

National Security

THE WELLINGTON EXPERIENCE: AN APPRAISAL

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Colonel David O. Smith has adopted a unique methodology in writing his most recent book *The Wellington Experience: A Study of the Attitudes and Values Within the Indian Army* as he did for his earlier work, *The Quetta Experience: Attitudes and Values Within Pakistan's Army*. Using available end-of-tour reports submitted by U.S. military officers who attended the Indian Defense Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington between 1979 and 2017 as well as structured interviews, Colonel Smith evaluates how attitudes have evolved in the Indian armed forces. These reports and interviews **include** 21 officers from the U.S. Army, four from the U.S. Air Force and four from the U.S. Navy. Spread over almost four decades and involving a considerable number of respondents the study draws from a substantial amount of data to show the evolution of the Indian army.

However, one also has to keep in mind the study's limitations while reading. First, the study provides only "a perspective" about the DSSC, from the narrow prism of U.S. officers who attended the institution. Second, the conclusions drawn from the study of a

training institution—irrespective of its primacy—when used to extrapolate the culture, traditions, professional ethos, and outlook of a large institution like the Indian military would neither be fair nor accurate. Third, entry into the DSSC is based upon a competitive examination and only around 20-25 percent of officers manage to enter the College. In the wider context of the whole of the Indian military this becomes an even more miniscule ratio. The student officers who undergo the course at Wellington are a selected lot of officers generally professionally superior to the bulk of officers who fail to qualify. They, therefore, have brighter career prospects and higher stakes which modulate their conduct and behavior which may not be a true reflection of their actual instincts. Similarly, the Directing Staff and Senior Management at such institutions are top professionals likely to attain higher ranks in the military and are therefore career conscious and cautious in their behavior.

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The tendency not to question or challenge superiors is ingrained in not only South Asian but Eastern culture in general. In the case of India, George Tanham in his seminal study on *Indian Strategic Thought* **points out that**, “the caste system has given Indians a hierarchical view not only of India but of the world; they rank nations by size, culture and power...[The caste system] tends to foster a conservative and non-innovative mind-set.” Smith has **referred** to Pavan Varma’s study which mentions “moral relativism” as an Indian trait, although Smith notes his conscious use of the term “South Asian” rather than Indian in discussing cultural traditions and practices. Tanham also alludes to this relativism noting that, “Indians see [their interference in East Pakistan and in Sri Lanka] as less reprehensible than similar actions by neighbors against them.”

Read with the above caveats in mind the book provides an insight into the Indian military culture from a distinctive angle. To Colonel Smith’s credit he has maintained objectivity in a study whose basic information is based on personal experiences of American students who spent a year with their fellow Indian students and instructors. Such a lengthy interaction is bound to introduce a degree of subjectivity in their narratives depending on whether their personal experiences were pleasant or unpleasant. The conclusions of the study are mostly pertinent, pointed, and insightful. However, there are certain observations which could further amplify some conclusions and modify some others as explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Four main subject areas of the book with their possible implications for Pakistan and for South Asian security and stability in general would be discussed as under:

Perceptions of External Threats and Friendships

Indians have experienced numerous foreign invasions and occupation of their homeland by foreigners including the colonization by the British, which has made suspicion of outsiders a part of India's strategic thinking that should explain the mistrust of the American intentions. Smith's contention that India's lack of trust in the United States is due to a long history of cordial relations between Pakistan and the United States, may only be partially true. A look at the history of U.S. relations with India and Pakistan would illustrate that even during the heydays of the U.S.-Pakistan bonhomie the volume of economic assistance given to India under the PL-480 program—also known as the Agriculture Trade Development and Assistance Act—was far **greater** than that given to Pakistan. During the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962, the United States rushed to India's assistance and **supplied it** with huge quantities of arms and equipment. After the Chinese nuclear test in October 1964, the United States was quick to **offer assurances** that it would help Asian nations “in dealing with Communist China's aggression,” and discussed earmarking some of its nuclear warheads for India to deal with the Chinese threat at **senior levels** of the Johnson administration—although these discussions were later dropped in consideration of India's non-aligned status and the likelihood of other countries located on China's periphery to demand similar assurances. However, Indian interlocutors were **assured** in private meetings with their U.S. counterparts.

Smith is right in concluding that despite recent improvement in Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation India is unlikely to become a true strategic ally of the United States. It would be a folly on the part of the United States to expect India to do its bidding vis-à-vis China at the cost of its own core strategic interests.

Much is made by the USS *Enterprise* Task Force's foray into the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 War to support Pakistan, and both Smith and Tanham have made a reference to this, however, India never mentions a similar task force dispatched by the United States to the Bay of Bengal in India's support in 1962. One would have expected David Smith to have made a mention of that as well. As for growing hostility towards Pakistan one can furnish the following reasons:

1. Pakistan has refused to accept India's primacy in South Asia and amongst India's smaller neighbors it is the only country which poses a military challenge to India.
2. India believed that it had cut Pakistan to size in 1971 but to the country's dismay Pakistan not only bounced back but acquired nuclear capability to nullify India's

conventional military advantage.

3. Pakistan has involved outside powers in South Asia by entering into close strategic relations with the United States and of late with China to constrain India's ability to project its power beyond South Asia.
4. India blames Pakistan for keeping the Kashmir problem on the boil.

