Understanding the Indian Public Opinion-Foreign Policy Relationship

PRITHVI IYER

ORF OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Understanding the Indian Public Opinion-Foreign Policy Relationship

PRITHVI IYER

ORF OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prithvi Iyer is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation, Mumbai. His research interests include understanding the mental health implications of political conflict, the psychological underpinnings of public policy, and discourse on Countering Violent Extremism.

Understanding the Indian Public Opinion-Foreign Policy Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the contentious idea of a nexus between public opinion and foreign policy agendas, focusing on the Indian context. The paper examines the history of the discourse and outlines the key ideological divergences and events that have shaped the inquiry. It then traces the public opinion-foreign policy linkage in the Indian context, and frames the analysis against other representative democracies, specifically the United States. Using theories of political psychology, the paper provides an account of how opinion is formed that updates obsolete notions of a passive public who merely follow elite preferences. The paper also highlights the role of disruptions in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the linkage between public opinion and foreign policy is fraught with disagreements and contradictory claims regarding its perceived importance. At the core, scholars have even disagreed on a universal definition of "public opinion", with explanations diverging based on how one construes "the public".[1] Nonetheless, a working definition of the concept is crucial to contextualise this paper: "public opinion" is understood as the collective preferences of a nation's population as gauged through polling data and other self-reporting measures. This paper specifically examines how public opinion is constructed and its salience in foreign policy decision-making.

The realist tradition as championed by the likes of Hans Morgenthau clashed with proponents of representative democracy on the role of public opinion in shaping outcomes and objectives of foreign policy interventions.[2] The realist tradition deemed the public to be grossly unaware of the nuances of foreign policy decision-making and considered this to be the domain of elite opinion leaders. Moreover, the prospect of integrating public opinion as a variable in foreign policy instilled a fear that the "emotional may govern the rational"—a reality incompatible with the realist view on how foreign policy must be construed.[3]

Even in the Indian context, researchers considered public opinion to be of no bearing to foreign policy and instead sought to focus solely on the role of elite opinion in constraining foreign policy outcomes.[4] Less skeptical researchers considered the public opinion-foreign policy linkage in India to be "indirect at best" and felt that foreign policy is a low salience issue for the Indian public, which made research into this area less noteworthy.[5]

However, the meteoric rise of the Narendra Modi government and the importance of public perceptions in bolstering its ascent has made research into this topic especially important. Unlike the ones who thought of foreign policy as an exclusively elite domain, the current dispensation has placed foreign policy debates at the centrestage of their electoral campaign and galvanised voters through key foreign policy decisions. The primacy of domestic political considerations informing foreign policy in the Indian context—a phenomenon observed during previous governments—also applies to the Modi administration. This principle seeks to ensure that the domestic agenda dovetails with India's foreign policy choices.[6] Owing to the importance of public opinion in a democratic government's hold on power, this paper contests, domestic public opinion can shape foreign policy choices. However, due to foreign policy being an issue of less salience for the public, and with public opinion still not universally understood as a coherent variable, it may not independently exert influence on foreign policy. However, public opinion is an important intervening variable as it mediates the relationship between policy choices and how it is framed by the government to bolster its image. Thus, public opinion is an important variable in relation to foreign policy decision-making as, based on perceived public interest or outrage for policies, governments may prime the public by framing interventions that magnify their favourability. This may explain why the hyper-nationalist rhetoric[a] accompanying cross-border conflicts with Pakistan is considered a function of its effectiveness with domestic constituents.

The electoral salience of positive public opinion was also evident in how the retaliatory airstrikes after the Pulwama terrorist attack assuaged the public's concerns of national security and bolstered Modi's

---

a   Rhetoric that frames complex geopolitical conflicts in strict binaries of "Us" and "Them" by invoking the concept of national allegiance and nationhood.

image as the indispensable defender of the country.[7] This was evident in the massive boost in Modi's approval ratings that saw a jump from 32 percent to a whopping 62 percent in the aftermath of the Balakot strikes. Moreover, in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, Modi's popularity rose from 47 percent to 62 percent—analysts widely attribute this approval to the air strikes.[8] This episode shows that the electorate is not only concerned about domestic issues. Threats to national security, the government's framing of the crisis, and its means to deal with them—all have a profound impact on domestic audiences and their voting preferences. Thus, the perceived audience costs of threats to Indian national security as witnessed in the air strikes embolden the need for retaliatory attacks, indicating the power of public opinion as an intervening variable shaping foreign policy decision-making.

HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC OPINION-POLICY LINKAGE: THE ALMOND-LIPPMAN CONSENSUS

The skeptical view of public opinion's bearing on foreign policy can be traced to the public sentiment of disengagement and isolationism that seemed to be brewing in the post-War years. An American public leaning towards isolationism worried the elite class, as it was this very public sentiment of turning away from global cooperation that was implicated in fuelling the Second World War.[9] The public was construed as a powerful force out of sync with the complex realities of governance, and a fear that acting on the sentiments of an isolationist public might lead the nation to repeat the failed isolationist policies of the interwar period, led to a post-World War II consensus—much in synchrony with the realist school of thought.[10]

- Public opinion is volatile.

- Public opinion lacks coherence or structure.

- All things considered, public opinion has little bearing on policy.

