Getting India's World Right

Incremental concessions will get India nowhere with Pakistan and China. What we need is a classically conservative foreign policy, based on realism.

ABHIJNAN REJ

AT THE SECOND edition of the Raisina Dialogue—an annual international geopolitics conference my employer co-organises with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—in January, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a comprehensive inaugural address. Mr Modi spoke of the key drivers of his active foreign policy and, as expected from such a speech, touched on the major international relations achievements of his government. But it was a single line from his speech, amplified in a tweet of his, that has had the commentariat perplexed.

The Prime Minister, by way of enunciating the broad principles that drives the way his government looks at the world and India's place in it, noted that "self interest alone is neither in our culture nor in our behaviour". The implication was that there was more to his foreign policy than a selfish pursuit of material prosperity and national security. Even individuals who have applauded Mr Modi's vigorous pursuit of India's interests abroad found themselves asking: What is there to pursue beyond national interest? And why does India find itself repeating the same liberal line that its foreign policy is also a force for greater global good?

This was not the first time that this government has professed a "national interest plus" orientation for Indian foreign policy. Soon after coming to power in 2014, the Modi government spoke of "enlightened national interest" as the driving principle of its foreign policy.

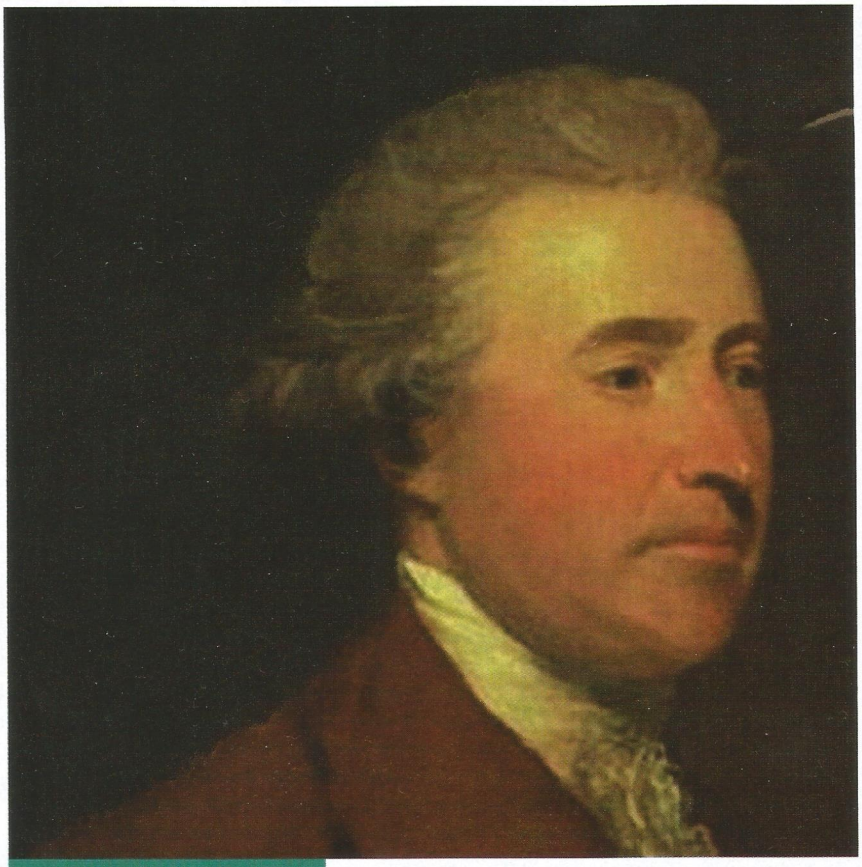
President Pranab Mukherjee, speaking on behalf of his new Cabinet in June 2014, described this concept as a combination of values and pragmatism, deployed towards "mutually beneficial" international relationships.

One way to explain such statements is to view them as rhetorical sugar coating the pursuit of self-interest for international consumption, much like the way the Chinese talk of "win-win relationships"—it sounds good but does not mean much. But taken at its face value, such assertions pose a special problem for those who had hoped that Mr Modi's principles and actions will serve as a template for conservative governance. And a conservative foreign policy differs significantly from that of a liberal orientation in that the pursuit of national interest is the *sole* objective of the same.

