

Must India's Foreign Affairs Strategy Change?

May 2020

- On May 20, 2020, Brookings India organised a Foreign Policy & Security Studies [webinar](#) panel discussion to launch a recent Brookings India [Impact Paper](#) "India's Foreign Affairs Strategy" by Amb. Shivshankar Menon.
- The panel featured **Dr. Alyssa Ayres**, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, United States; **Dr. Dino Patti Djalal**, former Deputy Foreign Minister, Indonesia; **Prof. Rory Medcalf**, Professor and Head, National Security College, Australian National University, and former diplomat to India, Australia; **Amb. Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, Brookings India and former National Security Advisor, India; **Dr. Justin Vaisse**, Director General, Paris Peace Forum, and former Director, Policy Planning Staff, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France.
- **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Brookings India, moderated the panel. In attendance were over 400 participants from around the world who tuned in via Zoom and YouTube.

Must India's foreign affairs strategy change?

Ambassador Shivshankar Menon opened the discussion by emphasising that India's foreign affairs strategy must indeed change, and that such a need was even more necessary in the post-COVID pandemic world.

He pointed out how the main trends that required a response when he first wrote his paper in February 2019 had in fact accelerated, including the retreat from globalisation, the rise of authoritarianism and fundamental shifts in the balance of power. He argued that in a world that is still "militarily unipolar, economically multipolar and politically uncertain", it made little sense for India to keep doing what it did in the 90s or at the start of the present century.

He summarised by suggesting that "we're in for a poorer, meaner, and a smaller world." Amb. Menon pointed out concerns regarding actions like raising customs duties, walking out of the RCEP negotiations, arguing instead, "India needs to be engaged with the world economy."

Strategic autonomy, multilateralism, or both?

Amb. Menon, in his opening remarks, discussed the issue of the effective end of multilateralism, and the ensuing fragmentation of politics and economics. Responding to this aspect of the discussion, Justin Vaisse challenged it by arguing, "self-reliance is not enough." He argued that certain goals could not be achieved by sovereignty and strategic autonomy,

citing the COVID-19 crisis itself as an example. He pointed out how the discovery and distribution of the vaccine could not be addressed through sovereignty and self-reliance, and that "no country will be safe until all countries are safe...so we really need to work together." He noted, "we Europeans don't like multilateralism because it's nice and because it's a Kantian view of the world. We like it because it works."

Amb. Menon provided a counter-response by stating that while he supported the need for greater engagement with the world, that doesn't translate to multilateralism. He suggested that in a time when both the greatest powers in the world had turned their back on multilateralism, "issues-based coalitions of the willing" could provide an answer, citing examples like maritime and cyber security.

Geo-economic realignments: The role of the Indo-Pacific

The geo-economics of the Indo-Pacific were discussed during the webinar. Dino Djalal discussed the importance of relations between India and Indonesia and why the bilateral relationship had underperformed somewhat. He said that "the Indian soft power is great in Indonesia... but again, in terms of diplomatic cooperation, I think we are really punching below the weight." He suggested that the real challenge aside from economics is a need for geopolitical alignment particularly given their common interests in the Indian Ocean.

Providing an Australian perspective, Rory Medcalf suggested that the uncertainties arising out of both the United States regional role and China's increasing assertiveness has meant that countries "are beginning to discover one another, or rediscover one another in the region." Regarding the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) outlook on the Indo-Pacific, he saw common threads relating back to notions of sovereignty, rules and non-coercion, which could be worked on as an opportunity.

While discussing trade relations in the region, he pointed out the relative weakness of the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific in relation to other pillars. On the other hand, he suggested that the elements of a regional economic architecture were starting to come in to play in the wake of China's expanding interests and presence. He saw the potential for diversification in the wake of the new push for self-reliance leading to genuine trade relationships in the region that could become arrangements later.

