

Role of Public in India's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Seventy-one year down the lane since independence, India is more externally engaged, than ever. The dynamics of foreign relations have changed inside out. Public support both domestically as well as overseas is now an important concern for New Delhi's foreign policy and this shift is not led by the government rather these changes are public driven through mediums and agents like the diaspora, media, internet, private sector, academia, interest groups and civil society as a whole. This paper begins with introducing the general theme of the paper and delves into the existing literature available on the subject and tries to explore it further. In the latter part, it explains the processes of foreign policy structuring and the actors involved following that how the actors involved are changing at each level from the official to the general public. How public is influencing official choices? Further I sum up my paper by summarizing and enlightening future possibilities.

Key Words : Foreign policy, Technology, Cable news

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an era when foreign policy is not just something coming from the head and heart of political elites but rather it is a voice of diverse community ranging from big business men to small peasants. Gone are the days when government use to have an exclusive monopoly on foreign policy issue, we have entered in a globalized era where presence of 24*7 cable news, advent of web.02 technology through internet and the social media have made possible the dissemination of information with just a single click. With all these visible changes in technology and politics people also get their role in foreign policy shaping through various channels and organized groupings. With this big change all over the world India also took a positive turn in this direction especially in post liberalization era. India is now more externally engaged than ever in its history and in this engagement, government is not the only stakeholder but also the public in various ways through various mediums. Support of people domestically as well as internationally

is now an integral part of India's Diplomacy. And 'Public' here is at an advantage as it exercise its role through various channels like media, diaspora, private sectors, big business personnel, civil society groups, interest groups, NGOs, academia etc.

Devesh Kapur in his article titled public opinion published in the *The oxford handbook of India's foreign policy* deals extensively and exclusively with the increasing role of public opinion in shaping the foreign policy imperatives of India. He starts with a general introduction of the role of public in India's foreign Policy and how public exercise this role through various mediums.

He says India's foreign policy since starting is dominated by the executive branch. Even in Nehru time the issue related to foreign policy is elite issue not the mass politics. Public opinion was centre of foreign policy construction only on sensitive issues where sensitivities of population or section of population mattered, for example India's policy with regard to Middle East, where the sensitivities of religious minority was taken into account.

While discussing the future discourse of role of public in India's foreign policy Kapur makes a point that there are chances that role of public in shaping India's foreign policy will be greater in coming times.

Structure of Foreign Policy Decision Making:

Tanvi Madan in her article "*Officialdom (South Bloc and Beyond)*" says, Number of actors are involved in the formulation of foreign policy at official level;

The Cabinet is the ultimate responsible official body for foreign policy decision making and among the Cabinet External affairs Minister is utmost important and power and role of others depends as per the Prime Minister.

The PMO includes officials on deputation from the MEA, who serve as working level advisors on issues related to foreign policy. In fact PMO exercise a greater role in a way that head of policy planning in MEA directly reports to PM. As it happened in the time of Indira Gandhi when P.N Haksar was her principal secretary. Her era from 1967-1973 is often referred as one of the era away from MEA and towards PMO (Madan, 2015).

The **Nation Security Council System** is chaired by Prime Minister other members included are External Affairs Minister, Defense Minister, Home Minister, Finance Minister and the deputy chairman of Niti Aayog¹. It was established in 1999 by then PM, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee. It is a deliberative body which means it is a debating and discussing body, it is not mandated to make any decision.

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is one of the ministries that play a pivotal role in foreign policy formulation. At administrative level this ministry was led by Foreign Secretary². Foreign secretary was assisted by Secretary (west) and Secretary (east) which is a geographically divide portfolio but these secretaries don't cover the relation with UNSC Permanent 5 members and India's neighbor³. New portfolio of economic Secretary has also been introduced who controls the relations regarding energy related issues, multilateral economic diplomacy related issues etc.

Ministry of Finance has direct as well indirect control over foreign policy issue by indulging itself in economic diplomacy and by approving budget for other ministries,

respectively. Similarly, issues related to International Climate Change negotiations are directly dealt by Ministry of Environment and forest on international forum. Ministry of Home has its special role in terrorism related issues, sharing of intelligence output, visa processing and clearance issues etc.

Conceptual analysis:

Media:

There is increasingly shift in the role of mass media in a globalized era from a passive transmitter of policy of government it now plays a more active role of constructor of foreign policy. **Manufacturing consent Model** used to work in an era preceding the advent of cable network where news on security and foreign policy used to be in line with official policies or as a response to government policy but with the advent of cable network and the internet, things become really fast, there is almost no time lag between the event and its coverage.