This consensus was based on the assumption that the lay person is too consumed with everyday struggles, making them ineffective arbiters of foreign policy questions. However, it is worth noting that this skeptical view of public opinion's bearing on foreign policy was preceded by overarching optimism. Those committed to ideals of Wilsonian liberalism, for instance, considered the public's views to be imperative on constraining the choices of governments.[11] Abraham Lincoln went so far as to claim that, "with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed".[12] While the post-War consensus went against this liberal democratic view on public opinion, an imminent resurgence in public opinion research—triggered by the public's seemingly coherent response to the Vietnam and Korean Wars—was in store. Meta-analysis of the public response to both wars indicated that the public engaged in rational cost-benefit calculus before supporting or protesting the war. The analysis revealed that every time American casualties increased by a factor of 10, support for the war dropped by about 15 percentage points.[13] This coherent public response to the war had contradicted the long-held Lippman consensus and its bearing on policy outcomes compelled skeptics to reconsider their skepticism as public opposition to the conflict rose with an increase in casualties—a simple heuristic to gauge policy effectiveness.[14]

Apart from seeming coherent, public opinion during the Korean War also demonstrated the ability to constrain foreign policy choices. Despite initial public support for Harry Truman's decision to send American troops—attributed to the fear of a communist takeover of South Korea and threatening US interests abroad—the pervasive nuclear taboo in public consciousness was decisive and upheld

deterrence, indicating that in certain situations, a resounding public mood can alter policy decisions.[15] As noted by Nina Tannenwald, the horror associated with atomic bombs posed impediments to its use.[16] While strategies of proportional response dampened the allure of nuclear weapons, the moral and public sentiment dimension also held sway as America's image was at stake. Even in the context of the Vietnam War, public opinion's bearing on government agenda seemed clear. Joseph Nye's work that examined the moral framework guiding US presidents found the likes of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to be consumed by the fear of "being the president who lost Vietnam" and were willing to sacrifice many lives to avoid that personal cost.[17] This crippling fear of a tarnished legacy, borne out of perceptions of public disapproval, reiterated the importance of public opinion in constraining foreign policy choices.

Along with coherence and, in some cases, tangible impact, public opinion research by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, which looked at all US polling data since the '30s, found that public attitude has also remained stable and changes in public attitudes can be traced to evolving economic and political situations. Taken together, these research insights provide compelling evidence to refute the Lippman consensus on all three counts.[18] The challenges posed to this consensus was only emboldened after the wars in Korea and Vietnam. For instance, during the first year of the Reagan administration, public opinion was deemed to be a strong force that shaped decisions on key issues like defense spending.[19] But probably the most striking impact of public opinion at a policy level in the post-Vietnam years was witnessed in context of four arms control treaties signed by the United States. Researchers looked at over 500 opinion polls gauging public attitudes towards four major arms control policies—the international control for atomic energy, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, SALT 1 and SALT

2—spanning the Truman and Raegan administrations and found that public opinion was decisive in shaping the agenda, ratification and implementation of each of the four policies.[20] Additionally, anecdotes about the fear of public backlash shaping policy as witnessed in the case of John F. Kennedy's fear of impeachment if he failed to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, or the Carter administration's responsiveness to public impatience to free US hostages in Iran as the issue had gained electoral salience in relation to the 1980 election, sought to crystallise perceptions contradicting the Lippman consensus and in support of acknowledging the importance of public opinion.[21]

Thus, the lessons learnt from the Vietnam War and subsequent post-war foreign policy initiatives contradicted notions of an incoherent public opinion that has no effect on policy outcomes. These contradictions were by no means US-centric and can be traced in the Indian context as well.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT: DISSECTING THE PUBLIC OPINION-FOREIGN POLICY RELATIONSHIP

The scholarship on public opinion in India is at a nascent stage and was largely considered to be the domain of elite opinion.[22] However, the proliferation of social media and the meteoric rise of Narendra Modi as a global leader—aided by his social media presence and an ability to create an illusion of accessibility for his electorate through various online image building campaigns—reiterates the priority laid by the government in using social media to uphold positive public opinion.[23] Most notably, the "Mann Ki Baat" radio show that seeks to establish direct lines of communication with the electorate about issues including foreign policy signals the rising relevance of public opinion and its relationship with foreign policy in India.[24]

To illustrate the importance of public opinion to Indian foreign policy, this section refutes two assumptions of the Almond-Lippman consensus: One, that public opinion is incoherent and two, that it has little bearing on policy. This section also lays out how Indian public opinion and its relationship with foreign policy is different to what was observed in the United States, owing to a highly diverse citizenry, numerous faultlines based on identity markers, and a largely collectivistic society.

Assumption 1: Public opinion is incoherent

Unlike what the realists predicted, Indian public opinion on foreign policy seems to have been coherent with changes in public opinion corresponding to evolving geopolitical realities. Polling data reveals that even if the Indian public may not be aware of the complexity of international affairs, they are also not oblivious to it.[25] With respect to public opinion on the US for instance, high warmth during the early '60s was followed by a steady decline and a massive drop in favourability in 1971—the year that coincided with the US lending support to Pakistan and aiding the USS Enterprise air carrier into the Bay of Bengal, an issue that gained salience through media reportage.[26] Juxtapose these findings with the Lowy India poll of 2013 that saw 75 percent of Indians seeking closer ties with the US shows how the efforts made by both countries to work together and revive their relationship is reflected in the public's favourable view of the bilateral relationship.[27] Interestingly, during the years of coldness towards the US, Indian public opinion's favourability for the USSR saw a dramatic rise, which was attributed to the Soviets supporting India's war effort against a Pakistan aided by the American dispensation.[28]

