Book Reviews

South Asia

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Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy
Shivshankar Menon. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016. $26.00. 159 pp.

Shivshankar Menon is one of the most gifted people to lead the Indian Foreign Service, both in terms of his intellectual grasp of strategy and foreign policy, and in his diplomatic skills. In this slim volume, he uses five complex decisions in which he participated as examples of the way Indian policy deals with the inevitable competition among its foreign-policy goals. The 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement with China drew on his background as one of India's 'China cadre'; the others – the US–India nuclear agreement, India's response to the bloody attacks on Mumbai in 2008, the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 and India's decision to adopt a no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons – occupied the later parts of his career, including his time as foreign secretary and as India's national security adviser.

Menon's basic argument is that India is on its way to becoming a great power, and that, at this stage, its policy combines bold goals and cautious tactics. As a practitioner, he recognises that serious policymaking is rarely black and white, and usually involves trade-offs among important national goals. His title, *Choices*, reflects this.

Those who have dealt with India from the outside often observe that choices do not come easily to India's diplomatic establishment, especially when, as often happens, they pit some of India's idealistic goals against its more hard-nosed geostrategic interests. In that case, as this book illustrates, realism usually has the edge, though policy continues to be articulated in the

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idealistic language that India gave the world in the 1950s and has modulated gradually ever since.

As India's power expands and its international profile becomes more prominent, India's preferred policy stance – non-alignment or, as one hears more frequently nowadays, strategic autonomy – and its geostrategic requirements are likely to be in tension with increasing frequency. Relations with China in particular are likely to generate more than their share of competing objectives, with the strategic challenge from China pulling India in one direction and the increasingly important India–China economic relationship in another. I would have welcomed a bit more discussion of this prospect. Menon's book is an excellent and authoritative guide to how some of the stars in India's foreign-policy leadership think about the inevitable trade-offs they deal with.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate: Covert Action and Internal Operations
Owen L. Sirrs. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. £110.00/$155.00.
317 pp.

Owen Sirrs is a professor at the University of Montana, and his CV lists stints with the US Defense Intelligence Agency and the US military in Afghanistan. His book on *Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate* has pulled together material previously discussed in an enormous number of books and articles by participants in Pakistan's intelligence adventures, both from Pakistan and from other countries, as well as by observers of them. Sirrs paints a picture of an agency that has from its inception been an important player in Pakistan's troubled security policy – but also in 'black operations' in its domestic politics. Known as ISI, the agency famously reports both to the army chief and to the prime minister or president of Pakistan. Thus, when the national leadership is civilian and weak, it becomes an instrument of military domination.

The book has some interesting material, but also curious gaps and mistakes. The maps are practically unusable, for example. While his bibliography is long, it omits some surprising sources; some of his juiciest stories are unsourced; and there is no mention of interviews even though a number of the dramatis personae would surely have been willing to be interviewed. All told, he paints a picture of an agency that operates within the army's orders but largely outside the legal and judicial framework. He argues that ISI's poor understanding of the dynamics of East Pakistan contributed importantly to Pakistan's ultimate loss of Bangladesh, and that the agency similarly misunderstood the Kashmiris, leading to the debacle of Pakistan's attempted conquest of Kashmir in 1965. He credits ISI with a better understanding of Afghanistan – and with relentless

pursuit of the army's, and former president Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's, goal of a subservient government in Kabul, while running roughshod over the 'strategic partnership' with the United States. He correctly acknowledges that the United States and Pakistan had significantly different strategic objectives in Afghanistan. This is still true.

One well-connected Pakistani friend commented to me that 'there is a great deal we simply don't know about ISI'. This book doesn't change that – indeed, it illustrates the problem. By pulling together the main features of the story, this book represents a useful resource for scholars. But it will inevitably leave them with a great many unanswered questions.

Half Lion: How P.V. Narasimha Rao Transformed India
Vinay Sitapati. Guragon: Penguin Random House India, 2016.
₹699.00. 391 pp.