There is this **Al Jazeera Effect model** as well which talks about mixing social media with the news media which happens during Arab Spring, social media is widely used to made the news viral with in span of minutes and this effect public opinion and led to **emergence of anti-government responses** in almost whole of the Arab world. With this information revolution thing media is not just passive transmitter of national policy from government to the citizens but instead is an independent actor in shaping public opinion *vis-à-vis* Foreign policy (Kapur, 2009)

Media also plays a role in generating foreign policy consensus, MEA has separate division known as **publicdiplomacy division**⁴ whose main task is to build foreign policy consensus domestically and building positive image of India abroad. Publicity division of MEA also works to handle domestic media regarding these issues. It can also alter the discourses around a policy by framing and presenting issue in a particular way (Joshi, 2015). It can generate criticism for any policy as effectively it can generate support for it.

As per Manoj Joshi, Indian media role in formulating and influencing foreign policy can be seen in 2 phases. The first phase is from independence to 1991, this was

1. Earlier this position was with deputy chairman of planning commission.
2. Earlier there used to be office of secretary General which was replaced by Foreign Secretary in 1964
3. UNSC P5 relations and relation with India's neighbours continues to be the domain of Foreign Secretary responsibility.
4. Established in 2006

the period when media was exclusively under government control except the print media. Post 1991 with the advent of internet there begin transformation in cable news broadcasting, importing newsprint become free.

The turning point movement was Kargil conflict of 1999. When private cable journalist gave live coverage of the war zone which triggered a wave of nationalism and government instead of stopping it under bureaucratic limits took benefit of it.

Media now is not just reporter or consensus builder of foreign policy instead it took a better role of being an arbiter of contending views. Media has played a great role in Indo-US Nuclear deal, in Srilankan civil war, in Baluchistan issue etc.

Thus, so far role of media over foreign policy issue has increased post liberalization but still it is not as influential as it should be in a democracy and this is because of lack of access to information as government maintain high level of secrecy⁵ on foreign policy related issues and issue of reportage. As per Pandalai study of Indian media she says 'the Indian media affected foreign policy formulation in a minimalistic and often symbolic manner' (Pandalai, 2013).

The Parliament:

One of the mechanism linking public opinion to foreign policy is the Parliament but role of parliament has really been very limited with the advent of standing committee on external affairs, foreign policy issues are hardly discussed in the parliament and even if it is discussed, it is just related to passport issues, haj related issue or Diaspora issues.

Parliament role is minimal in foreign affairs issue even in emergency situations like Kargil war in 1999 when Lok Sabha was dissolved there was no special session and PM Vajpayee refused to have one and handled the issue single handedly removing any kind of parliamentary scrutiny over executive

India's foreign policy may have emerged from the head and heart of its PM but India's advance in International Politics is not free from the constraints of domestic politics and elite opinion (Chaudhary, 2015). So India can enter treaties or declare war without approval of parliament just with executive orders. Only way the

executive decision can be ruled out is through the no confidence motion.

Only ways parliament can impact foreign policy decision making is:

- By exercising financial controls through budget allocated for multiplicity of activities
- Motion or resolution can be proposed on various executive issues pushing the government to justify its decisions
- There is observable limitation placed by parliament on the foreign policy decision making, often termed as **paradox of majority governance** (Chaudhary, 2015). In which majority government have to take into consideration the demand of opposition in order to main legitimacy.

States:

Regional preferences became really important at centre while taking foreign policy decision. E.g. In Nov, 2013 Prime Minister 's decision of not to attend the annual Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo as a pressure from regional parties⁶ on pressurizing Sri Lankan Government to protect civilians from ongoing conflict⁷.

Private Sector:

We observe that till mid 1980s there was actually no significant role private sector played in shaping of India's foreign policy. And till 1980s world was under the so-called cold war and India was the emerging leader of the non- aligned world with the anti-imperialist rhetoric which subsequently tilted India's orientation towards the socialist bloc and hence India adopted socialist mode of development virtually suppressing the private sector in India

In the mid-1980s, things changed in such a way with India taking its initial step towards economic liberalization under the Rajiv Gandhi leadership. Here, began hey days of private sector in India. Private sector started booming. The share of private sector in the economy also rose. *Rajiv Kumar and Santosh Kumar in their book "In the national interest: a strategic foreign policy for India"* said that there are three distinct component of foreign policy framework of India: Security, economic

5. Under official secrets act.

6. Tamil Regional parties: DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam)

7. Fourth Elam War of Srilanka

prosperity and global public good

Talking about **Security**, Kumar and Kumar argued that India's geostrategic security policy was single handedly managed by Nehru in the initial years, even later security policy remains largely the monopoly of government in general and MEA in particular. Kumar and Kumar argued that **Economic prosperity** is the key to India's success in world affairs thus it should remain the exclusive focus of India's foreign policy in the coming decades.

