for access at: *Press Information Bureau of India Archives (1947-2001)*. Available from: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/phase2/archivyear.aspx?mincode=PRIME%20MINISTER>

²³ Gandhi, Indira. 1966. "Independence Day Speech (August 15)." *Press Information Bureau of India Archives (1947-2001)*. Available at: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/phase2/archiverelease.aspx?mincode=PRIME%20MINISTER&relyear=1966&relmonth=8>

independence' (Jaishankar 2020, 111).²⁴ It is also synonymous with a demand for legitimacy and dignity in the face of historic subjugation and runs like a streak through much of post-colonial geopolitical behavior. Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon argues, for example, that both India and China 'share the humiliation of colonial occupation, of once being among the richest and most advanced societies in the world in 1750, to becoming among the poorest, weakest, and least industrialized countries in two centuries' and insists that this has motivated them 'to achieve power and agency in the international order to make renewed subjugation or humiliation impossible in future' (Menon 2021, 320).²⁵

This form of anti-colonial nationalism also emphasised (and still emphasises) the importance of autochthonous identity as a source of authentic, locally-relevant worldviews. For example, Indian nationalists seek to correct the contradiction of opposing 'European dominion using the conceptual frames provided by European rationality' (Tharoor 2020, 27).²⁶ These and other efforts reinforced 'the role of indigenous culture as something to be consciously awakened in anti-colonial nationalism' (Tharoor 2020, 28)²⁷ and such support for indigenous cultures expanded beyond the immediate cause of anti-colonialism to incorporate a strategic vision shaping the Indian state's geopolitical practice.

Pan-Asianism

Pan-Asianism has featured prominently in Indian foreign policy before, during, and after the Cold War. More than mere platitudes of shared history, pan-Asianism functioned as a geopolitical template to craft unilateral and multilateral approaches to global challenges. It also, however, empowered transborder identities and affiliations as a way to challenge the territory-centric Western conception of sovereignty, which it viewed as 'a universal virtue endorsed by powerful states that work[ed]...to legitimise the asymmetrical and discriminatory power relations that characterise the West-non-West duality' (Pourmokhtari 2013, 1783).²⁸ By doing so, it brandished non-Western forms of sovereign identity 'in which sovereign power was historically fragmented and distributed among many, mostly informal but effective, forms of local authority' (Hansen et al. 2006, 297).²⁹ Its close emotional linkage to anti-colonialism was evident well before the Cold War when it featured prominently in the narratives of the Indian freedom movement, which often emphasised the shared sense of victimisation of colonised Asian states. By the early 20th century, 'Pan-Asianism was part of the reaction to imperialism and colonialism and to the impact of the West on Asian societies' (Menon 2021, 31).³⁰ Pan-Asianism shocked into action Asian nationalism by virtue of a number of events. For example, the Japanese victory's 'admirable assertiveness' (Medcalf

²⁴ Jaishankar. 2020. *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.

²⁵ Menon. 2021.

²⁶ Tharoor, Shashi. 2020. *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What it Means*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pourmokhtari. 2013.

²⁹ Hansen et al. 2006.

³⁰ Menon. 2021.

2020, 54)³¹ over Russia in 1905 led Nehru to later remark that it had ‘lessened the feeling of inferiority, from which most of us suffered’ (Nehru 1934, 455)³² while ‘The triumphs of the Chinese revolution were hailed with enthusiasm as portents of the approaching freedom of India and of the elimination of European aggression in Asia’ (Nehru 1985, 417).³³ After the world wars dismissed, for Asian countries, the idea of Western superiority, there arose ‘the belief that Asian fates were linked and that Asians would take charge of their own destinies together’ (Menon 2021, 31).³⁴ Pan-Asianism as a geopolitical vision reverberated broadly across facets of India’s domestic political communities. Political scientist R. K. Tiwari, for example, noted that some Indian political parties believed India carried ‘a special responsibility for developing associative life in South-East Asia’ (Tiwari 2019, 274).³⁵

