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Vinay Kaura

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# Exploring Strategy in India

Vinay Kaura  
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**Keywords:** international relations, neoclassical realism, Indian foreign policy, Indian domestic policy, India-Pakistan relations

## *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy*

**R**ajesh Basrur in *Subcontinental Drift: Domestic Politics and India's Foreign Policy* draws on substantial theoretical literature on international relations to discuss India's foreign and security policies. Basrur is a senior fellow in the South Asia Program at the S. Rajaratnam School International Studies in the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the author of *South Asia's Cold War: Nuclear Weapons and Conflict in Comparative Perspective* (Routledge, 2008) and *India's Nuclear Security* (Stanford University Press, 2005). He has relied upon neoclassical realism, incorporating domestic factors to explain India's foreign policy—a remarkable achievement, as explanations of India's foreign policy from structural realism often ignore domestic factors.

The book's key argument is that, despite India's long-standing aspiration to achieve great-power status, policy drifts have thwarted the country's ambitions. Basrur highlights the prevalent features of India's political system and explains how they have impeded its decision making to shape the external environment. Domestic politics influenced critical foreign-policy choices—the Indo-US nuclear deal, India's involvement in Sri Lanka's civil war, India's nuclear strategy, and the response to cross-border terrorism from Pakistan. In each case, India's decisionmakers responded to external factors, but the domestic political dynamics influenced the implementation of these policies.

The 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal separated India's civilian and military nuclear reactors while legitimizing its clandestine nuclear weapons program. This notable agreement bypassed the rules of the nonproliferation regime, indicating India's "shift from the margins of the central dynamics of the



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international system to a key position in its strategic politics” (41). The deal was strategically advantageous for India as it contributed directly to the deepening of bilateral ties between India and the United States. Apart from the many challenges faced at the international level, India’s party politics presented a classic case of neorealism (72). The subsequent negotiations between New Delhi and Washington became entangled in India’s domestic coalition politics as the opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, opposed the nuclear deal, not on ideological grounds, but to create political trouble for the coalition government led by the Congress Party. The enthusiasm generated after the nuclear deal fizzled out as political tensions soared. Eventually, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went ahead with the deal through a two-level negotiating strategy—one with his domestic interlocutors and another with the United States.

The second case is India’s disastrous military intervention in Sri Lanka’s civil war. India’s intervention to assist the Sri Lankan government in its fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was seriously constrained by the domestic politics in India. India’s then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi involved India in the conflict, partly due to New Delhi’s concerns about Sri Lanka’s growing closeness to external powers and apprehensions that other players could have intervened in the region (78). The Indian government hoped that sending a peacekeeping force aimed at disarming the LTTE would also expand the country’s regional influence. The LTTE later rearmed, however, and inflicted heavy casualties on India’s peacekeeping forces. India’s policy drift in Sri Lanka was also dictated by the country’s domestic politics—the provincial government of Tamil Nadu, an Indian state home to a substantial number of Tamil people, harbored reservations about India’s attitude toward Tamils living in Sri Lanka. This situation led to failure of military intervention and created animosity between India and Sri Lanka, paving the way for China to expand its foothold there. Basrur highlights three incidents in which India’s domestic politics forced the government to refrain from assisting Sri Lanka—declining assistance to Sri Lankan troops in 2000, the inordinate caution about signing the Defense Cooperation Agreement with Sri Lanka, and New Delhi’s reluctance to assist Colombo in its final phase of the civil war against the LTTE (90). He showcases “how the system driven policy preference has been faced with serious obstacles by the distribution of domestic political power in India” (106).

The third case study deals with India’s nuclear strategy, as Indian policymakers were calling for minimalistic nuclear deterrence without answering the question of what exactly minimal deterrence is (116). To explain this idea, Basrur includes the views of prominent Indian strategic thinkers and defense luminaries such as Shivshankar Menon, Shyam Saran, B. S. Nagal,

Arun Prakash, and Prakash Menon. The analysis of their views demands a maximalist rather than minimalist approach (139–41). In India's case, its nuclear policy drift has sustained the cost calculus. It is yet to be seen whether it will reach a tipping point (147).

Basrur's excellent analysis demonstrates that multiple institutional problems, including the contested nature of Indian federalism and bureaucratic lethargy, affect the quality of Indian policy making. According to Basrur, it is a case of policy drift that may be responsible for India's persistent inability to frame a coherent policy to counter Pakistan's decades-long sponsorship of terrorist groups against Indian interests. India has failed to inflict sufficient harm on Pakistan, as illustrated by Basrur's discussion on the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai. In light of the multiple terrorist attacks emanating from various Pakistan-based terror groups, India long refrained from taking hard measures against Pakistan, given the fear of a catastrophic nuclear conflict in the region (153). The most odious terror attack in the last two decades occurred in 2008 in Mumbai and caused two problems—how to respond to the external and internal challenge mounted by Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Various governments at the center have attempted to look toward the external threats of cross-border terrorism and have neglected the internal factors (179). Besides other factors, a lack of coordination between different agencies was responsible for India's failure to ward off the attack.

