

Bharatiya Janata Party's Idea of Cultural Cohesion

Dr Abhay Kumar
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Delhi

Dr Shalini Prasad
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
TRKM College Aligarh

Culture can influence the national security consideration through ideational factors like culture, norms, ideas and values, it is clearly reflected in India's foreign policy. India's national identity and normative aspiration have significantly shaped foreign policy choices. The BJP inherited the ideological notion of a culturally unified state. The BJP was preoccupied with culture of national power and status which could only be enhanced by its assertive and offensive foreign policy. The paper tries to did linkages between cultural connotations and with the notion of foreign policy with special reference to BJP foreign policy. It will try to investigate how its cultural notions impacts BJP to articulate its foreign policy. The idea of Hindu Nation, Hindutava ideology are cultural dimension upon which BJP party define its idea of strong nation and foreign policy too.

Introduction

Bharatiya Janata Party's political attributes and stance were of very much reflection of the Sangh Parivar's idea of the Hindu culture. Culture remains the basic parameter on which to some extent political and strategic decision were taken. The ideology of Hindutva reflects in the foreign policy of the BJP. They wanted to enhance the status and prestige of India and perceived India emergence as a great power in the international system. The Hindu idea was to dispense with the moralistic belief peace, secularism and global disarmament preached by Nehru. The BJP ideology was major breakthrough from its predecessors as its vision was to replace it with the

hard core realistic notion where India foreign policy is based on the perception of national interest and power.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, his party the BJP and its mother organisation the RSS are true believers of nuclear weapons (Chengappa 2000: 35). They had no doubt that India had to have the bombs. The acquisition of nuclear weapons will enhance and glorify the status of India in the international system. On the other way round it is the Hindu culture which will be glorified “BJP denote nuclear weapons as an article of faith, part of their vision of resurgent militant India” (cited in Malik 2010: 219).

Cultural cohesion may be defined as “the socially constructed and transmitted assumptions, habits of mind, traditions, and preferred methods of operation-that is, behaviour-that are more or less specific to a particular geographically-based security community” (Gray 1999: 28). “The national security of a state, when seen through the strategic predispositions, or behaviours, of its leaders, may influence them to define their country’s security discourse in terms of what they see as their country’s strategic culture” (Gray 1999: 28).

It can influence the national security consideration through ideational factors like culture, norms, ideas and values; it is clearly reflected in India’s foreign policy. India’s national identity and normative aspiration have significantly shaped nuclear policy choices. Two vital norms uncomfortably coexist within this national identity: while one seeks India to achieve major power status in the world community and the other desire it to demonstrate its moral superiority over the world’s major powers which have exploitative persona or are over militarised and oblivious to the needs and wishes of the need of the majority of the world (Perkovich 2000: 448).

Simultaneously, the BJP inherited the ideological notion of a culturally united state. The BJP was obsessed with a strategic culture of national power and status which could only be enhanced by the acquisition of nuclear weapon states. Jaswant Singh (Ministry of External Affairs for India under the BJP) defines India’s strategic culture and says one has to “examine the very nature of India’s nationhood; the very characteristics of its society; and the evolution of its strategic thought evolved over the ages” (Singh 1999: 2). “Strategic culture is a by-product of the political culture of a nation and its people; an extension of the functioning of a viable state and more particularly its understanding of the ways in which the power of a state can be used” (Singh 1998: 2).

Nehru followed a humanitarian approach of peace and disarmament and discarded nuclear weapons but he was not against nuclear energy if it is used for peaceful purpose. His legacy was followed differently by his daughter Indira Gandhi who conducted peaceful nuclear explosion but since then none of the governments in India till 1998 openly declared their nuclear weapon capability. It was only the Bharatiya Janata Party who crossed the moralistic notion of idealism and favoured the hard power policy as the great power norm to the inclusion of the nuclear power.

The BJP over the years always considered a part that believes in hard power more than soft power. The rise of BJP from two MPs from 1984 to coming into power in 1998 always accepted pursuit for nuclear weapons as the source of power. In each of its elections manifestos, the one common point besides 'Ram temple in Ayodhya' had been demand for nuclear tests and when it rose to power with a coalition government in 1998 it had to fulfil its promise what had been her longest and strongest demand. The tests particularly suited the BJP because the politics of promise keeping needs something that evokes themes of sacrifice and cost-to India and to the party.

