

Interview - Ravi Neelakantan

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Ambassador Ravi Neelakantan served in the Indian Foreign Services from the 1970s until 2009. During his tenure he has held multiple portfolios including as Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Ambassador to ASEAN and Vietnam in addition to various postings in Tokyo, Belgrade, Munich, Moscow and Bhutan. He has also worked in the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Finance on a range of issues including India's Foreign trade, child labour, and the Middle Eastern oil industry. Post-retirement he has been working as a Senior Fellow in the Centre for Public Policy at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

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

Some of the more absorbing areas of research that are happening in the field of international relations these days are, the effect of rising nationalism on a country's foreign policy; the exit of globalization as an integrating phenomenon with nothing substantial to replace it, to enable the coming together of nations for a common purpose; the alarming decline in areas of convergence in the conduct of international trade; and a near total inattention to monitoring progress in the area of the Sustainable Development Goals, even though many of the Millennium Development Goals were never reached.

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

I grew up in Delhi where the overhanging influence of the bureaucracy in general and the civil service as a profession, in particular, was simply too difficult to avoid. In the period up to the eighties in India, the foremost professions that presented themselves were the civil services, medicine, and engineering based activities. Today, there are a variety of avenues that one can choose to pursue, Since the mid-nineties, however, the availability of information has also increased both in quality and quantity.

In the service, my thinking has changed along with the advances in technology. Since information is the main raw material for the Foreign Service its availability, easy access, and its use for effective decision making has improved. Levels of awareness among practitioners of diplomacy has also gone up enormously, over the years. However, like in all bureaucracies, the asymmetric use of power by those who man it in its various departments, has always been a dampener. To be able to convince someone or an organization always turned out to be a burdensome task. This was mainly owing to information overload, because everyone has access to the same sources of information, but used it differently. Personal preferences and biases have often diluted decision making, and stall implementation of those very decisions. Over time, I found out that despite all round efforts, a fair share of ideas and decisions in government get their due, typically by chance and occasionally by design.

The concept of 'good governance' has been critiqued for its vagueness and for being monopolized by western liberal democratic structures. What are the advantages and limitations of leaving it open to regional interpretation? Does this need to change?

Ultimately good governance is country specific. So long as we have different political ideologies guiding governance in each country, differences will persist. Even "western" democratic structures are no longer truly democratic given the oversized influence of media in general and social media in particular. Today, the individual thinks that he/she is empowered but the governments around the world are using the very tools of such individual empowerment to regulate and control individual freedoms, either transparently or by stealth.

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ASEAN member states have increasingly coming under fire for extensively policing the internet in their states, creating a barrier towards digital integration. How can organizations like ASEAN work with governments to navigate this conundrum and what is the future of digital freedoms in these countries?

Digital freedom is a chimera. So long as the basic infrastructure is provided by a government or an agency of the government, all talk of integration is essentially for the galleries. In fact, many governments would like to influence other countries' populations using the cover of integration of digital platforms. So long as differences in the economic and technological development exist in different countries, the more powerful country in a grouping will always try to exert its influence on the less powerful – using digital or “democratic” means.

India has often been criticised for lacking a ‘grand strategy’ in its foreign policy. How would you respond to these claims?

Ideas or phrases like “grand strategy” become relevant for a given country when it has some power (political, economic or cultural) to project. India for the last seventy years has been responding to external stimuli and trying to project power in an episodic manner in many developing countries. This has not yielded success a hundred percent of the time. Most of our “grand strategy” is to ensure that our interests are not adversely affected and that we have some manoeuvring space. This is more like surviving on a day-to-day basis in the international context. India as a player in the international arena does not face any existential threat. It may take a decade or two to really evolve a “grand strategy” and project the same for our benefit. Right now, our strategy to have space for autonomous decision making appears to have survived.

How would you respond to criticisms that India has both severed the most economic ties with its neighbours while simultaneously opposing their attempts to connect with other countries in the region as in the case of Nepal and China?

