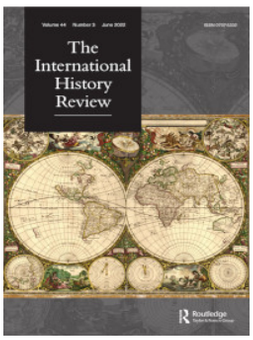

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The Limits of Decolonisation in India's International Thought and Practice: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This special section responds to the call for renewed attention to the international implications of decolonization with a particular focus on India and the South Asia region. The section offers insights into historical continuities and ruptures in Indian internationalism, interrogating divides between colonial and postcolonial as well as between national and international. In turn, it de-centres histories of global order-making in the twentieth century, building on the work of a growing chorus of international historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars seeking alternative visions of the international in an increasingly multipolar world order. In challenging the binary rupture of India's international outlook in the pre- and post-independence period, this special section forces us to reconsider the temporal landscape of India's decolonisation moment. Through an avowedly international outlook, many of the papers introduce new spaces, connections, and entanglements through which Indian independence was realised, and in turn through which the scales of the international can be scrutinised. This brief introduction introduces the papers, teasing out the wider themes that link them, and their connections with the broader purposes of the special section itself.

KEYWORDS

Decolonisation; international relations; international history; Indiadiplomacy; statecraft

The papers in this special section respond to the call for renewed attention to the international implications of decolonization with a particular focus on India and the South Asia region. Within histories of empire and decolonization, India has often been central. Indian representatives took part in the League of Nations, demanded home rule and later political independence, and negotiated a British withdrawal from the subcontinent (though the negotiated elements quickly gave way to the horrific violence of partition and a war between newly independent India and Pakistan). Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, became an international figurehead, leading Afro-Asian demands for racial parity, independence, and non-alignment and using the United Nations to assert representation.[1] But India also demonstrated the many paradoxes that engulfed newly independent states: the simultaneous championing of democracy and use of violence against minorities; demands for non-proliferation while pursuing a nuclear program; supporting national self-determination while invading Goa; and navigating the complexities of reconciling different sovereignties, jurisdictions, and zones of governance into a singular nation-state.

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Whether seen as an historical event or as a theoretical standpoint, decolonization does not signal a clean break. Confronting the wreckage of retreating empires in the twentieth century, newly independent states faced a world order permeated by the visions and logics of imperial systems. At the domestic level, institutions and ministries were staffed and structured through particular social logics and hierarchies of power. These systems of governance organized society in certain ways, bestowed certain forms of subjectivity, and often privileged certain practices of economic productivity and extraction. In the borderlands of decolonizing states, often incoherent and sometimes improvised boundary lines regularly failed to map onto the interests and needs of local populations. Meanwhile, the intellectual tools for navigating these problems were entangled with the very systems of knowledge from which anti-colonial thinkers and activists had spent decades seeking liberation. Such histories and their attendant ideas are well understood at the domestic level—at the level of the nation-state—and in recent years historians have returned to considering the *international* consequences of decolonization moments and movements. This scholarship reminds us that in certain important ways the theory and practice of the 'international' was forged *in* colonized worlds. The 'international' was not a realm that decolonized states joined at the moment of their independence. It was a world that they themselves had shaped and within which they had staked claims, fought battles, forged alliances, and envisaged end-states for decades.[2]

How did India constitute the 'international'? As India seeks to position itself as a key global player in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to re-examine this question, and understand the different ways in which India, and Indians, positioned themselves internationally both before and after the 1947 moment. In older narratives, before partition, India's international engagement was subsumed by the British Raj, while after, it took an independent course. These articles, based on a conference and workshop held at Ashoka University in February 2020, interrogate the rupture narrative of India's 1947 moment, and the idea that India became 'international' at this point. Collectively, they not only root India's international relations in a longer, deeper (and messier) history of Indian strategic and international thought, but also recover Indian agency and intellectual vitality in the theory and practice of international affairs.

