

Book Review
By
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Shivshankar Menon,
Choices: Inside the
Making of India's
Foreign Policy, (India:
Penguin Random
House, 2016) 243

"India will be a different power and will continue to walk its own path in the world. That is the only responsible way for us." (p.205)

Such is the confidence exuding from the narrative penned down by Shivshankar Menon in discussing some of the contemporary foreign policy "Choices" made by India, in his book, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*. Intertwined with personal impressions sporadically, the book generally takes the reader through the making of these choices, the "reasons and considerations that weighed in the choices that were made in the government, on behalf of India". The instances of these choices, are chosen because the author feels that, "India's global role and posture are largely the result of these and similar choices; hence their lasting significance."

The book provides, in an easy to read manner, an insider's account of some five key contemporary foreign policy choices. This is by no means a comprehensive account of all the post-Cold War foreign policy choices of India but an examination of decisions that governed India's relationship with China, United States, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and India's nuclear posture. The narration brings forth strongly how governments operating in "uncertainty, risk and immediacy" make important choices.

Menon's account of these choices in India's foreign policy require a close read, because he writes from personal experience having being involved in making them. He served as the National Security Advisor from January 2010 to May 2014 preceded by this tenure as foreign secretary from October 2006 to August 2009. Prior to this, he not only served on the China desk in India's Foreign office but also went on to be India's envoy to Israel, Sri Lanka, Beijing and Pakistan.

The chapters discuss a range of issues from Indian foreign policy conundrums - like boundary dispute with China, dealing with Sri Lanka the "aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast"; the cross-border terrorism issue under the umbrella of "protracted and intractable" conflict with Pakistan - to that of the foreign policy successes like the US-India nuclear initiative, that put India into entirely a different league among the non-NPT nuclear weapon states. The narrative of the book is exuberating this confidence of a successful Indian foreign policy lead by tactful personalities in difficult situations, opting for "boldness" in policy conception but with "tactical caution". The realist in Menon shows no qualms in admitting that "governments are usually forced to make minimax foreign policy decisions - decisions aimed at minimizing the harm to one's own interests while maximizing the gain." Although Menon doesn't indulge in counterfactuals in a given foreign policy choice he discusses, but he does rationalize the domestic, political and systemic factors that impinged upon the need for a specific decision.

The first chapter on pacifying the border dispute with China, lucidly characterizes the evolving "international context" as a determining factor that demanded imposition of "peace along

the border while leaving to the future the more politically difficult task of settling the boundary.” The success of the settlement was that it “delinked” the boundary issue from the rest of India-China relationship. He concludes that futuristically the status-quo on the boundary settlement is the realistic way forward.

His assertion that “finding the balance between rivalry and cooperation, is among the hardest task in strategy”, holds more true for the India-Pakistan context. Here the reader is compelled to ask why the lessons learned on settling the India-China border dispute are not applicable in India-Pakistan context; where all progress on dialogue is essentially “linked” to talks on terrorism. While discussing the issue of cross-border terrorism in the context of Mumbai attacks, Menon expounds the Indian strategy to respond to such cross-border terrorism is to pursue all “legal and covert means to achieve its goals” and through “uniting the international community to force consequences on Pakistan for its behavior.” While rationalizing the choice of restraint in responding to the Mumbai attacks through force, Menon gives undue credit to India’s decision making calculus and its rationality; glossing over the danger of escalation of any use of force across border as being an important ingredient in India’s calculation of restraint. This exposes the dilemma of India’s Pakistan policy which views Pakistan through a narrow prism and has virtually reduced relations to cross border terrorism issue.

Chapter two and five are devoted to explaining the choices that transformed India’s global nuclear outlook, i.e. India-US Nuclear Initiative and the no-first use pledge respectively. The chapter on India-US initiative discusses the historical baggage of Cold

War and ensuing skepticism of reconsidering relations with US; a narrative that kept resonating in the media and public discourse throughout the course of negotiations of the deal. The author rightly cherishes the “unconditional clearance” from the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the ardent diplomacy that was able to achieve a deal with no international nonproliferation obligations. Menon does give a tribute to “US power and persuasion” in respecting “India’s red lines” of “no reference to testing, no discriminatory provisions and no periodic review of India’s behavior on the exemption.” Reading this instance, one cannot but notice the hypocrisy of the nonproliferation diplomacy propagated by the United States in trumping its nonproliferation goals to geopolitical interests. This is further compounded by the fact that India’s strategic congruence with the US in the Asia-Pacific, according to Menon, doesn’t extend to West Asia, where India is an “awkward partner” with divergent interests than those of United States.

Interestingly, the author mentions the “unspoken factor” that provided the strategic context of US-India Nuclear initiative i.e. the rise of China that impressed upon US and India the need to build “strategic congruence”. Indian diplomats seldom explain this narrative with such unambiguousness. This is not the sole instance, elsewhere while talking about India’s world-view he expounds that India has been throughout an “anti-status-quo power seeking to revise and reform the international order”, which is a clear manifestation of India’s “strategic autonomy” reflected in all major foreign policy choices that the government of India has made.

Menon’s account of Why India Pledges to “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons” (NFU), is colored by the “anxiety in India

about the wisdom of this commitment". The chapter explains India's rationale for NFU, which has been to deter "others from attempting nuclear coercion or blackmail against India". The overall tone of the debate about the NFU underlines the limited utility of nuclear weapons as war-fighting weapons and questions the proponents of strategy of graduated response in India. However, Menon makes the NFU claim ambiguous by bringing in a debate about a "potential grey area" in India's policy where India may use nuclear weapons first especially against an adversary with a first use policy, in circumstances where a potential launch on India may be imminent. This is a dangerous scenario outlined by a former National Security Advisor, and justified on grounds that the current public nuclear doctrine is silent on this scenario. Such ambiguity about a potential preemptive strike from a state with a NFU policy is not only a clear departure from the declared doctrinal stipulation but also an alarming regional development.

In the final chapter, the book leaves the reader with some policy inferences/lessons drawn from India's foreign policy choices, which the author likes to call India's "predilections". These include the fundamental role of personalities, strategic boldness amalgamated with tactical caution; value of domestic political process and realism in policymaking processes. However, the policy inferences offered in the book aren't applicable in the India-Pakistan conflict dynamics; where the personalities; strategic boldness and caution in implementation have virtually failed; making the situation reach an intractability.

Overall, it is a well written, clear, and easy to read work and the five instances narrated offer some insight into India's choices in foreign policy; choices that weren't always satisfactory and are

not irreversible either. The book provides a well narrated account of events that transpired in the making of these choices while over projecting India's strategic boldness. The book underplays the significance of India-Pakistan relations as a priority foreign policy issue for India and takes a narrow prism to approach it.

With his vast experience and long career in the Foreign Service of India, one does feel that Menon's account is lacking a debate on the future trajectory of India's foreign relations; and a debate on how to translate India's growing power and influence into assuming greater responsibility for peace at the regional and global level.

Nonetheless, with India getting influential at the global level and assertive regionally; there is value to understanding how India's foreign policy apparatus makes its choices and hence there is value in reading Menon's account of India's contemporary foreign policy "*Choices*".

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