And in the issues of the **global public good** which includes in its domain the shared responsibilities that is those activities and action in which action of any one player will affect others. E.g. Climate Change negotiations, Nuclear disarmament, drugs related issues etc.

There is increasing role of private sector in all these realms in a way private sector help in building a negotiating stance through research and development India's private sector role in the foreign policy related issue began in mid-1980s when Rajiv Gandhi for the first time took business delegation with him on his official trip to USSR. Thereafter followed by first instance in which private sector influence India's stance on global trade negotiation on TRIPS⁸ issue⁹ in Uruguay Round¹⁰. In early phase India's foreign policy was dominated by political and security related issues in which private sector role was largely marginal. In post Pokhran II¹¹ era when India was under international economic sanctions, Private Sector played an important role by playing **Track II diplomacy**¹².

During India- US nuclear deal, private sector very much was in support of India's official stance. Private sector played an instrumental role in Global cyber security negotiations as private sector was more informed about its complicity than public sector. Therefore, government

in this issue had to take on board private sector contribution.

Private sector so far is not that influential as it should be and as per the Rajiv Kumar there are three factors behind it:

- There is continuation of protectionist tendency in large part of private sector.
- Highly fragmented private sector with no united stance on any important economic issue.
- Heavy reliance of private sector on government for the necessary inputs like electricity, coal, transport, etc. which are public sector monopolies.

Due to all the above reason private sector is not in a position of to take an opinion contrary to the adopted position of government (Kumar, 2015).

Universities:

While analyzing the role of academia and universities on foreign policy objectives, studying role of pioneer of foreign policy in India is inevitable and as per Kanti Bajpai such was the impact of Nehru's knowledge about external affairs and charismatic personality that Indian academia didn't consider their input as wise as PM's expertise and thus they remain restricted in this intellectual vacuum.

Nehru on the other hand was institution builder as well, he has lead role in establishing Indian Council of world Affairs (ICWA) and Indian Institute of International Studies (ISIS)¹³. At present international relations is taught in about 150 universities but still attitude of bureaucracy is quite conservative, not letting people know the information and data required for effective research¹⁴.

Think Tanks:

Same is the anecdote of influence of think tanks on Indian foreign policy. Although India has fourth largest¹⁵ number of think tanks in the world but their impact on

8. TRIPS: Trade relate aspects of Intellectual Property Rights

9. TRIPS ISSUE: private sector of generic drugs was against it and lobbied hard.

10. Uruguay round: eighth round of global multilateral trade negotiations. It is conducted under the framework of GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs).

11. Pokhran-II series of five nuclear bomb test explosions in 1998 by India at Pokhran

12. Track-II diplomacy is kind of unofficial dialogue and problem solving activities, it involves non-governmental, informal, private citizens' contacts.

13. Since 1970, ISIS is part of Jawaharlal Nehru University (and renamed as School of International Studies (SIS)).

14. Due to official's secret act.

15. After US, UK and China

Indian foreign policy is minimal. There is also problem with the working of think tanks very first is the lack of enough information due to official secrets act which obviously led to compromise with quality of research and its effectiveness to be included in policy formation

Another problem is lack of sufficient funding. Even private sector is not in favour of providing adequate funding to Indian think tanks and others which are funded by government like IDSA¹⁶ are not that much critical of government policies. Although now things are changing, independent private think tanks are emerging like ORF (Observer Research Foundation) by reliance group which are doing well, infact foreign think tanks like Carnegie endowments and Brookings Institutions is also taking think tanks to new platform of research outputs and influence but still think tanks and universities have long way to go.

Other than this there are other actors as well who impact foreign policy decision making in very influential manner like diaspora, civil society groups, interest groups, pressure groups. NGOs etc.

Conclusion:

In formulating and shaping India's foreign policy, India's officialdom is very status quoist they are not as open to outside expertise as they should be. Like US State Department's Policy Planning Staff, India also established Policy Planning Review division¹⁷ but unlike US one, it does not include expert advice from academia and think tanks.

In fact in a research paper titled "*Developing India's foreign policy Software*", Daniel Markey argued about the reasons preventing India's rise to great power status and in that he mentions; Shortage of staff of IFS; inadequate mid-career training, indifference towards outside expertise; poorly funded and highly regulated universities; and inability of think-tanks to conduct good research due to lack of information as some of the reasons.

Although things have changed in past few decades MEA is becoming supportive of the research, there is proactive public diplomacy division which keeps on sponsoring various track 1.5¹⁸ dialogues. In fact, birth of

National security advisor board is also a move in a positive direction. Yet this is not enough much remains to be done.

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16. IDSA: institute for defense studies and Analysis, established in 1965

17. PPRD now known as Policy Planning Research Division. It is renamed in 1966.

18. Track 1.5 diplomacy is when both official and unofficial actors are involved in any negotiations.

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