During the Cold War, the ineluctable geographing action of the two primary superpowers was almost as influential as that of the European colonial powers, continuing to shape and reshape global territorial order, which ‘broke Asia into sub-regions and treated it as one more arena and therefore a sideshow to the confrontations of the two superpowers’ (Menon 2021, 84).³⁶ This ‘20th century notion of the Asia-Pacific and an East Asian hemisphere excluded India at the very time Asia’s second-most populous country was opening up and looking east’ (Medcalf 2020, 5).³⁷ For Indian leaders, the superpowers’ activity was seen in much the same way as European colonialism and both were seen to have immorally and disproportionately victimised Asian states and to have robbed them of their agency. Thus, Nehru endeavored to create in Asia an “area of peace” or geopolitical space for India’ (Menon 2021, 322).³⁸ This motivated not just his offer of a third alternative to binary geopolitics but also his idealised vision of pan-Asianism as an opportunity for historically victimised Asian states and societies to be independent and free of external pressure. By completely removing Asia from the pressures of the West, it would become a conflict-free region and would therefore serve as an exemplar for global peace initiatives (Menon 2021, 71).³⁹ This manifested in India’s attempts to resolve the Korean Conflict, for example, as well as Nehru’s early insistence through the 1950s to resist ‘attempts by China at Bandung and by Indonesia’s Sukarno and others later to organize the nonaligned countries into a regular system of meetings with a secretariat. For Nehru it made no sense to oppose the Cold War blocs only to form another block of the nonaligned’ and he wanted the spirit of Bandung to lead to cooperation ‘with the superpowers for decolonisation,

³¹ Medcalf, Rory. 2020. *Indo-Pacific Empire. China, America, and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region*. United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.

³² Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1934. *Glimpses of World History*. New York: Asia Publishing House.

³³ Nehru. 1985.

³⁴ Menon. 2021.

³⁵ Tiwari, R. K. 2019. *Political Parties, Party Manifestos and Elections in India, 1909-2014*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

³⁶ Menon. 2021.

³⁷ Medcalf. 2020.

³⁸ Menon. 2021.

³⁹ Ibid.

disarmament, and development, and against racism and apartheid' (Menon 2021, 52,78).⁴⁰ This was more than moral grandstanding.

India's sense of pan-Asian identity, as manifested during such events as Nehru's 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, revolved (and revolves) around India's geographic position as the pivot point in the Indian Ocean but also in its millennia of history as an origin, destination, and trans-shipment point for substantial social and economic commerce transcending a broad geographic region from Zanzibar to Bali (Kaplan 2010).⁴¹ The Delhi-based Asian Relations Conference of 1947 was 'the first attempt to bring together the voices of a unified Asia. It was the genesis of efforts to build Asian regionalism, a sense of shared purpose and identity informed by geography...' (Medcalf 2020, 60-61).⁴² Pan-Asianism had such strong appeal within anti-colonial geopolitics because it sought to 'free Asia and Africa from the colonial yoke' (Menon 2021, 48).⁴³ It was an appeal that relied not just on the moral argument against colonial subjugation but also on the shared, millennia-long history of the countries of Asia which fed into a sense of shared geopolitical destiny and powerful diplomatic influence. In March 1947, when hosting the Asian Relations Conference, Nehru asserted that 'Geography is a compelling factor, and geographically [India] is so situated as to be the meeting point of Western and Northern and Eastern and South-East Asia. Because of this, the history of India is a long history of her relations with the other countries of Asia' (Guha 2011, 315).⁴⁴ Menon notes geopolitical products of such discourse, when 'India under Nehru actively assisted Sukarno in Indonesia and Aung San in Burma to shed the colonial yoke, offering political and some military and logistical support' and he adds retrospectively that 'It was clearly in independent India's interest to expand the area of free and like-minded countries in its periphery' (Menon 2021, 73).⁴⁵ In this sense, 20th century pan-Asianism built atop an extensive history of Indian geopolitical visions which prioritised multipolar commerce across a broad maritime domain.