At the level of political dynamics, the BJP preoccupied infused with the idea that it is an organisation that delivers on its promise no matter what the cost to the party in terms of immediate political returns. The nuclear tests would be the promise that had been fulfilled (Bajpai 2009: 38). After the tests, one of the aides of the Vajpayee explained, "He wanted to come in with a bang at that time. It was also to say that he had kept his word on something he had been advocating India should do for the past thirty years" (Bajpai 2009: 38).

After the tests, Vajpayee himself noted to his aides: "I had faith in the country's inherent strength to withstand any difficulties that may arise out of the test. The fundamentals of the economy were strong and in such cases I believe our people are ready to make any sacrifice for security of the country" (cited in Chengappa 2000: 50).

According to the former Foreign Minister, Jaswant Singh, "all the weakness, vulnerability, lack and effeminacy of the past are behind India after Pokhran", with a "transformation from the moralistic to the realistic and India's self-centred pursuit of strength" (cited in Chaulia 2002: 221). In reply to Raja Ramanna, a leading nuclear scientist, who asked him why he wanted to test at that juncture, Vajpayee simply said, "I want to see India as a strong country and not a soft one

With the BJP nuclear weapons are seen as vital for national power and status” (Chengappa 2000: 52).

Within this strategic culture, there was nothing terribly problematic about the importance of nuclear weapons. It was obvious to its proponents and adherent’s that nuclear weapons must be an element of national power, and status. The all round vision of BJP government was to glorify India’s interests and power which create a strong image of India’s position in the world. Even though international regime reacted strongly including subsequent actions by the United States and the others with a fear of troubled south Asian region as it was followed by Pakistan the very next day.

Closely related to this “power-enhancement argument is the notion that the tests were an Indian identity assertion exercise after it had suffered a dent when the country was forced to adopt economic liberalisation measures under intense pressure from international institutions” (Varadarajan 2004: 319-342).

India demonstrated that it could do what only the five recognized major powers had done. The Indian achievement was even greater as it came against such odds and obstacles. The Indian press and public hailed the achievements of the nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

In the words of Raja Ramanna, “India is the only developing country to have achieved such stupendous success in the field of atomic energy despite innumerable pressures and all sorts of discouragement from various nations” (Perkovich 2000: 157).

Nuclear weapons proved to be the most powerful currency in BJP’s world view. BJP considers that in the long run, economic and technological power counts for a lot in terms of national capabilities and standing. But nuclear weapons are spectacular announcement of power that is difficult to ignore. Thus “to go nuclear’ is the status enhancing proposition. The acquisition of nuclear capability, the argument goes, was perceived as an assertion of India’s place in the world” (Bajpai 2009: 38).

“In the BJP strategic thinking it was not necessary for a state to wait for technological and economic power before developing military power. Rather the reverse is true in the view that national power comes primarily from military strength (Bajpai 2009: 38).

The political and strategic values of the BJP could now serve as an influential tool for the nuclear test. The importance of the cultural factor becomes clearer when Narasimha Rao of the Congress party, Vajpayee's predecessor as Prime Minister chose not to test. That Rao did not test and that Vajpayee did so, it might be argued, occurred because of different orientation towards risk taking, that is Rao was a risk-averse leader, whereas Vajpayee was risk taking. The decision to test or not to test therefore depends on the risk preferences of the two leaders. A risk averse leader might just as well have chosen to test and reap the almost certain political dividends of domestic approbation. Rao's decision to hold back the tests is thus more likely related to the nature than the Congress Party's strategic and political thinking that his risk averse personality (Bajpai 2009: 38).

Hence, it was the different perspective of the strategic and the political culture of the BJP from the Indian previous government which finally led to the nuclear tests in the 1998. The BJP vision of India was clearly different from its predecessors which transformed the nuclear policy from ambiguity to acceptance of development of the nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Tests and BJP's Political Survival

It was certain that the political and strategic ethos of the BJP cemented this argument that at some point in power they would authorise nuclear testing but when Vajpayee finally took the decision to conduct the nuclear tests was also a personal ambition to prove him. Some believes that Vajpayee's personal political survival and desire to promote him as a strong leader play an important factor in the decision to do the nuclear tests. Vajpayee decided to test in 1996 but due to instability of the coalition government cancelled the test. In 1998 again Vajpayee formed the government in alliance with seventeen other political parties known as National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (Chengappa 2000: 29).

