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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with insightful speakers, The Insight Bureau was in conversation with Professor Chilamkuri Raja Mohan with the Institute of South Asian Studies, on how India and the region will likely to respond to current geopolitical events.



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**Andrew Vine:** Hello, and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, the founder and CEO of The Insight Bureau, and today, I'm in conversation with Professor Raja Mohan. Welcome to Singapore again.

**C Raja Mohan:** Thank you, Andrew. Nice to be here with you.

**AV:** Very nice to see you. Well, you're no stranger to Singapore. You are a Visiting Research Professor with the Institute of South Asian Studies. You're also a Distinguished Fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute and, of course, a leading commentator on India and the South Asia region. That's why we wanted to have a conversation together. Welcome. You used to be the director of this institute. What's your reason for being in Singapore this week?

**RM:** The visiting affiliation keeps bringing me to National University of Singapore and the Institute of South Asian Studies. So I still write for them, and work with them on their projects and programmes. Singapore, as you know, is some kind of an informal capital of Asia, so being here keeps my Asian connections alive.

**AV:** Indeed, I've always found that Singapore has that special place of taking attention to what's happening in South Asia. When you're in Hong Kong, it's all too much to do with China ...

**RM:** ... yes, Hong Kong was once-- as you know, it was under the British India. So, there is a lot of India left in Hong Kong. So if you go to the Hong Kong Press Club, you still see the Indian menu at the bar!

**AV:** Well, here we are today, and the big news is of Donald Trump's reemergence. He's going to be in the White House from January, but already getting cracking with his administration in waiting. A great time to ask you what we think the impact is going to be. And indeed, I read the other day your article for the Indian Express -- you write for The Indian Express and Foreign Policy, amongst others -- you entitled it "India, Trump, and Crisis in Multilateralism."

**RM:** I think much of the world underestimated the kind of fundamental revolution, if you will, that he's sought to bring to the United States. Because most of us dismiss him because all of us view through the liberal filter, but if you just step back and see what he has done in the last 10 years, he's changed the Republican Party from a party in support of globalization, a party in favour of immigration, and a party in favour of global engagement, to one that is opposed to globalization. It is opposed to immigration. It is opposed to expansive American international role.

**RM:** So I think now, coming back a second time, and I think he's going to go full steam with this agenda to implement his attempt to deconstruct globalization, which he thinks has worked badly for the Americans, American working people. So things like WTO and other trading arrangements, he's going to go with a real hammer and tongs at that system, and essentially targeting China as well. Second, I think, on immigration, there's going to be a lot of focus on ending illegal immigration or throwing out illegal migrants, while at the same time, he talks about facilitating legal immigration because the US industry needs technical talent.

**RM:** And third, on the global role, as he says, look, he doesn't want to fight wars -- which he accuses the Democrats and the liberals of doing it -- he wants to end wars and see a more restrained US role in the international system as opposed to this, "We are everywhere. We'll solve every problem," to one, formerly focused on power, and fix things when somebody attacks you, but avoid getting into prolonged wars around the world.

**AV:** Underlying here, you hinted at the fact that for many of the multilateral organizations we may have seen a kind of 'peak multilateralism' -- and they have been under pressure for a while anyway -- and it is right to reexamine whether these institutions are fit for purpose in 2025.

**RM:** Absolutely. I think, on the UN, as we know that, for a brief while after the Cold War, when Russia was friendly to America, China was too weak to challenge America, they seemed to sense the US and its allies could do what they wanted. But once Russia started asserting itself, China has risen, it's become much harder. So the UN Security Council is largely dysfunctional.

**RM:** A second element of the global multilateralism has been the WTO, the entry of China, which Americans fully backed and supported in 2001. So now, I think they regret that support to China's entry. They feel China has weaponized interdependence. So therefore, they're going to force a restructuring of the global trading rules. And on technology, and on climate change, they want to lift the restrictions so that the US capital, US technology sector can actually thrive.

