

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

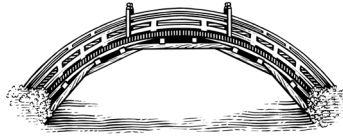
Rajesh Basrur's

*Subcontinental Drift:*

*Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*

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*Ian Hall*

*Kate Sullivan de Estrada*

*Jivanta Schottli*

*Frank O'Donnell*

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## India's Foreign Policy and the Ethic of Responsibility

*Ian Hall*

Classical realism was formulated in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s to tackle a pressing problem: how to reconcile democratic politics with power politics. Most classical realists valued democracy as the form of government most likely to protect rights, uphold freedoms, and enable a majority of citizens to flourish.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, they observed that democracies often pursue foreign policies that are ill-conceived or downright dangerous.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, classical realists lamented that democratic leaders are frequently outmaneuvered by authoritarians better schooled in the dark arts of international relations.

Rajesh Basrur's excellent book *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy* responds to a similar challenge. This time, however, it is faced by India, a rising power whose foreign policy is "periodically afflicted" by "uncertainty and indecisiveness" (p. 1). Basrur's concern is the mismatch between India's ambition and its mixed record of success in the post-Cold War world. He argues the problems stem from domestic political constraints and the "limitations" of India's policies and policymakers (p. xi).

If the postwar classical realists looked at India today, they would likely agree. They also blamed subpar foreign policies on domestic politics, which in democracies can empower poor leaders and flimsy ideas. They pointed to strategies like isolationism and appeasement, championed by popular politicians and widely supported in the interwar years but which undermined the capacity of democratic states to deter aggression and defend

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IAN HALL is a Professor of International Relations with the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University and an Academic Fellow of the Australia India Institute at the University of Melbourne (Australia). He can be reached at <i.hall@griffith.edu.au>.

<sup>1</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, for example, was an admirer of democratic politics, for all its flaws, as his book *The Purpose of American Politics* makes clear. Others, including George F. Kennan, were more ambivalent. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960); and John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1943).

their citizens when conflict eventually erupted.<sup>3</sup> Even when it comes to their own security, the classical realists complained, democratic leaders and peoples can be feckless and reckless. Sometimes they were naive. At other times, they were prone to crusading moralism and ideological dogmatism, which could have even worse effects on national security and international order than simple idealism.<sup>4</sup>

For Basrur, the shortcomings with foreign policymaking in India—in particular, the causes of “policy drift,” in which necessary action is not taken or is performed suboptimally—are more quotidian. He shows how they can and do arise from the messiness of coalition politics, the complexities of federalism, and elite irresponsibility. But the consequences of these shortcomings, as his book shows, are still serious, and analysts and policymakers need to understand them properly if they are to remedy them effectively.

*Subcontinental Drift* contributes to this effort by examining four episodes in India’s foreign policy with the help of neoclassical realism, which draws inspiration from its classical forebear to explain state behavior in international relations.<sup>5</sup> Each case study is impeccably argued. Basrur finds evidence for what he terms “involuntary drift” in the long struggle to secure support for the U.S.-India nuclear deal and in New Delhi’s mishandling of the bilateral relationship with Colombo in the latter stages of Sri Lanka’s civil war. In both cases, he argues that New Delhi’s freedom of action was constrained by circumstances largely beyond its control: principally, a fragmented parliament that gives small parties outsized influence. In the second two cases, Basrur detects signs of “voluntary drift” in the unresolved saga of India’s nuclear strategy and in its failure to adequately prepare for mass casualty terrorist attacks prior to the assault on Mumbai in November 2008. Here, he thinks, leaders had sufficient control to make the changes needed but failed to act responsibly (p. 111). India’s politicians have long had the means, he argues, to establish a clear nuclear strategy but have not done so, allowing inconsistencies to emerge between stated doctrine and evolving capabilities. Similarly, Basrur claims, India’s leaders could and should have heeded warnings about the threat posed by militant Islamist

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<sup>3</sup> On isolationism, see George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). On appeasement, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 43–45.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Herbert Butterfield, *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

groups harbored in Pakistan. They did not act to address clear weaknesses in internal security, however, concentrating instead on fruitless attempts at coercing Islamabad into ending its covert sponsorship of terror.

These arguments are finely crafted and convincing. Yet the theoretical innovation of *Subcontinental Drift* is also worth discussing. In particular, Basrur reintroduces a normative dimension to the analysis of policymaking and implementation, something that was always present in the work of classical realists but which their critics deplored and contemporary realists often avoid.

Given how poorly democracies fared in foreign policy in the first half of the twentieth century, the classical realists believed there was a pressing need for a theory of international relations that would teach democratic politicians and the public the rudiments of power politics.<sup>6</sup> To construct one, they drew on philosophy, sociology, and theology and looked to the lessons that Europe's past might teach the global present. They told their democratic pupils that international relations "is a struggle for power."<sup>7</sup> They counseled that international law and institutions were imperfect instruments, world government was unlikely, and that a balance of power was often the best that could be achieved. They taught that to safeguard their citizens from external threat, leaders must adhere to what Max Weber called the "ethic of responsibility" and set aside the "ethic of conviction."<sup>8</sup> Finally, they urged democratic leaders (and indeed the public) to prioritize the "national interest"—especially national security—above other political concerns.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of national interest got the classical realists into trouble. Critics questioned whether it was ever possible to define such a thing. These critics suggested that some classical realists were passing off their subjective preferences for certain policies as incontestable eternal truths.<sup>10</sup> They argued that a more objective framework might be used to build scientific theories of international relations—something which many modern-day realists begrudgingly accepted.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Guillhot, ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Tucker, "Professor Morgenthau's Theory of Political 'Realism,'" *American Political Science Review* 46, no. 1 (1952): 214–24.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that the idea of the "national interest" went away—clearly it did not. But later realists, especially structural or neorealists, did not rely on the concept in their theories of international relations.

In *Subcontinental Drift*, Basrur rightly asks whether something valuable was lost in this push to focus on the empirical at the expense of the normative. We can and should, he thinks, scrutinize whether policymakers “act morally,” especially the “neglect of their responsibility to act morally” (p. xi). Politicians should act according to some kind of ethic of responsibility, and scholars should explore whether they do. Importantly, however, Basrur does not try to assess politicians’ conduct using an external standard, as the classical realists did so often with their conceptions of the national interest. Instead, he weighs the outcome of policymakers’ actions against their own expectations of what should have been done in the situations in which they find themselves (p. 25). “In all the cases discussed in these pages,” Basrur observes, “the standard from which deviation is evident was explicitly set by policymakers themselves” (p. 195).