Vinay Sitapati begins his account of the complex and contradictory political career of P.V. Narasimha Rao, India's ninth prime minister (1991–96), by citing a story from the *Bhagvata Purana*, one of the ancient writings that have shaped India's cultural traditions. Narasimha, half-man and half-lion, is able to slay a mighty demon because of the ambiguities and contradictions he embodies. Sitapati's book is an admiring account of how this ancient hero's namesake was able to be, by turns, fox, lion and mouse, and in the process to transform India's economy, politics and military power.

It is widely believed that Manmohan Singh, a PhD economist and skilled technocrat who would himself become prime minister in 2004, was the architect of India's transformation. Sitapati sets out to challenge this conventional wisdom. The author rightly credits Singh with developing the intellectual framework within which India's economic transformation took place. But he makes a good case that only the prime minister could supply the political cover Singh needed to put in place a major deregulation, and that Rao, however improbable his selection as prime minister may have been, did the job with a level of Machiavellian guile, cunning and sometimes concealed decisiveness that few believed him capable of.

Rao himself was not a natural choice to introduce and sustain such dramatic changes in India's state-centric economic management. He had been an enthusiastic participant in the earlier system. Nothing in his previous career suggested that he would have much interest in upending the 'license permit raj' that was so central to India's economic management and political deal-making. And yet, once convinced that this was necessary, Rao was able to take decisive – and sometimes devious – action, resulting in the greatest growth spurt

independent India had known. Sitapati goes on to describe how Rao introduced elements of a welfare state and used these to strengthen the political consensus behind deregulation. He credits Rao with preserving the option to test a nuclear device, which his successor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, actually implemented. His major failure, in Sitapati's eyes, was the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, carried out by operatives of the Bharatiya Janata Party who essentially betrayed a bargain Rao believed their leaders had struck with him.

At the time of these events, Rao did not come across as a heroic figure. I remember, as a US diplomat, calling on him when he was out of office, and finding him worn down with cares and rather taciturn. A few months later, in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, he had manoeuvred his way into the prime ministership – and power had put a new spring in his step. He had admirers among Indian political analysts and historians, but he was not widely liked. His cautious style generally served him well, but did not make him popular. The poignant story of how his erstwhile colleagues in the Indian National Congress shunned him when he died illustrates how lonely he had become. They forced the family to move the funeral out of Delhi, to his original hometown of Hyderabad; newly minted prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh promised to have a memorial built in Delhi, but nothing came of it; and most conspicuously, the funeral cortège leaving Delhi stopped outside the locked gate of the Congress party headquarters, but contrary to other former leaders, the body was not brought inside.

Nonetheless, Rao certainly deserves to be remembered as one of those who created today's India. Sitapati's lively and readable account will help to make this happen.

When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics
Milan Vaishnav. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.
£25.00/$40.00. 410 pp.

Milan Vaishnav tackles the tantalising issue of corruption in Indian politics on three levels: as a storyteller, a political scientist and a policy thinker.

The most compelling, in my view, is the story he tells through the eyes, careers and fans of such colourful politicians as Pappu Yadav, Ateeq Ahmed, Mohammed Shahabuddin and Arvind Kejriwal. He starts by highlighting the stunning number of Indian politicians who have been charged with crimes. By 2014, 34% of India's national parliamentarians had pending criminal cases against them, and for 21%, these involved serious offenses (p. 10). The trend in recent years has been relentlessly upward, in both categories. The core of Vaishnav's argument is that this does not represent an information gap on the

part of India's voters. Rather, it reflects the voters' judgement that their politicians' criminal pedigrees put them in a position to provide better services to constituents and, in places marked by ethnic or caste rivalry, to help their confrères beat out their ethnic or caste competitors. The main characters are unforgettable. The logic of the 'market' for criminally tainted politicians is distressingly strong, and very persistent.

The most ambitious level of this book is Vaishnav's political-science analysis. He works over the numbers with great care, demonstrating with multiple approaches to statistics what his anecdotes illustrate.

