

BOOK REVIEW**Pax Indica: Shashi Tharoor**

Reviewed by

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When Shashi Tharoor's doctoral thesis on Indian foreign policy appeared as a book with the magistral title 'Reasons of State' in 1980 or so, it was widely received as a precociously scholarly work, but notable more for its boldly critical approach to the subject. His detractors put down its mild agnosticism about non-alignment to the influence of the American academic milieu to which the young research student was presumably over-exposed without much significant corrective from the Indian counterpart. But there is no question but that 'Reasons of State' was a considerable work and there is a great deal in it which still merits careful reading.

Not only have three decades gone by between 'Reasons of State' and Shashi Tharoor's present book, but with all that the passage of time – his brilliant career in the UN and an eventful spell in the Ministry of External Affairs [MEA] – would have meant for the evolution of thinking and the learning process of a remarkably receptive individual, Pax Indica is a work that will be variously viewed. The author says that the book is a work of reflection, not scholarship. An impeccable caveat, but hardly assuring it a safe passage. Not being admittedly a scholarly work, it can count itself out from a critical appraisal of its value as a contribution to academic foreign policy discourse. But on the other hand, as a work of reflection it hardly keeps to its remit, thereby laying itself open to criticism as any work of scholarship, which this book is in parts, would. It is also not unfair to ask whether any rising politician with a future to protect can produce a true work of reflection on a sensitive political theme.

"India's role in helping shape the global order for tomorrow centred on a peace system that will help promote and maintain a period of cooperative existence

in its own region and across the world” – that is how Tharoor defines Pax Indica. He traces the enterprise to the vision of Pandit Nehru, much as Nehru’s India had spent years “increasingly divorced from global trade and investment” and it is only since 1991 that “India has become a poster child of globalization”. Today the basic task for India in international affairs is to pursue a foreign policy that “enables and facilitates the domestic transformation of India”. And that will require India having to work for an international environment characterised by good neighbourly relations, leveraging the positive dynamics of regionalism and sub-regionalism and building up a structure of beneficial bilateralism and diverse multilateralism with all major powers.

It is an inspiring and benevolent vision statement. From Tharoor’s point of view, it also has the merit of embracing the principal policy initiatives of the present government as well as providing an elegant intellectual underpinning [such as used to be the forte of a handful of stalwarts of the MEA from time to time] to the dominant logic in India’s prevailing foreign policy environment. And where there are discordant elements in this immaculate foreign policy design, Tharoor deploys his renowned writing skill to smooth the rough edges and synthesise the melange of ideas in a lucid and readily digestible form.

The narrative, however, is by no means lacking in traps nor has Tharoor evaded some of them. He presents a highly persuasive argument for non-alignment, being duly mindful of his being regarded as a sceptic of that time-honoured concept. But when he says that foreign policy in India “was seen by its practioners, starting with Nehru, as an end itself”, it is a serious but erroneous criticism and a good part of MEA archives would be a repudiation of that argument. Tharoor himself mentions PL 480 wheat and Green Revolution technology from the US [but not the National Extension Service which came before these]; more instructive is India’s role over the years in GATT, aid diplomacy, both bilateral and multilateral, nuclear cooperation, the leveraging of our membership in bodies ranging from the Commonwealth to the Colombo Plan, all of which adding up to a clear systemic awareness of the instrumental nature of foreign policy. Tharoor, however, overlays the narrative of Indian foreign policy evolution by averring that, “on the basis of

what was achieved in the first forty years after independence, it was possible for Indian foreign policy to use the favourable international situation after 1991 to take major steps in furthering our basic objectives". And he quotes the Canadian scholar David Malone throughout the book to buttress his views on the post – 1991 evolution of foreign policy.

It is on relations with Pakistan that the book tries to come to grips with some tough issues. The author gives a comprehensive account of the state of relations between the two countries underlining the diverse and deep-seated sources of Pakistan's hostility towards India, with even the country's liberals providing little hope that the hate-India sub-culture in the country would wither any time soon and asks what is the way forward for India. While his diagnosis is flawless, Tharoor's remedy is less so. His considered proposition is that India can and should help Pakistan "transcend its dreadful circumstances" and "help it develop a stake in mutually beneficial progress" by resorting to initiatives like opening up of markets, a liberal visa regime and concessions on issues where vital interests are not involved. It is a view held in some well-informed and enlightened circles in India where the successive acts of Pak terrorism against India have not persuaded the adherents that realpolitik and reciprocity should rather be the way to deal with such an exceptional neighbour. Pax Indica should have no qualms about accepting the hard reality that Pakistan is more an issue for India's security and defence than for its diplomacy, for a long time to come.

