MENZIES AND NEHRU: A LONG FOREIGN POLICY SHADOW?

A work-in-progress

Dr Auriol Weigold
Fellow, Australian Prime Ministers Centre, Canberra*
Visiting Fellow, University of Canberra

Introduction

We are all too aware of the on-again, off-again nature of the Australia-India bilateral relationship. It has become characterized over time by neglect and blame, outcomes of foreign policy differences. Australians with an interest in India have spoken, written about and questioned Australia’s neglect of India over time. It has in fact been a two way street where both sides have been guilty of ignoring the other for lengthy periods, interspersed with episodes of blame for unpopular foreign policy decisions.

In examining the ideas of neglect and blame they may be seen as outcomes of Prime Ministers Menzies’ and Nehru’s failure to relate personally or professionally, and the gulf between their foreign policies, creating a pattern of distrust, even hostility that cast a shadow over the then potential bilateral relationship.

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The idea that neglect may also be borne of misunderstanding has a foundation in Menzies’ remark in his Memoir *Afternoon Light* that “Occidentals” had difficulty in comprehending India. ¹ Cultural misunderstanding was also a two way street, aptly explained by Meg Gurry: “policy makers are people too and carry pictures in their heads about other people … [that] somehow get cranked into the process of policy making”. ² Cultural misunderstanding between Australia and India has been an ongoing barrier to closer relations.

It is equally plausible, however, to argue that the foreign policy gulf between Australia and India and the vigor with which Menzies and Nehru pursued their irreconcilable policies, led to a two-way imbroglio at government-to-government level, and left little desire or opportunity to create a beneficial relationship beyond trade and aid.

This work in progress paper will suggest that Australia’s and India’s post-war foreign policies, based on their individual national values and priorities demonstrated across the 1950s (a decade of much debate on international issues), diverged to a point that signaled only the unlikelihood of a high level bilateral relationship emerging. Instead a potentially beneficial bilateral relationship between two Commonwealth member nations became characterized over time by difference. Arguably this legacy has continued to interrupt any sense of continuity Australian governments have striven for.

**Menzies’ view of postcolonial Asia**

The good start made by Prime Minister Chifley in the two years between India’s independence and Menzies’ election left Nehru hopeful of a productive relationship. ³ A hope that was quickly dashed by the hostility that rapidly developed between them. The personal dimension was fuelled by Menzies’ lack of interest in India and Asia more broadly. He could not see the relevance for his country of the early wave of new, postcolonial nations. This was given expression in a number of ways that merit mention before examining the more substantial problem of foreign policy divergence.
Menzies’ lack of interest is well substantiated by his Foreign Minister, R.G. Casey, who argued for engagement with India and Asia more broadly, his High Commissioner in India during the 1950s, Walter Crocker, and contemporary academics and historians such as Alan Watt and Gordon Greenwood. Australian international relations scholars including John Burton and members of the Australian media wrote critically about official Australia’s absence from the Asian-African Bandung Conference in 1955.  

Nehru’s early view that Australians were outgoing and not tied to the past were encouraged by Australia’s representation at the Inter-Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in March 1947. The presence of Australian observers at a second conference hosted by Nehru on Indonesia in January 1949, fostered Nehru’s belief. His hope of positive engagement, however, fell away during early 1950s Commonwealth Leaders Meetings where the depth of foreign policy difference was clear. In drawing up an invitation list for the Bandung Conference, Nehru and his Colombo partners noted Australia’s regional position and recalled its earlier attendances at regional conferences, but were left with a question mark over Australia’s inclusion. Menzies meanwhile had determined that his government “preferred not to be asked to the Bandung conference … but … ‘did not want to have to say so’”, and took steps to ensure an invitation was not received. Australia’s absence, at least in part due to concern that racial issues might be raised, were referred to at the end of Nehru’s well-crafted speech at the concluding session of the Conference on 24 April 1955:

… We send our greetings to Australia and New Zealand … They are next to us and I should like Australia and New Zealand to come nearer to Asia. I would welcome them because I do not want that what we say or do should be based on racial prejudices. We have enough of this racialism elsewhere.

