

## **Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in India**

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### **Topic and Contribution**

India is an increasingly pivotal player in international politics. Its growth over the last three decades has created one of the world's largest economies. Its strategic value as a partner against China has increased its importance to the United States and the West, but it seeks to simultaneously maintain strong ties with Russia and is developing its own relations with the Gulf states and Southeast Asia. India is also the world's largest electoral democracy. Its domestic politics are often highly competitive, with a democratic public that many suggest is increasingly attuned to international affairs. Indeed, militarized crises with Pakistan in 2019 and China starting in 2020 quickly entered in domestic politics, with the ruling party and opposition clashing over whether the government handled these incidents properly. India's international rise is a central issue in its domestic politics and political economy, and these domestic political tides will likely play a key role in determining India's choices on the international stage in the years to come.

Our manuscript uses decades of re-discovered survey data and a deep qualitative knowledge of key foreign policy crises and decision points to systematically explore and contextualize the structure of Indian public opinion toward major powers and important foreign policy issues over a period of seven decades. We blend modern social science methods and theory with an accessible but rigorous historical overview of India's foreign policy, especially its relations with the United States, China, and Russia/USSR. We cover a broad historical range, from the 1950s to the present, in ways that illuminate the connection between long-term trends and contemporary and future policy trajectories. Throughout, we link our findings to broader debates in IR research: this is a project about India, but in recurrent engagement with theories and evidence from other contexts.

The project thus aims to speak to both India-specific questions and general research on democracy, public opinion, and foreign policy, while attracting a diverse audience of academics, think-tankers and analysts, and interested members of the public in the US, India, and elsewhere. India has not received the same sustained attention in IR literature as China or the United States but there is growing demand among academic and policy audiences for rigorous research on Indian foreign policy and its link to domestic politics. Our manuscript would provide distinctive value-added for both India specialists, international relations generalists who want to learn about India, and readers interested in India as a potential partner to balance against a rising China. We discuss this potential audience in greater detail below.

### *Data and Evidence*

Our study builds on previous research focused on specific historical instances and issue areas where domestic politics and foreign policy interact in India. Among many, Sasikumar and Verniers (2013) study the curious case of the US-India nuclear deal, Raghavan (2010) highlights domestic pressures on Nehru before the 1962 war with China, Hymans (2006) ties domestic nationalist projects to nuclear proliferation, Gaikwad and Suryanarayan (2021) show that caste hierarchy shapes views of globalization, Blarel and van Willigen (2020) explore how public opinion is manifested through federalism, Ogden (2010) and Hall (2019) study the impact of Hindu nationalism on foreign policy, Plagemann and Destradi (2019) link populism to shifts in the making of India's foreign policy, and Narang and Staniland (2018) argue that "accountability environments" vary across governments and issues in India.

Despite clear interest in how domestic politics affect India's foreign policy, there is limited research on the role of public opinion. Some studies use elite surveys (Cortright and Mattoo, 1996; Ganguly et al., 2016), which are valuable, but likely do not reflect attitudes held by the general public. Prefiguring the trends we identify below, the most influential public opinion studies (Kapur 2009, 2015; Lalwani et al., 2022) find striking differences in response rates across different socioeconomic strata. Most major public opinion surveys recently conducted in India (like a series from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) include few foreign policy questions.

We deal with limitations by assembling a wide variety of survey data stretching back to the 1950s. Assembling this unparalleled range of public opinion data, which draws from over four dozen large surveys conducted in India across a span of sixty years, is one of our project's key contributions. The surveys include newly-recovered historical data from United States Information Agency (USIA)-funded polls as early as 1958, as well as modern, nationally diverse scientific surveys from Pew and Gallup in the 2010s. Together, they comprise the most comprehensive set of public opinion data on Indian foreign policy analyzed in the political science literature.

The USIA-funded Indian Institute of Public Opinion's (IIOPO) surveys between 1959-1988 covered views of foreign countries and, more irregularly, particular foreign policy issues. IIOPO surveys from this period provide uniquely consistent, longitudinal coverage of important issues like attitudes toward major powers. Exploring longitudinal change in opinion this period has previously been difficult because available data was often from one-shot studies, and the few consistent studies (like India's National Election Survey) did not usually cover foreign policy. The IIOPO surveys, especially the "International Images" series, are an important exception. International Images surveys were fielded annually or biannually, and focused mainly on international issues, especially respondents' views of foreign countries. While only top-line statistics are available for surveys in the 1950s and 1960s, we use the original, complete, punch-card-format data to conduct modern statistical analyses on IIOPO data starting from the early 1970s. IIOPO data are a product of their time. They do not follow 21<sup>st</sup> century sampling methods, for example, but we argue that historical polls provide not only provide extremely useful data context on attitudes about foreign policy in India, they provide the best opportunity for political scientists to study how Indian attitudes evolved during the Cold War.

