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LAKHAN MEHROTRA: THE ODYSSEY OF A DIPLOMAT: THROUGH THE CORRIDORS OF TIME


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In his memoir, “The Odyssey of a Diplomat through the Corridors of Time,” former Indian diplomat Lakhan Mehrotra provides a historical narrative of India’s diplomatic endeavours. Filled with personal anecdotes from the author’s illustrious diplomatic career, the book is composed of a foreword penned by eminent Indian diplomat K. Natwar Singh and divided into twenty sections, accompanied by an endorsement written by Shyam Saran, Former Foreign Secretary of India. Mehrotra worked as diplomat in the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Mexico, and many more. With expert storytelling, diplomatic deadlocks and historical events, this book delves into the socio-political contexts that profoundly transformed Indian Foreign Policy since independence. The book covers diverse region from the Arctic to the Pacific.

The initial chapters, “My Early Years: 1934-1951” and “Sojourn at Allahabad: 1951-1958”, introduces readers about author’s educational and personal background. Mehrotra’s upbringing and education in Uttarakhand along with the local customs he has imbibed, inspired his intellectual pursuits. The next section includes author’s experience at the University of Allahabad as a student. Engaged in student politics, Mehrotra scrutinized the surging tide of Indian politics. It was also in Allahabad, Nehru’s political ideals ignited and inspired Mehrotra’s understanding of Indian Foreign Policy. He further explored the philosophical principles of Ashoka and interacted with various eminent Indian freedom fighters, such as Rajashri Purushottam Das Tandon during this time. This section chronicles author’s odyssey and lesson he congregated as a student, followed by his subsequent employment at the University of Allahabad.

The historical narrative then shifted to the 1950s. It was a period characterised by India’s conviviality with China. Nehruvian Policy of Non-Alignment and Peaceful

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co-existence, enshrined in Panchsheel, takes centre stage in India's Foreign Policy. In the 1960s, Mehrotra worked as a liaison officer for the Government of India in China. During this time Mehrotra had the opportunity to witness this evolving relationship between these two nations. However, the challenges arising from the Tibetan issue between India and China marred the bonhomie. The leadership role of Sardar Patel is also discussed. The author discusses China's aggressive posture in Northeast India and its ramifications on India-China bilateral relations. India's encounter with China in the 1962 war redirected India's foreign policy and recalibrated the power dynamics between these two Asian powerhouses. As both countries were vying for supremacy, the 1962 war ignited a seismic shift in Indian Foreign Policy.

Cultural Diplomacy takes centre stage in the chapter "With His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Dharamsala". Buddhism and Tibetan perspectives helped Mehrotra to explore people-centric approach on global cooperation. His conversations with his highness Dalai Lama offer new outlook about Indian diplomacy which is based on compassion and peaceful settlement of disputes. Mehrotra's memoir fall in line with Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power. The author further investigates the extensiveness of India's cultural diplomatic assets. His conversation with Dalai Lama, he was convinced him, by embracing spirituality and cultural diversity India can harness its true soft power potential.

In the subsequent chapter "New York: 1962–1964" the author was posted in the Indian Consulate in New York. After his encounters with distinguished Americans and Indians, this memoir shed lights on US Foreign Policy towards India at that time. The author meticulously recounts the UNSC deliberations following the liberation of Goa in 1961. In the UNSC deliberations, the United States put forward a resolution to condemn India's actions. USSR provided unwavering support to India by vetoing on this resolution. Within this chapter, the author bestows historical event that happened in the United States and in India. For instance, the author discusses Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the death of Prime Minister Nehru (Tayal, 2020). After a brief tenure in Mexico, the author was posted for two years in Cuba. The pinnacle of his stay on Cuba is the depiction of his encounter with Fidel Castro and Cuban revolution.

In the subsequent chapter, the author discusses, India adopted unperturbed diplomatic techniques to deal with neighbouring countries particularly China. After the 1962 war with China, delicate negotiations were needed to restrict further aggressions. Through Mehrotra's memoir, readers can witness the thrust of intense negotiations and the complexities of diplomacy.

The next section deals with the role of Indian leadership in shaping Foreign Policy. The untimely demise of Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and the transformative policy measures enacted by Indira Gandhi's administration were vividly explained in this memoir. Under Indira Gandhi's regime from 1967 and 1977, the focus of Indian Foreign Policy was concentrated to ensure regional security by limiting cross

border terrorism, and fortifying border defences. This was a transition from India's idealistic posture to proactive strategies with a keen eye on regional stability. The reader is whisked away on a thrilling rollercoaster expedition and bearing witness to the tectonic shifts in India's foreign policy landscape.

Understanding the dynamics of Cold War politics and India's stance of neutrality is meticulously explored in the chapter "From one Hemisphere to the Other: 1966-1969". The focus of this chapter is India's deepened relationship with the Soviet Union. As the USA was supporting Pakistan, disrupting India's aspirations for a peaceful neighbourhood, India was compelled to forge stronger defence ties with USSR. Thus, the burgeoning defence agreement is born out of necessity, ensuring India's survival, and averting the suzerainty of the USA and China. The Rupee-Ruble agreement follows, solidifying India's path and cementing its place on the world stage (Tayal, 2020)..