Menzies’ concern was probably not without reason. As a white nation with a restrictive if not racist immigration policy underlined by his support at Commonwealth Leaders Meetings for South Africa’s right to discriminatory racial practices as domestic policy, and its vote at the United Nations against India’s proposals for an inquiry into apartheid, predictably engendered anxiety that Australia
might be confronted at Bandung in any discussion about racialism. Australia’s concern about being questioned on its immigration policies had surfaced before and is noted in an analysis of the Preparatory Papers submitted for the Commonwealth Relations Conference, held in Lahore in March 1954 and entitled “The Multi-racial Commonwealth”. Nonetheless it was an opportunity missed by Menzies to present Australia as an insider rather than an outsider in the Asian region.

His concerns about the composition of the Commonwealth illustrate another barrier between Menzies’ and Nehru who sought to keep India with it. In his devotion to the “old” British Commonwealth Menzies gave expression to his strong, consistent and vocal opposition to India, as a Republic, being allowed to remain in the Commonwealth. His opposition, drawn out over more than two decades in speeches and in his publications, most clearly indicated his sense of loss of the Old White British Commonwealth and his resentment of the postcolonial newcomers, led in by India, did not abate.

Drawing together Menzies’ view of Asia (while acknowledging that Australia’s relations with Asian nations other than India developed differently), he had no curiosity about other cultures. He had no desire to make regional visits and had expressed (in the context of a proposed visit to Indonesia in 1958) no wish “to get to know his neighbours better”. He found “the heat and discomfort extremely wearing”. If for Menzies Asia was incomprehensible, that was not mirrored by his Foreign Minister, Richard Casey, who was a friend and admirer of Nehru, and whose foreign policy desire was to see Australia as a bridge between East and West. He recognized, however, that issues central to Australian policy made this unlikely and indeed, unrealizable. Casey was almost alone in promoting the value of relationships with India and Asia more broadly. “Few ministers had any interest in Asia and Menzies seems to have had none at all”. In relation to India, Menzies’ western-oriented gaze prevailed.

Nehru, expressing his view of Australia, felt concerned about fears in Australia about Asian neighbours and colour issues and he reassured Australians that “Asians could be good neighbours”. Ironically Nehru himself demonstrated that the best of the East and the West could come together.
Difference persisted and the pattern of bilateral initiatives that emerged across the decades since Nehru’s death and Menzies’ retirement was uneven and, apart from extended economic activity since the liberalization of India’s economy at the start of the 1990s that has continued apace, the passage of time has not yet led to deep connections that demonstrate our importance to each other at so-called strategic levels. This leads to examination of the fundamental divergences in Australia’s and India’s foreign policies, rather than their leaders’ differences, from the birth of Indian independence and the onset of the Cold War.

**Divergent national interests**

To look at the ongoing failure to achieve substance and continuity in their bilateral relationship, is not to say that there have been no spikes of interest in India from Australia at government level, and the 1990s are a case in point. The focus was economic, people to people contact continued, but cultural misunderstanding persisted. With the election of the Howard Government the overt interest disappeared although economic engagement again expanded.

To briefly visit the reverse side: India’s interest in Australia at government level arguably has not re-emerged in a major way since the pre-Menzies years apart from economic ventures, aid and trade, and except when there is a problem – for example the still-running Indian student debacle, and Australia’s refusal to sell uranium to India. What may be called India’s neglect of Australia has been interrupted by “good” or “bad” initiatives by our government, demanding responses.

Arguably India responds to Australia more than it initiates. The explanation probably lies in the reality that India has, and always had, bigger fish to fry. This became clear from the 1950s and on, when India’s foreign policy placed the country on a world stage.

