

Shyam Saran, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Juggernaut), Pages: 312, Price: Rs. 599.00

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This ‘part-thesis’ and ‘part-memoir’ guided by thoughtful analysis and re-assessment of the most critical episodes and manoeuvres in India’s foreign policy since its Independence, enables the reader to distinguish between the various threads that tie together the author’s exemplary experiences as a diplomat. In the course of this wonderful journey, the writer rediscovers startling similarities between our ancient treatises on state-craft, their enduring relevance to our present position in the international order and our transitioning world-view. As the book gradually progresses, Shyam Saran ,with an enviable wealth of knowledge pertaining to policy formulation and implementation coupled with over four decades of hands-on experience in the Indian Foreign Services, helps illuminate the contemporary challenges faced in global politics, the issue of security transcending borders and India’s relations with its next-door neighbours with an eye for great detail and traces India’s recent diplomatic history with its traditional and revered culture. He also treats the readers to exclusive behind-the-scenes negotiations on pivotal issues such as the Indo-US nuclear deal and Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, revealing strategic inflection points in the course of engagements with our partners-in-progress.

The book stands as a testament to India’s consistent search for strategic autonomy (a recurrent theme headlining our foreign policy interests) and has been divided into 3 parts. Part One emboldens our “Tradition and History”, beginning with the essay on “Sources of India’s worldview” where he recognises the profound impact of our remarkable physical landscape upon the combined Indian perception and how it continues to shape our world-view irrespective of the prevailing social, cultural and political diversities. Taking a cue from ancient

texts such as the Arthashastra by Kautilya, Nitishastra by Kamandaki, Bhagavata Purana and Narada Purana, Saran draws on the dynamic theoretical frameworks of these masterpieces to analyse the multipolar landscape of contending states. The Mandala Theory, proposed by Chanakya, dominates much of the narrative by enlisting the various components of national power (Swamins, Amatyas, Rashtra, etc.) and formulating policy options for expanding states in a multistate setting, when confronted by a hostile state. Whereas the *Nitishastra* lays emphasis on wise-counsel (Mantra-shakti) than on the power of the king (based on his treasury), his army (Prabhava) or his own temperament (Utsaha-shakti).

The author goes into lengthy details, quoting the preferable qualities in a royal ambassador and the manner in which he should be conducting himself. Saran considers it worthy to examine India's worldview within the framework of the Mandala Theory; an action which triggers astounding revelations such as the Jambudwipa Mandala, which doesn't ascribe its superiority to the Bharatavarsha but rather radiates outwards; implying that the latter is furthermore superior, an idea diametrically opposite to the Chinese worldview which considers the core to be the most advanced of all. The author highlights the gradual metamorphosis of closely integrated states into several sovereign and fragmented ones while its security remains vulnerable to developments in its neighbouring countries. He considers the "reconciliation of our security interests" as a major impediment to the growth of our nation owing to the large extent of our subcontinent, the solution to which can be devised by the implementation of an inclusive strategy via imposition of security perspectives on other countries and by the creation of political, cultural, economic and security policies to design a web of interdependencies and bank on the leverage of its size and asymmetric strengths vis-a-vis its neighbours to achieve a level of interconnectedness that would supersede all borders.

The author also draws attention to the benefits of dense engagements and productive co-operation which would eventually result in a shared regional identity and expansive yet shared politico-socio-economic interests with the rest of the world. Our crossroads culture is the result of the confluence of several languages, cultures, religions and belief systems, all of which have immensely contributed to create an identity that is uniquely ours.

Shyam Saran goes on to map the forces that shaped our foreign policy post-Independence. He defends Nehru's world-view and believes India's policy of *non-alignment*, in a Cold War era, was born out of a sense of practicality which primarily served its own strategic interests. As Saran asserts, it was "a policy assuring relative autonomy to a newly emerging country in a polarised international environment."

