

**DOES INDIA NEGOTIATE** by Karthik Nachiappan. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2019.

FOR years we have been battling to understand how Indian officials negotiate abroad. So far, there has been little more than inferential and anecdotal analysis. There have been suggestions that Indian negotiators reflect cultural and religious traits, based on the Hindu caste hierarchy or the strategic principles of the *Arthashastra*. Others have pointed at ideological drivers, based on India's post-colonial, anti-imperialist and non-aligned rhetoric. In Stephen Cohen's seminal book, India is described as a perpetual naysayer, a country that 'can't say yes.' Many retired officials in the West, in turn, have described India's negotiation style as obstinate, defensive or even obstructionist.

But the proof is in the pudding – and in scholarship that means evidence. Karthik Nachiappan's book is a formidable feast of empirics based on four in-depth case studies. He helps us understand the 'logic' of India's multilateral behaviour, which he describes as 'sober, rational, driven by interests and institutional capacity' (p. 10, 191). India may not be a proactive rule *maker*, but it is also not a passive rule *taker*. Indeed, in some cases it has been a rule *breaker*, but in most instances, the book argues, India's dynamic negotiation style presents the country as a rule *shaper*.

He forwards that Indian officials negotiate based on flexible interests that adapt, varying institutional capacity, and different degrees of influence from domestic interest groups. His four case studies are short but specific and deeply researched, based on multilateral archives, interviews and other primary sources, reflecting the value of historical and case study methodology to understand the many undiscovered logics of Indian foreign policy.

On the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC, 2003), he defines India's negotiation approach as 'pointed and pragmatic' based on a 'fortuitous partnership' (p. 37) between the government and domestic lobbies, leading to simultaneous changes in domestic tobacco control legislation (COTPA). On the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC, 1992), he describes the political rationale of India's 'defensive strategy' (p. 54), which helped to reframe negotiations to focus on equity and financial assistance for developing countries.

On the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT, 1996), India 'strove to negotiate a tough CTBT that placed symmetric expectations on all [Conference on Disarmament] member states' (p. 99), and its position only hardened *after* the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Finally, on the World Trade Organization's Uruguay Round (1993), India's negotiation was 'tough but pragmatic and rational' based on a 'practical, yet sober, approach' (p. 143).

Overall, Nachiappan's superb book throws light on four different dimensions in India's negotiation processes that deserve further research. First, coordination issues: the case studies show how the interests and organizational cultures of different ministries have at times either aligned or clashed. For example, on the FCC, the ministries of External Affairs (MEA) and Environment and Forests had different mandates abroad, which were eventually harmonized. As international negotiations become increasingly complex, for example on data governance, artificial intelligence or the outer space, it is unlikely that we will see the MEA remaining in the lead as it used to.

Second, the role of external expertise in shaping the government's interests: on the FCTC, for example, evidence based research from civil society experts helped negotiators internalize that the tobacco industry benefits were outweighed by long-term health costs of tobacco consumption. Similarly, in the case of the FCC, think tanks like TERI and the Centre for Science and Environment played a determinant role in shifting India's initial 'defensive position' to a more informed focus on 'differentiated responsibilities'. On trade, the book illustrates the influential role of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) or the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) and other organizations as sources of technical expertise, rather than just political lobbying. With the Indian Foreign Service and the overall bureaucracy more

constrained than ever, a variety of domain specialists will have to step in to help bridge new knowledge gaps and support India's negotiation stance.

Third, the case studies also show the crucial role of political leadership of Prime Ministers, whether Vajpayee's personal interest in regulating tobacco use or Narasimha Rao's determination to join the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) despite fierce domestic opposition. Eventually, the buck stops with leaders, and to assess the salience of public opinion it would help to focus on a few case studies under weak coalition governments. Do governments cave in to political pressures to ensure re-election, or do they sometimes also use these domestic forces as an excuse to increase their diplomatic bargaining power?

Fourth, how much of a proactive role should India take in negotiation processes? For all the talk about India as a 'leading power', Nachiappan's book shows us that multilateral negotiations are complex and costly, consuming vast diplomatic resources and often stretching on for years. He argues that India may, therefore, not want to bite off more than its negotiators can chew. On the other hand, many regional neighbours and other developing countries also expect India to represent their interests, more than ever: in the case of the FCTC, for example, WHO/SEARO countries delegated negotiation responsibilities to India because it was 'relatively more knowledgeable on tobacco control' (p. 33). Will India be able to balance its restrained approach, limited capabilities and rising demands to shape global governance?

Nachiappan's book not only offers extraordinary insights into four multilateral negotiation processes, but more broadly also offers an excellent contribution to understand how Indian officials seek to maximize their country's international influence. However, beyond skill and expertise, India's negotiation capacity will hinge on its crude capabilities at home, whether economic, military or scientific. Both in the CTBT and WTO negotiations, Nachiappan mentions that Indian officials at times 'implored' their counterparts to accommodate India's interests (122, 160): a more prosperous and powerful India will hopefully equip its negotiators to henceforth be in a better position at the diplomatic high table.

**Constantino Xavier**

Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Brookings India