India’s foreign policy, forged from the onset of the Cold War, has been dominated by non-alignment and peaceful coexistence ideals in contrast to Australia’s commitment to powerful friends in a western oriented alliance.
During Nehru’s period in office, his international interests were in acting as a broker between great and emerging powers and promoting his “One World” ideals. He stated that: “we should not align ourselves with other power blocks. We can be of far more service without doing so …”. \(^{13}\) This proved to be the case in India’s independent advice to other Commonwealth countries and the United Nations over issues such as the recognition of Communist China, the Korean and Indo-Chinese wars, interaction with Russia, the Suez Canal crisis and South Africa’s apartheid policies that led to its withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

Thus Nehru conceived non-alignment both as a “principle”, that of exercising autonomy in international affairs, and as a “mechanism”, that of trying to create an area of peace outside the bipolar power structure of his period. \(^{14}\)

Australia, on the other hand, was and is, prepared to participate in collective measures to “prevent and remove threats to the peace”. \(^{15}\) As a nation with a small population in the post-war years, it relied for its defence and security agreements, as it still does, primarily on the United States as demonstrated in its 1950’s determination to secure ANZUS and the now defunct SEATO.

Today India remains nominally unaligned, a position steeped in its history and tradition, and carefully observed officially while India’s new foreign policy has allowed India “the luxury of converting the slogan ‘non-alignment’ into an ‘independent’ foreign policy”. \(^{16}\)

This is not to say that India has no bilateral or multilateral agreements. The Indo-US Nuclear Agreement is seen as a bilateral agreement and not an alliance with the United States; its support for building infrastructure in Afghanistan but not joining other nations in sending troops, and its continued relationship with Iran, which the United States has discouraged, are evidence of its present independent stances. More broadly, India’s Look East policies have seen it engage regionally including with Australia in acquiring energy supplies, and in security measures, for example, around the Indian Ocean littoral.
As noted, Australia’s foreign policy has not shifted from reliance on primarily the United States, and on regional and multilateral security agreements. The Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, stated in April 2008 17 “We are a regional leader. We are not, however, a powerhouse. Regional and multilateral institutions work well for a nation like Australia. Working internationally to strengthen the mechanisms of international order helps underpin Australia’s safety and prosperity”.

In contrast to India, Australia is bound by its treaty obligations although they are no longer the barrier to engagement with India that they were when the Baghdad Pact and other multilateral security pacts including SEATO were signed, and vehemently objected to by Nehru.

**Commonwealth Leaders Meetings**

The final communiqués issued at the end of each Conference were bland generalizations but usually indicated some friction in wording such as “In the course of their discussions the Commonwealth Ministers have reviewed all the major international questions of the day … In this association of free and independent nations inevitable that there should be some differences of viewpoint and opinion”. 18 The differences referred to in final communiqués from Menzies first Commonwealth Conference in January 1951 to the Suez crisis are identified in the *Selected works of Jawharlal Nehru* 19 that includes his speeches, letters and memoranda, and a selection are correlated with Menzies’ works and Australian histories. Their foreign policies diverged along aligned – non-aligned lines and old Commonwealth – new Commonwealth determinants.

Relations with China and Russia were ongoing points of disagreement between Australia and India. India announced its recognition of the Government of the Peoples Republic of China on 30 December that year. 20 Menzies, in resisting any recognition of Communist China, noted that the then Republic of China along with India had been original members of the United Nations, but in terms of national security the “extreme and aggressive posture of Communist China” was part of Australia’s determination to draw the United States into “our corner of the world” as a member of ANZUS. 21
The first break between India and Australia over China had occurred at the Prime Ministers’ Conference in 1951. Nehru told the meeting that Asia did not see current world problems in terms of the Cold War division between communist and anti-communist, and criticized American interventionist attitudes towards China.

Menzies in response replied that it would be unfortunate if the Prime Ministers did not pay “due regard to the policies and intentions of the United States” and warned that “Commonwealth friendships” should not be achieved at the cost of “friendly relations with the United States”. Menzies claimed victory over Nehru in the conclusions of the meeting that endorsed cooperation between the Commonwealth and the United States.

