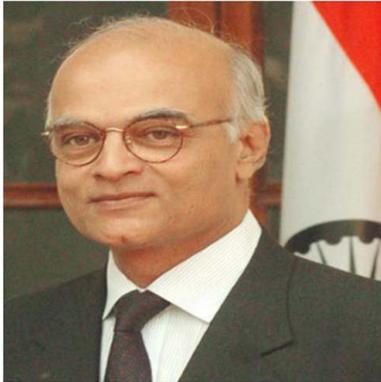


## Shivshankar Menon's book *Choices* ( 2016 )

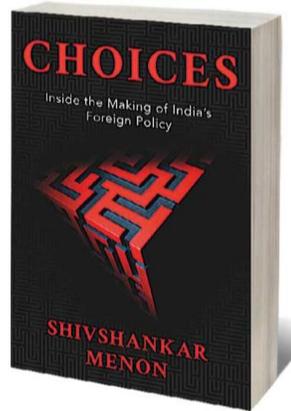
### The Sober Realist

**Shivshankar Menon** places five defining moments of Indian foreign policy in the long sweep of history



alpix 0763

**Shivshankar Menon** IFS *Retd*  
BA His Hons 1970 MA His 1965  
National Security Adviser 2009 – 2014  
Foreign Secretary India 2007- 2009



Publisher : Penguin



The book is an insider's analysis of five key foreign policy decisions in the last two decades: the border peace and tranquillity agreement with China; the civilian nuclear deal with the United States; the 26/11 crisis with Pakistan; the Sri Lankan war against the Tamil Tigers in 2009; and India's choice to adopt and persist with the nuclear No First Use policy

In the foreword to an aide's book on presidential decision-making, John F Kennedy wrote: 'The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself.' Yet even if the process of decision-making was obscure, it was necessary and unavoidable: 'We cannot escape choice.' Coming from a man who held the future of the world in his palm during the Cuban missile crisis, these words are worth pondering. But they call for an attitude that few decision-makers have been able to cultivate: *an acceptance of the limits of all knowledge, including self-knowledge.*

Indeed, few leaders in our times have displayed the temperament and ability to reflect deeply on the choices open to them: on the range and limits of action as well as their foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences. What's worse, they seem incapable of doing so even in retrospect. This is why most political and diplomatic memoirs turn out to be elaborate exercises in self-exoneration—charades in which the corpse masquerades as the coroner. In consequence, the *rare account that honestly probes the choices* open to the decision-maker is indispensable for students of policymaking.

In India we have had few such analytic accounts by diplomats or politicians. Perhaps the sole exception is the late ( DU alumnus BA Hons 1955 MA 1957 Delhi / ZH ) **JN Dicit's** series of books which... illuminate the context in which many of our foreign policy crises played out. Shivshankar Menon's *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Penguin, 243 pages, R 599) is a superb addition to this genre. The book is an insider's analysis of five key foreign policy decisions in the last two decades: the border peace and tranquillity agreement with China;

the civilian nuclear deal with the US; the 26/11 crisis with Pakistan; the Sri Lankan war against the Tamil Tigers in 2009; and India's choice to adopt and persist with its nuclear No First Use policy.

The sheer range of issues covered here is testimony to *Menon's stellar career as a diplomat*. He has been India's envoy to Israel, Sri Lanka, China and Pakistan as well as Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor. What you won't learn from his resume, though, is the deeply historical cast of his mind. He mentions in passing that he had originally intended to pursue doctoral research comparing ancient Indian and Chinese traditions of kingship. I can think of few practitioners anywhere who can match his ability to place contemporary global politics in the long sweep of history: the churning background of economic and technological change, geographic and cultural predispositions, institutional and practical considerations. This historical sensibility undergirds this book, but in the forefront are individuals and the choices they confronted.

Menon unpacks each of these decisions by examining the overall context as seen by New Delhi, the range of alternatives and considerations, and the consequences that flowed from the decision. He rounds out each decision by also looking at the current and future state of play. In every case, he shows an altogether rare ability both to understand the interests and perspectives of decision-makers on the other side and to avoid assuming that one's own side is the repository of all virtue. He also repeatedly breaks with the received wisdom, especially in India. The underlying attitude is one of sober realism: an insistence that we must deal with the world as we find it and not as we would have liked to find it. This may seem rather atheoretical to those schooled in the Economics-envying discipline of International Relations. But they would do well to recall that this is a tradition going back to EH Carr, the founder of modern Realism and himself a career diplomat.

The book begins in April 1992, when *Foreign Secretary Dixit* asked Menon if he thought it was possible for India to settle the boundary dispute with China. **An experienced China-hand, Menon** felt that a settlement was not in the offing. But the changing global context might incline Beijing to seek stability along the border, so allowing it to focus its energy and resources on more pressing areas. It was in India's interest, too, to pursue such an outcome.

Menon's account of the ensuing negotiations is worth reading closely. The Line of Actual Control LAC had not been mutually agreed upon after the 1962 war, but the areas of differing perceptions were well known. Yet, getting the 'purists in the Ministry of External Affairs' to agree that the LAC should be the basis of a confidence-building agreement was no easy task: 'The iron had entered their souls, and they were less aware of the infirmities and ambiguities in the formal position of each side.' Eventually, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao gave a go ahead to negotiate on the basis of the LAC, but with the caveat that both sides would mutually agree and clarify the LAC.

25.12.2016 Open Magazine Srinath Raghavan

*Shiv's tour Se force was released by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh . Former Cabinet Minister and Harvard grad P Chidambaram , journalist Srinath Raghavan and broadcaster Karan Thapar discussed the book at the India International Centre New Delhi Friday 2 December 2016 , Launchdate .*