Less convincing, perhaps, is the distinction drawn in the book between “voluntary” and “involuntary” drift. The problem here may be that some agents are treated as structures and some things as fixed when, in fact, both are changeable. In all four case studies in the book, Basrur’s pointed and perceptive analyses of India’s coalition politics in the 1990s and 2000s arguably tell more than one story. At times, apex leaders are faced by what appears to be a fixed and daunting “distribution of power” (p. 34) that militates against a policy. At other times, things look more fluid, and coalition politics seem less like “material constraints,” to borrow from the book’s first section. In these circumstances, such as those surrounding then prime minister Manmohan Singh’s late push to pass the nuclear deal in parliament, there are many agents and few, if any, structures.

These are minor quibbles, however, about what amounts to an impressive contribution to our understanding of India’s post-Cold War international relations and to the realist tradition of thought. *Subcontinental Drift* sets a new standard for studies of how domestic politics shapes foreign policy, not just in India but in democracies more broadly. ♦

## Gambling on India's Foreign Policy: The Importance of Implementation

*Kate Sullivan de Estrada*

As Indian prime minister Narendra Modi ricocheted around the globe in mid-2023—welcomed in Japan and Australia in May, embraced in a four-day state visit to the United States in June, and celebrated as the guest of honor at France's Bastille Day parade in July—newspapers and policy journals brimmed with India analysis. Confronted by the hype around Modi as a metonym for India's growing power and influence, rising uneasiness about the future of Indian democracy under his watch, and New Delhi's equivocal position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, much of the commentary framed intensified relations with India through the metaphor of a “gamble.”

Ashley Tellis began with an analysis of “America's bad bet on India” in *Foreign Affairs* in early May, arguing that the deepening defense relationship between Washington and New Delhi was unlikely to lead to India partnering with the United States in a military coalition against China.<sup>1</sup> Later that month, Christophe Jaffrelot argued in *Le Monde* that “betting on India is a short-sighted strategy for France,” highlighting concerning domestic political trends and describing Indian democracy as “literally put on hold” between elections that are no longer fair.<sup>2</sup> By July, *Financial Times* commentator Martin Wolf had concluded both that “Western leaders are making a sensible bet on India” because of its economic growth prospects and that “Modi's India is moving in an illiberal direction.”<sup>3</sup> Other analysts

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KATE SULLIVAN DE ESTRADA is Director of the Contemporary South Asian Studies Programme and Associate Professor in the International Relations of South Asia at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies and St Antony's College, University of Oxford (United Kingdom). She can be reached at <kate.sullivan@area.ox.ac.uk>.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “America's Bad Bet on India: New Delhi Won't Side with Washington against Beijing,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>.

<sup>2</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, “Betting on India Is a Short-Sighted Strategy for France,” *Le Monde*, May 25, 2023 ~ [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/05/25/betting-on-india-is-a-short-sighted-strategy-for-france\\_6027951\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/05/25/betting-on-india-is-a-short-sighted-strategy-for-france_6027951_23.html).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Wolf, “Western Leaders Are Making a Sensible Bet on India,” *Financial Times*, July 18, 2023, ~ <https://www.ft.com/content/c9de715e-2e29-4a7f-880b-1509c04bf11b>; and Martin Wolf, “Modi's India Is Moving in an Illiberal Direction,” *Financial Times*, July 25, 2023 ~ <https://www.ft.com/content/bf591089-6e9d-4cf9-ac80-8c63e3b12f42>.

questioned whether India's rise was "inevitable" and if it would be best to deal with India "as it is, not as we might like it to be."<sup>4</sup>

Anyone interested in these questions would benefit from reading Rajesh Basrur's careful and rigorous book *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*. Rather than assessing India's policy achievements and failures through the lens of the United States' imperative to counterbalance China in its systemic challenge or India's democratic potential to support the values-based construction of the Indo-Pacific as "free and open," *Subcontinental Drift's* start and end point is New Delhi. Basrur's interest is "the central concerns of Indian national security strategy" (p. 28) and, more specifically, the ability of the Indian state "to ensure the security of its people" (p. 24). Importantly—and this is where the book's emphasis on "drift" comes in—his focus is less on the formation of domestic policy preferences and more on whether policymakers are able or willing to make good on those preferences once they have been formed (p. 23). The study's overall conclusion is sobering: "India's potential for achieving major power status stands on a relatively weak foundation, owing to its inability to follow through on those policies that are crucial to its security" (p. 193).

*Subcontinental Drift's* point of departure is the observation that "Indian foreign policy has often been characterized by multiple hesitations, delays, and diversions" (p. 181). This justifies the volume's analytical focus on the domestic drivers of policy drift, which is defined as a policy process "initiated purposefully but...greatly impeded by intervening factors" (p. 8). Some of India's most pressing security concerns—its strategic relationships with the major-power United States and smaller-power Sri Lanka at pivotal moments, its long-term nuclear strategy, and its patchy record on protecting Indian citizens from cross-border terrorism—form the empirical substrate of the book. Basrur's focus on the domestic determinants of policy drift in each of these cases positions *Subcontinental Drift* in productive company with a small, though growing, number of existing works that take seriously how India's domestic context gives rise to and shapes its foreign policies.

Policy drift is different, Basrur clarifies, from "policy paralysis" or purposelessness (p. 7). Where policy drifts, it has a direction but does not travel or travels only in a slow or meandering fashion. This is a weighty clarification to make: Are perceptions of Indian foreign policy ambivalence

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<sup>4</sup> Milan Vaishnav, "Is India's Rise Inevitable? The Roots of New Delhi's Dysfunction," *Foreign Affairs*, April 14, 2023 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/indias-rise-inevitable>; and John McCarthy, "India Doesn't Share Our World View," *Australian Financial Review*, May 21, 2023 ~ <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/india-doesn-t-share-our-world-view-20230516-p5d8r8>.

both within and outside India better explained by policy drift by than policy preference? For example, does policy drift help us understand the Indian government's ambivalent response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine or the executive's evasiveness around China's territorial gains at the shared border since 2020? If such questions are better explained by policy drift, it would mean that policymakers wished for different outcomes but were unable to deliver them. This would run against recent foreign ministerial claims around India's intentional hedging strategy and self-described skill at having "many balls up in the air at the same time."<sup>5</sup> It would also temper expectations of what will eventually emerge from the valorized and supposedly new foreign policy traits of "risk taking" and "big calls" in the Modi era.<sup>6</sup>

Equally valuable is Basrur's distinction between two modes of policy drift. Drift is either "involuntary" in nature, whereby the distribution of domestic political power impedes executive control over policymaking, or "voluntary," whereby decision-makers are able but unwilling to exercise responsibility (pp. 8–10). The difference flows from one of the author's chief theoretical innovations in the book: he engages not just with the material but also with the "normative" dimensions of domestic drift (p. 38). As a result, the analysis reaches beyond structure to permit an interrogation of the agency of Indian state actors, and attributes suboptimal policy in certain cases to their "failure to exercise responsibility" (p. 28).

