

Decoding Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article reviews a recent book titled '*Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*' by Shivshanker Menon. The book offers a glimpse of the Indian diplomatic endeavours reflecting elements of history, legacy, negotiating skills, geo-strategic dynamics, and critical policy decisions entwined in a compact narrative. The author has provided a diplomatic testimonial as a serving envoy on key foreign policy initiatives, which primarily served national interest.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, India, China, South Asia

'Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy'

by Shivshankar Menon

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The book under review offers glimpses of the Indian diplomatic endeavours reflecting elements of history, legacy, negotiating skills, geo-strategic dynamics, and critical policy decisions entwined in a compact narrative. The author has provided a diplomatic testimonial as a serving envoy on key foreign policy initiatives, which primarily served national interest. Being a diplomat with a keen academic inclination, he has drawn analytical conclusions from the negotiations and final outcomes. The author has interpreted the contemporary foreign policy through the diplomatic choices arrived during the course of five different episodes. Though the book claims to have upheld 'strategically bold' and 'tactically cautious' policy measures, it can be inferred from the discussion that as a diplomat, Mr Menon has advocated a risk averse and at times what can be referred as a conservative foreign policy stand.

The first chapter titled '*Pacifying the Border-The 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement with China*' has reflected on the relation with China and outlined the history of border dispute. The chapter has begun with an interesting anecdote on the journey of the author as a diplomat. He ventured into Foreign Service as a field study option to explore China to integrate inputs in to his doctoral thesis. The chapter takes through the diplomatic efforts to find legal solutions on border issues with China in the nineties. The author has narrated the political and diplomatic efforts for creating a conducive environment, both within the country and across the negotiating table. The chapter has thrown light on the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru's policy towards China as well as on the nuances of leadership qualities of the then Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao. The author has quoted a candid conversation with Foreign Secretary Jyotindra Nath Dixit in early nineties on the diplomatic possibilities of finding a peaceful relationship with China. Mr.Menon's experience and expertise landed him in the External Affairs Ministry as a Joint Secretary dealing with North and East Asia. Mr. Menon had the responsibility to engage in productive negotiations with Chinese officials to reach an

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amicable solution to the border dispute. The book has provided key insights in to the cartographic manipulation exhibited by Chinese officials from time-to-time and exemplary restraint rendered by the Indian side. It has also provided policy prescriptions for a bolder foreign policy initiative by delinking history and settling for a legally valid 'status quo' with a long-term objective of peaceful and stable relation with the neighbour.

The second chapter titled, '*Natural Partners: The Civil Nuclear Initiative with the US*' has provided an in-depth analysis of the difficulties in traversing through an unprecedented policy terrain. The chapter has mainly three elements, the political commitment and domestic pressures, secondly, the diplomatic efforts, technicalities and language of the texts, and thirdly, the global response to the initiative. It navigates the readers through the laborious efforts of the political and diplomatic machine to reach the Civil Nuclear Initiatives with the US. The author has highlighted the credibility and political risk taken by the leaders, Dr. Manmohan Singh and President George .W. Bush to initiate the bold strategic partnership. He has painstakingly analysed the colossal efforts on both sides to amend the laws to treat India like a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) for the purpose of civilian nuclear commerce. It included three and half years of intense and complex political, diplomatic and technical efforts to accomplish the partnership. The clauses and its dimensions are analysed to give the reader clarity on the possible interpretation of the text in the future. Mr. Menon has acknowledged the capacity issues faced by Indian diplomatic team in completing the marathon process of significant magnitude. As a diplomatic achievement in his tenure, the author believes that the agreement had set arguably higher standards and expectations from the India-US relationship.