Basrur's book highlights institutional infirmities that have hindered India's foreign and security policies as organizational decision making remains ad hoc and idiosyncratic. Many examples of policy drift mentioned in the book emanate from the dynamics of coalition governments dealing with allies' short-sighted demands. Through these cases, Basrur explains why India's foreign policy has been characterized by multiple hesitations, delays, and diversions (181). India's desire to secure major-power status therefore currently stands on a shaky foundation, partly because of its inability to implement crucial security policies (193).

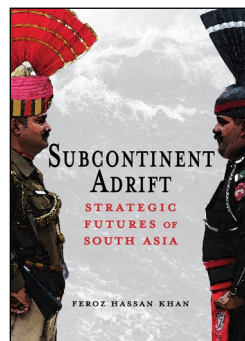
### ***Subcontinent Adrift: Strategic Futures of South Asia***

The book *Subcontinent Adrift: Strategic Futures of South Asia* by Feroz Hassan Khan explores the dynamics of Indian-Pakistani relations and the way the two nuclear-powered neighbors are shaping the political order in South Asia—an important geographic region of three nuclear-armed countries (China, India, and Pakistan) that share a history of geopolitical and ideological rivalry.

Khan had a long career in the Pakistan Army, where he served in the strategic planning division. He now teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey,

California, and authored *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2012). With remarkable objectivity, Khan clarifies the internal variables that have thwarted the neighbors from resolving their dispute and normalizing their bilateral relationship. Khan identifies cognitive bias, strategic enclaves, and right-wing religious nationalism as key variables.

Unearthing the unfathomable layers of Pakistan's strategic culture, Khan argues that Pakistan views everything through its deeply embedded India-centric lens; it views itself as the underdog and India as the regional hegemon set to inflict a fatal blow to Pakistan's survival. He writes that both countries are hostages to a stubborn fixation on competition; even after developing nuclear capabilities, these fixations continue to aggravate at a time when the rest of the world is moving toward economic interdependence, connectivity, and regional integration (xi). Two phenomena fuel the Indian-Pakistani relationship—cognitive bias and unresolved issues—and without a structural framework for peace and security, distrust continues (1).



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To Khan, cognitive bias results from continuous tensions and frequent military conflicts. While both Indians and Pakistanis at the most common level are affected by it, the military personnel of the two countries are particularly in its grip. This cognitive bias has also been passed to generations of Indians and Pakistanis who have had no contact with each other. Pakistan's obsession with seeking parity with India has exhausted the state economically and strategically. Khan justifies Pakistan's nuclear development on the pretext that, with India's growing global stature, Pakistan perceived the West-dominated international system as tilting toward a stronger India, rather than toward a weaker Pakistan (26).

To understand the irritants in the bilateral ties further, Khan brings in a "levels of analysis" approach to identify systemic, bilateral, and domestic irritants (36). An interesting variable leading to the subcontinent's drift is the existence of "strategic enclaves" in India and Pakistan. According to Khan, these enclaves have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, sabotaging the normalization efforts between the two estranged neighbors and enhancing nationalist sentiments (36). Regarding country-specific domestic factors contributing to subcontinental drift, India's dominating strategic enclave, its rigid bureaucratic structures, politics of regional parties, and competing visions of realism and idealism have caused India "to suffer from incoherent grand strategy" (42),

which may approximate to what Basrur calls “the lack of incisive policy making and the tendency of important policies to drift uncertainly.”

Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan’s military dictator in the late 1970s and 1980s, abandoned the secular ideals of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the country’s founder, and transformed Pakistan into a narrow-minded state where religious fanaticism was sanctioned by myopic policies. Pakistan’s overt and covert support to Islamist extremism led to terrorist attacks in the Kashmir valley and, later, in many parts of India. Pakistan also long used the Afghan crisis to finance and train anti-India terrorists. This risky strategy backfired when these jihadist terror outfits once trained for sub-conventional wars turned their guns on their erstwhile benefactors (47). Thus, modern-day Pakistan is a state where religious extremism continues apace, and the economy depends on external aid (50). It is debatable, however, whether Pakistan has learned its lesson and is trying to roll back its support for terror groups, as Khan claims.

