

Oxford Handbooks Online

Public Opinion

Devesh Kapur

The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy

Edited by David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan

Print Publication Date: Jul
2015

Online Publication Date: Dec
2015

Subject: Political Science, Comparative Politics, Political
Behavior

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198743538.013.22

[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the role of public opinion on Indian foreign policy and focuses on four principal questions: One, how informed is the Indian public about foreign policy issues and how have its views been measured? Two, what shapes public opinion on foreign policy issues in India? Who are the key actors and how have they changed over time and issue area? Three, what are the mechanisms that link public opinion to public policy in foreign policy and on what issues has public opinion mattered? And four, what is public opinion about India in other major countries and what does it reveal? Finally the chapter concludes with some observations on public opinion's interactions with changes in other variables shaping foreign policy, such as the rise of business and a more federal polity.

Keywords: India, public opinion, foreign policy, business, federal polity

AMONG the many factors that drive a country's foreign policy, the least understood is the role of public opinion. Foreign policy has always been the one area where governments feel they have fewer domestic constraints in implementing policies. Public opinion on foreign policy is viewed to be largely acquiescent (i.e. latent) or at least implicitly supportive of the policy actions of the government in power. But public opinion can also be 'primed' and strategically manipulated to support (or oppose) policy changes which may challenge long cherished shibboleths, whether compromising on boundary disputes or international agreements, or aligning with new partners. To what extent has public opinion been a constraint on policy-makers in Indian foreign policy? Who is the 'public' in public opinion? And to the extent public opinion has been a constraint, has it been the result of indifference of policy-makers—and in particular India's political leadership—to engage with public opinion or their inability to prime it in desired directions?

In any democracy, there is a presumption of some link, however weak and indirect, between public policy and public opinion, insofar as the latter represents voter preferences. But public opinion's links to foreign policy are more tenuous. Recent literature addressing the question of who shapes and influences a country's foreign policy seems to be in broad agreement that relative to earlier years, foreign policy is evolving from being the preserve of political elites into an arena in which a more diverse range of actors plays a larger role, from business to the media. The advent of 24/7 cable news, the internet, social media, and other platforms for the rapid and constant dissemination of information has irrevocably weakened governments' control over information. But how much better informed is the 'public' on foreign policy issues relative to the past?

Studies of public opinion on foreign policy in the United States continue to demonstrate a marked knowledge gap between the general public and policy elites when it comes to questions of foreign policy. Is public opinion on foreign policy typically anything more than off-the-cuff remarks, something that is more latent than real on most foreign policy issues and acquiescent as long as policies stay within a range of acceptability? While there is considerable convergence between public and elite opinion, there (p. 299) remain major areas of disconnect

(Holsti 2004). These differences need not imply a lack of an opinion on the part of the general public, which while often uninformed, does appear to maintain a set of values and principles that enable it to pass judgment on the foreign policy objectives of the government of the day.

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' (Aldrich et al. 2006: 487). It is therefore important to understand what shapes public opinion on foreign policy issues. The information the public gets from the government is subject to problems of framing, selective use of information, and strategic manipulation. The mass media's role is therefore critical.

The information revolution of the recent past has ensured that media sources no longer serve as a passive transmitter of national policy from government to people. Instead, news media in democracies increasingly play the role of independent actor and ultimately shaper of public opinion as regards foreign policy. In particular, when political elites are at loggerheads with each other over foreign policy, the news media plays a pivotal role in making this conflict overt and susceptible to the influence of public opinion. The change in the media's role in shaping public opinion, from trying to ensure acquiescence if not public consent for the government's decisions to 'indexing' the degree of discord among foreign policy elites and acting as a vehicle for these elites to criticize one another, has been highlighted by Aldrich et al. (2006). They argue that a spectrum of views regarding foreign policy objectives is necessary in order for foreign policy issues to play a role in electoral politics, and define three criteria that are needed to ensure public participation in foreign policy discussions: the public must have a set of values or attitudes by which to judge foreign policy; the public must be able to express these attitudes in an election; and the public must be faced with a range of foreign policy alternatives upon which it has a basis to make a genuine choice.