India's neighbours (including Pakistan) are smaller in size. Thus, spans of control are smaller for effective decision making in these countries, in the field of economic growth and their use in our relations with one another. If we remove Nepal and Bhutan out of the equation, India's economic productivity is modest in comparison to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Pakistan, in some of the selected sectors. I would include, garment/apparel production, infrastructure, sports goods and even carpets, among others, in this regard.

When a small country like Nepal sees its near total dependence on a country like India, it is always looking for avenues to diversify its sources of import to reduce that dependence. In a decade or so, Chinese railway infrastructure is likely to reach Nepal's border. At the same time, if we continue to grow at our own pace, combined with an indifferent approach to productivity, probity and proficiency, that underpin the robust growth of a competitive economy, we will have a big problem on our hands. We will continue to fend off external stimuli, or respond to them when it affects our interests, while using terms like “grand strategy”, “projecting our influence” etc. without any meaningful effect on the ground.

Could you talk a little about India's regional partnerships and what you think the consequences of India pulling out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will be?

The RCEP is the economic version of the East Asia Summit (EAS). The EAS was originally conceived, in the early 2000s, as an exclusive grouping with 10 members of the ASEAN joining hands with China, Japan and South Korea. However, by 2002, India had become a fully-fledged dialogue partner with the ASEAN and also wanted to join the EAS, when the idea was mooted. So did Australia and New Zealand. Neither China nor Malaysia (within the ASEAN) were favourably disposed towards India joining the EAS. However, after much lobbying the three Commonwealth countries did join the EAS in 2005 – the year when it was inaugurated.

Unlike other EAS member countries, India was among the few with an economy, although well connected with a growing and globalized world, that had little to boast about, either in terms of productivity or diversified high-tech/high value investment. From the seventies to the late nineties, other member of the EAS had achieved higher

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levels of productivity and a significant level of diversion in technology-based industries in their economies. India was unable to match this at that time. Its effect was felt in the first two decades of the twenty first century when we could not offer the world market, the basket of goods at the price that was being demanded by the modern-day consumer. Further, the sectors in our inward investment and the contents of India's export basket remained narrow in variety, while others within the EAS/RCEP took advantage through their more attractive investment policies and offering higher levels of productivity across sectors. India stuck to its more tried and tested policies. This gradually weakened the competitiveness of our economy.

Even though we were off the block along with others in the RCEP saga from 2012, India's negotiating position was always defensive. Indian negotiators had to keep an eye on the effects that the RCEP would have on Indian domestic players in the areas where India felt threatened and also negotiate for a deal that will be acceptable to all other members, in the globalized economy. This one foot in each camp approach was further weakened by the lacklustre growth in our economy when the final details of the RCEP were being agreed upon. Thus, India could not agree to sign the RCEP because of the perception that it will cause significant damage to its economy, especially in the agriculture sector – the sector that employs the most people in our country.

The effect of India not joining the RCEP now is that it missed a bus that was going on an interesting journey, to unite the Australasian geological mass like never before. The Indian economy's managers have always felt hesitant in engaging with the rest of the world unless they see the advantages upfront. In the short run there would not be any major damage. As and when the RCEP is up and running, say by the beginning of the 2021, India should ready some measures that would enable it to join the RCEP then, and simultaneously create a way for the "threatened" domestic sectors of our economy to compete. In particular, the agriculture sector in India should be given tools to make them internationally competitive and, in the services sector, India should enable counter measures for those countries in the RCEP that still make use of non-tariff barriers to thwart our efforts for increasing services exports.

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

Students should pay attention to how countries in Asia have grown over the last five decades, particularly Vietnam, Thailand, China, South Korea, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. They should study what makes these economies tick. They should ascertain if there are any scalable lessons for us, be it in the field of investment or tourism or infrastructure or skill acquisition or even manufacture. We should humbly look at smaller countries to learn from effective examples rather than western countries for encouraging inspirations. The white man may not have the answers all the time.