Interview – Sreeram Chaulia

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 22 2024

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

As a discipline, International Relations (IR) has always followed the empirical trail. The most exciting debates will always be in response to changing global events and circumstances. I think the biggest question is about the current stage of global power configuration – is it bipolar, multipolar, or nascent multipolar? These questions and debates are not new, but in times of power transition, they are most significant. If we say we are moving towards a multipolar world order, then what would this order be like – stable, violent, or disruptive? Power transition is certainly one of the main issues. The huge gaps that existed in the unipolar and bipolar eras may dissolve into something very competitive and a conflict-prone world. Organski and others wrote about it long ago, but the speed of change in the real world today is tremendous. This is where the most fascinating debates are.

If you read works from ten years ago, they seem so outdated today. This just reflects empirical reality and how it is running far ahead of scholarship and theory. We need to make sense of this change and transition. We are used to thinking in terms of what is called a 'post-Cold War era.' In my assessment, that is over. We are in a new era. Defining that new era, its contours, and this more populated space of major powers will force us, in the scholarly world, to rethink our assumptions. The categories of great, middle, and small powers may require significant revision. Then there is also the issue of power diffusion – who is going to build a different world order? Who will take the lead? There has already been a lot of debate about the liberal international order mainly by Western scholars because they are highly worried and anxious that it is collapsing or has already collapsed. What will replace it? All these I think are the defining questions of our time.

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

I think it is not just me but the entire scholarly community coming to grips with the fact that the rise of China has been a fundamentally game-changing development. Just ten years ago, China would still be bracketed as one of the emerging or rising powers, if not a middle power. For a long time, it was even called a middle power. But now there is a universal consensus that it is already a great power. This singular development, in many ways, is restructuring or reordering the world. I have been following quite closely, what this means for India's neighbourhood and spaces in

Asia – which is of course China's prime domain – but also elsewhere in the world (for example, the Global South). The potential for great power war or regional wars fueled by US-China competition (or 'extreme competition' as U.S. President Joe Biden calls it) is a pertinent issue. One has to look at great powers and what they are doing. A lot of people resent IR literature for being great power-centric. But their role is absolutely critical; they throw their weight around, intervene in many parts of the world, and exacerbate (if not create fresh) rivalries. It is crucial that we study their behaviour and competition.

I would not have thought of China's rise as such a primary concern ten years ago. In those days, we were still discussing the soft balancing of all rising powers against US hegemony. But now the situation is much more complex. For many countries in the Indo-Pacific, balancing is against China, not against the US anymore. There was a time when many of us from the Global South considered US Dollar dominance or American interference in different regions of the world and its wars to be the foremost global issue. But we have increasingly moved in other directions, because of the tectonic shifts linked to China's rise.

Has the field of strategic studies become stagnant with little innovative thinking?

The era of wars is back. Strategic studies, as we have known it since the end of the Cold War, will have to adjust. The outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia War, the Israel-Hamas War, the Armenia-Azerbaijan War, and numerous other long-simmering armed conflicts in various parts of the world, including the Middle East/West Asia and Africa, is in some ways unanticipated as the prevailing notion was that countries could somehow avoid resorting to war or the use of force. The field of strategic studies was mostly based on the ideas of deterrence, containment, counterbalancing, etc. But what was not anticipated was that these concepts and ideas would break down, and we would go back to the era of territorial conquest, war, and occupation. We are adjusting to this new era of much sharper-edged international relations than was the case even five or ten years ago. The assumption that wars are becoming rarer, and we are entering some kind of long peace has been shattered. Strategic studies will have to come up with a different set of paradigms as to what can mitigate these war-like conditions. If we are returning to a kind of Hobbesian world – *Bellum omnium contra omnes* ('war of all against all') – it benefits no one.

In summary, Strategic studies needs to catch up and come up with new paradigms to: (a) make sense of this new era of wars, and (b) think about how we can achieve some general strategic stability or co-existence that will ensure no return to large-scale conflicts or war.

Can you provide insights into your upcoming book on India's strategic partnerships? Given that the term 'strategic partnership' is used broadly by governments these days, what distinguishes India's approach?

My last book, *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi's National Security Crises*, was about India's adversaries, mainly China and Pakistan, and how India has evolved in its strategic culture to take on this two-front challenge. The emphasis was on the evolution of India's approach to national security vis-à-vis these two adversaries. I have now completed writing a new book titled, *Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners* (Rupa Publications, forthcoming). The book addresses the following questions: Why does India cooperate with certain countries at a profound and advanced level? What does that tell us about the kind of power India is? Why are these countries interested in India? What do they find valuable in pursuing this partnership? How are these partnerships shaping the strategic environment?

