

James Crabtree interviews **Raja Mohan**

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Mohan's world

James Crabtree

The world's most important geopolitical relationship is clearly that between China and the United States. But over time India will grow into an important global power too, transforming Asia's balance of power into a complex triangular affair. And few writers have examined the often-dramatic changes in India's recent foreign policy more closely, and with more success, than Raja Mohan.

For the past four years, Mohan has led the Institute of South Asian Studies, a research institute tucked away in a distant corner of the main campus of the National University of Singapore. Although perhaps best known for his weekly columns in the *Indian Express*, he has also written more than half a dozen books, all probing the same basic question: what kind of great power will India eventually become?

At one level, India's geopolitical rise is a relatively recent affair, accelerated by the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014. More recently, New Delhi has even moved to abandon its traditionally equivocal stance between China and the US, moving decisively to side with the latter in 2020, after a violent clash that left twenty Indian soldiers dead following a face-off with China in the Himalayan mountains.

New Delhi's turn towards Washington represents a major international shift. It is also one that Mohan himself generally supports, having long argued for stronger ties with the US, and the West more generally, while growing sceptical over the consequences of China's rise. Yet Mohan has charted a deeper long-term shift too, dating from the 1980s, as India gradually moved away from the foreign policy shibboleths that marked its international role after independence in 1947.

Mohan, sixty-eight, worked for a time as a journalist in Washington, DC, before returning home to spend time in universities and think tanks. Perhaps India's most influential foreign policy writer, he grounds his analysis in a pragmatic and unsentimental realism, examining the way states such as India behave, given their interests.

More to the point, for the general reader, his work is marked by the crisp prose of a foreign correspondent, rather than the jargon-filled style of an international relations academic. His analysis is grounded in a broad-ranging reading of history, taking in everything from the legacy of the British Empire to the role of Indian maritime power in antiquity.

I met Mohan in Singapore in November, a month before he was due to move back to India to take up a new position at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi. We began by discussing his approach to international affairs.

For someone who has not read your work, how would you describe your worldview?

I look at India's trajectory in the international system, and I try to understand it from a structural and realist perspective. I'm trying to break the familiar tropes that mystified Indian foreign policy for decades, and to say to people: 'Look, this is what we've all been brought up to think. But reality is actually going in a different direction.'

Indian foreign policy was framed historically as being about non-alignment, idealism, leading the Third World, standing up to imperialists and so on. And I've been trying to show that it is not really about that anymore. Today, India is changing, because our circumstances have changed, both internally and externally.



Raja Mohan (centre) at the Students Union Office at Jawaharlal Nehru University, circa 1970s

Revolutionary governments often begin with a grand idea of the world. This was true of Bolshevik Russia, and Communist China, and the Islamic Republic of Iran; they all came with a sense of how the world ought to be organised. India did the same after independence in 1947, when its politics were dominated by English-educated lawyers with liberal internationalist principles and views rooted in a particular socialist, anti-imperialist tradition.

But this combined to produce a worldview that was impossible to sustain. After 1991, when the Cold War ended, we were clearly heading to a new situation. And that is what I have tracked and continue to track.

How did you start this journey?

I did nuclear physics for my master's. Then I joined an international studies programme in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. This was back in 1974, which happened to be the year India tested a nuclear device, and my department happened to study issues like arms control and disarmament.

For me, it was quite a revelation to deal with the world of politics, as opposed to the world of academic science. India made the claim that its nuclear test was peaceful, even though everybody in the world thought India was being crazy. That said, a lot of Indian decision-makers genuinely believed that story about a peaceful test, having been brought up with this ideology of peace and disarmament. But the underlying strategic logic for why India needed to acquire nuclear weapons was also clearly there too. And that was my first encounter with real world foreign policy, and one that took me to the heart of Cold War international relations.

How did your time at Jawaharlal Nehru University affect your thinking?

I was living in a university where Marxism was rampant. And not just one kind of Marxism either. It was every possible school, from classical communists to Maoists and Trotskyites. And all these people were obsessed with international debates on the left, so you had people who knew more about what was happening in the British Trotskyite party than in India. So all this mix

of science, international politics and Marxist thinking gave me a quite unusual perspective on the world.

