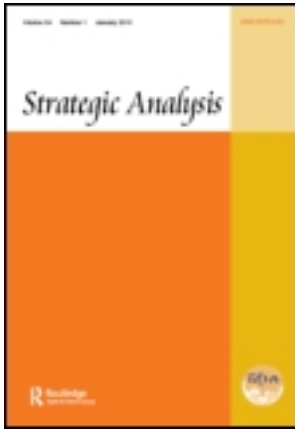


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In Memoriam

K. Subrahmanyam and Indian Strategic Thought

Anit Mukherjee

In the end an intellectual's life is judged not only by those who mourn his passing, but also by those who challenged his ideas. K. Subrahmanyam, the undisputed doyen of India's strategic community, had his share of both, and his death at the age of 82 on 2 February 2011 leaves behind an immeasurable void. In his professional career, K. Subrahmanyam faced much criticism for his views, at various times, from within the military and among civil servants, the academic community and foreign observers. The criticism – a badge of honour of sorts – was primarily because he had the courage to challenge conventional wisdom and speak truth to power in a passionate desire to influence policy. Over time, however, most of his detractors came to grudgingly respect him and his ideas. This comes across clearly in the large number of personal tributes and recollections written by his colleagues and followers in India and abroad.¹ Arguably no other public intellectual in India has had such a domineering influence in his chosen field of policy. Though ironically it was his largest ambition – to change India's attitude towards national security – he only partially succeeded and obsessed about it in the twilight of his life. Indian policy makers will do well to pay attention, even if belatedly, to his arguments and to honour him appropriately. However, first it might be instructive to briefly examine his influence on Indian strategic thinking and recognize some of the principles by which he lived.

K. Subrahmanyam used to recall sadly his first engagement with national security at the highest levels when he was working as a junior official in the Ministry of Defence during the Indo-China War in 1962. Since then he worked with almost every prime minister on most aspects of India's national security. Immediately after the 1962 War, he worked under Defence Minister YB Chavan on the much needed restructuring and rearmament of the military. Recognizing his potential, YB Chavan was instrumental in appointing K. Subrahmanyam as the second Director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) – which was initially inspired by the American RAND Corporation. This position, which he held for a second time in the 1980s, allowed him to nurture and encourage strategic thinking in India. He wrote prodigiously on a variety of subjects, including defence planning, higher defence organization, technological changes in warfare and foreign policy among others. An important part of his role was to mentor and encourage military officers, bureaucrats, diplomats and journalists to think outside of their individual silos and connect politics and foreign, defence and economic policies, and thus enter the realm of strategy. He was also fearless in taking on what with hindsight we know to be ossified thinking, whether in the political

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class, bureaucracy, military or even in the academic community. His direct challenge to the fallacious, though fashionable, defence versus development debate forms the bedrock of a classic work on the topic.² Perhaps his most important legacy, for which he was often inaccurately demonized as a hawk, was in the field of nuclear strategy. Immediately after China's nuclear tests in 1964, K. Subrahmanyam tirelessly argued for India to have a nuclear weapons programme. This was not because he believed in it – on the contrary he argued how nuclear weapons made all-out wars unlikely – but thought it was in India's national interest. Hence, in the 1980s he played an important and, as yet, little known role in the intellectual push for the nuclear weapons program. In the process he invited the wrath of not just India's peacenik lobby and the largely liberal academic community, but also Western analysts with patronizing views about India. He returned the compliment tongue-in-cheek by, according to some accounts, coining terms like 'nuclear apartheid' and the 'Ayatollahs of non-proliferation'.

In 1999, K. Subrahmanyam came prominently into the national limelight with his appointment as the Chairman of the Kargil Review Committee. In this role he was invaluable in reforming higher defence management. The committee, in a short span of around four months, interviewed a large number of serving and former political, bureaucratic and military officials, and captured their perspectives on national security. While the committee attracted some criticism for not appropriating blame for the failures leading to the Kargil war, its non-inquisitive style ensured the full cooperation of all stakeholders. K. Subrahmanyam also insisted that a public version of the committee report be released, a wise decision that allowed an unprecedented debate on national security. However, a decade or so after the reforms were introduced he was unhappy with its implementation.³ In a stinging indictment he complained that 'India's political class is still not in a position to tackle the national security issues with the seriousness they deserve.'⁴

It is not as if K. Subrahmanyam was without professional fault and perhaps one legitimate criticism is that he did not fully comprehend the importance of declassification in allowing strategic thinking. That Indians supposedly lack a strategic culture is a view most famously propagated by George Tanham.⁵ Some, in fact, credit K. Subrahmanyam for inspiring George Tanham to come to this conclusion.⁶ The supposed lack of strategic culture has since become a recurrent argument, almost a mantra, in many sections of the Indian strategic community. This perspective however has less to do with timeless Hindu culture, as Tanham argued, and instead has more to do with the fact that the government's bureaucratic procedures do not emphasise declassification.⁷ As a result there are a number of first and second order effects that hinder the growth of strategic studies. First, there is little data to encourage scholarly analysis. Moreover careers in this field are difficult and do not attract talent. Second, military history remains an under-developed area of study that results in a constant reinvention of the wheel. Finally, without declassification, it is not possible to build up civilian expertise in military affairs. In sum, that Indian strategists struggle with planning for the future has less to do with their culture and more to do with their inability to analyse the past. K. Subrahmanyam, perhaps because he was a part of the system and was not trained as a scholar, failed to adequately emphasise and educate policy-makers on this crucial issue.