India's pursuit of pan-Asian ideals, however, worked at cross purposes with the United States and the Soviet Union, which 'saw Asia primarily through the prism of their global rivalry, and saw little value in helping to build Asian unity for its own sake' (Medcalf 2020, 63).⁴⁶ Early U.S. geopolitical strategists, for example, considered the possibility that 'democratic India could be won to the anticommunist cause, having just fought off an armed Communist uprising in Telangana' and expressed 'an appreciation of India's potential as a market, and...potential as a partner against communist China' (Menon 2021, 50).⁴⁷ Such U.S. policy efforts led to the formation of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, which further ossified Cold War geopolitical positioning in Asia from an Indian perspective by crafting geographically delimited blocs of support

⁴⁰ Menon. 2021.

⁴¹ Kaplan. 2010.

⁴² Medcalf. 2020.

⁴³ Menon. 2021.

⁴⁴ Guha, Ramachandra. 2011. *Makers of Modern India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

⁴⁵ Menon. 2021.

⁴⁶ Medcalf. 2020.

⁴⁷ Menon. 2021.

and opposition across and within Asia (Menon 2021, 51).⁴⁸ U.S. interest in courting Indian support waned, however, due to such events as the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Pan-Asianism's threat to Western geopolitical constructs is crystal clear in the Western diplomatic communiques preceding Bandung. The United States internally assessed its objectives during Bandung to be 'chiefly concerned with impact on uncommitted elements in neutralist countries and in countries aligned with the West. Our objectives should be (1) successful rebuttal of Communist charges, and (2) encouragement of an affirmative attitude by the Conference toward Free World and U.S. achievements and goals' ("Memorandum," February 8, 1955).⁴⁹ The United Kingdom, meanwhile, worried that the Conference participants would express unequivocal condemnation of colonialism and invite British colonies as observers, undermining British constitutional rule over its remaining colonial people. The United Kingdom government particularly warned that 'Anti-colonialism is such an obsession with...[Jawaharlal] Nehru, that it might even be unwise to approach him with counsels of moderation' ("Notes from," November 18, 1954).⁵⁰ Just two decades later, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was equally suspect of U.S. geopolitical action in Vietnam, viewing it from the perspective of a victimised Asian state when she asked aloud during an address to Asian delegates in 1972 whether the 'savage bombing' would have been permitted had it occurred in a European country versus an Asian one? (Gandhi 1973, 5).⁵¹ She encouraged support for joint India-China efforts to resolve the crisis, reflecting the fact that 'Both India and China found the idea of Asian solidarity useful to their pursuit of independent space in the international system' (Menon 2021, 321).⁵²

One of the more enduring aspects of pan-Asianism is the proliferation of Asia-based and Asia-created multilateral organisations. For India, these include the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh-Bhutan-Indian Nepal (BBIN) grouping, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). Indian willingness to engage with these and other groups has

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Memorandum From the Acting Chief of the Reports and Operations Staff (Gilman) to the Secretary of State." February 8, 1955. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XXI*. eds. Edward Keefer & David C. Mabon. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1990). Document 11. Available from:

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v21/d11>

⁵⁰ "Notes from the Commonwealth Relations Office on the holding of an Afro-Asian Conference." November 18, 1954. University of Luxembourg CVCE. Available from: https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/dd10d6bf-e14d-40b5-9ee6-37f978c87a01/c28105d8-8f82-4f57-b077-7e87dfbc7205/Resources#28ed9770-3abf-4aaf-a343-875c230f95ef_en&overlay

⁵¹ Gandhi, Indira. 1973. "Prime Minister's Address to One Asia Assembly. February 6, 1973." *Press Information Bureau Archives: 1947-2001*. Available from: https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/ArchiveSecondPhase/PRIME%20MINISTER/1973-JAN-JUN-PRIME%20MINISTERS%20SECTT-VOL-I/PDF/PRI-1973-02-06_022.pdf

⁵² Menon. 2021. Of course, India's geopolitical pan-Asianism faced its own hurdles internal to Asia. A series of crises ruptured Asian unity through the years, including the wars between India and Pakistan, China's civil war and the Great Leap Forward, the split in the Korean Peninsula, the Sino-Vietnamese War, Indonesia's internal struggles of the 1960s, and especially the 1962 war between India and China, which 'From an Indian perspective...was a shocking betrayal of the principles of cooperation and coexistence...' See also: Medcalf. 2020. pp 62-65.