His policy recommendations are the most depressing feature of the book. Vaishnav has put together an impressive and quite creative list of policy measures that might eventually change voters' calculus about whether criminal muscle really is a prerequisite for providing constituent services. But these reforms – even those that draw on institutions already in use in India – promise to be difficult. He argues, for example, for putting in place 'smarter regulations', and for starting from scratch to reinvent and modernise a panoply of laws dating from the mid-nineteenth century and drafted by the British imperial authorities. He makes an excellent case for both recommendations. But reading these proposals as the US Congress struggles to tackle the future of healthcare, tax reform or even the ordinary annual budget, one wonders how many of these extraordinarily difficult tasks the Indian legislature would be able to tackle during any given five-year electoral cycle. The goals make one want to stand up and cheer; the complexity of actually achieving them is daunting.

This is an important book. Milan Vaishnav has gotten deeply into the weeds of Indian politics, and presents in granular detail a remarkable picture of how India's political machinery works. His depiction of the people involved alone makes it a must-read for anyone who cares about the political future of the world's largest democracy. Vaishnav closes with some observations on other countries in which the same problems might recur. Political junkies interested in other countries as well should read and ponder this book.

Rivers Divided: Indus Basin Waters in the Making of India and Pakistan
Daniel Haines. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017. £35.00/$45.00.
264 pp.

As a US diplomat specialising in South Asia, I came to this book as an admirer of the Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 between the governments of India, then headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, and Pakistan, under Field Marshal Ayub Khan – the most enduring agreement ever signed by those two hostile neighbours.

Only once had I been exposed to the contrary point of view. Toward the end of a conference on Kashmir, I found myself sitting at dinner next to Roger Fisher, whose slim volume *Getting to Yes* has introduced generations of Americans to the art of negotiation. Fisher had assisted the World Bank president with the Indus treaty negotiations early in his legal career. I asked him if anything about the negotiations had surprised him.

His response surprised *me*. Fisher was disappointed that the agreement had not adopted the optimum usage of all the Indus Basin water. The Indus Waters Treaty provided for a 'divorce', with Pakistan taking all the water in the three western rivers and India having predominant rights to the three eastern ones. To me, that was brilliant. The two hostile riparians would not have to interact on contentious issues on a daily basis. In my view, this contributed to the treaty's survival through three wars. Fisher, who had hoped for a 'joint custody arrangement', found the treaty a waste of water resources.

Daniel Haines takes us behind the curtain. He not only provides a lucid account of the ingredients that went into the treaty, including the ecology and economy of the river basin and the negotiating history both within and between the two countries involved; he also deals at length with the philosophical difference I discovered in talking to Roger Fisher. The American lawyer David Lilienfeld had pushed – successfully at first – for a 'whole basin' approach, hoping that the experience of cooperating in an agreement where the scientific data drove everything else would yield not just economic but also political benefits.

Haines's account makes clear that this model was too difficult for either country to pull off. India and Pakistan started with incompatible positions on how rivers figured in national sovereignty, views that were intensified by their mutual hostility and need to defend their nascent independence. Moreover, the earlier history of dealing with Indus Basin-related issues when the British ruled the subcontinent had yielded ample disagreements between central and local authorities, which played out in some degree in the treaty negotiations.

Haines goes one step further and argues that the treaty was an expression of Cold War politics. I don't altogether accept this. Certainly, US interest in peacemaking between India and Pakistan, and in promoting economic development in the Third World, was partly motivated by a desire for strengthening US influence. But this general goal would not necessarily have required a deep US involvement in treaty negotiations.

Haines is fascinated by Lilienfeld and his influence on the early stages of the process. I was fascinated by his account – but unpersuaded that Lilienfeld had the right answer. Pursuing the hydrologically ideal solution would, in my view,

have been a classic case of the best being the enemy of the good. Haines does not explicitly say so in the book, but I believe he would agree.

The Indus Waters Treaty has been back in the news for the last decade or so, with active disputes over Indian proposals to construct waterworks along the upper reaches of the rivers the treaty allotted to Pakistan. Anyone who wants to understand the possibilities and limitations of dealing with these disputes should read Haines's book. I suspect, however, that they will come away feeling, like me, that a good riverine divorce is better than a bad joint river-custody arrangement.