The conceptual underpinnings of such a foreign policy are provided by a body of theory and practice called *realism*. A realist orientation for Indian foreign policy will be premised on the fact that force and diplomacy go hand in hand and coercion is often a valuable instrument of statecraft. It will be premised by the fact that international law is of limited use when it comes to advancing national interests. It takes as a fact that peace can only be secured by balance-of-power arrangements. And above all, it suggests that national sovereignty—and the preponderance of sovereign power—is the only absolute in the international system, to be preserved at any cost.

This essay will examine the links between conservatism and various schools of realism. While I will sketch what such a putative conservative-realist foreign policy for India means in practice, this essay is primarily an exercise in highlighting intellectual history. The Indian Right, over the last few years, has set out to define itself in terms of ideas which will then provide policy directions. The economists among

NIRANJAN SHRESTHA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



For Burke, desirable change shaped by prudence shaped by traditions is gradual and organic.

them have been quite successful in doing so, but foreign policy scholars have generally shied away from this exercise. This essay is a first pass at redressing this situation.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONSERVATISM

I will take conservatism to mean the belief that establishment and preservation of order, in face of forces that seek to overthrow it, is the primary task of statecraft. Conservatives see good in the *status quo*—in distinction to revolutionaries who consider it as an impediment to progress. Conservatives seek to "conserve things, when worse things are proposed in their place", as the contemporary British philosopher Roger Scruton put it in a recent book. But it is a peculiar irony of history that this commonsensical dictum would be translated into a coherent political philosophy in the shadow of revolutions.

Soon after the French Revolution of 1789, the British philosopher Edmund Burke wrote a book that was to define modern western conservatism. But it was in the light of the (failed) revolutions of 1848 that a German journalist, Ludwig von Rochau, would take up a number of Burkean ideas and transplant them into a theory of statecraft, based on balancing antagonising forces both inside a state and in the international system. Rochau's "realpolitik" will take as its goal the pursuit of "equilibrium" at home and abroad. In time, the most famous practitioner of this art would be the American scholar-diplomat Henry Kissinger who would, in turn, draw lessons from three 19th century conservative statesmen: the Austrian Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich, the British Viscount Castlereagh, and the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

Burke is no stranger to Indian conservative thinkers, not the least for the fact that he tirelessly advocated the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal and the author of many misdeeds. Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, wrote: "Prudence is not only the first in rank of the virtues political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all." For Burke, desirable change shaped by prudence shaped by traditions and norms—the opposite of how the French Revolution came to be—is gradual and organic.

Burke's ideas would find much resonance among the counter-revolutionary forces in Europe in the first half of the 19th century. The failed revolutions of 1848 would also cause a lot of European intellectuals to question the foundational assumptions of liberalism. Among them, Rochau would seek to analyse politics and political change not in terms of ideas but in terms of power, an intellectual return to Niccolò Machiavelli. First published in 1853 (with a second expanded edition in 1868), Rochau's *Foundations of Realpolitik* would advance four fundamental propositions about the role of power and ideas in politics—and introduce "realpolitik" as a term of art.

A recent book on the intellectual history of realpolitik by the British scholar John Bew puts these propositions as: all politics—including the rights of sovereignty—is an expression of power; governance is effective when contending forces within a state are balanced to an equilibrium; ideas, in politics, need not be noble to be effective; and that the spirit of the age is of paramount importance in determining a nation's trajectory. As Bew identifies it, Rochau's realpolitik was influenced by Burke in two significant ways. Both stressed the importance of organic evolution of the state, as well as the importance of taking history into account while determining the features of political situations.

While Rochau's book was predominantly a treatise on domestic affairs, the second edition did extend the realpolitikal principles to international affairs. In particular, Bew writes, "Rochau rejected both *Gefühlspolitik* (sentimental politics) and *Prinzipienpolitik* (principled politics) as the basis for a nation's foreign policy", and called for Germany to seize the initiative and wage pre-emptive wars against its traditional adversaries like France.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the

DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

great powers of Europe convened in Vienna between late 1814 and the middle of 1815 to negotiate peace. The revolutionary fervour in Europe was a common challenge for all European powers; the challenge for them was to manage discord both at home and prevent would-be-hegemons like Napoleon from plunging Europe into war again. The Congress of Vienna was hosted by Austrian statesman von Metternich and put forward a delicate system of balance of power among European states.

