

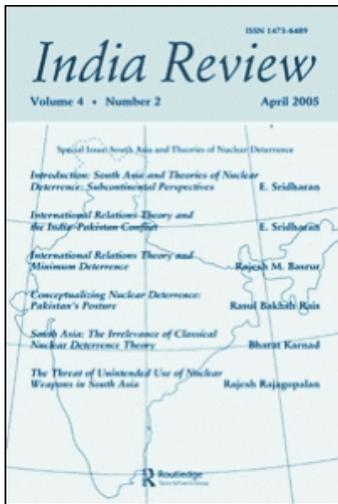
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## Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy

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# Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy

*DEVESH KAPUR*

## Introduction

Among the many factors that drive a country's foreign policy, the least understood is the role of public opinion. In any democracy, there is a presumption of some link, however weak and indirect, between public policy and public opinion, in so far as the latter represents voter preferences. But public opinion's links to foreign policy are more tenuous. In the Indian case there have been very few attempts to gauge public opinion on foreign policy issues, let alone to examine its effects on the country's foreign policy. This paper measures public opinion on Indian foreign policy through a survey of more than two hundred thousand households (the largest ever in India) and lays out some hypotheses on whether (and how) public opinion might effect Indian foreign policy in the future.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I first summarize some key findings of the literature on public opinion and foreign policy, which has been mostly developed in the US. The next section examines some of the surveys on public opinion and Indian foreign policy. Subsequently I describe the methodology of a pan-India foreign policy survey conducted in 2005–06 and some of its principal findings. Finally, in the conclusion I lay out some hypotheses on how public opinion may affect Indian foreign policy in the future.

## Foreign Policy and Public Opinion: What are the Links?

For a long time researchers argued that the general public paid little attention to foreign policy, simply avoiding or ignoring foreign policy issues, often considering them too remote to matter for their day-to-day lives. Opinion polls in the US have invariably found widespread levels of public ignorance about international issues. There is very substantial evidence that the public is poorly informed about foreign policy

issues, even today with around the clock media coverage and the wealth of information on the internet.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, it is not surprising that foreign policy is much more the domain of elite than mass politics. But even if there are differences between elite and mass public opinion on foreign policy issues, is it really a problem? Different people have different views on what is the “national interest” (vividly illustrated by the contentious debates in India surrounding the nuclear deal with the US), perhaps reflecting different priorities, but does it negatively affect the country? In his analysis of this literature Holsti finds that there is both consensus as well as divergence between the general public and elites about foreign policy objectives.<sup>2</sup> These could be the result of the greater distance that elites have from the direct effects of international competition or pressures from various interest groups and allies of the government.

Obviously in a democracy, there are troubling normative implications if elites pursue public policies contrary to voters preferences. But even if this were true in some cases, voters always have the option of removing a government if they have intense policy preferences on an issue that is contrary to the government’s. Alternatively, the legislative branch may be a conduit for the public view because that branch of government is closer to the people. If the public no longer feels that its voice is being represented by the opinion makers at all, opposition parties can capitalize and vote out the government.

But one could argue that precisely because of this apprehension, the executive branch is mindful of public opinion on foreign policy issues. This is one reason why research in the US suggests that public opinion shapes foreign policy decision-making more than in the past, with a reciprocal relationship between public opinion and policymakers. While political elites and “opinion leaders” try to educate or manipulate public opinion, they are also sensitive to the preferences of the electorate. Thus, while there may not be a strong public opinion on a particular issue, policymakers “take into account that the public may voice a strong, opinion in response to their decisions”.<sup>3</sup> In the US “there is a surprisingly widespread view among foreign policy officials that public input into, and even to some extent influence on, the foreign policy process is both necessary and desirable. Among the foreign policy officials . . . the notion that public support of policy is a *sine qua non* – and that it must therefore be a major factor in policy decisions – is so widespread as to suggest the existence of a ‘norm’

within the bureaucratic subculture.”<sup>4</sup> A mounting body of evidence suggests that the foreign policies of American presidents—and democratic leaders more generally—have been influenced by their “understanding of the public’s foreign policy views”, making public attitudes a critical component in foreign policy decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

One reason why this may be the case is suggested by research arguing that the public’s lack of factual information does not imply a lack of an opinion – the foreign policy-stands of ordinary citizens are informed by their core values and are generally stable and coherent. Although what passes as public opinion in foreign policy is typically off-the-cuff remarks, public opinion on foreign policy issues is more latent than real on most foreign policy issues and acquiescent as long as policies stay within a range of acceptability. “Latent public opinion should not, however, be considered either meaningless or insignificant for several reasons. First, latent opinion can have an effect upon foreign policy officials who must, and do try to, anticipate the future impact of current policies...Thus, even when latent, public opinion can constrain decision makers’ options.”<sup>6</sup>