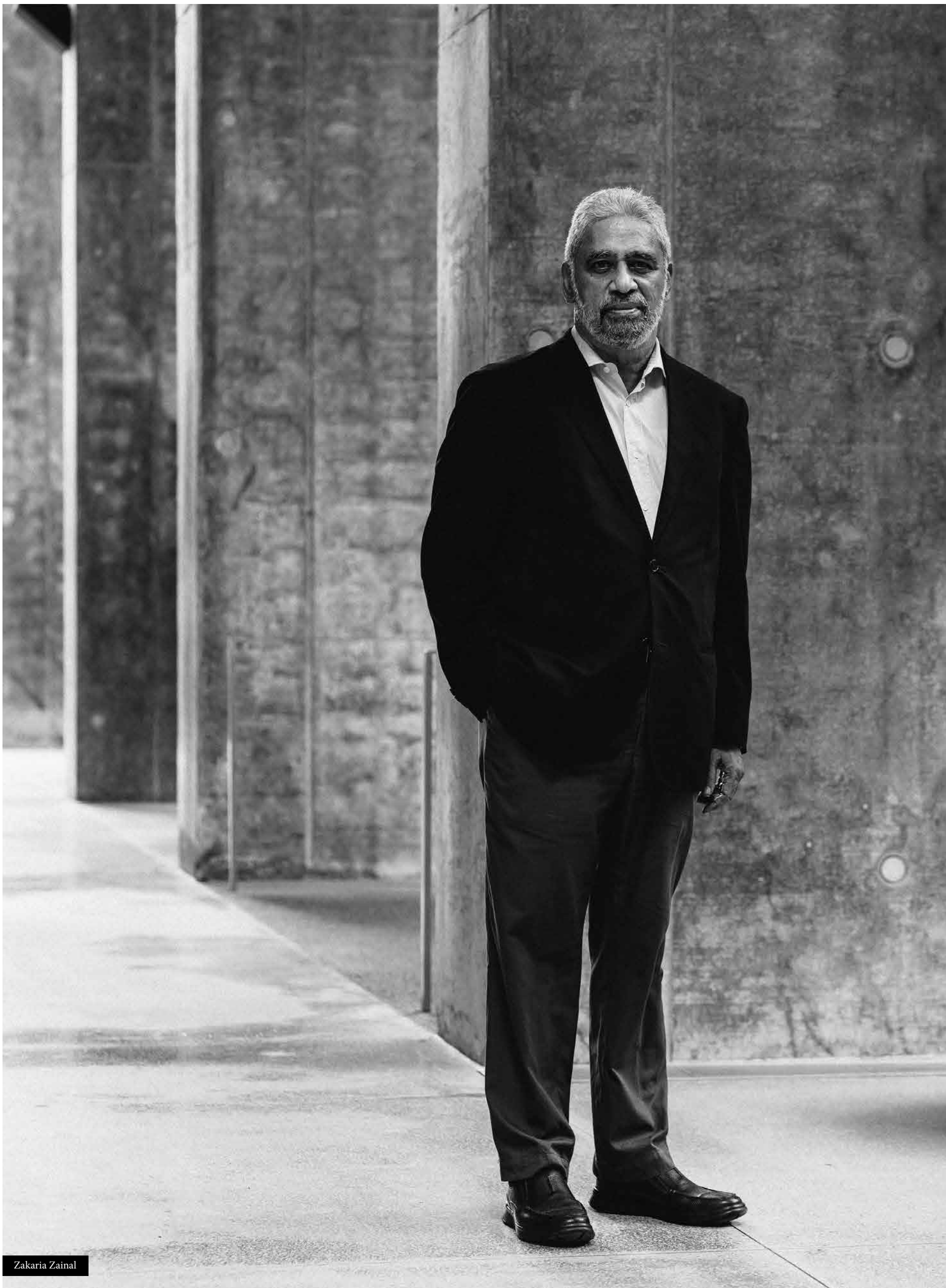
I broke from the left by the time I was thirty, but retained the deep structural analysis that Marxism offers. I have also learnt to balance the liberal instincts to build a better world with a realist perspective on the challenges of change. I try to learn from the work realists like Reinhold Niebuhr, E.H. Carr and Raymond Aron and historians like Mark Mazower while digging deep into the ethical realism of the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata* that has so much to offer on war, peace and statecraft.

Many know you as a columnist and journalist. How did you transition from researcher to writer?

My first job was at one of the first defence think tanks in Asia. And while I was there, I got this regular writing slot for the *Hindu*, one of India's best newspapers. I started writing initially on nuclear and arms control issues. But then I moved on to broader subjects: US-China relations, US-Russia relations, India's role in the world and so on. And then one day they said: 'Would you like to go to Washington and report?' Now at the time I was not a reporter, I was just an academic. So I thought that was a big chance. And I went to Washington, which was not just a great place in the early nineties, but also a triumphal empire.

You are often viewed as an Atlanticist in India, meaning you back closer ties with both America and Europe. Did that start then?

