As India continues to wrestle with the Chinese military aggression in the Galwan Valley in the Union Territory of Ladakh, similarly the South East Asian nations are tackling the brazen military expansionism of the Chinese in the South China Sea. A sudden surge of hostilities triggered by China has led the world community to question Beijing's political ambition and military aggression. In India's context, it is all the more imperative that she comprehend the motive of the Chinese, as she has, in the recent years, encountered a rise in tensions along the India-China border. A comprehensive answer for the Chinese posture lies in Shivshankar Menon's 'Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy'. A retired career diplomat and a former National Security Adviser to the Indian Prime Minister between 2010-14, Menon had served as India's Ambassador to China between 2000-03. Prior to 2000-03, he served a couple of tenures in China and had also completed his PhD on 'Ancient India-China Kingship.'

Unlike other Indian foreign policy books, Choices presents a profound understanding of the fundamental workings of decision-making machinery which enables the formulation of Indian foreign policy. The book comprises five chapters, each narrating a major international event in India’s recent past. These five events have been particularly selected by the author as he was directly involved and associated with the decision-making process. Interestingly, the author sheds light on the various arguments, discussions and negotiations that were involved in shaping the course of action at the highest political and bureaucratic levels. He weighs in and analyses their outcome in terms of the best national interest through the maximising gains and minimising loss- matrix. The author keeps feeding his audience with different arguments, perspectives, and assessments without thrusting his opinions onto them. Rather, he appears to be stimulating the reader to understand the rationale of the state’s actions and decisions.

In his capacity as a practitioner of diplomacy and a scholar of Chinese culture, Menon has well-articulated and evaluated the Chinese politico-cultural dimension through a historical account, featuring various challenges that prevail between India and China since India's independence. Having been instrumental in the formulation of the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement, Menon has used his bureaucratic experience and interaction with the Chinese to provide his readers with an accurate insight into the Chinese psyche and thinking.

The opening chapter discusses the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement between India and China and their historical bilateral relation post-1947. The backstory

---

The reviewer is Phd scholar with JSIA, O P Jindal University. His research interests are maritime security, Indian Ocean and India's maritime strategy.
of India-China ties helps the reader to understand the events that led up to the border disputes, thus enabling the audience to put into perspective the ongoing tensions along the India-China border in the Eastern Theatre of Ladakh. Menon’s incisive understanding of the Chinese history, culture, and political vision helps his audience grasp the intricate nature of the Chinese psyche with ease and clarity. In view of the current military entanglement with China, a parallel could be drawn with the past Chinese aggressions on the Indian state- the genesis of the events being strikingly similar. The chapter recounts the near impossible challenges that hindered the execution of the Agreement from within the country’s political spectrum and acknowledges the cleverness of the then incumbent Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who used his political astuteness to dissolve any dissent by bringing the opposition on board for the formulation of the policy.

The following chapter delineates India’s decision to initiate the Civil Nuclear Deal with the United States (U.S) and expounds the complexities involved in the nuclear negotiations, including the convolutions concerning the formulation of the agreement besides India’s strategic calculations and dilemma over the civil-nuclear pact. The author remarks at the far-sightedness, determination, and tenacity of the Indian political leadership to ensure the nuclear deal goes through successfully, despite heavy criticisms from within the political party as well as from the opposition. During the course of the chapter, the reader trails the trajectory of the development of the Indo-US ties over the nuclear covenant and spells out the arduous tasks taken by the Indian stakeholders along with their U.S counterparts in ensuring the completion of the agreement.

The third chapter deals with the 26/11 Mumbai attack and addresses the state sponsored terrorism from Pakistan. It weighs and analyses India’s response and puts forth other possible counter-retaliatory measures that could have been carried out by India while pre-empting the consequences of those actions. Menon articulates the reason why the Indian political leadership consciously chose the use of restraint over a military riposte as a counter-offensive. The decision-makers assess and evaluate situations before arriving at decisions based on the minimax matrix. In response to the terror attack, the leadership was convinced that there was more to gain for the state by exercising a restraint response than a knee jerk military riposte. To substantiate this argument the author offers accounts of different countries that have adopted different strategic mechanisms to engage terrorism and evaluates their outcomes while contrasting them with India’s decision. In doing so, the writer allows the audience to develop a different perspective by helping to recognise the motive behind India’s choice of response.

In the following chapter, the author sets up the stage by providing a glimpse at the historical social fabric of Sri Lanka to explain the cause of the civil war that ravaged the country for 26 years. Furthermore, he reports the key factors that drove India to militarily intervene in the Sri Lankan conflict. Addressing the issue, Menon presents both India and Sri Lanka’s perspectives vis a vis the conflict while contrasting the differences of perception between the two governments. He presents the reason and the justification for the choice of decisions made by the leadership of both countries without attempting to prove the superiority of anyone. While giving credit to the Sri Lankan leadership for its role in the elimination of the LTTE and in the rehabilitation
of the Sri Lankan Tamils with the help of the Indian Government, Menon was equally lacerating regarding their leadership for failing to show compass towards the vanquished and disregarding the humanitarian aspect and for creating a devolution of political power through a democratic system to create an inclusive united social structure.

The penultimate chapter delivers the rationale behind India’s assertion and its strategic decision to acquire nuclear weapons and it endorses the reasons for India’s ‘No First Use’ policy. India has been steadfast in its stance of wanting to create a nuclear-weapons-free world. However, it has refrained itself from signing and complying with the discriminatory policy of the Nuclear-Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Having been threatened on more than one occasion by nuclear armed states, the Indian establishment was left with no other choice than to arm itself with nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence, with the sole purpose of protecting its citizens from nuclear threats. Despite not being a signatory of the NPT and being a nuclear state, India has conscientiously adhered to the non-proliferation policies and has desisted the spread of nuclear technology and has been the only nuclear weapon state to call for a global nuclear disarmament. Additionally, India’s ‘No First Use’ policy has reassured the global community of its unwavering aspiration and commitment to create a nuclear-weapons-free world.

In the concluding chapter, the author reviews the five events and discusses the behaviour of the respective states and points out the policy choices made by the Indian decision makers. He reiterates the complexities involved in the decision-making apparatus as he states that countries make decisions based on the minimax matrix of minimising harm to one’s own interests while maximising the gain. He concludes by expressing his conviction about India’s rise and confirms that it is on the path to becoming a great, powerful, and prosperous nation in the years to come.

The book leaves no room for criticism as the author comprehensively synthesises his experiences in a well-articulated, rational, and succinct manner which enables even a layman to understand the process of decision making at the highest level. Menon has beautifully expressed the evolution and trajectory of India’s relation with various countries using these five events and has also depicted the complex and strenuous historical overhang of relations with its hostile neighbourhood. Choices can certainly be deemed as one of the finest books ever written on India’s foreign policy as it ropes in history, diplomacy, politics and state’s principles to illustrate the manner in which they play a significant role in determining and influencing the making of Indian foreign policy.