The public’s views on foreign policy seemed to be shaped significantly by the behavior of policy-making elites, the news media, and other opinion leaders. Zaller’s Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of public opinion formation posits that survey answers are a “top-of-the-head” response to the questions presented.<sup>7</sup> However, inferential caution is warranted on responses to specific questions since they are affected by framing, priming, and the like. Thus, “the public hold attitudes about foreign policy, but determining which aspects of those attitudes will get expressed is neither straightforward nor automatic. Elites appear to retain some leeway in shaping the expression of public opinion, but the mechanisms that give them that leeway are still little understood.”<sup>8</sup> And the information the public gets from the government is “even more subject to problems of framing, selective use of information, and strategic manipulation than is the information from the mass media.”<sup>9</sup>

Foreign policy is one area where governments feel they have fewer domestic constraints in implementing policies. Foreign policy officials may prefer to avoid engaging public opinion, because it could act as a constraint preventing the implementation of steps that may be dictated by their perceptions of the “national interest.” Indeed, in the absence of debates among elites on foreign policy issues, public

opinion is likely to be either acquiescent (i.e., latent) or at least implicitly supportive of the policy actions taken.

The more contentious the debates among foreign policy elites, the more likely that public opinion will get activated. It is important, however, that these debates be overt, that is, reported in the media. Thus the mass media is a critical actor that connects public opinion with foreign policy decision making.<sup>10</sup> Hitherto the media was seen as a passive transmission mechanism that informed the public of the views of opinion makers by circulating opinions between decision makers and “opinion makers.” This was perhaps especially the case of the English media in India. Increasingly, however, the media (and especially the electronic media and TV in particular) may be becoming an independent actor in its own right, its priming effect evident by the role of TV in the aftermath of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in India. Aldrich and others outline three important conditions for public opinion on foreign policy to influence electoral outcomes. One, “the public must possess coherent beliefs or attitudes about foreign policy.” Two, “voters must be able to access these attitudes in the context of an election.” And three, political parties “must offer sufficiently distinct foreign policy alternatives so that voters who have accessed their available attitudes have a basis on which to make a choice.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Foreign Policy and Public Opinion in India**

Foreign policy in India was long dominated by the executive branch (and continues to be) with even the legislative branch, let alone public opinion, having little affect. Opinion makers, via media, did play a role, but as Baru argues, the Congress Party’s dominance and a high degree of consensus among mainstream political parties, meant that the media played a “marginal role” and “did not influence official thinking in any significant way.”<sup>12</sup>

India’s foreign policy under Nehru was clearly an area of elite politics rather than mass politics – at least until the disastrous war with China in 1962. Nehru had, to a great extent, shaped Indian public opinion about China in the early 1950s. Later in the decade, China’s polemical attacks on Nehru set Indian public opinion against any concessions to the Chinese, which shows that while leadership can shape public opinion, this can backfire and hobble its room for maneuver.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, while its efficacy may be debated, the combination of Nehru’s personal stature and his leadership of India’s preeminent

ruling party underpinned the domestic legitimacy of Indian foreign policy. But even then one can make a case that while Indian public opinion acquiesced in foreign policy decisions, foreign policy elites in turn took into account latent public opinion wherever sensitivities of certain sections of the population mattered, be it religious minorities (in shaping India's Middle East policies), regional groups (such as Tamils towards Sri Lanka), or the majority community (often reflected in hard line positions vis-à-vis Pakistan).

Changes in India's domestic polity, however, suggest that public opinion is likely to play a greater role in shaping the future of India's foreign policies. First, India's political landscape has become more fragmented. As a result, executive power has been weakening (relative to legislative and judicial branches of government). Fierce electoral competition has meant that marginal voters matter more for electoral success. And while foreign policy issues may not enjoy issue salience with the median voter, if it matters more for the marginal voter, then public opinion on foreign policy issues could become a more potent electoral issue. If India's current economic trajectory continues, the marginal voter is likely to be urban and more educated, and if, for this demographic, foreign policy issues have greater issue salience, then public opinion will have greater weight. Therefore, even should foreign policy continue to be a domain of elites, if their views differ significantly from those of the population, it raises serious questions not just about the legitimacy of the policy, but also its resilience to changing political fortunes.

There are few robust surveys of public opinion on Indian foreign policy. Cortright and Mattoo conducted a survey of the opinions of Indian elites on India's nuclear options finding in 1994 and found that 57 percent supported the official Indian position of nuclear ambiguity, another third favored the nuclear option, whereas just eight percent favored renouncing India's nuclear program.<sup>14</sup> The survey was purposely selective, with a sample of 992 covering seven Indian cities.

