

Interview – Dhruva Jaishankar

Written by E-International Relations

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Dhruva Jaishankar is Executive Director of Observer Research Foundation (ORF) America, which he helped establish in 2020. From 2016 to 2019, Jaishankar was a Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings India in New Delhi and the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. From 2012 to 2016, he was a Transatlantic Fellow with the German Marshall Fund (GMF) in Washington DC, where he managed the India Trilateral Forum, a regular policy dialogue involving participants from India, Europe, and the United States. From 2009 to 2012, he was program officer with the Asia Program at GMF. Before that, he worked as a research assistant at the Brookings Institution in Washington and as a news writer and reporter for CNN-IBN television in New Delhi.

In 2015-2016, Jaishankar was a Visiting Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. His research — on India's relations with the United States, Japan, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Europe; defence and security policy; and globalization, democracy, and technology — has been published in several books, policy reports, and publications including *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Survival*. He holds a B.A. in History and Classics from Macalester College, and an M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown University. His book, *Vishwa Shastra: India and the World* was published by Penguin Random House India in December 2024.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I study the international relations of India and its place in world affairs, which is the subject of my forthcoming book, *Vishwa Shastra: India and the World*. There is a fair amount of interesting extant literature on the subject but still vast gaps that need to be filled. I find historical works to be most useful, but, amazingly, some important subjects such as India-Russia relations, the 1965 India-Pakistan war or India's foreign policy of the 1990s have not received sufficient treatment: that is, a PhD dissertation or good book-length study based on primary source material.

The politics of India's international economy and trade and its recent relations with Southeast Asia are also still underserved. In addition, a range of potentially fascinating topics, including migration and technology, exist. At the same time, many other areas, including the Cold War and India's nuclear program, have been studied and documented quite extensively, so I am sceptical of new undertakings in these areas.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have seen a swing in trends in contemporary international relations even over the past 20 years that I have been around professionally. The early 2000s saw the ascendance of U.S.-led IR liberalism (such as the work of John Ikenberry and Francis Fukuyama) and a greater emphasis on regional studies, particularly of the Middle East and the Islamic world after the 9/11 attacks. Academically, the trends have shifted over time to quantitative methods and constructivist theories, to the point that these dominate political science departments at major universities. But I think the events of the past few years – the ascendance of Donald Trump, the rise and behaviour of China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – have prompted a return to realism, qualitative methods, and what Kenneth Waltz might have considered first- and second-image explanations. What is notable about all of this is how much trends in policy and academic research follow real-life events. The rise of health, climate, and tech security in recent years offers further

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evidence of such shifts. Even in India, there has been a recent welcome and resurgence in diplomatic history, enabled by the increased availability of declassified documentary sources.

Personally, I have tried to familiarise myself with a wide range of sources, methods, and traditions. But I do find realist explanations of international behaviour to have the strongest resonance across history and time. I also appreciate theory grounded in history and find that cross-regional comparisons can offer novel insights. So, while my own formal training was in classical and European history and later in security studies, the cannon that theorists draw from is far too limited. International relations so rarely draw universal insights from, say, Latin American revolutions, pre-colonial South and Southeast Asia, or non-Western political theorists, but are content with well-worn debates around the Peloponnesian Wars or World War I. What I have attempted to do is insert more of the Indian lived experience into the popular understanding, whether the international relations of Ashoka, the military traditions of the Maratha and Sikh Empires, or the process of colonialism. Even post-Independent Indian history is widely perceived as an aberration or sideshow in traditional IR, when for India at least it was much more a natural outgrowth of its historical and security predicaments.

India has historically been averse to being part of alliances and maintains the multi-alignment rhetoric. Does this approach prevent India from forging commitment-based partnerships with the USA and European countries?

I do not think commitment-based partnerships are either an end goal of diplomacy nor have they enjoyed a long history. In fact, alliances as they are thought of today are in large part a product of the nuclear age and the historical experience of the post-World War II world, particularly in Europe and Japan. It is also questionable that India has been averse to alliances since it signed treaties with Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan upon independence as well as a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971. But these arrangements, whatever their practical significance or legal standing, are a means to an end. The fact is that the United States and Europe are also more sceptical of treaty commitments today than they were in the past.

As India seeks to become a hub for global innovation, what are the key policy areas that need attention to foster an environment conducive to research and development, especially in high-tech sectors like AI, semiconductors, and outer space?