Even on China, public opinion declined dramatically in the aftermath of the 1962 war, indicating the evolving nature of Indian

public opinion that is responsive to conflicts at the international level.[29] Perhaps counter to intuition, the Lowy poll of 2013 showed that Indians felt warmer towards China (44/100) vis-a-vis Israel, Indonesia and Vietnam.[30] This surprising warmth in 2013 has been replaced by sheer anger against China. As noted by the 2020 Mood of the Nation survey commissioned by *India Today*, 84 percent of Indians do not trust China and 59 percent went so far as to say that the country must go to war with China.[31] This evolution from relative warmth in 2013 to hostility in 2020 is not arbitrary; rather, it seems to be shaped by events like the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the border skirmishes over the Line of Actual Control that took place in 2020.

In relation to Pakistan, however, the distrust and hostility seems to have been a consistent feature in polling data, hinting at the power of deeply engrained hostility embedded in public consciousness. Thus, the Indian public's attitudes on foreign policy may be relying on a simplistic understanding of the world. However, this does not mean that their opinions are incoherent or irrational. Instead, they seem to be responsive to evolving threat perceptions and geopolitical realities, making their opinion an important determinant of assessing the power of the electorate and the ability of the government to be in sync with those that empowered them.

Assumption 2: Public opinion has no bearing on policy outcomes

Cases of how public opinion have shaped foreign policy outcomes in the Indian context also contradict the Lippman consensus and warrant the need for rigorous research on this subject. Most notably, public pressure against Jawaharlal Nehru in the run up to the 1962 war against China was considered a key variable in constraining elite preferences over dealing with the adversary.[32] Even in the context of Indian participation in the US war in Iraq, public opinion seemed to have had a decisive role in

the final outcome.[33] Despite the ruling elites in India showcasing willingness to provide refuelling facilities and troops for the war, public sentiment, as gauged through an opinion poll in 1991, contradicted these desires and mounted pressure on the government to reduce support towards the war, which led to tangible changes at a policy level: refuelling facilities and troop assistance were denied and India's participation in the war was heavily curtailed.[34]

Even former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's decision to cancel his trip to Sri Lanka for the Commonwealth meeting in late 2013 due to public antagonism towards the Sri Lankan government, and support for the Liberation TIgers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cause during the civil war, reflects the role of public opinion in forging tangible policy changes.[35] The Ananda Vikatan public opinion poll that showed 54.25 percent of Indians supporting the LTTE was made public before this visit and was bound to affect the government's handling of the situation.[36] Note that the meeting was scheduled in 2013, a year before the general elections and it was important to keep the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a key regional coalition party for the Congress in Tamil Nadu, as an ally as it was an important vote bank.[37] Thus, alienating the Indian Tamils, who openly supported the LTTE and disapproved the Sri Lankan government's stance, created a fear of losing influence in the region. In this case, a foreign policy issue had gained electoral significance and was instrumental in shaping policy decisions.

The public has also expressed strong preferences in India's nuclear policies. The indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-proliferation treaty (NPT) was seen by the public as a means to impinge on India's autonomy and sovereignty with 85 percent of Indian respondents expressing a desire for India to go nuclear in a poll conducted in 1995.[38] This pro-nuclear sentiment was not accounted for by the Narasimha Rao government, who despite making plans for nuclear tests, backed

down when the US became aware of the plan.[39] Thus, once again, public opinion was at odds with the elites who decided against the tests, probably due to geopolitical considerations and a fear of deteriorating bilateral relations with a key ally. However, the electoral significance of this pro-nuclear public sentiment was observable in cementing Vajapayee's image as a "strong leader" and the BJP government was credited for the "daring step" of conducting nuclear tests and displaying decisive leadership during a vulnerable time—and this was reflected in public sentiments.[40] A poll by the Indian Market Research Bureau found that after the Pokhran II tests in 1998, 63 percent of respondents expressed greater satisfaction, 76 percent felt safe, and a massive 91 percent felt pride over India's decision to conduct the nuclear test.[41]

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that public sentiment alone cannot shape electoral outcomes. Despite public opinion rallying behind the Vajpayee government in the aftermath of the Kargil War, his coalition was plagued with factional infighting, which was evident in the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led by Jayalalithaa withdrawing support from the coalition amidst protests over the sacking of a navy chief.[42] Thus, the relationship between public opinion and electoral salience is not a definitive causal one and, instead, is shaped by domestic political considerations. This was reflected in the case of the no-confidence motion against Vajpayee's government, which resulted in the call for fresh elections in the aftermath of the Kargil war.