This book covers seven case studies of what I consider to be India's most consequential strategic partnerships. It is released in October 2024. The idea is to break out of the mould of being a specialist on only one country, region, or bilateral relationship. A lot of people spend their whole lives studying one partnership. This is because they conduct in-depth ethnographic research/studies on these bilateral relationships. This book, however, brings all of them in one place. The book is intended as a window to understanding India's grand strategy and statecraft through the study of these seven bilateral strategic partnerships. I am also making the case that middle powers have been mostly associated with multilateralism, which is seen as their main vehicle for status enhancement. What I am arguing here is that rising powers differ somewhat from middle powers, focusing more on bilateral strategic partnerships. It has become fashionable to focus on multilateral diplomacy because it is seen as the right format or means for middle or rising powers to do well. But we cannot disregard the bilateral. So, in theoretical terms, I am trying to bring

bilateralism back into the center-stage of IR, and this is in keeping with the empirical shift to sharper-edged international relations that we are seeing in the real-world.

As to India's distinct approach, my book compares it to the models of strategic partnerships of U.S. and China. My main finding is that structure matters. India's position as a rising power in the current transitory world order determines its approach to strategic partnerships. Unlike China and the US, which are already accepted as great powers, India is a 'would-be great power'. Therefore, its friendships have a different purpose, tenor, and character, which are analysed in-depth in my book.

Could you provide examples of successful strategic partnerships and the key factors contributing to their success?

Globally, the Russia-China strategic partnership stands out. It is not an alliance, but a very special strategic partnership. There was a time when most of the scholarship and commentariat was skeptical about this partnership. A common observation was that surely the sky is the limit, but they have a lot of mutual suspicions. But now, especially since the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia war and the increasing China-US global strategic competition, Russia and China have come far closer than they ever were in their history. They have managed to breach mutual suspicions and combine forces against the US and Europe. It is a classic non-western strategic partnership that seems to be growing as we speak.

There are many others worth mentioning. For example, Australia-India, by wide consensus, is the fastest-growing strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific. This is unique and recent, something that happened in the last ten to fifteen years or so. Again, it is worth analysing why this has happened. A simplistic explanation could be that both are now aligned toward the US, so they are coming together. But actually, they have their own logic and rationale for this, as middle or rising powers. In the Middle East/West Asia, you have Israel-Saudi Arabia. They have not had formal diplomatic relations but the level of coordination between their intelligence, military, security apparatus, and the business community is tremendous. It is a strategic partnership, in all but name. If you look deeper, the need for strategic partnerships is not necessarily because of what is referred to as the 'quasi-ally' status – "We both are US allies, so therefore, I and you should get together and get along well" – but that is not the case. In fact, they are trying to wean away from overdependence on the US, and in my research, I find this to be the reason why they are so keen on strategic partnerships. Even the US, the biggest alliance-builder in the world, is resorting to strategic partnerships.

Some very interesting partnerships have sprung up lately which deserve attention. The most interesting ones are counterintuitive, surprising, or the ones breaking the mould, especially those which overcome historical baggage. For example, US-Vietnam. In 2023, they upgraded their ties from 'comprehensive partnership' to 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. These types of friendships deserve closer scrutiny because they show change over time, from a period when the relationship was negative or hostile to now, when they have become close partners.

Could you discuss the specific research methodologies or unique approaches you've employed that have proven to be effective in gaining deeper insights or promoting innovative thinking regarding strategic partnerships?

You must study these partnerships closely but not so much that you get lost in the details. Many scholars focus on individual strategic partnerships, and they keep on writing about them. We do need that kind of work (which is of a more anthropological style where you are looking at one case study in greater detail) as broader studies draw on it. But then, we need to look at this as a phenomenon (to not miss the forest for the tree!) and compare one set of partnerships with other sets or dyads – the good old comparative method! In scrutinizing these dyadic pairings, it is essential to persistently examine their similarities and differences. Only through such a detailed analysis can one attain a more analytically rigorous assessment of the significance of these partnerships. It is important to look deeper but only up to a point. In my view, what holds greater significance is to have a number of diverse cases for thorough comparison and contrast. The comparative method stands out as consistently superior. Within our field, ideological rigidity is rampant – individuals align themselves with a specific camp or theoretical tradition – "I belong to this camp, and I will only try to justify/defend my theory." I propose that one must be agnostic, focusing on empirical evidence

and data, conducting comprehensive comparative analyses, and drawing conclusions based on testing of hypothesis.

You host a national television show, *Indian Diplomacy*, covering India's international affairs. What drives the show's approach, and how does it contribute to raising awareness about India's role in global affairs, particularly among the younger generation? Are there any particularly memorable moments and experiences from your time on?

