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India's Foreign Policy: Coping with the Changing World

Muchkund Dubey  
(Pearson, New Delhi, 2012)  
(Pages 306 + xiv; Rs.699)

This first major book on foreign policy by former foreign secretary Muchkund Dubey (apart from a study on WTO, and several edited works) commands attention. While setting out the key lines of his world view in broad brushstrokes, it concentrates on selected countries and themes: relations with Bangladesh, the US, Russia, China, Japan, the civilian nuclear deal, the UN, disarmament and security and ties with neighbors; the final chapter on the Indian diaspora is welcome as few have given this subject the attention it merits. The author explains his omission to cover in detail relations with Pakistan, besides Africa, much of Asia, Europe, and Latin America, and other themes, in terms of his future book plans.

For Dubey, globalization and the end of Cold War are the key drivers of changes in the international affairs environment, with which India has had to cope. Curiously, I could not find the phrase 'economic reforms' in the book; nor is it an entry in the index. Most of us would view reforms as another big driver, of course domestic and not external, guiding Indian foreign policy adaptation.

Dubey survey of foreign policy is insightful, unalloyed with personal reminiscences or narratives of the 'I-me' variety of the role he played, not just in high office, but also in the early phase of his career. This is a pity. Few today, especially the young, will recall, for instance, his exceptional contribution in the framing of the first UN 'Development Decade' in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is another matter that the high hopes of those days were not realized, but that effort represented a unique Indian contribution to multilateral diplomacy. Perhaps a personal narrative of his rich experiences could be captured in an 'Oral History Record', as part of a project that is now gathering momentum, with the support of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

One of the strong points of this book is a fine chapter on dealing with neighbors, premised on Dubey's dictum that they should receive the highest priority, and that 'a country is judged by the prism of its neighbors' perception'. We only have to look to the record of bilateral visits by our highest dignitaries to see that this has simply not been the case. Dubey's prescription: need for greater sensitivity to psychological factors; no interruption of dialogue; not permitting stagnation in bilateral relations; making short-term sacrifices for long-term gains; non-reciprocity; people-to-people contacts; safeguarding basic interests; and factoring neighbor's interests into broader policymaking. Each needs close examination by scholars and thinktanks, to produce recommendations. We also find support for this in the published archival collections on relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and

Sri Lanka, produced by AS Bhasin; these give chapter-and-verse proof of our weak record on these points.

The root of our failure: lack of a considered, consistent, and coherent policy, transparently articulated. Dubey makes this point in criticizing ‘the absence of long-term thinking and a holistic approach’. In my view we lack both a public statement of the principal axes of foreign policy, and an internal document that sets out more detailed objectives. The result has been that in dealing with neighbors we lack clear purpose or a master plan. Example: Australia has just announced a plan to strengthen ties with Asian states, setting out 25 objectives. When did we do anything comparable in relation to any region?

Dubey covers democracy and governance in Bangladesh and our economic relations in two comprehensive chapters; these will surely be a fine resource for scholars. Yet, despite his intimate knowledge of this oft-neglected bilateral relationship, the author has rather little to say about the ups and downs of India’s political relations with Bangladesh.

On China, examined from different perspectives in three chapters (including one that looks at the role played by each at the UN), he recommends continuing engagement, and expects that the large trade imbalance will be rectified with an improvement in India’s competitive strength. He rightly calls ‘highly exaggerated, if not totally misplaced’ the security and market flooding arguments that have blocked sub-regional cooperation between China and NE India, that would also connect with Bangladesh and Myanmar – the ‘Kunming initiative’ now called BCIM. On Russia he urges stronger economic content, to match our strategic goals.

The author observes: ‘diplomacy operates on very thin margins of practical possibilities’. Very true, but it is a function of any foreign ministry and its embassies to work on expanding these margins, using all opportunities available. Why does this not happen sufficiently in India? Dubey might have expanded on this theme to give actionable recommendations, beyond urging that we need to be proactive.

All in all, a fine work focused on selected themes. One hopes the next book, a companion volume, will provide a full panoramic analysis.

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