

South Asia

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India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present

Shivshankar Menon. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021. \$39.99. 416 pp.

Shivshankar Menon is a man of many talents. Since he left Indian government service in 2014 after an extraordinarily distinguished career, he has added writing brilliant books on the global international order and India's place in it to his list of accomplishments. In 2017, I reviewed in these pages his analysis of five key Indian foreign-policy decisions in which he took part (*Choices*, 2016). *India and Asian Geopolitics* looks at the same landscape from the perspective of a loftier mountaintop, reviewing India's strategic position from a pan-Asian perspective.

Menon spent three diplomatic tours of duty in China, the last of them as India's ambassador; headed India's diplomatic missions in Israel, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; played a critical role in negotiating the India-US civil nuclear agreement; and served as foreign secretary and finally as national security adviser to prime minister Manmohan Singh. This history gives him a 360-degree view that not many practitioners have.

Menon's view of India's core interests starts with the country's internal health – economic growth and distribution, and good governance. This is the right starting point for a sound foreign policy, and adds to the case that Asia is the right context in which to consider India's place in the world. India benefited strongly from the 'great globalisation' in the decades that followed 1990. Perhaps as importantly, Asia is well on its way to becoming the world's economic centre of gravity.

The author's prescription for India is what Jawaharlal Nehru might have come up with if he were making policy today – minus Nehru's more ideological view of economics. Menon is a firm believer in India's uniqueness, in the legacy the country bears from its 5,000-year-old civilisation and the strategists who guided it in centuries past. He remains committed to the idea of strategic autonomy – with the caveat that for India to prosper in a world where supply chains and trade require global relationships, its economy must be open to the world. Both today's much more intense India-US relationship and the hoped-for improvement in India-China relations are critical to India's future. He argues – as he also did in his earlier book – for bold initiatives, carried out with care and even caution.

This is an important book, focused on the future and based on a clear-eyed analytical view of the past. It is also a very good read: Menon writes with elegance, and he is willing to be refreshingly blunt about what he considers the policy missteps of India and others. He finished it before the devastating second

coronavirus wave struck India. He notes that the virus has led to a turning inward in many countries' trade policies. The additional wreckage the pandemic caused in India after his draft was complete will complicate the task of restoring India's economic rise, perhaps even more than Menon projects. This book is sure to make readers think hard about where India and the world are going.

Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving Between Dictatorship and Democracy

Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat and Niloufer Siddiqui, eds.
Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020.
£37.50/\$49.95. 336 pp.

I'm not normally enthusiastic about edited volumes, but this one provides an exceptionally useful round-up of Pakistan's beleaguered and oft-maligned political parties. The three editors are joined by another 15 authors, most of them Pakistani but working at universities outside Pakistan.

The book begins with chapters devoted to each of the major parties – the only currently active iteration of the Muslim League, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Imran Khan's Pakistan Justice Movement (PTI), the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) – plus one chapter each about the more splintered leftist parties and religious parties. These provide a wealth of information about their respective ethnic 'homes', their governing and party-building style, their ability to transition from opposition to government, and the types of politicians they attract.

A second section is devoted to in-depth discussion of the parties' constituency-building style, including how they do outreach, how they stay together after losing an election and how they operate in opposition. The final section explores how parties deal with the judiciary, foreign policy and, above all, the military – or, to use the term preferred in Pakistan, 'the Establishment'.

This is a political scientist's book, with a lot of information packed into fewer than 300 pages of text. The chapter on relations with the military is in my judgement the strongest in the book – deservedly so, since this is a key aspect of any serious discussion of Pakistani politics. As a group, the party chapters are also strong and perceptive. The chapter on women in elective politics is commendable, but would be more fun if it went into greater detail on some of the colourful women who have succeeded in that world – not just Benazir Bhutto, but also Abida Hussain and her daughter Sughra Imam, among plenty of others.

The picture that emerges of Pakistani politics is not particularly flattering – but then, no one interested enough to be reading this review would have expected otherwise. There are few heroes. This is a very difficult environment to navigate, one in which politicians cannot be sure of their authority. The

country's political issues are dominated by security and an overpowering suspicion of neighbouring India. Still, the volume provides an excellent view of the survival skills that Pakistani political organisations have to develop.

If I were a young diplomat heading to a political-reporting assignment in Pakistan, I would definitely want this volume on my bookshelf. It has the strength one expects from an academic work. Importantly, it conveys the tremendous diversity of Pakistan's ethnic and religious landscape, and the complexity of all the parties' relationships with the military.

The Bhutto Dynasty: The Struggle for Power in Pakistan

Owen Bennett-Jones. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. £20.00/\$28.00. 319 pp.

Owen Bennett-Jones was the BBC correspondent in Pakistan for many years, and like all good journalists has an eye for a good story. The one he's chosen to tell here is one of the best, and is not just about the two Bhuttos who have led Pakistan.

It is a book – and a clan – full of larger-than-life characters. The author starts with the family's ancient history and seventeenth-century decision to settle close to Larkana, the Sindhi town with which the Bhutto name is intertwined. The first prominent member was Sir Shahnawaz Bhutto, born in 1888, who was the chronicler of the family's earlier days. The capstone to his colourful career was his appointment, right after Partition, as *dewan*, or prime minister, of the princely state of Junagadh. That linked him with the early history of Pakistan: the state's Muslim prince had acceded to Pakistan, but its majority-Hindu population (with a little help from the Indian Army) acceded to India.