fluctuated with time and conditions but its pan-Asian efforts demonstrate that India 'was not just a reactive or passive object of Asian geopolitics but an active participant, and it sought to shape the Asian environment' (Menon 2021, 2).⁵³ Unlike the Western-led collective security organisation SEATO, which 'Many Indians saw...as a mortal blow to Asian unity and resurgence,' (Menon 2021, 322)⁵⁴ these other organisations again provided a degree of Asian authenticity and a challenge to prevailing geopolitical norms. This has continued to the present day. New Delhi's diplomatic initiatives such as Look East and Act East presaged increasing engagement with the Quadrilateral Dialogue. In 2014, India invited the SAARC leaders to the swearing-in of Prime Minister Modi and in 2018, India invited ASEAN leaders to attend Republic Day celebrations. Pan-Asianism as geopolitical practice was also evident in the 2017 shared Indo-Pacific vision expressed by Prime Minister Modi and then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in which both countries sought 'to enhance the positive influence of traditions of non-violence, tolerance and democracy in Asia' ("India-Japan Joint," September 14, 2017).⁵⁵ The inherent cultural affinity of pan-Asianism as an enduring tool of Indian geopolitics is perhaps best captured in the comments of Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, who spoke on the occasion of the 4th International Conference on Dharma-Dhamma in 2018:

'India's Act East Policy...is much more than a diplomatic initiative...the Act East Policy aims at sharing not merely economic opportunities – but at an integration of the dreams and hopes of the hundreds of millions who live in India and in Southeast Asia. And in other parts of Asia that are covered by the Dharma-Dhamma footprint. Our past has a common source – inevitably, our destiny too is linked' (Kovind 2018).⁵⁶

Non-Violence

The embrace of non-violence as not just a tool of political power, but a guiding moral force, grew from a rejection of the colonial world, which was 'a zone of exception and lawlessness, allowing for unrestrained violence and exploitation, in part a realm believed to be ruled by excessive despotism that at times was emulated in order to indigenize colonial rule' (Hansen et al. 2006, 302).⁵⁷ In India, this violence manifested in aggressive civil responses to protest in places such as Jallianwallah, Punjab, and Amko Simko field, Odisha. Indian elites viewed violence as the illegitimate tool of colonial military and police authorities wielded over centuries to subjugate colonised people. Indeed, Hansen et al. have noted British assessments of local forms of punishment in India as 'ineffective' which led the East India Company 'to erect public gallows and open new prisons,' relying on 'the frequent use of capital punishment' to 'create an all

⁵³ Menon. 2021.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India." September 14, 2017. Ministry of External Affairs. Available from: https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Japan_to_India_September_14_2017

⁵⁶ Kovind, Ram Nath. January 11, 2018. "Speech by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind on the occasion of inauguration of the 4th International Conference on Dharma-Dhamma." *Press Information Bureau Archives*. Available from: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive2/AdvSearch.aspx>

⁵⁷ Hansen et. al. 2006.

important aura of fortitude and rigor that remained a cornerstone of British rule in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (Hansen et al. 2006, 303).⁵⁸ In response, Nehru criticized the 'outright plunder' of British colonial practices, which gave way to the Bengal famine of 1770 (Nehru 1985, 297).⁵⁹ For Nehru, violent acts were the product of a failure in the human condition. Nehru channeled Kenneth Waltz's First Image in believing that 'Wars...are made in the minds of men, and therefore it is in the minds of men that war must be eradicated...communication and contact between governments and peoples rather than force...will end conflict and make India more secure' (Bajpai 2014, 121-123).⁶⁰ Non-violence, however, also addressed the concerns of formerly colonised countries that the international system was neither just nor equitable. Even today, 'India also speaks for a larger developing world constituency insofar as equity and fairness are concerned' (Jaishankar 2020, 120).⁶¹ India's 'presence not only adds to the credibility of various global initiatives and negotiations but often, as in the case of Paris on climate change, helps to find an outcome' (Jaishankar 2020, 124).⁶²

