

Shashi Tharoor's *Reasons of State:* A Study of Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's Reasons of State is an insightful study of the political developments in the field of foreign policy of India; Tharoor's this nonfictional work analyzes India's foreign policy during 1966-1977 under the rule of Indira Gandhi; this work can be divided into three parts; the first part presents Tharoor's insight in the backdrop of the Indira era; he examines Mrs. Indira Gandhi's antecedents: Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. She has inherited the legacy and the strategy of the foreign policy of India from them. In the second part, Tharoor explores, inspects and evaluates the foreign policy of Indira Gandhi; he also studies the roles of opposition and the Ministry of External Affairs in India's foreign policy making. In the third part he examines the response, pressure of public opinion, interest groups and the press. Tharoor attempts to weigh up the effectiveness of the Indian foreign policy and achieves national end through the conventional means of Defence and Diplomacy which are not at all employed. He mentions the large gap between theory and practice of foreign policy making; the governance in India, rather than boosting the institution increased individual's dominance. Indians failed to recognize foreign policy as one of fundamental pillars of governance.

Key Words: Foreign policy, Political, Governance, Emergency, International relations

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Shashi Tharoor's book, *Reasons of State* (1982), is a shrewd dissertation of Indian Foreign Policy making during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's regime; through this work, the writer presents an insightful study of the political developments and an analysis of Indian foreign policy under the rule of Indira Gandhi during the period of 1966 to 1977; it is one of the deep studies of how foreign policy is made in India.

In the beginning of the book, Shashi Tharoor explains that it is not possible to reckon foreign policy poles apart from the domestic concerns and institutions, for it has its genesis in political development and is always linked to it. S. K. Dhawan aptly observes: "Foreign policy cannot be very different from domestic aspirations and policies" (116). In her address to All India Congress Committee Seminar in New Delhi on 31 August 1970, Indira Gandhi remarked: "No government can afford, however idealistic it may be, to leave or neglect the practical interest of the country. We believed—and we still believe—that freedom is indivisible, that peace is indivisible, that economic prosperity is indivisible. And these are the fundamentals on which our foreign policy is based" (42).

After the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Congress syndicate was searching for a consensus and flexible person for the post of Prime Minister; in the personality of Indira Gandhi they found a befitting candidate for this post. She knew that her survival depended on the members of the syndicate who were more anxious about the interests of factional and regional powers. Tharoor explores in the book the apprehensive condition in which Mrs. Gandhi was governing; in her early phase, rather than producing anything new, she worked to establish herself as a dominating politician; during this period she liked to rule, control, subvert, and master the plans of remaining in power.

During the Emergency Indira Gandhi dismantled every institution which came in her way; she put her hold on the Press, Judiciary, Parliament, and Cabinet. “The manner in which the emergency decision was reached and implemented clearly reveals Indira Gandhi’s fatal leadership flaws. Self-sufficiency, independence, and autonomy, which, when displayed in good measure can be virtues, became flaws” (Carras 210). As Prime Minister, her dominance is wielded on every field of governance; out of the different prerogatives one to which Mrs. Gandhi instantaneously turned is India’s foreign policy. The Congress syndicate and seminar members ignored this matter of international affairs, providing her a free hand. Although, she had got a small governing experience but still her official presence with her father, the Ex-Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru, in all international meetings and discussions with foreign bigwigs had helped her to expand expertise with the world of Indian diplomacy. This unofficial experience and absolute hold on the governance gave her full scope to develop foreign policy of her own; she made a unique contribution to the world of international affairs. All the characteristics of her personality as a Prime Minister are combined in forming her view about the foreign affairs; she was always mindful about emphasizing the significance of India, moreover, she never accepted India to be put side by side to smaller powers or be ignored. In her foreign policy, the inclination towards Russia was apparent; she formed an image of pro-Soviet and anti-Western.

Mrs. Gandhi had a dual policy; she shielded her decisions by declaring two grounds—one by saying that we are strong enough and the second she is doing this with an intention to strengthen the economy. Nevertheless, she was open-minded with every other country but still the Western criticism and her growing resentment steered her towards the Soviet camp. Tharoor reveals that Indira’s mind-set of resentment towards the West was not applicable to France, because she had soft corner for it. For Mrs. Gandhi, ‘West’ to a large extent meant ‘America’, whose insincerity in the 1971 war, is explicitly condemned. She obviously points out that her amity with a country is a part of worldwide affairs and it doesn’t mean that she should relinquish her sovereign outlooks on any key issue; it is all stuff of bewilderment. Tharoor thumps the exact note on her foreign policy. “. . . throughout her Prime Ministership, Mrs. Gandhi indicated no desire to formulate a vision of the world and to direct India’s foreign policy toward it” (*Reasons of State* 74).