**RM:** So there's a completely different approach to key issues of the world, and we're going to see that. And I don't think Trump bothers too much about the niceties of multilateralism. It is a focus on unilateralism, a focus on working in small coalitions, as opposed to trying to get 180 countries to agree on climate change, but actually force issues on the basis of your strength and your partners.

**AV:** And we know that Donald likes to think of himself as the dealmaker. We are really unsure of what he's going to do, so there's this level of uncertainty, but with that comes a kind of power to negotiate. And this might be a really good thing in terms of getting countries to really sit down and reexamine how they work together on trade, on technology etc. We hear a lot of news about the so-called 'techno war', where America wants to ensure it dominates and constrains China. How does India fit into all of this as well?

**RM:** First, let me say something about how Trump can actually help himself, the United States, as well as the world. Take, for example, the Ukraine war. He doesn't own the war. So he can say, "Look, the Democrats made mess of it." So, he can now force both Zelensky and Putin to come to a deal, starting from first principles, how you can apply pressure on both of them. Similarly, in Gaza, he's going to go full steam with the Israelis telling them that, "Look, it's time to move on." I believe Elon Musk has already met the Iranian ambassador in New York. So he can actually take a fresh look at all the major problems, and that gives him a chance to take a different approach. And being, as you said, a dealmaker, I mean, as he himself says, others are scared of him because he's unpredictable. So he's going to take full advantage of that.

**RM:** On the technology issue, I think what he has done is -- working with Musk and with other techno billionaires from Silicon Valley -- he's saying, lift the restrictions on US technology industry, where the Democrats had imposed too many regulatory constraints on the development of technology, and that he's going to make full steam to re-establish American dominance over the technology sector. And I think the Silicon Valley, Wall Street are quite enthused with it. So I think India will be quite enthusiastic to see how it can build this relationship. But of course, India has one problem on trade side; India is not very trade-friendly. Therefore, Trump is going to demand market access, demand reciprocity. If India is prepared for that, it can probably be one of the major beneficiaries of Trump's return to power.

**AV:** Also, with the world being much more multipolar, this is a kind of a balancing act.

**RM:** I agree with you on the balancing part, but I don't think it is multipolar in a real sense. Actually, what we've seen happen in the last decade is the rise of a lot of non-Western force, including China, has taken place. But they're rising at the expense of Europe and Japan. So the US itself has held a fairly solid share of the global GDP. And now, with China slowing down, the Eurozone falling behind, the US is going to actually be at the top of the heap for quite some time to come. And none of the other powers can fully compete, except China, to some extent.

**RM:** Therefore, I think the question is, everyone would want to keep the Americans in the good books or be in the good books of the United States but, at the same time, find ways to retain a measure of autonomy because US power actually is increasing. While this is not the popular trope, my sense is, under Trump, we're going to see a strong US asserting itself. So he would want to get into the line of fire and actually look for deals. I'm sure even Putin and Xi Jinping will look for -- if they can find a deal with Trump, they'll be quite happy to take it.

**AV:** And so when it comes to India -- and obviously you study the government's response to all of this very closely -- what would you say the priorities are for India right now to guarantee its good, strong growth rate at the moment? What are the priorities?

**RM:** Yes, I would say basically three priorities. I think for India Trump will build on the previous good relationship, which is at the personal level. I mean in India, Mr. Modi has had a good relationship. And Trump even now fondly recalls the big rallies that Modi had organized, one in India, one in the US actually -- in Houston where the Indian diaspora was mobilized; it was called the "Howdy Modi Rally" -- and Trump sees Modi as a strongman, who can get things done. That's one part. But at the same time, Trump when he refers to India and Modi, he says, "Tariff King!"

**RM:** India has to show that, look, it can't expect unilateral benefits from the relationship in the US. So it needs to actually offer some tangible benefits to Trump. So we're going to be tested for our capacity for give and take. Now I think we have to learn the art of deal-making with Trump.

**RM:** The third aspect, I think the foundation for a strategic partnership in terms of Asian balance of power, the creation of the Quad [the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue], the framing of the Indo-Pacific, was done under Trump. I think India had a good relationship with Biden as well, but India would expect the broader convergence on Asia will continue under Trump, given the focus on China and Asia that Trump is going to bring.

