

“THE INDIA WAY: STRATEGIES FOR
AN UNCERTAIN WORLD”
BY SUBRAHMANYAM JAISHANKAR

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Amidst the chaos and contestations on finding the right term to describe India’s power status as aspiring/rising/promising or evolving, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar’s *The India Way: Strategies for an uncertain world* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2020) comes loaded with answers like “India may be rising, but it clearly has a great distance to go” (Jaishankar 2020: 123). The book illustrates events, challenges, weaknesses, dogmas, politics and a personal account of India’s Foreign Policy by a career diplomat, in fact, none other than India’s current Minister of External Affairs. Writing the first-hand account may be common by foreign policy practitioners, but a sitting foreign minister rarely pens his thoughts and ideas. With forty years of experience, after two successful stints as a diplomat in China and the United States, Jaishankar’s study revolves around changes in the world system, especially the rise of China, new strategic alliances and the return of nationalism-based foreign policy at the critical time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jaishankar begins with an acceptance that the rise of China is an inspiration to India, but this needs to be seen through an interest-based and strategic prism. He states India and China began their economic, political and strategic together, but no one anticipated the rise of China, especially that it would claim global power status. China’s rise is a rare non-western phenomenon that has claimed a power equilibrium with the USA, based on its cultural

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heritage of projecting China's personality. Interestingly, Jaishankar argues that China has been winning in the global contest for power without fighting, and the US is fighting without winning (Jaishankar 2020: 21). Meanwhile, the power quest between the USA and China has created disruptions, with each power focused on selling its own products, like America First and the China Dream.

The global financial meltdown in 2009 had little impact on the Chinese economy. While the USA suffered financially and had non-lucrative outcomes from a long stretch of involvement in Iraq, China developed an active export-oriented market. It helped China to manage the 2009 crisis well. In this process China has been able to broaden its market outreach globally and meet its huge strategic targets in South Asia, Africa and ASEAN (Jaishankar 2020: 144). China has successfully served its National Objectives through strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the same time, BRI has emerged as a challenge for international players, including India. As a result, "China's powerful rise is among the multiple factors that have led to a more uncertain world" (Jaishankar 2020: 151), and "the rest of the world may appreciate the remarkable rise of China, but India lives with it up close as an immediate neighbour" (Jaishankar 2020: 133). Chinese expansionist geo-strategic thoughts intend to create a Unipolar World order with others as its tributaries. The traditional global powers like the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, European Union, Australia, and India are uniting bilaterally and multilaterally to take upon the China challenge in a liberal democratic model. However, considering an erratic and unpredictable the United States and an uncertain Japan in finding common grounds against China, regional players like India stand on the cusp of confusion.

Jaishankar argues that imbalanced trade with China and interest-based cooperation with the United States and Japan have forced India to introspect its own capabilities. Meanwhile, India has proved itself strong by developing its nuclear capabilities and playing more significant roles at the UN and WHO. While Jaishankar boasts India's capabilities, he criticises the previous non-Bhartiya Janta Party administrations for doing little to boost India's

capabilities. In his view, India has missed many opportunities to make a mark, especially in matching with the development patterns of China. Overall, Jaishankar's pre-Modi assessment in the book is way too critical. For instance, Jaishankar makes a pre-mature assessment that "India has not only established its credentials as the pharmacy of the world but also as a health security responder" (Jaishankar 2020: 210), citing India's fight against COVID-19. However, the current Second Wave of COVID-19 in India explains it otherwise. Within few months, India is making pleas to the global community to provide immediate medical help by sending in vaccines, oxygen and other medical needs.