In the Indian case, there have been relatively few analytically sound attempts to gauge public opinion on foreign policy issues, let alone to examine its effects on the country's foreign policy. This essay examines the role of public opinion on Indian foreign policy focusing on four principal questions: One, how have the views of the Indian public on foreign policy been measured and whose views are they representative of? What do these surveys tell us about how informed the Indian public is about foreign policy issues and, relatedly, to what degree is foreign policy the domain of elite rather than mass politics? Two, what shapes public opinion on foreign policy issues in India? Who are the key actors—have they changed over time and issue area? Three, what are the mechanisms that link public opinion to public policy in foreign policy and on what issues has public opinion mattered? Four, what is public opinion about India in other major countries and what does it reveal? Finally the chapter concludes with some observations on public opinion's interactions with changes in other variables and the questions that arise.

(p. 300) Foreign Policy and Public Opinion in India

Foreign policy in India was long dominated by the executive branch. In its early years under Nehru's Prime Ministership, foreign policy was clearly an area of elite rather than mass politics—at least until the disastrous war with China in 1962. While its efficacy may be debated, the combination of Nehru's personal stature and his leadership of India's pre-eminent ruling party underpinned the domestic legitimacy of Indian foreign policy. Popular legitimation meant that public opinion on foreign policy was channeled through the opposition members of Parliament and the print media, which served as the vehicle for opinion-makers. Despite the overwhelming majority of the Congress in Parliament, Nehru's 'personal responsiveness to parliamentary criticism (even by individual members)' was crucial to ensuring Parliament's role in foreign policy (Bandyopadhyaya 2006: 112).

Baru argues that 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' (Baru 2009: 278). Subsequently, as consensus turned to greater contentiousness with the fragmentation of the Indian polity, this changed. Raja Mohan (2009: 6–7) has argued that K. Subrahmanyam, a key figure in Indian security and foreign policy circles, 'demonstrated the extraordinary possibilities for leveraging the power of the media not only in shaping the public discourse on foreign policy, but also as a tool to mobilise pressure on the politicians and bureaucrats deciding foreign and national security affairs'.

Hence, while 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). Indeed it could be argued that the fear of adverse public opinion has made it much harder for India to negotiate territorial disputes with China, given the reality that such an agreement can only occur with some give and take on both sides.

Changes in the 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 (especially relative to legislative and judicial branches of government). Fierce electoral competition has meant that swing voters matter more for electoral success. And while foreign policy may not enjoy issue salience with the average voter, if it matters more for the swing voter, then public opinion on foreign policy issues could become a more potent electoral issue. If India's current economic trajectory continues, the swing voter is likely to be urban and more educated. For this demographic, foreign policy issues have greater salience, and hence public opinion on foreign policy will have greater (p. 301) weight. Therefore even if foreign policy continues to be a domain of elites, should their views differ significantly from those of the population, it could raise 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. The most long-standing survey has been from the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (since the mid-1950s), but it does not appear to have been subject to serious analysis. Cortright and Mattoo (1996) conducted a survey of the opinions of Indian elites on India's nuclear options in 1994 and found that 57 per cent supported the official Indian position of nuclear ambiguity, another third favored the nuclear option while just 8 per cent favored renouncing India's nuclear program. The survey was purposely selective, with a sample of 992 covering seven Indian cities.

Surveys of Indian foreign policy have become relatively more frequent in recent years, but vary considerably in their key characteristics and robustness. These include cross-national surveys such as ones conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and the World Public Opinion Surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (see the Rielly references at the end of this chapter), as well as Kapur (2009) and the Lowry Institute (Medcalf 2013). A limitation of many of the earlier public opinion surveys was that the sample frame was largely urban, which meant that the sample was unrepresentative of the Indian population.