Starting in the 2000s, we measure attitudes using modern scientific surveys. We focus on China-related questions in surveys by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) in 2006, Pew Global Attitudes in the 2010s, and Gallup World Polls from 2006-18. We also bring in more recent press surveys as relevant. These surveys more closely approximate national representation

in demographic and geographic terms. While they all ask key questions about attitudes toward major powers, question wording and covariate availability is less consistent than in IIOPO data—both between survey firms and over time within single firms. The higher quality methods, however, and availability of some of the data allow for much more sophisticated empirical analysis of the disaggregated determinants of attitudes.

We contextualize these data with rich qualitative descriptions of the key dynamics of India's foreign policy toward China, the United States, and Russia/USSR. These three relationships are central to contemporary Indian foreign policy, and of enormous importance to understanding today's international system, but this is not new: managing these three powers have been essential to Indian foreign policy since the 1950s. We provide an accessible overview of the wars, crises, and shifts in Indian foreign policy choices over the past 60 years, exploring when and how public opinion changed or remained constant around these key inflection points. The manuscript can serve a partial introduction to Indian foreign policy in general, as well as a more focused and specialized study of public opinion.

### *Connections to the Literature*

The proposed manuscript makes several analytical claims. First, it builds on the Hyde and Saunders (2020) “malleable constraints” and Narang and Staniland (2018) “accountability environment” frameworks. It argues that India is characterized by important variation in the issues that the public cares about, both by topic and over time. This means that there is varying space for political leaders to pursue different international strategies. For instance, the Indian public has been relatively sympathetic to the USSR/Russia since the first polls on the topic in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and this continues even into the present. This public sentiment helps us understand why the Modi government has faced little domestic criticism for its refusal to join American-led efforts to coerce Putin's Russia. Conversely, a deep skepticism of China can be found in the public going back to the 1962 war; while opinion slowly improved after the war, it has always been far lower than views of the US or Russia/USSR. Since the 2020 border crisis, latent hostility has resurfaced, creating domestic-political constraints on the government's ability to dramatically shift its China policy while the border dispute endures. Growing pro-American sentiment in recent decades has helped India move toward the West, and even perturbations over human rights, trade tension, and diplomatic clashes have not overcome this momentum. Yet this exists alongside pro-Russian sentiment, helping India occupy an unusual but domestically sustainable position of multi-alignment.

Second, we explore the impact of short-term shocks and crises. We use evidence from surveys conducted before and after short-duration foreign policy crises—mainly border clashes/crises with China—to evaluate the coherence, consistency, and sensitivity of the Indian public's attitudes about foreign policy. These analyses allow us to intervene in long-running debates about how well-formed and meaningful public opinion is when it comes to “hard” issues like foreign policy (Pollock et al., 1993). Most of the debate about whether ordinary voters hold coherent opinions that can create pressure for politicians is based on evidence from a few OECD countries, with little evidence from democracies in the global south. We show that the Indian public is “pretty prudent” (Jentelson, 1992) when it comes to the broad outlines of foreign policy. Attitudes toward major rivals and partners like China, Russia, and the United States are warmer when bi-lateral relations are good, and cooler when relations are bad. Evidence around major crises like the 1962 India-China war, for example, even suggests that attitudes are not wholly dependent on cues from political elites. In a time of single-party dominance in India's

parliament, public opinion on China diverged from the platform promoted by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and created pressure on his government. Though we show that the Indian public is forming reasonably coherent, meaningful attitudes about foreign policy as early as the 1960s, evidence from a series of smaller crises and “shocks” after the 1962 war give a sense of the limits of public attention. We use newly-recovered punch-card responses to IIOPO surveys in the 1980s and modern scientific polling in the 2010s to show that public opinion does not respond to small border clashes, even though experts at the time agreed those clashes had dangerous escalation potential. Indian voters are more attentive to foreign policy than some literature would lead us to expect, but their attention is not infinite.