This alienated Nehru considerably and led to the observation that Australia had no opinions of its own on international issues, that it was a “copy of the United States in foreign affairs”. Australia was dismissed for the first time as “An American stooge”, an ongoing charge. 22

The Soviet Union was also a bone of contention between them. Nehru had visited Russia and in turn been visited by Prime Minister Bulganin and Communist Party General Secretary Khrushchev in November 1955, seen as a ground breaking event in India, but visits that aroused suspicion about India’s non-aligned position in Australia. It was the first Cold War visit to by Soviet leaders to a “non-socialist developing country” and India provided Soviet diplomacy with “an excellent opportunity for projecting their points of view …” to the international community. 23 Nehru reported to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting on 20 June 1956 that he had no doubt that significant changes were taking place in Russia and that it was clear to him that the Soviet leaders wanted to establish friendly relations with non-communist countries. Menzies position was that it was “not acceptable to judge the policies of the Soviet leaders only by their words. … Was it not still the ultimate aim of the Soviet Union to see communism the dominant political faith throughout the world?” 24

These were long-running issues for Australia and India. During that mid-century period Australian domestic policy was coloured by the opposition Labor Party favouring the recognition of Communist China, and the fall-out from the defection of an official from the Soviet Embassy in Canberra.
SEATO and Australia’s enthusiasm for it was another illustration of the foreign policy gulf dividing Australia and India. As background to SEATO - by 1954 the situation in South-East Asia was looking more dangerous and Australia, isolated geographically from its alignment allies, feared the spread of communism as the French withdrew from Indo-China and North Vietnam became a communist regime. There was unrest in Malaya and Indonesia, and the Korean War had shown that China was willing to support other communist countries.

After meetings in Geneva and Manila, a collective defence organization instrument was signed in September 1954, and its membership reflected the combination of France, Britain and the United States, western powers from outside the region, and Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan, pro-Western powers within the region.

Intended to provide a collective anti-communist shield, SEATO supported Australia’s security needs, in addition to ANZUS, and linked Australia more closely to the United States. Largely negotiated by Casey, Menzies saw SEATO as “the keystone of our Pacific structure”. 25

Nehru’s reaction to the proposals that shaped SEATO was hostile. They cast what he called a “deep shadow” over Indian hopes of sustaining an area of peace in South East Asia. In his view the proposals came close to assuming a “kind of Monroe Doctrine unilaterally over the countries of South-East Asia” and that this would impinge on India’s “basic politics and … seek to contain us in alignments”. India wanted only to preserve peace in the area with her neighbours and observe its policy of “non-alignment and non-commitment to world tensions and wars”. 26

Nehru reiterated this view in his speech “World Peace and Cooperation” to a closed session of the Bandung Conference on 22 April, 27 at which he also read the Conference’s proposed Joint Communique, adopted as ten principles on 24 April 28 that clarified the participating nations’ commitment to friendship and cooperation. The sixth principle read “abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers …”.

In 1955, predictably, the Baghdad Pact divided Australia and India again. In alignment terms, Australia supported the London and Washington initiated sequence of agreements, from the treaty of “friendship and cooperation for security” between Turkey and Pakistan, the “military assistance” understanding between Iraq and the U.S. both in April 1954, the Turkish-Iraqi “mutual cooperation pact” and the special agreement between Iraq and Britain, respectively in February and April 1955, which devolved into the political-military bloc of pro-Western regimes known as the Baghdad Pact. 29 It consisted of five powers, Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and Britain.