In recent years, several cross-national surveys – the Pew Global Attitudes Project and the World Public Opinion Surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs – shed some light on Indian public opinion on foreign policy. The results of the surveys conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs are summarized in Table 1. The surveys found that in general, Indians believed that the US and China would have about the

TABLE 1  
 INDIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON FOREIGN POLICY: SUMMARY  
 OF RECENT SURVEYS

Survey	India sample size	Coverage	Results - attitudes towards:	
			US	China
Pew, 2006	2, 029	Urban	56% viewed the US favorably, down 15% from 2005. 4 <sup>th</sup> highest rating given out of 15 countries polled	Not available, but 56% viewed China favorably in 2005
Pew, 2007	2, 043	Urban	59% viewed the US favorably, up 3% from 2006 15 <sup>th</sup> highest rating out of 47 countries polled	46% viewed China favorably, down 10% from 2005 26 <sup>th</sup> highest rating of 47 countries polled.
Chicago Council of Global Affairs, 2006	2, 458	National, Formally Educated	66% believed US had significant influence on the world <sup>21</sup> 54% <i>wanted</i> US to have that much say in the world	46% believed China had significant influence on the world. 48% <i>wanted</i> China to have that much say in the world

same power they currently have in ten years. However, there seemed to be some ambivalence towards China's economic rise. The World Public Opinion Survey found that 58 percent thought it would be either equally positive/negative or positive if China's economy grew to be as large as the US' economy, whereas the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 48 percent thought China's growing economic strength was problematic. Somewhat interestingly, 43 percent thought it would be mainly positive if the US becomes military *weaker* than it is today, whereas 40 percent thought it would be mainly positive if China becomes militarily *stronger* than it is today. However, both surveys suggested that public opinion in India was favorable towards the US. In both surveys public opinion in India consistently ranked near the top of the list in its confidence in and support of the US (compared to other countries where the poll was carried out). This has not always been the case, however. In 2002, the percentage of the polled Indian population expressing a favorable opinion of the US, at 54 percent, was in the lower half of the countries polled. (Presumably prior to this period, public opinion in India may have been even more

unfavorable). In 2005, the percentage shot up to 71 percent, the highest of any country polled. And in the Pew Global Attitudes Survey conducted in 2007, India ranked 14<sup>th</sup> among the 47 nations (most of the other countries ranked above it were African countries), with 59 percent of the public holding favorable views of the US.

These cross-national surveys suffer from two limitations. First, since their sample frame is urban, these are not *nationally* representative samples and therefore can be seriously biased. Second, the sample sizes are too small (less than three thousand in both cases) to understand variation *within* India, whether across states or among socio-economic groups. This is important because a political party with a concentrated electoral constituency may take a strong position based on the need to shore up its political base even though this might differ from national public opinion. And, if it is part of the ruling coalition, the exigencies of coalition politics may still result in a policy being vetoed.

To address this problem we conducted the largest ever random, nationally representative survey of foreign policy attitudes of Indians in 2005–06 covering 212,563 households. The survey instrument was modeled on an annual randomly sampled survey of foreign policy attitudes of Beijing residents from 1998 to 2004.<sup>15</sup> However, in addition, our survey design allowed us to measure the response of ten specific socio-economic (SEC) groups, defined by education and occupation (six in urban and four in rural India).<sup>16</sup> Data from the Beijing surveys show that wealthier, better educated, better traveled, younger, and better-informed residents had more positive feelings towards the US. What does Indian survey data tell us?

### Survey Results

First, there is a clear relationship between non-responsiveness to questions on foreign policy and socio-economic status (Table 2). I attribute non-responsiveness to *ability* rather than *willingness* since there is no reason to believe that poorer groups would be wary of answering these questions because of fear of adverse consequences. The non-response rate among the most elite socio-economic (SEC) group – SEC A1, which accounts for about one percent of the population and includes those with at least a graduate education and in professional or managerial jobs or employers – is 28.7 percent. On the other hand, the non-response rates, averaged over the three lowest socio-economic groups – SEC E in urban India and SEC R3 and SEC

TABLE 2  
 PERCENTAGE THAT RESPONDED TO QUESTIONS  
 AS "DON'T KNOW/CAN'T SAY"

Category	Share of population (%)	%
SEC		
SEC A1	1.1	28.7
SEC A	3.3	32.8
SEC B	5.2	42.4
SEC C	6.4	50.9
SEC D	7.2	61.4
SEC E	9.1	72.2
SEC R1	2.7	49.7
SEC R2	8.0	61.4
SEC R3	27.9	71.0
SEC R4	30.2	82.2
AGE		
15–19 years	6.9	64.8
20–29 years	28.6	67.0
30–39 years	24.0	70.7
40–49 years	17.1	71.7
50 + years	23.4	77.6
Gender		
Male	51.0	62.3
Female	49.0	80.1

Note: N = 212,563.

