

## Jawaharlal Nehru and World Order

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Trustees and Secretary of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the honour of delivering the Nehru Memorial Lecture as we mark the 125th anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru's birth. Your Trust has a remarkable history of promoting educational links and understanding between India and the UK. Nehru himself represented the best in both cultures, in his person and intellectually. He also did more than most to bring them together.

Unlike many previous speakers, I can claim no particular personal knowledge of Nehru which qualifies me to speak of him, with one exception. The exception is two breakfasts that Nehru as PM gave us as a party of about thirty school boys in 1960 and 1961 on the back verandah of Teen Murti House, when he spoke to us about India and our role in its change. Before leaving he had time for each of us, asking our names and what we wanted to do in life. I still find it hard to believe that a Prime Minister of India with all his preoccupations could do this for a group of ordinary school boys from a boarding school in central India. Those meetings left us with the lasting feeling that this was our country, our government, and our Prime Minister. I mention them to give you an idea of the greatness of the man, of his commitment to talking to and educating his people, and his love of youth and change. That is why, like all Indians of my generation, what we are and what India has become are, to a very great extent, a product of what Nehru did.

Preparing for this lecture I was struck by the fact that Nehru's political life covered a period when the world was successively reordered in fundamental ways: the USA's rise to superpowerdom, the emergence of the Soviet Union, the defeat of Nazism, the independence of India and dissolution of European colonial empires, the Chinese revolution, the creation of the Cold War bipolar order, (and the first cracks in it that Nehru foresaw), the establishment of the institutions of global governance that we have today, — the list is long and significant in so many ways.

Today again the world order is changing rapidly before our eyes. The post Cold War unipolar moment is past but we do not yet know what will come in its place. Is it being replaced by global disorder? Or will we see the emergence of a polycentric order with one, two or more dominant or predominant powers? Or will we return to a new and complex bipolarity? I am acutely aware that as Edmund Burke said, “You can never plan the future by the past.” But the past can teach us how to think about what we see around us. I, therefore, thought it might be worth looking again at Nehru’s views on world order.

## World View

Nehru’s world view evolved considerably over the course of his lifetime.

From an idealistic almost utopian and socialist view of the world, (as evidenced in his 1927 Brussels speech), deeply influenced by Wendell Wilkie’s idea of One World, politics issues in the forties and responsibilities of office after 1946 steadily moved him to a more grounded appreciation of the fallibility and imperfections—and the incorrigibility— of the international state system. The evolution of his thinking was gradual and steady, occasioned by the political complexities of the forties and early fifties. Among them were the choice between fighting Fascism or fighting for freedom, (Bose vs. Nehru), between his socialist inclinations and the need for US and Western help in developing India, (his differences with Mathai and later Rajaji in the fifties), and the practicalities of being in power and running India.

He said in 1951 that: *“In my general outlook on life I am a socialist and it is a socialist order that I should like to see established in India and the world.”*<sup>1</sup> By 1958, though, he was saying that, *“Democracy and socialism are means to an end, not the end itself. ....The touchstone, therefore, should be how far any political or social theory enables the individual to rise above his petty self and thus think in terms of the good of all. The law of life should not be competition or acquisitiveness but co-operation, the good of each contributing to the good of all”*.<sup>2</sup> This is a much more expansive view, moving closer to a liberal rather than a doctrinaire socialist position.

In the forties Nehru rejected European style power politics and was scathing in his criticism of realist prescriptions about international order. This was a time when Churchill, Walter Lippman and Nicholas Spykeman wished to divide the world into a

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<sup>1</sup> Statement in Selected Works Vol 5 (1987) p.321

<sup>2</sup> World Marxist Review: Problems of Peace and Socialism, (1958) p.40

series of regional blocs, each under a great power's leadership, (including one under India). Instead Nehru proposed a "world association" of states that recognised the essential equality of states. [In this, and subsequently in drafting the Panchsheel or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, he was more Westphalian than the European powers who had first made that order. In fact one could argue that his 1940s idea of "non-involvement", later folded into "nonalignment", was practically an extension of the Westphalian principle of non-intervention which both superpowers found most inconvenient in the fifties and sixties, and flouted regularly.]