Minor quibbles aside, the best manner of recognizing K. Subrahmanyam's contribution is by completing what he considered to be his unfinished agenda. Writing in the early 1970s he had argued that Indians need to have an attitudinal shift towards national security. To do so, the government must implement the following measures. First, as

he repeatedly recommended the Ministry of Defence should appoint a Blue Ribbon Commission to examine the current lacunae in India's national security agencies including in the military.⁸ Second, the government must, for the sake of effectiveness, re-examine the process of specialization or 'domain expertise' in the generalist IAS civilian bureaucracy as recommended by a number of administrative reform committees. Third, the armed forces must also encourage regional and functional specialisation and facilitate greater interaction with the civilian scientific and academic community. Fourth, the institute that K. Subrahmanyam nurtured – IDSA – needs to re-examine the role it wishes to play over the next few decades. With the establishment of numerous think tanks, both service-specific and private, and the proposed Indian National Defence University, IDSA now has serious competition in the market place of ideas. While this is a welcome development, IDSA must revisit the debate that occurred at the moment of its founding regarding whether to follow the 'IISS or the RAND model.'⁹ The former means no access to official, classified documents while the latter would have allowed access to scholars with a security clearance. The issue was clinched in favour of the IISS model when General JN Chaudhuri argued that there were no civilian experts that could advise the military on its affairs. As expertise in defence studies gradually spreads outside the military, IDSA and the Defence Ministry should revisit that argument. Only then can it make itself truly relevant to policy-making. Finally, the ministry of defence should initiate the process of declassification without which there can be no serious debate or discussion about national security. The policy of not releasing historical documents for scholarly analysis is simply untenable. That simple measure could, in principle, help generate the sort of debate that K. Subrahmanyam would have revelled in.

While K. Subrahmanyam's true intellectual legacy awaits a good biographer, he had three other personal qualities that made him stand out. First, he was patient and generous to those below him – the true mark of greatness. Hence he gave time and served as mentor to generations of scholars, analysts and practitioners who approached him for advice. He combined this with a deep respect for the views and wisdom of the common man and wrote for the vernacular press – a rarity among the elite strategic community. Second, he had the ability to listen to all views and arguments and at the same time, to use President Obama's memorable phrase, could 'disagree without being disagreeable.' A related quality was an ability to change his views with time and changes in the environment. Hence, for instance, his transformation from scepticism of the United States to fully embracing the strategic partnership reflected a sophisticated response to the post-Cold War scenario. Finally, he lived his life according to his principles and had an impeccable sense of integrity. Two episodes especially stand out and should be instructive to the current generation of IAS officers, bogged down under numerous cases of disproportionate income and involvement in political corruption. During the Emergency, while serving as Tamil Nadu Home Secretary, he refused to condone many of the excesses that were being perpetuated by local Congress politicians. While his principled opposition led to a minor fall out with Indira Gandhi, he was too valuable to be kept out for long. Much later, he was offered the Padma Bhushan by successive governments but turned it down as a matter of principle, saying that bureaucrats should not accept awards and favours from the government. It is entirely appropriate that in the current climate of corruption and self-aggrandizement K. Subrahmanyam's ideals and life-work should be recognized with a posthumous Bharat Ratna – but that might be asking for too much from India's political class.

Notes

1. For a good essay see Srinath Raghavan, 'K. Subrahmanyam, 1929–2011,' *Seminar*, No. 619, March 2011, pp. 77–81. Also see event summary by Constantino Xavier and Stephen Cohen, 'The career and ideas of K. Subrahmanyam,' at http://www.brookings.edu/events/2011/0218_india_subrahmanyam.aspx.
2. See K. Subrahmanyam, *Defence and Development*, Delhi: Minerva Associates, 1972.
3. For more on implementation of defence reforms see mine, 'Failing to Deliver: The post crises defence reforms in India, 1998–2010', *IDSa Occasional Paper 18*, March 2011.
4. See 'Report of the Kargil Review Committee: An Appraisal', *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2009, p. 19.
5. See George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1992.
6. See Inder Malhotra, 'Our Strategic Asset,' *Indian Express*, 3 February 2011.
7. See mine, 'Tell it like it is,' *Times of India*, 9 June 2010.
8. See K. Subrahmanyam, 'Indian Armed Forces,' *Dainik Jagran*, 3 February 2008; and 'An Armed Forces Commission', *Defence and Security Alert*, September 2009. For a good discussion on the need for such a committee also see the following blog roll: <http://pragmatic.nationalinterest.in/>.
9. For a discussion of this issue see K. Subrahmanyam, 'The Birth of IDSA and the Early Years,' *Strategic Analysis*, 13(4), 1990, pp. 463–470.