R4 in rural India – which account for two-thirds of India's population, is more than three-fourths, about three times greater than the highest socio-economic group. High non-response rates among the weaker socio-economic groups indicate that they may be "efficiently" ignorant; that is, they are not interested in putting in the effort on an issue that has low salience for them. The response rate is also higher in urban India and among younger respondents. This could be either because they are more educated and/or have more exposure to the media. Interestingly the response rate for men is considerably higher than for women, but it is unclear whether this is because men are more opinionated in general or more aware about foreign policy issues.

Are the foreign policy responses of certain demographics distinct from the rest of the population? To test this we ran t-tests to check for the equality of means between two groups. The results are reported in Tables 3, 4 and 5. The "yes" column refers to people in the relevant group while "no" refers to people not in the group. For instance, the first column in the first row in Table 3, is people who are "elites" (defined as members of SEC A1) and the second column

TABLE 3  
 OUTCOME: "(AVERAGE) FEELING TOWARDS USA, CHINA, AND PAKISTAN"  
 (SCALED 1-100)

		yes	no	t-test of significance
SEC A1 ("elites")	USA	66.72 (5948)	61.33 (53730)	<b>-16.34</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	China	53.58	50.22	<b>-11.09</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	29.85	32.25	<b>7.24</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
Urban	USA	62.44 (50546)	58.72 (9132)	<b>-13.52</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	China	50.92	48.55	<b>-9.58</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	31.93	32.49	<b>2.11</b> ( <i>p</i> = .035)
Young (less than 30 years old)	USA	61.65 (6918)	61.90 (52760)	0.796 ( <i>p</i> = .426)
	China	49.69	50.66	<b>3.46</b> ( <i>p</i> = .001)
	Pakistan	32.72	31.93	<b>0.009</b> ( <i>p</i> = .009)

Note: Number of non-missing observations in parentheses.

TABLE 4  
 OUTCOME: "ATTITUDE TOWARDS FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS: US, CHINA  
 AND PAKISTAN - AGGRESSIVE OR PEACEFUL?" (SCALE 1-7)

		yes	no	t-test of significance
SEC A1 ("elites")	USA	4.02 (5731)	4.04 (54601)	0.69 ( <i>p</i> = .492)
	China	4.31	4.54	<b>8.87</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	2.19	2.43	<b>10.26</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
Urban	USA	4.04 (50813)	3.97 (9519)	<b>-2.78</b> ( <i>p</i> = .006)
	China	4.49	4.70	<b>10.42</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	2.40	2.47	<b>3.94</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
Young (less than 30 years old)	USA	4.16 (7028)	4.02 (53300)	<b>-5.56</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	China	4.57	4.51	<b>-2.47</b> ( <i>p</i> = .013)
	Pakistan	2.52	2.40	<b>-6.16</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)

Note: Number of non-missing observations in parentheses.

TABLE 5  
 OUTCOME: "ATTITUDE TOWARDS FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS US,  
 CHINA AND PAKISTAN TRUSTWORTHY?" (SCALE 1-7)

		yes	no	t-test of significance
SEC A1 ("elites")	USA	4.24 (5690)	4.20 (54316)	-0.61 ( <i>p</i> = .108)
	China	4.29	4.55	<b>9.65</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	2.12	2.43	<b>12.87</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
Urban	USA	4.22 (50518)	4.09 (9488)	-5.71 ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	China	4.49	4.69	<b>9.61</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	Pakistan	2.39	2.47	<b>4.61</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)
Young (less than 30 years old)	USA	4.34 (6982)	4.19 (53020)	-5.96 ( <i>p</i> = .000)
	China	4.57	4.52	-2.35 ( <i>p</i> = .019)
	Pakistan	2.53	2.38	<b>-6.90</b> ( <i>p</i> = .000)

(again in the first row) is people who are not elites. The t-test is significant indicating that indeed the response of SEC A1 is indeed statistically distinct from all other sections of the population. Indian elites have warmer feelings towards the US and China, but the opposite (i.e., colder feelings) towards Pakistan compared to the rest of the Indian population. Indian elites, the group that matters most in shaping foreign policy, hold both more intense beliefs than all other socio-economic groups, but the variance in views of this group is the highest compared to all other groups. Thus, Indian elites not only have stronger opinions than other socio-economic groups but also disagree with each other to a greater degree than members of other groups. This "Elite discord" and lack of consensus in the very group most central to foreign policy is perhaps the most worrying aspect of India's foreign policy.

Urban and young respondents (less than 30 years old) also have statistically significant differences in responses compared to their rural and older counterparts respectively. To the extent that India is poised to become more urban and the current "youth" cohort will move into higher age cohorts, the views of these groups will become more dominant in Indian public opinion on foreign policy issues.

It is one thing to express an opinion on an issue, but it is quite another to say that the issue's salience for the respondent is high enough to somehow matter. One area where it might matter is of course voting behavior. When asked if their views on foreign policy and how the government performs in this area influenced their voting decision in parliamentary elections, about half of respondents in the SEC A category either strongly or somewhat agreed with the proposition, whereas the fraction was just above a tenth for SEC R4 (Table 6). If India's current economic trajectory continues, the marginal voter is likely to be urban and more educated. For this demographic group, foreign policy issues have considerable issue salience. Consequently, public opinion on foreign policy issues is likely to have greater weight in the future.