One of the interesting things I learned to appreciate while writing my book was that India has been on a quest for technological mastery almost since its independence in 1947, in fact slightly before that time. Some of the same challenges bedevilled India's quest for defence, nuclear, space, and computing technologies from the 1950s to the 1980s. Ultimately, no amount of political intent can make up for creating policy priorities, incentives, and financial outlays, but the good news is we are beginning to see some useful steps being taken now. The power of replication and external competition is also valuable: never waste a good crisis.

Multiple minilateral groupings determine security in the Indo-Pacific. Can a collective security arrangement emerge in the Indo-Pacific?

I do not think the intention is to create a collective security arrangement because of the dynamic that is at play today in the Indo-Pacific. This is a region that is defined by China's growing strategic footprint, and increased competition, particularly with the United States and India. That competition looks different for actors, whether in Japan, Australia, South Korea, or much of Southeast Asia. So, to impose a NATO-like framework on a diverse set of countries with very different capabilities and threat perceptions is problematic. Instead, we are likely to see increased competition, primarily between the United States and China over supremacy in the western Pacific, that will spill over to other regions, including the Indian Ocean. India has its own concerns about China, independent of the United States.

How prepared is India to mitigate the economic risks of potential disruptions in trade with Northeast Asia, particularly in the technology sector, in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait? How should these risks be factored into India's long-term economic and security strategies?

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I do not think anyone is prepared, not even China or the United States. The fact is the world has become accustomed to a high degree of economic interdependence. The combination of three shocks – the COVID-19 pandemic, the Galwan clashes between China and India, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine – have increased the urgency to prepare for such contingencies. As a result, a variety of steps have already been taken to begin the process of preparation for a major disruption, whether for natural (e.g. an earthquake or pandemic) or manmade (e.g. conflict or economic sanctions) reasons. But this will be a long road, and will require short-term trade-offs which many in the private sector – and consumers! – may be unwilling to make. The objective then is to increase resilience through a combination of reshoring and indigenisation, coalitions, and excess global capacity.

Given the bipartisan consensus on countering China, how do you see the second Donald Trump administration balancing economic protectionism with the need for resilient supply chains and continued investment partnerships in the Indo-Pacific?

By and large, the Trump administration – and the U.S. strategic community – is clear about the need to lessen dependencies on China. The challenge, in addition to the cost of doing so, is how to do so in a phased manner that does not prompt a political backlash. For example, applying tariffs on China, stemming immigration, and initiating trade disputes with allies and partners would increase inflation considerably, threatening Trump's political mandate in two years. A calibrated plan that increases economic resilience while mitigating the adverse economic consequences is what is needed. This is difficult – but not impossible – to pull off.

What role can India play in pushing negotiations on UNSC reform forward, and what concessions or compromises should India be prepared to make in the interest of broader reform?

India has been clear in its position and in trying to maintain momentum for the process of UN Security Council reform, both through the G-4 (with Brazil, Germany, and Japan) and through what's called the L.69 – a group of developing economies calling for more radical reform. The US, UK, France, and Russia have at least paid lip service to such reform, although they have dragged their feet. The two main obstacles at the moment are China and the lack of consensus within the Africa block about how to allocate two seats on the Security Council. All of this comes before questions of who gets the veto. There is a valuable precedent for the expansion of the Security Council since it happened once before, and members have changed as well, so it is not impossible. But sometimes the Global South needs to find consensus within before it can really effect major change.

What are some overlooked issues or challenges in international governance that need more attention to be paid?

New technologies are being developed faster than any domestic or international regulations. Some kind of export control regime for highly capable dual-use technologies is sorely needed. We are also set for a new era of nuclear proliferation and competition, driven by China's ongoing build-up. Questions of public-private cooperation on finance, trade, and technology are poorly understood and managed and often fall outside of formal academic disciplines. The politics of migration is still understudied and misunderstood, despite the potentially dramatic political implications.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I think it is such a compelling subject but professional opportunities are limited. Two broad pieces of advice. One, have some clarity about professional objectives. Do you intend to work for a government or international organisation, be a tenured professor, work at a think tank or non-profit organisation, or work in the private sector? This would help clarify the necessary academic qualifications. For example, whether to enrol in a political science PhD. or a policy master's program, or whether to get professional experience. In any of these cases, solid primary source research skills, analytical capabilities, and clear and concise writing are valued, and these make skills transferrable across sectors. Two, supplementing general skills with domain expertise is always valuable. This can be in a discipline such as law, economics, business, science and technology, or language skills or area studies. I often suggest that people insert a bit of international relations in another field of study because the fact of the matter is that we will need a wider range of professionals to develop a better familiarity with IR in an increasingly interdependent but contested world.

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