The heart of the book is about the Bhuttos who led Pakistan: first Zulfikar, son of Sir Shahnawaz, and then his daughter Benazir. Both of them continued the traditions of the Sindhi 'feudals' as illustrated in the lives of their forebears. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto never admitted fault and was ruthless with those who crossed him. If anything, Bennett-Jones's stories about how he dealt with his political rivals are tamer than those that circulated when I was serving at the US Embassy in Pakistan. Ahmed Raza Kasuri, a volatile junior member of Bhutto's PPP and the intended target of the bullet that got Zulfikar hanged, had the habit of pulling up his trouser leg at dinner parties to show the other guests the scars of knife wounds said to have been inflicted by Bhutto's goons. Another rival inside the PPP, Sikander Raheem, was rumoured to have been shoved down a flight of stairs.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was at his best – and worst – when dealing with powerful leaders of other countries. Bennett-Jones describes his manipulative relationships with Richard Nixon and the shah of Iran. The author came to Pakistan too late to attend the dinner Bhutto gave for the visiting Henry Kissinger in October 1974,

but had he been there he could have used the story. Kissinger, in toasting Bhutto (with wine – prohibition came three years later), drew on a speech that mined Bhutto's old term papers at the University of California for material that painted him as a great intellectual. Bhutto's response was equally creative – and obsequious: his speech painted the newly remarried Kissinger as God's gift to women.

Benazir Bhutto, both in power and out, engaged Bennett-Jones's attention and curiosity more than any of the others. She was a modern woman – and yet, very much her father's daughter. She surrounded herself with people from her father's circle, but preferred those who were not old enough, or senior enough, to refer to her as 'daughter', as is customary in Pakistan.

Bennett-Jones's discussion of the Bhuttos' relationship with the army is probably the most important part of the book. No one has yet been able to lead Pakistan without an alliance with the army. That includes Zulfikar: the army had deep misgivings about him, but he sent out the most troublesome generals to ambassadorial posts. Nevertheless, the army – along with his own political overreach – was to be his undoing. (When one of the ambassadorial generals showed up at our house for tea, it was clear that Bhutto was in trouble.)

This book is a wonderful read. Bennett-Jones occasionally gets carried away recounting a colourful story, but that only makes the book more fun. It's easy to see the Bhuttos' attraction, at their height, for Pakistani voters, and equally easy to see how they came undone. I felt at the time that Pakistan was not a big enough stage for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bennett-Jones shows why.

To Kill a Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism

Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. £20.00/\$25.95. 320 pp.

This is an angry, sometimes polemical book. It makes an argument that at the outset is mainly about democracies in general, and then becomes more specifically about India.

The authors' basic thesis is that democracy flourishes when the underlying society is healthy, and is continually tended by the government. The first half of the book includes chapters on health, food security, access to basics such as land and water, transit, education and the problem of 'wage slavery'. The authors have developed comparative data on other democracies, particularly the economically successful ones in East Asia, all of which makes a compelling case that social and democratic health often sustain each other.

The second half examines India-specific institutional decline and problems that include the role of money in elections, what the authors call 'elective despotism', the lack of independence in the judiciary, a supine press and finally

demagoguery that redefines ‘the people’ to exclude various minority groups. Unlike the first half, which traces the source of the problem to India’s early years, most of the discussion in this part is focused on Narendra Modi.

Particularly in the first half, the problems the authors chronicle are well known and their description is accurate, if sometimes unbalanced. In the second half, I believe that the authors have focused so relentlessly on the defects that they have missed some genuine bright spots.

My main argument with the authors is that they have an aspirational – and impossibly high – standard for democracy. Democracy is ‘freedom from hunger’, ‘saying no to brazen arrogance’, ‘rejection of ... every form of human and non-human indignity’ (p. 30) – the definition goes on for a full page. Every item they list is something that I would like to see, but unless the democracy is made up solely of angels, I would not expect to see it all together.

The authors’ discussion of how democracies end is more compelling. Two models are on offer: the ‘sudden death’ view, and a longer-term breakdown of democratic consensus, which may take the form of a democratically elected government that sets out to wreck democracy (pp. 21–5). This last view appears in the discussion of ‘elective despotism’. The authors see in Modi’s government an increasingly high-handed example of this type of despotism.

They do briefly discuss what they refer to as substantial countercurrents to this depressing prognosis, including the relatively low aggregate vote totals for Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, the fragmented map of power at the state level and above all India’s intrinsic pluralism – its many languages, ethnicities, caste and class divisions, and more. India is a mosaic not because of the workings of the constitution or the policies of a particular government, but because of thousands of years of heritage. Added to this is the impact of 75 years of democracy. Jaded as they are, the authors recognise that India’s embrace of democratic ideals has awakened a yearning to draw closer to these ideals.

An important reason to read this book is not so much because of what it recounts about India, but for the cautionary tale it offers about the stresses on all democracies at this time in history. Relatively new democracies have slipped into ‘elective despotism’ (the authors cite Poland and Hungary). Countries we are accustomed to thinking of as exemplars of robust democratic tradition and unbreakable institutions now seem to have taken several steps in that direction (the authors do not discuss recent trends in Germany or the United States under Donald Trump).

They close on a more hopeful note: ‘democracies foster hope against hope’ (p. 290). If Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane are thinking of a sequel, I would hope they will be able to observe how countries have come back from the stresses they are undergoing now.