This special section offers insights into continuities *and* ruptures in Indian internationalism, interrogating divides between colonial and postcolonial as well as between national and international. In turn, it decentres histories of global order-making in the twentieth century, building on the work of a growing chorus of international historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars seeking alternative visions of the international in an increasingly multipolar world order.[3] Consequently, the following articles reveal many of the historical underpinnings for India's contemporary place in global affairs and the complicated trajectories of India's foreign relations. In short, they force us to think critically about the ongoing colonial legacies and neocolonial practices that continue to shape India and South Asia as a whole, thereby calling into question the spatial and temporal limits of decolonization in new ways.

Decolonization, in its most literal form, entailed a transition from a world of empires to a world of states. The danger, however, is that this process is narrated as a linear process of inevitability. The practice and theory of decolonization was more complicated. As new scholarship on the intellectual worlds of anti-imperialism is increasingly showing, decolonization expressed multiple temporal horizons that complicate this rupture narrative and force us to think more carefully about the pre-histories, teleologies, and afterlives of self-determination.[4] On the one hand, decolonization was profoundly future-orientated. The 'world-making' that Adom Getachew has pointed to in the Afro-Caribbean internationalism of the mid-twentieth century had precedents in the anti-colonial internationalism of South Asian movements.[5] Indeed, Afro-Asian solidarity was built in part upon this shared vision of a world order liberated from class and race hierarchies, even if its protagonists did not always agree on what this meant in practice.[6] On the other hand these futurist visions were frequently entangled with retrograde recoveries of imagined pasts. The imaginaries of decolonization were suffused with the politics of time: a striving

towards a resurgent future yet often fuelled by the hopes of recovering dreams of past greatness.

The politics of time were embedded in debates over the pasts, presents, and futures of the Indian nation. In this collection, Martin Bayly's study of the development of international affairs knowledge in the first half of the twentieth century jumps scales from political to *international* political thought. What he terms the 'pedagogy of internationalism' captures the eagerness with which a series of Indian international thinkers sought to engage with worldly knowledge—including international affairs knowledge—both before and after 1947, as a means of advancing India's transition into the international community, partly through re-thinking its international pasts. Despite the apparently emancipatory potential of this quest, these knowledge communities necessarily interfaced with modernist and imperial structures such as the League of Nations' affiliate bodies and their efforts to inculcate a 'scientific' modernist study of international affairs. Far from standing apart from the world, India's international relations thinking was the story of multiple intellectual lineages—both 'imperial' and 'anti-imperial'—and their entanglements in global processes of knowledge systematisation.

In her study of India's early international affairs think tanks, Raphaëlle Khan further shifts our attention away from practices of diplomacy to practices of knowledge. Concentrating on the Chatham House network of international affairs think tanks that emerged in the settler colonies in the 1930s as an outgrowth of global shifts in international affairs knowledge production, Khan shows how think tanks were 'part of a wider struggle over competing visions of world order that straddled the moment of independence and continued on a global scale'.[7] This presents one of India's first international affairs think tanks, the Indian Institute of International Affairs, in a new light. Often seen as a mouthpiece for the retreating colonial state, we instead see how individual IIIA members operated in what Thakur, Vale, and Davis have termed elsewhere the 'grey zone of subversive politics', between imperial and postcolonial worlds, reappropriating colonial structures of knowledge and expertise for more emancipatory political goals and visions.[8] In turn, the paper blurs binary distinctions between 'nationalist' think tanks such as the Indian Council on World Affairs and the 'imperial' IIIA.