In Chapter Three, titled, "Krishna's Choice: Strategic Culture of a Rising Power", Jaishankar touches upon the long-standing debate on whether India has its own strategic culture. The chapter must be seen as the continuation of a long-standing discussion between Indian and Western Scholars on India's strategic culture, especially by George K. Tanham's pioneering work *India's Strategic Thought: An interpretive essay* (Tanham 1992). Tanham blatantly refutes any evidence to prove the tradition of strategic culture in India, which the Indian scholars have not welcomed. Former Foreign Secretary of India and National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has made vital interventions in suggesting that India has a rich strategic culture accounted in the epics like *Arthashastra*, *Mahabharata* *Bhagavadgita* (Menon 2013). Similarly, Jaishankar finds the Mahabharata as "indisputably the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts and statecraft" (Jaishankar 2020: 48). He argues that the Mahabharata accounts for real-life situations and their inherent choices, representing the present world's multi-polar world order. Therefore, as India prepares for more significant contributions globally, it should rely on its own traditions to address a tumultuous world.

Dipping into history, Jaishankar reasons that the leaders of the Indian freedom movement were clear on the foreign policy outlook of an independent India. Thus, soon after British left India in 1947, it worked to mainstream itself in the world politics beyond the adversarial Cold War scenario. Through a Non-Alignment

Movement, India became a leader among countries freed from colonial clutches. Meanwhile, India's quest for global leadership faced a significant challenge during the 1962 War with China where India lost severely. The loss continues to be a dreadful reminder to India's policymakers about China. However, India's successful intervention to support East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 against Pakistan had helped India to forget the dreadful past.

In discussing Globalisation, Jaishankar argues that it brought significant changes in the world order, especially in India. In 1991, India, in sync with global economic changes, opened up its economy to the world. However, "after decades of Globalisation being touted as politically correct and economically inevitable", Jaishankar observes that "we see a dramatic revival of nationalism across geographies" (Jaishankar 2020: 110). The rise of nationalist movements across India, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom are now the common phenomenon supporting a global rebalancing which "was already in evidence" (Jaishankar 2020: 3) present to reject globalisation. It is "now overlaid by greater regional volatility, higher risk-taking, stronger nationalism" (Jaishankar 2020: 3).

On the neighbourhood front, India has/had its challenge and despite its best efforts, India continues to have an unstable neighbourhood. Strained relations with Pakistan and an unsettled border with China are immediate challenges to India. Jaishankar seems to suggest that off-track decisions of past governments have cost India hugely in asserting its position now. Meanwhile, he finds the steps taken by Prime Minister Modi match the present needs though a number of foreign policy initiatives like "Act East, SAGAR, Neighbourhood First and Indo-Pacific strategy" (Jaishankar 2020: 187). While he credits the current government for taking bold steps, the outcomes of these initiatives tell otherwise. While Sri Lanka has established strategic ties with China, a friendly neighbour like Nepal has shifted its treads towards China and continues to shed its India-centric outlook.

On the China Challenge, Jaishankar suggests that "the ability of India and China to work together could determine the Asian Century. Equally, their difficulties in doing so may well undermine

it” (Jaishanlar 2020: 133). However, China is a daunting challenge to India. “The rest of the World may appreciate the remarkable rise of China; but India lives with it up close as an immediate neighbour” (Jaishanlar 2020: 133). To deal with China, he hopes high for global groupings like the Indo-Pacific which will not only address the rising security challenges in the maritime domain, involving the USA, Japan and Australia, but also help to balance an imbalanced Asia and Indo-Pacific region. Further, he suggests that the Japan-India cooperation may skew a new Asian balance. However, Jaishankar fails to provide a roadmap in this regard.

The main attraction of this book is the author himself who served India in almost all strategically important countries, including China and the USA as the top diplomat. While one begins the book to find inside stories of his past experiences, there is hardly any reflection in this regard. There are more philosophical musings than intricacies of India’s foreign policy and his engagement in it. The author holds more to himself than he reveals, and this continues to bother the reader throughout the book. Also, Jaishankar overrides on China in almost all of the eight chapters, creating a mismatch with the title of the book. The book is centred on China and deals with India-China competition at large but does not suggest a roadmap for India to deal with the China challenge. Overall, the book remains abstract on India’s foreign policy. It becomes more vague when the author makes statements like the “India Way would be more shaper or decider than just be an abstainer” (Jaishanlar 2020: 211). However, the book must be read by the students, researchers and the policy makers in understanding the changes and challenges in India’s foreign policy.

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