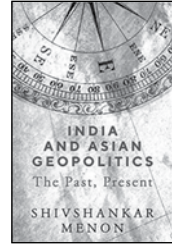

India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present
Shivshankar Menon

Brookings Institution Press, (2021), Washington D.C.
ISBN: 978-0815737230, 416 pp., Rs. 5,107.92
(Paperback)



Namita Barthwal

The book, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present* is a thesis of Shivshankar Menon's discussion with young students of International Relations at Ashoka University. The generation of students, he teaches, is mostly born in the 21st century, the time when India is already in a race to achieve the status of an influential state along with other Asian states. He advocates that Asia, presently, is at the centre of world politics. In highlighting the success of the Asian states, he writes: "India and China have eliminated more poverty in a shorter amount of time than any other nations in history. Several Asian states have acquired the agency in the international system unprecedented in their modern history."

The wave of globalisation has turned several Asian states into vigorous engines of global economic growth. These states now are heading towards military build-up and wanting to change the world order where, at present, the US is seen as the sole superpower. The premier candidate for this is China. In the book, Menon has discussed in detail the global aspiration of China and its consequences for India.

Before joining Ashoka University as a lecturer, the author had an illustrious career that include an accomplished diplomatic career. He had

Namita Barthwal is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi.

also served as the foreign secretary of India and in the Prime Minister's Office as the National Security Advisor. In the acknowledgement, he implicitly explained the rationale for writing this book. The purpose of the book, he defined, is to give the new generation a sense of what his "generation's times were like".

The author recommends to the readers that this book "should not be considered a work of scholarship or of international relations theory," but an attempt "to look at Indian foreign policy with a wide-angle lens". That lens he uses is geopolitics, to which, "India is a significant constituent".

In the book, Menon explores Indian foreign policy through a conversant geopolitical perspective as "it reveals about India's past, present, and, possibly, future behaviour" against the backdrop of the rise of Asia, particularly, India and China.

The 13-chapter book is divided into two parts: (i) the *Past*, where the author narrates the historical evolution of India's foreign policy vis-à-vis Cold War and Asian geopolitics, and (ii) the *Present*, where he locates India as "the ultimate pivot state" in classical geopolitical literature.

The author affirms that there is an evident continuity in India's foreign policy which has not really deviated since the times of India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He cited Nehru's first speech as the leader of a sovereign state—"Tryst with Destiny"—to explain that it is the strategic autonomy that has helped India's foreign policy to maximise its choices in the international political arena. He also asserts that India's foreign and domestic policies are articulately linked. The primary focus of both policies is to elevate the status of India and transform it into a prosperous nation. The author is impressed by Nehru's vision as he states "Nehru already saw Asia free and potentially one political, economic, and strategic space". He added: "he [Nehru] saw the outlines of the three trends that were to shape India's world in the decade to come: decolonization, the reshaping of subcontinental borders, and the Cold War."

Menon has mentioned that the geopolitical drivers of India's foreign policy are geography, demography and economics. These drivers have fixed the parameters of India's foreign policy and the country reacts in a certain way because of these critical aspects. In the west, India has an arch adversary Pakistan who considers India an existential threat. The relationship between India and Pakistan has really affected India's foreign policy's fluid expansion in West Asia. Pakistan plays a geographical barrier and significantly barricaded India's geographical interaction with West Asia. On the other hand, China's exponential rise shows India cannot decisively shape global order in its favour without significant economic clout.

The relationship between India and China has been discussed and analysed in detail in the book. Menon was an Indian ambassador to China. This makes him an authority when it comes to assessing the Sino-Indo relationship. The author writes about the Galwan incident of June 2020, which marked a sharp slump in India-China relations. According to him "both India and China have developed and changed since the strategic framework was put in place in the 1980s." Issues such as maritime security and cyber security have come to the forefront in the recent times "as a result of development, their interests have grown and expanded, and they now rub up against one another in the periphery they share, starting from the Indian Ocean extending to the South China Sea."

He recalls the major incidents in the early phase of the Sino-Indian relationship. He states that from 1959 until the war in October 1962, China and India attempted to find a way out of the boundary issue. However, both the countries ignored the worth of understanding the adversary's compulsions. As a result, both operated on false assumptions and failed to build a partnership.

Menon recollects the killing of five Indian policemen in 1959 at the Kongka pass in the western sector by the Chinese. For India, Beijing's decision to return the bodies on November 14—Nehru's birthday was

mortifying. This act suggested the leadership in China, Mao Zedong, had led to the steady hardening of the Chinese position on the territorial dispute. Menon asserted that “the real driver and decider of China’s road to war with India, by subsequent Chinese accounts, seems to have been Mao Zedong himself.”

However, he also attempts to explain the slip-ups on the Indian side as well. He believes that India, in the past, terribly failed to gauge Chinese intent which has contributed to the deterioration of the complex and troubled bilateral relationship. In Chapter 3, he shared an anecdote about when Zhou Enlai visited Delhi in April 1960. He criticised Nehru’s maladroit political and diplomatic signalling. He touched upon the ambiguity about whether or not a ‘package deal’ was offered by Zhou. The ‘package deal’ talks about how “China might accept the MacMahon Line as the boundary in the east if India accepted the status quo created in the west by China moving forward into Aksai Chin during the 1950s”. Was this a missed opportunity or did Nehru deliberately reject it as it was considered by Delhi to be cartographic aggression by China? It is unanswered.

A decade later, after the Sino-Indo War, in May 1970, Mao signalled his willingness to improve relations with India. He conveyed this to the Indian chargé d’affaires Brajesh Mishra. This is referred to as the ‘Mao smile’. Mao even sent a message of friendship to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. However, India was hesitant about this proposition. In the book, Menon describes the episode as a missed opportunity. He writes: “Whatever the Chinese motives, this episode of the Mao smile, when India failed to respond meaningfully to China in 1970, must go down in the books as an opportunity unexplored, perhaps missed.”

In conclusion, Menon puts his mind on the geopolitical block of Asia. He asserts that “neither China nor Asia is ready yet for a China-centred order”. He raised a word of caution for India as he writes, “India is being reduced to a bit player on the international stage. We have lost

five years. Our national confidence has been replaced by bravado and extravagant statements.”

He urges India to set aside communal hatred and aspire to be a nation that has universal appeal. In the end, Menon remarks that “India’s future resides in the hands and heads of all of its citizens. How we as citizens perceive our situation and choose to build our narrative deeply affect our future.”