Saran views the Indian subcontinent as a single geopolitical and ecological space, despite our multicultural diversities and economic interdependencies, circumventing national boundaries as the ultimate objective of India's foreign policy. Interestingly, his approach may also justify India's quest for a South Asian Customs Union, a common currency and even a South Asian Parliament, regardless of the strategic importance we accord to our boundaries. Besides, the deep rooted asymmetry of South Asian politics holds India prisoner from playing a larger role keeping it at odds with its immediate periphery. Saran sees hope in India becoming a powerful engine of growth for all its neighbours: as an opportunity and not an adversary. Thus, after establishing a convincing cyclorama, he moves onto focus upon India's immediate neighbourhood and its fractious relationship with important neighbours – Pakistan, China and Nepal, in Part Two: Neighbours.

The author, a Chinese expert, emphasises that there is a lack of familiarity with Chinese culture and their peculiar world-view. The Chinese believe that China's delegation as an under-developed country was an aberration of the last few centuries and that they are destined to regain their rightful position as a global power. If India is to address the Chinese challenge, it must familiarise itself with their way of strategic thinking. Saran argues that the belief that we are heading to a China-dominated world is overblown, given that China is still way behind the United States economically, militarily and in technological advancements.

Talking of Indo-Nepal relations, Saran also discusses China's engagement in Nepal, where he was posted during 2002-04 (against the cyclorama of an India-backed dialogue between a seven-party alliance and Maoists laying the ground for them to join the mainstream and the fall of monarchy). In the face of China's continual economic expansions, leading to its increased involvement in Nepal's domestic politics, Saran visualises India's Nepalese policy as continuing to be "episodic, crisis-driven and weak".

On the age-old question of Pakistan, Saran states that the equation between the countries isn't going to drastically change overnight through any big-bang affair because of deeply entrenched differing viewpoints. His alternative is a series of well thought-out modest steps resulting in a substantial cumulative outcome. The book asserts that India's future is tied to the stability and prosperity of its immediate neighbours. Hence, the regional economic integration of the subcontinent must rank as one of India's highest foreign policy priorities. The challenge here is to slowly transcend these political divisions and make borders increasingly irrelevant in economic trade terms, while acknowledging that the border conflicts with Pakistan aren't going to dissipate soon.

In Part Three: The Wider World, Saran provides an insider's account through interesting anecdotes about two important negotiations in which he played a key role – the Indo-US nuclear deal and the negotiations on Climate Change at Copenhagen. The book takes the reader through some nail-biting negotiation tactics, several intense parleys, surprise hurdles and ego clashes employed by the author (who served as the Prime Minister's Special Nuclear Envoy), to ensure that India was able to gain access to civil nuclear commerce while keeping intact its nuclear weapons strategy programme. Ultimately, India successfully negotiated with 48 countries, which were part of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, for an India-specific waiver, allowing the deal to come through. At Copenhagen, on Climate Change, Saran recalls how China's Chief Climate Change Negotiator, Xie Zhenhua, publicly berated his own *premier*, accusing him of giving in to the excess demands of the United States. He observes, "Xie's outburst was most unusual and unexpected. For an official, to angrily disagree with his own premier in public would be unthinkable in any country, and more so in authoritarian and strictly hierarchical systems like China's."

In the end, Shyam Saran's re-imagination of India's historical evolution seeks to serve food for thought; served on an innately cosmopolitan platter. The world we live in today is greatly influenced by networking rather than hegemony, which further fuels the power to influence global trends. It is here, that a cosmopolitan outlook holds promise. He also warns against a possible relapse into an assertive and competitive nationalism (of the type that is currently sweeping the world) and reminds the readers, that India possesses the attributes of upholding diversity and plurality that could contribute to the success of a new international order. Ultimately, this is where India, a plural vibrant democracy aspiring to be a free economic power, holds the advantage over all other countries.

Thus, Shyam Saran's 'How India Sees the World' is a must read for all those interested in an authentic yet quick reference on contemporary trends in India's foreign policy, supplemented by the Author's breathtaking command of the ancient foundations and the Cold-War dimensions of our foreign policy.