

India's Diplomacy in *Absentia*

*Violence, Defense, Offense*¹

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INTRODUCTION

The rare occasions when diplomacy does not constitute international politics arise from the presumption there are no other actors or diplomacy's supplementation. An instance of the former was the Chinese diplomat's report which led to the first mention of the Roman Empire in Chinese records, thereby expanding awareness and setting the scene for diplomacy with the empire.² As for the latter, it is war.³ Diplomacy therefore expands awareness, and so its field, and continues alongside war and inevitably replaces it. All three, diplomacy, its presumed absence, and supplementation, are *International Relations*' (IR) subjects. Diplomacy's centrality to IR is what makes it vital to *Political Science*, for IR's domain of interstate relations is at a minimum related to the intrastate relations studied by the latter.⁴ This is now recognized by IR, and so it accounts for interstate relations by referring to the intrastate. What this affirms is the inextricable intermixing of intrastate and interstate politics, and so reiterates the role of diplomacy in animating all politics and why diplomats merit study. Yet when they are studied, imposed categories occlude them and nowhere is this more apparent than in the study of Indian diplomacy. When not riddled with factual errors, conceptual imposition makes for incoherent, emaciated, or morally suspect analysis.⁵ For instance, *Realist* authors use their theory of rationalism, i.e., *Realism*, to account for Indians and Pakistanis, yet claim both have different rationalities, and all while attenuating actors to materialism and so denying them their culture and history. Meanwhile, *Postcolonial* authors reduce actors to alien concepts of status at the expense of the material. Underscoring both schools is their infantilizing Indians as learning to do diplomacy from *Liberals* and then *Realists*, both understood as past masters, of diplomacy by virtue of being European.⁶ Out-of-court at inception then is equality,

and so of diplomacy being investigated in terms of its non-Western producers. The price is that their intellectual categories are lost, and so our understanding of international politics enervated. In short, requisite is an intellectual history of diplomacy in producer's terms rather than that of those who study them.

Doing so is to understand coherently, fully, and morally.⁷ All three begin with noting discrepancies between the expected and practice, an instance of which is that Indian diplomats make sense of their practice not via European, much less North American, symbols or texts, but through the epic *Mahabharata*. An example from the fieldwork within India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is illustrative. The top diplomat—the Foreign Secretary—after decades in the bureaucracy and aware that new diplomats had no idea of their job, asked if they knew what their job was. His audience said they did not, so the Foreign Secretary explained their job in terms of what is familiar to them, as their murmurs and bobbing heads confirmed—the epic. That the *Mahabharata* is the reference for the MEA was reiterated during my teaching two of its batches. It was impossible to miss that everyone, regardless of caste or religion, knew the ins-and-outs of the epic, perhaps because they were totally removed from the West's semantic fields relating to diplomacy. Symptomatic was a new Hindu diplomat, who said early one morning—while exchanging Mughal couplets with another Hindu diplomat—in a freezing train in Rajasthan: “No matter how English speaking we are, this [the *Mahabharata*] remains our basic.” Furthermore, in conversation with nearly six percent of Indian diplomats, not one contradicted the Foreign Secretary's view. Essentially, what he did was retrieve a tool from an intellectual kit already known to new diplomats so they could make sense of their job.⁸ This familiarity with the *Mahabharata* at the level of individuals conducting diplomacy is suggestive of the epic playing a role in the very production of diplomacy. Any other suggestion, such as of Western concepts influencing Indian diplomacy, is inexplicable, for it makes for an unfathomable chasm between policy and those who make it. Moreover, such a suggestion contradicts the representativeness of democracy which, regardless of its flaws, defines Indian bureaucratic politics.⁹

That is why the first section of this essay theorizes how the *Mahabharata* produces diplomacy but not in terms of the epic, nor analysts. Rather, the *Mahabharata* is made sense of in terms of its utilization by India's most successful and influential diplomat, Mahatma Gandhi, who understood the myth as a reading on *violence*. To view the myth in, as will be shown, the ever-influential Gandhi's terms, is not an exercise in nativism, but to recognise the epic's lived-quality. An aspect of this is the epic's transmission into the Indian state's corridors of power by Gandhi, as the managing of *violence*. In other words, the *Mahabharata* is utilized to account for diplomacy today not for sentimentality nor for novelty, but to reveal that “which Western observers normally miss or misunderstand,” and as it happens, as a “corrective to the allegedly universalistic theories of interest that dominate political analysis.”¹⁰ To do both cannot miss that the roots of the production