While discussing India’s search for a grand strategy from Indira Gandhi to Manmohan Singh, the book briefly highlights various policy approaches undertaken by India’s political leadership until 2014. All these efforts failed when Pakistan undertook the Kargil misadventure in 1999 and when the 2008 Mumbai attack was traced to Pakistani soil.

On the other hand, Pakistan’s grand strategy is centered on ensuring its viability against numerous threats emanating from internal and external factors and creating alliances to counter India’s attempts to isolate Pakistan globally (118). The key dilemma before Pakistan is whether to resist India’s hegemonic pressure or give up the fight and become a vassal state of India (103). For Pakistan, the India–Afghanistan ties have been of serious concern as those ties could create a two-front situation in the future (114). While Khan rightly expresses Pakistani frustrations over the United States condemning it for its covert support of Islamist extremism and terrorism, he seems to duplicate Pakistan’s unsubstantiated allegations of Indian intelligence’s covert support to the independence movement in Balochistan.

The 1986–87 Brasstacks Crisis was the outcome of India’s biggest military exercise as a message to Pakistan’s growing interference in India’s internal matters, such as the Khalistan movement led by radical Sikh elements. The doctrine of India’s then Chief of the Army Staff Krishnaswamy Sunderji delivered the message that India had the military muscle to secure its national interests (127). Equating General Sunderji with Pakistani General Mirza Aslam Beg, Khan regards both as thinking generals for conceiving “military modernization plans” and for showing “non conformist tendencies” (133). The new Indian Cold Start doctrine, which became public in 2004, aimed at swift military action

by a combined strategy of the Indian armed forces following any provocative incident at a time when political and domestic anger is high and when no international intervention has taken place (131). Pakistan became concerned about the implications of the Cold Start doctrine only after the 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal. In response, Pakistan reshaped its army doctrine in 2011. Thus, India's conventional advancement pressured Pakistan to restructure and reposition its conventional forces (146).

Following India's nuclear test in May 1998, Pakistan declared its nuclear weapons potential. Nuclear weapons have also led to an arms race, which has seriously impacted Pakistan's economic development. The current scenario seems outdated for India's Cold Start doctrine and Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons. Khan mentions that India's fifth-generation doctrine, as the defensive-offense doctrine of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval calls for the use of gray-zone warfare against terror outfits in Pakistan, offers an example—the 2019 Balakot surgical strikes against Pakistan-based terrorist hideouts (159). In the era of modern-day hybrid warfare and gray-zone warfare, India and Pakistan are modernizing their conventional forces (182). Since American forces have left Afghanistan, Washington's dependence on Pakistani support has declined substantially, Indo-US ties have strengthened, and Pakistan is deepening its ties with China.

Talking about the future, Khan describes three options—"the Good, the Bad and the Ugly" (198). The "Good" future requires enlightened leadership in both countries that can perceive the dangers of continued conflict. Due to the Indian military's acquisition of sophisticated technologies, the imbalance between India and Pakistan will increase, to Pakistan's disadvantage. In the "Bad" future, both states embrace a mini-Cold War, with their international borders resembling a new iron curtain, and the prospects of rapid escalation will rise. Under the "Ugly" option, India waits for Pakistan's collapse, forcing Pakistan to acquiesce to India's terms for peace on the subcontinent. Khan concludes by arguing that the prospects for peace, détente, and stability in the near future seem out of reach. The India-Pakistan rivalry will likely grow, and the advancement of disruptive technologies such as the autonomous weapons system will exacerbate the instability in South Asia, whose future is inevitably linked to what happens between India and Pakistan. While external events may not interfere with India's internal politics, the Indian government would do well to address the criticism of its policies toward minorities as it could affect India's image in neighboring countries. If India's ruling politicians fail to connect domestic elements with their long-held ambition to play an important global role, they will remain largely unfulfilled. Khan argues forthrightly that both countries

cannot do anything about each other's domestic political phenomena, and the only way to overcome the impasse is the 1999 Lahore Declaration.

In conclusion, Basrur and Khan have authored vivid accounts of the Indian subcontinent's drift. They agree on the oversized role of the Pakistani military in India's national politics, where most security and foreign policy decisions are directed toward Pakistan. Both books significantly outrank others that often deal with great-power South Asian policies rather than with the two nuclear-armed neighbors locked in a hostile relationship and constantly drifting from crisis to crisis. These books are relevant for senior members of the defense community and will remain an indispensable reference for South Asian security for years to come.

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#### Vinay Kaura

Dr. Vinay Kaura is an assistant professor in the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies and the deputy director for the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan, India.