A MAN CALLED KISSINGER

From that point on, a balance-of-power system that maintains equilibrium in the international system would be the lodestar of realism in international relations—and maintaining it, backed by the threat of force if needed, the central goal of diplomacy. And much of the appreciation for the subtlety of the Metternichean system would be explained in a 1954 Harvard doctoral thesis of a 31-year old German-Jewish refugee to America—Henry Kissinger.

Long after Kissinger had completed his PhD and gone on to become, first, Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor (NSA) and, then, Secretary of State, journalists and scholars alike would turn to his thesis to find clues about

According to Kissinger, revolutionary powers cannot be appeased through diplomacy alone.

JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

The US is the most valuable partner India has when it comes to keeping Chinese power in check.

the organising principles of Kissinger's often brilliant (and not-infrequently cold-blooded) diplomatic machinations. And they would find them. Kissinger's thesis—published as *The World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* in 1957—would define the necessary and sufficient conditions for peace and cooperation among nations in the international order—the equilibrium that balance of power systems seek. Kissinger writes:

"There exists two kind of equilibrium then: a general equilibrium which makes it risky for one power or group of powers to attempt to impose their will on the remainder; and a particular equilibrium which defines the historical relation of certain powers among each other. The former is the deterrent against a general war; the latter the condition of smooth co-operation."

In a journal article in 1956, Kissinger would term the goal of the Congress of Vienna as one of coming to both equilibriums at once. The British representative Viscount Castlereagh's conception of an equilibrium in Europe was one where "hegemony was impossible"—of a general equilibrium. Metternich's as well as the other Continental powers' conception was that of a particular equilibrium, of "a reconciliation of historical aspirations."

But it was the introduction of notions of "revolutionary" and "legitimate" powers that would shape Kissinger's realism the most. A revolutionary power, in Kissinger's definition, would be a power that would consider the international order unacceptable, and seek to change its basic structure. Revolutionary powers pursue "a policy of unlimited objectives", and as such cannot be appeased through diplomacy alone—the use (or the threat of use) of force become an imperative while dealing with them. A legitimate power, on the other hand, would seek to redress any imbalance in the order through an appeal to—in Kissinger's words, "a sense of obligation." In Kissinger's own thinking during his time as Nixon's NSA, North Vietnam was

the classic example of a revolutionary power. (I will come to Pakistan as an example of a revolutionary power later in this essay.)

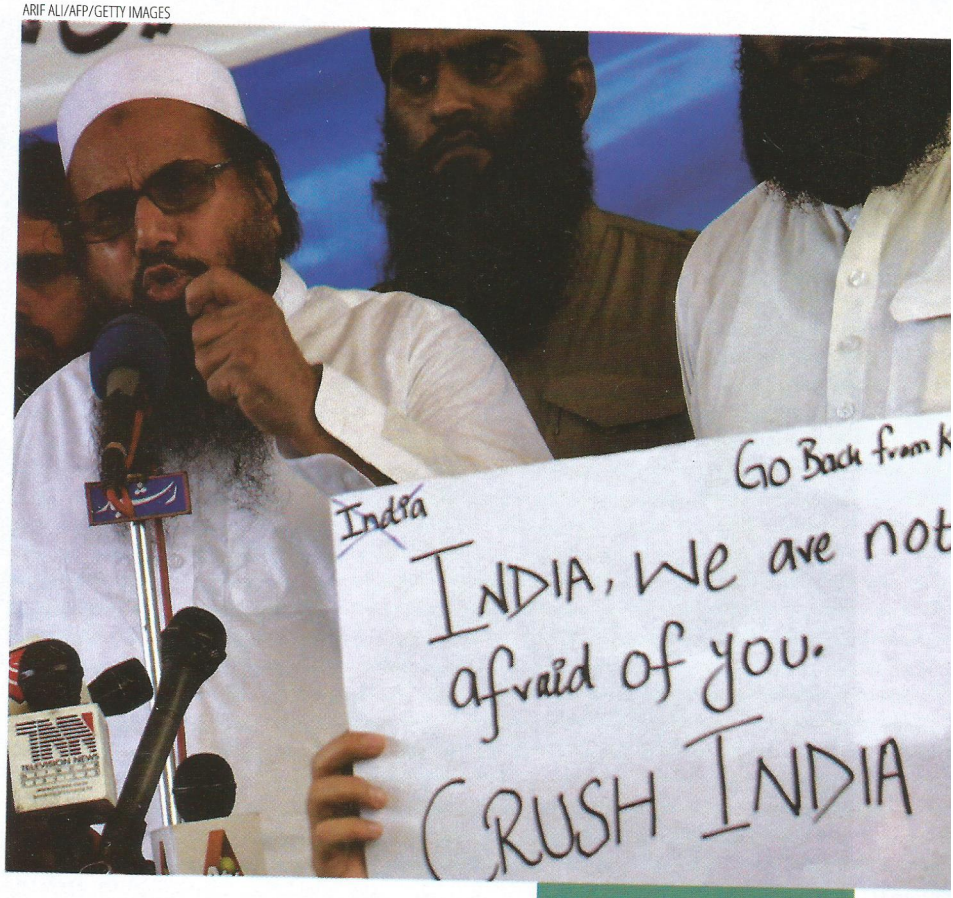
The American journalist Robert Kaplan, another great realist of our times, read another key lesson in Kissinger's *World Restored*. "Because the real task of statesmen is to forestall revolutions," Kaplan writes, "the real heroes of history (in Kissinger's view) are enlightened conservatives such as Metternich and... Edmund Burke." In Kissinger's hands, realism and conservatism became two sides of the same coin: both are political quests for order in a world constantly under threat from revolutionary fervour of a Napoleon, a Mao—or an Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Kissinger's search for equilibrium in a world whose structure revolutionary powers consider "illegitimate"—and the conditions that bring about that equilibrium, by coupling force and diplomacy—was not premised in the intrinsic desire on the part of statesmen to bring about the same. Writing in *World Restored*, he was clear on this point: "An international order is... rarely born out of consciousness of harmony." This is the gist of his realism. But how is it that a sense of harmony that many powers may indeed share may not be enough to restore equilibrium in the international system?