In the upcoming chapter "Historic Changes in the Sub-Continent", Mehrotra's memoir delves into India's intricate relationship with Bhutan, Bangladesh Liberation War, and the annexation of Sikkim into India. Despite Bhutan's proximity to India, in the 1980s, Bhutan deviated from India's interests. Bhutan aligned itself with China and the Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodia during the NAM's summit. Consequently, in 1985, Bhutan inked the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and lent support to Pakistan on various issues. As situation became complex, India adopted a delicate balancing act to safeguard Bhutan's autonomy from the clutches of China. To accomplish this, Mehrotra argues that since the 1980s, India has strived to fortify Bhutan's territorial integrity, exemplified by consenting to the amendment of Article 2 of the Friendship Treaty in 2007. Hence, liberating Bhutan from seeking India's advice on foreign policy. Amidst Bhutan's mountainous landscapes, a vibrant tapestry of power dynamics and diplomacy unfurls, leaving readers enraptured. In the ensuing segment, Mehrotra steers his focus towards the appropriation of Sikkim into India. In 1973, anti-royalist uprisings erupted just beyond the Chogyal's palace, the final monarch of Sikkim. In 1975, following the Indian Army's takeover of Gangtok, a referendum was conducted that resulted in the dethronement of the monarchy.

In the upcoming chapters titled "Back to Moscow" and "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan," the author delves into his experiences as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The author unravels the manifold challenges faced by India. The Soviet Union anticipated India's endorsement of this invasion and believed that true friendship is put to the test in times of adversity. India defied the USSR's agenda and opposed this intervention in the UN General Assembly. Following this, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was re-elected, and despite the differences concerning the Afghan intrusion, the two nations remained resolutely united in their pursuit of peace and stability in Afghanistan. The author delivers a historical narrative and carefully picturises the falling state of the Soviet system (Tayal, 2020). From the turbulence of Moscow, the author was dispatched to seemingly serene

Argentina. He provides a first-hand account of the UK-Argentina clash over Falklands in 1983. Surprisingly author's omission of India's standpoint on the events is notable, considering the resemblance between the Argentinean intrusion and India's manoeuvres against the Portuguese in Goa in 1961 (Tayal, 2020).

The subsequent section grapples with India's convoluted relationship with Sri Lanka in the chapter "Sri Lanka". Mehrotra focuses upon India's role ensuring peace and stability during the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict by sending Indian Peace Keeping Force. The complex negotiations between India's then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan president Premadasa are expounded upon with meticulous detail.

In the concluding chapters "Back to India" and "My Last Dream", the book delves into Mehrotra's personal odyssey as Secretary in the Ministry of Indian External Affairs. Mehrotra argues it was during the 1990s, there were fundamental shifts. India's aspirations were no longer confined to Asia, as it was striving to become regional to a global power. This transformation comes alive during Nelson Mandela's historic visit to India in 1990. During his visit in India, Mandela praises India's nonviolence principle rooted in Gandhian doctrine. A deeper association between India and Africa became evident after this visit. India's Look East Policy is another prominent theme explored in this memoir. The adroit execution by Narsimha Rao's government to develop dynamic relationships with Southeast Asian nations is also applauded by the author. Entwining historical facts with personal reflections, the book presents a unique perspective that breathes vitality into India's past.

However, Mehrotra's excessive reliance on personal experiences obfuscates the objective analysis of Indian Foreign Policy. Instead of a mere memoir, a comprehensive analysis should have accorded equal importance to the triumphs and tribulations faced by diplomats. Such balanced approach would have helped readers to understand India's diplomatic landscape properly. Moreover, India's geopolitical factors which greatly influenced India's policy choices haven't explored in detail. India's global engagements in the book suggests a favourable bias, yet diplomatic history is teeming with complexities and challenges that shape events. While the book acknowledges hurdles such as the 1962 China conflict, a more profound analysis of India's diplomatic mistakes would have added depth to the narrative.

Upon closer examination, absence of detailed discussion on pivotal Indian foreign policy decisions becomes apparent. The annexation of Sikkim and its political implications on India's Foreign Policy are missing from memoir. In terms of coalitions, the book presents a hyper optimistic viewpoint on India's relationship with the Soviet Union. Despite India good relations with the USSR, comprehensive perspective would have discussed the potential drawbacks or dependencies that may have arisen from this partnership. Scrutinizing how this alliance impacted India's autonomy in foreign policy could have elevated the memoir to unprecedented heights.

Notwithstanding various limitations, “The Odyssey of a Diplomat through the Corridors of Time” delivers a panoramic view of Indian Foreign Policy. Mehrotra’s memoir endeavours to journey across the chasm between the complicated realm of diplomacy and the ordinary public life. The book can be useful to gain practical knowledge on negotiation and the indispensable role of socio-cultural elements in shaping foreign policy. Mehrotra’s encounters and the experiences he gathered can help future diplomats to navigate the complex domain of diplomatic service.