

The Geopolitics of Foreign Policy

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India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present

By Shivshankar Menon

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What drives India's foreign policy and national security interests and how does India aim to achieve them? In 'India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present', Shivshankar Menon explores the past, present and future of India's engagement with Asia and the world by locating its policies in the geopolitical drivers of geography, history, economics and demography. These long-term drivers of Indian foreign policy explain both continuity and change in its approach to the world. The geopolitical framework also helps in exploring India's options in Asia's intensely contested strategic space as China and the United States contest for primacy in the region.

India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present, Shivshankar Menon's recent scholarly rendition, is significant for the conceptual framework it provides us to grapple with the puzzle that is Indian foreign policy. By locating India's external in the context of "larger historical shifts in Asia and the world," the book helps us escape the reductionist nature of mainstream foreign policy analysis. Foreign policy is often seen as a reaction to external changes, motivated by domestic political considerations or driven by the personality of the decision-makers, what Ken Waltz famously described in his book, *Man, State and War*, as three levels of foreign policy analysis. Menon does not discount these factors but argues that a set of state characteristics – geography, demography, history and economics – helps decision-makers to make sense of its geopolitical environment and act to preserve its interests and values. Understanding the constant character of these long-term drivers of Indian foreign policy helps decode the "strong continuity in foreign and security policies of successive (Indian) governments." If decisions of the state made by its political decision-makers are "raw material of history", it is often very difficult to decode the motivations and rationale behind such decisions. Even when data abound, particularly with the recent opening up of the archives, making sense of foreign and national security policy requires a conceptual framework that cannot be filled by the over-deterministic discourse of the Western international relations theory or eclectic formulations of ancient wisdom contained in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. *India and Asian Geopolitics* fill this void.

Menon's masterly weaving of the conceptual aspects of Indian foreign policy with its historical granularity renders the book a deeply academic hue. This is most evident in the first part of the book which deals with India's past foreign policy behaviour, right from the time of independence to the period after the end of the Cold War. However, his operational experience as one of India's most outstanding diplomats and astute practitioners of foreign policy is evident in the second part of the book which deals with India's contemporary grand strategic problems – the rise of China, the decline of the United States (US), the era of populism and the impact of deglobalisation. *India and Asian Geopolitics*, therefore, is both a

historical account of Indian foreign policy and a practitioner's guide to its present and future. Very rarely do we encounter a situation where authors can combine conceptual clarity, historical detail and policy-relevant analysis in a single volume on Indian foreign policy.

Menon believes in India's physical, social and economic uniqueness which renders it with a "sense of difference". Its unique set of interests are neither fully compatible with other powers in the world nor stand in complete opposition. Its quest for strategic autonomy is grounded in this *sui generis* nature of India's condition. The book's strong defence of 'strategic autonomy' is, however, contingent on the assumptions around the desirability of hegemonic, bipolar or multipolar international systems, the costs and benefits of alliance politics and, finally, India's role in the power transition involving China and the US. Implicit in India's quest for strategic autonomy is its preference for a multipolar world and the desirability of multipolarity over bipolarity and hegemony in the global system. For any state aspiring to be a great power in a heavily contested space of international politics, multipolarity provides for greater influence and manoeuvrability. It also necessitates that New Delhi remains ambivalent on firm alliances with any of the other great powers in the system, instead opting for "shifting balances and alliances of convenience." Lastly, India's recourse to the ensuing US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific is neither to unequivocally support US primacy nor to confront China alone but to work towards a regional balance of power that could help sustain a multipolar, multiverse Asian order.

However, China's stupendous rise has raised questions marks on the above assumptions. For the first time in India's history, New Delhi confronts a great power on its immediate borders. India could manage and even benefit from the bipolarity of the Cold War and the hegemonic system of US primacy in the post-Cold war period because in both scenarios there was no essential conflict of interest with the great powers. With Beijing, on the other hand, New Delhi suffers from both physical and psychological anxiety. Multipolarity helps in a state's quest for power but under acute asymmetries of material capabilities, it surely does not provide for a 'strategy of survival'. Therefore, the increasing gap in material power between the two Himalayan powers ensures that India's quest for multipolarity will be subsumed under its desire to halt China's primacy in the region. Not without reason, therefore, India has become the champion of liberal or American order in the Indo-Pacific. This also explains its embrace of the strategic partnership with the US. Irrespective of the debate around elite consensus in Indian foreign policy over the nature of India's relationship with the US, all governments since the second stint of Indira Gandhi in the early 1980s have paid significant attention to strengthening the Indo-US strategic relationship. However, in the last decade or so, New Delhi's rationale for a strong security partnership with Washington has changed dramatically. Far more than ever, India sees its security cooperation with the US through the prism of balancing China. Increasingly, New Delhi's fear of entanglement is being weighed against the fear of isolation in the face of the overwhelming power of its principal adversary. Under the preponderance of adversarial power, "shifting balances and alliances of convenience" may not serve New Delhi's interests. Anchoring Asian security in American power is therefore not such a bad idea especially when regional balances of power may not suffice to halt China's juggernaut. And in international politics, nothing succeeds like success. Leave aside multipolarity, a truly bipolar Asian order between China and the US will only exacerbate the region's slow but

steady embrace of China's primacy, as is evident in the attitude of Southeast Asian countries.

Such intellectual debates notwithstanding, *India and Asian Geopolitics* is a must-read for all those who are interested in the origins, processes and future of Indian foreign policy. It is also equally valuable for those interested in understanding the larger undercurrents of Asia's geopolitical trajectory. The book is a timely reflection on a very important subject, especially in a period when foreign policy has become a part of domestic political strategy and assumed great significance in electoral politics.

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