

---

## ***NSI's Jelena Vidojević in conversation with Shivshankar Menon***

This exclusive interview is part of **Missing Voices: Critical Thinking in Times of Polycrisis**, a discussion series presented by the New South Institute (NSI).

The series seeks to offer a necessary and fresh contribution to current global debates on the future of the global order, bringing together diverse voices and perspectives that have often been marginalised, oversimplified, or silenced altogether. Here, NSI's Jelena Vidojević is in conversation with Shivshankar Menon.

**Q Jelena Vidojević: Over the past two decades, we have witnessed profound geopolitical shifts, marked by changing power dynamics and the emergence of new actors. Power has become more widely distributed and less structured. Various attempts have been made to describe the current moment. Some refer to it as a "confused international order," others as a state "between orders," or "neither unipolar, but not yet multipolar" to highlight just a few. How would you describe it?**

**A Shivshankar Menon:** Until recently I described it as a world "between orders". However, now I speak of it as a world adrift. "Between orders" implies that we are heading towards a new order. I am not certain that is the case any more, for several reasons. All the great powers, including those who organised and led the previous post-World War II order, are now revisionist and unhappy with the present situation. I do not see where the new order is coming from or who will organise it. The flatter distribution of power between nations suggests that it will be harder to form a new order to replace the one that clearly no longer functions. Nor is this a multipolar or bipolar world, in my opinion.

In many ways we are reverting to the historical norm. World orders are the exception in history rather than the rule and are the product of a tremendous imbalance of power in favour of a hegemon, as we saw after WW II and even more so at the end of the Cold War. That situation no longer exists. During the Cold War, NATO<sup>1</sup> and the



### Shivshankar Menon

Shivshankar Menon is currently Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi, and is a Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Washington D.C. Menon served as national security advisor to the Prime Minister of India from January 2010 to May 2014, and prior to that as Foreign Secretary of India from October 2006 to August 2009. A career diplomat, he has served as Ambassador and High Commissioner of India to Israel (1995-1997), Sri Lanka (1997-2000), China (2000-2003), and Pakistan (2003-2006). He was also a member of India's Atomic Energy Commission (2008-2014). He served in India's missions to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna and in the Department of Atomic Energy in Mumbai.

<sup>1</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Warsaw Pact countries accounted for over 80% of the world's military power and GDP<sup>2</sup>. Today, China and the US account for less than 50% of world's military power and GDP, and cannot count on unconditional support from their allies.

**Q Jelena Vidojević: What makes the current crisis of the (liberal) world order different from all the previous crises of the world order(s)? Are there fundamental differences in the nature, scale, and/or complexity of today's challenges? And crucially, what lessons can we draw from the past to help navigate the way forward?**

**A Shivshankar Menon:** The two distinguishing features of our present situation are the globalised economy that we are all part of and the changes that technology has brought. In effect, the hard boundaries, single loyalty, and absolute sovereignty of the Westphalian nation-state have been made porous. Today our major challenges are trans-national, for example climate change, terrorism, developing country debt, inequality. But we lack the means to deal with these challenges, since our international institutions are constituted by nation-states whose rivalry makes the multilateral system ineffective for the most part.

**Q Jelena Vidojević: Predictions about the future are largely pessimistic. Multilateralism, once one of the core pillars of the liberal international order, appears to be in retreat. Global institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War are increasingly constrained, due in large part, though not exclusively, to the circumstances of their origin. They struggle to respond effectively to the world's most pressing challenges. At the same time, a growing number of new institutions are emerging, competing for legitimacy. What can we expect in the near future?**

**A Shivshankar Menon:** We often forget that the UN<sup>3</sup> was designed and initially largely operated as an instrument of power politics and as a means to preserve empire. That it did not remain so was despite the intent of its founders, men like Churchill, Smuts and others. That India, the USA, and others succeeded in dismantling the old European colonial empires through the UN, must count as one of the great ironies and achievements of history. If the multilateral system is ineffective today, it is largely because it is composed of member states that are quarrelling amongst themselves. Competition amongst major powers is inherent to an international system of sovereign states. It has always been so. I would not look to the alphabet soup of institutions for real solutions to today's international problems.

**Q Jelena Vidojević:** One of the most significant geopolitical developments appears to be the

<sup>2</sup> Gross domestic product.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations

(re)emergence of Asia as the world's most (economically) dynamic region. In the coming decades, China is likely to join the United States in shaping the global order. What implications will this have for India's foreign policy? And will India be able to maintain its "strategic autonomy" amidst intensifying power competition?

**A Shivshankar Menon:** As I said earlier, I do not share your optimism that a single new global order is likely to emerge soon, particularly since the two major powers in the world today seem structurally at odds, and between them lack the overwhelming power that, say, the US and Soviet Union had during the Cold War to shape the international system. Today China and the US together represent less than half of world's GDP and about the same proportion of global military power. Besides, several other regional powers are emerging around the world, which constrains the ability of China and the USA to shape the global order.

**Q Jelena Vidojević:** What role does, or should, BRICS<sup>4</sup> play in India's broader foreign policy framework? Neither of two influential publications, authored by diverse groups of policymakers and analysts - *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty-First Century (2013)*<sup>5</sup> and *India's Path to Power: Strategy in a World Adrift (2021)*<sup>6</sup> - highlighted BRICS as a priority of the highest importance. What are your views on the significance of BRICS in this context?

**A Shivshankar Menon:** BRICS is important to India in several respects. It offers alternative views on international developments, and promotes diversity in approaches to economic issues, thus introducing a useful element of pluralism in international society. It has already set up the New Development Bank, and some of its ideas on restructuring international institutions are gathering support. Over forty countries of different political persuasions, wish to join BRICS, which suggests that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs and distribution of power in the world, and a search for alternatives. This places a great responsibility on BRICS and institutions like the non-aligned movement, where we can incubate ideas and identify steps to improve the lot and foreground the voices of developing countries in the world.

<sup>4</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

<sup>5</sup> Khilnani, S. (ed.) (2013) *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the 21st Century*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>6</sup> Aiyar, Y., Khilnani, S., Menon, P., Menon, S., Pai, N., Raghavan, S., Ranade, A. and Saran, S. (2021) *India's Path to Power: Strategy in a World Adrift*.

Available at:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/618a55c4cb03246776b68559/t/6228938d13e53b7365b9035b/1646826385112/Indias\\_path\\_to\\_Power\\_English\\_Final.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/618a55c4cb03246776b68559/t/6228938d13e53b7365b9035b/1646826385112/Indias_path_to_Power_English_Final.pdf)