Since the first two of four case studies in the book focus on policy developments during India's era of coalition politics,<sup>7</sup> prior to the return of a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) in 2014, it would be easy to conclude that the era of involuntary policy drift is over, further bolstering government claims of a newfound capacity to make decisive policy choices. But the book's second two empirical studies carefully demonstrate how voluntary drift persists to the present day: there is clearly more at play than the presence or absence of coalition governments. India's nuclear strategy, Basrur argues, has been plagued by "the political leadership's reluctance to exercise its responsibility for optimizing a strategy that was always under its control" (p. 183), while in the case of cross-border

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<sup>5</sup> Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, "External Affairs Minister's Speech at the 4th Ramnath Goenka Lecture, 2019," Ministry of External Affairs (India), Media Center, November 14, 2019 ~ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32038>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Yogendra Yadav, "Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989–99," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 34/35 (1999): 2393–99.



terrorism emanating from Pakistan, “policymakers repeatedly failed to put a recharged policy fully in place and to hold those responsible for its recurring setbacks accountable” (p. 184). These “ethical failings,” as Basrur terms them, are sustained, and—in these two cases—stem from an entrenched responsibility deficit that supersedes the distribution of domestic political power and operates consistently despite the respective low and high policy salience of nuclear and counterterrorism strategies.

These powerful insights and the potential wider application of policy drift analysis to other cases underscore the value of this volume for policymakers, analysts, and scholars. Moreover, Basrur’s judicious mapping of the four empirical case studies offers the student of India’s foreign policy capsule lessons on a spectrum of “deficient” cases—not usually the fodder for foreign policy analysis. The book equally serves as a springboard for further research, with two areas of particular note.

First, *Subcontinental Drift* brackets questions of domestic policy preference formation in relation to national security, reading these as “in tune with standard realist expectations” (p. 21) both in theory and in empirical explication. Yet a deeper interrogation of Indian foreign policy actors’ initial policy intentions—the directions in which policies struggle to travel—would be valuable across all four cases. “Standard realist expectations” are neither natural nor neutral but socially contingent. For example, as Basrur makes clear, they have a strong moral content (p. 23). Claims to a superior morality in Indian foreign policy are longstanding as well as evolving.<sup>8</sup> We might, therefore, find important, politicized divergences from, as well as convergences with, the moral imperatives of so-called realist foreign policy responses. Certainly, Basrur is correct to claim that realism is “back” in some sense, as great-power competition resurges and whatever consensus there was around the post-1945 liberal international order declines. But the role of ideas is more, not less, important in these times of flux: processes of identity-construction and recognition come to the fore during periods of order transition as states and actors engage in struggles over which identities and actions will emerge as legitimate.<sup>9</sup> How is this ideational flux shaping domestic policy formation in the Indian context?

Second, and relatedly, a future study or review essay might examine how *Subcontinental Drift*’s “neoclassical realism-plus” framework works

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Mawdsley, “Introduction: India as a ‘Civilizational State’” in “India as a ‘Civilizational State,’” special section, *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 427–32.

<sup>9</sup> Michael C. Williams and Iver B. Neumann, “From Alliance to Security Community: NATO, Russia, and the Power of Identity,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 357–87.

together with or against a new wave of research that draws international social factors into the study of Indian foreign policy. Illuminating works on India's stigmatization in the global nuclear order, for example, both reveal how important normative imperatives emerge from that order's socially hierarchical nature and examine India's creative policy responses.<sup>10</sup> Work on the international social dimensions of global nuclear responsibilities is of particular relevance for understanding what produces the fascinating tension between India's minimalist and maximalist position on nuclear strategy examined in *Subcontinental Drift's* fourth chapter. Minimalism seems likely born of efforts to differentiate India's nuclear weaponization from that of "immoral," arms-racing Cold War superpowers, while maximalism may stem from a conformist imperative for India's nuclear weapons program to compare favorably to the techno-rationalist "achievements" of powerful and high-status nuclear-armed states.<sup>11</sup>

*Subcontinental Drift's* curiosity about why things go awry in India's foreign policy should be infectious to both international observers and to an Indian citizenry who stands to bear many of the costs of policy drift. Moreover, Basrur's subtle clarification that a strong executive backed by a parliamentary majority is insufficient to overcome a deep-seated responsibility deficit in key policy areas is important for observers who seek to peer under the veneer of Indian foreign policymakers' new discursive stridency. Crucially, policy drift is by no stretch an Indian phenomenon, and lessons for "policies in other states, both large and small" can and should be drawn from this work (p. 197). Basrur's great gift through *Subcontinental Drift* is to highlight that the implementation of foreign policy matters as much as its formation. For those states gambling on their bilateral relationships with India in the current geopolitical moment, this insight must apply not only to their calculations about India's foreign policy directions but also to calculations about their own. ♦

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Smetana, "(De-)stigmatising the Outsider: Nuclear-Armed India, United States, and the Global Nonproliferation Order," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23, no. 3 (2020): 535–58; and Aniruddha Saha, "Nuclear Stigma and Deviance in Global Governance: A New Research Agenda," *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2022) ~ <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac055>.

<sup>11</sup> Nicola Leveringhaus and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "Between Conformity and Innovation: China's and India's Quest for Status as Responsible Nuclear Powers," *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 482–503.

## Explaining Policy Drift—An Analytical Template Drawn from the World’s Most Populous Democracy

*Jivanta Schottli*

**S***ubcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India’s Foreign Policy* was written in response to what Rajesh Basrur describes as three tensions: “a desire to investigate the contradiction between India’s quest for power and status and the limitations of its policies and policymakers”; “the gulf between studies on India’s external relationships and cutting-edge theory”; and “the materialist/normative divide in academia” (p. xi–xii). Basrur, drawing on an illustrious and unique career that has bridged area studies and international relations theory, is eminently well placed to address all three. He delivers empirically rich chapters, an elegant theoretical argumentation, and a clear message.

### *Situating the Gap between Objectives and Outcomes*

The book frames its central question as “why policymakers, consciously responding to systemic incentives, often find their policy initiatives caught up in prolonged and meandering pathways in trying to attain their objectives” (p. 2). The gap between objectives or intent and subsequent diversionary processes is what Basrur refers to as the phenomenon of “policy drift.” In framing its question thusly, the book addresses two long-running debates. Scholars have engaged in ongoing discussions about the particularities of India’s emergence as a power, puzzling over the slow or gradualist path the country has taken, the purposefulness and intent behind policy choices, and the strategic thinking of the country’s policymakers. At the same time, the book’s central question confronts a deep ontological challenge of how to overcome the external-internal distinction that is so often drawn within and between the disciplines of international relations and politics and in the categories of agency and structure.