As Prime Minister, Nehru was faced with the reality of the Cold War, of a bipolar world where initially both and later one of the superpowers insisted that India choose one side over the other. Nehru, therefore, had hard choices to make. In the event he fought conventional wisdom and what was probably the majority opinion in his party and chose a set of policies that kept India out of the two great alliance systems and, as he put it, away from entanglements. In a letter to KPS Menon in January 1947 he explained the logic of what later came to be called non-alignment as:

*"Our general policy is to avoid entanglement in power politics and not to join any group of powers as against any other group. The two leading groups today are the Russian bloc and the Anglo-American bloc. We must be friends to both and yet not join either. Both America and Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of each other as well as of other countries. This makes our path difficult and we may well be suspected by each of leaning towards the other. This cannot be helped."*

Nehru's foreign policy response to the bipolar order was three-fold: to seek the strategic autonomy that a non-aligned policy offered; to concentrate on the centrality of Asia in his foreign policy; and, an activist Indian posture on issues of global order.

Nehru may have been unhappy with the bipolar world he saw around him but he was realist enough to know that he had no choice but to be involved in it and that India's own transformation required more rather than less engagement with the world. His early decisions keeping India in the Commonwealth, the first republic to be a member, on visiting the USA in 1949, and on other issues, made it clear that non-alignment was not a turning away from the world but a different way of engaging with it. By 1959 he was giving Nikita Khrushchev realist advice: *"You don't change the course of history by turning the face of portraits to the wall."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> New York Post, 1 April 1959

By the late fifties, JN's ideas on the world order and his foreign policy practice were eminently compatible with Wilsonian liberal internationalism. This was not out of woolly headed idealism but out of a conviction that a fairer international order would help to mitigate the asymmetry of power that had formed the post-War order, and thus serve India's needs.

Indeed Nehru never went as far as later self-styled Nehruvians in his critique of Western dominance or the post-WWII order that was essentially a Western creation. Nor did he push for the creation of an anti-Western bloc in Asia — something recognised and appreciated by Britain in the fifties but not the USA. He kept the tone of the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and 1955 Bandung Conference remarkably moderate and defended the UN's role.<sup>4</sup> He disagreed with Zhou Enlai at Bandung when Zhou proposed a permanent regional association of Asian and African countries. (This would have served PR China's political needs at a time when it was not in the UN, confronted the US, and was isolated). While Nehru spoke of Asia's resurgence, it was to equalise the historical balance rather than to create regional exclusivity or exceptionalism, or to repeat in Asia what Europe had done. He often said that there should be no Asian world different from any other.

In effect Nehru was willing to live within an improved version of the existing system of international governance, the Western dominated post-War global order, once it recognised and preserved the independence of states. There is a contrast in the fifties and sixties between Indian, Japanese and Chinese reactions in practice to the global order. Japan conformed, China under Mao sought to overthrow, while India sought to adapt and improve the primarily Western political order in the world and in Asia.

Nehru concentrated Indian diplomatic and foreign policy effort on removing imperfections in the existing world order as he saw them. This explains his pursuit of decolonisation, his raising apartheid in the UN for the first time, his advocacy of disarmament, and his bringing development onto the international agenda. We often forget his pivotal role in suggesting and drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the fundamental international covenants on human rights that we now take for granted.

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<sup>4</sup> Amitav Acharya: Asian Approaches to International Order and Global Governance, (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore), December 2010

There is an interesting issue here about Nehru's attitude to sovereignty and how absolute it should be. As a liberal, who worked hard to develop international law and practice on human rights, for instance, Nehru was willing to see restrictions on the absolute sovereignty of the Westphalian state. He did so as leader of a relatively weak state which had just recovered its full independence, that would normally be expected to be extremely touchy and prickly about sovereignty. To the extent that he saw certain internationally agreed limits on sovereignty as legitimate, Nehru had a coincidence of approach with the global super-power, the USA, whose effort after WWII was to ensure that the global commons remained open (if secured by the US and her allies), that US power could reach everywhere, and that the world economy be as open and integrated to her own as possible.

### War and Peace

Nehru's greatest fear was that the bipolar world order of Cold War alliances with newly invented atomic weapons would lead the world into another disastrous world war. This would make his efforts in India meaningless, and mark the end of civilisation as we knew it. *"Without peace, all other dreams vanish and are reduced to ashes"*, he said.<sup>5</sup> How he chose to address these issues gives us a glimpse of how he reconciled his preferences for the world order with a realistic appreciation of how international politics worked.