The third Chapter, *Restrain or Riposte? The Mumbai Attack and Cross-Border Terrorism from Pakistan* has discussed the policy choices reviewed by the Indian administration against Pakistan after the terror strikes in Mumbai in 2008. The chapter has not offered critical inputs in to the existing debate on Indo-Pak relations .The chapter has analysed the shared history, weighed the conventional war options with the sponsor state of cross border terrorism and the response of the US in the existing geo-political scenario. The commando-style attack by a handful of terrorists of Lakshar-e –Taiba (LeT) persisted for three days under full glare of global media questioned the competency of our security and intelligence agencies. Hence the government and bureaucrats had to pacify the public sentiments by concrete action. The author had assessed the implications of both retaliation and restraint in his capacity as the Foreign Secretary. The chapter has attempted to explain the diplomatic, theoretical and practical manifestations of covert and overt actions against the terror outfits and the sponsor state. It has highlighted the importance of covert options of bringing international community together and isolating the sponsor state.

Though the operational and diplomatic options in dealing with cross-border terrorism have been discussed in academic discourse before, it is interesting to revisit the policy options during the Mumbai terror episode particularly in the context of the recent 'surgical strikes' by the present government. As a policy option, the military combat followed by the Israeli military troop against non-state actors is thoroughly analysed in the Indian context .The author has concluded that any controlled application of military will not lead to deterrence by the terror organisations like the Lakshar-e –Taiba (LeT). Hence he has categorically disapproved the military option as it can possibly incur added burden of costs and risk the progress of economy. Another interesting aspect discussed is the limited co-operation extended by the US owing to their geo-political and strategic priorities in Afghanistan. The author had advised the Indian diplomats "not to shy away" from addressing the Balochistan reference which was initially found in the Sharm-el-sheikh Joint statement. This can be scrutinised in the broader context of Balochistan remark made by the current Prime Minister of India. The author has made a candid point on the possibility of continued "intractable conflict" with Pakistan owing to political factors and restrictive foreign policy options. Since an international consensus of a humanitarian and borderless world is a distant utopian dream, it will be rational to analyse factors objectively in the national interest.

The fourth chapter has explored the history and politics in Srilanka through the rise and fall of Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). The military force in a close door combat of thirty-month

has ambushed the twenty six year old civil war, which lead to extensive civilian casualties. The chapter has explored the Tamil history and rise of separatism in Srilanka. India has been cautious about the policy options in Srilanka since the suicide attack on Rajiv Gandhi. The peace- keeping mission and the foreign policy options of India are reviewed in the chapter. The diplomatic efforts of India were concentrated to ensure a safe corridor for the civilians. The author has concluded that preventing the resurgence of separatist groups will be critical to the future of the island and peace in this part of the sub-continent

The fifth chapter has analysed the affirmative policy stand of *No First Use of Nuclear Weapons* where India has pledged not to initiate but only retaliate in defense and simultaneously advocated nuclear disarmament. The chapter explains the geo-political and strategic reasons of India's elation to Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). The author has outlined the nuclear doctrine of Pakistan, China and the US and has argued that Indian nuclear weapons are meant to prevent nuclear coercion and blackmail. The Indo-China and Indo-Pak deterrence are crucially linked and is critical to peace and security order in Asia. The security concerns can be effectively handled by building institutional capacity to control any possible escalation if deterrence fails. The dynamics of maritime nuclear security particularly positioning of nuclear weapons in the sea as well as the geographical challenges of monitoring in the vast Indian Ocean is reviewed in detail. There is also emphasize on the economic benefits of evading a nuclear arms race with the 'credible minimum deterrence' policy followed by India.

The final chapter has encapsulated the behaviour of sovereign states and the foreign policy constraints in specific circumstances. It has put forward an aspirational argument about India being a 'great power', which is a debatable hypothesis at this juncture in the realm of foreign policy.

The book does not attempt to eulogize the decisions in which the author himself was actively or passively involved. As a seasoned diplomat he has outlined the importance of creating a calculus of national interest with a mini-max strategy, which is significant in foreign policy. He has mentioned in passing the few blemishes in the Indian diplomatic community at the negotiating table but has not stressed on the ways to address those aspects. The book has criticized the inability of the political class to segregate the strategic choices from the domestic political interests. Constant engagement with key allies as well as caution in tactics would be the key policy advices from the book. The book captures the essence of Indian foreign policy dynamics through the lens of policy practitioner.