Foreign policy attitudes towards another country are a complex amalgam, which needs to be distinguished between attitudes towards the *country*, its *government*, or its *people*. This matters because it has been argued that negative attitudes towards the people of a country are more problematic than negative attitudes towards the government of that country, because the former indicates more deep rooted resentments compared to the latter. In the surveys of Chinese public opinion conducted by Johnston and Stockmann, the Chinese

TABLE 6  
HOW IMPORTANT IS THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE  
IN FOREIGN POLICY FOR VOTERS?

SEC	% Either strongly agree or somewhat agree	% Neutral	% Either strongly disagree or somewhat disagree	% No response
SEC A1	50.4	6.6	16.0	27.0
SEC A	50.3	6.5	12.2	31.0
SEC B	44.0	6.0	8.8	41.2
SEC C	38.0	5.0	7.7	49.3
SEC D	30.6	3.8	5.6	60.0
SEC E	21.1	2.7	3.8	72.4
SEC R1	34.9	3.9	9.9	51.3
SEC R2	26.7	2.8	6.7	63.8
SEC R3	21.7	2.0	4.1	72.2
SEC R4	11.6	0.9	2.0	85.5
N = 212,563				

Q. "My views on foreign policy and how the government performs in this area influence my voting decision in parliamentary elections"; 1-Strongly Agree, 2-Somewhat Agree, 3-Neutral, 4-Somewhat Disagree, 5-Strongly Disagree, 6-No Response.

harbored more negative views of the US government compared to the Japanese government.<sup>17</sup> Presumably Chinese views of the US government could change after Obama replaced Bush. However, when it came to their views of the peoples of the two countries the opposite was true – the Japanese people were viewed much more negatively. One implication of these findings is that relations between China and Japan are likely to be more fraught than between China and the US, although the latter is likely to be more volatile.

Drawing on Johnston and Stockmann, we used a thermometer scale to gauge Indian attitudes towards key countries, based on the following question: “If you have warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 50 and 100 degrees. If you have no warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 1 and 50 degrees. If you have neither warm nor cold feelings, please choose 50 degrees.”

To the extent that Indians express their opinion about the degree of warmth (or positive feelings) towards a country (the choices were US, Japan, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia) the US ranks highest, no matter which way the data is segmented, be it socio-economic group, income, state, gender, age, or rural-urban. Indians have the warmest feelings towards the US followed by Japan, with (expectedly) Pakistan at the other end of the spectrum (Figure 1).

The preference domination of the US over China and Pakistan in the thermometer measure of warmth towards a country is across all socio-economic groups (Table 7A). Interestingly, Johnston and Stockmann observe similar behavior among socio-economic groups in

GRAPH 1  
OVERALL FEELINGS OF WARMTH TOWARDS FOREIGN COUNTRIES.

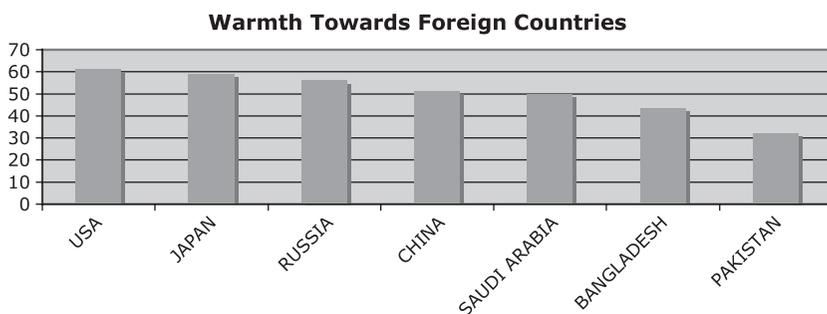


TABLE 7A  
RATINGS ON FEELINGS OF WARMTH TOWARDS  
FOREIGN COUNTRIES ACROSS SECS

SEC	US	Pakistan	China
SEC A1	66.7	29.8	53.5
SEC A	65.3	30.2	59.9
SEC B	62.7	31.4	52.1
SEC C	62.6	32.2	52.0
SEC D	61.2	32.0	50.8
SEC E	59.8	34.2	48.5
SEC R1	62.5	31.6	52.8
SEC R2	61.5	32.0	52.1
SEC R3	58.6	32.3	48.9
SEC R4	58.8	33.5	48.9

*Q. If you have warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 50 and 100 degrees. If you have no warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 1 and 50 degrees. If you have neither warm nor cold feelings, please choose 50 degree. 888 DK; 999 no answer.*

their survey analysis of residents in Beijing.<sup>18</sup> This could be explained either because the elites are more informed about the US or because they benefit more from a relationship with that country. Interestingly, weaker socio-economic groups also unambiguously prefer the US relative to other countries. Thus, while Indian elites may like the US more in absolute terms, weaker segments of society also appear to harbor warmer feelings towards the US compared to other countries.