Speaking at Columbia University in 1949 he asked:

*"How can (that) peace be preserved? Not by surrendering to aggression, not by compromising with evil or injustice but also not by talking and preparing for war! Aggression has to be met for it endangers peace. At the same time, the lesson of the past two wars has to be remembered and it seems to me astonishing that, in spite of that lesson, we go the same way. The very process of marshalling the world into two hostile camps precipitates the conflict that it had sought to avoid. It produces a sense of terrible fear and fear darkens men's minds and leads them to wrong courses. There is perhaps nothing so bad and so dangerous in life as fear. As a great President of the United States said, there is nothing really to fear except fear itself."*<sup>6</sup>

Nehru's preferred instrument to amend and improve the world order was multilateral effort, centred on the UN. For Nehru had the liberal's faith in the law even as

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<sup>5</sup> Speech to UNGA, 28 August 1954

<sup>6</sup> Speech at Columbia University, (1949), in *Speeches 1949-1953*, p.402

he brought the historian's cautious (or conservative, realistic and sometimes cynical) gaze to bear on the international order.

He turned to the UN to take the lead on nuclear disarmament, even though he recognised that it was a flawed instrument, often paralysed by US-Soviet hostility. And while setting out an ambitious goal of general and complete disarmament, the immediate actions he actually proposed were limited and rational, even though they initially met with fierce opposition from both superpowers. He proposed a test ban, a partial test ban to start with, and a halt to nuclear proliferation. That these were later adopted by the international community, albeit modified and only partially, suggests that he was both practical and ahead of his time.

### International Law

Nehru had a constitutional vision of world order which strengthened the regime of international law and peace.

It was Nehru's faith in the law that led him to first take the Kashmir issue to the UN Security Council in 1947 when Pakistan sent in their Army and tribal raiders to force the princely state of J&K to accede to them. Nehru's faith in the UN was shaken by what followed, the political manipulation by great powers which first set back and then made impossible a solution of the issue by India and Pakistan themselves, whether militarily or through negotiations. As a result, when it came to accepting international mediation or taking other issues affecting India's integrity and sovereignty to international bodies, or accepting the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, Nehru was far more circumspect than his idealistic pronouncements might have led one to believe.

Nehru was realist enough to know that in the real world it was the balance of power and the interests of the great powers which would have a decisive say in the settlement of issues between states. After his experience of taking J&K to the UN, he did not take any of India's political crises or issues — the India-China boundary, the Portuguese occupation of Goa, or river waters in the sub-continent — to international organisations or arbitration, no matter how strong India's case.

He also recognised that regional issues with broader implications for world peace, like the wars in Indochina and Korea, were best dealt with by those great and local powers who were directly concerned. He attempted to bridge the gap between the absolute sovereignty of states and the effects of local conflicts on the broader peace by helping to pioneer novel forms of peacekeeping — the International Con-

trol Commission in Indochina, the UN's peace keeping operations in the Congo, Gaza and elsewhere. In each case Nehru was the driving force behind active Indian involvement in the design and execution of peacekeeping in forms which had never been tried before by the international community.

Less remarked upon is the fact that, no matter how passionately he felt about the threat of thermo-nuclear war and nuclear disarmament, he was realist enough to know that the then nuclear weapon states would only respond to power. He therefore kept India's nuclear option open, even when he was advised against it by several colleagues in politics. When his friend and colleague Homi Bhabha once suggested some unilateral disarmament steps by India that would have limited India's future options, Nehru said, "*You handle the physics, leave the politics to me*"! If India has created meaningful deterrence against nuclear threat and blackmail by testing nuclear weapons in 1998, the credit should also go to Nehru for his foresight in making that possible.

### China and Asia

China was one foreign policy challenge that brought into play, and conflict, multiple strands in Nehru's thinking.

Nehru saw the Chinese Communist Party's victory and formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 for what it was — the historic re-emergence of China on the world stage as a potentially powerful and independent actor. He was therefore among the first to accord diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China, despite his association and friendship with Chiang Kaishek and Mme Chiang. (When jailed during WWII, the person he chose to write a long new year letter to outlining his hopes, fears and emotions in December 1942 was Mme Chiang. The letter was never delivered, finding its way into British Archives through British censors instead)<sup>7</sup>.

The immediate challenge that new China posed to Nehru was the PLA's entry into Tibet in 1950, leading to appeals for assistance by the Tibetan authorities, and the great changes that these portended for India's security and boundaries. Nehru's foreign policy response was threefold:

- Firstly, to engage China directly, building a new relationship, as exemplified in the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with the Tibet Autonomous Region of

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<sup>7</sup> Ramachandra Guha (ed.): *Makers of Modern Asia* (Harvard, 2014)

China which shed the GoI's inherited colonial rights to station troops and control communications in Tibet;

- Secondly, to refuse to take sides in China's multiple disputes whether with Japan, in Korea, Indo-China, or elsewhere. Instead he chose to establish India as an honest broker who could play a role in mediating solutions or implementing them, as in Korea and in Indo-China;
- And thirdly, to embed China in an international order that would encourage responsible behaviour on her part. Hence his consistent advocacy that the PRC occupy the Chinese seat in the UN, and his attempt to bring China into his Asian diplomatic initiatives, whether the 1947 Asian Relations Conference or 1955 Bandung Conference.