Therefore, he knew that if he did not order the series of tests quickly, the opportunity might never reappear as his government can fall prey in the hand of coalition partners. Another significant account was the year 1998 was Vajpayee's personal decision with support from his closed aid, Brajesh Mishra who was his personal advisor and country first National security Advisor. Vajpayee personally was committed to making India a nuclear power, and he went ahead with the tests without a detailed policy review within the government. He made a decision on his own, having consulted senior scientists and a few senior BJP leaders (Bajpai 2009: 40).

As on March 20, 1998, the day after Vajpayee was sworn in as prime minister; he presides a meeting with India's nuclear scientists and asked for a briefing on India's nuclear program. He did not immediately clear the tests but indicated his strong interest in testing. On April 9, three days after the test of Pakistan's Ghauri missile, he indicated that the scientists should go ahead and fix a date with Mishra for the nuclear test. "The reason to test nuclear device was to bolster regime stability. It has been argued that a party heading a coalition government might have been tempered card to bolster its own survival" (Mehta 1998: 403-406).

Vajpayee decision was a case of political survival as they faced in the aftermath of the fractured electoral verdict. For survival, Vajpayee had to manage his allies and the opposition, and to ward off extremists within his own party and lastly refurbish his political image. Vajpayee viewed "that nuclear tests would cement the party as the popular favourite and enhance its electoral standing" (Karnad 2002: 399). In 1998, the BJP was the largest single party in terms of the number of seats in Parliament, but it was nowhere near a majority. Electoral concerns and the "need to maintain alliances with coalition partners had forced the BJP to moderate it with aggressive religious stances" (Karnad 2002: 399). Vajpayee also wanted to rule out that he is an ineffective and a weak prime minister. He wanted to reframe his image as decisive, visionary and determined leader.

As Bharat Karnad who was a part of national security advisory in board Vajpayee's government writes "There is little doubt that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's decision to resume nuclear testing at one level, sprang from his personal desire to disprove he was a weak leader" (Karnad 2002: 399). Therefore it could be concluded that Vajpayee could count on the fact that testing was popular. Virtually all public opinion surveys on nuclear weapons suggested that testing and weaponisation brought about a huge wave of popularity. Opinion polls taken after the tests revealed that the decision to test had overwhelming popular support. A staggering 91 percent of the adult literate population had heard about the test and 90 percent of those polled felt personally proud of this achievement (Sidhu 2004: 12).

Vajpayee knew the aftermath of the vent will reap a better fruit for his party and his own image as a strong leader. He understood the ramifications of test both in short-term and a longer-term. Their immediate impact would be to make it more difficult for his various allies to counter attack its allies and could easily cement it ties under the veil of nuclear tests. In the longer term, even if

the alliance began to fray and the opposition parties gained strength, the conduct of the tests under a BJP government added to Vajpayee's political credibility. The nuclear test had been well acclaimed as a milestone in India's foreign policy.

Post 1998 Nuclear Tests Scenario

The 1998 BJP "manifesto committed the party to lists of strategic, organization and deployment options, including establish a National Security Council on the line of US to constantly analyse security, political and economic threats and render continuous advice to the Government" (Adeney and Saez2005).

To address these concerns to other national security issues, the government formed a new body named National Security Council (NSC) in November 1998. This was crucial development as it was the first occasion since independence that the government had established a civilian of expert to coordinate defence thinking and to advice on the issues of national security. NSC has several tier arrangement at cabinet level if consists of Prime Minister, deputy Chairman of planning commission, the minister of Home, Finance, external affairs and Defence Minister chiefs of staff and National security Adviser (NSA)- he also serves as principle private secretary to the Prime Minister.

This national security advisory board (NSAB) consisted of almost 30 former officials, academicians and journalist. It was this body which was given the responsibility to draft nuclear doctrine (Adeney and Saez 2005).

This Council was designed to undertake following functions: i) to commence India's first-ever Strategic Defence Review to study and analyze the security environment and make appropriate recommendations to cover all aspects of defence requirements and organisation. ii) to re-evaluate the country's nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons. iii) to expedite the development of the Agni series of ballistic missiles with a view to increasing their range and accuracy. iv) to increase the radius of power projection by inducting appropriate force multipliers such as battlefield surveillance systems and air-to-air refueling. v) to enhance the traditional and technical capabilities of the external intelligence agencies and also to increase the interaction and co-ordination with user departments and, lastly place para-military forces in sensitive border areas the full control of the Indian Army (Manifesto Bharatiya Janata Party 1998).