Drawing on neoclassical realism, Basrur analyzes instances where Indian foreign policy outcomes have deviated from realist expectations—not those of theorists, he is careful to point out, but of policymakers. In other words, he demonstrates how policymakers have responded clearly to systemic

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JIVANTA SCHOTTLI is Assistant Professor in Indian Politics and Foreign Policy at Dublin City University (Ireland), where she is also Director of the Ireland India Institute. Her research focuses on institutions and policymaking in India, with an emphasis on maritime policy and the Indo-Pacific. She can be reached at <jivanta.schottli@dcu.ie>.

incentives, broadly defined as the power differentials between states. This is the case for India, for instance, when opting to improve relations with the United States as a result of the recalibrations caused by the end of the Cold War, in the effort to rebuild relations with Sri Lanka following India's "intervention" in the country's civil war, in the long-postponed decision to go overtly nuclear in 1998, and in efforts to manage cross-border threats from neighboring Pakistan. Explaining why these policy shifts took place when they did, and the ways in which implementation was subsequently hampered by domestic politics, is a major part of the book's analysis.

However, Basrur seeks to do much more than describe or explain what happened in the past. The additional objective of integrating a moral dimension into the analysis by highlighting the question of responsibility adds a layer of complexity that is thought-provoking but which also leads to several further questions.

### *What Is the Moral of the Story?*

At the end of the book, Basrur claims that his analytical framework, when applied to cases of Indian policy drift, highlights and integrates both material and nonmaterial factors into an explanation for why suboptimal outcomes occur and persist. He uses the categories of "involuntary" and "voluntary" policy drift to capture the extent to which material and nonmaterial factors play a role. In the case of involuntary drift, material constraints play a central role, defined largely as the control that decision-makers have over their policy environment. This is relatively easier to pinpoint, for instance, in the number of parliamentary seats the governing party holds and the extent to which it may be beholden to coalition partners. What is less clear are the nonmaterial factors that account for what Basrur describes as "the abdication of responsibility" (p. 196). His identified nonmaterial factors include a lack of epistemic rigor and knowledge among the civilian leadership on the issue of nuclear strategy, evidence of leadership incompetence, and sustained neglect across central and state governments to develop a robust security infrastructure and effective policies to prevent and deter terrorist attacks.

By foregrounding policymakers and attributing to them a moral responsibility, Basrur is offering a way around the criticism often levied at "big theory," that it applies arbitrary, artificial, or (even worse) Eurocentric standards of what constitutes "the norm." In the analytical framework presented in the book, the actor sets the standard against which the course

of action and deviation is to be measured. Perhaps there would have been more scope for exploring the role of the individual—to what extent does the leader and leadership matter? On many occasions, Basrur uses a cost-benefit analysis as the reason for either action or inertia. Depending on whether the costs outweigh the benefits, either action or inaction can become more attractive to the policymaker. From the analysis offered, Basrur seems to be advocating a need for more principled leadership, a more rigorous system of accountability, and a more discerning public that is alert and willing to hold its policymakers responsible. In the case of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, there is in some ways a collective abdication of responsibility, given the public's failure to hold policymakers to task for the lapses in security both in the lead-up to and during the attacks.

Another important objective Basrur articulates in the first chapter is the effort to go beyond addressing anomalies and puzzles to develop a theory with broader explanatory power. While he does draw out system-level implications and structural insights from an analysis that examines policy-level variables, it remains unclear how prevalent policy drift is as a phenomenon. There is also the issue of scale and how to measure or compare the consequences and costs of policy drift. In the two cases of “responsibility abdication”—India's muddled nuclear strategy and the lack of preparation for, and botched response to, the Mumbai terrorist attacks—the costs have been very high for the country but remain extremely difficult to quantify. The implications of policy drift could also lay dormant, brought to the fore by a crisis or an unexpected development. For instance, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement succeeded in ending sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, but critics argue that not enough has been done to encourage and sustain intercommunity cooperation. Brexit and its unexpected aftermath exposed what many have described as a gradual decay in institutions and mechanisms that were meant to guarantee representation and consultation across the communities.

Returning to India, one is left wondering if Basrur's analysis simply confirms the pathologies in Indian foreign policy, adding to the list endemic failures of governance and severe shortfalls in moral leadership. This would make for grim reading. There are those cases where Basrur admits that external dynamics have more to blame for choices taken or not taken. For example, he implies a strategy of prudence on the international stage has delivered policy payoffs rather than policy drift. However, this “prudent reluctance” (p. 191), which Basrur in part recognizes as a realist reading of external constraints and dynamics, is also attributed to something

inherently cultural/societal: an embedded mindset toward status and upward mobility. It is not clear if this societal feature also explains the larger problem of abdication of responsibility in policymaking. Several further questions remain: when and how to know if policy drift is happening and how bad it is, how to pinpoint its origins, and how to separate one area of policy drift from the negotiations and bargaining that were happening at the same time. The chapters on nuclear strategy and the Mumbai terror attacks chart decades of policy drift, carrying over legacies and path dependencies that could be traced to the 1950s.

*Subcontinental Drift* provides much food for thought. Basrur has reminded us of the very real consequences that abstract strategy and leadership can have in causing and averting the loss of life. Understanding the constraints, control over, and consequences of policymakers' choices in the world's fifth-largest economy is a must for anyone trying to address global challenges. Basrur's book is a template for analyzing policymaking in the world's most populous democracy. ♦

## Essence of Indecision: Understanding Indian Security Policy Choices

*Frank O'Donnell*

As India's decisions become more consequential to global politics, understanding the influences behind them is increasingly crucial for scholars, policy experts, and world political leaders. Rajesh Basrur's new book, *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*, deftly explains the interplay of India's internal politics, external environment, and policymaker preference hierarchies to offer a persuasive theory of Indian decision-making on foreign and defense policy. Importantly, the book includes case selections that encompass security policy decisions made not only during the current government led by Narendra Modi, which began in 2014, but also during the previous several decades. As such, this book is highly recommended for both scholars and relative newcomers to the topics of South Asia studies, rising powers, and international security.

As befits one of the most thoughtful scholars of India's security policies, Basrur eloquently engages with existing theoretical schools of international relations and their explanations of Indian external conduct. He develops the neoclassical realist paradigm as a theory more permissive of domestic political explanations than the external systemic focus of structural realism. The author modifies this paradigm to introduce an analytic tool of evaluating whether policymakers make the necessary decisions within their power to protect citizens. This test inherently draws upon realist thought, dating back to Kautilya and Machiavelli, that the primary—and moral—obligation of leaders is to protect their subjects. As Basrur powerfully argues, locating responsibility for state failures in this regard is crucial not just for better policymaking but for theoretical development in bridging the “materialist/normative divide in academia,” as “in important respects, the moral *is* the empirical when accountability is neglected in making policy” (p. xii).

