

Taylor Dibbert Interview for Huffington Post

1. Your book “Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy” has just been published. Would you tell us a little bit about it?

It is a book about five major foreign policy choices that the government of India made in the recent past, and what they say about India’s present and future behaviour as a great power. The choices include the first border related agreement on pacifying the border with China, the civil nuclear negotiations with the USA which helped transform the India-US relationship, and the decision not to use overt force against Pakistan after the Mumbai terrorist attack.

2. Why did you decide to write this book?

The idea of the book came to me from a study group that I took in Harvard in spring 2015, when I realised that there was considerable interest in how these choices were made by governments, not just among foreign policy wonks but among those studying other disciplines as well. I then thought it worth putting down recollections of why and how these decisions were made.

3. What are a couple key takeaways that you hope will resonate with policymakers?

This is really a practitioner’s account. It reflects the reality that governments make national security and foreign policy choices in the fog of events, and that there are seldom black or white, true and false, right and wrong, choices. Instead much of the time we are trying to maximise gain and minimise harm. The book also reflects the reality (that IR theory sometimes underestimates, and crime fiction overestimates) that personalities matter in decision making. Policy makers might find it reassuring to know how others dealt with some of the dilemmas that they face.

4. What sort of feedback have you gotten thus far? Have there been any comments or observations that have surprised you?

The most surprising comment I heard was that the book is “shockingly readable”. I assume that was a compliment. Overall the reaction has been generous and complimentary so far.

The book came out in the US just when India-Pakistan tensions were high after cross-border terrorist attacks, and when India decided to act across the line of control against terrorist launch pads. Since the book had predicted this it was natural that the Pakistan chapter attracted considerable comment.

5. How long did it take to write? Do you have a writing routine?

These were decisions that I was associated with so I suppose the book has been a long time in the making. But the actual writing was relatively quick, taking about a year, once the ideas had been clarified through discussions in the study group and with friends and colleagues. This is my first book so I cannot say I have a writing routine yet, though I prefer writing early in the morning.

6. Do you have any literary influences?

I would hesitate to claim any literary merit for what I write. I have always admired historical writing that displays clarity and simplicity while explaining complex ideas, like Isiah Berlin's writings and EH Carr's "Twenty Years Crisis".

7. What do you read for fun?

Fiction by Elmore Leonard, Indian authors like Amitabha Ghosh and Vikram Seth, and Chinese authors like Qiu Xialong and Ha Jin.

8. What's the best book you've read this year?

Naming just one book is an impossible task for me. I enjoyed Srinath Raghavan's "India's War" about India in the Second World War. Another was "The Gunpowder Age" by Tonio Andrade, a fascinating account of the spread and use of military technology that stands traditional views on their head. Prasannan Parthasarathi's "Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not" was a stimulating read. I also thoroughly enjoyed rereading two older books, finding something new in them each time. One is Kenneth Pomeranz on "The Great Divergence" about how the West pulled away from China, India and Japan in the eighteenth century even when they seemed as or more ready to industrialise. The other is a classic, "The Pattern of the Chinese Past" by Mark Elvin, from 1973, which, in its last paragraphs, predicts much of what we have seen China achieve in the last thirty years. All three are great examples of the historian's craft.