More recent surveys have become more sophisticated often using a multi-stage stratified random sampling procedure with probability proportional to habitation size and electoral rolls as the sampling frame in urban areas and randomly selected electoral constituencies as primary sampling units. There are concerns about the relatively low response rates and how these are accounted for. Problems also arise related to sampling from voter lists because these are often poorly maintained. In addition, since public opinion research in India needs to be carried out face-to-face, a key issue ignored in these surveys is the possibility of response biases due to respondents giving socially acceptable answers. But perhaps the most important question that is weakly addressed by these surveys is differences within elites and between elite and mass public opinion on foreign policy issues. Often the small sample size does not allow for robust statistical claims to get at the fine-grained differences that capture differences in public opinion across states and 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.

Political and policy elites often deploy public opinion to buttress their case, but in most cases it is unclear whether they are simply invoking public opinion to mask their own preferences or actually reflecting it, and even then which 'public' do they have in mind? The intense partisan political battles at the time India was considering signing a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States (between 2005 and 2008), triggered claims on all sides that they were responding to (p. 302) public opinion—but with little evidence. Where did the Indian public stand? How do Indians think about issues with foreign policy implications—and in particular about the United States?

To address the problem of small sample size (and thereby analyze the multiple cleavages in Indian society that create different 'publics') Kapur (2009) conducted the largest ever random, nationally representative survey of foreign policy attitudes of Indians in 2005–6 covering more than 200,000 households. The survey measured the

response of nine specific socio-economic (SEC) groups (six in urban and three in rural India), defined by education and occupation. As the largest survey of Indian public opinion on foreign policy attitudes, its findings were revealing.

First, it demonstrated a clear relationship between the ability to respond to questions on foreign policy and socio-economic status. The more elite (defined both by education and occupation), the more likely Indians will be to have an opinion on foreign policy issues. The rural poor either 'don't know' (two-thirds) while another quarter have 'no response', indicating that foreign policy has low salience for them. At the other extreme—educated urban professionals—the figures were a fifth and 6 per cent respectively.

Second, to the extent that Indians express their opinion about the degree of warmth (or positive feelings) towards a country, the broad trends have been clear in recent years. Indians have the warmest feelings towards the United States followed by Japan, with (expectedly) Pakistan at the other end of the spectrum and China in between. This holds true no matter which way the data are segmented—by socio-economic group, income, state, gender, age, or rural/urban.

This evidence is broadly corroborated by cross-national surveys conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs over the last decade. In both surveys on global public opinion, India consistently ranked near the top of the list in its confidence in and support of the United States. This has not always been the case, however. In 2002, the percentage of the polled Indian population expressing a favorable opinion of the United States, at 54 per cent, was in the lower half of the countries polled. In 2005, the percentage shot up to 71 per cent, the highest of any country polled. In the Pew Global Attitudes Survey conducted in 2007, India ranked 14th among the 47 nations (most of the others above it were African countries), with 59 per cent of the public holding favorable views of the United States. Most recently (in 2013), a survey by the Lowy Institute of Australia found that Indians rank the United States first, followed by Singapore, Japan, Australia, and Russia. Other than Russia, Indians feel warmer towards these countries than those in the BRICS group (such as South Africa, Brazil, and China) with which India is often seen to share diplomatic or economic interests.

Third, respondents in higher socio-economic groups in India have warmer feelings towards the United States. This may be so either because the elites are more informed about the United States or because they benefit more from a relationship with that country. More interestingly, however, the weaker socio-economic groups also unambiguously prefer the United States relative to other countries. Thus, while (p. 303) Indian elites may like the United States more in absolute terms, weaker segments of society appear to value a relationship with the United States more than that with other countries.

Fourth, despite the social, economic, and political diversity across Indian states, the warmer sentiments towards the United States are valid across all states. Even in states with strong left parties which are the most vociferous opponents of closer relations with the United States (Kerala and West Bengal), respondents clearly prefer the relationship with the United States over the relationship with China. Kapur (2009) also did not find any statistical difference in states with a higher Muslim population and those with a low concentration of Muslims, although individual level data on religious beliefs and foreign policy attitudes require more research.