Academic realist literature has long grappled with this question. Kissinger's own answer—that geography and history provide differing conceptions of security for different countries—can be complimented by basic insights about human nature itself. The 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes viewed the manner in which sovereign states interact as being analogous to selfish behaviour of humans with "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" lives. The American theorist Hans Morgenthau, writing in 1948, built on this insight to argue that nations relentlessly pursue their self-interest (no major surprise there!) and also that the pursuit of national interest is a pursuit of power. In this formulation of realism—"classical realism" in academese—power is understood as anything that allows one nation to dominate another.

While human nature and contingencies of history and geography were the drivers of classical realism, in the late 1970s, it was superseded by structural realism. In the structural narrative, nations relentlessly compete with each other, not because of human nature but because of the simple fact that there is no supreme authority respected by all in the international system that can credibly adjudicate disputes. This condition of "anarchy" in the international system is why the world sees relentless security competition between states and, absent a credible balance of power in the international order, wars. The structural-realist school also argues history and internal politics of a country matter very little—a view of the international system as a set of billiard balls on collision paths.

ARIF ALI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



PAKISTAN: A REVOLUTIONARY POWER

Despite the foundational differences between the different schools of realism, the primary goal of an explicitly realist foreign policy is conservative. It is the creation of equilibrium out of contending powers and forces—a balance-of-power system, in other words. But realism also has other lessons in store for nations seeking to pursue such foreign policies.

One, international institutions are of limited utility when seeking to preserve lasting peace. In any case, truly effective international institutions will necessarily consist of nations willing to significantly trade their sovereign prerogatives for other incentives—a no-go prescription in realism. Two, force and diplomacy must always be coupled, for diplomacy without the threat of use of force is often an easily called bluff. Three, revolutionary states that seek to radically alter the balance of power to their favour cannot be appeased with small concessions. Force is the only way to keep them in check. Fourth and finally, a realist *qua* conservative foreign policy necessarily avoids overreach. Restraint plays as much role in it as resolve in the use and non-use of force.

Does the extant direction of Indian foreign

> Pakistan will, as its *raison d'etre*, keep challenging a South Asian regional order with India at its centre.

ED JONES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

To deal with China, India needs to adopt "onshore" as well as "offshore" balancing strategies.

policy since 1947—or even since 2014—meet all of these criteria? If it does not, what course correction does our foreign policy need to undertake, assuming that a conservative consensus on foreign policy (with or without the current dispensation in power) is possible? Taking India's positions on Pakistan and China as examples, let me provide a few (partial) answers.

