

Book Launch: US India Relations – Carina van de Wetering

Comments by Salvador Santino Regilme Jr.

-- Clinton: Nicolas

-- Bush: Santino

-- Obama: Jeff

Good morning! I'd like to thank Dr. Carina van de Wetering for inviting me as one of the discussants for the launching her first book. Congratulations for this wonderful achievement! My first professional and intellectual encounter with Carina was in the summer of 2011 at the Oxford Rothermere American Institute in the United Kingdom. At that time, a few weeks before starting a PhD, I was intellectually intrigued with Carina's project on US-India relations and her interests in constructivism. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to participate in this book launch! Before starting my discussion, let me issue a caveat: I am neither an India country specialist nor a poststructuralist-oriented constructivist scholar. My huge interest and delight from reading this book emerged as an International Relations scholar specializing in post-Cold War US foreign policy by deploying an analytically eclectic approach to scholarship.

My brief talk in the launching of Carina's book is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss what I call as "internal assessment", or substantive points that are immanent within the book manuscript's analytical strategy, approach, and the puzzle. I discuss in this part some of the insightful findings from the book chapter on US-India relations during the two terms of the Bush administration, 2001 to 2009. In second part, and perhaps the more important part, I focus on "external critique", which presents some of my comments that transcend of what I think was the intended scope and strategy outlined in the book.

Internal Critique

As the title suggests, the book focuses on how exactly United States security policies toward India have transformed during the administrations of Clinton, Bush, and Obama — or more particularly during the post-Cold War era. The puzzle that motivates this book is indeed unique for several reasons, one of which pertains to the type of question that it seeks to investigate. First, the bulk of foreign policy analysis scholarship is dominated by causality-driven research puzzles — that includes those that employ experimental methods, historical analysis, and other positivist methods — that seek to uncover how X variable (or a combination of other factors) lead to Y foreign policy-related outcome. This book, meanwhile, contributes to foreign policy scholarship by raising an interesting puzzle that lays bare the ideational and discursive structures that underpin foreign policy outcomes — or the “how-possible” or “constitutive type” of questions.

Second, the book provides a well-substantiated defence of a poststructuralist-oriented constructivism as a distinctive form of analytical strategy. In contrast to a positivist form of US (and perhaps German brands) of constructivism, the book, in theoretical terms, implicitly argues that materialist-oriented foreign policy outcomes are made possible (or facilitated) by the various types of ideas, representations of (US and India), policy justifications, policy diagnosis, and other discursive pronouncements formulated, promoted, and reinforced by American policy stakeholders. In empirical terms, the chapter on the Bush administration demonstrates a well written and empirically rigorous case study of how the Bush administration (and its other crucial stakeholders) built on the early improvements in US-India relations created during the Clinton years. Particularly, the chapter shows that the Bush administration reinforced the image of India as a key partner of the US primarily because of its shared democratic values and its potentially strategic role as a balancer of China’s growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region and the world stage. By analysing various policy pronouncements and discourses culled from official and secondary documents, the chapter demonstrates various positive transformative changes in US-India bilateral relations that include India as having a big economy vis-à-vis its effects to the environment; as having a vibrant democratic culture;

and as a key ally of the US in South Asia — all of which appeared to have been intensified in US policy discourses during the Bush era. Notably, the Bush administration promoted the image of India as a “rising power”, a foreign policy metaphor that did not exist in the political vocabulary of the preceding administration.

In a lot of ways, the macro-discursive structures underpinning US security policies during the Bush administration represent a politics of continuity and change. Specifically, it was a politics of continuity to the extent that images of India as a democratic ally and as an important economic player, yet US-India bilateral relations were also a politics of change to the extent that the Bush administration has formally, explicitly, and consistently acknowledged New Delhi’s potential to influence world politics — and, such acknowledgement was absent in the discourses from the previous (Clinton) administration.