No, I didn't start out as an Atlanticist, or even as especially pro-American. The tradition in JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University] was to be anti-American, to say: 'Look, these guys are warmongers.' Meanwhile Russia was the underdog, fighting back for peace, blah, blah, blah. But once the Soviet Union collapsed, you had to deal with that. How come the good guys lost? Washington for me dispelled the impression that the US is an evil empire. Actually, I found that in DC it was mostly chaos, with a policy system that was deeply disaggregated, with multiple contending schools of thought. So this opened my eyes to show America as a complex world within itself.



Zakaria Zainal

Tell us about your book, *Crossing the Rubicon*, which was published in 2003.

I came back to India in 1995 to become the paper's diplomatic editor. By that time, I could talk to government ministers, and so I got a ringside view. India was recalibrating its foreign policy. The Soviet Union had collapsed. The US was the sole superpower. In the past many in India really thought the US was stupid and imperialistic. But my book was about the end of that, as India began to engage with the world and with the West in particular.

This had three essential components. One was a shift from a state-led socialist economy. The second was to reconnect with the West. And the third was changing India's terms of reference to the world, from an ideology of non-alignment or anti-imperialism to one that had more pragmatic terms grounded in self-interest. I asked how can India take advantage of this new world? Because remember, India was broke in '91, and its process of economic reforms began following a period of financial crisis. So my question was: 'Do we need a new framework to deal with this world, rather than the one we inherited after independence?'

The theme of India's changing approach runs through all your books. But are you writing about a change that is already happening? Or are you making an argument about where India *should* go?

A lot of people ask me that. I suppose I mix both. As a reporter, you see how India was dealing with these issues, and you write about that. But simultaneously you can engage with the policymakers and say: 'Look, can we do more change? Can we explore a peace process with Pakistan? Can we do more with the Americans?'

In *Crossing the Rubicon* you described India as a porcupine that was once prickly and defensive, but then said that it was becoming more like a tiger. Do you think that description still stands?

The porcupine mentality of being defensive was so ingrained in the Indian psyche. Shedding that was a fight. It didn't happen overnight. There were still those on the left who said we can't trust the Americans. But look back to where we were in 1991 and where we are today. It's exactly thirty years later, and the change is real and dramatic. To be honest, I thought people would accept that change was needed far more quickly. So perhaps I did underestimate the resistance to change.

You have been part of a pro-American vanguard in India. But your next book, *Impossible Allies*, released in 2006, discussed nuclear tensions between India and the US.

The nuclear issue became the pivot on which India turned. We conducted a series of nuclear weapon tests in 1998. The Americans were pissed off. But then in 2000 President Clinton became the first president to visit India in a long time. So our nuclear tests opened the door for the first intensive strategic conversation between Delhi and Washington. Clinton came as a gesture, mostly to say to us, 'Let's start afresh.' And it was then people began talking about ties between the world's two largest democracies and so on. So I think that second book captures the American arguments for rethinking and improving its Indian relationship.

While Mohan's early career dealt with ties with the US, recent years have had a different focus: China. In 2012 he wrote *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*, a book published for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an American think tank whose India office he led at the time.

Long before the term Indo-Pacific entered common use, Mohan examined the implications of China and India once again becoming major maritime powers in Asia. As both nations grew economically, both were sure to think more broadly about their security interests, he suggested, in turn looking to expand their maritime

power across the vast stretches of ocean that link Africa to Australasia.

Behind this lay a still bigger strategic shift. Traditionally India had conceived of Pakistan as its primary security rival, and worried more about tangling with China along the length of its 3,500 kilometre land border. But beginning with a story drawn from Hindu mythology—entitled *Samudra Manthan*, meaning 'to churn the ocean'—Mohan argued that this new Sino-Indian contest at sea was now his nation's premier security challenge, and one for which in many ways it was not well prepared.

***Samudra Manthan* changed your focus from the US to China. What explained that shift?**

By that time it was becoming clear that China had a strategy to move into the Indian Ocean, as opposed merely to pushing forward with economic reforms. So instinctively I thought: 'Look, there is something big going on here.' The question of how China's maritime rise affects India was significant. They were beginning to come into Sri Lanka. They were doing things in Myanmar. And then I happened to move to Singapore for the first time between 2007 and 2009, where you could see the emergence of the Chinese navy quite clearly. A rising China was already clear. But the question was what kind of China will it be, and what will that mean for India.

You are often seen as quite hawkish on China. Is that where you started out?

