

How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century,
by Shyam Saran, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017, pp. 312, Rs 599

*Shrabana Barua**

One of the first lessons a student of international politics is introduced to is that foreign policy is a compendium of continuity and change, of static and dynamic co-existence, mired in the national interest of the nation state. In the Indian context, in particular, the first political theorist the same student studies is the realist ancient thinker Kautilya. These elementary but indispensable lessons form the basis of Shyam Saran's riveting work, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*.

Saran's summary of the book in the introductory chapter, followed by its compartmentalisation into three parts, makes for a clear preview of his ideas that are a mix of experience and visionary consciousness. The first section explains how the geography and history of India has an architectonic role in the formulation of Indian foreign policy. Chapter 1, 'Sources of India's World View', takes the reader back to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Kamandaki's *Nitisara* and other ancient references as sources from which India still draws much of its fervour for inter-state strategies. India's sense of prowess as a powerful Asian country is derived from its geostrategic location at the intersection of spatio-cultural points such as China and Central Asia and Southeast Asia and Asia.

Diplomacy and the role of diplomats (a distinction noted by Saran) are both important tools of foreign policy that India seem to fare well in.

* The reviewer is a Research Scholar in the Diplomacy and Disarmament Division, Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament (CIPOD), School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



India's diplomatic manoeuvres during and after the Cold War period, when world politics was at a defining stage, are vindicated. In Chapter 2, 'Foreign Policy from Independence to the End of the Cold War', non-alignment has been commended as a policy that enabled India to maintain its autonomy while sufficiently engaging with the rest of the world. Thereafter India's 'Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World' (Chapter 3) was geared towards securing its strategic and economic interest in the new globalised multipolar world by renegotiating its priorities towards both the Western and the Eastern worlds alike.

In the second section of the book, in Chapter 4, Saran claims that 'the defining feature of South Asia is asymmetry', and therefore the challenges of proximity, especially with neighbours like Pakistan and Nepal, are often severe. India's attempt to catapult South Asia as a powerful region gets clubbed under narratives of domination. Yet, it cannot be ignored that India's economic resurgence has catalysed the shifting of world focus from transatlantic to Asia-Pacific.

When it comes to Pakistan, 'puzzle' is what Saran defines India's foreign policy towards it, one that oscillates between 'dialogue–disruption–dialogue' (Chapter 5). Though mechanisms like back-channel talks to deal with problems linked to the Kashmir issue are appreciated, he suggests that India should maintain pressure points for Pakistan, such as that in the Gilgit-Baltistan area. Further, Siachen and Sir Creek disputes find adequate space as matters that should have been resolved when time was ripe. Very few diplomats have placed their views on the subject as conclusively as Shyam Saran has.

Chapter 6 addresses the need to understand China. The limited understanding India has of the Chinese view of the world has been disadvantageous. In any case, misinterpretations and failed negotiations are what triggered the border disputes with China, and this is what Saran examines through a sectoral analysis in Chapter 7. Saran makes a chronological inspection of some of the border conventions and agreements dating back to the nineteenth century up to more recent times. He narrates how border negotiations evolved from being a Chinese 'package proposal' in the 1980s to making marked progress, with India recognising Chinese rights over Tibet and over Sikkim as part of Indian territory in the early 2000s. Today, each acknowledges the position of the other as an eminent player in South Asia. However, asymmetries still exist. If these are to be addressed efficiently, the answers, according to Saran, should be found in the pragmatic Kautilyan principles.

Chapter 8 is filled with anecdotes of Shyam Saran's experience in Nepal and more, most of it regretting the undermined potential for friendship the two nations have. The relationship is a 'paradox'. The once viable Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950 soon lost its lustre with the advent of China and the 1960 China–Nepal boundary agreement. India's support for 'multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy' in Nepal backfired. The major concern, sufficiently elaborated in the chapter, is the fact that it is China that has aligned with the economic, political and social transformations taking place in Nepal in a more acceptable way than India. Yet, people-to-people relations are still bustling with about 6 million Nepali residents in India, who need to be harbingers of the message that India's growth is Nepal's opportunity. Indeed, Nepal should consider itself as a territory which is 'India-open', rather than a state that is landlocked by India.