Thus far, this paper has examined how public opinion may have shaped foreign policy outcomes in the Indian context; it appears that a clear causal link is hard to justify. It is also worth exploring whether foreign policy is important to the Indian voter. Prior consensus suggests it is not important as voters care more about development and the economy—both factors in their realm of influence.[43] Yet recent research contradicts this assertion, and it seems that foreign policy disputes

indeed constitute an important part of public consciousness.[44] Even though it may not wholly shape voter outcome, it is crucial in bolstering party image and voter confidence. An excerpt from an interview with Yashwant Deshmukh, founder of the Indian international polling agency C-voter and political analyst, reiterates this idea, "*I can't recall the last time Indians read party manifestos and went out to vote. Elections are generally fought on narratives and ideologies – such as national security or corruption.*"[45]

This belief that voters are deeply moved by topics of national security that are key foreign policy challenges may explain the logic behind some analysts attributing domestic pressure for a strong response to the Uri attacks, which shaped the government's decision for a publicised and aggressive surgical strike.[46] Thus, foreign policy and how it is construed by the public can, at least to some degree, have real-world consequences. This is because foreign policy issues like border disputes or decisions affecting national security, however far removed from the public's daily life, tap into certain innate human vulnerabilities and seem to gain electoral significance by consuming public consciousness. Bilateral disputes invoke feelings of "us vs them" and defense policies are a metric to assess safety. These are important heuristic judgments that make governments more desirable to the electorate, and trivialising the public's attention to such matters is erroneous. As seen in this analysis, the electoral gains bestowed upon a government attuned to public perceptions is reason enough for it to be a determinant of policy.

UNIQUENESS OF THE INDIAN VIEW

India is a highly diverse country with numerous social strata, leading some to wonder if there is any analytical basis to study the "Indian public" as a whole or do such socio-demographic differences render such an analysis ineffective?[47] Differences based on geography, socio-

economic background, religion and caste are only some of the many variables dividing the public, which makes sampling the Indian population more complicated than with seemingly more homogenous populations like that of the United States. Indian polling data points to some key variables that pollsters must account for while devising future polls that claim to be representative of India as a whole.

Longitudinal analysis of polling data on public opinion in India reveals that the rate of "Don't know" responses is higher for low-income groups, while workforce participation, higher levels of education and urban residence predicted higher response rates.[48] Thus, pollsters must focus more on "feeling-driven" questions that require less prior knowledge about foreign policy to reduce non-responsiveness rates.

Even with respect to approval ratings towards specific countries, polling data has revealed significant regional differences (See Table 1).

Table 1. Unweighted, unconditional approval ratings for the US, China (2008-2018)

Region	China Approval	US Approval	Approval Gap
North	0.46	0.72	0.26
Central	0.35	0.61	0.26
East	0.26	0.44	0.18
South	0.54	0.64	0.10
West	0.35	0.59	0.24

Source: Gallup poll data[49]

The table shows that feelings towards countries are shaped by regional differences and the cultural context underscoring different

regions in India. For instance, the proximity of East India to China and its looming presence on India's eastern border could explain lower approval ratings for China vis-a-vis North India—a geography far removed from the theatre of Chinese influence.

Apart from socio-economic background and geography, religious affiliation is also an important point of variance within Indian public opinion. It was revealed that Indian Muslims on average had 14 points lesser warmth for the US in comparison to Christians while religion-specific differences on China were not statistically significant.[50] This could be due to Indian Muslims finding common cause with those in-group members who were victims of systemic religious discrimination post 9/11.[51] Thus, the Indian public comprises multiple groups with different backgrounds and weighting for these differences is imperative to form a robust assessment of Indian public opinion and its bearing on foreign policy outcomes.

It is clear that the Lippman consensus was erroneous in trivialising public opinion and unlike what the realists posited, public opinion in a democracy is a factor constraining leaders to some degree. This analysis, however, still leaves a critical question unanswered: Is public opinion shaping policy or are leaders priming the public to have opinions in line with their agenda? All evidence in support of public opinion's importance to foreign policy has had trouble establishing a definitive causal link. Nonetheless, a deeper examination of how the public constructs its opinion on world affairs can help provide some clarity in the answers to this question. More specifically, understanding the sources of public opinion—the role of the elites along with traditional and digital media—can help contextualise evidence both in support of and against the role of public opinion in foreign policy.

THE SOURCES OF PUBLIC OPINION ON FOREIGN POLICY

1. The Elite-public Discord

The long-held belief about public opinion formation has been focused on a top-down approach wherein elite opinion leaders prime the relatively uninformed masses about foreign policy.[52] Since foreign policy has been considered an issue of low salience for the lay person, a myopic focus on elites informing the public has been the convenient explanation.

However, as scientific polling grew in the United States, a gap between elite preferences and public opinion started emerging, which compelled researchers to reconsider prior assumptions about the passive role of the public. For starters, on the question of the role of the US in world affairs during the early '90s, a majority of elites (97 percent) preferred the US to have an active role in world affairs while the rest of the public seemed less enthusiastic about this prospect.[53] Additionally, 90 percent of US elites believed the nation should provide more economic aid, especially to Eastern Europe after the Cold War, and considered the main foreign policy issues confronting the US to be internationalist in nature: arms control and proliferation of nuclear capabilities. Much to the contrary, the rest of the public was less enthusiastic about economic aid and tended to consider America's main problems to be more domestic in nature: unemployment and protection of US businesses abroad.[54] Even in relation to US-India ties, it was noted that attempts by ruling elites Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon to prime the US public to think of India as a threat failed due to feelings among the public that India is a fellow democracy.[55]

Such inconsistencies between elite opinion and public opinion, also known as the "elite discord", can also be viewed in the context of India's

foreign policy undertakings. The ability of the Indian public to constrain Nehru's policies against China after the 1962 War while also facilitating the reduced Indian involvement in the Iraq war despite elite opinion favouring increased involvement alludes to gaps between elite and public opinion. Thus, merely attributing public opinion as an outcome of following what elites posit is highly simplistic and fails to capture the complexities of public opinion formation.