of diplomacy lie in Gandhi's theorizing violence and his invention of *satyagraha*, which absorbed offense instead of replicating it, so as to curtail it. Moreover, *satyagraha*'s formal nationalization to become India's diplomacy was because Gandhi's foremost pupil was also India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his legacy shapes the diplomacy of the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Before explicating how Indian diplomacy from Nehru to the BJP utilized the *Mahabharata* as presented by the Mahatma, elaborated is how he understood the myth. He had long engaged the epic and reproduced two lessons from it. Between 1905 and 1947 he directly referred to or quoted it nearly three hundred times, patiently studied it, translated entire sections of it, and encouraged its study.¹¹ The first lesson he took wholesale was the *Mahabharata*'s *dharma*-complex or contextual action. In fact, the word *dharma* in the sense it is used in the epic suffuses his writings, appearing more than three thousand times. The second was the epic's concern with managing offense, defensively, that is, curtailing offense without replicating it. The *Mahabharata*, though professing *ahimsa* or nonviolence, was for Gandhi unable to resolve the quandary of defense without offense. Gandhi solved this by replacing interest with disinterest, applied contextually. This is because interest permits equivalences—that is, contracts between interested parties—to make for politics both between and within nations; but paradoxically, it is to safeguard interests that the parties resort to offense. In contrast, *satyagraha* is defensive and so calls not for interest but for disinterest, extending to a willingness to sacrifice one's own life. No doubt this requires courage, but it also allowed parties to extricate themselves from the dependency and contingency inherent in contracts. Testimony to the effectiveness of disinterest was *satyagraha* terminating British colonialism by absorbing its offenses while not replicating them. But Gandhi had no dictum for what a defense was, apart from that it was always contextual. That Gandhi's *satyagraha* is what India chose is why its diplomacy is *in absentia*, for the very disinterestedness of diplomacy continues to animate practitioners.

The next two sections demonstrate how this intellectual setting arising from Gandhi's *Mahabharata* actually animates diplomatic practice. This begins to emerge in what underscores diplomacy, and that is the *Mahabharata*'s calculations of contextual defense. This is discernible in two diplomatic practices: the instant that India deployed nuclear-capable strategic airpower diplomatically against Balakot, a target in Pakistan, in 2019, and the perpetuity extending beyond the nation-state's history that is Indian nuclear diplomacy, culminating with the adoption of No First Use (NFU) and Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD). To excavate both in terms of diplomats, rather than analysts, discloses the term for calculation was defense. Noteworthy, too, is that relative to offense, defense improves systemic security, stems sovereignty's fragmentation, and retains control over the future. This is because offense finds security in exceeding opponent's offensiveness, which naturally intensifies competition and so perpetually degrades global security. In addition, sovereignty is fragmented by security being dependent on the

opponent's choice to exceed or not, one's own offensiveness. Moreover, offense constantly hands over control to opponents because it is their actions that actors must counter, since security lies in exceeding everyone else's offensiveness. However, the superiority of defense over offense tactically, strategically, and morally, has a cost. Defense is contingent on not matching offense and so necessitates sacrifice, which calls for an uncommon courage. Undoubtedly, offense is courageous, but this is immeasurably intensified in defense because sacrifice requires absorbing offense while not replicating it. Nowhere was this more apparent than in India's nuclear diplomacy as invented by Nehru and now practiced by the BJP. In short, what this shows is that there is no constant to Indian diplomacy in practice except that it is a defense applied contextually.

The preoccupation with context and defense is ironically most apparent in the BJP's attempts to refute it, so as to be able to claim a new intellectual history at a remove from the Mahatma's. For instance, at Balakot the BJP wanted to be shot of the courage defense demands, and so sought to change diplomacy from contextual defense to contextual offense. The desire to be done with being courageous is calculable in the price the BJP's leadership paid. It began with equating India with Pakistan to calculate the offense, and fragmenting India's sovereignty for security became dependent on how Pakistan responded. Moreover, control was handed to Islamabad because it could now legitimately escalate to safeguard itself from an offensive neighbor. That the price was paid to secure freedom from having to be courageous is obvious in what occurred prior to Balakot. Then, New Delhi did muster the courage to contextually sacrifice itself, overwhelmingly in the borderlands, to deaden the offense of terrorism by denying any meaning to Islamabad's provocations. Moreover, defense in the context of China had also denied its provocations meaning, if only until the adoption of NFU between 1998 and 2003. Till then, New Delhi enhanced systemic security, maintained sovereignty, and control, by not responding offensively to Pakistani and Chinese offenses. Doing so, however, meant choosing to live in the shadow of terror as well as nuclear annihilation and this sacrifice called for an uncommon courage. It ensured defense, but that was undone by NFU's adoption because, if only for the bureaucrat who formulated the policy, it was a stop-gap measure until India could be offensive. In short, India was contextually offensive at Balakot but remains defensive in its nuclear diplomacy despite officialdom. Additionally, while Balakot was a shift from defense to relieve the BJP of having to be courageous, NFU was defense but in service of offense.

What attests to the *Mahabharata's* centrality then is not that it is utilized but that its abrogation consumes diplomatic policy makers even as they seek interest with results disastrous for the globe. How, therefore, interest infiltrates disinterest, requires gauging, and this is done in the conclusion via a calculus of disinterested diplomacy with offensive diplomacy, which exposes its foundations as interest and, inevitably, contracts, because of its Abrahamic origins. Extending the calculus to China makes visible the anti-interest "brightness" (明). Recommended for

implementation ritualistically, it not only provides a means to manage the infiltration of interest but also divulges that what is truly at stake is not only the fate of nations but freedom itself.

