

# Building a Strategic Culture: Indian Intelligence, Policy and Regional Security, 1962-1972

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In 1962, there was a breakdown in diplomatic relations between India and China. The conflict that followed was regarded as embarrassing for the India political and military leaders, as they were caught completely off guard, and their intelligence infrastructure was non-existent. For the Indian strategists, this was such a humiliation that India sought to never allow itself to be so vulnerable again. Looking forward nine years, the Indian military infrastructure responded to a Pakistani preemptive strike intended to cripple the Indian Air Force, going on to win air superiority. Additionally, during the fighting itself, many parties involved and outside observers contend that the Indian intelligence network, especially the increasingly notorious Research and Analysis Wing, had armed and mobilized Bangladeshi resistance and enabled Indian forces to bypass Pakistani strong points and utterly dislodge the Pakistani position in what is now Bangladesh. The Sino-Indian War humiliated the Indian military complex, and the policy that evolved from this humiliation was one motivated by a desire to achieve never to be caught off-balance again. This quest for strategic invulnerability resulted in a change in Indian discourse about the subcontinent and the use of “offensive intelligence,” where organizations in India, especially the Research and Analysis Wing, took measures to actively forward their agendas beyond the Indian borders. After this, India’s agenda was no longer discussed in terms of Indian security, but rather regional security, and Indian leaders put forward ambitious plans to position India as a major world power and voice of the subcontinent.

Israeli diplomacy and military scholar Yaacov Vertzberger offers extensive commentary on the factors that led to the war between China and India. Nehru’s understanding of international law appears to have been idealistic. Specifically, he placed great weight on India’s position in Tibet being supported by international law, while China perceived the laws as being rooted in colonialism in the ways that they made specific reference to territory, and as such, only appealed to them when it served their position.<sup>1</sup> Nehru, being a Western educated lawyer, placed faith in the rule and adherence of international law, and took Chinese concessions to the terms of the McMahon line to be tacit acceptance of Indian legitimacy, when in fact China merely saw the acceptance of these terms as part of the political game for which it would receive favor and consideration at a later time.

Much to the Chagrin of China, Nehru had grossly misunderstood the severity that India’s encroachment in Tibet impressed upon the Chinese leaders, instead assuming a mutual need and friendship based off of what many now consider to be possibly questionable historic Indo-Chinese relationships. Additionally, it seems that Nehru conducted his regional policy while wearing the proverbial blinders, as his discussion of the Tibetan situation was uncomfortably similar in tone to the one used by the British colonial powers that had only recently departed. Finally, the US Central Intelligence Agency was actively involved in supporting Tibetan resistance to China via supplying arms and bringing rebels to America for training, as well as organizing the Dalai Lama’s escape. The CIA’s operations were all run through the CIA’s agents in New Delhi. Indian complacency towards CIA activity was interpreted as collusion. The culmination of all these factors combined with what was continuously read as Indian military and civil encroachments on Chinese territory stimulated a desire in Beijing to punish India.<sup>2</sup>

Vertzberger contends that this gross misreading of Chinese policy led to a war in which China achieved its immediate aims, however the manner in which the war was prosecuted made it a pyrrhic victory in terms of Indo-Chinese relations that continued to be strained to the time of his writing.<sup>3</sup> It is the contention of this paper that this war did not just permanently mar Sino-Chinese relations, but it permanently altered Indian strategic culture and effected the rise of new discourse and a new era of cynicism. Great thinkers throughout the ages have argued in various forms that a person can be a product of their environment and Plato contended in *The Republic* that the State is the “soul writ large.” Pre-1962 India can be read as idealistic, and in a sense what followed after was a birth of an almost existential cynicism towards political process and an overwhelming desire to insulate India from the vulnerability experienced in the Sino-Indian War.

In the introduction to his paper, historian George Tanham comments that Nehru’s strategy was to free India from concerns about international politics so that it could focus on internal development and strengthening regional ties. Specifically, Nehru championed a “Pan-Asian” movement that the rest of the continent viewed with extreme skepticism (Tanham attributes this to Indian Independence blinding Nehru to the many ethnic and cultural differences that keep the continent divided and would eventually create problems in India as well)<sup>4</sup> India, according to Tanham, developed a new strategy in the

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<sup>1</sup> Vertzberger, Yaacov “India’s Border Conflict with China: A Perceptual Analysis” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol 17, No. 4 (Oct. 1982), pg. 610

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<sup>2</sup> Vertzberger, 619-623

<sup>3</sup> Vertzberger, pg. 625

<sup>4</sup> Tanham, George *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica: 1992) pg. 48

period after the Sino-Indian War, with the common goals of not just being able to resist hostile action, but to:

“Prevent any of India’s neighbors from recourse to foreign policy...deemed inimical to Indian interests...deny Pakistan a meaningful potential to challenge Indian predominance on the subcontinent,...Achieve close relation to the Soviet Union to counter China and Pakistan.”