For Nehru the last objective, embedding China in the world order, was most important. Even when bilateral engagement had borne bitter fruit in the world's largest boundary dispute after 1959 and in armed conflict in 1962, and when China questioned Nehru's personal bona fides, he never wavered in instructing the Indian delegation to support seating the PRC at the UN in 1962 and 1963. Nehru has been much criticised in India and abroad for his China policy. This is not the place to analyse its strengths and weaknesses. But he saw his China policy as much in terms of the global order as in terms of a testy bilateral relationship that led to armed conflict in 1962.

His approach to Asian issues was based on a clear and strategic view of events. Take the Peace Treaty with Japan in San Francisco in 1951, for instance. Nehru's arguments for not signing the San Francisco Treaty were not couched in sentiment but in practical political terms. His three main objections were:

- Any Treaty excluding China and Russia would be unstable over time. (Unlike Nehru's reasons, China and Russia did not sign because they wanted a punitive Treaty. They are still negotiating for one.)
- Leaving open and unsolved sovereignty issues regarding Formosa, the Kuriles, Sakhalin, the Senkakus, and the Ryukyu Islands including Okinawa would only lead to future conflict.
- Nehru opposed the agreement joined to the Treaty allowing US military bases in Japan and making Japan a subordinate military alliance partner of the US. This would keep Asia unstable and should have been done after Japan regained her sovereignty not before, Nehru felt.

In all three respects history has proved Nehru right.

In other words, Nehru saw the Treaty in practical terms of its future effect on Asia, creating instability and tension. (In fact, Nehru could not avoid the suspicion that Dulles willed it so since tension and crises in Asia gave the US enhanced geopolitical leverage.)

### Responsible Power

To sum up, throughout his eighteen years as PM Nehru had to deal with asymmetries of power in a post-War global order arranged by the West, and to find ways of rearranging it short of conflict and war— war, which he repeatedly said had become unthinkable in the nuclear age. He was not anti-Western in a cultural or ideological sense, as some subsequent self-proclaimed Nehruvians have been. In fact Nehru consistently accepted the liberal principles which the West professed, (democracy, liberty, equality, sovereignty, and so on). But he sought to hold all states, including the West, to those principles.

We are again at a moment in international relations like the one that Nehru saw in the late forties and fifties, when a new order is being born out of a fundamental shift in the balance of power. The geopolitical and economic centre of gravity is shifting to Asia and we are groping to create the habits, structures and institutions that will enable us to manage the international system. The Bretton Woods institutions are increasingly irrelevant to the management and future of global finance. The UN Security Council's role is peripheral to most political issues and crises in the world today. New arrangements are attempted in crisis, like the G-20 after the global financial crisis of 2008, but existing power holders find it hard to bring themselves to transfer real power to them, or even to implement agreed quota reform in the World Bank. It is still difficult to see how the diffusion of power in the international system and the tendency towards polycentricism will be institutionalised in the absence of the sort of ideological homogeneity that underpinned the post-War order. But one can certainly say that we are once more, like Nehru, India and the world in the late forties and early fifties, at another moment of creation.

Are there lessons for us in Jawaharlal Nehru's experience of trying to adapt the world order to secure peace, advance human rights and create conditions for economic progress, at a time of fundamental transitions in the balance of power? Graham Allison reminds us that war occurred in 11 of the 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power.<sup>8</sup> In Nehru's lifetime the world managed three power transitions through war, (the thwarted rises of Germany and

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Allison: Financial Times Op-Ed 22 August 2012

Japan, and the successful rise of the Soviet Union), and one peacefully, (the rise of the US to superpower status).

We hear a great deal today about the rise of Asia and of re-emerging powers, with China at the forefront. We hear talk of the decline of the West. (Frankly, I consider some of the talk of decline exaggerated, but what matters is not what I think but what those in power believe, and they seem to believe this narrative of power transitions in a hierarchical world order.) We see Asians seeking a greater voice for themselves and their region in the global order — whether China, Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia or others. We also see the building of new institutions, like the BRICS Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, new financial and payments arrangements outside the US dollar, and new connectivity in the Asia-Pacific region and the world as a whole. As in the past the economic transition is well ahead of the political transition.