Fifth, broad public opinion on foreign policy indicates that the Indian public is not naïve and indeed demonstrates a streak of pragmatism. For instance despite its warm sentiments towards the United States, it ranks that country low both in terms of trustworthiness and how aggressive it feels the US government to be. This is perhaps why, in response to another question on India's dealings with foreign governments, the majority of respondents felt that the Indian government should be tougher in its negotiations with the United States (Kapur 2009). Thus while Indians see the United States as worthy of emulation they are also wary of US power. This could either be because they are bothered by the accumulation of power (no matter who has it) or it could instead be a hangover of Cold War alliance dynamics or indeed even cultural differences.

This streak in Indian public opinion is further confirmed by the findings of the 2011 Lowy Institute poll: 83 per cent of Indians considered US–India ties to be strong and a further 75 per cent wanted US–India ties to strengthen in the near future. Nonetheless, a significant minority of 31 per cent believed that the United States posed a threat to Indian interests, perhaps because of perceived US support for Pakistan. The Lowy Institute survey noted that while 72 per cent of Indians believe the United States can be a good partner in Indian Ocean security, a higher percentage—84 per cent—want India to have the most powerful navy in the Indian Ocean, which appears to reflect

an increasing desire for India to assert its status as an emerging power. Perhaps most emblematic of Indian public opinion towards the United States (according to the Lowy survey) is that 78 per cent of Indians believe that it would be to their benefit if India was more like the United States. Whether this means that Indians simply want to be as rich and powerful as the United States or something else is, however, unclear.

Sixth, to the extent that elites matter most in shaping foreign policy, two features of their responses were especially noteworthy in the survey by Kapur (2009). One, they held more intense beliefs than all other socio-economic groups. For instance they harbored warmer feelings towards both the United States and China but also colder sentiments towards Bangladesh and Pakistan. Second, the variance in views of this group was least compared to all other groups. As Indian elites become more socially heterogeneous, it is unclear if this will hold true in the future.

(p. 304) Factors Affecting the Public's Views on Foreign Policy

Given an increase in public opinion polls, questions arise over how one should interpret them, given the effects of framing, priming, and the like. What are the relative roles of policy-making and policy-influencing elites, whether within the legislative or executive branches or the news media and opinion leaders? How does the government make selective use of information and strategic manipulation to shape public opinion? For that matter how do 'opinion leaders' and opposition parties try to educate or manipulate public opinion?

There is broad agreement on the growing role of mass media in shaping public opinion with shifts in the media's role from a passive transmission mechanism that informed the public of the views of opinion-makers, to a more activist role. The former was perhaps especially the case of the English print media in India. Increasingly, however, the advent of 24/7 TV news and the electronic platforms has made the media an independent actor in its own right, its priming effects on public opinion evident in a range of cases, sometime forestalling, sometimes goading the government to act and circumscribing the traditional autonomy of foreign policy elites.

The interplay between a changing media landscape—a far more competitive market-driven industry with new technologies and a younger scrappier viewership—and public opinion is a complex story (Pandalai 2013). The pre-cable network era 'manufacturing consent' model held that news on security and foreign policy was largely in line with the policies shaped by elites and by the government of the day. The subsequent 'CNN effect' model took into account the rise of 24/7 cable news coverage. This type of news coverage could 'make policy'. The pressures of real-time news coverage that does not abate, means that governments must respond to news rather than news to governments.

More recently, the 'Al Jazeera' effect mixes social media in with news media. As groups used social media during the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera not only played coverage of the events, but also of the planning and methods devised to produce the events. Highlighting social media as the means for action alerted the watching public not just to what was happening, but to how they could get involved. In return, Al Jazeera knew where the action was going to take place. This symbiotic relationship that fuses multiple media forms, in which posts can go viral in minutes, swiftly shaping public opinion before governments even realize what is happening, poses new and unnerving challenges for all governments.

