

Review: Forged in Crisis: India and The United States Since 1947 by Rudra Chaudhuri IC Hurst & Co. December 2013

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Rudra Chaudhuri in his book re-tells the United States-India story while challenging the current accounts authored by both American and Indian writers. It looks at the question of the relationship between India and USA in the context of motivational factors of ideas and interests. It also highlights the crucial importance of elites and the bureaucrats in the formation of Indian foreign policy. The book maps out various periods of crisis which reveal the complex manner in which India has sought to pursue both material objectives and ideational values.

The research question is based on the interpretation of the US-India relationship on issues of strategic importance to both the countries. It also focuses on how India's continued refusal to align itself with either superpower in the era of Cold War and the later years masked the fact that India sought material interests and was successful in achieving them.

The author views the relationship from a realist-constructivist perspective. India as a country with regard to its foreign policy has repeatedly attained what it wanted from the USA without relinquishing its stance on non-alignment and has only focused on enhancing its military and economic power. USA realized the importance India held in terms of being a growing economy, having a strategic location, its entrepreneurial spirit and its well-established credentials as a democracy which continued to influence world politics. Chaudhuri points out that the relationship has evolved over the years due to mutual trust which these countries place in one another. This is evident from

“India’s relationship with the US has been the most comprehensive association the country has had since independence... India and the US had long engaged each other in a series of crises that gradually forged a deeper sense of each other’s motivations and aspirations ... both sides managed to remain sure-footed but resilient. This resilience was not assembled in a decade or two. It rested on the successes and failures of the past sixty years, programming a degree of trust and a sense of each other into a relationship that was in fact considerably more cooperative than otherwise believed. ... This is truly a relationship forged in crisis.

Qualitative sources of data have been used in the book with the author being the primary source of gathering information. He has used both historical narrative and contemporary sources of data. Primary source material was surveyed in three countries including the USA, India, and the UK. The author has used documents, declassified papers in archives and official publications. He has also collected data from sources such as Newspapers (The Times of India, The Hindu) and secondary source material such as memoirs and published diaries. Detailed interviews were conducted with politicians, Cabinet Ministers, retired Foreign Service and military personnel, former intelligence officials, journalists, think tanks and scholars.

Even though the author has tried to frame a complete picture of the relationship between two countries, it is tough to escape the subjectivity and personal agendas of the elites and bureaucrats who were interviewed for the book. The Publications and newspapers are also edited to serve the interests of the nation and might not necessarily be the reality.

The purpose of the book is simply told in chronological order and in the context of seven critical 'key turning points' in diplomacy that India has shared with the United States of America, where the Indian leaders proved that they would continuously adhere to their policy of non-alignment. The crisis selected for examination by the author are Indian food and arms scarcity in 1947-48, the Korean War, The Chinese Invasion , pressures on India to accommodate Pakistan on Kashmir after 1962, the Birth of Bangladesh and the US invasion of Iraq and the nuclear deal of 2005-8. Throughout the book, it is evident that while India has always treated the USA on an equal footing based on mutuality of interest, USA saw India as weak but was taken aback by its tough negotiating skills and the way it was convinced about its exceptionality and sovereignty.

The first part of the book looks at the early foundations of non-alignment and the practice of India as a decolonized nation and it stand to maintain its individuality. The non-alignment movement was not rooted in isolating the community according to Nehru. The key foreign policy was to communicate and maintain contact with all. The second part highlights the changes which came in Indian Foreign Policy. The author highlights the border case of 1962 between India and China which sowed the seeds of change between USA and India. Because America provided aid, the light in which the US was perceived changed and led to a deeper friendship between two countries. It changed the previous stance taken by the Prime Minister which said

“The prime minister had once boasted how seeking arms aid accounted to becoming a part of ‘someone else’s bloc’. He forcefully argued that ‘taking military help’ means ‘practically becoming aligned to that country’ ”

Rudra Chaudhuri also asserts that the period after 1947 till the liberalization was the lost half century because India ignored US food aid, the assistance for the green revolution and setting up of various IITs. In the lookout for being independent India refused help from IMF and IBRD as well. The support for Pakistan also did not prevent US and India from reaching a stronger depth of mutual understanding. The refusal to assist US invasion of Iraq, in the absence of an explicit UN mandate also did not affect India’s growing ties with the US.

The nuclear deal with the US did not “entrap India into a network of American alliances”. Between “independence and the material need to work more closely” with the US the Idea of “autonomy stood firm”.

The evidence and methodology adopted by the author seem correct as such data could not be obtained by quantitative methods. He has taken into account the narratives of all the people who could have influenced the relationship between two nations. A large number of other state actors have played a significant role in determining the relations such as China, The Soviet Union, and Pakistan. Both the countries need to maintain appropriate bilateral relationship and at the same time cannot afford to threaten their relations with other state and non-state actors.

The author concludes that India would never be an ally of the US, but Cooperation on a range of issues will continue and be strengthened in future. The relationship would never come to a point where the two countries can take it granted. Chaudhuri answers the research question and poses a new one that whether an alliance-like relationship between the United States and India would do any good for international politics given that India stays with an alternative set of arguments in an international system, where a number of social and economic factors pose challenges.