Tharoor had the privilege of interviewing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During interview, Tharoor questions about her vision of the world, and India’s place and role in the

world affairs; the conversation between Tharoor and Mrs. Gandhi exposes her practical insight about the role of India in foreign affairs:

. . . Five considerations emerge for Mrs. Gandhi's statements: the value of independence and self reliance; an assertive "Indianness"; an awareness of the use of foreign political policy for domestic economic ends, with both involving the concept of "strength"; a rejection of traditional international power politics; and finally almost surprisingly, a quest for international influence in the direction of peace and of the "eminence" resulting there from. (*Reasons of State* 89)

After considering the diverse aspects of Mrs. Gandhi's personality and insinuating these facets of the foreign policy, Shashi Tharoor shifts to the administration of institutions associated with the foreign policy of India during Mrs. Gandhi's tenure. Tharoor prefers to call the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as super Foreign Minister, in day to day affairs. Quoting Foreign Minister, Chagla, Tharoor stresses upon that Mrs. Gandhi remained more engrossed in travels and meetings with international dignitaries. She was interested only in the decisions linked to U. S., U. K. and Soviet Union and left the 'smaller countries' affairs to the foreign minister. She gave little time in meeting foreign ambassadors of less significant countries, and also she was very lackadaisical about appointing ambassadors to these countries, resulting in a loss of good will in international relations.

Mrs. Gandhi's diplomatic relations reflect her reluctance to fine-tune herself with other countries. India's friendly relation is sacrificed when she took a decision to make the country a super nuclear power; at first, there were two opposing schools of thought about her foreign policy—one group slated her for her inclination towards the US and the other assumed that she was favouring Soviet Union. But later, with her absolute hold on the Congress Party, whatever decision she took with her advisory committee became the party line; Mrs. Indira Gandhi's personalization of power increased as the party's capability to act decreased. It is in the later phase that all the decisions and answerability rested on Mrs. Gandhi as the policy matters flowed from her.

Indira Gandhi restructured some committees linked to foreign affairs; in 1970, Mrs. Gandhi abolished the committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Internal Affairs, and replaced them with Political Affairs Committee (PAC) in which her close associates were members. Although they would meet regularly but her decision was final; the Cabinet surrendered its rights as a foreign policy making body to the Prime Minister. To strengthen her power Mrs. Gandhi took advice from her close associates accountable only to her; they were Uma Shankar Dikshit, Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, D. P. Mishra and Nandini Satpathy.

Tharoor also speaks about a parallel group of advisors in Prime Minister's secretariat, Dharam Vira, L. K. Jha, and Haksar. Tharoor points out the role of Haksar and D. P. Dhar in devising the convoluted and vital policy resulting in the Bangladesh crisis. Haksar was instrumental in shaping various foreign policies; later on, they were replaced by R. K. Dhawan and Yaspal Kapoor. When Mrs. Gandhi was in power she appointed four foreign ministers:

Sardar Swarn Singh, Mohammed Currim Chagla, Dinesh Singh, and Y. B. Chavan. Evaluating their success and failures, Tharoor says, Swarn Singh is well-expressed minister who go through all his files but regrettably is absolutely powerless of presenting new ideas or creating policy. Tharoor praises M. C. Chagla who is a pioneering and logical administrator; he has a short tenure but he fails to leave a considerable impact on India's long-standing policy guidelines. He had a greater independence of action and opinion as weighed against other foreign ministers. He was given greater power to act and advise as compared to his colleagues. Dinesh Singh, a close associate and a member of 'Kitchen Cabinet', is also a close friend of the Soviet Union and is known more for his ostentatious and jovial style. Y. B. Chavan, the last foreign minister of Mrs. Gandhi, was unfortunate, for he served at the peak of the Prime Minister's power; subsequently he made the slightest likely impact on any aspect of foreign policy. Tharoor, alongwith this incompetent foreign minister, presents the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in a disgusting way. Tharoor also criticizes the poor coordination with the MEA; it has a role only in implementation of policy rather than its formulation. The MEA was unsuccessful to change itself according to the need of the time and carried on to stick to the supposition and practices of an old-fashioned non-alignment. Amid unskilled and powerless ministers, and professionally unproven staff, India failed to put on better image in international affairs.