Third, we search for key cleavages that structure opinion. Patterns in who voices opinions or not, and patterns in the content of those opinions have substantial distributional and democratic consequences in India, and interesting implications for an academic literature that has thus far focused on democratic publics in the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and Japan. India’s electorate is twice the size of these four electorates combined. First, while aggregate public opinion on foreign policy is reasonably coherent, many survey respondents decline to express opinions about foreign policy topics, and those who do respond are systematically more educated and wealthier. We argue that the size and relatively elite credentials of India’s “foreign policy public” raises questions about whether public opinion is a meaningful avenue for democratic accountability on foreign policy issues. Among those who do express opinions, about China for instance, we see strong and consistent patterns of variation built around region, and much less evidence that opinion cleavages are structured by partisan identity. This finding is an important contribution to the foreign policy opinion literature, because it does not appear in evidence from other contexts. We argue that the interplay of region, partisanship, and the socio-economic correlates of non-response contribute to a cautiously-optimistic outlook for accountability and democratic constraint in foreign policy issues.

## **Proposed Structure**

We are flexible about the ultimate structure of the manuscript and welcome feedback on it. Our current proposed framework is below.

### **1. The Public in Indian Foreign Policy**

This section situates India in the broader IR literature on democracy and foreign policy, discusses India-specific research on public opinion toward foreign affairs, and introduces a set of key themes and findings. We identify mechanisms through which Indian political elites can guide public opinion, as well as topics about which public opinion seems relatively stable and difficult for elites to easily change. This section also offers an accessible overview of key events in Indian foreign policy to orient the reader.

### **2. Data and Trends**

We outline the survey data we are using, their strengths and weaknesses, and provide a broad comparative overview of key trends in views of major powers (US, Russia/USSR, and China in particular) as well as, when possible, specific issues like nuclear proliferation.

### **3. Indian Views of China: War, Crises, and Rivalry**

This section begins with a wide-ranging summary of Indian views of China since the late 1950s, ranging from historical data during the Cold War to the most recent polls during and after the 2020 Galwan border clashes. It explores domestic determinants of these views, exploring the impact of partisanship, education, and region, among other

covariates, and then focuses on a set of specific crises to see how responsive Indian respondents have been to short-term shocks.

#### **4. The United States and India: A Tumultuous History**

We next turn to Indian opinion toward the United States and specific US foreign policies. The data show dramatic swings in Indian sentiment toward the US that broadly track major geopolitical trends, but that in some cases seem to precede actual Indian policy changes. We explore key correlates of these views, assessing similarities and differences with the China evidence in section 3.

#### **5. Understanding India-Russia Relations**

Section 5 delves into a relationship that is under-studied outside India, exploring how the Indian public has viewed Russia/USSR both during and after the Cold War. We striking trends in general favorability that persist into the present, even as Western opinion toward Russian has become increasingly negative. The Indian public, as well as Indian foreign policy in general, can simultaneously hold pro-Russian and pro-American views, a finding that is important for making sense of how the Global South is likely to navigate an era of renewed major power competition.

#### **6. Implications for Research and Policy**

This section has two key parts. The first takes stock of India's fit with the analytical frameworks introduced in Section 1. It argues that India can be productively studied using existing IR frameworks, but with a distinctive combination of domestic variables that make it quite different than many electoral democracies in the Global North. We suggest the possible range of cases that may look similar, including other middle/rising powers in the developing world like Indonesia, Turkey, and Brazil. We then explore what our findings suggest for understanding India's foreign policy now and in the future.

### **Audience**

There are several potential audiences for this manuscript. The first is IR scholars who either work on India or are interested in learning about Indian foreign policy. The project's combination of quantitative data and deep historical context from India with an interest in speaking to general IR questions seems like a good fit with this audience. We also anticipate that scholars of Indian domestic politics would be interested in the topic, given the prominent use of foreign policy as a campaign issue in Indian recent elections.

The second primary audience is the large, and growing (in fact, much more rapidly than in academia), group of think-tankers, policy analysts in government and the private sector, and journalists who are interested in the international relations of South Asia. Both of these audiences span the United States, Europe, and India, as well as other countries with strong scholarly and policy interest in India like Singapore, Japan, and Australia.

Finally, we anticipate that some members of the general public would be interested in the topic, given the enthusiasm for foreign policy issues among substantial sections of the Indian public and growing curiosity about India in the United States.