Finally, India declared that global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament is its national security objective. India shall continue its efforts to achieve the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world at an early date. Since no-first use of nuclear

weapons is India's basic commitment, every effort shall be made to persuade other states possessing nuclear weapons to join an international treaty banning first use

Modi Era

Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014, which has shown more assertiveness in international relations and dealing with foreign policy, particularly in its dealing with its neighbours. India's relations with some of its neighboring countries have always been problematic as China and Pakistan as its biggest security challenges in the region. This aspect of India's foreign policy has remained unchanged for the past few decades but the recent developments have witnessed a sharp change from its predecessors.

Security analysts say that unlike his predecessors, PM Modi has chosen to be more assertive when it comes to national security. As an example of this assertiveness, they point to India's "surgical strike" against suspected militant hideouts in Pakistan in response to a deadly attack on Indian troops in Kashmir in February. While Modi received domestic praise for his military action on Pakistani soil, the war-like situation between India and Pakistan was not appreciated internationally.

Modi's strong response to the terror strikes in Pulwama has made it clear that despite his critics, he has managed to change the fundamentals of Indian foreign and security policy in his five years in term. The use of air power to target terror camps deep inside Pakistani territory was the first such act after the 1971 war. It shattered the myth of Pakistan's nuclear capability and has thrown open the possibility of India fighting a limited conventional war if need be. Modi's message to Pakistan has been heard around the world and will have serious ramifications for India's global engagement.

Conclusion

The idea of power as envisaged by Sangh Parivar was to make India stronger on cultural and military level. The aim is to enhance the glory of the Hindu culture and make Hindus realise about rich heritage of the Hindu culture or religion. The Hindus must be strong enough and united to face any threat arising from alien powers. Further nuclear power was perceived as a

source of immense strength which could increase the status of India. Jana Sangh from its beginning supported the manufacturing of the nuclear weapons.

Therefore as discussed above it could also be derived that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its ideological precepts and approach to foreign policy- making, thereby locating the decision of the part to go nuclear within the ambit of the ideological lineages of the party. It takes a look into the foreign policy preferences of the BJP by locating its basis in the ideological foundations of the party. This testing of the bomb signified a break from Nehruvian non-proliferation ideals and provided an opportunity of implementing its alternative model capable of shaking the roots of the Congress party's foreign policy. As the whole discussion of this chapter focussed upon the discourses of the Sangh Parivar and its political wing BJP's vision of Power it delineated how the ideas, beliefs, concepts, practices of the previous ruling government, Congress was different from the vision of the Sangh Parivar in relation to power.

Whereas Congress ideology favoured idealist and moralistic aspects of not attaining nuclear weapons and always performed an ambiguity reading becoming a nuclear power, the Sangh Parivar outrightly regarded nuclear power as the tool for gaining power. Internally they stressed Hindu culture and religion as the source of power for the Indian people and externally it was nuclear power to gain international recognition. Power ingrains strength to the people so the Sangh vehemently supported these two aspects of power which could take Hindu nation towards a new zenith.

References

Adeney Katharine and Lawrence Sáez (2005), *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, London: Routledge.

Bajpai, Kanti (2009), “BJP and Bomb”, in Scott D. Sagan (ed.) *Inside Nuclear South Asia*, California: Stanford University Press.

Chengappa, Raj (2000), *Weapons of Peace: the Secret Story of India's Quest to be a Nuclear Power*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers.

Gray, Colin (1999), *Modern Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Karnad, Bharat (2002), *Nuclear Weapon and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy*, New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.

Malik, Priyanjali (2010), *India's Nuclear Debate Exceptionalism and the Bomb*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Manifesto (1998), *Bharatiya Janata Party 1980–2005: Party Document-Volume 1, Election Manifestoes*, New Delhi: BJP HQ, 245–316.

Mehta, Bhanu Pratap (1998), “India: the nuclear politics of self-esteem”, *Current History*, 97 (623): 403-406.

Perkovich, George (2000), *India's Nuclear Bomb*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

*Singh, Jaswant (1999), *Defending India*, New Delhi: Macmillan India.

Sidhu, Singh Pal Waheguru (2004), “Evolution of Nuclear Doctrine”, *Centre for Research Policy*, New Delhi: 4-34.

Varadarajan, Latha (2004), “Identity and neo-liberal (in) security”, *Review of International Studies*, 30(3): 319–342.