Democratic leaders cannot control all elements of their domestic political context and have even less influence over often fast-moving developments in regional and international politics. Reflecting this reality,

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**FRANK O'DONNELL** is a Nonresident Fellow in the Stimson Center South Asia Program (United States) and a Senior Research Adviser in the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. He can be reached at <fodonnell@stimson.org>.

Basrur conceptualizes the distinct categories of involuntary and voluntary drift (pp. 9–10) to explain why “uncertainty and indecisiveness have periodically afflicted India’s foreign policy in areas of critical importance to its national security” (pp. 1–2). Involuntary drift occurs when leaders cannot implement effective policy due to players with domestic veto power. In the two cases of involuntary drift exemplified in negotiating the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement (2005–8) and Indian policy toward the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009), these veto players were Indian political parties opposed to the prime minister’s preferred course of action. The parliamentary fragility of coalition governments meant that these parties were able to variably block, water down, or delay the execution of policy responses. Importantly, Basrur notes that the initial preferred policies of decision-makers were “system-driven,” and would be recognized by structural realists as judicious initiatives to improve or stabilize India’s international power position.

The U.S.-India civil nuclear deal has been extensively covered in extant literature on contemporary Indian foreign policy, which has also established that the parliamentary opposition of both the opportunistic Bharatiya Janata Party and the anti-American Communist Party of India (Marxist) was the major cause of delays to India’s approval of the deal. However, the Sri Lankan case study offers a rare cogent yet nuanced account of Indian policy toward each phase of the civil war, and how shifting domestic political forces in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu complicated India’s response. The book demonstrates how India’s hesitant and halting support for the Sri Lankan government, especially in the latter stages of the war, created room for China to fill this space and establish a strategic foothold in Colombo, which it continues to enjoy today. Ineffective Indian policies have therefore led to negative systemic consequences for New Delhi in its broader geopolitical competition with Beijing.

The second part of the book examines cases of voluntary drift, where decision-makers face little or no meaningful domestic political constraints on their ability to devise and implement their preferred policies. Policy drift here occurs when leaders still “choose options that avoid difficult and costly action, in part because the political cost of inadequate action is not severe, and sometimes because responsibility for a lack of decisive action can be transferred to other agents” (p. 10). The author focuses on two cases of such drift—nuclear strategy and counterterrorism policy—noting that Indian leaders tend to enjoy more structural freedom from domestic political constraints on these sensitive issues. Basrur is careful to include examples of voluntary drift under previous Congress-led and BJP-



led governments to underline that it is a feature of Indian policymaking regardless of the stripe of leader.

The current Modi government exhibits a personalized, hegemonic authority over Indian politics, institutions, and media that appears to be only strengthening at the time of this writing in the summer of 2023. As Modi enjoys more control over domestic, foreign, and security policies than any prime minister since Indira Gandhi, this voluntary drift section of the book is most pertinent to understanding Indian security policy dilemmas into at least the near future and should accordingly draw special attention from readers. Inadequate or nonexistent policy solutions to security problems that India faces form a “responsibility deficit” (p. 10), in that Modi and his small circle of security policy advisors are not acting in a manner consistent with their responsibility to protect their citizens. Nor have they demonstrated an acceptance of accountability for their decisions because they operate within a political system largely devoid of meaningful checks and balances.

The counterterrorism chapter includes a detailed review of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, reprising the failures in multiple levels of intelligence, security force capacity and readiness, political decision-making, and policy coordination that enabled the Pakistan-sponsored terrorists to launch and continue their horrific killing spree for as long as they did. The halfhearted and insufficient nature of domestic security reforms before and after the attacks underlies a grave failure measured in lives. However, Basrur astutely highlights a dichotomy in India’s counterterrorism policy that is too rarely explored in the literature: Indian policymakers have largely avoided addressing the understaffing, inadequate training, poor intelligence sharing, and corruption in the central and state law-enforcement systems as well as similar manpower and intelligence-sharing issues in the armed forces. Strengthening India’s domestic security forces would prevent more terrorist attacks and limit the damage caused by those that succeed. Instead, New Delhi prefers to frame its counterterrorism approach as solely an external policy concern and develops extensive diplomatic and military initiatives to attempt to coerce Islamabad to stop hosting terrorist actors on Pakistani soil.

This is counterproductive for Indian security, as diplomatic and military coercion only motivates Pakistan to expand its nuclear forces and retain a level of support for anti-India terrorists as another tool in its defense. It also consumes bandwidth from India’s understaffed Ministry of External Affairs, especially in prioritizing the pursuit of international

condemnations of Pakistan at multilateral forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and others over more achievable and necessary development cooperation initiatives. Modi's emphasis on the need to condemn and isolate Pakistan in every BRICS bilateral and group meeting, as he reportedly did in the annual BRICS summit hosted by India in 2016, is not an effective substitute for the abovementioned domestic resilience measures. Nor does it advance India's desired image as a rising power and one that no longer should be "hyphenated" with Pakistan in understanding its impacts on global politics.

The nuclear strategy chapter (chapter 4) is in many ways a welcome update of Basrur's authoritative book *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*.<sup>1</sup> The chapter revisits the Wohlstetter-Blackett debate, which sets out the two schools of maximalism and minimalism regarding the force and doctrinal requirements to establish nuclear deterrence. This reviewer has found Basrur's account of this debate invaluable as a teaching tool to engage new students in the field. Importantly, the chapter contends that many of the Indian doctrinal and posturing shifts we have seen since 1998—moving gradually toward maximalist school tenets of a larger, more diversified force and a potentially more flexible policy on nuclear use—are the result of policymaker inattention to nuclear issues. This inattention extends to a lack of curiosity or interest in understanding how conventional and nuclear doctrines interact, which prevents corrective policies that would impose restraints on nuclear force development and conditions of use. This may account for part of the story, but Basrur somewhat downplays the nationalist symbolic celebrations that Indian political leaders enjoy when announcing that India has fielded, for example, its first intercontinental ballistic missile or nuclear-armed submarine. Moreover, policymaker briefings to media on nuclear and missile programs are phrased in terms of demonstrating credible military resolve against China, a framing which diverts public attention from conventional weaknesses against China—or indeed the absence of a coherent China strategy.

New Delhi's response to the China challenge will, in large part, define India's rising power trajectory in the 21st century, and voluntary drift is becoming an entrenched habit of Modi's security policymaking. As such, a third voluntary drift chapter on India's response to the China's

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<sup>1</sup> Rajesh Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

incursions into Ladakh since 2020 would have added even more value to this work. Initial poor intelligence analysis and cross-verification enabled substantial numbers of Chinese forces to move to new positions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh in April 2020. From May 5–6, 2020, onward, Chinese troops swept in to occupy significant strategic tracts of Ladakh claimed by India. While quietly bolstering Indian positions to prevent further incursions, the Modi government has adopted near silence in public and in parliament on the matter, even to the extent of claiming that there have only been clashes “along” the LAC, therefore arguably accepting that China’s captured territory is the new de facto Sino-Indian boundary. Emboldened by this Indian attitude, People’s Liberation Army forces are now attempting similar incursions across the LAC. The signature “accountability deficit” of voluntary drift is highly pronounced here, in that the Modi government is trying to minimize the sense that there is any problem for which it should be held accountable.