The China factor in India's view of the larger world has a glaring significance in the book. The reader begins to understand why Saran picks the Kautilyan narrative to describe India's foreign policy stance, which is a pursuit for power, particularly in South Asia. Yet, what goes missing in Saran's repeated use of the Kautilyan lens is the omission of neighbours Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh, as if the Raja Mandala theory depicts not the comprehensive circle of state but only a curve towards the north! The author leaps from Pakistan, China and Nepal as India's neighbourhood component to addressing the transcending problems India faces in the twenty-first century. At the same time, he himself makes a point about the inadequacy of using a narrow understanding of the Kautilyan frame of reference to deal with the expansive nature of problems today—problems that can be better analysed through more accommodative principles like those of Ashoka's.

The third section opens with the chapter titled, 'Tackling Energy Security and Climate Change' (Chapter 9), noted as the twin challenges for India. To understand the chapter holistically, it is best read along with Chapter 12, 'One Long Day in Copenhagen'. The cross-cutting threats of the world have necessitated global negotiations where, unlike in the old world order, even smaller nations have a part to play. In doing so, India has been an active player (also as part of the BASIC group—Brazil, South Africa, India, China) in the climate change negotiation, but one that, according to Saran, has only been non-progressive. The move from principles like the 'common but differentiated responsibility' to 'pledge and review' is a reversal of the Kyoto mandate. Interestingly,

the changing dynamics of India–US relations vis-à-vis that of China–US in 2009, when global environmental agenda witnessed a watershed moment, are well pointed out. Many moot points of the negotiation, debates on transparency and funding issues, and episodes of conversations and talks behind closed doors that only a negotiator can testify to, have been well placed to make the chapters a nourishing reference for scholars of environmental diplomacy and negotiation. Problems of resource crunch, ecological sustainability, population explosion, food insecurity, etc., have also been discussed by the author, with statistical data to support his claims in most cases, making the arguments concrete and comprehensible.

In Chapters 10 and 11, Saran collates his experience during the making of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, from negotiating the many clauses of the agreement to mustering support at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) from the 48 member countries that went on to become a telltale of exceptionalism in the nuclear world order. He acquaints the reader with the cumbersome journey of the multifold negotiations drawn over three years, filled with hurdles, not just international but also domestic. Many contentious clauses deliberated upon during the negotiations have been described. But Saran's frustrations become evident at many places, which helps the reader to understand the fragility of the matter in hand. Admirably, Saran has not backed down from naming those people who, in his view, helped to catalyse the deal and those who displayed rather obstructionist behaviour as an outcome of what Saran thinks is personal envy! He also praises George Bush and Manmohan Singh for creating history by signing the nuclear deal that has major bearings on India's energy security in the contemporary world.

The section ends with the chapter 'Shaping the Emerging World Order and India's Role'. Though the US is still the dominant power today (with Europe in flux due to events like Brexit and Russia acknowledging multipolarity in principle), it is no longer the hegemon, a place coveted aggressively by China. Importantly, it is in Asia where a new world order is taking shape. Therefore, Saran analyses certain scenarios in various regions of Asia, comparing American and Chinese military and economic influences at work, and concludes that China's attempt at gaining world dominance is not attuned to contemporary realities. With a growing interconnected world, it is in multipolarity that the future lies. Therefore, India should resist hegemonic forces while being rooted in its civilisational values of cosmopolitanism and plurality.

The epilogue, 'India and the New Global Landscape', ends the book on a futuristic note about India's potential as a major power in the twenty-first century. India has attained expertise in what Shyam Saran enumerates as the three critical domains of the new world order: maritime, space and cyber. While he cautions about the pervasiveness of technology and cyber tools often existing beyond regulations, India's capability in these spaces is what will lead it to be an influential actor in the globalised and digitalised world. However, alongside this exists the bane of religious fundamentalism spreading beyond regional borders. Insecurity has led countries to respond narrowly while dealing with ubiquitous threats. India's response should lie in collaborative commitment and practising the liberal ideals enshrined in the Constitution, while adhering to age-old principles of *sama*, *dana*, *danda*, *bheda* in dealing with the complex world of today.

Shyam Saran's book is a befitting example of a text that provides a realist map of how (and why) India responds to the changing world of the twenty-first century that is at a defining stage in international history. The book flows meticulously from one phase to another and uses simple language that makes for very easy reading. Without resorting to citing explanatory footnotes/references in each chapter, the book contains a long index at the end that sufficiently assists readers to understand terminologies and concepts better.

If one is to sum up the underlying message of the book, it is that India has an identifiable worldview and an increased assertiveness today that emanates from historical moorings embedded in its civilisational spirit and its geostrategic location. Also, increased capabilities in various sectors enable it to play a major role in the globalised world despite the rise of China. As Dr Manmohan Singh writes in the foreword of the book, Shyam Saran's book indeed '...leaves us with a lot of food for thought'.