VIOLENCE

What makes the *Mahabharata* seminal is that it engaged Gandhi, whose most significant follower was Nehru. Looking back on his prime ministerial work in his later years, Nehru said, "The policies and philosophy we implement are taught by Gandhiji . . . His solutions helped us cover the chasm between the Industrial Revolution and the Nuclear Era. After all, the only answer to the Atom Bomb is non-violence." Nehru elaborated, "Gandhiji organised a practical philosophy of action which we inherited . . . the most practical substitute for violence by bringing about a mighty revolution with the bloodless weapon of passive resistance." Asked if passive resistance, that is, defense, suggested "Gandhiji broke and emasculated your earlier faith in scientific Socialism with his spiritual solutions," Nehru answered: "It is wrong to say that he broke or emasculated anybody. Any such thing would be against his way. The most important thing he insisted upon was the importance of means: ends were shaped by the means, and therefore the means had to be truthful. That is what we learnt from him and it is well we did."¹² As for Gandhi, he never doubted Nehru: "You cannot divide water by striking it with a stick. Jawaharlal will be my successor. He does what I want. When I am gone he will do what I am doing. Then he will speak my language too."¹³

That this language conveys a theory is obvious in Gandhi's abstracting the concerns and elements of the globalized international system to violence and nonviolence, and from it, forging a theory of action. In doing so he forwarded an intellectual stream he had long engaged, most tangibly, in the *Mahabharata*. Its contribution to Gandhi was twofold. The first arises from its very narrativization, which is the moral of contextuality which is also presented contextually. For instance, example after example is made to demonstrate the point of contextuality. This is significant and, following the text, is termed *dharma* or contextual action. There is an interrelated category within the text: highest-*dharma* or the super-moral. Their relationship is complicated by, for instance, *ahimsa* and *anrasamsya* (nonviolence and noncruelty) being amongst highest-*dharma*, which suggests that contextual action cannot be the moral. Indeed, of the fifty-four instances in the text of highest-*dharma*, there are more than twenty-five categories and numerous subcategories, including individual *dharms*. In other words, if *dharma* is context-dependent action, then highest-*dharma* is knowing that this is the way to act in whatever situation one is in, and recognizing that situation within an ontology that admits virtually endless variation and deferral in matters of formulating and approaching *the highest*. In other words, the text's moral—that is, the highest-truth—is that all contexts generate their own truth. In short, *dharma* is a metaphysic that enables highest-*dharma*.

In putting them forward in combination, what is constructed is the *dharma*-complex, and it accounts for Indian diplomacy's consistent concern with calibrating defense contextually—or its failed abrogation by the BJP now.¹⁴ The second contribution the text made was in its grappling with the problem of defensively managing offense, and even curtailing it without reproducing it. The epic, though preaching the sanctity of all contexts which logically disallows any offense to any context, was unable to manage offense. Hence the epic's story of the killing of a blind beast by the hunter Balaka, who is nonetheless transported to heaven because the beast had vowed to kill all creatures. The issue of what is usually wrong becoming right and its reverse is managed by the *dharma*-complex, but its logic demands nonviolence, so how can Balaka's violence be permissible, much less rewarded? This is what Gandhi resolved by categorizing actions as offensive and defensive, which allowed him to develop the practice of *satyagraha*, and which Nehru made into diplomacy, and the BJP continues to follow, if only, in trying to undo it.¹⁵

It began with Gandhi recognizing life is violent and so nonviolence is an unrealizable ideal, but that this did not "vitate the principle itself." Noting the "difference between one action and another lies only in the degree of violence involved," Gandhi classified actions into two classes: offense and defense. The latter is a form of offense since it defends, but it is also ontologically different from offense for absorbing the former and doing so in one's own terms rather than with any reference to the former. This is *satyagraha*, and its success is contingent on its practitioner entirely giving up any interest in themselves, laying themselves open to offense, and in absorbing it, converting it.¹⁶ That accounts for the ferocity of Gandhi's battle-cry. "Fight violence with non-violence if you can and if you can't do that, fight violence by any means, even if it means your utter extinction," he said, knowing full well it was inevitable in the face of offense.¹⁷ Facing it called for the courage unique to defense, and so Gandhi sought in an SS—Schutzstaffel—officer of the Third Reich, for it was one of the most formidable fighting forces of his day, the "art of throwing away my life for a noble cause."¹⁸ This raises the question of what is the *noble cause* and whether resisting to the point of extinction is in keeping with the cause or defense. Taking them in turns, the cause for Gandhi was the epic's *dharma*-complex, which was the *truth*, because of how he placed it in relation to other matters. He wrote: "While the end is truth, non-violence is the means of attaining it. In such matters, the means cannot be separated from the end. Hence I have written that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin."¹⁹ As for truth being synonymous with the *dharma*-complex, this was apparent in his writings, of which he wrote:

At the time of writing . . . my aim is not to be consistent with previous statements on a question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. . . . But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to . . . try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies.²⁰

Truth is the same duality as the *dharma*-complex. Truth is certain within the practitioner's immediate context, and this very momentariness of truth makes for an abiding truth: the truth of contextual truth. If every situation is truthful then its protection had to also be truthful in that it did not destroy any context, including the offensive. That is why only *satyagraha* could do because it internalized, rather than generated, violence. Gandhi relies on converting the offender's violence to nonviolence by the spectacle of the former's effect on the latter—which also reiterates the abiding nature of truth. It is this that brings to the fore the question: Does defense merit death? Clearly, there can be no conversion if the defender perishes. Additionally, there is the momentariness of truth which mandates that it can only be the practitioner in context who can judge what the acuity of the defense ought to be. The combination means that while defending to the point of suicide is acceptable, such a finality must be judged in the moment for whether it maintains truth or converts the offensive. If it does then death can be entertained, but not otherwise because that undermines truth. In practice this translates into tolerance for sacrifice, so long as the truth is not eliminated, and offense is converted. Death is undoubtedly a barbarity and intolerable, but only if it extinguishes truth.

What this was, was a radical departure from the world's conceptualization—note the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* foremost declaration being the *Right to Life*—and underpinning it was the ejection of interest. *Satyagraha*'s basis cannot be interest because it relies on disinterest in the most meaningful of senses—to sacrifice one's own life. Gandhi therefore pursued disinterest as the foundation for *satyagraha*. It is, in addition to not seeking life, a disinterested response because it also cannot be contractually engaged by offense since despite its threats or more, it cannot find any interest to offend. Moreover, not only is any offense rendered meaningless by disinterested actors, they are also the means to convert offense. Conversion occurs when offense realizes its "evil," as the British did with the opium trade. Its death knell was sounded, after all, not in China, or because of Chinese actions, or their wars with the British, but at the center of the drug trade, London, because of British regret. It was forged from the realization that they, the British, conducted "the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times."²¹ In other words, the British realized their ways were offensive and thus evil and so they ceased.

This combination of disinterest and context is not unique to India and indeed long predated the nation-state. By its birth, it was also apparent that the combination was applicable to the realm of international politics. That Gandhi recognized both is apparent in his noting *satyagraha* in at least two instances. The first *satyagraha* was Polish resistance to Nazi Germany, which continued after Warsaw had capitulated. Gandhi's commentary on the resistance is telling. "Supposing a mouse in fighting a cat tried to resist the cat with his sharp teeth, would you call that mouse violent? . . . In the same way, for the Poles to stand valiantly against the German hordes vastly superior in numbers, military equipment and strength,

was almost non-violence. . . . You must give its full value to the word ‘almost,’” said Gandhi. The second instance of *satyagraha* was created by Pakistan invading Kashmir in 1947, of which Gandhi said: “Pakistan invaded Kashmir. Units of the Indian army have gone to Kashmir . . . on the express invitation of the Maharaja and Sheikh Abdullah . . . the real Maharaja of Kashmir. Muslims in their thousands are devoted to him.” For Gandhi and India, Pakistan’s violence was an offense against the people epitomized by Sheikh Abdullah, and therefore worthy of resistance which, though by an army, was different enough from Pakistan’s offense to be nonviolent since it was not contingent on the former, and sought not to extinguish it by contract, but rather, convert it by sacrifice. “I do not agree that the armed force our Government has dispatched to Kashmir has committed aggression there,” said Gandhi, for the troops were conducting a defense. Yet defense was violence, which is why he found it “barbarous,” but it had to be done, for as he had said, the end was not nonviolence. It was only the means to truth, which is the lesson he learned from the *Mahabharata*—its *dharma*-complex.²²

The novelty of Gandhi’s philosophy and its practicality as *satyagraha* both within and without nation-states is only apparent if contextualized in diplomacy as it is generally understood. In the Western tradition, the diplomat incorporates only after the grounds have been prepared by crafting everything into interests by academics. In other words, the relatively recent Westphalian system’s way of conceptualizing in terms of interests must first be disseminated globally before it can be utilized. Though this conceptualization is new in global terms, it is European and so has a history in states crumbling from a church, splintering out of the papacy. This history of fragmentation was the reproduction of interest into other realms. After all, interest’s constitution today in material terms is just a secularization of interest as real and ideal, understood as man and God and which was to be mediated by the contractor, the papacy. The locking together in contract is not new either, just a replay of Christ as mediator trying to unify man with God. Of interest is Christ’s purpose because it arises from man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and that is doubly significant: for being an Old Testament story, and because it marks the birth of interest as the splitting of the world into components which then must contract, to unify. Indeed, contracting to unify is the entire purpose of this intellectual stream, which, because of where it originates, organizes everything descended from Abrahamic religion. Its most noteworthy contribution is interest not only for its ubiquity but also for highlighting Gandhi’s ingenuity as well as the technical finesse of a handful of Indian diplomats in applying it to international politics.