It is probably still the case that the news media influences public opinion and thereby foreign policy, rather than sculpting or determining policy. The news media pushes a government towards action, forcing it to speed up the decision-making process, with negative coverage being especially potent in this regard. It is more likely to influence symbolic, highly visible agendas with intense emotional characteristics, rather than (p. 305) substantive agendas. However, the media is also often the sounding board for governmental policy decisions in general, including foreign policy. And the extent to which governmental elites react to the media, or are beholden to it, is still somewhat contingent on the quality of leadership of the government of the day—and as noted below, importantly on the so far limited role of Parliament.

The interplay between a rising assertive middle-class with 24-hour private satellite news is a new factor in the Indian political and social matrix affecting public opinion. It has spawned anti-corruption movements (like the Anna Hazare movement) and new political parties (such as the Aam Admi Party). Many members of this middle-class are globalized, with some being part of the expanding Indian diaspora, and public opinion on foreign policy cannot ignore what affects this diaspora. Several examples illustrate the consequences of this potent brew on Indian

foreign policy.

For instance when there were incidents of attacks on Indian students in Australia during 2007–10, a slow news period led the TV networks to frame the issue through the lens of race and not criminal behavior. The Indian TV media's blanket coverage of this issue forced the Indian government to treat it as a race matter in its dealings with the Australian government. Stories of India's interactions with Australia were contextualized within the assertions of a highly mobile and visible diaspora, expressing the aspirations of a resurgent post-colonial nation. The rapid buildup of public opinion via the Indian media forced the government to make this a central issue in its dealings with Australia, crowding out other important issues in the bilateral relationship.

In early 2013 news reports that two Indian soldiers had been killed by their Pakistani counterparts on the disputed border in Kashmir and one of the bodies had been decapitated sparked full-blown outrage in the Indian media. The story dominated prime-time talk shows, a format that inevitably favors stridency over thoughtfulness, and essentially shut down a sputtering peace process. As is usually the case, the reality was more complex and nuanced, but a government undermined by scandals simply could not afford to appear 'weak'.

The deterioration in India's relations with the United States stemming from the arrest of Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade in New York in December 2013 was yet another noteworthy instance of this phenomenon. In this case what was interesting was a clear divide in public opinion not just between India and the United States, but between the Indian-American community and Indians (in India) with the former more outraged by the treatment of a maid by the Indian diplomat and the latter by the treatment of the Indian diplomat by US authorities.

However, while a strident media undoubtedly inflamed public opinion in India, it raised a harder question. Just how strong were the ties between the world's largest and oldest democracies, whose common value systems supposedly make them 'natural allies', that an incident involving a diplomat and a maid could so easily threaten to derail the relationship itself? Or was it the case that the much ballyhooed relationship had been weakening over the past few years and that the incident simply laid bare this reality?¹ Public opinion was certainly not the reason why the foundations of the relationship eroded. The root causes of that lay elsewhere—squarely with two distracted and (p. 306) fumbling governments having allowed the economic, security, political, and bureaucratic stabilizers of their relationship to weaken.

Mechanisms Linking Public Opinion to Foreign Policy Decision-Making

What are the mechanisms that channel public opinion on foreign policy? For instance is the legislative branch a conduit for the public view because that branch of government is closer to the people? If so, a key institution that might link public opinion to pressure on the executive is Parliament.

Parliaments intervene primarily in foreign policy through enactment of laws related to sovereignty and national security. Members of Parliament can use parliamentary instruments such as question hour, committee meetings, and budget approval processes, all of which provide opportunities to engage the government.

However, the Indian Parliament's role in either channeling or shaping public opinion on foreign policy issues has declined in recent years. The Standing Committee on External Affairs hardly ever discusses foreign *policy*. An analysis of reports of the Standing Committee of Parliament attached to the Ministry of External Affairs—23 during the 14th Lok Sabha (2004–9) and 25 during the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–14)—reveals not one report related to policy stance.² The Standing Committee's reports on the budgets of the Ministry of External Affairs reflect an accountant's view, not a policy and strategic one.

