

Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy

David M. Malone

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After more than 20 years of major market reforms that followed a foreign exchange crisis in 1991, India's stunning economic growth has enlarged its international profile. But unlike China, India's security challenges and perspectives on foreign policy remain largely unknown to the rest of the world. What kind of great power does India aim to be?

The timing is right for *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*, a concise treatment of India's growing stature in Asia's geopolitics and in international affairs. This lucidly written tome draws on the personal experience of its author, David M. Malone, until recently Canada's high commissioner to India (2006–08), and his in-depth study of the existing Indian literature. Chapters 1 and 2 are brisk introductions to India's unique civilization and its ancient and modern history. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 assess India's vexing security challenges, its striking economic growth, and its relations with neighboring states, respectively. Those three chapters provide the thematic backdrop for much of the book.

Malone fluently identifies key internal and external barriers that will hamper India's striking economic growth: rampant corruption, poor business conditions, law and order problems, communal unrest, religious conflict, and abject poverty. Although the conflict in Kashmir attracts Western headlines, India's most insidious internal threat remains the Naxalite movement, a Maoist insurgency whose violence has spread to almost a quarter of Indian districts. An estimated 30 armed insurgent groups operate in the country's ethnically diverse northeast.

Despite India's robust linguistic, ethnic, and religious links with much of the region, its diplomatic relations remain poor with virtually all of its neighbors. Malone cites the tiny landlocked kingdom of Bhutan and the Indian Ocean archipelago of Maldives as the only two examples of India's successful relations with smaller neighbors. Ties between India and Bangladesh remain marred by disputes over terrorist havens and illegal migrants. Nepal is resentful of what it views as excessive Indian interference. India's intelligentsia remains hostile toward Myanmar's military junta, despite India's careful relations

with it for the sake of Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state adjacent to Myanmar, which China claims. In Sri Lanka, after nationalism coalesced around a Sinhalese Buddhist identity, India, in the guise of peacekeeping, intervened militarily, becoming embroiled in combat against Tamil separatists, who in 1991 assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

The book comes up short on the question of Pakistan, despite offering a fascinating and impressive survey of New Delhi's dangerous neighborhood. Malone contends that the possibility of a full-scale Indo-Pak war is "less likely" than ever—barring the rise to power in Islamabad of a radical group or individual. But perhaps that assessment would have been more compelling had Malone devoted more than six of his 425 pages to the countries. On Indo-Afghan relations, in league with popular opinion, Malone finds that shared history, culture, and the desire to rid the region of undue Pakistani influence bind the countries, with many Afghan elites, including President Hamid Karzai, educated in India. Of course, warm Indo-Afghan relations also complicated Washington's aim of getting Islamabad to cooperate fully after 9/11.

Some readers might be surprised that *Does the Elephant Dance?* leaves out a meaningful treatment of India's growing links with Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Latin America generally. However, the countries Malone discusses are tremendously important. Chapters 6 through 11 survey India's relations beyond the subcontinent: with respect to China, the United States, the Middle East or "West Asia," East and Southeast Asia, Europe and Russia, and the multilateral institutions and processes that have mattered most to New Delhi. Overlapping border disputes brought India a failed war with China in 1962. Malone lays out persuasively why even though conflict between the bilateral trade partners is "highly unlikely—both sides have too much to lose," friction between them will remain high. Both countries have nuclear weapons. Both are expanding and modernizing their militaries. Both have large reserves of manpower. Both are vying for wealth, markets, energy, and influence across Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and Central and East Asia. And both are modern republics animated by nationalistic mythologies of ancient "civilizational greatness." As a result, distrust and uncertainty will persist in the East.

In the West, U.S.-India relations were historically antagonistic during the Cold War, called the "lost half century" or "the fifty

wasted years.” But the world’s oldest and largest democracies made up for lost time by signing a civilian nuclear deal in 2008. By late 2010, Washington even endorsed New Delhi’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. U.S. officials have declared forthrightly that New Delhi stands as America’s “primary global partner” and is “poised to shoulder global obligations.” Malone helpfully guides readers through the logic animating U.S. policies. Certainly, Washington seeks to groom India as a counterbalance to China, but it also seeks to encourage India’s greater stake in the international system, thereby constraining its future ability to maneuver and convincing its elites to share global burdens rather than free-ride.

Chapter 8 explores Indian foreign policy in the Middle East or “West Asia,” an infrequently used designation that grows bothersome after a few paragraphs. The chapter nevertheless gives readers an insightful glimpse into how during the Cold War, India cultivated a broad set of alliances “with virtually all countries of the area,” and lately has established close relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. Chapter 9 provides a useful sketch of India’s growing economic interaction and defense ties with regional groupings in East and Southeast Asia. Chapter 10 lays out India’s cordial relations with Russia, which reflects both past ties and future returns from several planned oil and natural gas pipelines. This chapter also analyzes India’s warm relations with Europe, especially the U.K. and France. Interestingly, Malone writes that although Indian diplomats view Europe as a bastion of culture, many do not take the European Union’s pretensions to significance seriously. Finally, on the multilateral front, although New Delhi has refused to sign the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and upended the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations, Malone recollects that among foreign diplomats, Indian negotiators are widely reputed as brilliant—as well as “arrogant,” “moralistic,” and “confrontational.”

Malone is correct when he claims that “India’s foreign policy has tended to be reactive and formulated incrementally, case-by-case, rather than through high-minded in-depth policy frameworks.” But a slight weakness lies in the author’s repeated insistence that India must promote some grand foreign policy vision. Beyond his recommendation of expanded regional trade, Malone might have adopted his own advice by explaining the new course he would counsel for India’s foreign and strategic policies. After all, what India should

adopt as a long-term strategic vision remains confusing, especially after Malone writes that India has gained when its diplomacy remained flexible, and yet, during the Cold War, “India’s moralizing foreign policy touched a raw nerve in American diplomatic circles.” Moreover, according to Malone, the fact that “contemporary U.S. approaches to China oscillate between policies of containment and engagement,” some Indians question the logic of choosing sides between the two—a factor that could explain New Delhi’s reluctance to articulate a foreign policy approach in the early 21st century.

That aside, Malone sheds light on the more obscure aspects of Indian policy. For instance, there is a disjuncture between policy-making centers in New Delhi and policy implementers abroad. Malone writes that now and then, Indian officials at international forums adopt positions contrary to New Delhi’s foreign policy objectives. On India’s limited bureaucratic capacity, Malone writes that Indian leaders have resorted to hiring private sector lawyers due to a shortage of government trade negotiators. Clarifying the murky facets of Indian security, Malone argues that the intelligence capabilities of its external spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, are dubious, while India’s Air Force and Navy are “star performers” compared to the Army.

Overall, Malone provides readers a substantive range of perspectives on how India’s daunting domestic disturbances and regional security challenges will constrain its ability to translate economic growth into international prominence. *Does the Elephant Dance?* successfully illustrates India’s central dichotomy: its aspiration for a larger role in the world and the limits on that ambition arising from regional constraints. But only time will tell whether this lumbering elephant is nimble enough to waltz onto the global stage, put on its heels, and dance.

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