

Fear and the Security Dilemma in Jawaharlal Nehru's Political Thought

Written by Ameya Pratap Singh

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Fear and the Security Dilemma in Jawaharlal Nehru's Political Thought

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/03/fear-and-the-security-dilemma-in-jawaharlal-nehru-political-thought/>

AMEYA PRATAP SINGH, AUG 3 2020

For the emerging subfield of Global International Relations, as Amitav Acharya has argued, the intellectual thought of Jawaharlal Nehru offers the ability to '[redefine] existing IR theories and methods and [build] new ones from societies hitherto ignored as sources of IR knowledge'. Not only did thinkers like Nehru hail from societies whose local subjectivities were uniquely shaped by the productive frictions between colonial epistemés and anti-colonial struggles (in the process hugely shaping their worldviews), they also read world history distinctively, from, and for, the margins of global politics. As this short article will argue, Nehru's reflections on 'fear', which undergird his exposition of the workings of power politics, provide useful insights on how fear orders social interactions, and on fear's larger significances for IR.

Before I begin to do so, however, two clarifications are in order. First, I primarily treat Nehru here as a theorist of fear in IR, and a practitioner secondarily. Nehru was independent India's first Prime Minister, and later also helmed the Ministry of External Affairs during his seventeen-year tenure as the Prime Minister. However, what is often forgotten, as Sunil Purushotham highlights, is that 'unlike in the West, many of the important ideological innovators in the colonial and postcolonial world were more often than not also political practitioners concerned with changing the world rather than merely interpreting it'. So far, scholarship on Nehru's Foreign Policy has exclusively privileged the latter, often at the neglect of the former (See Andrew Kennedy).

Second, while Nehru's reflections on fear are ontologically fuzzy, and occasionally tend to misattribute psychological characteristics to states without first providing a sophisticated theory of 'how states can feel emotions' (something emotions' scholars now carefully address), they are still valuable contributions to the IR canon. This is because, as Andrew Ross has argued with respect to classical theorists such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, such thinkers were receptive to the limitations of 'segregating psychological and social processes' and had a prior appreciation for 'creative role emotions play in human interaction'. Therefore, admittedly even in the absence of sustained engagement with specific 'neuro-corporeal mechanisms by which emotional expressions propagate through social interaction', they can provide analytical leverage to help unravel the complexity of emotional dimensions of political life; something out of reach for materialist or factual explanations.

On the subject of fear, in particular, Nehru held a distinct advantage over his realist peers who treated 'fear' as an epiphenomenon of material factors or as interchangeable with rationality under conditions of anarchy. Arash Pashakhanlou's analysis of fear in the works of Kenneth Waltz, Hans Morgenthau, and John Mearsheimer concludes that while all three scholars 'include fear in their theoretical frameworks, none of them -actually needs to incorporate it to create their respective realist worlds'. In distinction, however, as Alexander Wendt evinces, it is the socially mediated 'animating force of purpose' that determines the specific consequences of material configurations. While efforts 'to prevent the fear and anxiety associated with unmet needs are part of human nature...fear and anxiety themselves are socially constructed'. In other words, while fear is inherent to the biological make-up of human beings, its ability to impact the perceptions, cognitive appraisals, and actions of state actors is contingent upon the social contexts within which such actors operate. In a similar vein, a deeper reading of Nehru's writings, speeches, and policy decisions show that - due to what Vineet Thakur refers to as Nehru's identification of the 'ontological fallacy of a priori fear structures' - his political thought contains an almost constructivist appreciation for the cognitive

Fear and the Security Dilemma in Jawaharlal Nehru's Political Thought

Written by Ameya Pratap Singh

and social dimensions of fear.

This becomes most conspicuous in Nehru's examination of the relationship between fear, the Security Dilemma and pre-emptive war, as he attempts to describe instability in conventional deterrence models during fear spirals. Highlighting the 'autonomous' role of fear Nehru argues:

Sometimes, the fear in the man transfers itself psychologically to the animal. Man becomes afraid of the animal and then the animal becomes afraid of him and, between them they make a mess of it...Well, it is perhaps not fair to compare wild animals with men. Nevertheless, the analogy, I think, holds when one party gets afraid. Once a nation gets afraid, then the other nations get afraid and so the fear rises to a crescendo and leads to deplorable consequences (Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, vol. 13, pp. 335-336)

I am quite sure very few people in the world, in any country, like war or want war. In spite of this fact, we almost inevitably tend to go in the direction of war. It is really fear that is in the background, the fear that the other country will attack and so let us attack before we are attacked. The result is same kind of a feeling that induces a wild animal to attack a human being. But no wild animal attacks a human being unless it is afraid, or unless it is hungry – it is the psychology of fear that makes people not only prepared to attack but possibly start an attack before the other party attacks them (Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, vol. 21, pp. 471).

