

REPORT ON THE BOOK LAUNCH OF

DOES THE ELEPHANT DANCE? : ***CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY***

BY

DAVID M MALONE

The Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Oxford University Press organized the book launch of *Does the Elephant Dance?: Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy* by David M Malone. The event was organized at The Oberoi Grand on May 11, 2011. The book was released by His Excellency M K Narayanan, Honorable Governor of West Bengal.

The event started by the welcome address delivered by Samir Kumar Das, President, Calcutta Research Group. He introduced the author and his book to the audience. Das also gave a brief outline of the various research work done at the CRG.

The welcome address was followed by the address by the Honorable Governor. The Governor congratulated the author David M Malone on his book and said that it was a well written, lucid and balanced study of Indian foreign policy. The author being a foreign career diplomat had successfully brought a sense of detachment in his study. It was, according to the Governor, a valuable addition to the study of Indian foreign policy.

The Governor, who has previously served in the capacity of the National Security Advisor in the Government of India, gave a brief account of the vicissitudes of the Indian foreign policy. He said that the path taken by the Indian foreign policy and its makers is often perplexing to outsiders who are not privy to the mechanism behind the scene. Indian foreign policy has been shaped by its history and its core values to which it is committed. He also emphasized that India's preoccupation to maintain its secular and peaceful democracy gives the impression that its foreign policy has taken a back seat. He said that the foreign policy formulation in India follows the pattern of concentric circles depending on the level of engagements. The Governor said that at the level of Indian foreign policy the immediate neighborhood is of prime importance.

Commenting on Malone's book, the Governor said that that the former's assertion that India's relationship with the US has improved and simultaneously the relationship between Russia has weakened is not supported by evidence. The improved relationship with the US has not affected relationship with Russia. At the same time, India's relationship with the EU has prospered and now the latter has become a major business partner. The governor, though, emphasized that

there is much more to India's foreign policy than just economic diplomacy and economy is not the pivot around which the Indian foreign policy revolves. The address of the Governor was followed by the release of the book.

After the release of the book, David M Malone spoke on the content of the book. Malone said that the literature available on the Indian foreign policy written by foreign experts quote copiously from the works of their fellow western writers. Instead, he decided to use the sources within India to write his book. According to Malone, history is the key to understanding the Indian society of the present day. Malone likened India with the US in terms of the fact that the big powers are always criticized by the smaller powers.

According to Malone, the most engaging relationship for India is with China. The entire relationship between the two is defined by their desire to become the leader of Asia. He also said that the normalization of the Indo-US ties was not easy to negotiate as they carried a lot of historical baggage. Nuclear cooperation in this regard did not become so much a triumph of the relationship between the two but the manifestation of the normalization of the relationship. India and the US were not natural allies as their interests are different. They will cooperate with each other according to their own interests.

Malone dealt on Nehru as well. He said that Nehru saw the US as the emerging imperial power in his times. Nehru's entire worldview was anti-imperial and he saw India as an Asian power that can lead other nations in the process of decolonization.

The address by Malone was followed by a round table on "Indian Foreign Policy and Current Challenges." It was moderated by Ranabir Samaddar and the panelists included Paula Banerjee, Secretary, CRG and faculty member Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, member, CRG and Professor, Department of Political Science, Rabindra Bharati University, Anita Sengupta, Fellow, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Hari Vasudevan, Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies and David Malone.

Paula Banerjee said that she had a sense of *déjà vu* in the current understanding of the Indo-US ties. She said that the optimism expressed by Malone on Indo-US ties was too early. According to Banerjee, India and the US were neither antagonists nor an ally. Both countries were prone to take a high moral ground with India taking up the rhetoric on the basis of its anti-colonial struggle while the US used its campaign against slavery. Banerjee said that that the problems in the Indo-US ties resulted from their divergent interests. In fact, the Indo-US ties were peripheral for the countries involved. India always had a world view as a leader of the decolonized world. Banerjee saw a great deal of continuity in the Indo-US relationship and their respective foreign policies.

Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury said that in order to be a global actor which India aspires to be it is important that the policy on its neighbors is given importance. He said that most of the writings on Indian foreign policy emanates from Delhi. With the Look East policy Kolkata has the potential to emerge as the nodal point through which this policy could be exercised. He said that for a large part Indian foreign policy had been obsessed over Pakistan. Now, India has developed the same obsession with China. Whenever Indian policy is formulated

on Myanmar or Bangladesh, it is done through the looking glass of competition with China. Chaudhury said that Indian foreign policy cannot be a result of a knee jerk response. In fact, most of the time Indian foreign policy has been reactive rather than proactive. He said that India and China have been able to build their economic relationship notwithstanding the disputes between them. He also stressed the importance of India's experience with the problems of the refugees. India has been receiving refugee since the partition and before international resolutions and conventions came into force.

Anita Sengupta spoke about Indian foreign policy regarding Central Asia. According to Sengupta, there is a pattern to India's foreign policy in Central Asia. She said that the region is critical to India's strategic and security interests. India's relation in Central Asia was mediated by Soviet Russia and as such India was in a privileged position but India did not take advantage of this privilege. Also, India's relation with Afghanistan is a continuous challenge.

Hari Vasudevan pointed out the presence of the Indian diaspora throughout the world. He said that Indians have built up series of communities of interests in other parts of the world. Vice versa other communities have made India their home. Interestingly, studies on Indian foreign policy do not take this phenomenon into account. According to Vasudevan, modernity in India did not emerge only from its interaction with the British Raj but also was constituted by the different engagements with different communities over time.

Discussion on these views followed. After the round table the vote of thanks was delivered by Stephen J Mcgurk.