

**BOOK REVIEW**

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***From Chanakya to Modi: The Evolution  
of India's Foreign Policy by Aparna Pande***  
New Delhi: Collins, 2020

*Reviewed by Sugandhi*

Aparna Pande's work, *From Chanakya to Modi*, offers a compelling examination of the evolution of Indian foreign policy, tracing its trajectory from ancient times to the present era under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The author delves into the strategic deliberations of Indian statesmen throughout history, drawing parallels between the policies implemented from Pandit Nehru's time to Prime Minister Modi's. She also focuses on the diplomatic acumen of the legendary statesman, Chanakya. The front cover of the publication, adorned with the tricolour, serves as a symbolic representation of the Indian National flag. Pande structures the content into five distinct chapters, methodically illustrating how historical occurrences, ideologies, notable figures, and fundamental principles have played pivotal roles in shaping the course of India's foreign relations.

Pande initiates the discussion by elucidating the manifestation of India's endeavour to amalgamate modern and traditional aspects in its engagements with other nations. A succinct outline is provided regarding how India and its people perceive themselves on the global platform. The author categorises India's contemporary foreign policy into four primary strands: imperial, messianic idealism, realism, and isolationism, mirroring Walter Russell Mead's classification of ideological approaches in US foreign policy discourse. She explains that in his book, *Special Providence*, Russell Mead delineated four distinct paradigms that have significantly influenced American foreign policy subsequent to the attainment of

independence in 1776. US relations are shaped by key ideas from notable figures throughout history, according to Mead. The Hamiltonian school prioritises bolstering American enterprise domestically and internationally. The Wilsonian ideal emphasises a moral obligation to disseminate American values globally. The Jeffersonian perspective focuses on safeguarding American democracy amidst global threats. The Jacksonian approach reflects a cultural ethos of honour, independence, and military pride among Americans. US foreign policy has historically aligned with one or more of these ideological frameworks. In comparison, she elaborates that Indian Foreign Policy has sometimes been called 'Nehruvian': a blend of messianic idealism, with some realist, imperial and isolationist elements, since Nehru was the only leader who could incorporate the best of all strands in defining India's global outlook. Moreover, she discusses the significant contribution of India's rich heritage to the Indian concept of self, domestically and internationally, viewing neighbouring countries as integral to its civilisation. Additionally, she asserts that Indian foreign policy makers perceive the Indian subcontinent as a unified entity, with neighbouring states, spanning from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, playing a crucial role in India's security. By drawing parallels between ancient Indian empires and contemporary India, Pande notes that most ancient empires refrained from expanding beyond their territorial boundaries due to ethical considerations, mirroring modern India's approach of non-interference and respect for other states' sovereignty. She also explores the influence of ancient Indian texts, like *Arthashastra*, by Chanakya, a renowned statesman, on shaping India's foreign policy, evident in the naming of the diplomatic enclave in New Delhi as Chanakyapuri. Pande elucidates how the founders of modern India were divided between realists and idealists, both contributing to India's global perspective to varying extents. The impact of Buddhist, Jain, and Ashokan principles on Gandhi's *ahimsa*, the non-alignment policy, and the Panchsheel doctrine underscores the moral underpinnings of India's post-independence foreign policy. Pande further highlights the British role in establishing the institutional framework that continues to shape India's foreign policy significantly in the post-independence era. When discussing individuals who have had an enduring impact on India's foreign policy, she discusses all significant leaders, while focusing primarily on Nehru, who was widely regarded as the architect of India's foreign policy. She examines Nehruvianism, detailing it as a combination of both realism and idealism. Analysing Cold War politics and the post-Nehru quest for power, she provides a comprehensive overview of leaders succeeding Nehru, and compares their policies to his, particularly highlighting Prime Minister Modi's similar fervour to Nehru in foreign policy matters. She also underscores how the BJP's foreign policy has embraced certain aspects of Nehruvianism, particularly the notion of India as a distinguished civilisation with a global role and a commitment to economic self-reliance.

In addition, Pande clarifies that not only individuals but also principles and interests, akin to those in other countries, are crucial in shaping India's foreign policy. These encompass strategic autonomy, Indian exceptionalism, multilateralism, and global diaspora, which have endured and, in some cases, developed and broadened under different leaderships over time. Illustrating this point, Pande points to how the diaspora community was not a focal point during the Nehruvian era but has gained substantial importance in the current government's policies.

