

The Mirror of the Epic

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The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World

By S Jaishankar

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One of the many interesting aspects of the book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, just published by India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, is the use of a rare lens — *the Mahabharata* — to frame the current global strategic problems and India's foreign policy challenges. Jaishankar's judgements on themes ranging from non-alignment to balance of power will surely draw much critical interest within India and beyond.

Whether scholars and diplomats agree with Jaishankar or not, there is no doubt that the book opens an important window into Delhi's changing worldview. His excursion into *the Mahabharata* should also reinforce the growing global interest in engaging with the Indian classics on the enduring sources of, and new possibilities for, Delhi's grand strategy.

For Jaishankar, *the Mahabharata* is "the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts on statecraft" and a "graphic account" of real-life situations and the complex challenges they present leaders. "The courage required to implement policy is perhaps its most famous section — the Bhagavad Gita."

He points to other elements that persist in modern international relations — accepting tactical compromises for strategic gain, promoting regime change, ensuring balance of power, observing and violating accepted norms, shaping the discourse and controlling the narrative. Jaishankar draws on episodes from the epic to illustrate these themes in their contemporary context. Anyone reading the book today would naturally look for clues for Delhi's current thinking on how to cope with the growing power gap with China and Beijing's military campaign to change the territorial status quo in eastern Ladakh.

Jaishankar argues that, "our current concerns have an ancient reflection in that tale, especially leveraging the external environment to address bilateral imbalances." What, then, about non-alignment, the holy grail of India's foreign policy? He draws on two characters in *the Mahabharata* who choose variants of non-alignment that make them marginal to the great war between the Kauravas and Pandavas at Kurukshetra.

Krishna's brother, Balarama, "opts out of the conflict by taking a long pilgrimage during the war. He comes back angered by its outcome and yet unable to influence it in any way" and "Rukmi of Vidarbha is the other notable warrior who stays out of the war, but for a very different reason. He overestimates his value to both sides and ends up accepted by neither."

Jaishankar sums up the problems with India's preference for perennial hedging and the reluctance to make difficult choices: "Where we have remained uninvolved, we are nevertheless left to face consequences. On some questions, we run the danger of displeasing all parties. Where we have aligned on larger contradictions, our reluctance in doing so fully has not been without costs".

He grapples with the importance of explaining modern India's refusal to see the world in terms of power. He points to the international context of the two world wars – the Cold War and the era of globalization – that have marked the last hundred years. But in a more demanding and complex world that is unfolding today, Jaishankar suggests, rediscovering the arts of realpolitik and developing the discipline to pursue it is critical.

The genetic code of modern India's worldview was indeed formed during the inter-war period when liberal internationalism emerged as a powerful force globally amidst the ruins of the First World War and influenced the mainstream national movement. The rising left in the early 20th century offered a strong critique of liberal internationalism. But the left was far more sweeping in its rejection of traditional statecraft.

If liberals championed bourgeois internationalism, the communists were mobilising the workers of the world to overthrow the global order. The global divisions within the left had their impact on India, where the socialists broke away from the communists on a range of issues. Communists themselves split repeatedly as the global left began to fragment. There was a range of other worldviews, from Tagore's universalism to multiple strands of nativist resentment against the West.

However, few of them could survive the extraordinary hegemony of liberal internationalism personified by Jawaharlal Nehru, who dominated the Indian foreign policy discourse immediately before and after independence. Nehru and his generation had little time for the ancient Indian traditions of statecraft.

This was not surprising, since there was little intellectual codification of it. The story of Indian statecraft was alive in mythology and the popular reading of the epics. But it was not part of either the study of international relations in India or the diplomatic practice. There was a good reason for the failure. After all, the story of Ashoka came into full view only in the last decades of the 19th century and a manuscript of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* was rediscovered in Mysore accidentally during 1905. As awareness of India's footprint beyond the subcontinent emerged, the Greater India society was established in Calcutta in the 1920s, triggering an Asianist movement across India.

The Indian study of international relations and foreign policy, however, remained rooted in European history and Western political thought. All that, however, is beginning to change. There is growing interest across the world in taking a fresh and deeper look at Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, for example. The late Roger Boesche at Occidental College, Los Angeles, Subrata Mitra at Heidelberg University, Pradeep Kumar Gautam at Delhi's Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, and, most recently, Delhi University's Deepshikha Shahi and South Asian University's Medha Bisht are among many who offer fresh interpretations of

the *Arthashastra*. Their work is part of a much broader intellectual effort of reclaiming non-Western or global traditions of understanding international relations.

Indologists around the world have long studied the Indian epics, including *the Mahabharata*. Gurcharan Das, Bibek Debroy and Ramesh Menon, among others, have drawn attention to the contemporary relevance of *the Mahabharata*. But not many have read the epic for detailed insights into India's international relations.

One exception is the work of Amrita Narlikar, who heads the German Institute for Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, and her polymath mother Aruna Narlikar. Their work, *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata*, tries to explain Delhi's recent negotiating history by drawing on the discourses in *the Mahabharata*.

The issue is not about privileging "Indian" over "Western". The new international relations scholarship on *the Mahabharata* underlines its universal relevance. For, the epic is a deep reflection on the struggle for power among sovereigns, who must resolve multiple strategic and ethical dilemmas.

The emerging cohort of strategic communities can and must learn from all traditions of statecraft, including Western, Chinese and Indian. The last few decades have unsurprisingly seen an explosion of international studies on the Chinese tradition of statecraft. Jaishankar's *The India Way* is a timely call to fill the deficit on the Indian end.

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