

Book Review: “India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present”

WRITTEN BY: Shiv Shankar Menon

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The book entitled *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*, by Shiv Shankar Menon responds to India’s stand in the sub-continent and beyond. The book is another masterpiece of India’s foreign policy. His earlier book, *Choices: Inside the making of Indian Foreign Policy* (2016) has been a major source of references in the academic arena especially in understanding the foreign policy of India. Menon, with his in-depth experiences of diplomacy as a foreign secretary from 2006-2009, and simultaneously having served as a national security adviser from 2010-2014, fits well in analyzing the foreign policy of India. The book unfolds the vexed issues underlying India’s foreign policy over the years. Menon begins with historical prelude of India in Asia especially after independence and later on delved on India’s role in shaping the world order in the ever changing contour of foreign policy. Overall, the book is a comprehensive work of scholarship capturing different constituents of India’s past and possibly the future behaviour that India must adhere to as a major player in world politics.

The approach followed by Menon is basically Indo centric. The reason is obvious, as India holds a better position in the region both in terms of security and economic aspects. Being a neighbour of two unfriendly neighbours Pakistan and China, India cannot compromise its interest in the region; therefore a powerful India with profound ties with the world major powers is something which cannot be isolated. In the economic front, Asia with 4.4 billion people, about 60 percent of the world’s population spreading in forty-nine nations, and tied together by rapid growth of infrastructure, trade and investment, India’s contribution can’t be shy away in this arena as well. The book is subtly divided into two parts. Each parts holding significance of particular phases in shaping India’s foreign policy.

In the first part - *The Past*, Menon divided India’s foreign policy into different phases. Beginning with the inheritance, Menon mentioned about the unique geographical significant of India’s strategic location in the region. For instance India played a pivotal role especially in 1000-1820 AD as rich trading partners to countries as far as to the Middle East and East Asian countries. Thereafter, after the occupation of the region by the Britishers the rich glory gradually began to diminish. Then the writer moves on to explain about Nehru’s view of Asia and Pan-Asia and need of Non Aligned Movement (NAM) under a sub-title *The Independence*. Nehru’s speech of 14 August 1947, ‘Tryst with Destiny’ that one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments was highlighted with proper emphasis on shaping India’s need. There is no doubt that one can see that Nehru followed a well knitted approach

of blending domestic and foreign policy at equal importance. Nehru knew it well that domestic consolidation and growth obviously will make India robust and key player internationally in shaping world politics. Besides this, the neutral stand of NAM were also credited by the writer by mentioning about the economic transformation of the third world countries, averting of nuclear holocaust and also the decolonization of Africa. However, Menon remarked that a lack of hard power might have compelled India to play a proactive approach with China in respect of Tibetan issue. This situation placed the new Republic of India in an unprecedented geopolitical situation of compromise. The Cold War further complicated India's situation. The balance of power politics between United States of America and the Soviet Union forced India to choose its own stand in dealing the situation. Remaining aloof from the two powerful blocs under the banner of NAM championed by Nehru also led to neutralization of tension between the two super powers, as India actively began to engage in disarmament issue.

In the Second part: *The Present*, Menon explained about, how the channels of globalization affected Asia's geopolitics on one hand and on the other it increases India's role in this new environment. Objectively speaking, economic growth and progress in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in - more people in the world living longer, healthier, more secure, and also more prosperous lives than ever before in history. The paradox is that globalization is not purely economic phenomenon. The primarily agents of globalization were now not only government but private actors outside government such as transnational corporations and institutions also began to play an important role. There is no doubt; India, China, and Asia in particular were fundamentally benefited by this channel of globalization to which Menon beautifully covered minutely in details. The vexed issue between India and China were also discussed in this section. Like the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and India's reluctant to join, and also China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to which India looks with cautious as it aims to pass through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Most interestingly, the economic crash of 2020 with the COVID 19 pandemic, and China's relatively quick recovery and accelerating its economic expansion is another factor that may impinge between the two countries. Today China is in central to the world economy, it manufactures one-fourth of global industrial production and is the largest consumer of several commodities and products and the question that raises here is how will India compete to this phenomenal change, to which Menon suggested that only a robust and well planned foreign policy with proactive role of both soft and hard power can balance the status quo.

Interestingly, Menon opined that China's rise is only the most striking aspects of what globalization has done to the balance of power in Asia. This trends poses a challenge, as a beneficiary of globalization, China is not only a status quo power in the world economy, but is also politically revisionist, wishing to change the political order in Asia to reflect its primacy. Menon further said that, China does all these to seek a fundamental reordering of the political dispensation in Asia. However, the will to power United States of America and Russia is not going to be easy. In addition to this, the Eurasian littoral is crowded with warships from Japanese, Indonesian, and even Indian maritime maneuvers around and not to forget the formation of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) comprising of USA, India, Japan and Australia is going to make it even more difficult for China in achieving primacy at sea especially in the Indo-Pacific region. If China were to deny access to others to the seas near China, without the ability to protect the sea-lanes it relies on, then it will itself risks in

having its energy and other supply lines cut in the event of conflict with the United States or other serious naval power.

Finally, viewing Asia from India's prism, Menon quoted V.S. Naipaul's famous phrase that the views from India to the east and west differ remarkably. To the east are the fastest growing economies in the world, rapidly industrializing and urbanizing, with strong state structures and modernizing societies. To the west are economies that rely on extracting natural resources, primarily oil, with fragile state systems under threat, fractured politics, and half-made societies. Menon also stated P.V. Narasimha Rao announcement of 'Look East' policy in April 1992 and thereafter morphed into 'Act East' under recent National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Hurdles emanating from its neighbours has also been elaborated by Menon and agreed in total the challenges posit from China. China is consistently engaging the neighbours for the future predominance in India's neighbourhood – building ports and bases in Djibouti, Gwadar-Jiwani, Hambantota, Kyaukphyu, Malacca, the Maldives and elsewhere is few to be noted. The question that remains here is that, whether China's accommodation of some Indian concerns could amount to anything more than a tactical response or to a probable outbreak of hostility. Menon said both countries used outside countries as a balancer to check mate each other and thereby reduces the full-fledged conflict.

Menon further remarked that, India must carefully deal the rise of China by stating the need for India to follow proactive approach vis-à-vis China. However, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi statecraft carefully sees that Nehruvian era is sideline and new image build on with more focus on India's glorious past by concentrating on India's civilizational glory. To this Menon stated that this is noble soft power goal and it is useless unless backed by strong hard power. The practical challenge for India is to pursue a foreign policy that will continue to transform the country into a vibrant world players for which regional and global comprehensive ties is needed. Now in a region where China is continuously expanding its tentacles of dominating India, the overall or grand strategy India should adopt is to engage with the world - whether it is called preventive engagement, or strategic outreach or any other catchphrase, India must engage quoted Menon. Further, for India if there was a scope for building up national strength and hard power-India must keep its periphery pacified, stay out of blocs and work with coalitions of powers wherever India's interest coincide. There is no time for drama, showy events, and the pursuits of status stated Menon.

The overall assessment is that, Menon documented India's foreign policy from the independence era to the present scenario by critically analyzing the various intricacies in a complex world order. The main focus of the book is about how India should prepare to respond to rising China. No doubt, with the expertise in the field of foreign policy, Menon makes a powerful geopolitical case for India by suggesting engaging both the regional and global players in craving India's foreign policy for any futuristic maneuver.

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