In the chapters that follow, Tharoor advances valid arguments for promoting good neighbourly relations with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Afghanistan, overcoming 'present policy biases or shortcomings that stand in the way of an imaginative approach to relations'. He quotes with approval the Canadian scholar Malone's unexceptionable view that India cannot aspire to be a great power until it achieves a better handle on its region without the support and active involvement of outsiders. On relationship with China, Tharoor makes some good points in analysing the perplexing aspects of China's policy towards India, including the tactical option that she enjoys, of needling India on the border whenever it suits her. He believes that India should pursue common interests with

China, promote trade and people-to-people relations while taking pro-active steps of her own to strengthen the border infrastructure and to deepen the maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean on the one hand and scaling up relations with Taiwan on the other. Tharoor expresses his clear-eyed view that China and India are already at very different stages of development, ruling out commonalities, and that while China will eventually share with the US the position of a super power, India will not figure on the global stage to that extent, but will be a significant player in its own region and through the attraction of its soft power, be hugely influential well beyond its borders. Much the same reading of the future as of Fareed Zakaria according to whom India's advantages "will still make for a powerful package, whether it is technically two, three or four in the world" [not cited in the book].

About the extended neighbourhood of the Middle East India could be said to have managed creditably to develop an active and growing relationship with Israel without jeopardizing the traditional ties with the Arab countries and Iran, but Tharoor's level of ambition makes him alive to the lack of a serious effort to develop a strategic dialogue with the region. India's exclusion from the peace-making initiatives in the Middle East is a low point from the days when she was a major player in the diplomatic dialogue on the region. India's energy security ineluctably calls for a strong blue water navy to protect safe passage through areas like the Straits of Hormoz; given the compatibility of geopolitical aspirations of India and the Middle Eastern nations, a multi-faceted engagement with the region is seen by the author as a natural policy choice. He regrets, however, that neither New Delhi nor Washington has seen fit to use India's continuing Iranian connections diplomatically in view of the possibly stronger likelihood of India being a more useful mediator than the EU countries in Iran's dispute with the west on its nuclear programme.

'Look East Policy' receives a positive treatment in the book [though "the general reorientation of foreign policy which included changes in India's relations with the US and Southeast Asia" is somewhat tersely attributed to 'the government of Narasimha Rao'], with references to India's dialogue partnership with ASEAN, Indian membership of ASEAN + 6 and CEPAs with Singapore, ASEAN, Malaysia,

South Korea and Japan. But India remains overshadowed by China in terms of trade and economic presence in the region, not to speak of the potential that the affluent and well-entrenched Chinese diaspora offers the mother country. The space given to the regional sub-groupings like BIMSTEC and IRO-ARC may be thought as being out of proportion to their current level of activity, but Tharoor is right about being bullish on their potential. Indeed India, much as it finds its available resources for regional trade and economic cooperation groupings already stretched, would need to do much more to activate them.

What the author has to say about the present state of India-US relationship and its future possibilities no doubt forms an important part of the book. He believes that India-US relationship is now poised for significant possibilities and that its momentum is strongly supported by the influential Indian-American community that figures in both the American and Indian foreign policy milieux, but there are also several divisive issues like the Nuclear Liability Law [which the US feels hinders its companies from benefitting from the Nuclear Deal that it brought off with so much pains], sanctions on Iran and India's unwillingness to buy combat aircraft from the US, not to speak of differences on global issues, large-scale US military aid to Pakistan and a US tendency to treat relationship with China as far more important than with India, despite shared values and interests. The book rightly argues from the premise that strategic partnerships are "tricky to conceive and implement". India's partnership with the US still lacks substantive definition, baulking such valuable outcomes as mechanisms for intelligence sharing, joint military operations and collaboration in high technology. More inchoate is Obama's vision of a global partnership between India and the US, the scope for which would need to be extended so as to cover international economic questions, preservation of the global commons, space exploration, nuclear proliferation and the like. As against all this, the author maintains that New Delhi has not done enough to define its own sense of its role as an emerging great power and therefore has no coherent vision of what it wants from a strategic partnership with the US. But surely, for starters, India's demand for permanent membership of the Security Council is good enough as definition of India's role as an emerging great power?