With the desire to establish naval dominance over the Indian Ocean, cultivate force projection capabilities and eventually achieve recognition as a “great world nation” (via naval technology, nuclear capability and requisite delivery systems and a robust defense industry) as long term strategic goals.<sup>5</sup> The accomplishment of such strategic goals would afford India the international regard that it felt that it deserved as a rightful insurer of regional stability.

In her 2004 account of the Indian Research and Analysis Wing, Fahmida Ashraf describes the organization as emerging out of an internal conflict that resulted from the failures in the Sino-Indian War and the Pakistani-Indian Conflict of 1965. Ashraf contends that the creation of the RAW was the result of bickering between the military intelligence apparatus and the civilian-controlled Intelligence Bureau. What came of this conflict was the RAW. A defining characteristic of the RAW is that it reports to the prime minister (unlike most counterpart organizations, like the Russian GRU which reports to the general staff, and the CIA which goes through the Department of Homeland Security). Tanham asserts that this absence of a conduit is a reflection of the almost cliquish nature of the Indian government; in the absence of a traditional federal strategic body, the heads of the Indian state themselves are directly responsible for creating the strategic culture by which the state operates.<sup>6</sup> Accepting this, it is imperative that there be a short distance between executive decision and implementation. Therefore, RAW has the ability to act quicker on incoming political information than other organizations. This leads Ashraf to claim that they are the primary means of implementing the Indian strategic agenda in South Asia. Ashraf continues to outline the objectives of RAW as monitoring military progress of Pakistan, studying the developments in neighboring countries, studying Chinese-Russian relations, and maintaining connections with Indian communities in foreign countries for use in lobbying foreign governments.<sup>7</sup>

Operationally, RAW functions much like any other intelligence organization, in that it provides the standard faire of tactical intelligence (ie-short term and rapid response information gathering for emerging conflicts and crises) and strategic intelligence (long term analysis of

trends and foreign governments). What sets RAW apart from other organizations is the fact that “Offensive Intelligence” is one of the stated functions, where offensive intelligence involves sabotage, subversion and use of propaganda to achieve foreign policy goals in countries of interest. Ashraf contends that this was not just limited to foreign countries, but offensive intelligence was employed to exert further control local politics and quell unrest during the Emergency of 1975-1977.<sup>8</sup>

While RAW or any other form of federally-condoned subversive action does not appear in other sources, it is widely accepted that India has taken active involvement in the affairs of its neighbors, using any and all means to forward their agenda. Writer and commentator on Nepali affairs Rabindra Mishra holds that India sought to keep Nepal within its sphere of influence, and used the threat of supporting opposition politicians based in India to cow Nepal into signing an arms deal, whereby India would be the principle supplier of munitions and that the Nepali government would be required to first get approval before purchasing or transporting munitions through India and to further assert their power in India, Mishra contends that when Nepali political exiles fled to India, seeking support, Indira Gandhi demanded the exiles cease all political activities, which, according to Mishra, allowed the Panchayat regime to continue ruling unabated.<sup>9</sup> Mishra goes on to comment on the substantial support base for Nepali Maoist rebels in India, and then cites that the region in which the Maoists were based were vulnerable regions of the Indian border, and would not have likely escaped the attention of Indian intelligence. Additionally, he goes on to comment that after 9/11, the Indian government found it politically expedient to crack down on the rebels by declaring them terrorists and pose itself as a player in the War on Terror. All the while this was happening, many of the top leaders of the Nepali Maoists were releasing their communications from Delhi and were giving interviews in India. India officially denied any knowledge of their whereabouts, all the while publicly supplying military aid for Nepal’s internal struggle.<sup>10</sup> In any case, it appears that Indian intelligence used Nepali resistance based in India as a control rod for political stability, allowing strife to increase when India sought to apply pressure to the regime, and striking at the rebels when they sought political stability in Nepal and to appear as the regional provider of security.