No, originally, I was not anti-China at all. I still travelled to China often in the 1990s. Indeed, the Chinese were quite fond of me. For many years I was never critical of them. I was some kind of ex-Marxist, so I had a sense of their history and a sensibility for their politics. The idea at the time with Sino-Indian ties was still that we could work together. We thought both of us could rise together, and that there would be no conflict.

But all that started falling apart from 2008, after the global financial crisis, which is also about the time the US-China relationship also turned down. The Chinese began to think that they had arrived. And because of this, they did not have to make nice with India. And as that reality begins to hit, the question of dealing with Chinese power suddenly becomes a central question in Indian foreign policy. But it's not that they are good or bad. It is that they are a rising power and we have to be prepared, given they are now strong.

In 2014, Narendra Modi arrived as India's prime minister. You published *Modi's World* in 2015. What kind of foreign policy figure has he turned out to be?

Under Manmohan Singh as prime minister, India's geopolitical ambivalence came back to full force. You had India's biggest moment with 9 per cent growth in the late 2000s. Around the world, everybody, especially the US, was falling over themselves to be nice to India. But the government at that time was like a deer caught in the headlights. The left and the Congress leadership said: 'Look, don't get too close to the Americans.' And the government didn't have the gumption to accept what was being presented to it on a platter, namely building better ties with Washington. And then Modi comes along and he's ready to seize all this without any hesitation. So in that sense Modi was a strong leader with a capacity to take bold decisions and discard a lot of the inherited baggage. His willingness to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy has helped galvanise India's international relations.

Many in the west are supportive of Modi geopolitically, but anxious about his illiberalism domestically, as he moves India to become more of a Hindu majority state. How do you think about this tension?

Yes, there are major concerns about India's domestic political trajectory. The Western discourse is, in fact, an amplification of India's intense internal debate about that direction. Insofar as the West goes, it is unlikely to abandon Modi at this stage because of the worries

about Indian democracy; there is far too much riding on the partnership with India. As regards India's internal evolution, a lot of chatter about the demise of Indian democracy is simply off the mark. Neither Modi nor the BJP, I believe, can override the essential feature of Indian society, namely enormous diversity of religion, language, caste and region. Modi's appeal to Hindu nationalism has been successful so far; there is nothing to suggest it is entrenched and irreversible. State elections across the country through Modi's time as PM have shown that mobilising Hindu nationalism is not enough to extend the BJP's sway across all of India. So I believe there is nothing wrong with Indian democracy that can't be fixed by what is right with Indian democracy. This diversity has a big impact on electoral politics, and it will eventually nudge the political classes towards coalition building and governance from the centre, rather than the political extreme.

You are moving back to India soon. What are you looking forward to intellectually about being back in New Delhi?

When Indians talk about Asia, there is often not much engagement. My last four years in Singapore have helped to give me a full sense of the larger regional dynamic that is unfolding, and how that all links to policy in the US, in China and in Europe. So what's coming next will be an exciting period. My challenge will be to consolidate the way I have been thinking about foreign policy. I'm not going to be around forever, so my plan is first to write a new book looking at India's developing role in Asia's security sphere. And then my plan is to develop a bigger work looking at the neocolonial politics of India, something that could capture, in a much more detached sense, the core geopolitical imperatives that drive Indian foreign policy. So that's my next big project.

Overall, how do you describe your approach to geopolitics?

I'm one of those guys who says that Newton's laws of gravity are natural and you can't argue with them. There are similar laws for how states behave. Each state looks to its own interests. Understanding this is what it means to be a realist. But each country also has its own traditions and culture. So diplomatic style can change. In one sense India's problem is that we have abandoned our own realist tradition and we need to re-find it. Thankfully you can find that realism everywhere, whether it's looking at the Peloponnesian War, or the Chinese warring states period, or India's own ancient history. In all of these periods there were fights, diplomacy and statecraft. So gradually the point is, I think, India is rediscovering its own realist tradition, and that's a good thing.

Looking to the future, what kind of great power will India become?

That's the big question. Oddly, in the 1950s India did think in very grand terms about what it wanted to do in the world, albeit at that time when its income was only around \$100 per capita. India today needs to think in similar grand terms. One priority is to integrate its own region economically, for instance, by overcoming the long divisions of partition with Pakistan, because to be a great power you need to have stability in your own backyard.

Second, we've got to think of a more balanced Asia, given China, and that can only be done in partnership with the West. It's not that we can isolate China. Indeed, we shouldn't want to isolate China. So the big thing is, can we create a structure that works for everyone in Asia, where there is a new balance of power that is sustainable? So India needs to move from a kind of idealist internationalism to a new pragmatic multilateralism, in which we don't simply say that this or that is a problem, but are actually part of the solution. □

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