The future of rising India

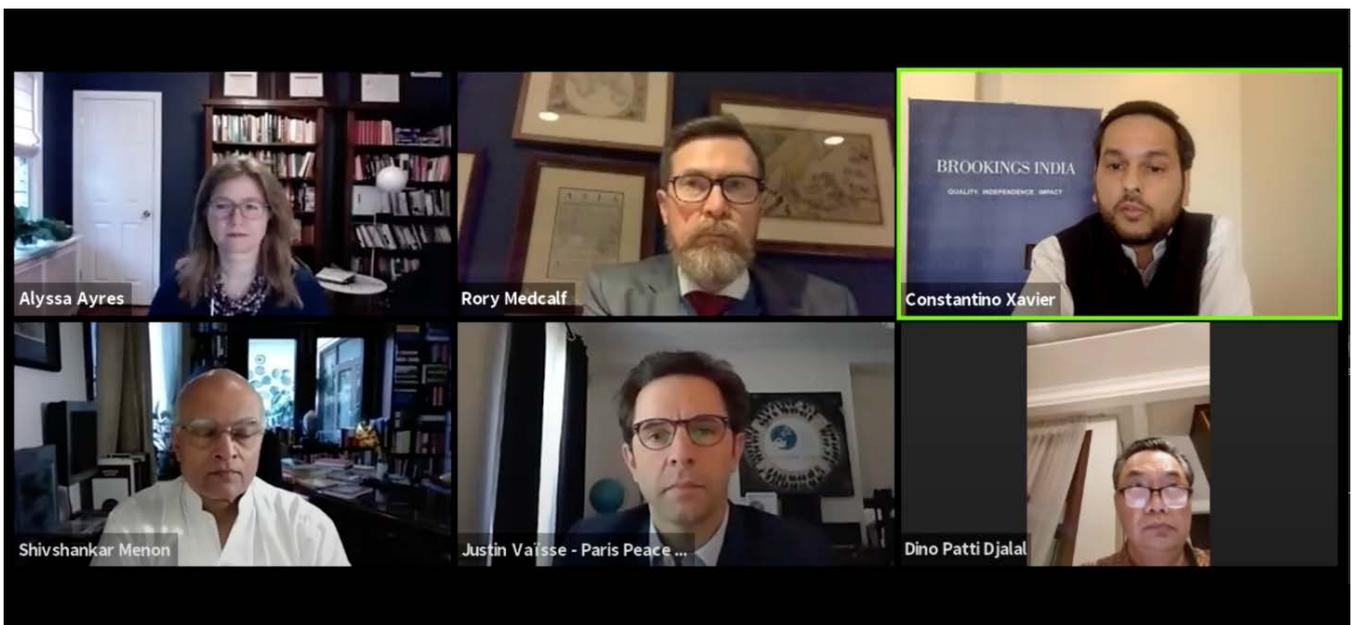
A great deal of attention was paid to the expectations held by the world in general regarding India's future role. Alyssa Ayres highlighted how India's soft power fed into the expectations the world had for it, and that "so much of India's enormous soft power stems from the fact that this enormous, huge, often very chaotic place, is a democracy and provides that voice to people, regardless of literacy, regardless of income, and that is an inspirational thing," which thus needed to be preserved. She suggested that the importance of liberal democracy issues had slid down the priority list to some extent in bilateral ties with the United States, which needed a revisit.

Watch the full video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtNQH17Nzic&t=218s>

Read the full transcript:

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Transcription.Must-Indias-Foreign-Affairs-Strategy-Change-2.pdf>



(From L to R): Dr. Alyssa Ayres, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, United States; Prof. Rory Medcalf, Professor and Head, National Security College, Australian National University, and former diplomat to India, Australia; Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Brookings India; Amb. Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, Brookings India and former National Security Advisor, India; Dr. Justin Vaïsse, Director General, Paris Peace Forum, and former Director, Policy Planning Staff, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France; Dr. Dino Patti Djalal, former Deputy Foreign Minister, Indonesia.

This event summary was prepared by
Nidhi Varma
 Research Assistant, Foreign Policy.
 Email: nvarma@brookingsindia.org



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