India's embrace of non-violence is often popularly linked to the figure of Mahatma Gandhi and his advocacy for *satyagraha*, or passive political resistance in the face of colonial oppression. However, preceding its colonial manifestation, there is a more subtle version of non-violent geopolitics that appears throughout the millennia-long history of foreign engagement evident across the kingdoms of South Asia. For example, during the Maurya Empire (322 BCE - 185 BCE), Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism allegedly brought about 'his renunciation of warfare and his re-definition of righteous conquest' (Singh 2008, 353).⁶³ Ashoka's painful experience with war in Kalinga (modern-day Odisha) allegedly forced him to face the violent and fundamentally tortuous character of war. The 13th rock edict of Ashoka further laments the ways in which war's chaos destroys the ideal society; not just the warmakers but also:

'...the Brahmanas and *shramanas*, members of other sects or householders who are living there, and who practice obedience and firm devotion to superior persons, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, proper courtesy to friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives, to slaves and servants--all these suffer injury or slaughter or deportation of their loved ones. And if misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives of persons who are full of devotion towards them...this misfortune too becomes an injury to their own selves. This [suffering] is shared by all and is considered deplorable by Devanampriya [Ashoka]' (Hultzsch 1925, 47).⁶⁴

During the time of Akbar, also, the Mughal ruler's military campaigns 'were portrayed as the progressive realisation of the state of *Sulh-i kul* (absolute peace). It was the

⁵⁸ Hansen et. al. 2006.

⁵⁹ Nehru. 1985.

⁶⁰ Bajpai. 2014.

⁶¹ Jaishankar. 2020.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Singh, Upinder. 2008. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. India: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt Ltd.

⁶⁴ Hultzsch, Eugen. 1925. *Inscriptions of Asoka. New Edition*. India: Oxford University Press.

ideological extension of Akbar's strategy of accommodation that saw conflict as a transient condition rather than as a perpetual state of affairs' (Vivekanandan 2014, 76).⁶⁵ Remorse, regret, and the redeeming quality of suffering are frequent themes throughout India's social and religious fabric. Non-violence bore a strong moral message. For many, 'Non-violence was the way to vindicate the truth not by the infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on one's self. It was essential to willingly accept punishment in order to demonstrate the strength of one's convictions' (Tharoor 2020, 303).⁶⁶ Nowhere was personal strength more important than in the traditional view that a 'king establishes his control...through righteousness, not through violence or force' (Singh 2008, 353).⁶⁷ Here there is an enduring geopolitical message: the power of the Indian moral example can subdue foreign kings and distant lands, far more effectively and with greater permanence and equanimity than any weapon of war. This has been identified as a prominent message in more modern times. Today, 'The Indian penchant for claiming the moral high ground in international relations and the idealism of the Nehruvian era clearly carry traces of the importance given to dharma as the foundation and purpose of political action' (Rajagopalan 2014, 58).⁶⁸

However, beyond its moral draw, non-violence also sought to challenge aspects of the realist world order in which anarchy reigned. 'Nehruvians,' Bajpai asserts, 'believe that the state of anarchy can be mitigated, if not eventually supervened. International laws and institutions, military restraint, negotiations and compromise, co-operation, free intercourse between societies, and regard for the well-being of peoples everywhere and not just one's own citizens, all these can overcome the rigours of the international system' (Bajpai et al. 2014, 117-118).⁶⁹ Nehru's explication of the concept of *panchsheel* (peaceful coexistence) came well before the 1955 Bandung Conference. In his 1949 Independence Day Address, he commented on the ongoing political ferment in China by saying 'Whatever our individual reactions may be to any changes elsewhere, our policy is clear that we do not wish to interfere in any way internally with other countries...No country can impose freedom on any other...' (Nehru 1949, 99-100).⁷⁰ Rather than a full-throated defence of Westphalian borders, this was meant as a clarion call on behalf of colonised states that although they had not chosen the contours of their own borders, they expected those borders to be free from the violence of colonising powers and their legacy practices.

⁶⁵ Vivekanandan, Jayashree. 2014. "Strategy, Legitimacy and the Imperium." in *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*. eds. Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit, and V. Krishnappa. New Delhi: Routledge.

