

## Review – Spying in South Asia

Written by Dhruv Gadhavi

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### **Spying in South Asia: Britain, the United States, and India's Secret Cold War**

By Paul M. McGarr

Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Contributing significantly to the literature focusing on the functioning of intelligence outside the Anglosphere and shedding light on the 'missing dimension' of the Cold War as it had played out in the Indian subcontinent, Paul M. McGarr's new book is solidly grounded in primary resources from archives in the United States, United Kingdom and India. An experienced intelligence historian, McGarr traces the characters, events, institutions, policies, publications as well as the perceptions spread across continents, which shaped the contours of covert intervention by British and American intelligence and security agencies, in the face of looming shades of red (Soviet and Indian communism), and the covert cooperation with Indian agencies. At a time when there is domestic scrutiny and global curiosity regarding Indian intelligence agencies, this book essentially explores the historical experiences in their own sovereign territory with British and American intelligence and security agencies as well as its lasting influence.

The core argument which cuts through McGarr's book is that the interventions undertaken during the Cold War by the British and American intelligence and security agencies in India proved to be 'misguided' and 'largely self-defeating' (p.3). This argument is situated in the context, and McGarr's question: why do South Asians associate intelligence with covert action, grand conspiracy and justifications for repression, as opposed to the Western notions about surveillance? While the first half of the book reflects how such associations and notions were the making of the activities of foreign intelligence agencies, the latter half of the book highlights how such notions were reinforced by Indian politicians for electoral gains. It is towards the conclusion that one would realise that the chapterization of the book follows not just a sequential timeline but also a consequential one. Even today, the effects of using the preserved mystique and the secrecy hold much sway in the domestic political discourse. Those currently amused by allegations of the 'malevolent foreign hand' meddling in domestic politics would find it interesting to note that such smearing dates back to the Nehruvian era and has endured through a number of succeeding governments. Similar nuances situate the book in a welcome shift from the conventional East-West binary of Cold War intelligence studies and offer a fresh North-South perspective.

Independent India was handed over literally the ashes (referring to the destruction of relevant documents in New Delhi and Shimla) of the colonial Intelligence Bureau (IB). Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel had to take up the challenge of putting into place an intelligence service for India's national security requirements which necessarily had to be 'built differently' (p.15), with a reference to the colonial legacy of the IB. Chaya's work provides a closer look at the initial years of the post-colonial Indian intelligence culture (Chaya, 2022, p.88-120). Indian leaders had to balance, among other things, Indianization of the intelligence system while maintaining a security liaison with Britain's MI5. Balachandran has pointed out the danger of 'possible infiltration of foreign thinking' into the Indian strategic and administrative policies while maintaining intelligence liaison with a dominant partner like MI5. He further suggests that the 'IB was made a vehicle to implement the strategic ideas of the British' in the initial years of Cold War (Balachandran, 2022, p.106). That also meant prioritising to deal with the competing threats of communalism and communism to India's national security. India's Non-Alignment Policy offended a large section of policymakers in the West and most of them could not rightly assess the minds of influential personalities like V.K. Krishna Menon and Indira Gandhi throughout the Cold War years. As the Iron curtain descended over eastern Europe, India became a

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'magnet for foreign intelligence agencies' due to the 'favourable conditions' (p.7). That made India a special place for MI5, MI6 and the CIA as well as Soviet intelligence agencies. Against this backdrop, the book covers the politics of defections, elections and spy scandals. In this saga of covert intervention and covert cooperation, the signing of the declaration in Tashkent between India and Pakistan in 1966 has been rightly referred to as one which marked the end of British influence in the Indian subcontinent.

Initial misgivings of Indian leaders on cooperating with Western intelligence agencies were resolved by the Chinese offensive of 1962. India's partnerships with British and American agencies were not limited to training officers and security forces, but encompassed intelligence sharing mechanisms and joint covert missions like Operation Hat. The rhythm of the intelligence partnership between Indian, British and American intelligence was frequently broken by the more ambitious and frequently misguided covert interventions by the latter, objectives of which were seldom realised. It underlines how covert interventions disrupted constructive diplomatic relations. Therefore, the awkward exposes, spy scandals, media coverage or politicians, paranoid about regime change when regime change was rampant, shall not be blamed for the diplomatic rows arising out of matters covert.

In the age of India's multi-aligned foreign policy, there are considerations for everyone. Firstly, for the foreign intelligence agencies of the friendly countries, on how they approach India and what will be their intended proportion of covert cooperation and covert intervention. Secondly, for the Indian agencies, to redefine the terms of engagement with foreign intelligence agencies and to identify new opportunities and newer limitations. Finally, for Indian politicians, to re-evaluate the use of a 'malevolent foreign hand' as a tool in the domestic political discourse for narrow political gains. Due to the secretive nature of some events, there are some questions for which McGarr could not find a logical answer, and therefore, has referred to them as uncertainties. On the questions of whether MI5 and Sanjeevi Pillai had colluded to undermine V.K. Krishna Menon and whether or not Indira Gandhi was a victim of CIA dirty tricks, the author has resisted the urge to push half-baked narratives.

The book will undoubtedly succeed in fostering a debate on the evolution of India's relationship with secret intelligence and its 'wider global consequences' (p.13). This book could be complemented by a work based on Cold War records declassified by India in the future, which could bring out the considerations which Indian policymakers and intelligence agencies had during those years of covert intervention and cooperation. A further complimentary work could explore the comparative analysis of British and American intelligence relationship with Pakistan and India during the Cold War.

### References

Chaya, D.P. (2022) *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises: Spying for South Block*. Routledge, pp. 88-120.

Balachandran, V. (2022) *Intelligence Over Centuries*. Indus Source Books, pp. 106.

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