Indian strategist Sanjay K. Jha comments on the situation of Nepal as it stands today and makes policy recommendations in his essay: “India-Nepal Relations: Royal Takeover and its Implications.” This paper devotes little attention to the cultivation of Nepali-Indian relations, instead appealing to “extensive bilateral ties reflecting the

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pg. vi-vii

<sup>6</sup> Tanham,

<sup>7</sup> Ashraf, Fahmida *RAW: Covert Instrument of Indian Ambition* (Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad: 2004) pg.12-14

<sup>8</sup> Ashraf, pg. 15-16

<sup>9</sup> Mishra, Rabindra “India’s Role in Nepal’s Maoist Insurgency” in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2004) 632

<sup>10</sup> Mishra, 636-639

historical, geographical and military links.”<sup>11</sup> Jha’s contention is that there has been undue focus on restoring democracy from a monarchy to Nepal, and that the threat of the Maoist resistance poses a much greater threat to regional security. Interestingly enough, Jha comments on Nepal’s efforts to seek outside support and supplies, both from China and Pakistan as a means to offset Indian influence, however he counters the possibility of these with the fact that the Maoist threat posed to the Nepali government would not be a serious concern to China, whereas it is a source of instability in India along the border; meanwhile, Pakistan has no overland route to transport any materiel. The conclusion is then that the only power that can truly stand for Nepal’s interests in India and that the interests of creating a suitable democratic government need to be shelved in favor of promoting regional stability.<sup>12</sup>

Mishra’s concern and Jha’s advocacy for further Indian involvement are uniquely placed. Jha acknowledges outright that some of the smaller states near India seek independence, however he, like other Indian strategic thinkers, pushes the notion that no one besides India can physically provide for security or even cares about the plight of the individual nation enough to be bothered by such a crisis. Irrespective of any judgments on the veracity of Jha or Mishra’s concerns, the inevitable result is that India is setting itself up to be the source of regional stability, quite possibly by any means available. Tanham addresses this same notion in his account of the Indian zones of influence. Indian strategic thought, places several concentric circles with India in the center. The first circle contains India, and represents the foremost desire of India to create internal stability and mobilize the nation as a cohesive unit, even if by military imposition on certain occasions. The second circle contains Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and the Maldives. This concept of the unified subcontinent is approximately borrowed from the strategic assumptions of the British Raj, however the postcolonial Indian interpretation brings with it a great degree of cultural baggage. Specifically, Tanham claims that India assumes a degree of cultural unity between all of these nations that none of these member states agree upon. The third circle includes Pakistan, which is regarded as the premier threat to stability, top this day, and exists as an outlier and counterweight to the Indian influence in the region as well as China which is seen as another threat and longstanding competitor, as well as Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) which was seen as a great friend and insurance against Chinese influence. The last two circles contain Indian Ocean and the rest of the world (US and Western European powers, the Pacific, Africa etc.)<sup>13</sup>

Within the second circle, Tanham offers some insight to why India seeks such great influence over this region: specifically, India sees similarities between the ethnic problems faced by the rulers of these small states and sees them as inherently unstable as the majority of them are not democratic. Additionally, Tanham comments that these small states seek freedom from Indian influence, whereas India is eternally fearful of foreign influence and responds by attempting to exert greater influence over these smaller states, resulting in the continuation and enhancement of regional treaties from British times, whereby the government in India demands significant control over these smaller nations’ defense and foreign policy (in what Tanham refers to as the ‘Indira Doctrine’ because of the similarities to the Monroe Doctrine). In response to what it perceives as threatening foreign policy and subversion by other world powers (Chinese sponsorship of local conflict and American involvement through the CIA are favorite targets of this suspicion, according to Tanham), the Indian intelligence community, especially the RAW are seen to take destabilizing measures of their own, towards preserving Indian preeminence as the regional stabilizer.<sup>14</sup> These same concerns are echoed in Ashraf’s paper, although using more aggressive and suspicious rhetoric: specifically, she accuses the RAW of acting as a tool of Indian regional hegemony. Quoting Pakistani defense analyst Ikram Sehgal on RAW’s activities:

“This is a deliberate implementation of the policy of the Indian government to annex and occupy neighboring countries or to browbeat them into accepting Indian regional hegemony. That RAW takes the initiative to sow anarchy and disorder puts it in a murderous class of its own.”<sup>15</sup>

Ashraf continues to level accusations against RAW, contending that it played a vital role in moving forward the incorporation of Sikkim into the Indian state, on account that the CIA was making inroads into the Sikkim government.<sup>16</sup> It has been difficult to verify this claim, however if this were the case, it would be consistent with Tanham’s account of Indian strategy. What is consistent, both by direct assertion in Tanham and Ashraf is that India seeks to present itself as the guarantor of security in South Asia, with Ashraf contending that the Indian intelligence apparatus, specifically the RAW, “has...played a significant role in enhancing India’s image as an important international actor.”<sup>17</sup>