Visions of decolonization were not only temporal and doctrinal in character, but also carried with them multiple respatializations of the world. The meta-geographical imaginaries of Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism, for instance, converged in the subcontinent in the decades prior to Indian independence, as Cemil Aydin and others have explored.[9] Very often these imaginaries were rooted in lived experiences: migration patterns, solidarity networks, and 'paracolonial' trading communities, as well as transboundary confessional or religious mobilities.[10] Continuing the conversation on temporality and transition, these imaginaries challenge the idea of a transition to a fixed territorial international order post-1947.[11] A variety of spaces, scales, and geographies operating within and beyond the South Asia region accompanied the transition to an independent India with implications for how we read the logic of Indian foreign policy at this time.[12]

A host of recent works focussed on South Asia has added weight to this area of the literature, exploring more contested spatial processes of territorial state-formation as occurred (and continue to occur) on the frontiers and borderlands of South Asian states.[13] In this collection Elisabeth Leake continues her work in this area, showing how constitutional debates on the status of India's northeastern states displayed a wider interface between India's 'international' and 'domestic' policy agenda—the 'intermestic'. As Leake's article highlights, these processes of spatial formation were rendered somewhat ambiguous in part through the movements and arrangements of those peoples inhabiting these areas. India's creation of the North-Eastern Council (NEC) and its use of both the Ministries of External Affairs and Home Affairs to govern the region demonstrate how postcolonial India tried to delineate the national from the international. Indeed, resolving these contradictions between the domestic and the foreign, while needing to adhere to the boundary lines drawn by colonial officials, posed many challenges to the postcolonial leadership in integrating these regions under a single undivided sovereignty. Drawing on

imperial methods, with their emphasis on zones of influence, provided Indian leaders with rationales for only partly integrating the northeast into the greater Indian union while still asserting it as a national space.

Individuals and institutions also played a key role in evolving India's nascent foreign policy apparatus: its ministries, its agents, and its forms of knowledge.[14] Challenging us to think more deeply about the pre-histories of India's post-1947 foreign policy posture, Vineet Thakur offers us an individual study of V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and G. S. Bajpai and the interwar conferencing that cast the foundations for a post-independence Indian foreign policy. As he shows, these foundations were not set in the post-1947 moment, but can trace a deeper lineage back to the very different context of the Commonwealth debates of the interwar period. Building on his growing work in this area, Thakur shows how these proto-diplomats used such fora as a training ground—a type of diplomatic pedagogy—but also as a means of broadcasting India's increasing autonomy in international affairs, carving out a space for Indian diplomatic influence within the Commonwealth.

Taking us beyond the 1947 moment, Bérénice Guyot-Réchard's portrayal of the 'inner world' of early Indian diplomat Apa Pant, drawing upon his diary collections, offers new insights into what made postcolonial diplomacy distinct. This intimate study in many ways showcases the continuities and dislocations embedded in India's post-independence diplomatic identity. Pant, a privileged scion of the Deccan principality of Aundh, benefitted from his position in the elite circles of the Congress movement, becoming India's first Commissioner to East Africa. As Réchard reminds us, 'princely para-diplomatic experience became an advantage in post-colonial India's arsenal'. Yet this was a role that also won him celebrity status for his anti-colonial credentials, including his advocacy of the Kenyan liberation movement. Nonetheless, Pant found his position as a postcolonial diplomat entangled in the enduring imperial politics that continued to shape East African affairs. Relations with the Indian overseas communities that remained in East Africa were particularly fraught. Pant's distaste for their prejudiced view of East African nationals highlighted the tensions that arose from the shifting forms of subjecthood that Indian independence brought to its populations overseas—a direct consequence of the para-colonial ties and colonial labour movements that predated 1947. Bringing the diaspora together under Delhi's fold whilst championing African decolonization were, Réchard shows, increasingly contradictory aims, raising the question over whom the postcolonial diplomat serves.

Such tensions were in evidence elsewhere. Exploring recently unearthed archival material, Avinash Paliwal turns our attention instead to the building of India's post-1947 intelligence architecture through his study of the role played by Indian spies in establishing the Ghanaian intelligence services. The alliance forged by Kwame Nkrumah and Jawaharlal Nehru appeared to be a manifestation of the power of the 'Bandung spirit' of non-alignment, though as Paliwal shows, this was an intelligence relationship built upon the sinews of colonial bureaucratic ties, one that remained infected by the influence of imperial intelligence structures. Both countries struggled to move on from the organisational and legal structures that remained in place post-independence, highlighting the incomplete nature of postcolonial transitions and the limits of south-south cooperation. The growing power of the Ghanaian security forces strained the civil-military relationship, with the overthrow of Nkrumah providing an ironic demonstration of the dangers of an overly powerful security service.