The preference domination of the US over China and Pakistan in the thermometer measure of warmth towards a country is across all age categories (Table 7B). Younger people seem to have warmer feelings towards the US than older cohorts. This could be the result of

TABLE 7B  
RATINGS OF FEELINGS OF WARMTH TOWARDS FOREIGN  
COUNTRIES ACROSS AGE GROUPS

AGE	US	Pakistan	China
15–19 years	64.1	35.2	52.2
20–29 years	62.1	32.7	50.9
30–39 years	60.1	31.3	50.6
40–49 years	59.7	31.1	51.1
50+ years	59.9	31.9	50.0

*Q. If you have warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 50 and 100 degrees. If you have no warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 1 and 50 degrees. If you have neither warm nor cold feelings, please choose 50 degree. 888 DK; 999 no answer.*

older generations lingering memories of the Cold War and anemic relations with the US in that period, while the post Cold War generation in India has grown up in an environment of much closer relations between the two countries.

The preference domination of the US over China and Pakistan in the thermometer measure of warmth towards a country holds across all states as well, with the exception of Assam (Table 7C). Even in

TABLE 7C  
RATINGS ON FEELINGS OF WARMTH TOWARDS  
FOREIGN COUNTRIES ACROSS STATES

States	US	Pakistan	China
Andhra Pradesh	68.4	32.1	51.9
Assam	63.6	33.7	63.4
Bihar	53.6	33.3	53.3
Chandigarh	65.5	35.1	55.6
Chattisgarh	56.8	34.8	53.2
Delhi	67.3	34.8	53.5
Goa	64.6	25.7	45.8
Gujarat	51.4	25.8	39.1
Haryana	71.3	29.5	55.5
Himachal Pradesh	59.9	28.7	52.3
Jammu	61.1	28.5	46.8
Jharkhand	63.0	34.8	54.1
Karnataka	68.2	37.8	54.4
Kerala	52.9	36.1	48.9
Madhya Pradesh	57.5	31.7	49.4
Maharashtra	58.2	29.5	45.2
Orissa	64.7	29.5	53.2
Punjab	68.1	41.6	54.3
Rajasthan	56.9	27.8	48.5
Tamil Nadu	71.9	33.5	63.4
Uttar Pradesh	58.6	31.3	50.2
Uttaranchal	59.3	30.3	50.1
West Bengal	61.6	35.3	55.8

*Q. If you have warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 50 and 100 degrees. If you have no warm feelings toward a certain country please determine its position between 1 and 50 degrees. If you have neither warm nor cold feelings, please choose 50 degree. 888 DK; 999 no answer.*

*Q. Do you believe that the Indian government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. The United States/China is a major power. Do you believe that it the US/ Chinese government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. Pakistan is an important neighbor. Do you believe that the Pakistani government is peaceful or belligerent? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*(7 most trustworthy, 1 least trustworthy).*

states ruled by the left parties who are the most vociferous opponents of closer relations with the US (Kerala and West Bengal), respondents clearly preferred the relationship with US over the relationship with China. The cross-state variation also gives some clues to the questions whether India's Muslims – an important voting constituency in an increasingly competitive voting environment – harbor less warm feelings towards the US than the rest of the population. While the data does not have the religious beliefs of respondents at the individual level, there was no statistical difference in the aggregate response in states with higher Muslim population from those with low concentration of Muslims.

A poll conducted in July 2008 in urban India after the Left parties withdrew support for the government to protest against the nuclear found that 34 percent of respondents were for the deal and 13 percent were opposed. Twenty-one percent felt that "Government knows best" and another 32 percent had no opinion. Support was greater among the young and among graduates, whereas Muslims and the elderly were less enthusiastic (even though more supported the deal than opposed it).<sup>19</sup> A subsequent poll after the Indian general elections in 2009 found that just 37 percent had even heard of the deal. Indeed the fact that in the 2009 Indian elections, the Left parties lost heavily in regions with a strong Muslim concentration (in Kerala and West Bengal), suggests that linking sectarian cleavages to foreign policy issues has low electoral salience when underlying public opinion is unenthusiastic.

On the other hand, strong public opinion on a foreign policy issue – support for the Sri Lanka Tamil issue in Tamil Nadu – has led political parties in that state to be vociferous on this subject. The National Election Survey of 2009 found that a very large majority of voters (81 per cent) in Tamil Nadu felt that the LTTE's demands were justified and 85 per cent said that the Indian government should bring pressure on the Sri Lankan government to ensure the safety of Tamil citizens in that country.<sup>20</sup> Tamil Nadu's political parties, one could argue, were simply responding to public opinion when they organized fasts, protest marches, and fiery speeches in support of the cause of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The inter-linkages between the well-being of the Indian diaspora and public opinion in India are likely to pose greater challenges for India's foreign policy in the future.