DEFENSE

That the *Mahabharata* became India’s diplomacy, via Gandhi, is nowhere more apparent than in nuclear diplomacy. That it was directly drawn from the *Mahabharata*’s lessons on contextual defense is because the formulator for nuclear

diplomacy was Gandhi's pupil, Nehru. He limited the atom to research with the 1948 Atomic Energy Act. Moreover, to curtail any slippage to offense, and always aware of context, India proposed in 1954 a Standstill Agreement to suspend nuclear testing. China's announcing it would develop a bomb, the war with China, and its nuclear test in 1964, could not divert India's nuclear research away from research. However, parliament was not as steadfast in defense and more prone to India's deteriorating context, which is why fear of China led to calls for weaponization.²³ Nehru was unaffected, but following his death, democratic pressure made Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri initiate the Subterranean Nuclear Explosion Project (SNEP) in 1965, which upon completion would have put India three months from a test.²⁴ Even if SNEP was not scrapped within months by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, it would have maintained India's posture of being less capable by design, and so less offensive, than its nuclear rivals—starting with China and extending to other nuclear powers.

Mrs. Gandhi's policies by being her father's, maintained Gandhi's philosophy. Hence, she pressed for the curtailment of nuclear weapons and proposed at the UN a non-proliferation treaty, a full five years, before the Non-Proliferation Treaty.²⁵ Despite its efforts, India failed to secure a nuclear guarantee. The unbearable burden of obliteration prompted a test in 1974, but it was not followed by militarization because the logic of defense continued: India remained in an indisputably weaker position *vis-à-vis* adversaries. The next steps were also contextually defensive despite involving weaponization under Indira's son, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and its revelation in 1998. The context for weaponization was Rajiv's Six Nation Five Continent Appeal for nuclear disarmament at a summit meeting in 1985, which garnered little interest. Meanwhile, undeterred by India's test, China expanded its nuclear weapons program and supplied one to Pakistan. "Beijing has consistently regarded a nuclear-armed Pakistan as a crucial ally and vital counterweight to India's capabilities," testified the CIA's director in 1993.²⁶ Despite all, India maintained its posture of weakness relative to all including Pakistan, which achieved weapon's capacity some eight years before New Delhi.²⁷ Its capacity was prompted, in addition to Pakistan, by contradictions in China's NFU policy from the 1980s. "Very often one finds strategists arguing abstractly in favour of first strikes in conventional and nuclear war, even while claiming that China is committed to a second strike posture," commented an analyst.²⁸ It was in this matrix of nuclear instability, escalation, dissemination, illegality, and deception that India became a nuclear weapons state, disclosed it promptly, and continued its posture of weakness—at least in practice—with NFU and CMD. This was done because at the core of policy change was the abiding concern with defending without offense.

That practice was motivated by contextual defense is confirmed by what was said about it by those who did it. In other words, how practice was made sense of. At a broad level, survey results showed that until the 1990s there was a "remarkable picture of restraint in the face of grave provocation," as nearly half the

members of the strategic elite did not consider nuclear retaliation necessary even in response to a minor nuclear attack. It was in this milieu that Rajiv operated, and he reproduced it. His scientific advisor said Rajiv “was genuinely against the bomb,” implying he had been forced to weaponize. The sentiment arose from the purpose inherited from his mother, grandfather, and his *guru*, Mahatma Gandhi. A Foreign Secretary who served Rajiv reminisced that he “envision[s] a world without hate, fear and confrontation . . . This, in Rajiv Gandhi’s own phrase, is ‘India’s millennial concept of the world as a family. This vision of a new world order is a spiritual vision, not unlike Jawaharlal Nehru’s but closer, it seems, to Mahatma Gandhi’s.’”²⁹ In noting this, all that is being restated is that defense was policy and that it was an inheritance from India’s freedom struggle.

That was also evident in what was said of Mrs. Gandhi, which will have to suffice in the absence of any official records of the decision to test. A secret cable from American ambassador Chester Bowles and about a private conversation between the Canadian high commissioner and Mrs. Gandhi noted: “With China at her [Mrs. Gandhi’s] back, and Pakistan lurking on the sidelines, she foresaw no alternative but to keep open her option on the production of nuclear weapons.”³⁰ As for the actual decision, the Indian Foreign Secretary at the time wrote: “There were no policy papers nor had there been any discussion on this crucial matter in the External Affairs Ministry.” The official had suggested drawing up background papers and Mrs. Gandhi had agreed, but on the day, she glowered and asked who had authorized their preparation. The official continues: “I tried to refresh her memory, but she would have none of it. She said something about a ‘national decision,’ but we were not aware of any national decision or even debate in Parliament on the sensitive issue. At least three of us [the Secretaries in charge of the Defence, Finance, and Foreign, ministries] were greatly puzzled at our summary and inexplicable rebuff for carrying out what we conceived to be our assigned duty.”³¹ This firsthand report of the decision-making behind the test reinforces the contention that nuclear decisions rise from inherited beliefs, and that this was so for Mrs. Gandhi was clear to another American ambassador, Daniel Moynihan, who reported it to Washington in January 1974.³² What is significant here though, is that on both sides of the watershed that was the test, India operated in terms of calculations to defend, as opposed to exceed, at a minimum, Pakistan’s offensive capacities.