Nehru voiced his opposition, stating that while India’s views on military pacts and alliances were well known, the view from Asia more broadly was that such pacts, far from ensuring peace and security, had a disruptive effect. A second effect, he stated, was the breaking up of Arab unity as some Arab nations opposed the Pact and the third, that such military alliances were provocative to the Soviet Union. 30

The Suez crisis divided India and Australia again from July 1956. Nasser’s announcement on 26 July that Egypt was nationalizing the Suez Canal brought an inevitable polarization of views: “We cannot allow Nasser to get away with this act of appropriation … in the last resort … force may have to be used”. 31 Menzies responded to the news while en route from Quebec to Washington. He replaced Casey (who disagreed with his views on the use of force), 32 at the twenty-two nation negotiations in London held between 16 – 23 August. The British Prime Minister’s reaction was to welcome Menzies’ war-like stance. Eden saw in him a crucial ally if a hard-line approach eventuated. The London Conference was called to seek a resolution that restored control of the Suez Canal to its international users. Nehru, who was represented at the London Conference by Krishna Menon, advocated a peaceful approach recommending that Nasser should be brought into talks and, if they failed, “we should not permit a setback and a drift towards conflict”. 33 This was welcomed by Nasser. 34

A the end of the London Conference eighteen nations supported a plan proposed by the United States for international control of the canal. The Indian plan, presented at the Conference by Menon, proposed operation of the Suez Canal by Egypt with “a
body of user interests … on the basis of geographical representation … charged with advisory, consultative and liaison functions”. 35 The Indian plan was supported by the Soviet Union, Indonesia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but gave more to Egypt than the European nations and their supporters were prepared to concede.

In all, fifteen states joined Britain and France backing the United States, leaving the international board solution as the one to be presented to Nasser. Menzies, who had not taken much part in the debate, reacted that if Nasser rejected the proposal and Britain regarded this as a cause for war, 36 “Australia would certainly be in this with the United Kingdom”. Menzies was dismissive of the Indian proposal: “pious talk about peace … would give Nasser practically everything and which no self-respecting British Government could accept”. 37 Menzies’ cards were clearly displayed.

Someone had to take the proposal for international control of the canal to Nasser. Dulles elected not to do this and Menzies found himself invited to lead what became known as the Menzies Mission, to talk with Nasser. As Hudson put it in Blind Loyalty: Australia and the Suez Crisis: “If he was meant simply to deliver an ultimatum to Nasser preliminary to an Anglo-French invasion of Egypt, he was an obvious choice. If he was meant to persuade Nasser to negotiate … he was not the obvious choice. 38

Menzies led a committee that was made up of representatives from Ethiopia, Sweden, Iran and the United States and met Nasser in Cairo. It was Menzies’ task to discuss with Nasser whether or not his government would negotiate with the eighteen nations in favour of international control. Menzies’ committee was not to negotiate with Nasser. They met on 3 September and in a week talks had collapsed. Menzies returned to London on 10 September and laid the blame for the failure of his mission on Nasser.

On 7 September Nasser was in contact with India’s Ambassador to Egypt consulting through him with Menon about the wording of a memorandum that indicated Nasser’s preparedness to negotiate. He requested that Menon visit him in Cairo immediately after Menzies’ departure and expressed his view that “India was ideally placed to convince the Western Powers …” 39 to negotiate further with a representative body.
Nehru wrote to Eden and Eisenhower on 11 September, conveying to the former his “earnest appeal that you take my views into account”, and to the latter his hopes that the “great influence of the United States can be exerted to pursue paths of negotiations and avoid resort to other methods”.  

Following the post-Menzies Mission meeting in London from 19 September to discuss his report, respond to Nasser’s memorandum and to set up the British-French-American Association of Canal Users, the process ground on inexorably. Mansergh captured it in his *Documents and Speeches on Commonwealth Affair*, describing it as “The Decision to Intervene and the Failure to Consult: A Divided Commonwealth”.  

Speeches included Menzies’ to the House of Representatives and Nehru’s to the Lok Sabha, stating and re-stating their respective positions on the use of force.

The Suez crisis was by no means the last of the conflict between Menzies and Nehru over policy. Nehru’s protest in April 1957 about Australia’s statement on Kashmir, in the Security Council, is referred to below.  

