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India's New Minister of External Affairs on India's Position in a Polycentric World



Dr. Subrahmanyam JAISHANKAR, India's newly appointed Minister of External Affairs, spoke at the 6th stars Singapore symposium 2019 on "Geopolitical Perspectives: The New World (Dis)order" alongside senior representatives from the United States, China and Europe. In this exclusive interview for stars, Jaishankar explains why India takes a more assertive stance towards China's Belt and Road Initiative, how India's role is changing in the region and around the globe, and how its relationships with emerging and established powers will likely unfold. The interview was conducted by Christian VON LUEBKE, Professor for Southeast Asian Studies at HTWG Konstanz, Germany.

Christian VON LUEBKE: What is India's viewpoint on China's Belt and Road Initiative?

Subrahmanyam JAISHANKAR: I think there are multiple narratives on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese emphasize the benefits of connectivity and the provision of a global public good in an under-connected world. It is projected as a case of regional and international cooperation and shared interests. Some assert an underlying "commercial" narrative that the BRI allows China to redirect industrial excess capacities and seize business opportunities. But where there is concern in some quarters is that infrastructure projects can be utilized as dual-purpose facilities. There is also a belief that the BRI is a purely national initiative because business and employment opportunities accrue mostly to Chinese firms and workers. This debate includes issues of local ownership, transparency and public debt. The Chinese appear conscious of this and have responded publicly to many concerns. These are some of the key issues that have surfaced. Undoubtedly, there are different views on the outlined potentials and risks, but for India the BRI has a very unique angle. It involves a violation of national sovereignty, which is clearly not acceptable to any country.

How does the Indian government respond to these challenges?

India has historically objected to the construction of the Karakoram Highway. That very zone hosts the flagship project of the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC stretches across “Pakistan-occupied Kashmir” – a territory that neither Pakistan nor China claim to be part of their national territories. The only national sovereign claimant is India. On 13 May 2017, India’s Ministry of External Affairs has clearly stated its position and emphasized that connectivity initiatives should be based on international norms, good governance, and principles of transparency and equality. Future connectivity initiatives should be guided by principles of financial and environmental responsibility to avoid excessive public debt and ecological costs. Meanwhile, India is fostering its own connectivity programs: the “Act East” policy, that includes a Trilateral Highway interlinking India with Myanmar and Thailand; and the “Go West” strategy that involves numerous infrastructure linkages with Iran and other Central Asian partners.

To what extent has India’s foreign policy changed over the past years? What are future priorities?

Foreign policy is not an end in itself. Nations conduct foreign policy because they try to leverage the global environment as they seek to achieve domestic objectives. Considering its current state of development, India would benefit from an increased access to capital, technology, best practices, and international partnerships. Hence, much of today’s foreign policy is informed by these objectives. Meanwhile, India’s economy is the fifth largest in the world and it will continue to grow. Accordingly, India has more to contribute and will also seek to influence global debates. A key example of this growing stature in international affairs is the Paris Agreement on climate change, where the Indian contribution was key to attaining a constructive outcome. Another example is India’s enhanced commitment to disaster relief operations in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Thus, India is shouldering more responsibility, increasingly influencing global agendas, responding to growing global expectations, and seeking to develop national capacities by partnering with the world.

In what ways will Indian society and economy exert an influence on global affairs?

Today, India stands out as an effective democracy in the region – but also as a rule-based market economy and a multi-faith society with pluralistic characteristics. I think all of these achievements will resonate with global debates. At the same time, we are experiencing a rebalancing in the global power architecture and the ways we frame narratives. The dominance of the West is reducing. With the passage of time the importance of different and sometimes neglected cultures will attain greater recognition – including the contributions of India, both historical and current.

What are the prospects of regional cooperation in South Asia?

It is difficult to enhance regional cooperation without a sound foundation. The greatest challenge for South Asian regionalism have been Pakistan’s reservations on trade and connectivity with India. Today the largest cooperation responsibility is shouldered by India. We reach out to neighbouring countries, invest, and promote regionalism. Yet if regional organizations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), are to take off, we need the commitment of all members, including Pakistan. Less formalized trilateral or quadrilateral cooperation efforts can help – for example the BBIN initiative that interconnects Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Here, India can act as a lifting tide and provide economic impetus to neighbouring economies. Especially countries that have made prudent policy choices have done well recently. Bangladesh, for instance, has made great strides with promising social and economic trajectories.

How would you evaluate the role and impact of BRICS in today's geopolitical setting?

The BRICS group came about in an era when Western dominance was very strong and non-Western countries remained on the sidelines of international talks. In response, a select group of emerging countries established a platform for joint interests. I believe there is great merit in continuing these dialogues. There has been some criticism of the BRICS in the Western press. But I think that Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – each in their own right – have regional influence and growing responsibilities. Their cooperation has strengthened each other's position and BRICS has been characterized, by and large, by constructive policy meetings. India's role and position within BRICS has not changed significantly. We continue to work intensively with each of these countries. What has changed, however, is the geopolitical setting. We are moving towards a more polycentric world, where former Western alliances have less traction and new players enter the arena with diverse and often nationalistic interests. In view of these complex geopolitics, I believe BRICS will continue to play its role; not least because it allows for issue-based dialogues among key emerging countries.

How would you characterize India's future relationship with the United States?

In the short to medium term, I would predict a stronger India-US relationship. Over the next years, we may witness a still greater convergence of interests than before. This convergence is partly driven by geopolitics and domestic dynamics – but it also signals a change in national mindsets. If you were to ask US citizens about their attitudes and affinities to different Asian countries, India would receive relatively favourable scores. This India-US convergence does not preclude the strengthening of additional bilateral relationships with Asian or other emerging economies. A key feature, however, will be the rise of bilateral linkages and nationalist outlook.

*Since 31 May 2019, Dr. **Subrahmanyam JAISHANKAR** has been serving as Minister of External Affairs of the Government of India. From 2018-2019, he was President of Global Corporate Affairs at Tata Sons Private Limited. Jaishankar has served more than four decades in various diplomatic positions, including as Foreign Secretary of India (2015-2018), Ambassador of India to the United States (2013-2015) and China (2009-2013) and as High Commissioner to Singapore (2007-2009). Jaishankar played a key role in negotiating the Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement and was the Press Secretary to the President of India.*

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