2. Role of social context

One way to explain this apparent elite discord is to account for the role of social context and peer-to-peer conformity in forming public opinion.[56] Through their seminal research, psychologists Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram have shown the power of social influence in shaping attitudes and it is imperative to understand that "public opinion" has a "public" quality to it and human beings are social animals, conditioned to be embedded and deeply influenced by their immediate social networks.[57] Especially in India, owing to a culture of collectivism, the role of the family in shaping political beliefs has been particularly significant and opinion formation about politics and foreign policy cannot discount the powerful role of the community one inhabits.[58]

Peer influence moderates the role of elites in shaping behaviour as people often tend to implicitly trust their peers more than the government.[59] An experiment examining whether subjects would endorse state-sanctioned violence against an adversary reaffirmed the importance of peer conformity in shaping public opinion.[60] The results indicated that those who were primed to endorse violence by being told that others with similar personality characteristics had also endorsed violence ended up responding just as the priming cues predicted, while those who were primed to not endorse violence using a similar priming technique, disapproved of state-sponsored violence.[61] Thus, the power

of shared consensus borne out of perceived similarities with peers and its effects on public opinion are important and requires policymakers to understand that opinion formation is not merely top-down (from ruling elite to public). Instead, despite having little factual knowledge, the public often relies on certain heuristics of determining right from wrong; such heuristic frameworks are shaped by the socio-cultural context and peer conformity, which is why opinion polls are an important factor in gauging public perceptions.

The importance of social context reveals the dangers of purely gauging public opinion through elites but does not lay out how certain foreign policy issues become more important to the public than others. To understand how the public develops strong attitudes on foreign policy, the role of the media is crucial. Analysing the role of the media and its use by ruling elites to prime public opinion unearths a complex reality: Although the masses may form opinions independent of elites and in turn inform policy agendas, their framing of issue salience and their perceptions of right and wrong are also shaped by what the media feeds them.

3. The role of the media

Mass media is an effective conduit between the government and the people. It has served to fill the information gap between policymakers and the ones who put them in power. The dawn of the information age, bolstered by the explosion of TV news, changed the landscape of public opinion and its relationship with foreign policy. As noted by Baum and Porter, traditional media outlets were beholden to the ruling elites for reliable information that was then passed onto the public.[62] As long as the public was unengaged with foreign policy, ruling elites enjoyed a free hand in framing their policies in a suggestive light as media houses resisted disappointing their information suppliers.[63]

This interplay between government agenda and the media in shaping public opinion is an important one to analyse. Foreign policy issues, traditionally of low salience to lay people, tended to activate public interest through elite debate on news channels, and media reportage often aided such elite debates to prime viewers to construe foreign policy in a suggestive light. For instance, during the final years of the Barack Obama administration in the US, wherein the nuclear deal with Iran was poised to be a defining foreign policy achievement for his administration, public opinion polls saw Americans broadly support the deal while simultaneously displaying doubts about whether the deal would mitigate Iran's threat to the US.[64] Thus, the framing of the virtues of the deal by the administration in consultation with the media helped garner support for the deal even though fears about Iran persisted. As noted by Iyengar (1991), "the themes and issues that are repeated in television news coverage become the priorities of viewers. Issues and events highlighted become especially influential as criteria for evaluating public officials."[65]

The Indian media landscape also indicates how media often primes the public's view on leaders and their policies. For instance, the media's excessive focus on cross-border conflicts with Pakistan and China, two key foreign policy issues for the government, reflects both the importance of geopolitical conflicts to public consciousness and the media's role in reinforcing its salience. More recently, the excessive focus by news anchors on sanctions against China, most notably the bans on Chinese products, has greatly contributed to assuaging national sentiments through the tactic of "*metus hostilis*"—leveraging fear of the enemy to distract the electorate from domestic problems like the mishandling of a pandemic.[66]

The media's penchant for sensationalising India's conflicts with foreign nations that tap into a so-called fear of the enemy syndrome is

not merely a product of being beholden to policymakers. Along with having to work in synergy with those in power, traditional media outlets are also driven by commercial interests. The "eyeballs" attached to news platforms determines its advertising revenue, which provides incentive for the tabloidisation of an already divisive media environment.[67] Since viewership is important for media platforms to earn money, the public plays an active role in how news is framed. It seems that collective public consciousness is rooted in partisan preferences, which makes news that widens group divides more palatable.[68]

Such preferences for divisive news are embedded in the psychological make-up of human beings. Robert Sapolsky famously argued why humans are wired towards "us vs them" conflicts.[69] According to this view, group divides are innate, and the psychological dimension of tribalism makes news that pegs India against an enemy to be especially alluring. Neurobiology and developmental psychology tell us that humans are wired to display deep allegiance to the "familiar" while showing hostility and skepticism towards the "unfamiliar".[70] Thus, cross-border conflicts with adversarial nations trigger such primal fears of the "unknown" and in turn strengthen attachment towards the in-group, which in this case, is the Indian state. Thus, foreign policy issues that frame clear divides based on group membership seem more important to the electorate and the media's ability to keep these issues at the forefront indicates at least tacit knowledge of how such conflicts are bound to garner more attention.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL DISRUPTIONS AND HYPERPOLARISATION