South Africa’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth and their much publicized clash in the United Nations General Assembly at the end of the decade reinforced the strength of their differences. The Suez crisis as it was pursued by Australia and India emphasized this. Today the substance of foreign policy divergence has conflated, but barriers to Australia and India achieving the substantial Strategic Level Partnership that former Prime Minister Rudd aspired to when he settled for re-badgeing and extending agreements already in place in November 2009, remain.

**Blame and Neglect**

While foreign policy differences are less divisive in the post-bipolar world, arguably the key reason for the uneasy relationship today is the long-held habit of Australia and India blaming the other for policy decisions or events which impact adversely, followed by periods of neglect.

While Australia no longer neglects India and is the prime initiator of areas of engagement, what may be called a blame-game persists within the relationship and
surfaces with alarming frequency. This too leads back to Menzies, with Nehru identifying reasons to be critical of Australia.

India’s reaction to the effects of the discriminatory White Australia policy on migration, discussed in the Bandung context, has deep roots. In anti-colonial India it was seen as “blatant selfishness, typical of a colonial power”, that view gathering strength as Australia’s post-war migration was ramped-up.

The White Australia Policy’s effect has rolled forward across decades of Australia-lberating, recently a response to John Howard’s statement in December 2003 about pre-emptive strikes, called racist by India because of the likely targets. Most recently the botched charges against Mohamed Haneef, and the Indian media’s assertions that the Haneef case and the bashing of Indian students in Australia were racially based.

Menzies suggestion in 1957 that Australia might send forces to Kashmir and the Australian statement on that matter to the United Nations Security Council, considered hostile by India, was another early example of India’s singling out Australia as being blameworthy.

The reaction against Australia’s selling of Mirage fighter jets to Pakistan in 1990, putting Pakistan in the frame, had also first emerged during the Menzies-Nehru years. In 1954, Australia supported the United States supplying military aid to Pakistan and was accused by India of favouring Pakistan and creating a possible source of conflict within the Commonwealth. This argument stretched into the inclusion of Pakistan in the Baghdad Pact and SEATO.

Australia has had less occasion to blame India for its actions. The most strident episode in recent years was the overblown reaction to India’s nuclear tests in May 1998 when John Howard was Prime Minister, a reaction that reverberates still with India’s nuclear agreement with the United States leaving Australia the outsider in India’s burgeoning nuclear commerce.

Two policy shifts in Australia in 2008 and a consequent failure to meet Indian expectations, saw a dip in the relationship: the reversal of the Howard Government’s
agreement to sell uranium to India and the badly orchestrated downplaying of the quadrilateral talks with the United States, India, Japan and Australia. Allowed to come to fruition, either could have contributed to what might be called a strategic partnership. Instead they led to a renewed wariness in India about Australia’s intentions.

Towards the mid-point of Australia’s August 2010 election campaign, India was noting unfavourably Australian indications from both sides of politics that student visas will be limited in number and scope. At the same time, cricket, the staple of Australia-India complementarities, was a point of attack. The problem for India and other Afro-Asian cricketing nations was the possibility that John Howard might remain Australia’s nomination for the position of Vice President of the International Cricket Council.  

The Australia Government has been re-elected with Julia Gillard Prime Minister. She has already attracted a rebuke for travel warnings that may have affected attendance at the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. It remains to be seen whether Kevin Rudd as Foreign Minister pursues his former positive agenda and, in India’s view, how many faux pas Australia makes while it attempts to change the dynamics of the Australia-India bilateral relationship to something approaching a “relationship of genuine collaboration and candour”.  

Endnotes

5 David Walker, Nervous Outsiders: p. 44.


17 Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, 9 April 2008, A Modern Australia for a New Era - Speech to Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra


19 See for example, S. Gopal (General Editor), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series (New Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1999), Vol. 15, 26 Oct 1950 - 28 Feb 1951.


22 Meg Gurry, Leadership and Bilateral Relations, pp. 518-19.