⁶⁶ Tharoor. 2020.

⁶⁷ Singh. 2008.

⁶⁸ Rajagopalan, Swarna. 2014. "Grand Strategic Thought in the Ramayana and Mahabharata." in *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*. eds. Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit, and V. Krishnappa. New Delhi: Routledge.

⁶⁹ Bajpai, Kanti, Saira Basit, & V. Krishnappa. 2014. "Introduction: India's Grand Strategic Thought and Practice." in *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*. eds. Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit, and V. Krishnappa. New Delhi: Routledge.

⁷⁰ Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1949. "Translation of speech delivered by the Prime Minister at the Red Fort in Delhi on the morning of the 15th August, 1949." *Press Information Bureau of India Archives*. Available from: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/phase2/archivemonth.aspx?mincode=PRIME%20MINISTER&relyear=1949>

Even when embracing self-defence, Indian leaders typically conveyed India's right in benign terms that suggested a state reluctant to incorporate violence into a broader geopolitical framework. For example, while Prime Minister Indira Gandhi throughout the 1980s expressed 'gratefulness' to India's *jawans* (soldiers) for defending the homeland and for facing 'aggression with courage,' she also insisted that '...our effort is that there should be no war. And there should be friendship with our neighbours and with far-off countries.'⁷¹ More recently, Prime Minister Modi asserted that 'Our military strength has always been for self-defence and will always remain so. We never had any greed for other's land. Even historically it was the same' (Modi 2018).⁷² These public expressions of inherent non-violent intent, coupled with a morally justified commitment to self-defence, attempt to align with a 'Gandhian' strain of foreign policy thinking, which insisted that 'an India that was organised on Gandhian lines would not be an object of aggression in the first place since it would threaten no one' (Bajpai 2014, 138).⁷³

Non-violence shaped geopolitical decision making at the level of the prime minister on several key occasions. Menon writes that Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, even amidst the turbulent times of the mid-1960s, 'was not ready to abandon his Gandhian commitment to nonviolence and to authorize the atomic energy establishment to work on a bomb or an explosive device' (Menon 2021, 118).⁷⁴ Interestingly, even after the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed in 1968, 'Gandhian and civil society voices' called for India to join, warning India not to abandon nonviolence (Menon 2021, 120).⁷⁵ In 2003, when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee ultimately decided against joining the U.S.-led military operation in Iraq, his argument during the meeting of India's Cabinet Committee on Security 'reflected more an attitude to the use of force than to relations with the United States' (Menon 2021, 216).⁷⁶ This was done despite considerable domestic debate across India in 2003 about the possible strategic advantages to be had if India deployed soldiers to Iraq (Mitra 2016).⁷⁷

A different side of non-violent geopolitics moved beyond the rejection of violence and to an active embrace of peace-focused diplomacy, notably through the provision of development assistance and a public defence of the borders of colonised states. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1981 lamented that 'big powers are using their resources not in development work, not in helping the poor, but in increasing their armaments - bigger and bigger, and more sophisticated modern weapons. What for?'

⁷¹ Indira Gandhi. Independence Day speeches. 1981, 1982.

⁷² Modi, Narendra. 2018. "English rendering of PM's address at the commemoration of 75th anniversary of 'Azad Hind Fauj' at the Red Fort. (October 21, 2018)." *Press Information Bureau: Government of India*. Available at: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive2/AdvSearch.aspx>

⁷³ Bajpai. 2014.

⁷⁴ Menon. 2021.

⁷⁵ Menon. 2021.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Mitra, Devirupa. 2016. "How India Nearly Gave in to US Pressure to Enter the Iraqi Killing Zone (July 8, 2016)." *The Wire*. Available from: <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-nearly-gave-us-pressure-join-iraq-war>

(Gandhi 1981).⁷⁸ In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh professed that ‘Our goal in South Asia is to seek a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood. We seek to accelerate the pace of social and economic development in our country and our region, while safeguarding our national security. Our foreign policy has been based on these principles’ (Singh M 2008, 7).⁷⁹ Twelve years later, Minister for External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar wrote that ‘...India too has turned to development partnerships as a significant instrument in its diplomatic tool kit. And it has done so in its own unique India Way’ (Jaishankar 2020, 96).⁸⁰ He has further suggested that ‘The world must be reminded that we provided economic assistance and training to others even when our resources were meagre’ (Jaishankar 2020, 12-13).⁸¹