Mrs. Gandhi’s clarity of thought on nuclear policy was an inheritance from her father. He too tried to calculate defense from before India came into existence, but unlike his daughter, spoke of it. For instance, in a lecture prior to independence on “defense and national development,” Nehru laid out defense without offense: “India will . . . not prepare for or think in terms of any aggression or dominion over any other country. Defence thus becomes purely defence against external aggression or internal disorder.”³³ Inaugurating India’s first reactor a few years later, Nehru further detailed the policy: “No man can prophesy the future. But

I should like to say on behalf of any future Government of India that whatever might happen, whatever the circumstances, we shall never use atomic energy for evil purposes. There is no condition to this assurance, because once a condition is attached, the value of an assurance does not go very far.”³⁴

While it is significant that Nehru denounced nuclear weapons, what is noteworthy is his overt articulation of unconditionality because anything else would be “evil.” Its spiritual rather than political connotations convey the issue was not developing or using nuclear weapons but their offensiveness. That is why he wrote in 1964 in the margins of a note to the country’s foremost nuclear scientist, Homi Bhabha: “Apart from building power stations and developing electricity, there is always a built-in advantage of defense use if the need should arise.”³⁵ Yet diverting the program to military purposes was an abomination, but one dependent on context. That is why Nehru also said that if nothing were done to check weaponization then “it may become almost impossible to control the situation.”³⁶ To lose control was ultimately not to weaponize, or even use, but to do so offensively. That is why Nehru sought to placate the offensive amongst his electorate by noting that there was a built defensive capacity to nuclear research. However, the temptation to offense was too great, which is why bombs should never be built, though he was aware of the compunctions of a contextual defense which might necessitate them. Hence, he wrote, at the end of his days: “We are determined not to use weapons for war purposes. We do not make atom bombs. I do not think we will.”³⁷

What is remarkable is not that India was forced into making bombs but that doing so was in line with the *Mahabharata*’s lessons on *ahimsa*, *dharma*, and the *dharma*-complex. These, however, persist despite bureaucratic elements trying to undercut the *Mahabharata*’s lessons. The most significant instance of this was K. Subrahmanyam, the bureaucrat who drafted the policy of NFU and CMD. His purpose was not to eschew nuclear bombs but to always remain inferior to offensive parties who are so by virtue of having more tools, in this case bombs, to be offensive. Hence, India keeps to the epic’s lessons, and so continues to make the sacrifice of living in the shadow of being unable to deter annihilation via the logics of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). However, the bureaucrat was unable to fully comprehend the logic-stream beginning with the *Mahabharata* that he was engaging, and so undercut the defense he planned, while maintaining contextuality. Committed to a contextual nuclear defense, the official repeatedly voiced his case in Gandhian terms. For instance, he wrote a “future strategy has to be based on a vision of non-violence” and also that “non-violence as a resistance strategy had to be on a case-by-case basis: it cannot be treated as universally applicable against all aggression in the world,” and indeed the only reason for India’s non-violence was that nuclear weapons meant “the globe has shrunk to a small space station.”³⁸ This final conditionality to defense is what negated this very Gandhian thinking, and illustrates Subrahmanyam’s limits. That is because the sacrifice implicit in defense neutralizes the offense to meaninglessness and perhaps might

even convert it—if the offender realizes the pointlessness of its exertions. However, and in contradistinction to Nehru, the bureaucrat made defense conditional, and mandated the possibility of offense. That undermined India's pledge to only defend and converted it into no more than a stop-gap measure to the day when enough arms could be stockpiled to permit offense. In short, until India achieved first-strike capacity. This also undid defense because a preemptive strike against India was now no longer unjustified because its defense was just a means to play catch-up to being offensive. Nevertheless, and despite the official's long-term intentions, India continues to maintain inferiority to all the nuclear powers that threaten it, which attests to the continuity of the *Mahabharata* despite, in turns, Subrahmanyam's limitations and incompetence.