MPs also rarely raise questions in Parliament on foreign policy—an average of just over 24 questions annually over all sessions of Parliament between 2011 and 2013. The questions were mainly about passport offices, permits for the Muslim *Haj* pilgrimage to Mecca, attacks on members of the diaspora, and some policy related questions with regard to India's neighbors. The fact that Parliament rarely discusses issues of foreign policy reflects in part the fact that it has not been discharging its role in discussing government policies more widely, a reflection of the broader problems afflicting the institution.

Two examples illustrate Parliament's weakness. During the Kargil war in 1999, the Lok Sabha stood dissolved and the opposition parties and the media called for a special session of Parliament to discuss the issue. But Prime

Minister Vajpayee refused to convene one, removing any parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive. In the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, the opposition vacillated between criticizing Pakistan's role on the one hand and the Indian government's woeful security response to the attack on the other. By amplifying often insignificant problems while ignoring serious questions, Parliament's self-inflicted near-irrelevance has meant that the form for channeling public opinion on foreign policy has shifted to the media (within which a small number of opposition and government parliamentarians do express themselves, often eloquently).

(p. 307) Indian foreign policy elites do appear to be mindful of latent public opinion wherever sensitivities of certain sections of the population are at play, be it religious minorities (in shaping India's Middle East policies), regional groups (such as Tamils towards Sri Lanka), and the majority (Hindu) community (often reflected in hard-line positions vis-à-vis Muslim Pakistan). While direct evidence on these questions is lacking, some examples illustrate this syndrome.

India's relations with Sri Lanka have been bedeviled by that country's treatment of its minority Tamilian community, given their ethnic links with the southern state of Tamil Nadu. While not unmindful of public opinion in that state, however, for the most part there is little evidence that the central government allowed it to unduly influence Indian foreign policy towards Sri Lanka. With regional parties running the state since the late 1960s, the central government had little incentive to pay much heed to public opinion there, since it was after all a small fraction of overall public opinion in the country. Even the support that the Indian government provided to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the early 1980s was driven more by the central government's calculus rather than in response to public opinion in Tamil Nadu. More recently, however, with coalition governments becoming the norm, regional parties from the state became part of the coalition government in Delhi and acquired greater voice. And to the extent that central governments have to heed public opinion in the states which form their political base, a new transmission channel from regional public opinion to Indian foreign policy has become established.

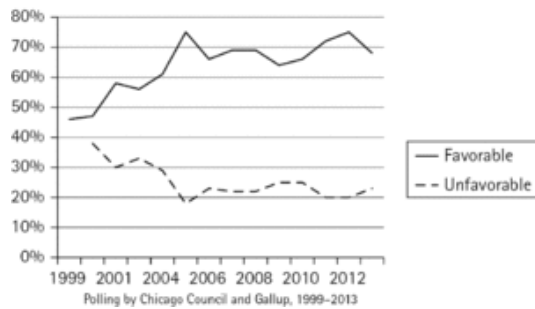
Hence it is not surprising that contrary to its long-standing policy of not voting on country-specific resolutions, in 2012 and 2013 India voted against Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). At the time the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and it acted on its perception of public opinion in that state (although there is little independent evidence of exactly what that opinion might be). However, in 2014 when the same issue was brought before the UNHRC, India abstained. This time the DMK was no longer part of the UPA coalition and the transmission belt from public opinion in the state to the central government on the UN vote had snapped.

Two additional examples are illustrative. In 2011, the Indian government had reached an understanding in principle with the Bangladesh government to sign a treaty to share the waters of the Teesta River, which flows into that country from West Bengal, and thereby reciprocate the positive steps taken by the Sheikh Hasina-led government. However, this was vetoed by another coalition partner, the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC), fearing that her opponents would use it against her in the next election. However, in this case even when the TMC left the coalition government, the central government did not sign the treaty, perhaps fearful that with national elections around the corner, it might lose even the few seats it held in that state.