*Subcontinental Drift* will have lasting value, especially in its crystallization of voluntary drift as a conceptual explanation for what appears to be a growing pattern in Indian security policy decisions. At the time of writing, Manipur—a state with critical proximity to China and described by an Indian official as “India’s main gateway to Southeast Asia”—has suffered a civil breakdown in basic law and order, with armed groups overrunning police stations.<sup>2</sup> The Indian Army’s 57th Mountain Division has been withdrawn from supporting India’s border defenses against China and deployed to Manipur instead, weakening New Delhi’s military position against Beijing. Modi and his home minister, Amit Shah, are resisting involvement in the crisis and instead adopting another policy of near silence to avoid responsibility for it. Unless India’s policymakers end this voluntary drift practice of refusing to make hard but necessary decisions and then fully implement them, India is more likely to suffer systemic consequences that complicate its global rise to power—and force even more difficult decisions on its leaders. ♦

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Sudha Ramachandran, “As Manipur Burns, India’s Connectivity Plans in Southeast Asia Go Up in Smoke,” *Diplomat*, July 27, 2023 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/as-manipur-burns-indias-connectivity-plans-in-southeast-asia-go-up-in-smoke>.

## Policy Drift as an Inevitability and an Occasional Success

Sameer Lalwani

As India rises in economic and geopolitical stature, it has sought to cultivate an image of a leading power with multialigned dexterity. In a year where India helms the G-20 presidency, champions the global South, caucuses with the G-7, assumes leadership roles in both the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Quad, and deepens strategic ties with the United States while steadily maintaining defense relations with Russia, one might ascribe Indian foreign policy with a Bismarckian level of skill and sophistication. And while this could be a reasonable assessment, Rajesh Basrur's thoroughly researched contribution to neoclassical realist theory, *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*, reveals serious shortcomings in Indian foreign policy over the past two decades of India's rise. He terms these faults "drift," and it is this Indian foreign policy drift—at times timidity, at times torpor—that Basrur seeks to critique and explain.

Briefly summarized, Basrur seeks to explain the dependent variable of India's foreign policy drift—the delta between New Delhi's stated foreign policy aims and its actual choices. Drift is characterized as indecisiveness and treated as generally, though not exclusively, suboptimal behavior. It fits well within similar research on puzzling state behavior such as "underbalancing" or neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

Basrur distinguishes drift from paralysis, noting that there is movement, but it is "erratic, slow, and uncertain" (p. 8). He contends there are two sources of drift. Involuntary drift is when domestic politics, specifically weak coalitions, hamstring leaders' autonomy to make bold, decisive moves for fear of small pockets of opposition pulling out of coalitions, which would result in government collapse. Voluntary drift, however, is perhaps Basrur's more novel contribution. Basrur contends voluntary drift occurs when a leader possesses sufficient control over policy but simply fails to execute it by avoiding costly choices or difficult tradeoffs and effectively deflects

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**SAMEER LALWANI** is a Senior Expert in the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace and a Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (United States). He can be reached at <slalwani@usip.org>.

<sup>1</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2006); and Dan Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliances, and World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

responsibility and accountability. Other strands of international relations scholarship might characterize this as poor leadership, whether the failing is a deficiency in charisma, confidence, acumen, or moral fiber.<sup>2</sup>

The book sets out to test his theory on four major but diverse episodes of Indian foreign policy: counterinsurgency, nuclear deterrence, internal security reforms, and geopolitical realignment. The episodes include India's nuclear deal with the United States (2005–2008), material support for the Sri Lanka's fight against the Tamil Tigers (2000–2009), nuclear doctrinal developments (1998–present), and contentions with cross-border terrorism (notably the 2008 Mumbai crisis). Even seasoned India foreign policy scholars well versed in these episodes can discover new details in Basrur's thoroughly researched empirical chapters, buttressed by 48 pages of bibliography.

Basrur deserves credit not only for his rich empirical treatments but also for exploring some of the most consequential episodes in post–Cold War Indian foreign policy, despite some incongruity in each episode's duration, which varies from days (e.g., the Mumbai attack) to decades (e.g., nuclear doctrine deliberations). These cases track neatly with almost all the chapters in former Indian national security adviser Shivshankar Menon's policy memoir, which expertly illuminates many of the convoluted mechanics of India's foreign policy decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Because India has been led by a hegemonic political party and strong leader for almost a decade, its coalitional power sharing and the contentious federal politics that shaped its three-decade rise since the 1980s are sometimes obscured or forgotten. Many of the chapters in Basrur's book showcase the dynamics of India's intrastate bargaining with expert scientific communities, technical bureaucracies (like the Atomic Energy Commission), a sprawling network of national security and intelligence agencies, and rivalries between state-level regional parties shaping national-level coalition politics and thus constraining executive decision-making. It is not impossible to imagine the return of coalition politics hamstringing Indian foreign policy ambitions in the future.

Another strength of the book is Basrur's employment of diverse empirical methods. Given the inaccessibility of classified government documents, the chapter on nuclear strategy makes smart use of the writings

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 107–46.

<sup>3</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

of several former civilian and military officials to code their implicit nuclear deterrence views along the spectrum from minimalism to maximalism. In the case of cross-border terrorism and the Mumbai attacks, he creatively employs Robert Gregory's "backward-mapping and forward-mapping" (p. 26) to account for responsibility of the policy failures. The chapters on the India-U.S. nuclear agreement and Sri Lanka's civil war employ more traditional qualitative and process-tracing methods to stitch a thorough play-by-play of these two episodes.

Without depreciating the quality of this research, it's worth noting some quibbles with the research design, measurement, and dependent variable that might help to inform future efforts building off Basrur's work. One such quibble in the research design is that all four cases are coded as drift without sampling any opposing cases of persistence. This "selection on the dependent variable" is not just a concern in principle but actually deprives the reader of the full range of Indian foreign policy behavior that includes decisive successes, which would help illuminate contrasting drift.<sup>4</sup> We know the author believes variation exists because he rules out strategic culture explanations based on periods when India was "performing with unprecedented success" (p. 182). The lack of a baseline or divergent case of comparison confounds our evaluation of the explanation if the independent variables that account for drift—contentious coalitional politics and moral irresponsibility—are also active in moments of success. To rule out such a possibility requires at least some variation on the dependent variable: some cases of non-drift that are characterized as policy successes, effectiveness, or steadfastness. In fact, the India-U.S. nuclear agreement case could easily have been coded as steadfastness or success with much of the same evidence.