Any analysis on public opinion's relationship with foreign policy will be incomplete without accounting for the proliferation of social media and

the disruptions it has forged. India is a mobile-first news market with an overwhelming majority (68 percent) consuming news through their smartphones.[71] This digitalisation of news was dubbed to increase the prospects of a more informed public in matters of foreign policy but evidence on this front goes against this notion.[72] News consumption on the web has rendered digital media to be highly fragmented and the nature of information dissemination on the web has made public opinion more polarised.[73] This polarisation and social media's tendency to sift out contrarian views and only feed consumers with news that validates their partisan preferences, impedes public opinion's ability to constrain government conduct. As argued by Baum and Porter, this digital age allows leaders to enjoy a greater "elasticity of reality"—i.e., the ability for leaders to frame foreign policy agendas to suit their objectives.[74] While this suggestive framing of their agenda to the public is not novel, social media exacerbates these tendencies.

Moreover, it is evident that social media algorithms feed consumers with extreme forms of their own preferences,[75] and in this post-truth era, it reduces the prospect of an engaged and informed public that could check those in power.[76] Since social media has also disrupted the notion of an "expert" and has allowed anyone with a social media handle to document world events in real time, information that aligns with someone's partisan preferences are more likely to be considered as true, irrespective of the legitimacy of the news provider. This is even evident in the Indian context with data suggesting Indians as being more prone to consuming news through "side-doors", rarely accessing original sources.[77]

Figure 1. Relevant Attributes of a News Story
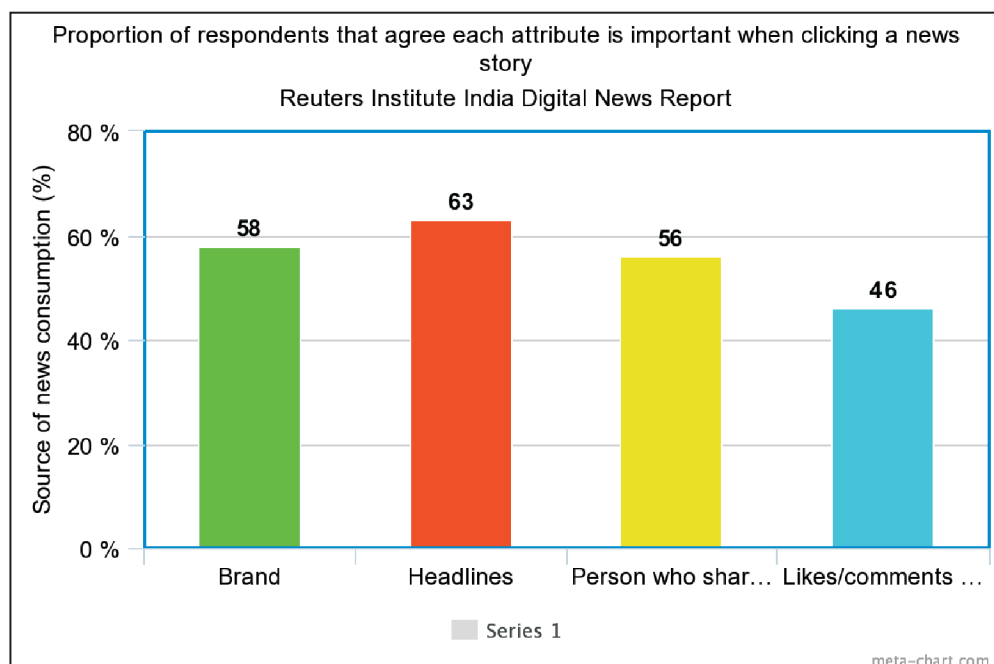
Source: Reuters Institute India Digital News Report[78]

Figure 1 shows that the likelihood of engaging with news is as much shaped by the brand (58 percent) as the person who shared it (56 percent). Thus, the relative parity between brand value and value of individuals when it comes to legitimacy as news providers indicates that consumers are seeking news that reaffirm their prior opinions provided by likeminded people, thereby, reducing traditional media's function as gatekeeper of truth. In such an environment, pleasing the echo chamber may be more important than making space for contrarian voices. This is potentially dangerous for a democracy and the role of public opinion within it. Social media's selective filtering of news and its propensity to spread misinformation also tends to reduce the power of the "audience cost" in holding to account democratic leaders and their foreign policy choices.[79]

The audience cost theory states that the penalty incurred by leaders for escalating foreign conflicts may lead them to be risk-averse on that front as they have more to lose than gain by engaging in risky foreign conflicts if domestic audiences are aware of their potential failures.[80] However, with social media and the ability of leaders to communicate firsthand with the electorate and shape a convenient version of foreign policy that suits their agenda, the audience cost theory that constrained democratic leaders may "fall apart".[81]

This agenda-setting function of governments using social media was evident in how the Modi government has carefully regulated the information available to the public and media on foregoing conflicts, thereby controlling the narrative. Even in relation to the border skirmishes with China in mid-2020, the agenda-setting role of the Indian government was crucial. They denied Chinese encroachment on Indian territory, contradicting a defence ministry document that cited Chinese presence in Ladakh.[82] The issued statement caused a stir, with opposition leader Rahul Gandhi accusing the dispensation of "lies" and Twitter caught on this trend and a hashtag "Modi surrenders to China" started doing the rounds.[83] This confusion caused the government to clarify what it called the "mischievous interpretation" of events on the LAC. Whether this was a mere misunderstanding or an attempt at purporting a favourable version of events on the border may be unclear but social media could indeed aid the idea that anyone can believe convenient versions of facts that suit their partisan agendas. This leads to a paradox: social media enables unparalleled levels of political engagement in the public domain but also destructs the notion that there is a single gatekeeper of truth, leading to more confusion and a greater elasticity of reality.[84]