Another case which was still unresolved at the time of writing was that of two Italian marines who had shot dead two Indian fishermen from Kerala in 2012 in waters within India's exclusive economic zone during an international anti-piracy campaign in the Persian Gulf and the Arab Sea (in which India was also participating). They were (p. 308) arrested and the incident has become a bone of contention between the Indian and Italian governments, with conflicting opinions over legal jurisdiction and immunities. Public opinion in the state of Kerala appears to have influenced the Indian government's stance, especially since the Defense Minister at the time was from Kerala, and doubtless mindful of public opinion in his home state.

Public Opinion in Other Countries About India

A parallel question to whether and how Indian public opinion affects the country's foreign policy is the nature of public opinion about India in other countries and its effects on Indian foreign policy (Mukherjee 2013). Despite the self-perception of Indian elites, public opinion in key countries was for long either apathetic about India—a reflection of the reality that India was neither a threat nor an opportunity for them from the 1960s to the mid-1990s—or ambivalent. This has, however, changed noticeably in the new millennium.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 22.1 US public favorability ratings on India, 1999–2012.

In the United States, favorability ratings toward India were relatively stable at a middling level of 45–50 per cent through the 1980s until 2001. Subsequently, post 9/11 and the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament (Chicago Council and Gallup), favorability ratings toward India have been relatively high, between 65 and 75 per cent, for much of the past decade (Figure 22.1). The question on which there has been a significant spike is whether the United States has vital interests in India. Between 1979 and 1999 fewer than 37 per cent of Americans believed this was the case. This sharply jumped to 65 per cent in 2002 and further increased to 77 per cent in 2011, more than twice its modest level for many decades. Similarly the percentage of Americans who view India as an ally grew from 49 to 78 per cent from 2000 to 2013, indicative of the development of closer relations between the two countries. (p. 309)

Overall, however, worldwide perceptions of India's influence in the world are sobering. In a BBC poll of over 26,000 respondents in 25 countries in early 2013, 34 per cent of respondents felt that India had a positive influence on the world while 35 per cent felt that it had a negative one, making it the first time since 2005 (when this polling began) that negative views of India outstripped positive views. India was ranked 12th of 16 countries and the European Union (EU).

Unsurprisingly India's favorability ratings in both China and Pakistan are low. Interestingly, in the case of China, views towards India and the United States have converged, although a minority (a quarter) views the two countries as hostile to China. In Pakistan, India is no longer the country viewed least favorably—the United States has taken those honors from India.

While India is viewed relatively favorably in Africa and some Asian countries (especially Japan and Indonesia), unlike the United States, views of India in other industrialized democracies such as Canada, Germany, and France (and indeed the EU at large with the exception of the United Kingdom) are much more negative. Why this is the case is puzzling. It might reflect the fact that India has opposed many of the international issues that the EU has championed—whether on the Doha Round of global trade negotiations, climate change, or the International Criminal Court—reflecting in particular very different views on sovereignty. It is possible that the presence of a large, successful diaspora in the United States has created more positive views of India in that country. This, however, would not explain why neither Canada nor Australia, both of which also host a large Indian diaspora, has such highly negative views of India.

What opportunities or potential obstacles does public opinion about India present for Indian foreign policy? There is little analysis on this issue and there is a need to understand whether (and how) the opinions of international publics matter for it.

Conclusion

If India's economic growth continues, its relatively low income notwithstanding, the country's sheer size will give it greater heft in the international system. Consequently foreign policy will necessarily play a bigger role in Indian policy-making. But the very economic growth that will drive this trend will also result in a public that has higher incomes, is more educated and urban, and has much greater media exposure. Public opinion will both interact with, and be shaped by, other variables relevant to foreign policy in India such as the rise of business and a more federal polity. While domestic issues will be paramount for the most part, the growth of the urban middle class will

ensure that public opinion will be less docile, more opinionated—and more unpredictable—on issues of foreign policy.