In challenging the binary rupture of India's international outlook in the pre- and post-independence period, each of the papers force us to reconsider the temporal landscape of India's decolonization moment. Through an avowedly international outlook, many of the papers introduce new spaces, connections, and entanglements through which Indian independence was realised, and in turn through which the *scales* of the international can be scrutinised. The agents of these studies moved through spaces and across thought-zones that evade simple categorization under the banner of 'nationalist', 'imperial', or 'postcolonial' worlds and worldviews. Indeed, in many cases it was the capacity of agents to unsettle from within imperial worlds which gave

their politics such purchase. As Frederick Cooper notes, studying colonial (and postcolonial) history 'reminds us that in the most oppressive of political systems, people found not just niches in which to hide and fend for themselves, but handles by which the system itself could be moved'.[15] This is not to diminish the importance of the decolonization moment in India, or anywhere else for that matter, but rather to pay closer attention to the subtleties of power through which processes of grand historical change were effected.

In consequence, this special section encourages us to focus on alternative internationalisms of the twentieth century. Through their temporal and thematic coverage, the papers also move beyond histories of twentieth-century Indian internationalism that have focused overwhelmingly on India's place in a Cold War world.[16] Instead, they reveal co-existing modes of Indian internationalist thought and practice that were often independent of superpower politics and which did not, and could not, easily fall into the category of non-alignment. While Indian internationalism certainly could not remain entirely aloof from Cold War questions, these articles demonstrate that for many historical actors, particularly those from the Global South, the Cold War was often subsidiary to other domestic and foreign policy concerns through which Indians grappled with, accommodated, discarded, or modified imperial ideas of governance and internationalism.

Finally, this special section requires us to think about the ways in which scholars co-produce knowledge about the past and present. The conference at Ashoka University, from which these papers emanate, brought together scholars working across international relations and international history, creating a cross-disciplinary dialogue, while also furthering intellectual collaboration between scholars based at institutions in India, the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. The experience highlighted the significance of developing a more globalised scholarship on decolonization and empire, one shaped by the active participation of institutions based in the Global South. It also emphasized the crucial role of financial and intellectual support from institutions located within South Asia for diversifying the nature of topics being examined in the region, as well as their participation in setting the research agenda. Both the content and contributors of this special section, and the broader conference, draw attention to the need for further international collaborative work on *internationalism* that transcends north-south divides and which is rooted in diverse educational settings, particularly in the states that themselves underwent processes of decolonization.[1]

In a wider sense, then, this special section marks a historiographical *and* a methodological argument in our understanding of India's decolonization moment and its international consequences, and questions the transcendence of imperial and colonial power, both then and now. Needless to say, the rise of decolonial movements across the humanities and social sciences gives urgency to this conversation, as indeed does the recovery of colonial and imperial imaginaries through recent events in South Asia. The reformulation of territorial boundaries, as well as boundaries of belonging, in Ladakh, Kashmir, and in relation to the Citizenship Amendment Act remind us that the struggle for national and international recognition in South Asia is ongoing. Indeed, taken as a whole, these articles also provide a useful reminder of the contingency and uncertainties of the process by which India constituted its international—such uncertainties ought not to be forgotten in the present moment, where the government in power seeks to project a fixed and self-evidently manifest aspect to India's international identity. Although these are not struggles unique to 'postcolonial' states, revisiting India's decolonization moment in its international dimensions reminds us of the urgency of using international history as a tool for further problematising the tendency to locate contemporary events within a single, pre-determined historical lineage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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