Apart from disrupting notions of audience cost by rendering the idea of "truth" to be malleable, social media also shapes foreign policy

outcomes in a few other tangible ways, accurately summarised by Kenneth Schultz in his work examining the perils of a polarised American foreign policy. He found that social media makes foreign policy harder in a few ways: 1) It reduces the prospect for bipartisan support, 2) It makes cross-party agreement more complicated as party affiliations become increasingly polarised in the social media landscape, and 3) it heightens the vulnerability of a nation's political system to foreign intervention.[85] The last one is particularly significant in altering public opinion, evident in Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, which saw misinformation and fake accounts infiltrate news feeds of Americans that showed a predisposition to concur with the fake news being propelled.[86] Thus, the malleability of truth, proliferation of misinformation and the paradoxical end result: an uninformed public in an information-overload, social-media world poses ominous signs for the future of public opinion and its bearing on foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

Future research ought to delve into how social media and its burgeoning influence is reshaping the formation and value of public opinion in foreign policy. Will these transformations in information access that has polarised the public to unprecedented lengths make leaders less interested in public opinion? Will the malleability of what is "fact" and the erosion of objective truth as we know it reduce the public's power in constraining elite preferences? Will the realist stance that public opinion should be kept away from foreign policy re-emerge as the popular consensus with social media indicating the dangers of an engaged but ill-informed public?

These are complex questions with no easy answers. While this paper has argued for why public opinion in India is both coherent and an

important determinant of foreign policy outcomes and outlook, the uncertain future of media, democracy and the role of public opinion within it makes it difficult to formulate definitive conclusions. ORF

ENDNOTES

1   Walter Shepard, "Public Opinion", *American Journal of Sociology Vol 15 No 1*, (1909), https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2762619.pdf

2   Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus", *International Studies Quarterly, Vol 36, No 4*, pp. 439-466 (1992), https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600734?origin=JSTOR-pdf&seq=1

3   Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

4   Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi", *India Review 17:4, 353-371* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2018.1510158

5   Jason A. Kirk, "The Evolution of India's Nuclear Policies," *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospec*t, ed. Sumit Ganguly, (*Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press*, 2010)

6   Winne Naham, "Remaking India: Modi's Blueprint to Align Foreign Policy with Domestic Agenda", *Sigur Center for Asian Studies, Asia Report no 33* (2015),

7   Tamanna Inamdar, "Six charts explain how Balakot strikes helped boost Modi's popularity", *BloombergQuint,* 12 March 2019, https://www.bloombergquint.com/elections/six-charts-explain-how-balakot-strikes-helped-boost-modis-popularity

8   Tamanna Inamdar, "Six charts explain how Balakot strikes helped boost Modi's popularity"

9   Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

10   Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

11 Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

12 Menahem Blondheim, "Public Sentiment is Everything: The Union's Public Communications Strategy and the Bogus Proclamation of 1864", *The Journal of American History Vol 89, No 3* (2002) pp. 869-899, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092344?seq=1

13 John Mueller, *War Presidents and Public Opinion*, (John Wiley and Sons, 1973)

14 Mueller, *War Presidents and Public Opinion*

15 Ninna Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the normative basis for nuclear non-use". *International Organization Vol 53, no 3 , pg 433-468,* June 1999, http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0020818399440779

16 Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the normative basis for nuclear non-use".

17 Joseph Nye, *Do Moral's Matter: Presidents and Foreign Policy, from FDR to Trump* (Oxford University Press, 2020)

18 Benjamin Page et.al," Foreign Policy and the Rational Public", *Journal of Conflict Resolution 32:211-247* (1988), https://www.jstor.org/stable/174045?seq=1

19 Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

20 Thomas Wallas Graham, "The Politics of Failure: Strategic nuclear arms control, public opinion and domestic politics in the United States: 1945-1980", *Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Political Science (1989),* https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/13981

21 Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

22 Devesh Kapur, "Public Opinion and Indian Foreign Policy", *India Review, 8:3, 286-305* (2009), http://www.tandfonline.com/action/ showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/14736480903116818

23 "Thinking of Giving Up': How Narendra Modi Has Used Social Media to Fuel His Politics", *The Wire*, 3 March 2020, https://thewire.in/politics/ narendra-modi-social-media-account

24 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

25 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

26 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's", *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper No. 2019-21* (2019), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ ssrn.3448740

27 Rory Medcalf, "India Poll 2013", *Lowy Institute* (2013), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/india-poll-2013

28 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

29 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

30 Rory Medcalf, "India Poll 2013"

31 "Mood of the Nation", *India Today*, August 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/mood-of-the-nation-survey-2020

32 Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

33 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

34 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

35 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

36 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

37 Prasanna Venkatesan, "Indian Foreign Policy vs Domestic Concerns", *Fair Observer,* 11 March 2014, https://www.fairobserver.com/politics/indian-foreign-policy-vs-domestic-concerns/

38 "Yes to the Bomb", *India Today*, 31 December 1995, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19951231-yes-to-the-bomb-754622-1995-12-31

39 George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb* (University of California Press: 2002) pp 329

40 Kanti P. Bajpai, *BJP and the Bomb," in Inside Nuclear South Asia*, ed. Scott D. Sagan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 36.