The need to more actively mold public opinion and react more rapidly to events led to the creation of the Public Diplomacy (PD) Division within the Ministry of External Affairs in 2006. The PD division defines public diplomacy ‘as the framework of activities (p. 310) by which a government seeks to influence public attitudes in a manner that they become supportive of its foreign policy and national interests’. Its Mission Statement is to ‘put in place a system that enables us to engage more effectively with our citizens in India and with global audiences that have an interest in foreign policy issues’. It recognizes that a ‘key facet of Public Diplomacy is that it goes beyond unidirectional communication; it is also about listening to a range of actors ... It requires systems that acknowledge the importance of an increasingly interconnected world where citizens expect responsiveness to their concerns on foreign policy (and other issues)’.³

However, it will take more than a bureaucracy to be responsive to, and mindful of, public opinion. In a democracy, it is fundamentally the responsibility of elected leaders not only to respond to, but also to shape, public opinion. Some of the most serious foreign policy challenges facing India require it to negotiate settlements with its neighbors as well as the global community (such as on climate change), which in turn means that India will have to make some concessions if its negotiating partners are to do likewise. That would require molding and shaping public opinion to prepare for this eventuality—but, sadly, there are few signs that those charged with this responsibility appear mindful of this challenge. Not just in India but the world over, political leaders need to be mindful of public opinion in formulating foreign policy, but not fecklessly, which would run the risk of becoming its captive.⁴

References

Aldrich, J. H., Gelpi, C., Feaver, P., Reifler, J., and Thompson Sharp, K. (2006). ‘Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9(1): 477–502.

Bandyopadhyaya, J. (2006). *The Making of India’s Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

Baru, S. (2012). ‘The Influence of Business and Media on Indian Foreign Policy’, *India Review*, 8(3): 266–85.

BBC World Service (2013). <>.

Cortright, D. and Amitabh, M. (1996). ‘Elite Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons Policy in India’, *Asian Survey*, 36: 545–60.

Gallup (2010). ‘India’s Leadership Unknown to Much of World’. <>, accessed April 1, 2014.

Holsti, O. R. (2004). *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. edn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kapur, D. (2009). ‘Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy’, *India Review*, 8(3): 286–305.

Khorana, S. (2012). ‘Orientalising the Emerging Media Capitals: The Age on Indian TV’s “Hysteria”’, *Media International Australia*, 1(145): 39–49.

Medcalf, R. (2013). ‘India Poll 2013’. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Mukherjee, R. (2013). *The Perceptions of Others: World Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy*. Kaithal: Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI).

Pandalai, S. (2013). *Who Sets the Agenda? Does Prime Time Really Set Policy?* IDSA Monograph Series. New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

Pew Research. ‘Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips’. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS. <,> accessed March 3, 2014.

Pew Research. ‘Indians Reflect on Their Country & the World’. Pew Research Centers Global Attitudes Project RSS.

<>, accessed April 1, 2014.

Raja Mohan, C. (2009). 'The Making of Indian Foreign Policy: The Role of Scholarship and Public Opinion', ISAS Working Paper No. 73, July.

Rielly, J. (1975). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1975'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1979). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1979'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1983). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1983'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1987). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1987'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1991). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1991'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1995). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1995'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Rielly, J. (1999). 'American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1999'. . <>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Notes:

(1.) See Devesh Kapur, 'Divided by Democracy', *Business Standard*, December 22, 2012. <http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/devesh-kapur-divided-by-democracy-113122200641_1.html>.

(2.) I am grateful for M. R. Madhavan of Parliamentary Research Services (PRS) for providing access to these reports.

(3.) Mission Statement, Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs. <<http://www.aseanindia.com/about/organisers/pdd/>>, accessed February 20, 2015.

(4.) I am grateful to Alex Polyak for research assistance and to David Malone and Rohan Mukherjee for their comments and helpful suggestions.

Devesh Kapur

Devesh Kapur is Madan Lal Sobti Associate Professor of Contemporary India and Director, Center for Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.

