

Interview – Shivshankar Menon

Written by E-International Relations

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Shivshankar Menon is a Distinguished Fellow at CSEP and a Visiting Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University. His long career in public service spans diplomacy, national security, atomic energy, disarmament policy, and India's relations with its neighbours and major global powers. Menon served as national security advisor to the Indian Prime Minister from 2010 to 2014, as Foreign Secretary from 2006 to 2009, and as Ambassador and High Commissioner of India to Israel, Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan from 1995 to 2006. Menon has also served as a member of India's Atomic Energy Commission and in India's missions to the International Atomic Energy Agency and to the United Nations. He has been a Distinguished Fellow with Brookings India, a Richard Wilhelm Fellow at the Center for International Studies, MIT, and a Fisher Family Fellow at the Belfer Center, Harvard University. He currently serves as chairman of the advisory board of the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi. He is the author of *Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy*, published by the Brookings Press and Penguin Random House in 2016. His new book, *India and Asian Geopolitics; The Past, Present*, was published in 2021. In 2010, he was chosen by Foreign Policy magazine as one of the world's "Top 100 Global Thinkers."

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

For me, the most exciting development is the emergence of young scholars studying the Indian experience, particularly of foreign and security policy, who are strong in the discipline of IR. They are methodologically coherent, and I see the beginnings of a truly global IR in terms of alternate ways of seeing problems. Ultimately, I would hope that this will result in an Indian school of IR emerging which contributes to globalising the discipline.

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

In retrospect, I feel that my understanding of the world was rather limited to begin with. I belong to the post-war generation who came of political age in the sixties, a time of radical political, technological, and social change in India. We were characterised by the strongly held opinions and convictions of youth. Our understanding of the world was shaped by Cold War bipolarity and the linearity of thinking that imposed even on the non-aligned. But that soon changed for me. The practice of being an Indian diplomat, dealing with China and nuclear issues broadened my thinking, as did our increasing agency in the international system, the rapid end of the Cold War, and India's transformation after 1991. All these forced us to revisit our assumptions and find more sophisticated explanations. Intellectually, while we were brought up on a rich diet, from Morgenthau to Nehru, I found E.H. Carr and the critical reading of classical texts (like the Mahabharata and Arthashastra) stimulating. Today, I would classify myself as a reluctant realist—more agnostic and open to multiple points of view than ever before.

What role does the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) play in advancing China's economic and soft power interests in South Asia? Has it had any adverse effects on India's aspirations for expansion in its neighbouring countries?

The BRI plays a very considerable role in advancing China's interests. It plays to China's strengths, which are economic, where it is not really matched by any other power in the subcontinent. Nor do outside powers prioritise countervailing China's growing influence in the subcontinent. By committing over US\$ 100 billion to BRI projects in

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the subcontinent, China has made herself indispensable to the infrastructure and economic plans of the leaders of several countries in the subcontinent. At the same time, the examples of Pakistan and Sri Lanka suggest that one should be cautious in drawing the conclusion that this automatically translates into political influence over a country's foreign policy, popularity, or into soft power. The attractiveness of the Chinese model or way of doing things is still rather limited, as is their power of attraction. This is still a work in progress and the Chinese leadership has often spoken of the need for China to gain soft power. So, its impact on India's relations with these countries has not, to my mind, yet peaked. India has other affinities and common interests with our neighbours that China cannot match that I think we should concentrate on, rather than trying to match or imitate China.

In your recent book *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*, you suggest that China will not “behave as Western powers have”. What makes Chinese ascendancy so distinct, and what does that say about the nature of the world order?

The Chinese are very conscious of their own political and strategic tradition. They, particularly their present leadership, see the last 150 years as a historical aberration, a “century of humiliation” is what they call it. It is an aberration in their mind from an imagined past when China was the preeminent power in the world, the largest economy, a technological leader, and so on. Objective historians and non-Chinese might have their own, different view of the past, but it is this perspective and the quest for primacy it produces that seems to drive China's international behaviour now. China's is a different strategic culture from that of the two previous global superpowers, Great Britain and the USA. Besides, China's geography, history, resource endowment and dependencies on the world are different from those western powers. Hence my sense is that they will not behave as western powers have. Today, China is yet to be a global superpower, and it is difficult to predict whether she will succeed in this quest, which is facing resistance.

In an article published in *The Print*, you critique the system of national boundaries, saying that South Asia has “old nations in new states”. What are the limitations of these boundaries, and what impact might their reconstitution have on geopolitics as we know it?

The idea of hard linear boundaries is a relatively recent one in history, a feature of the Westphalian state that has acquired popular legitimacy with the rise of nationalism. For most of history, borders, as opposed to linear boundaries, were zones of interaction and communities straddled these borders, while trading, traveling, and carrying on the normal business of life across these porous borders. With the evolution of India and its neighbours into modern Westphalian states in the second half of the 21st century, and the partitioning of the subcontinent into post-colonial states, hard boundaries were imposed on ancient communities and nations which did not coincide with natural features or ethnic divisions or with their patterns of life. This is why border zones in most of our countries have been unstable and increasingly securitised by the state, with unfortunate consequences for the inhabitants. The most extreme example of this phenomenon is Pakistan. But I do believe that there are political and economic solutions to these issues which are increasingly being practised by the other countries in the subcontinent, such as India and Bangladesh.

Having been the former National Security Advisor (NSA) of India, you played a key role in drafting India's foreign policy from 2010-14. What was the biggest challenge for India in the last decade, and how adequate was its response?

The biggest challenge in the last decade and a half was the fact that the international environment became less supportive of our efforts to transform India, particularly after the global economic crisis that began in 2007-8. The rise of China and the growth of China-US strategic rivalry changed the situation, opening new opportunities for India-US relations but also creating challenges in our neighbourhood and on the India-China border where China has been changing the status quo. China has emerged unequivocally as our greatest strategic challenge but is also our greatest trading partner. We now face a complex set of relationships with all our neighbours and the major powers in a world that is adrift between orders.

***Tianxia* (literally ‘all under Heaven’) refers to a world order informed by Chinese culture, morals and**

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ethics, which was significant before China's engagements with the rest of the world pre-19th century. How does this notion inform China's relations with its neighbours?

I am suspicious of single-point explanations for state behaviour. *Tianxia* can only be one factor influencing Chinese thinking. In any case there is no going back to the past, particularly one as idealised as China's is, or to the idea of *tianxia*. But I think that the sinocentric approach embodied in *tianxia*, of China as *zhongguo*, the middle kingdom, certainly does play a role in Chinese thinking on world affairs.

What are the key security challenges facing Indo-Sino relations post-pandemic?

The first is the border, which is now live all along the Line of Actual Control as a result of China's actions since spring 2020. By its actions, China has cast doubt on the agreements, confidence building measures, and understandings that kept the peace on the border, and the situation unchanged, for almost three decades. Chinese claims on our territory remain a security threat that we must cater for. There are other security issues which also concern us, such as China's military activity in the subcontinent, our periphery, and the Indian Ocean region. The uses she makes of a port like Gwadar, which seems economically unviable, are potential worries. So is China's covert support to certain insurgent groups targeting our north-east. If the political relationship remains adversarial, cutting our economic dependencies on China would become a strategic necessity. To my mind, the two countries need to find a new paradigm for the relationship, or a new strategic framework, within which to manage or settle these issues and to take the relationship forward. In other words, the present situation calls for a fundamental reset of India-China relations.

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

Learn as much as you can, keep an open mind, and follow your interest or passion (and not today's fashion).