A second quibble is with the characterization and measurement of the dependent variable itself. The vagueness of drift yields inconsistent forms of measurement. Throughout the book, the concept seems a bit malleable, being characterized in different chapters as: policy delays (e.g., during the India-U.S. nuclear agreement), policy shortcomings (e.g., military assistance to Sri Lanka that failed to keep China "at bay" (p. 192) or "offset China's financial advantage" (p. 105)), policy incoherence (e.g., declared minimalist nuclear doctrine incommensurate with robust nuclear capabilities), and inconsistent implementation (e.g., incomplete internal security reforms). This is important because each of these coding decisions could be true and

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Geddes, "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics," *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131.

yet still be consistent with an eventual foreign policy success. A nuclear deal eventually ratified could unlock a host of partnership opportunities. Discrete military assistance could still generate goodwill to counter China's eventual overreaches. A heterodox nuclear posture could hedge against future risk (as most nuclear powers have embraced) while being perceived as responsible and unthreatening. And even inconsistent reforms can still accompany a secular decline in terrorist violence across the country.

A third quibble is whether drift really should be this book's central variable of interest. Drift as a concept seems a common part of governance, akin to Weber's maxim that "politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards," and more likely if the external threat environment is modest relative to pressing internal challenges.<sup>5</sup> For a country like India, beset by urgent developmental and poverty challenges, geographically safeguarded by natural geographic defenses of oceans and high mountain ranges, and neighboring much weaker, fractious neighbors, one should expect foreign policy drift. The major foreign policy pursuits Basur studies—geopolitical realignment, counterinsurgency success, and efficient nuclear strategy—are often difficult, incomplete, and unlikely even under the best conditions. For perspective, note how often contemporary U.S. policymakers analogize U.S. foreign policy efforts to the tediously slow turning around of an aircraft carrier.<sup>6</sup> Given this, drift is likely to appear ubiquitous and overdetermined due to factors at all levels of analysis as Basur points out—structural, domestic political, and individual.

Another fruitful approach to the questions of interest might be to treat drift as the baseline expectation and seek to explain deviations from drift. If drift is the modal persistent condition (such as organizational pathologies or anarchy), then perhaps the more interesting dependent variable is when states break from and overcome organizational pathologies or when cooperation forms despite conditions of anarchy.<sup>7</sup> Drawing once again from Basur's empirical account, that the India-U.S. nuclear deal was successfully negotiated and ratified while overcoming all manner of bureaucratic and coalitional skullduggery is a surprising outcome worthy

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," as reprinted in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>6</sup> Antony J. Blinken, "Virtual Remarks on 21st Century Diplomacy and Global Challenges, the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan," U.S. Department of State, April 14, 2022 ~ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-virtual-remarks-on-21st-century-diplomacy-and-global-challenges-the-gerald-r-ford-school-of-public-policy-at-the-university-of-michigan>.

<sup>7</sup> Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy," *World Politics*, 38, no. 1 (1985): 1–24.

of explanation. Inverting drift as the baseline expectation rather than a deviation would still allow the argument to build on neoclassical realism as a “Type II” theory (pp. 14–15) that explains broader state choices rather than departures from realism.

Despite these minor quibbles, *Subcontinental Drift* is an engaging and thought-provoking read. Some arguments, particularly on moral responsibility, may challenge traditional social scientists’ inclinations. However, the book imparts invaluable insights and extensions for policymakers and students of geopolitics on the most crucial episodes of Indian foreign policy during the country’s rise over the past two decades. An enterprising scholar might seek to apply Basrur’s framework to India’s contemporary China challenge to examine whether drift or decisiveness characterizes its territorial disputes and security dealings with the People’s Liberation Army and whether this is accounted for by domestic politics, leadership choices, or another variable.

*Subcontinental Drift* also deserves a final recognition for offering a theoretically driven deep dive into the foreign policy behavior of a non-Western power to uncover general findings for international relations scholarship. An open secret of the international relations discipline is that most realist theories derive from fairly limited and selective empirics of European history, much to the neglect of Asia.<sup>8</sup> Studies of British or U.S. foreign policy often masquerade as big theory, while the geopolitical maneuvering of non-Western states is relegated to comparative foreign policy. This attention deficit is not merely a critique of inclusion but of accuracy—undersampling Asian national security and foreign policy behavior may profoundly bias our understanding of states’ average or modal behavior, such as balancing or arms racing. This becomes more conspicuous and problematic today as the locus of geopolitical contestation shifts to Asia and the Indo-Pacific. It is in this context then that Basrur’s ambitious new book building out neoclassical realist theory through Indian foreign policy empirics provides a refreshing contribution to the literature. ◆

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<sup>8</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “What (If Anything) Does East Asia Tell Us about International Relations Theory?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 53–78; and David C. Kang and Alex Yu-Ting Lin, “U.S. Bias in the Study of Asian Security: Using Europe to Study Asia,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 393–401.



## Author's Response: Indian Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy— Refining Neoclassical Realism

*Rajesh Basrur*

The responses to *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy* by the five reviewers in this roundtable (Ian Hall, Kate Sullivan de Estrada, Jivanta Schottli, Frank O'Donnell, and Sameer Lalwani) have been thought-provoking and have opened up several lines of refinement and inquiry. Additionally, my own reflections on the book several months after publication have led me to ponder its findings as well as the potential avenues it might open up for further research. Let me begin by responding to some critical comments.

On the whole, while raising astute questions about the book, all the reviewers were positive about its contribution to the literature, noting the study's theoretical strengths, empirical grounding, and focus on a geopolitical context that has not received much theoretical attention in the global international relations literature. The reviewers have made searching comments and suggestions to consider, however. Criticism is essential to moving the intellectual enterprise forward, and I attempt—I daresay all too briefly—to engage with it. If the reviewer's task is fundamentally to help refine a line of thinking, they have all accomplished it.

Hall touches on a vital point in his observation that the distinction between “involuntary” and “voluntary” drift is too sharp given that the reality is more nuanced. In the case of the India-U.S. nuclear deal, he correctly notes that despite the problem of structurally produced delay, the ultimate outcome was shaped by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's ability to override the limitations of his coalition and push through the Indian side of the deal. I may just say that this is a point I made myself in acknowledging that “the material distribution of power is not in itself the only arbiter of outcomes” and that there is also “the vital importance of commitment,” which is a nonmaterial factor (p. 71). But there is certainly scope for a more nuanced approach that makes the point more generally with respect to other cases. I am glad Hall has drawn attention to this as it provides the

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**RAJESH BASRUR** is an independent scholar based in Mumbai, India. He holds an Adjunct Professorship with the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University in Australia and a Senior Research Associateship with the South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at <rmbasrur@hotmail.com>.

reader with a clearer sense of how the analytical framework employed in the book might be strengthened.