Non-Alignment

Non-alignment deserves thorough scrutiny to properly disconnect it from what is often a narrowly interpreted origin of Cold War-era moralising. In fact, non-alignment represented a comprehensive, anti-colonial effort to divorce the dominant post-World War Two geopolitical structure from a rigid framework that accepted only two assumptions about state behavior: supportive of a ‘Western,’ liberal order, or a non-Western, centralised order.⁸² Non-alignment as geopolitical practice in Asia, and particularly in India, reflected a more historicised regional and global vision which dated back to the time of ancient kingdoms, of flexible and shifting territorial boundaries, of mobile social communities, and of tributary relationships, all of which required a pragmatic and multilayered approach to engagement with both enemies and allies alike. Indeed, this alternative view did not even fully accept such terms as ‘enemy’ and ‘ally’ to divide the international community. A non-aligned geopolitics that considers this longer history pushes back against the ‘vague, under-theorized, and insufficiently historicized notion of state sovereignty’ (Mongia 2007, 386)⁸³ so often referenced in Western geopolitical discourse today.

This more complete conception of non-alignment as geopolitics incorporates distinctive anti-colonial skepticism of post-World War Two power structures, alliances, and blocs, viewing them as not just ideological communities but as outgrowths of an inherently unequal system that arose from the discredited practice of colonial victimisation and power imposition. Nehru, for example, argued that a geopolitical vision informed by realist power politics was ‘supremely foolish, for it is based on the old policy of expansion and empire and the balance of power, which inevitably leads to conflict and

⁷⁸ Gandhi, Indira. 1981. “Smt Gandhi’s Independence Day Address to the Nation.” *Press Information Bureau of India Archives*. Available from:

<https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/phase2/archivemonth.aspx?mincode=PRIME%20MINISTER&relyear=1981>

⁷⁹ Singh, Manmohan. 2008. “PM’s Address on 62nd Independence Day.” *Press Information Bureau of India Archives (2004 onwards)*. Available from: <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive2/>

⁸⁰ Jaishankar. 2020. pp 96.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² The term ‘Western’ is inelegant and admits multiple problems of taxonomy, most importantly how to geographically and ideationally categorize countries under such a label. This also means an equal challenge in labeling the opposite of ‘Western.’

⁸³ Mongia. 2007.

war' (Nehru 1985, 540).⁸⁴ Non-alignment, in this way, supported (and was supported by) other sub-themes of anti-colonial geopolitics such as non-violence: together they insisted upon a new global vision that held greater moral weight than its predecessor and which rejected, as Mongia paraphrases Anghie, the actions of colonisation including suturing territory to sovereignty and the disproportionately of anointing sovereign colonising entities, already members of an elite community, with the right to determine which colonised communities may be recognized as sovereign and which may not, recognition being a necessary condition for being considered sovereign (Mongia 2007, 396).⁸⁵

The anti-colonial geopolitical motivations behind non-alignment come through quite clearly in the early political discourse of Indian and other leaders, who viewed many international borders as constructs of illegitimate colonial interests and who believed more generally that 'the concept of sovereignty, and with it the contours of the modern state, were imposed on the colonial world by European powers' (Nair 2017, 70).⁸⁶ Indian policymakers' assertion that 'There is a broad correlation between occupying the high moral ground and shaping the narrative' (Jaishankar 2020, 63)⁸⁷ also undergirded the early efforts of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as he sought to use a moral definition of non-alignment to rally the world's states. Nehru very early on channeled the same message of universal benign intent when he insisted that Indians 'cherish freedom for ourselves and do not approve of any others interfering with us. That is why we have decided, as a matter of policy that we will not join any of those power-blocs which we find in the world today. We will remain aloof from these entanglements and try to be friendly to all.' In this address, he previewed his upcoming October 1949 visit to the United States by saying that while he would bring 'a message of friendship and cooperation from our people,' he would also insist that 'By being friendly to one country, it must not be thought that we are becoming hostile to some other' (Nehru 1949, 98-99).⁸⁸ Indeed, this view was as much a reflection of the domestic mass political appeal for India to pursue its own path. Tiwari notes that 'To develop friendly relations with all countries and pursue an independent foreign policy, without alignment with any blocs, has been an important component of the framework of India's foreign policy endorsed by all national political parties' (Tiwari 2019, 272).⁸⁹