The survey also asked a series of questions to gauge the degree of an in-group identity among Indians, which leads to the construction of a different, often devalued, out-group identity. Thus, a high rating for Indian people and the Indian government would suggest higher levels of patriotism and pride on one's own country, a reflection of a stronger in-group identity. Conversely, lower ratings for people from foreign countries would indicate more devalued out-groups identities. In general, more identity difference is associated with more threatened or competitive view of the out-group.

The identity difference between Indians and other countries was calculated by asking respondents to indicate their degree of trust in their own government (i.e. the Indian government) and then asked to indicate their trust in the government of a specified foreign country (on a scale of 1 to 7).

Q. Do you believe that the Indian government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7-point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.

Q. The United States/China is a major power. Do you believe that the US/Chinese government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7-point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.

Q. Pakistan is an important neighbor. Do you believe that the Pakistani government is peaceful or belligerent? Please mark on the following 7-point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion

(7 most trustworthy, 1 least trustworthy).

The Identity Difference estimate was obtained by subtracting perceptions of a respondent's trust in a foreign country's government from the same respondent's trust in the Indian government. The more negative the score, the greater the relative degree of distrust in the foreign government.

In contrast to the findings in the thermometer measure of warmth towards a country, by this measure, China dominates over the US across all socio-economic groups (Table 8A). Expectedly again,

TABLE 8A  
DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS  
REGARDING TRUST IN FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND  
TRUST IN THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT ACROSS SECS

SEC	US	Pakistan	China
SEC A1	-1.3	-3.4	-1.2
SEC A	-1.5	-3.5	-1.3
SEC B	-1.7	-2.6	-1.5
SEC C	-1.8	-3.6	-1.5
SEC D	-1.9	-3.6	-1.6
SEC E	-1.9	-3.6	-1.5
SEC R1	-2.2	-4.0	-1.6
SEC R2	-2.2	-3.9	-1.5
SEC R3	-2.3	-3.9	-1.6
SEC R4	-2.1	-3.9	-1.7

*Q. Do you believe that the Indian government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. The United States/China is a major power. Do you believe that it the US/Chinese government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. Pakistan is an important neighbor. Do you believe that the Pakistani government is peaceful or belligerent? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion. (7 most trustworthy, 1 least trustworthy).*

distrust in the Pakistan government is highest. The identity difference measure of relative trust in the home government and a foreign government is less among higher socio-economic groups for US and China (and more mixed for Pakistan). This is not because trust in the foreign governments is greater among higher socio-economic groups, but rather because trust in the home government is less. Indian elites are more cynical and less trusting of the Indian state than poorer socio-economic groups.

The preference domination of China over the US and Pakistan in the identity difference measure of trust in government is across all age categories (Table 8B). In this case, however, there is relatively little variance across age groups, except at the two ends of the age distribution – the young and the old.

The picture is more mixed across states, although China dominates in the majority of states, that is, distrust of the US government is greater than the Chinese government (Table 8C). The US dominates in Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, while in three states (Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Orissa), the scores are identical. Distrust of the Pakistan government is (unsurprisingly) much greater

TABLE 8B  
DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS REGARDING  
TRUST IN FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND TRUST IN INDIAN  
GOVERNMENT ACROSS AGE GROUPS

AGE	US	Pakistan	China
15–19 years	-1.9	-3.7	-1.5
20–29 years	-1.9	-3.8	-1.6
30–39 years	-2.0	-3.8	-1.6
40–49 years	-2.1	-3.9	-1.6
50+ years	-2.2	-3.9	-1.8

*Q. Do you believe that the Indian government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. The United States/China is a major power. Do you believe that it the US/ Chinese government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. Pakistan is an important neighbor. Do you believe that the Pakistani government is peaceful or belligerent? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*(7 most trustworthy, 1 least trustworthy).*

than that of either China or the US. It should be noted that the survey took place during a period of relative thaw in relations between the two countries and not in the aftermath of a major incident.

The survey responses indicate that the Indian public is not naïve and indeed demonstrates a streak of hard realism in its judgments about the US. This was perhaps why, in response to another question on India's dealing with foreign governments, the majority of respondents felt that the Indian government should be tougher in its negotiations with US. Indeed, as events transpired after the survey was conducted, the Indian government did precisely that in its negotiations with the US on the nuclear deal, and by most accounts, the final deal that was struck was considerably more favorable than the initial negotiations.