Pakistan is a quintessential example of a revolutionary power, to use Kissinger's terminology. As such it will—as *raison d'etre* as well as *raison d'etat*—continue to challenge a South Asian regional order with India at its centre. This is likely to be the case even if India was to make concessions on Kashmir. Kissinger forcefully argued in his PhD thesis that appeasement through a series of incremental concessions to a revolutionary power is ultimately fruitless.

In Kissinger's argument, the Munich Pact of 1938, which granted parts of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany, was a classic example of how revolutionary powers are rarely placated through appeasement. A realist would argue that Indira Gandhi's decision to not settle Kashmir on terms favourable to India during the 1971 war with Pakistan and instead sanctifying Pakistan's irredentism through the Simla Agreement of 1972 is another clear example of failed appeasement. And herein lies a paradox: Indira Gandhi was—as scholar Surjit Mansingh explains in a recent paper—in many ways emblematic of classical realism. "She certainly saw," Mansingh writes, "national interest in terms of tangible power rather than morality." So what gives?

A large part of the problem is that Indian policymakers have never really warmed up to the idea of Pakistan as a fundamentally revisionist state. Recent empirical research on Pakistan's military—Christine Fair's research being the marquee, though not the only, example—has painstakingly established it as such. Successive Indian prime ministers, up to and including Modi before the Pathankot attacks of January last year, have imagined it as a legitimate power that can be engaged through diplomacy alone.

But realism holds that revolutionary powers must be subdued through the threat of force. The current government circa 2017 seems to

understand this much better than the previous ones. The Prime Minister's references to Balochistan and PoK during his Independence Day speech last year, the avowed cross-LoC strikes in September, and the Indian Army Chief's recent decision to refer to a limited offensive "Cold Start Doctrine" in public, are all signals that Indian foreign policy—mugged by reality—is taking a realist turn.

But a conservative foreign policy that is realist will also have to *conserve* resources—diplomatic as well as military, picking fights when absolutely necessary and that too in a way that core domestic national objectives are not compromised.

This is one crucial way in which a realist foreign policy is not a military-maximalist one.

Take Pakistan, again, as an example to contrast these two approaches. A conservative foreign policy will indeed rely more on cleverly and covertly exploiting fault lines inside that country. In contrast, a military-maximalist one (a "hyperrealist" approach, in the terminology of scholar Kanti Bajpai) will be more willing to undertake a large-scale and open-ended military confrontation with Pakistan with uncertain consequences for India. A conservative foreign policy is not risk-averse; but it is risk-conscious.

HOW TO DEAL WITH CHINA

A realist strategy for middle-powers like India would also be enlisting other countries to help preserve the extant balance of power in their region. This brings me to the question of China.

Now that the events of 2016 have finally killed the last vestiges of liberal optimism about Indo-Chinese brotherhood, how should India counter Chinese obstructionism as well as its efforts to shift the balance of power in South Asia away from India? A realist prescription would suggest, first and foremost, that India adopt both "onshore" as well as "offshore" balancing strategies—where smaller powers in South-East Asia are empowered and encouraged to keep the Chinese in check. In itself, this is not a dramatically original idea. After all, India's Act-East policy can also be viewed as an example of offshore balancing; so would be its assertive military diplomacy with countries like Vietnam.

An offshore balancing strategy is also a hands-off approach—and, in that, an essentially conservative one. To spell this out when it comes to China: under no circumstances should India embroil itself in any potential military conflict in East Asia, including in the South China Sea, that do not threaten India's sovereignty. At the same time, its economic muscle and diplomatic clout should encourage others to keep the balance of power from decisively shifting towards China in that region.

But India also has a disputed physical border with China—off-shore balancing alone will not be sufficient given this contest. India will have to significantly strengthen its conventional military forces. One imperative in this direction would be completing the raising of a dedicated Mountain Strike Corps directed at China, something that has been in the making since 2013. A robust nuclear triad is another. And above all, India strategists need to absorb a basic fact of life that the United States is the most valuable partner India has when it comes to keeping Chinese power in check. Period.

I end where I began—with the Prime Minister Modi's remarks at the 2017 Raisina Dialogue. While the Prime Minister ruffled many feathers by proposing that India's foreign policy has a "self-interest plus" orientation, he also noted that India's "strategic intent is shaped by our civilisational ethos of *yathartvad* (realism)," among other precepts. A conservative foreign policy for India would place this maxim above all others.

Abhijnan Rej is a Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. A strategic analyst and commentator, he focuses on developments in China, Pakistan, and United States, relevant to India's national security and foreign policy.