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- Security Sans Strategy?  
*Sumit Mukerji*
- US Defence of Taiwan: Complexities and Challenges  
*Anil Chopra*
- Assessing the Development and Challenges in  
Pakistan's Civil Nuclear Programme  
*Zoya Akhter Fathima*
- Wildfires and Climate Crisis: The Need  
for International Cooperation  
*Megna Suresh and Dhanasree Jayaram*
- Rentierism and the West Asian Economies: Case of Qatar  
*Anu Sharma*
- India-US Relations: Convergences and  
Divergences under the Biden Administration  
*Stuti Banerjee*
- Deepening Indo-US Maritime Cooperation  
in the Indo-Pacific  
*Rushali Saha*
- Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Underlining Factors  
of a 'Religious' State  
*Temjenmeren Ao*

*Book Review*

# BOOK REVIEW

## **The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World**

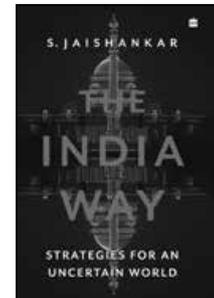
Author: S. Jaishankar

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## **HINA PANDEY**

As the title suggests, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* is just that; an outline reflecting what guides the current and future direction in the conduct of Indian foreign relations. It is a crisp commentary on India's engagement with the world, a guiding outline on the expected direction of Indian foreign policy, and an insight into what is being thought by the policy planners. But, most importantly, it is a firm articulation of India's global interests and values. In the author's own words, the book aims to "... develop an argumentation on contemporary politics. ..."

The book has inevitably generated many expectations mainly for two reasons: (a) it has come at a time of uncertainty and resetting of international affairs with regard to power-shifts, especially when the US alone is not the prime driver of international politics as its

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strategic influence is reduced; and (b) to gauge the future direction of Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis the flux in international relations amidst the unprecedented pandemic. In this respect, the work by the current External Affairs Minister brings forth much needed clarity relating to both issues.

What stands out as a profound message from the book for those who observe Indian foreign policy is that, “the execution on foreign policy choices is more important than debating them and they cannot be without costs”, and that, “past will be an influence but no longer a determinant of our future”. India’s abrogation of Article 370 and its dealing with China reflects these shifts in foreign policy thinking. One may argue, this current thinking would likely dictate India’s foreign-security policy choices in future as well. Additionally, the book also brings forth an unsurprising resemblance to what is being said and what is underway in terms of India’s current engagement with Japan, China, Europe and the extended neighbourhood. India’s “projection of its own distinct personality”, earning of goodwill in the Southern and extended Asia, and the building of global outreach of “the brand India” are the most visible objectives guiding India’s vaccine diplomacy during the first wave of COVID-19.

Unavoidably, generous attention is paid while discussing China. The phenomenon of China rise is viewed as “instructive”, as it holds an important lesson for India on how China was able to generate not only lasting economic growth but also favourable geopolitical balance, with accurate strategic clarity vis-à-vis the US and USSR during the Cold War era. Clearly, it leveraged the global environment to cater to national development well. However, in the current times, when global agendas are undergoing a change with the incorporation of diversified interests, China is required to play by the rules. It can no longer afford to play the “great disrupter” in engaging with international institutions of significance such as the IMF, WTO, and the UN. At various points, the book has compared foreign policy choices of the past and made a case for why certain orthodoxies need a review and at what points the conduct of Indian foreign policy options are to be more imaginative and risk taking. Here, too, China has received a mention. The author is critical of India’s handling of China in the past, which resulted in an unintended consequence of

China taking more “strategic space in Asia”. This ought to serve as a reminder that China’s rise cannot take place at the cost of India. Historical issues and border differences thus will define a new paradigm of India’s engagement with China.

The significance of Indo-Pacific to India’s grand strategy, too, has received sufficient attention in the chapter titled, “The Pacific Indian”. While the Indo-Pacific may mean differently to different players, to India, it is a “pathway” for its own rise and an enabler for responding and navigating the complexities of a changing world. In short, Indo-Pacific is viewed as an instrument to expand Indian interests globally. This is conveyed with clarity and conviction and can also be considered as an implicit undertone of the book. Within the conversation of Indo-Pacific, the prominence of the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis Indian security is emphasised, for which India has to get its maritime strategy right. This would mean a secure Indian mainland and islands with a stable and safe Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is viewed as a medium to build far and wide influence in the immediate and extended regions, such as Russia, Europe, Central Asia and even West Asia.

In the chapter “Krishna’s Choice”, parallels are drawn from *Mahabharata* in order to extract strategic guidance to navigate current foreign policy challenges, as the epic bears a resemblance to the context in which Indian foreign policy is operating. This chapter particularly speaks to Indian readers. Several examples from *Mahabharata* are cited to suggest that foreign-security policy dilemmas are to be resolved without getting “discouraged by the collateral consequences of the action”. This especially holds for challenges such as terrorism, “violation of sovereignty”, or “infringement of borders”. The author states, “if there is a message in Arjuna’s choice, it is that we have to face up to responsibilities, however difficult their consequences”. Additionally, as rising power India must cultivate the quality of “displaying responsibility”, “cultivate strategic patience”, and reject thinking in an orthodox manner similar to *Duryodhana of Mahabharata*. This chapter has also emphasised the importance of adhering to international rules, laws and agreements. As India’s power and influence gain traction in the world, the perception of a rule abiding, responsible player would only add to it. The author has reiterated

more than once how certain traditions or learning from *Mahabharata* can be very well applied to foreign policy choices. India must approach its conduct of foreign relations the way *Krishna* played its role in *Mahabharata*, to understand the big picture and fashion strategy accordingly. This could mean the practice of “strategic deception”, “control and shaping of narrative”, and an accurate judgement of the mindsets of adversaries as well as their intentions and capabilities. All this would add to facilitating a successful rise of India.

The book has laid out several takeaways for policy enthusiasts, especially for researchers at Indian think tanks. Albeit implicit, one of them is to think in terms of the “merits of realism in the conduct of world affairs”. This is deemed necessary as the world is currently witnessing a growing sense of nationalism across geographies. On a deeper level, it appears that perhaps the author expects the readers to not only take note of the currently evolving geopolitical state interactions but also compels them to think in order to contribute to the debate, taking forward the Indian view.

To conclude, notwithstanding the fluidity of international affairs, in the post-Pandemic world order, India’s global engagement in the near future can be expected to be driven by the (then) evolving geopolitical realities in addition to how the end of the pandemic will unfold. The Indian approach in dealing with matters of world affairs thus can be summed up in the words of former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, as, “... redesigning the airplane while flying it. ...” Interestingly, it is not only India that is faced with this paradox. In the author’s word, the world too faces a challenge, which “seeks to change the very order it is deeply invested in”.

In a broader sense, “The India Way” implies the construction of the Indian nomenclature or even a strategic language that the world not only understands but also agrees with. Additionally, “The India Way” can be defined as addressing the interconnectedness of strategy, diplomacy, capabilities to advance Indian interests based on values of collective consciousness. The book certainly provokes one to take note of the Indian perspective and also provides itself as a useful tool in inculcating the same. It is likely to remain a conversation starter for foreign policy observers, thinkers and practitioners.