Shashi Tharoor assumes that the inputs in the foreign policy emerge from the domestic policies, from the ruling party, and also from the opposition. Mrs. Gandhi said in an interview: "A country's foreign policy cannot be divorced from its internal policy. Any country, any government, any political party must decide what it believes in, and all its policies must then flow from this basic conviction or belief" (Pouchpadass 132). As far as ruling party is considered there is none superior to Mrs. Gandhi. The opposition failed to rise itself to that point. Bharatiya Jan Sangh is the only party which has a logical, devoted, and abstractly integrated foreign policy, but it is dismissed as a conservative organization with its foreign policy views based on chauvinism. To apprehend the foreign policy of every political party, Tharoor compares the election manifestoes of all the major parties. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh, which has a counter-productive foreign policy for the Congress, failed to generate a momentum in the foreign policy, because it was not in power. Tharoor gets information about this from the election manifestoes and campaign literature of all major political parties during 1967, 1971, and 1972. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh was not in favour of super powers; it favoured the South East Asian nations.

The liability for incompetent governance lies on the failures of the foreign minister and the Ministry of External Affairs. No positive action is noticed on the part of intellectual and public opinion, the illiteracy of the masses is one major factor that it could not make its impact; and moreover, those who were educated and intellectual could not collect sufficient strength to direct the policy; they are energetic and coherent in meetings, colloquiums, give radio and television discussions, interviews and publish articles. But Tharoor supposes all these deeds unproductive, for this could not leave a little impression on the established system; they liked better to accept the decision rather than arguing or suggesting. The tag of 'intellectuals' took

them away from masses which in fact would have backed them to make an impact; subsequently, this resulted later on into a lack of concern on the part of intellectuals in the matter of foreign policy. The Indian universities were also short of a solid academic infrastructure for the study of international affairs. This left a devastating influence on the intellectuals; they subjugated themselves to the decision makers; their opinions were far from realism and even less predictive for action; some intellectuals even wrote columns on Indian foreign policy in daily newspapers. Now it was the duty of the masses to create an influence in the absence of intellectuals. The public opinion was apparent, but unfortunately it had no influence on the foreign policy; it was confirmed by the Prime Minister herself that the Indian foreign policy has no place for public opinion; moreover, she was more enthusiastic to influence the masses. Tharoor even discovers the role of press, in influencing India's foreign policy. The Indian foreign policy is more disposed towards the different foreign lobbies which take part comprehensively in the External Affairs Ministry.

Tharoor's study makes it clear that India's foreign policy remained an unfamiliar field to most of the influencing factors like opposition, press, and masses; its mysterious nature has held it off from the ordinary masses. Tharoor attempts to weigh up the effectiveness of the Indian foreign policy and achieves national end through the conventional means of Defence and Diplomacy which are not at all employed. He mentions the large gap between theory and practice of foreign policy making; the governance in India, rather than boosting the institution increased individual's dominance. Indians failed to recognize foreign policy as one of fundamental pillars of governance. The spiteful temperament of the Prime Minister and the elusive concepts are the factors responsible for the failing of Indian foreign policy. Khilnani observes:

The Indian foreign policy has flopped in Srilanka, missed the mark of normalisation with Pakistan, failed to evolve a workable and steady relationship with China, failed to disarm suspicions of Nepal and Bangladesh. The Asean nations are also wary of India's motives, methods and objectives. The Thais and Indonesians think we are too pro-Russian while the Soviets are beginning to brood on proclivities of the Rajiv Administration in favour of the private sector. Only Western Europe, Japan and Latin America are actively thinking of further improving relations with India, especially in the economic sphere. (116)

Shashi Tharoor adds an epilogue to examine the Janata/Lokdal interregnum till the return of Mrs. Gandhi to power. He says that the speech of Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Janata government foreign minister, apparently pointed out that this government too did not plan to go away from the international policy of its forerunner. This government practically identified that foreign policy of Indira Gandhi has created dependence and widened relationship with US and China; it was phase of achievements and failures. Tharoor welcomes the notable departure from the past, and the ripeness and efficacy marked by India's foreign policy during this time.

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