## Conclusion

In virtually every society, elites play a much more dominant role in foreign policy relative to other domestic policy issues. This is one policy issue that is well within the domain of the executive branch, giving it considerable more autonomy. There is wide spread evidence that the mass public is poorly informed about foreign policy issues. And, if policy makers are able to tailor public opinion to create support for their policies through the media and various framing techniques, governments can have even wider latitude on foreign policies.

TABLE 8C  
DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS REGARDING  
TRUST IN FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND TRUST IN THE  
INDIAN GOVERNMENT ACROSS STATES

States	US	Pakistan	China
Andhra Pradesh	-3.3	-3.6	-1.3
Assam	-2.3	-2.6	-1.8
Bihar	-1.9	-3.5	-1.2
Chandigarh	-2.9	-4.1	-1.5
Chattisgarh	-1.5	-4.4	-1.4
Delhi	-2.2	-2.9	-1.6
Goa	-2.5	-4.2	-1.9
Gujarat	-2.1	-3.7	-1.8
Haryana	-1.7	-4.5	-1.5
Himachal Pradesh	-0.9	-3.8	-0.9
Jammu	-2.6	-4.2	-2.1
Jharkhand	-2.1	-3.9	-2.0
Karnataka	-3.1	-3.8	-1.5
Kerala	-2.4	-3.7	-1.8
Madhya Pradesh	-1.5	-4.5	-1.7
Maharashtra	-2.0	-3.7	-2.0
Orissa	-1.9	-2.9	-1.9
Punjab	-0.8	-1.7	-1.7
Rajasthan	-1.9	-3.6	-1.6
Tamil Nadu	-1.7	-4.7	-1.2
Uttar Pradesh	-1.1	-2.9	-1.4
Uttaranchal	-2.4	-3.7	-1.1
West Bengal	-2.4	-3.8	-1.4

*Q. Do you believe that the Indian government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. The United States/China is a major power. Do you believe that it the US/Chinese government is trustworthy or not? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion.*

*Q. Pakistan is an important neighbor. Do you believe that the Pakistani government is peaceful or belligerent? Please mark on the following 7 point scale the appropriate position that expresses your opinion. (7 most trustworthy, 1 least trustworthy).*

Nonetheless, there is broad evidence that even latent public opinion can still affect foreign policy decision making by constricting officials' options as they consider the electoral impact of their decisions.

The survey of foreign policy attitudes of Indians supports the common belief that a majority of Indians have little interest in foreign policy issues. But there are enough that do and this demographic group is growing rapidly. And foreign policy elites may be surprised by the sophisticated nature of Indian public opinion on foreign policy. For instance Indians see the US as worthy of emulation but are not naïve in their views of the US

government. A troubling finding of the survey is that Indian elites disagree with each other to a greater degree than members of other groups. This “Elite discord” and lack of consensus in the very group most central to foreign policy is perhaps the most worrying aspect of India’s foreign policy.

There is much that the paper does not address, in particular the precise mechanisms that may link Indian public opinion to the nature of Indian foreign policy. Future research needs to begin to investigate those links.

#### NOTES

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1. For example, a poll conducted in 2007 found that, “41% of Americans polled believe Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the 9/11 attacks- up from 36% who thought that in 2004.” (Newsweek, July 9, 2007).
2. Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
3. Philip J. Powlick and Andrew Z. Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus (in Reflection, Evaluation, Integration),” *Mershon International Studies Review* 42 (1) (May, 1998): 31.
4. Philip J. Powlick, “The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion among American Foreign Policy Officials,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35 (4) (December 1991): 634.
5. John H. Aldrich, and others, “Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 9 (2006): 496.
6. Powlick and Katz, p. 33.
7. John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
8. Aldrich and others, p. 487.
9. Aldrich and others, p. 487.
10. Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, “The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 11 (2008): 39-65.
11. Aldrich and others, p. 478.
12. Sanjaya Baru, “The Influence of Business and Media on Indian Foreign Policy,” *India Review*, this issue.
13. See Jagat Mehta, *Negotiating for India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2006. I am grateful to Srinath Raghavan for this point.
14. David Cortright and Mattoo Amitabh, “Elite Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons Policy in India,” *Asian Survey* 36 (June 1996):545-560.
15. Alastair Ian Johnston and D. Stockmann, “Chinese Attitudes toward the United States,” draft 2005.
16. The urban socio-economic groups (in descending order) are SEC A through SEC E, and Rural from SEC R1 through SEC R4. Within SEC A, a more selective group SEC A1 represents the top socio-economic group, about 1% of the total population.
17. Johnston and Stockman, “Chinese Attitudes.”
18. Johnston and Stockman, “Chinese Attitudes.”
19. The survey sample size was 1,520 respondents in urban India. <http://www.lokniti.org>.
20. “Against all Expectations,” *Hindu* (May 26, 2009), p. 4.
21. When asked to rank the amount of influence the US and China had respectively on a scale of 1–10, participants gave them a rating of between 7 and 10.