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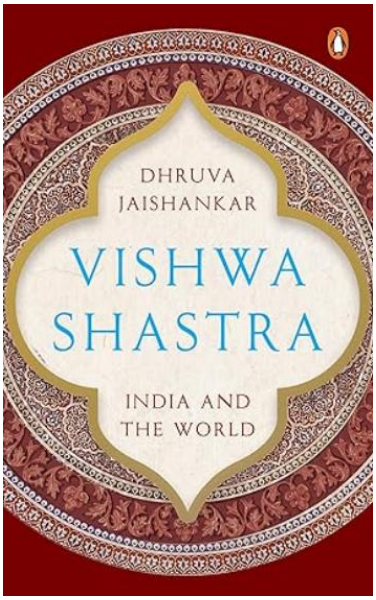
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Vishwa Shastra: India and the World

By Dhruva Jaishankar (Author) (Publisher: India Viking 2024)

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Dhruva Jaishankar, a senior foreign policy expert and Executive Director of ORF America, presents a comprehensive analysis of India's international outlook in his book "Vishwa Shastra: India and the World." The book, comprising 440 pages, was published by India Viking on December 15, 2024. Through a blend of historical context, strategic analysis, and pragmatic recommendations, Jaishankar maps India's global trajectory, anchoring it between ancient wisdom and modern pragmatism. He argues that "India's rise will be defined not just by its power but by its principles," emphasizing a balance between national interests and global responsibility. The book is meticulously structured, tracing the evolution of India's foreign policy across distinct historical phases while offering insights into contemporary challenges. Jaishankar critiques the colonial period as a time when "British colonialism erased India's agency in the world," while recognizing Nehru's non-alignment policy as a strategic response to Cold War politics.

Throughout the narrative, the author seeks to highlight India's journey from an ancient civilization with deep-rooted diplomatic traditions to an emerging global power navigating the complexities of the modern world.

The first section of the book examines India's engagement with the world across five historical phases, beginning with ancient statecraft and moving through colonial subjugation to post-independence strategies. The opening chapters challenge the notion that India lacked strategic foresight, using classical texts like the Arthashastra, Manusmriti, and Nitisara to underscore India's long-standing diplomatic and governance traditions. Jaishankar introduces the term "Indianate World," describing India's extensive trade and cultural linkages with other civilizations, directly and indirectly shaping global interactions. The narrative moves from prehistoric India—marked by early human settlements in the Narmada Valley and Tamil Nadu—to the rise of settled civilizations, notably the Harappan culture. This era saw early Indo-Pacific trade, including economic and cultural exchanges with China, which began as early as 2,500 years ago during the Shang Dynasty. The diffusion of Buddhism played a pivotal role in

spreading Indian art, music, astronomy, and medical knowledge to China. This period also marks India's transition to a medieval society, as the arrival of Islamic rule, particularly under the Mughal dynasty, deepened Indo-Islamic interactions through trade, cultural exchanges, and political domination.

By 1707, the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire ushered in a period of regional fragmentation and the emergence of early modern India. This phase highlights India's engagement with groups like the Marathas, Dogras, Sikhs, and Tai-Ahoms, whose military conflicts extended to Afghanistan, Tibet, and Myanmar. The advent of British colonialism disrupted India's political, social, and economic foundations, initiating an era of exploitation and resource extraction that left long-lasting scars on the nation. Post-independence, India adopted a policy of non-alignment, focusing on domestic development rather than foreign entanglements. During this period, India prioritized economic growth, the nuclear program, and regional security. Jaishankar highlights key milestones like the 1962 war with China, the 1971 war with Pakistan, and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE), all of which shaped India's strategic autonomy. India's intervention in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the broader Indian Ocean region reflected its expanding regional footprint. The economic liberalization between 1971 and 1991 marked a significant shift toward global integration while reinforcing India's strategic ambitions.

The second half of the book presents a forward-looking analysis of India's strategic priorities and foreign policy aspirations. Jaishankar emphasizes that future goals must be addressed through careful planning and pragmatic execution, focusing on four key areas: India's unique political, economic, and social circumstances, leveraging international partnerships for infrastructure and technological growth, recognizing that liberalization alone cannot resolve development challenges, and investing in national security and economic prosperity. According to Jaishankar, India's core priorities over the next decade will revolve around five strategic imperatives: accelerating domestic development to strengthen economic foundations, ensuring a stable and prosperous neighborhood through proactive diplomacy, balancing China's influence on both land and maritime domains, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, engaging with West Asia despite persistent challenges posed by Pakistan, and positioning itself as a key player within regional and global organizations.

Jaishankar's assessment of India-China relations is particularly striking. He argues that "With China, competition and cooperation have to coexist, but competition will be the dominant feature of the foreseeable future." However, while he acknowledges the challenges posed by China, the book lacks specific, actionable recommendations for addressing border disputes—a critical issue for India's national security. Field insights from border regions suggest that ground realities diverge sharply from policy rhetoric, underscoring the need for more concrete border management strategies. Despite outlining India's strategic imperatives, the book does not fully address the practical measures required to manage tensions along the India-China border. This omission is particularly significant given the ongoing border conflicts and the increasing militarization of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Jaishankar dedicates significant attention to India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, which remains a priority despite regional volatility caused by democratization, populism, and China's assertiveness. He emphasizes the need for enhanced regional cooperation through increased humanitarian aid, infrastructure connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges to maintain stability.

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On the Indo-Pacific, Jaishankar views maritime security as non-negotiable, stating, "A secure maritime neighborhood is not an option; it is a necessity." He advocates for stronger engagement with regional platforms like the Quad to counterbalance China's maritime expansion. The book also discusses India's engagement with the West, stressing the need for closer cooperation with European powers to reinforce its geopolitical standing. Jaishankar identifies technological self-sufficiency as a key goal, arguing that "Innovation is India's next frontier in global influence."

One of the book's major strengths lies in Jaishankar's four-stage model of India's foreign policy evolution. Between 1947 and 1971, India pursued non-alignment while asserting regional leadership, exemplified by its intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War. From 1971 to 1991, India prioritized strategic autonomy through close ties with the Soviet Union. The period from 1991 to 2008 marked a shift toward economic liberalization and global integration, while the post-2008 era reflects a multipolar approach balancing US relations with cautious engagement with China. This structured approach provides a clear framework for understanding the trajectory of India's international relations.

However, the book falls short in offering practical solutions to pressing issues, particularly India's border challenges with China. While Jaishankar acknowledges the failure of the Neighborhood First policy, concrete recommendations to improve cross-border relations are lacking. Furthermore, the book underemphasizes soft power dimensions such as cultural diplomacy and provides only surface-level coverage of economic diplomacy, both crucial for India's global ambitions. A more comprehensive analysis of domestic factors influencing foreign policy decisions would further strengthen the book's arguments.

The book "Vishwa Shastra: India and the World" is a thought-provoking and insightful contribution to India's foreign policy discourse. Despite some gaps in practical recommendations, Jaishankar's lucid analysis and strategic foresight offer valuable insights for both scholars and policymakers. The book reinforces a compelling argument: India's ascent as a global power is not inevitable—it requires vision, adaptability, and sustained effort. Through careful planning and a balanced approach to regional and global challenges, India can effectively navigate its path toward becoming a leading power on the world stage.

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