

Why “Choices”?

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Several people have asked me why I wrote a book on five issues in Indian foreign policy called “Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy”.

The idea for the book germinated last spring, in a study group on Indian foreign policy in Harvard where one session was devoted to India-Pakistan relations. We naturally discussed cross-border terrorism and the Mumbai attack of 26/11. After my customary presentation outlining the issues, the first student to speak, was one who had lost his father in the attack. From that point on there was an animated discussion among a group of students from countries around the world, from Argentina to Uzbekistan to India and to China, with diverse points of view expressed. The discussion went on well beyond the two hours allotted to the class and seemed to have touched a chord among many of the students, no matter where they were from.

I realised from that debate that most of us underestimate the complexity of foreign policy and national security choices that governments make. Indeed, choice is the essence of government. These choices are not only about winning or losing, being right or wrong, knowing true from false, or other binary choices. They are choices made in the fog of events, with imperfect knowledge and limited foresight into consequences. Often the policy maker finds himself “mini-maxing”, minimising harm and maximising gain, or balancing off different interests and considerations.

“Choices” is an attempt to describe that process, through five examples of choices made by the government of India, when I was lucky enough to be a participant in decision making on those issues.

The choices covered in the book relate to:

- The 1993 border peace and tranquility agreement between India and China when both countries agreed, despite having the world’s largest boundary dispute and within thirty years of having fought a war over it, to respect the status quo while they negotiated the boundary and developed the rest of their relationship.
- The Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement between India and the US in 2008, or the 123 Agreement, which removed a long standing obstacle and transformed the relationship.
- The Indian decision not to use overt force against Pakistan despite conclusive evidence that the terrorists who attacked Mumbai on 26 November 2008 had come

from Pakistan and were trained by elements of the Pakistan Army intelligence agency, the ISI.

- The last six months in 2009 of the Sri Lankan civil war which eliminated the LTTE as a fighting force and made us choose between India's strategic, domestic political and humanitarian interests; and,
- India's doctrine of no-first-use of nuclear weapons. Why have a weapon and announce that you will not use it?

Finally the book examines whether one can draw any conclusions about India's behaviour as a great power from the predilections that these and other choices reveal.

In effect the book concludes that India's foreign policy and national security choices have been personality driven, strategically bold but tactically cautious, marked by realism, and recognisably Indian, though this is hard to define. The role of the Indian prime minister in these decisions has always been most significant. International relations theory seems to underestimate the role of individuals, (while crime fiction overestimates it), even though choices are always made by people.

To my mind, there does seem to be an Indian way of dealing with these issues. And the end result, in terms of the primary goal of transforming India into a modern, strong and prosperous country, has been largely successful.

All in all, this is a practitioner's book, not a theoretical understanding of India's foreign policy, though you might argue that there are implicit theoretical and ideological assumptions in any such work. I leave that to others to discover and comment on.

It is also a small book, and therefore readable. Indeed, the best comment I got about the book was that it was, "shockingly readable!" I choose to regard that as a compliment.

The portions of the book which have occasioned the most comment were those relating to the use of force against cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, particularly because the book was released just as we were working our way through the terrorist attack from Pakistan on the Uri post and the Indian Army's response of a "surgical strike". Besides, the book had predicted that another Mumbai-type attack would not evoke the same response from the government of India and that any government of India would likely have to be seen to use force.

The other portion which has occasioned comment, largely outside India, was the chapter on no-first-use of nuclear weapons. Since this doctrine is so far unique to India and China, even though President Obama attempted tentatively to review the possibility of bringing US nuclear weapons doctrine closer to no-first-use, it is not surprising that many remain to be convinced of the utility of this policy. My own sense, as you will see from the book, is

that no-first-use is still the right policy for India's set of unique circumstances, but should continue to be regularly reviewed.

It was only after writing the book that I realised how China runs right through it. China is today a significant factor in every one of India's major relationships and in most aspects of Indian policy.

The utility of force and diplomacy is another theme that runs through the book, relating to Pakistan and cross-border terrorism, and to Sri Lanka in 2009, and to the use of nuclear weapons.

The book also raises, but does not attempt to definitively answer, several questions which came up in the course of looking at these choices. The morality of choices in foreign policy is one aspect that I think deserves to be further examined. Does national interest or national development justify all means and all acts of state? What makes one choice ethical and not another? It is justified to kill one person to save many?

My attempt when writing the book was to follow the historian's rule: to respect the evidence, and to separate one's own perceptions from facts and analysis. This is not easy to do. Only the reader can judge whether the attempt has been successful.

What kind of power will India be? We live today in an age of ultra-nationalism all around us, within India and abroad. I personally consider this dangerous, for it collects the tinder for a new conflagration, while denying leaders the flexibility to compromise and accommodate each other to keep the peace and concentrate on the real business of mankind, improving human welfare and realising our potential. Hence the continuing relevance of the quotation opening the last chapter from Gandhiji: "True power speaks softly; it has no reason to shout." We forget that at our own peril.

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