

Strategic restraint?

This volume from Cohen and Dasgupta challenges prevailing traditional views on why India has failed to sufficiently develop her military power and concurrent strategy. Rather than focusing, as others have done, on issues such as culture, the makeup of Indian society, the presence or not of political will or India's immediate strategic environment, the authors instead present a compelling case for what they refer to as India's "deeply engrained tradition of strategic restraint".

Chris Ogden



Reviewed publication:

Cohen, S.P. and Sunil Dasgupta. 2010

Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization

Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution

350 pages, ISBN: 978 0 8157 0402 7 (hardback)

AS A CONDITION that has dominated contemporary Indian politics for the last 60 plus years, this tradition is symptomatic of an enduring belief in political not military solutions, as well as a brand of government that privileges civilian influence over all others. It also highlights a key contradiction within India – a search for a suitably armed and modern military (including nuclear weapons), but an absence of clear strategic aims underpinning how such a process should be undertaken. It is this lack of political direction and certainty that results in a situation whereby India has been effectively Arming without Aiming.

Reflecting the authors' longstanding experience, the book presents in a highly lucid and engaging manner the myriad of challenges facing India across her three armed forces, as well as her nuclear capabilities and police force. Such challenges

relate to many of the dilemmas within the Indian system – from drawn out procurement practices, weak central planning and the incidence of corruption, to how to integrate a solid strategic vision in a state that lacks a commander-in-chief and often only nascent military doctrines. Through verdant detail, these problems (and many others) are presented in a comprehensive and compelling fashion. How, for example, can India have a fully realizable nuclear triad that can quickly respond to threats if its three armed forces are not coherently linked to each other? In turn, can a civilian controlled military really effectively gauge (and with sufficient speed) imminent threats from Pakistan or China? Such questions are compounded given consideration of India's internal security threats and the high incidence of insurgency since independence.

In their elucidation of such issues, the authors pinpoint the problems confronted by a large developing state grappling with how to adequately represent itself on the world stage. Central to this analysis, is the authors' focus upon how deep-seated the belief in strategic restraint has become. Dating from an "ideological preference" of her leaders whereby

violence was associated with colonialism and imperialism, it has endured as the state's preferred modus operandi, making it hard to shift and adapt. Of especial pertinence here, is India's aspiration to great power role – and the question of whether or not a great power can act with restraint when it is expected to be a responsible provider of security commensurate with its position in the international system? It is here, that the book's real strength lies, as it underlines the distance India needs to travel to ensure this status and, crucially, how she needs to do this in a manner recognizable to the rest of the world. Such importance is underpinned by the authors' efforts to always make their analysis relevant to policymakers – in particular in the United States – with the text acting as a magisterial example of bringing the empirical and analytical into the practical domain. Acting as a primer for the problems, but also possibilities in India's strategic future, it is vital reading for understanding the connotations and consequences that this future may bring.

Chris Ogden is a lecturer in Asian Security at the University of St Andrews, Scotland (cco2@st-andrews.ac.uk).

Both images from the illustrated manuscript Hamzanama commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in about 1562 – the Hamzanama narrates the legendary exploits of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the prophet of Islam.