Evidently, here Nehru's views bear remarkable similarity to other Security Dilemma theorists such as John Herz and Herbert Butterfield. Nehru perceived fear as a 'negative emotion' that was driving states towards certain forms of self-help behaviour, which in turn encouraged reciprocal responses from rivals and consequently produced an escalatory spiral of mutual fear and competition. In his reading, realist practices, such as arms racing or power balancing, were both, responses to fear stimuli and also key instruments through which fear was transmitted between security competitors. Interestingly, therefore, Nehru shifts the causal properties of anarchy to social interactions and constitutive realist practices that deepen fear's entrenchment in world politics. It was the very pursuit of security by states in an atmosphere of mutually constituted fear that led to an escalating sense of insecurity between them.

In addition, Nehru argued that states were unable to withdraw from this spiral, as fear also induced a sense of paralysis in their strategic calculations. Simply put, for Nehru such actors became 'reactionary' and unable to appreciate the long-term consequences of their political action. In order to mitigate this 'security dilemma', Nehru argued, states governed by the 'fear complex' would inevitably seek to injure other groups or 'impose their will' through the build-up of armaments and alliances. He believed that at an indefinite point, as the spiral of mutual fear intensified, state actors would concede to the pulls of pre-emption.

Worryingly for Nehru, fear, as an ordering device, also dominated the Cold War era. Describing the then state of affairs, he claimed, '...the two superpowers in the world are bitter enemies of each other. Both live in fear and keep preparing for war. Both claim that they are preparing to protect themselves...who is likely to be the aggressor and who the victim no one can judge. But it is fear which makes them do this' (Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, vol. 25, pp. 32). In essence, for him the US-Soviet rivalry of the Cold War era was not driven by 'power competition' or ideological rivalry. Instead, he viewed fear as driving the security dilemma between the two superpowers, and engendering a politics of security competition, ideological fundamentalism and rivalry. Therefore, Nehru perceived the Atom Bomb as a befitting symbol for the age, as it epitomised the paradoxical pursuit of security through the threat of greater destruction. For him, referring to the prevailing conditions as a Cold War was a misnomer, as it implied a degree of diffused antagonism and a false sense of security. Instead what the Cold War period truly signified was a waiting period towards some 'future shooting war' (Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, vol. 23, pp. 396).

These insights also have bearing on conventional deterrence models, which are typically premised on rational actor assumptions. These models fail to account for the psychological reactions elicited in actors via material expressions of power. In particular, they fail to assess the impact of power balancing on the ability of actors to make dispassionate appraisals of crisis situations. Instead, Nehru argued, the notion of collective peace was antithetical to the practice of collective security. The latter, which proffered an approach of 'mounting threats and fear and mounting

Fear and the Security Dilemma in Jawaharlal Nehru's Political Thought

Written by Ameya Pratap Singh

armaments' that was only to be 'matched by somebody else with power and armaments' only served to create greater insecurity between the two blocs and intensify the atmosphere of fear, instead of constraining it (Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, vol. 25, pp. 411.)

Neta Crawford's study of the psychological impact of fear on deterrence dynamics during the Cuban Missile Crisis supports Nehru's claims. She argues that the decision-making process of fearful actors suffered as they relied more on 'cognitive heuristics' instead of 'integrative complexity'. In turn, these simplified modes of thought attributed malevolent intentions to the 'other', thus increasing bellicosity and resistance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Jack Levy has also found that the arms racing was the primary reason that alliance build-up in the twentieth century led to war, as opposed to the Concert of Europe period between 1816 to 1848. Overall, Nehru's views seem to comport with the common refrain in the emotions' scholarship that emotional responses (such as fear) become operative for decision-making in moments of crises (See Robin Markwica).

Moving forward, this analysis of fear in Nehru's political thought opens up two avenues for future IR scholarship. First, based on these initial reflections, an inductive theory of fear in IR could be produced. Historical cases in which the logic of fear was instilled between states (For example. the early Cold War period), or crisis situations (For example. Cuban Missile Crisis, Berlin Crisis or Able Archer Crisis), could serve as useful cases to understand (1) how fear-based relational structures develop and operate the dynamics of the Security Dilemma and (2) what type of autonomous effects of fear can be seen in crisis situations. Secondly, for the study of Indian foreign policy, drawing insights from the history of emotions' scholarship could help unpack what is unique about the larger sociological understanding of fear in post-colonial India, and how the ideational challenges to the ordering effects of fear emerged during India's anti-colonial struggle. These moves could help re-cast post-independence India's peace-making efforts and Non-Aligned position with greater analytical purchase. Fear already enjoys the privileged status of being the most widely referenced emotion in extant IR scholarship. Building on Nehru, it is time to stop treating it as an epiphenomenon of material or discursive factors and appreciate its full affective role in socio-political interactions.

About the author:

Ameya Pratap Singh is a Doctoral Researcher in the University of Oxford, UK, His research interest are Emotions and Fear in IR, Nehru's Foreign Policy and International Political Orders. Twitter @ameyaprataps