41 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

42 "World: South Asia Vajpayee's thirteen months" *BBC News*, 17 April 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/322065.stm

43 Shivaji Kumar, "India's public opinion and foreign policy: a view from New Delhi"

44 Tanushree Goyal, "Do Citizens Enforce Accountability for Public Goods Provision? Evidence from India's Rural Roads Program", *University of Oxford*, 26 April 2019, https://ssrn.com/abstract=3378451

45 "What matters more to Indian voters in elections: campaign slogans or

party manifestos", *ThePrint* , 3 April 2019, https://theprint.in/talk-point/what-matters-more-to-indian-voters-in-elections-campaign-slogans-or-party-manifestos/216352/

46 Ruhee Neog, "Media, Policymaking and Public Opinion in India-Pakistan Crisis" *Investigating Crisis: South Asia's lessons, evolving dynamics and trajectories: The Stimson Centre,* January 2018, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/InvestigatingCrises.pdf

47 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

48 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

49 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

50 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

51 Aidan Milliff et.al, "Uneven Accountability? Public Attitudes on Indian Foreign Policy since the 1960's"

52 Adam Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites and American Public support for military Conflict", *The Journal of Politics Vol 69, issue 4* (2007), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00602.x

53 Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

54 Ole Holtsi, "Public opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond Lippman Consensus"

55 Jarrod Hayes, "Securitization, Social Identity, and Democratic Security: Nixon, India, and the Ties That Bind." *Inter- national*

Organization 66(1): 63–93 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818311000324

56 Joshua Kertzer et.al, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy", *American Journal of Political Science 61 (3): 543-558 (*2017), https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/QSXDUN

57 Joshua Kertzer et.al, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy"

58 K.S Padhy et.al, "Role of Family and Education in Transmission of Political Values", *The Indian Journal of Political Science Vol 47 No 3* (1986), DOI: 10.2307/41855250

59 Luke Keel. "Social Capital and the Dynamics of Trust in Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 51(2): 241–54 (2007), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00248.x

60 Joshua Kertzer et.al, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy"

61 Joshua Kertzer et.al, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy"

62 Matthew Baum et. al, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the age of Social Media", *The Journal of Politics* (2019), 10.1086/7022

63 Matthew Baum et. al, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the age of Social Media"

64 Aaron Walter, "Foreign Policy: Public Opinion and Political Legacy", *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences Vol 15,Issue 3* (2015), 10.1515/sjps-2015-0009

65 Aaron Walter, "Foreign Policy: Public Opinion and Political Legacy"

66 Wamika Kapur, "Tik Tok Ban highlights rising Techno-nationalism in India", *CGTN,* July 3, 2020, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-

03/Tik-Tok-ban-highlights-rising-techno-nationalism-in-India-RPaMoAsy0o/index.html

67 Ruhee Neog, "Media, Policymaking and Public Opinion in India-Pakistan Crisis"

68 Ruhee Neog, "Media, Policymaking and Public Opinion in India-Pakistan Crisis"

69 Robert Sapolsky, "This is Your Brain on Nationalism", *Foreign Affairs,* March 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-12/your-brain-nationalism

70 Robert Sapolsky, "This is Your Brain on Nationalism"

71 "68% of Indian users consume news on smartphones: Report", *The Times of India,* 25 March 2019, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/68-of-indian-users-consume-news-on-smartphones-report/articleshow/68565146.cms

72 Mathew Baum, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump", *Journal of Politics Vol 81 No 2* (2019), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mbaum/files/baum_potter_jop_preprint.pd

73 Matthew Baum et. al, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the age of Social Media"

74 Matthew Baum et. al, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the age of Social Media"

75 Zeynep Tufekci, "Facebook's Surveillance Machine." *The New York Times,* 19 March 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/opinion/facebook-cambridge-analytica.html

76 Matthew Baum et. al, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the age of Social Media"

77 "68% of Indian users consume news on smartphones: Report", *The Times of India*

78 Zeenab Aneez et.al, "Reuters Institiute: India Digital News Report", *The Reuters Institiute for the Study of Journalism* (2019), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/India_DNR_FINAL.pdf

79 Mathew Baum, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump", *Journal of Politics Vol 81 No 2* (2019), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mbaum/files/baum_potter_jop_preprint.pdf

80 Mathew Baum, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump"

81 Mathew Baum, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump"

82 Devirupa Mitra, "Modi's 'No Intrusion' by China Claim Contradicts India's Stand, Raises Multiple Questions", *TheWire,* 20 June 2020, https://thewire.in/security/modis-no-intrusion-by-china-claim-contradicts-indias-stand-raises-multiple-questions

83 Archana Chaudhry, "Modi Says China Isn't Occupying Indian Territory After Clash" *BloombergQuint*, 22 June 2020, https://www.bloombergquint.com/china/modi-says-china-isn-t-occupying-indian-territory-after-clashes

84 Mathew Baum, "Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump"

85 Kenneth Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S Foreign Policy", *The Washington Quarterly Vol 40 No 4* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406705

86 Scott Shane, "The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election", The New York Times, 7 September 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html

ORF OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Ideas • Forums • Leadership • Impact