It can be argued that for India these moments of transition in the international balance of power or re-ordering of international forces are moments of opportunity, when Indian diplomacy and policy can be most creative on the international stage and in the immediate neighbourhood, in arenas where the local balance is clearly in India's favour. This was certainly true in 1947-54, before the formation of SEATO and CENTO brought a Cold War bipolar clamp onto Asian politics. It was also true in 1968-72, when the international balance had space for PM Indira Gandhi to assist in the creation of Bangladesh. And it was true in 1989-96 before the Asian financial crisis and Taiwan crisis rewrote the rules. Today again flux in the international order permits creative Indian policy initiatives with her immediate neighbours, throughout Asia, and with the great powers.

At the same time Asia, particularly China and India, are often accused of not doing enough in helping the world to manage global challenges or in leading world opinion. Amartya Sen asked in an article in 2007, "Has Asia done enough?"

The example most often used in making the argument that India and China should be more "responsible" is their response to climate change. Are we in India responsible for climate change in the world? How do we tell an Indian that though he did nothing to create these gases and did not benefit from their use, he is now responsible for them in the future? Are his responsibilities, when his economy emits less per person than any other major economy, the same as those of individuals whose economies developed and grew by being such a huge burden on the atmosphere and environment?

There is clearly a problem here in how responsibility is defined. India should and must be a responsible global citizen. There is no doubt about that. Thanks to Nehru and Gandhi, India does not claim past humiliation or colonial experience as justification for present behaviour, good or bad. The question is how one defines good international citizenship and the idea of what constitutes responsible behaviour by a country or state or nation.

In my opinion responsible behaviour by a member of international society is not very different from that by any citizen of our smaller, local, national societies and communities — getting along with the neighbours, respecting the law and others' rights, and contributing to the common good within one's capacity to do so. If India has tried to do so at least some of the credit should go to Nehru for the habits, practices and institutions he created in India.

A Nehruvian policy would see India commit to being a good international citizen, publicly defining its goals and implementing them. On climate change, for instance, the focus should be on getting domestic energy policy right rather than endless international negotiations and posturing on rights and obligations. This would ensure India's energy supply and access, transition to renewables like solar and nuclear, and remove distorting subsidies. Internationally it would involve a commitment not to emit more per capita than the average of the industrialised countries. A beginning has been made in the last few years in India's own interest. Nehru once said that, "*Ultimately what we really are matters more than what people think of us*".<sup>9</sup>

Nehru still has a great deal to teach us in bridging the gap between implementing the state's primary responsibility to its own citizens and its responsibility as a global citizen within a benign global order.

There is, however, one great difference between what Nehru attempted and what we see now. What we hear from the larger Asian powers today is the expression of national power aspirations rather than contributions to global governance or order. Nehru had no illusions about leading the world or of rapidly achieving super power status, individually or collectively. (Nor, for that matter, did Mao, Nasser or Deng Xiaoping.) In that sense he was more of a realist than today's self-styled realists.

From the fifties to the nineties the larger Asian powers — India, China and Japan — were preoccupied with defending their sovereignty, developing their economies and trying to create an enabling external environment. Today we see an emerging *real-*

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<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Debates Pt.2 V.12-13 (1951)

*politik* in their behaviour. The resource constraints that limited their behaviour and demands on the international system are less and less domestic, or financial or military. The limits are increasingly in the realm of human capital and ideas. In Asia a rising tide of nationalism, verging on chauvinism, legitimises the pursuit of growing national power and status aspirations rather than global governance goals or domestic welfare. We see in the larger Asian powers the rise of leaders who project themselves as strong authoritarian defenders of national interest, who centralise power and decision making, and who are conservative within the political and social frameworks of their countries. As a friend of mine remarked recently: “with Nehru, there was always an excess of ideas over power; now, across Asia, an excess of power and a deficiency of ideas”.

‘We help the world by helping ourselves’ seems to be the present approach of both industrialised and re-emerging countries. This worked well when the global order was settled and public goods were provided by the post-war security and economic order. It enabled re-emerging economies like India and China to pull unprecedented numbers of people out of poverty and to develop several Asian economies at record rates over a considerable period of time. But today ‘we help the world by helping ourselves’ seems to me an insufficient basis to build a lasting global order reflecting present realities. For that we must learn from Nehru’s times again while devising our own solutions to today’s problems.