OFFENSE

A more recent attempt to undo the *Mahabharata*'s lesson only reiterates its organizing significance. This begins to emerge in India describing its airstrike by nuclear-capable Mirage-2000 fighter-bombers against Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) terrorist camps in Pakistan's Balakot region on 26 February 2019 as a "non-military" action.³⁹ The dissonance between the act and its description is not easily resolved. Nevertheless, what is certain is that for India this was a diplomatic rather than a military act because it was designated so and because it was presented by the top diplomat, the Foreign Secretary. That other pronouncements following the strike were overwhelmed by hyperbole and are riddled with inconsistencies, but more importantly bear no relevance to the state's understanding of its actions because they were unofficial. In any case, even before India could unveil its airstrike, Pakistan announced an "effective response" made its enemy bomb in "haste while escaping."⁴⁰ Just hours later, *Reuters* journalists visited the bombed location, took photographs, conducted interviews, and concluded India's bombs had indeed missed their target—which in any case was inactive.⁴¹ The Indian leadership's embarrassment teetered on mortification the next day when an Indian MIG-21 fighter jet was destroyed by enemy fire. Humiliation was guaranteed by satellite imagery and third-party sources confirming Pakistan's narrative.⁴² India's current BJP leadership which proclaims its *jumla*, or sophistry, turned to it.⁴³ At an election rally the Home Affairs Minister announced "300 mobile phones were active" in the bombing zone prior to the mission.⁴⁴ Proving 300 phones belonged to terrorists, not noncombatants, suggests excellent signals intelligence and human intelligence, despite the complication of there just being 150 recruits present. The implication was that India tracked millions of noncombatants in the expectation that some may become terrorists. This is all very unlikely since it is beyond intelligence agencies with superior budgets, technology, and training at integrating multiple sources of intelligence, noted an Australian military officer.⁴⁵

The only way to understand the strike then is to return to the official pronouncement and read it in the terms of its writers. In addition to it being a

diplomatic action, what becomes apparent if Indians are listened to, is a context of change from defense to offense. So said the bureaucrat who announced Balakot, and it was so obvious that even the Chinese “clearly see strategic culture is changing under the current government. India is willing to take risks. Use of force is no longer ruled out.”⁴⁶ The change arose from the airstrike’s architect—the National Security Advisor (NSA), whose role as coordinator for all diplomatic matters was reinforced in the wake of the strike by his elevation to Cabinet rank.⁴⁷ What reiterates that the NSA manages diplomacy—rather than the Foreign Minister—is his continuing to be the Prime Minister’s special envoy to critical neighbors despite the loss of territory to China at Doklam in 2020 and Balakot, selecting his own people for key assignments such as brokering negotiations with Nepal, and participating in all key diplomatic meetings in India. Indeed, the NSA is the “go-to man in Indian diplomacy . . . the foreign minister . . . a superior clerk,” noted India’s leading newspaper.⁴⁸ The only time the NSA’s explanation of his strategic approach, which makes for the means to read the strike, was recorded for general consumption was a lecture instructive precisely because despite notes, it is littered with irregularities and spliced with disfluencies and fillers, common to Indian-English, or *Hinglish*.⁴⁹ The content is not a regurgitation of received knowledge, but a lived sense of strategy garnered from background and career.

The NSA said the talk’s title—“India’s Strategic Response to Terrorism”—equates terrorism to other strategic threats including nuclear war, and so requires a strategic response, that is, behavior applicable to all situations in the long-term. In the nearly hour-long lecture, the NSA said whatever is done must ensure that India’s “civilizational values and culture remain intact” and that “we engage the enemy in three modes.” They are “defensive mode . . . if somebody comes here we will prevent him, we will defend this . . . defensive-offense, to defend ourselves we will go to the place from where the offense is coming from . . . third is the offensive mode where you go outright.” In this context, what was also of consequence was his saying the “nuclear threshold is a difficulty in the offensive mode but not in the defensive-offense” because “you (Pakistan) may do one Mumbai, you will lose Balochistan . . . there is no nuclear war involved in that . . . there is no engagement of troops . . . if you know the tricks, we know the tricks better than you.”⁵⁰

Contextual defense was therefore the NSA’s term for calculation, but in addition the airstrike was also an offense for being a contextual retaliation intending to kill many times more than the lives claimed by JEM’s acts of cross-border terror. The shift to offense then was thought out, but what was its purpose? The answer begins to appear in the price the BJP paid to be offensive. The cost began with the BJP equating, for the first time, India with Pakistan, which had to be done to calculate a more offensive response to Pakistani offensiveness. The very fact that the BJP chose to respond offensively was to also surrender India’s sovereignty to Pakistan because it dictated what India did. India’s offense also meant that control was handed to Islamabad and that the future was now up to it—for the first time