Given the difficult topography of the India-China border, which prohibits a large-scale war between the two countries, and the lack of power differential between the two, India does not see China as an existential threat. Colonel Smith has rightly identified a lack of an emotional element in the Sino-Indian conflict. There is a greater willingness on the part of India to negotiate with China to resolve differences and even during periods of tensions diplomatic interactions at multilateral forums such as BRICS, SCO, and the Russia-China-India forum continue. Further, Smith is right in concluding that despite recent improvement in Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation India is unlikely to become a true strategic ally of the United States. It would be a folly on the part of the United States to expect India to do its bidding vis-à-vis China at the cost of its own core strategic interests.

Perceptions of Internal Security Threats

Colonel Smith has highlighted the unenviable record of India's counter-insurgency operations and the tendency to prefer kinetic means at the cost of ignoring the other component—winning hearts and minds. One reason for this approach is the tendency to characterize insurgencies as an external rather than internal problem blaming these on foreign interference. Smith has rightly identified the problems in the Indian army's conduct in dealing with the insurgency in Kashmir including incidents of extra-judicial killings. A former Indian military officer, Ali Ahmed, seems to corroborate his findings **arguing** that: "The army has had an extended deployment in Kashmir. While it has enabled operational experience for its members, there is a danger that the advantages of this can make the army acquire a stake in the disturbed conditions. This makes the army part of the problem in Kashmir. Its deployment is not without a price in regard to the internal good health of the army." Ahmed alludes to ethically questionable practices of the Indian army which have resulted in recent discovery of **2,000 unmarked graves** and the estimated 10,000 missing persons and considers these responsible for the current distress in Kashmir. He also points to the elevation of General Bipin Rawat's as the Army Chief on the basis of his tactical experience in counter-insurgency operations suggesting that: "Inflation of this parameter amounts to incentivizing ticket-punching in India's disturbed areas by ambitious officers and ... making the army acquire a vested interest in disturbed conditions." He also seems to support Smith's point regarding military's lack of exposure to major military operations in a contested battle environment by stating that, "the mainstream army is more or less in static guard duties, manning the LoC fortifications with Standard Operating Procedures as guide or carrying out routine population control measures."



Attitudes Towards the State and its Institutions

There is room for disagreement with the book's conclusions about the apolitical character of the Indian military and its remaining unaffected by the wave of Hindutva-driven nationalism in the Indian polity. As argued earlier, the officers at the DSSC and similar military training institutions have high career stakes and would therefore be cautious in expressing their views on sensitive issues like religion, politics, or ethnicity in public. There is also a custom of service inherited from the British by both Indian and Pakistani militaries that religion and politics should not be discussed in the officers' messes. Outside the DSSC however, there is enough evidence to suggest growing politicization of the military. General Rawat's **public statements** supporting the ruling political dispensation and large numbers of senior retired officers **joining the BJP** on the eve of the last general elections, the use of surgical strikes for political purposes with the Indian Air Force towing the political line by endorsing the unsubstantiated claim of downing a Pakistani F-16 and delaying the inquiry report of shooting down of one of its own helicopters until after the elections, are cases in point. The virtual elimination of Muslims from the rank and file and **especially** the officers' corps is another dent in the secular credentials of the Indian military. **According** to Ali Ahmed: "There is a shift in civil-military relations from objective civilian control, that enhances professionalism and keeps the military apolitical, to subjective civilian control, wherein the military is co-opted through subscribing to the ideology-based security perspective of the ruling party. This shift poses for the military a risk of losing their apolitical ethic. Erosion of the apolitical ethic of the military will open up the military's secular ethic to modification."

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Attitudes Towards Nuclear Issues

It is a well-known fact that the Indian military was kept away from nuclear policy making in India and even now its involvement is limited. One reason could be that unlike the U.S. military which had deployed battlefield and theater nuclear weapons in Europe with American military units and sub-units handling the nuclear weapons in the field, in South Asia these weapons remain under centralized command and control and no delegation of these weapons is envisaged to formations and units. Therefore, there may be a limited perceived need to educate the rank file. However, Colonel Smith rightly points out a lack of protective gear and preparedness to fight in a nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons battlefield. However, talk of likely use of chemical weapons by Pakistan is irrelevant since Pakistan is a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and never possessed any chemical arsenal.

Another problem, specific to the Indian military is its tendency to downplay Pakistan's nuclear capability and its resolve to use nuclear weapons in certain conditions. This attitude is discernible at various Track-2 events especially tabletop exercises, on part of retired Indian military officers who seem to completely disregard the possibility of escalation and resultant nuclear use. General Bipin Rawat has **publicly stated** that India is ready to "call Pakistan's nuclear bluff." Such tendencies portend a reckless attitude towards nuclear dangers and might inadvertently lead to escalation during a future crisis. Unfortunately, such Indian behavior does not attract censure or words of caution on the part of the international community leading to further provocative behavior. The encouragement India received after its alleged surgical strike across the LOC in 2016 led to an even more provocative air strike at Balakot in February 2019. Again, instead of counseling restraint and responsibility the telephonic calls by John Bolton and Mike Pompeo did the opposite. India needs to recognize the catastrophic dangers of a nuclear conflagration for its own security and for the future of South Asian region as a whole.
