

Book Review: Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947 by Rudra Chaudhuri

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Rudra Chaudhuri's book aims to examine a series of crises that led to far-reaching changes in India's approach to the United States, defining the contours of what is arguably the imperative relationship between America and the global South. Ram Mashru finds this a richly detailed history of Indo-US ties, one that is enriched by providing an "Indian reading" of the relationship and that presents a nuanced but optimistic forecast for its future.

Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947. Rudra Chaudhuri. C Hurst & Co. December 2013.

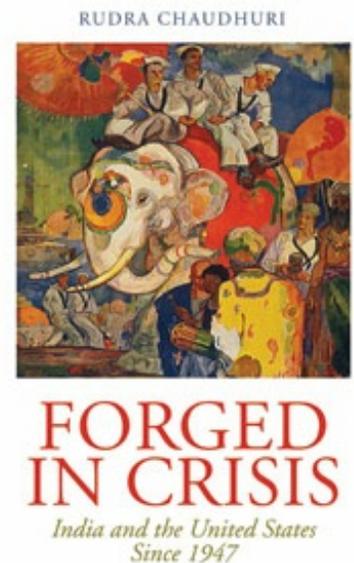
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Rudra Chaudhuri's *Forged in Crisis*, a history of India-US relations, is remarkably prescient. Its publication at the end of 2013 coincided with a bitter spat between New Delhi and Washington over the arrest of Devyani Khobragade, an Indian consular official working in New York, for the alleged underpayment of a domestic worker. Since then the book has gained fresh topicality: last month India elected a new government headed by Narendra Modi – leader of the nationalistic Bharatiya Janata Party – whose views towards the US and his approach to foreign policy more generally remain largely unknown.

In response to the Khobragade debacle, then Indian cabinet minister Shashi Tharoor asked if "an era of steadily improving ties between the two countries has come to an end?" This anxiousness is certainly not new. "Estranged democracies" was how Dennis Kux chose to describe the relationship in the title of his seminal 1993 book on the subject, and for plausible reasons: during the Cold War India was understood to be a Soviet sympathiser, the presentation of India in the American press has long been unfavourable and, historically, India has been hostile towards what it considers to be American intervention in its neighbourhood through, for example, the sale of arms to Pakistan.

But, as Chaudhuri reveals in his richly detailed monograph, these concerns are unfounded: India's relations with the US are the "most comprehensive" that it has had with any country "since [gaining] independence" in 1947. Chaudhuri charts Indo-US ties through the study of crises – moments of high diplomatic risk – and he shows that the relationship has not only overcome these potential pitfalls, but been strengthened by them. These "crisis" episodes include the Korean War, 1962 Indo-China border conflict, and US pressure on India to provide troops for the Iraq War. But the durability is best reflected by the mutual determination to cultivate ties. All of India's leaders, across party lines, have sought to foster links with the US and as early as 1951 Chester Bowles, the US Ambassador to India, encouraged President Truman to embrace India as part of a "new world", a view echoed by Bill Clinton decades later when he blamed the US's "clumsy diplomacy" for keeping India and the US "apart".

More impressive than this historical re-evaluation however is Chaudhuri's re-appraisal of India's foreign policy record, particularly the much-maligned doctrine of "non-alignment." Non-alignment – the "soul" of India's diplomacy – traces its roots to Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who promised to "keep [India] away from the power politics of [global] groups." The aim of doing so was to "assert India's autonomous place, in both thought and action, on the pressing issues of world politics."





1961: U.S. President John F. Kennedy points out a feature of interest to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during a stroll in the White House garden. Credit: US Embassy New Delhi [CC BY-ND 2.0](#)

Unsurprisingly non-alignment has provoked suspicion and bitterness, both at home and abroad: it was long considered a form communism, dismissed as “post-colonial semi-pacifism” and was interpreted as a refusal by India to engage on the international stage. Even *The Economist*, in an article published in March 2013, described “non-alignment” as an “out-dated” policy and called on India to “give up” on it.

Chaudhuri sets out to challenge this understanding, an ambitious task that he emphatically succeeds in. He torpedoed the dominant discourse on non-alignment, rejecting it as “simplistic”, “weak” and “uncritical,” and rubbishes the view that by sticking to non-alignment India’s external-affairs establishment is somehow intellectually bankrupt.

Instead he demonstrates that non-alignment is a form of strategic engagement – “engagement without entanglement,” as Nehru put it – that has allowed India to pursue multilateral dealings without becoming ensnared by global alliances. Normatively, non-alignment represents India’s commitment to independence, sovereignty and strategic freedom in its international relations.

These three stands – close US-India relations, the idiosyncrasy of non-alignment and India’s commitment to autonomy – converge most conspicuously with the 2008 Indo-US civil nuclear deal.

In 2005 India and US agreed to “full civil-nuclear energy cooperation,” a pact that would allow India to realise its goals of “promoting nuclear power and achieving energy security.” Until this point India had been a global nuclear pariah. In 1974 it tested its first nuclear bomb in contravention of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a document that it refused to sign on the grounds that it perpetuated “nuclear apartheid” between those states the treaty granted “legitimate” nuclear status and those that it did not. In the face of international condemnation India brazenly conducted its second nuclear test in 1998. The civil-nuclear deal, announced in 2005 but finalised in 2008, marked a “ground breaking” shift in global attitudes towards India as a nuclear state, and made nuclear commerce between India and the rest of the world possible for the first time.

Earlier negotiations, between the Clinton and Vajpayee administrations, had failed principally because of the US’s failure to respect India’s bargaining position. In 2005, by contrast, President Bush insisted that “international institutions” had to change to reflect “India’s central and growing role,” and followed through by securing the waivers necessary to bring India into the global nuclear fold.

Throughout this period India was a leading advocate for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Chaudhuri reconciles this seeming paradox – between India’s development of nuclear capabilities and its rhetoric of nuclear restraint – by highlighting the seamlessness with which India has negotiated its “material needs” (military and

technological parity with the West) and its ideational commitments, of which the negotiations over the nuclear deal is but one example.

Chaudhuri ends by looking to the future of Indo-US relations. Early on in his presidency, during an official visit to India, Obama described the Indo-US relationship as “one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century.” The relationship is a live one, characterised as much by divergence as it is by accord. India is key ally in Asia, where China, Pakistan and Afghanistan each pose grave challenges to the US’s interests, but on such issues as climate change, defence procurement, and trade, India and the US remain at odds. On balance, Chaudhuri concludes, these conflicting positions will do little to halt the momentum that has gathered over decades of mutual engagement.

Relations between the US and India, the world’s most powerful democracy and the world’s largest democracy, respectively, have attracted a great deal of scrutiny, and Chaudhuri’s monograph is a major contribution to the literature. In particular it succeeds on two levels. First, it is a richly detailed history of Indo-US ties, one that is enriched by providing an “Indian reading” of the relationship and that presents a nuanced but optimistic forecast for its future. Secondly, it is a formidable re-analysis of India’s foreign policy, one that rehabilitates India’s much denigrated diplomatic record.

Ram Mashru is a writer and researcher specialising in South Asia . [Read more reviews by Ram Mashru.](#)

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