vis-à-vis India. That Pakistan chose not to escalate despite no longer being denied the opportunity to do so by India's defense, for India was no longer defensive, testifies to Islamabad's ability to control itself in a manner impossible for the BJP. Indeed, Islamabad exercised a self-restraint almost equal to what New Delhi had practiced prior to Balakot, and this history provides the rest of the answer to what the BJP sought in its offense. Until February 2019, India had never granted equality to Pakistan. Indeed, equality was impossible because India unconditionally sacrificed itself and so maintained life whereas Pakistan's offense destroyed life. India managed offense by deadening it with sacrifice. There was therefore no equating of Pakistan's offense by India and so no proportionate or disproportionate response. This was so when Pakistanis occupied the heights of Kargil and even for the 2001 terror attack on India's parliament. Kargil was contained because India simply sacrificed itself to take back what it regarded as its own. Noteworthy about 2001 is that courage of an up-to-then uncalled-for intensity was required, and found over several months, to manage a provocation symbolically unprecedented, and so prevent escalation. India's capacity for courage ensured that there could be no escalation, much less to nuclear war, and this was a service to humanity. In other words, the courage to routinely sacrifice a few lives at the border, and even the homeland proper, meant India always retained control of what happened next. Indeed, so intent was India in sacrificing itself to retain control that the will to do so was driven home to Pakistan every so often with cross-border raids.⁵¹ The price the BJP paid to shift to offense then suggests that what the BJP's leadership sought was to be relieved of the courage required in continuing the sacrifices that rendered Pakistani terrorist offenses meaningless. Nevertheless, the shifting of India's diplomacy reiterated the abiding influence of the *Mahabharata's* notion of context, which Mahatma Gandhi brought to light and Nehru made diplomacy, as well as that the starting point for any change was another concept developed by Gandhi and Nehru, defence. Its primacy is highlighted particularly by the attempt at undoing it—no matter how stumbling the attempt.

CONCLUSIONS

The discrepancies that litter analyses of India, if not the entire non-Western world, inexorably and relentlessly coalesce into a requirement to conduct work coherently, fully, and morally. To do so inevitably makes for only one conclusion, that India's diplomacy is conducted *in absentia* for being driven by the lack of interests. This is so because diplomacy's root is *satyagraha*, which became possible because Gandhi theorized ahimsa, *dharma*, and the *dharma*-complex from the *Mahabharata* while solving its problem of engaging offense without replicating it. Doing so requires not interest, but disinterest. Yet it remains, even in India, a rarity, as is attested to by the failures of the bureaucrats shaping nuclear as well as anti-terrorism policy—Subrahmanyam for missing Gandhi's nuance and Doval for miscalculating that offense does not risk troops engaging.

These bureaucratic failures are why disinterest's Chinese covalent is useful. The equivalent to Indian disinterest are the instances of "brightness" in China's intellectual tradition dating to the pre-Christian era's *Zuo Zhuan*, which also struggled with interest.⁵² This is of interest because of the means suggested to regularize disinterest and so reap its benefits. The *Zuo Zhuan*'s struggles with disinterest are apparent in, for instance, the section on exchanging hostages to build trust and which is overshadowed by the insufficiencies of reciprocity. The text states: "Even with princes as hostages, there might not be sincere trust. If states dealt with others with brightness, and regulated their behaviour according to ritual, the trust would be solid even without hostages."⁵³ "Brightness" (明) is the means of overcoming contract's contradictions, which is why it merits interrogation in authorial terms. In the first instance brightness presented as a moral requirement for virtuosity and men with it possessed the virtue of brightness [明主 or 明君]. Virtuosity, in turn, has been understood variously, and including honesty and harmonizing with good rules. Virtuosity leads to rewards, sound government, good diplomacy, and even hegemony of "All Under Heaven" (Tianxia). Moreover, brightness for being moral is untarnished by tricks. "If a state deceives, the people will reciprocate in kind, friendly states will be alienated, and rivals will not be deterred."⁵⁴ Such a reading makes brightness procedural and legalistic, thereby reproducing interest and contract—for instance, use brightness to become virtuous to get rewards. Nor can such a reading contain brightness's incommensurability, which is precisely why the concept is proposed to overcome contract's shortcomings in politics and its concepts. Nevertheless, brightness is virtuous, which permits viewing the former as desirable but also as capable of standing on its own, as an alternative with significance. Indeed, that is why 明 was used rather than 明主 or 明君. Brightness is a solution perhaps unutterable in the context of Chinese writings, legalistic, practical, and so interest-bound, as they are—but it was. Inevitably, disinterest, and calculations of defense without offense, follow.

The call to make brightness international politics via ritualization is a uniquely Chinese claim, and in stark contrast to Gandhi's inheritors, who never even contemplated the idea. That is why India's MEA is largely disinterested in disinterest. Fieldwork within the MEA suggests that most diplomats become so to further their interests, often reprehensible for their narcissism, racism, or illegality.⁵⁵ That accounts for why there is no transmission of disinterest generationally, formally, or textually, let alone ritually.⁵⁶ However, ritual's inheritance, convention, conformity, and integration of life evidently contrasts with the creativity of constructing interest and its contracting. This divergence discloses a concern with a fundamentally philosophical concern: freedom. That freedom is the antithesis of ritual is a commonplace understanding, but it is a false one for being no more than an artifact of interest's claims to offer freedom. These offers are undermined by interest because it limits freedom to contracting and proscribes all else by not even permitting its contemplation. The unexpected result of this realization is that ritual is freedom

for not curtailing traditions of human action beyond contract. Indeed, any curtailment terminates life, for life is ritual and so everything else must be a sickness. As the Mahatma put it: “The winking of the eyelids does not need to be willed, there must be some disease if it is otherwise.”⁵⁷

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