Sullivan de Estrada usefully focuses on the importance of recognizing policy content as a possible factor producing drift. For instance, Indian policy on Russia's actions in Ukraine has clearly been awkward (though not novel if one looks back at Indira Gandhi's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–80 or even earlier cases). This uncertainty is the consequence of policymakers in New Delhi finding themselves caught between conflicting pressures that are structural (the changing power distribution in global politics) as well as domestically driven (the preference for maximizing policy autonomy by spreading India's strategic bets and establishing linkages with both the United States and Russia). Alternatively, policy uncertainty may be attributed to conflicting "normative imperatives"—a point that is applicable to the confusion in Indian nuclear strategy, which has been caught between the opposite ideational pressures of Gandhian morality and the realist imperative of acquiring stronger deterrence capability. To the extent that this has led to muddled thinking among Indian strategists, it is a valid point. I would nevertheless assert that the fundamental source of voluntary drift in this latter case is policymakers' neglect of the basics of nuclear weapons strategy and their failure to engage with these cross-cutting pressures. Still, Sullivan de Estrada is right in pointing out that ideational factors play an important part in shaping policy, and this is an aspect to which scholars should pay close attention.


Schottli raises a pertinent question: To what extent does leadership shape deviation from initial policymaking expectations? I pointed in this direction in both cases of voluntary drift: leadership failings have produced inadequacies in nuclear strategy and counterterrorism, but I highlighted the responsibility of strategic elites in the former case and the public at large in the latter. Nevertheless, the question of relative significance calls for a deeper exploration that assesses the degree of responsibility attributable to different types of actors. This is something that awaits closer investigation. Schottli also asks "when and how to know if policy drift is happening and how bad it is, how to pinpoint its origins, and how to separate one area of policy drift from the negotiations and bargaining that were happening at the same time." This is a valid criticism that calls for detailed study, one which scholars could usefully follow up on.

O'Donnell's critique offers an important suggestion: that a separate chapter on India's neglect of the threat from China and New Delhi's inadequate preparation to counter it would have made a

worthwhile addition.<sup>1</sup> From a realist standpoint, the rise of—and consequent threat from—China has been a very visible phenomenon, but the Indian response to it has been slow. This applies to all Indian leaderships and elites since independence and clearly requires a thorough and detailed analysis. In my book, I touched on China’s role as a systemic source of uncertainty and drift in the relationship. It would have been interesting to examine the India-China case at greater length in parallel with my analysis in chapter 5, where I highlight India’s neglect of the domestic dimension of its cross-border problem. In my defense, I would put in a caveat: all the cases in the book examine drift as deviation from policymakers’ own preferences, so the India-China case would not have been a good fit since the real problem was Indian policymakers’ underestimation of the threat in the first place. Still, O’Donnell’s argument is a valuable one that needs to be, and can be, addressed from within a Type I neoclassical realist framework.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Lalwani makes some significant points that are weightier than what he modestly calls “quibbles.” One is that drift is imprecise as it is something of an umbrella concept that covers, among other things, “policy shortcomings,” “policy incoherence,” and “inconsistent implementation.” This is true enough, and it complements Schottli’s observations, but my main purpose was to explain the occurrence of policy drift as a broad phenomenon, defined by me as “a policy process that is neither wholly purposeful nor wholly aimless, but rather movement that is initiated purposefully but is greatly impeded by intervening factors” (p. 8). The book is about deviation from policymakers’ own expectations (in terms of outcomes) and, by inference, the consequence of this deviation, not about the classes of deviation, which is an aspect open to further exploration. Lalwani also argues that a “more interesting” approach would have been to assess how states do or do not override organizational pathologies. Perhaps. But the book is not about the larger question of the ability or failure of policymakers to overcome obstacles to policy. My (less ambitious) effort has been more basic: to highlight the material and moral sources of policy drift and thereby facilitate the type of analysis he advocates.

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<sup>1</sup> The point has certainly been made from time to time. On India’s 1962 defeat at the hands of China, see Sumit Ganguly and Manjeet S. Pardesi, “Explaining Sixty Years of India’s Foreign Policy,” *India Review* 8, no. 1 (2009): 7. For more recent failings, see Rahul Bedi, “India Has Known about the Chinese Threat in Ladakh for Years. So Why Are We Unprepared?” *Wire*, June 30, 2020  <https://thewire.in/security/india-china-lac-threat-prepared>.


<sup>2</sup> Type I neoclassical realism theories are ones that explain anomalies and puzzles where states do not adopt policies in sync with systemic incentives (p. 14). See also Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

That said, I must again acknowledge that all the reviews in this collection have brought layers of complexity to my approach and hopefully prolonged its life.

Looking back, I have questions of my own with regard to my analysis. First, is it seditious in abandoning the primacy of material explanations of social phenomena? From the standpoint of neoclassical realism, and indeed from that of the much-wider community of materialist scholars, the book may be viewed as subversive in attempting to weave structural factors and moral responsibility into a single analytical framework. But it is not really that. I made it a point in chapter 1 to engage with realist thought, particularly the work of Hans Morgenthau, and highlight the linkage between the moral imperative underlying realism and material reality. My position is, I think, defensible because I underscore the linkage between the material and the moral, especially where (in chapters 4 and 5) a recurrent responsibility deficit is itself a kind of material reality that undermines policy efficiency and contributes to suboptimal outcomes. The material and the moral are inseparably intertwined, and I hope that the study has helped transcend the artificial boundary between them. Admittedly, much remains to be done in clarifying the extent of the linkage.

A second query I have for myself—one that I hope will interest scholars in future—is: How might this analysis, which engages solely with Type I theories of neoclassical realism (deviation from policy aims), be applied to Type II (deviant as well as nondeviant cases) and Type III (systemic impact of the Type II cases) frameworks? This is too large a task for me to contemplate at this juncture. I will only say that while neoclassical realism specialists tend to view the three types in an evolutionary or at least linear perspective, I have tried to draw attention to the much wider ambit of Type I than was the case in earlier writings. In doing so, I have provided space for other scholars to look at the knock-on effects of my analysis with respect to the other two types. A variable mix of material and moral factors is a valid basis not only for explaining deviation from policy aims but also for understanding domestic sources of policy generally (Type II) and consequently for better comprehending the systemic impact of a process generated by the interaction of external and domestic drivers in producing systemic effects (Type III). The feedback effects of the latter on policymaking would shape further policy responses.

My wider objective, in this work and in other writings, has been to examine the validity of realism in the overarching scholarly enterprise of theorizing international relations. The persistence and complexity

of realist thought has long fascinated me.<sup>3</sup> I began my engagement with international relations theory in the heyday of Morgenthau and later Kenneth Waltz as a committed realist but was pushed by liberal and constructivist critiques to search for explanations of the theory's inconsistencies and omissions. This book represents my tentative striving toward a more synthetical approach. My future work, therefore, will not be a surprise to readers who have survived this one! 

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<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 287–304.