In the concluding chapter of her book, she deep dives into the subject of India's strategic culture and institutions, noting that post-independence Indian foreign policy was more

driven by national pride than strategic security. It was only in 1964 that actual defence planning commenced, with military and intelligence previously excluded from strategic planning, while the external affairs ministry held sway. Through anecdotes, she demonstrates the prevalence of prime ministerial authority in foreign policy decisions since independence, attributing it to the lack of a strategic culture and heritage. Discussing the limited role played by parliament in the decision-making process of foreign policy, the author also examines the functions and deficiencies of crucial entities involved in foreign and security policies, such as the Cabinet Security Committee and the National Security Council. Furthermore, an analysis of the structural frame of the Indian civil services underscores its historical British roots and subsequent perception as 'elitist'. The author's critique is balanced, acknowledging both the successes and shortcomings of institutions and leaders within the system. Finally, the discussion shifts towards the evolving landscape of Indian foreign policy, particularly with the emergence of new stakeholders. The author contends that while India has progressed considerably from Nehru's idealistic era, it still aspires to achieve the status of a great power and lacks a clearly defined strategic culture.

Throughout the book, Pande upholds a balanced and analytical perspective, evaluating both the achievements and limitations of India's foreign policy strategies. She adeptly navigates intricate geopolitical issues, historical inheritances, and ongoing discussions, presenting readers with a thorough representation of India's diplomatic development. One of the strengths of the book lies in its thorough examination of India's diplomatic relations with its neighbouring countries, namely, Pakistan, China, and Nepal. Pande presents a sophisticated analysis of the historical animosities, territorial disagreements, and security apprehensions that have shaped these interactions over time. Moreover, she evaluates India's endeavours to promote connectivity, facilitate economic collaboration, and tackle cross-border issues within the South Asian region. In addition, Pande offers valuable perspectives on India's involvement in the global arena, encompassing its alliances with the United States, Russia, and the European Union. She scrutinises India's participation in international platforms such as the United Nations, G20, and BRICS, appraising its involvement in collective diplomacy and global peacekeeping operations.

The book, albeit very well crafted, is not devoid of limitations. Pande fails to reference the sentiments of individuals residing in adjacent nations in the locality concerning India and its external strategy, or how and whether this has influenced Indian external strategy in any manner or at any juncture. She also discusses how India has always exuded the doctrine of isolationism, since the ancient empires (barring the Cholas) did not contemplate expanding. She highlights how, in the Nehruvian epoch, and in contemporary times as well, India is hesitant to assume as substantial a position as predominant powers do, while still desiring a permanent berth in the United Nations Security Council. She also acknowledges that the doctrine of non-alignment was not a doctrine of seclusion and/or neutrality. If so, can we truly characterise India's current standpoint as a blend of isolationism and activism? Another criticism is that although Pande identifies the shortcomings in the external strategy throughout, she does not delve extensively into the present state of democratic principles, whether in the external strategy, specifically, or the country, more generally. With the ascent of Hindutva as part of the current government's ideology, some may label this as a reflective bias.

In summary, *From Chanakya to Modi*, true to its title, serves as a valuable asset for academics, policymakers, and students of global relations, appealing to individuals intrigued by India's global positioning. Pande's clear writing style, detailed historical accounts, and sharp analysis establish this book as essential for those aiming to grasp the complexities of Indian foreign policy and its relevance in an ever-evolving global landscape. Asserting that notions such as strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and regional stability can be traced to ancient philosophical doctrines and the influential thinkers of the early modern period are still relevant in contemporary times, Pande accentuates the significance of India's cultural and civilisational identity as a pivotal factor in the formulation of its foreign policy. She argues that historical narratives serve to contextualise India's position on the international stage and its engagements with other sovereign states in contemporary times through insights from historical experiences. Her work emerges as a definitive contribution, shedding light on the enduring doctrines, historical heritages, and contemporary hurdles influencing India's international interactions. Through extensive research and perceptive evaluation, Pande delivers a nuanced and captivating portrayal of India's diplomatic odyssey, spanning from ancient insights to contemporary pragmatism.

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