The inherent objection to an unbalanced, unequal system--one arising from anti-colonial movements--has taken on different forms in contemporary Indian geopolitical action. Contemporary re-assessments of non-alignment have been slightly more expansive, some framing it as Nehru's (and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's) pragmatic, interest-based approach to foreign policy and others deploying terms such as 'multi-alignment' or 'strategic autonomy,' which can be found in 'the foreign and security policies of successive governments of India...irrespective of their various political

⁸⁴ Nehru. 1985. pp 540.

⁸⁵ Mongia. 2007. Also see: Antony Anghie. 1996. "Finding the Peripheries," and "Francisco de Vitoria and the Colonial Origins of International Law." *Social and Legal Studies*. 5, issue. 3 (Sept. 1996): 321-336; Navid. 2013.

⁸⁶ Nair, Sheila. 2017.

⁸⁷ Jaishankar. 2020.

⁸⁸ Nehru. 1949.

⁸⁹ Tiwari. 2019.

persuasions and compositions and the predilections of different leaders' (Menon 2021, 361).⁹⁰ External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar suggests multi-alignment 'appears more energetic and participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement' (Jaishankar 2020, 103).⁹¹ He adds that 'the independent mindset that drove non-alignment and then protected our strategic equities can today be better expressed in multiple partnerships' (Jaishankar 2020, 79).⁹² Former Foreign Secretary Menon has recently defined non-alignment (or strategic autonomy) as 'keeping decision making power within India, avoiding alliances, and building internal capabilities while working with others when it was in India's interest to do so' (Menon 2021, 361).⁹³ This new activist approach reinvigorates Indian foreign policy rather than encouraging 'risk aversion' and preventing 'exploitation of new opportunities' (Jaishankar 2020, 26).⁹⁴ The rejection of an old system has led contemporary Indian diplomatic energy 'to be poured into reformed multilateralism...[because] The current anachronistic order must be pushed to change, along with its outdated agenda' (Jaishankar 2020, 32).⁹⁵

Conclusion

Contemporary geopolitical understanding largely relies on established IR theories, which embrace sovereignty as a 'European construct [that] developed and evolved together with a set of formidable colonial discourses that vigorously and repetitively, and by means of a reductionist motif, consigned the Oriental world to an inferior zone of otherness' (Pourmokhtari 2013, 1785).⁹⁶ Far from representing a mere framework for moral messaging, anti-colonialism embodied a deliberate geopolitical vision that provided colonised states a range of foreign policy tools to demand the relocation of centers of political, economic, and ideological power from formerly colonising states. It functioned (and functions) as a tool to challenge contemporary claims of the universality of sovereignty, which it argued was (and is) 'saturated by the inequalities of its colonial provenance' (Mongia 2007, 387).⁹⁷ India, as one of the countries that led the anti-colonial geopolitical process, pursued this through four areas of focus: autochthonous freedom, pan-Asianism, non-violence, and non-alignment. These four sub-themes all pursued aspects of anti-colonial geopolitics, particularly by emphasising the importance of colonised states owning their own freedom, sharing their identities across colonised Asian states, rejecting the use of violence that characterised the history of colonial practice, and insisting upon a multilateral international system that rejected externally imposed forms of alignment. Through these sub-themes, Indian leaders both past and present have sought to challenge existing power-territory structures in an effort to advance the global interests of India and the broader Global South.

⁹⁰ Menon. 2021.

⁹¹ Jaishankar. 2020.

⁹² Jaishankar. 2020.

⁹³ Menon. 2021.

⁹⁴ Jaishankar. 2020.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Pourmokhtari. 2013.

⁹⁷ Mongia. 2007.

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