External Critique

In many important ways, the book succeeds by rigorously deploying poststructuralist constructivism in its empirical analysis of discourses, ideas, policy justifications, and representations in world politics that emerged during the time of the Bush administration.

My constructive assessment of the book, however, consists of three main points. The first issue pertains to the book’s theoretical stance on materialism vs. idealism debate in world politics. Using the book’s empirical material on US-India relations, what exactly is its underlying theoretical stance when it comes to the role of ideas in an often-characterized materialist-dominated view of world politics? Do ideational structures (discourses, policy justifications, pronouncements by policy technocrats etc.) pre-exist and determine the actual policy outcomes in foreign policy? Or, does the book hold the more canonical view that ideas constitute (rather than cause) material policy outcomes? In other words, does the book view ideational/discursive structures as mere mirror-like reflections of what happens in the material world of foreign policy and world politics? This interesting puzzle reminds me of my PhD days, particularly when I asked Susan Hyde, my former

dissertation committee member at Yale and now at UC Berkeley, whether ideas or material factors determine my outcome variable, she told me that this divide seems “irrelevant”, as I should be looking instead on what she calls as “shared expectations”. Thus, do the positive images of India portrayed by Bush administration officials an emerging norm, or an emerging set of shared expectations both within and outside the US foreign policy establishment?

The second issue pertains to the role of India in US security policy construction as well as the role of discourse competition. While the book provides an excellent analysis of how Bush administration actively constructed images of India in US policy construction, it is not clear whether such active ideational construction is confined only to US domestic forces and whether there are any competing discourses that sought to challenge the dominant views of the Bush administration at that time. What was the role of Indian foreign policy lobby in Washington DC in the construction of US policy toward India during the time of Bush? How was it possible and to what extent did the Bush administration sustain its apparent autonomy (as gleaned from reading of the book) in constructing its foreign policy with New Delhi? Also, what was the role, if any, of other non-state stakeholders in the construction of US security policy toward India during the Bush years? What were the competing discourses that contested the mainstream positive characterization of India as perpetrated by the Bush administration? And how and under which conditions did the Bush administration’s set of discourses “won” over such competing discourses?

The third issue pertains to structure-agency debate in International Relations and its implications in the book’s analysis. The book did a good job of showcasing how various Bush administration officials championed various policy discourses and images of India as a key partner of the US to the extent that such discourses reflect the structural changes in world politics at that time. Particularly, De Wetering clearly shows how the representation of India as a “rising power” as advocated by individual agents of the US security establishment came in as reactions to the increasing role of India in the global political economy. To the extent that Bush administration officials discussed New Delhi’s

role in global governance of climate change was also a reflection of the structural changes in the environment and global structures of environmental governance vis-à-vis the environmental impacts of India's growing economic footprint. As far as structure-agency debate is concerned, what is the book's rudimentary stance regarding the genesis of foreign policy discourses? Particularly, how and under which conditions can individual agents challenge and undermine mainstream macro-structural discourses? Alternatively, does foreign policy construction remain within the range of capabilities of powerful agents within the state establishment?

In sum, *Changing US Foreign Policy Toward India* by Dr. Carina van de Wetering is an important contribution to the literatures on foreign policy analysis, US-India relations, and poststructuralist constructivism. First, whereas foreign policy analysis scholarship appears to be causality-driven, the book stands out in clearly demonstrating how ideas and discourses constitute actual foreign policy outcomes. Second, whereas scholarship on post-Cold War US-India relations apparently tends to focus on specific events and foreign policy outcomes, the book distinguishes itself from the pack by offering an innovative analysis of transformations in ideas and discourses propagated by US presidential administration officials over time. Third, whereas positivist scholars within IR tend to view post-structuralism with suspicion because of its appearance as highly abstract and irrelevant for its apparent inability to offer sensible grasp of world politics, this book showcases how poststructuralist constructivism can be rightfully applied in empirically oriented puzzles in foreign policy in ways that are coherent, convincing, and rigorous.