**RM:** And finally, I would say, on the technology sector, actually, there is going to be a lot of common ground that India is going to find. But there is some concern in India about immigration. But I think, for Indian technologists, everyone wants to be in the US. I think there's not enough understanding that Trump is talking about stopping *illegal* migration while facilitating legal migration. And then I think India with this technology pool will stand to benefit.

**AV:** We were comparing the opportunities for Indian entrepreneurs in the tech sector versus China and finding that the relationship with the States has been very healthy in terms of being able to collaborate, and have Silicon Valley as a base to launch and become the new unicorns. China unicorns are finding it tough in China; they're just going to the States themselves.

**RM:** Because if you go back 10 years ago, I mean, you had Silicon Valley and Wall Street venture capital so bullish about China's technology scene. And there was this happy convergence between US companies, tech companies, and the Chinese enterprise. I think Xi Jinping, by cracking down on the private sector, by cracking down on dissent, I think he's constricted space. And by embarking on, really, a challenge to American primacy, he's lost a lot of ground. My sense is the tech sector is one of the victims of assertive Chinese policy. But whether Xi Jinping has the capacity to rearrange, fix as part of a grand bargain with the Americans, it's always open. But at this point, the tech sector has now turned away from China. And if Trump is serious about imposing 60% tariff on Chinese goods and further squeezing China's technology sector, it'll be a hard time for the Chinese technology scene.

**AV:** We talk a lot about the rivalry between China and India. How do you characterize the relationship between China and India now?

**RM:** So India and China, actually, they began with the ambition to really work together, build a new Asia. I'm going back to the middle of the 20th century. But I think it's never been possible to build a common ground between Delhi and Beijing. Occasional periods of harmony, but most of the time, a low-intensity conflict between them. But now, I would say there's a serious crisis in the bilateral relationship. When the border has become more active, so there are frequent conflicts on the border. We had a series of conflicts: 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2020. And recently, of course, there was some agreement to diffuse some of it. But structurally, the challenge on the border, because border remains unresolved. 75 years after independence, we don't agree on where our borders are. So that's one problem.

**RM:** Second problem is India has a massive trade deficit with China. So you would have said, look, if economic relationship is good, it would compensate and balance the problems on the security side. But unfortunately, India's trade deficit with China has been growing very, very rapidly. So now, you have actually \$100 billion trade deficit for India. So India is trying to, like the United States, reduce its exposure to China, de-risk, and decouple. But it's not easy, but there it is. So the economic relationship is under a bit of a shadow.

**RM:** And the third is on the security side. A rising China and an emerging India are neighbours. They live in the shared neighbourhood of Asia and the Indo-Pacific. But the friction, as both of them rising at the same time, has generated significant friction in terms of how do they view the neighbourhood. Someday, we'll have to find ways of actually fixing the problem. But at this point, the friction is serious, so therefore, the tensions will remain. And that's where I think the Americans have exploited that, by reaching out to India as they seek to balance China. But I think Indian leaders realize, over the longer term, that the Americans will come and go, but India must live with China." Therefore, for India, peaceful coexistence, stable borders, they remain fundamental objectives. And the question is whether Xi Jinping or the next leader can actually facilitate the negotiation of such a framework.

**AV:** Well, a lot of moving parts to be thinking about in this part of the world. Thank you so much for spending a bit of time with me. We work together on conferences and events where all of these topics are front of the mind at the moment. So thank you very much for spending us the time, and look forward to seeing you back here in Singapore again soon.

**RM:** Thank you, Andrew. Thank you for inviting me for this talk.

Professor C Raja Mohan is a leading writer and commentator on India, South Asia, and regional geopolitical and security affairs. He writes for the Institute of South Asian Studies, and is a visiting professor, and is also a Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Society. He is the author of several books on India, its foreign policy and its relationship with China and other world powers.

To learn more about C Raja Mohan and his insights, please visit:

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