In many ways, the war fought between India and China very distinctly fed into a mentality that lead India to seek stability through a comprehensive and long-term defensive plan whereby it slowly exerted influence on its

<sup>11</sup> Jha, Sanjay K., “India-Nepal Relations: Royal Takeover and its Implications” in *Emerging India: Security and Foreign Policy Perspectives*, ed. NS Sisodia and C Uday Bhaskar. (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi: 2005), pg. 290

<sup>12</sup> Jha, pg. 297-298, 300-301

<sup>13</sup> Tanham, pg. 23

<sup>14</sup> Tanham pg. 27-29

<sup>15</sup> Ashraf, pg. 34

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 35

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* pg. 43

neighbors, while presenting itself as integral to regional stability to international powers. Especially in the case of Nepal, the fact that the actions taken by the Indian government in Mishra's article were not revealed until very recently suggests that India experienced a degree of success in covertly influencing regional and international politics so that not only did it help to create India as a great force for stability (especially when it used the Maoist insurgents to frame itself as a fighter in the War on Terror), but the continued influence of nations outside Indian borders affected internal discourse. When Jha or any other policymaker asserts the need for India to step in and exert control over a crisis, it is not rationalization, but rather part of the new discourse on native strategic culture to come out of the War in 1962. The best example of the revolutionary changes that came out of this period of change, and a great source of controversy is the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, or Bangladeshi War of Liberation.

Two days after the surprise Pakistani air strike, the Indian Air Force had regrouped and obliterated the Pakistani Air Force, seizing air superiority. Not too long after, the Indian Navy successfully blockaded Pakistani ports in then-East Pakistan, cutting off 80,000 Pakistani soldiers from resupply, reinforcement and evacuation. The United Nations Security Council attempted to demand a peaceful resolution to the conflict, however Russia used its permanent member status to veto any attempt at peace, which resulted in a General Assembly resolution, calling for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal, but India stonewalled these efforts. After several waves of attacks and the arrival of Indian paratroopers on the outskirts of Dacca, the Eastern capitol, Pakistani president Yahya Khan announced that Pakistan would not be able to hold its position in Eastern Pakistan. Remnants of the Pakistani army either surrendered or fled into the countryside to continue resistance or escape, while India and Bhutan formally recognized Bangladesh, with a population of 148 million.<sup>18</sup>

*Time's* coverage of the war is telling in its own right. The coverage touches mostly on the immediate details and results of the conflict, noting the emergence of the new state, the feeble UN attempts to stop the war from happening, the US's reaction (particularly negative, citing that president Nixon and Ambassador George H.W. Bush claimed that the war was a result of Indian aggression). Additionally, it offers a few brief moments to those caught in the wake of the struggle, as well as a quick background of the Bengali independence movement, citing, in classic underdog narrative, the plight of a people who contributed greatly to the Pakistani economy and were horribly mistreated in return. *Time*, an American magazine, serves as a barometer for regard of "India-consumers" in the West towards foreign powers, since the material it publishes will quite literally "play in Peoria"

<sup>18</sup> "Bangladesh: Out of War, a Nation is Born" *Time* (12.20.1971), pg. 1-3 Accessed through *Time* website via stable url: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,878969-1,00.html>

(and the rest of the United States). India, in the article, is mentioned as having confronted Pakistan on several occasions before and suffered the humiliating loss of having a portion of Kashmir taken under Chinese influence.<sup>19</sup>

The War was swiftly decided, however the article mentions that, while in retrospect, Pakistan had no chance of winning, there was a time when choosing Pakistan in that fight would not have been unreasonable. The nature of the opening air strike against "at least eight Indian airfields" and the fact that India was able to recover from the surprise<sup>20</sup> suggests that some degree of planning for such an attack occurred. Insignificant as this detail may seem in what appears to have been a crushing victory, there is no doubt that India displayed in 1971 a much more vibrant understanding of military strategy, as well as diplomatic maneuvering by way of their refusal to accept the UN proposed ceasefire until they had achieved their objective.