Europe, Africa and Latin America are lumped together in a chapter of the book as “an intriguing mix of underdeveloped opportunities and unexplored potential”. The treatment of Europe, however, pays less attention than the world’s biggest economic union and emerging political union, even if with not so creditble authority structures at the top, would seem to merit. But at bilateral and multilateral levels, member states of the European Union, especially Germany, France, UK, Spain, Sweden and Poland would need sustained engagement by the government on the one hand and business, industry and civil society of India on the other. The author rightly points out that in every fundamental particular Russian and Indian interests do not clash [a singular strategic asset], yet does not go beyond a perfunctory view of the options that Russia could continue to provide across a wide range of foreign policy and national security concerns. Africa and Lain America fare better, with a clearer delineation of possibilities through enlarged relations in different domains.

Tharoor’s exploration of soft power as an adjunct to diplomacy forms one of the most insightful – and readable – parts of this book. He extends the scope of the discussion by including the openness and pluralism of India’s selfhood with the underlying thesis that “India must maintain its true heritage in the eyes of the world”, the role of public diplomacy, bureaucracy and the Indian diaspora, along with issues connected with the internet and social media websites. Tharoor’s commendable record as a promoter of public diplomacy in the MEA bears witness to what effective leadership could achieve in change management in such an important functional area. To make India ‘the land of the better story’ in the information age, our systems would need to assume bolder initiatives on a wide front of culture, communications and policy making, not to mention the imperative of preserving our pluralist heritage free from blemish. To complete the picture on the functional side, Tharoor brings in the emic aspect of foreign policy; reordering the structures and processes of the MEA. He covers a wide ground, but some of his proposals like lateral entry into the Foreign Service for domain specialists, however well-intentioned, would predictably run into opposition from a cadre which finds its turf increasingly appropriated by other services.

In the book's review of India's multilateral diplomacy, the state of play in India's bid for permanent membership in an enlarged Security Council is depicted, with the odds left all but uncertain, but Tharoor believes that it is in the power of the US to break the impasse. As well as the Security Council and the General Assembly, the international financial institutions would need to be reformed and restructured so as to reflect the fact that emerging powers now command more weight and need a stronger voice in the way they are governed and run. It would be India's vocation to attempt to bring about a more democratic and more equitable global governance than what exists now.

Tharoor's advocacy of "multi-alignment as a grand strategy for the twenty first century" may provoke the response that it is little different from the thrust of foreign policy at the present moment. Not everyone will also agree with his premise that Indian diplomacy traditionally has been more concerned with principles than interests – perhaps it is more correct to say, using Tharoor's own analogy of the onion, that interests are clearly seen on peeling it. As for India's diplomatic style in this context, the way it is characterized here has more to do with the UN fora where a certain 'marketing mix' of interests and principles is par for the course for all countries. Bilateral diplomacy is another matter, where there is hardly any significant evidence of principles trumping over interests, irrespective of the China saga of the 1950s. Above all, Tharoor's less than correct characterization of non-alignment as the basis of Indian foreign policy over the years rather than its approach to relations with contending power blocs and his argument that "the be-all and end-all carapace of non-alignment had previously dominated India's strategic approach" are likely to be viewed by many readers as indicative of a biased approach to the concept.

That having said, Tharoor is right in saying that India is seen in some quarters as "congenitally pacific and non-assertive" and in stressing the need for changes in India's defence and security structures and the systems of defence policy making so as to have, among other things, a single point of military advice to the government on defence strategy and to have in place a second-strike capability and the possession of an effective missile defence system – widely discussed measures,

all. He seems to imply that he favours an Indo-US partnership in a world where the US and China are the No.1 and No.2 predominant powers, but observing wistfully that “the old obsession with strategic autonomy remains”.

Tharoor is on surer grounds when he says that “the networked world of today is a more fluid place” where we are witnessing “a world of many rising and some risen powers of various sizes and strengths but none strong enough to become a hegemon itself”. In such a world, Tharoor visualizes that India would move beyond non alignment to multi-alignment, belonging to and playing a prominent role in many groups and bodies of nations such as UN, G20, NAM, Community of Democracies and several others. That is indeed how it should be; that is what many other nations do, but why should that be ‘multi-alignment’, why not multi-involvement, unless the intention is to take to the polar opposite of non-alignment in a terminological leap and bound? “Strategic autonomy is all very well, but it cannot be the be-all and end-all of India’s attitude to the world”, says Tharoor, leaving one to wonder what there can be against it for the world’s second largest nation.

This is a great book, for all that, a most thoughtful exploration of India’s foreign policy and in the clarity and felicity of exposition of the author’s vision for India, a stimulating reading experience.

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