Being in academia for over fifteen years, what I have realised is that the audience we write or talk for is quite limited. I might not be far off in suggesting that the global scholarly community in IR, including academics, thinkers, and students, likely consists of a relatively small number, perhaps no more than a few tens of thousands of individuals on our planet. What I am doing through this TV show is to cater to general audiences that are more interested in world affairs and international current affairs and do not want to grapple with the theoretical jargon of either Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, or Constructivism. These are people who just want to understand why the world is going in a particular direction and what lies in store. Engaging with the wider public is one of the motivations for me for doing this show. Also, for the past fifteen years parallel to my academic writings, I have been writing opinion columns in newspapers and magazines, including in Hindi (which is the largest spoken native language in India). In a way, I already have a wider audience beyond the IR community and strategic elites. So, the TV show is meant to further expand that and to present an Indian viewpoint on international affairs which is often missing in the audio-visual format. It is an attempt at a soft power experiment. I have already completed more than eighty episodes as of April 2024.

The idea is to engage both Indian and international thinkers and policymakers, have them talk about the most happening issues of our time, and build public opinion favourable to India's rise. The platform we work on, 'Doordarshan', is the national broadcaster of India, and the show is part of the Government of India's efforts to mould national and international public opinion. We are still working on broadening our audience, especially online, as live TV audiences are falling all over the world. We specifically aim to engage the younger generation, fostering their interest in foreign affairs – something not naturally prioritized in the discourse of a developing country like India. Often, discussions in the news media are heavily domestic-focused, with strong opinions on internal politics. However, there's a lack of awareness about India's international engagements, strategic partnerships, global stances, involvement in building institutions, and more. The Indian G20 presidency contributed to a heightened interest in world affairs in India. My show is an effort to get more Indians to think about world affairs and more people around the world to appreciate what India is doing. Unlike in the US, where shows like *Fareed Zakaria GPS* have been hugely successful, in India, it is taking time for us to get traction and mass viewership. This is my simple and honest effort towards that.

As for the memorable moments and experiences, hosting VIPs and major policymakers is always worthy of cherishing. Presidents, Vice Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, and other senior political figures of countries always make a more lasting impression because they are catering to larger audiences. Their reference point is not a small set of people in an ivory tower, but they are trying to engage with the wider public. There is much to learn from hosting these people, not just in terms of their personal characteristics and traits but also in how they package and deliver their messages. It is an important lesson in public diplomacy. For example, hosting India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on the show, as well as the Vice President of the Dominican Republic Raquel Peña de Antuña, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (equivalent to the rank of Foreign Minister) of the Philippines Enrique Manalo, Panama's Foreign Minister Janaina Tewaney Mencomo and several other such distinguished practitioners has been particularly memorable. This is something both I and, I believe, the wider public look forward to. They are quite used to talking heads who are only analysts or academics, and they like to know from wielders of power or those who design and implement policy – from the horse's mouth so to speak. These are the most memorable moments and I hope to carry on with them.

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

Follow the evidence! That is most important. As mentioned earlier, do not get straight-jacketed into theoretical

camps. Be eclectic and open-minded. Look at all possible dimensions, compare and contrast, and do not be wedded to any one theory or paradigm. Often our senior scholars indoctrinate the younger scholars to stick to a particular theory or school of thought. I have never been a part of any single school of thought. If at all you can identify a running theme in my scholarship, it is to get a deeper insight into phenomena and explain them. The idea is that scholars instead of being pigeonholed into one category should produce a variety of works and show openness to following the evidence and make an informed judgement based on that. I think that is why, especially at the Ph.D. level, IR students must always do comparative politics as it is much more open-minded about theories. You do not have to belong to a certain camp and keep on pushing the company line for the rest of your life. IR scholars must benefit more from comparative politics.

Another piece of advice is to avoid ideological rigidity. I do not know if I can be branded as left or right-wing. Some of my books have been critiques of the global capitalist order and the unfair international system that is loaded against developing countries. Other books have been about foreign policy and national security, focusing on India's rise. If you were to assess my career, I am probably right-wing in the sense of being an Indian nationalist, but I am also a leftist in the sense that I want a revision of the existing international order which I consider unfair. I am not a status quoist, I stand for a change to a more democratic world order.

Lastly, keep referring to empirical reality when engaging with theory. Sometimes I find that scholars become very abstract and lost in their world. There is so much phraseology, jargon, and competition to sound the most complex. What that does is take you away from the concerns of the real world. Ultimately, what is this discipline for? Is it to problematize phenomena only or is it to help you understand what is happening, has happened, or will happen? The ultimate goal is not to uphold a theory but to help fill the gaps between existing knowledge and to help people think about the way the world is and the way it ought to be.