Both Tanham and Ashraf claim that India, through the RAW, effected Bangladeshi independence (although Ashraf is much more explicit about it) in the 1971 conflict. While Ashraf concerns herself with establishing specifics of Indian activities, Tanham passes over these in favor of looking towards the diplomatic agreements that India put forward, such as the Treaty of Friendship that limited the security policies Bangladesh could implement. Ashraf interprets the situation as a sign of an Indian desire to promote instability in its neighbors, however Tanham unpacks this argument further, citing an Indian appeal to cultural unity implied by geographic unity (at least the way Indian policymakers see it) to justify flagrant involvement and curtailment on their neighbors' autonomy.<sup>21</sup> The Indian policy researcher Sreedha Datta sets to undermine Bangladeshi grievances of excessive Indian involvement in regional politics by asserting that Bangladesh is partially responsible for the tensions between the two states, specifically writing "If Bangladesh suffers from the Indian 'Hegemony,' India suffers from Bangladeshi 'Ingratitude.'"<sup>22</sup> As cited in the historiographical essay prepared for this research (page 3), Datta draws upon a base of Indian political sentiment, and claims that the solution to this problem (lack of bipartisan Bangladeshi deference to India) is for India to adopt a unilateral policy towards border issues with Bangladesh, claiming that it will permit India to behave in a coherent manner without waiting for reciprocity.<sup>23</sup>

Without a doubt, it has been established that India has deliberately involved itself in the affairs of other nations without invitation, both to assert its authority in

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* pg. 6-10

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* pg. 1

<sup>21</sup> Ashraf, 35-36, Tanham, pg. 30-31

<sup>22</sup> Datta, Sreeradha "Indo-Bangladesh: 'Misreading' as a Policy?" in *Emerging India: Security and Foreign Policy Perspectives* ed. NS Sisodia and C Uday Bhaskar (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi: 2005), pg. 279

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 279-280

determining its neighbors defensive and security policies, and to damage states it sees as threatening. India sees the justification of all its actions as self-evident; they view themselves as the defenders of regional security, and whatever serves Indian defense and foreign policy agendas will have a trickle-down effect in the region, or so at least the thinking goes. A look at native defense scholarship informs the impact on indigenous policy research and also provides insight into the trajectory the nation has taken since then. Lt. General V.R. Raghavan's essay introducing the first section of *Emerging India*.

Raghavan holds that the military was expected to be quiet and subservient to the executive branch of the government, and was to take on only a passive role, instead of active planning. Specifically, he contends that military leaders were acutely aware of the developing situation in Tibet, however their counsel was ignored and the Indian government was traumatized by its lack of preparation for the war. Raghavan claims that the Indian defeat in 1962 "brought alive a dormant military capability and tradition" and broke down intransigence that plagued the top brass.<sup>24</sup> He claims that the 1965 war with Pakistan did not see full cooperation between the state and the military, and he cites a specific lack of coordination between the air force and the army, however the lessons learned from the previous war had immediate effect and produced more desirable results, and allowed for dynamic responses and the beginnings of a two-front war plan with China and Pakistan (in light of increasing US aid for Pakistan during the 1960s). This shift in strategic culture, he claims, allowed for the results of 1971, which "...changed the geopolitical foundations of South Asia, It also led to a new and lasting relationship between India and the Soviet Union."<sup>25</sup> India had, in a sense, achieved what they desired, and proved to the world that they were capable of changing the face of South Asia, effectively gaining attention of the world.

The shift from Nehru's unified Pan-Asian vision to the Machiavellian "Indira Doctrine" that motivated unconventional manipulation of smaller South Asian states can be understood best as Darwinian. Despite this major shift in strategic culture, India proved capable of remaining non-aligned in the Cold War; this was essential to the Indian leadership's self-conception. To preserve the first layer of security in Tanham's model, India could not compromise national identity by aligning with any of the specific powers in the Cold War, but the Sino-Indian War proved that India could not unify Asia and would not survive unless it prepared for war. India did not have specific designs beyond long-term strategic defense, and to accomplish this, India needed the compliance of the smaller neighboring states and a flexible, responsive and active military. In the absence of a strategy-giving body,

the creation Research and Analysis Wing directly under the prime minister allowed for immediate implementation of strategy, however the desire of the executive authority in India to promote India as a world power enabled the active involvement of the RAW. Weber wrote that the state is defined as the only legitimate source of force. Expanding on this idea, the Indian state used its new strategy to place itself as a culture-giving and culture preserving entity in the subcontinent, which in turn fueled a greater desire to present itself as an incredible world power, present even today as India pursues a space program, maintains its nuclear arsenal and works with the P5 nations to protect international shipping from piracy.

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<sup>24</sup> Raghavan, VR, "Strategic Culture: A Military Perspective" in *Emerging India: Security and Foreign Policy Perspectives* ed. NS Sisodia and C Uday Bhaskar (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi: 2005), pg. 20-22

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pg.22-24

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