

# The Global Indian Series- Geopolitical Trends and Indian Foreign Policy

Ambassador Nirupama Rao



**FORUM**  
OF FREE ENTERPRISE


*“Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives”.*

**- A. D. Shroff**  
(1899-1965)  
Founder-President  
Forum of Free Enterprise



## **SHAILESH KAPADIA**

(24-12-1949 – 19-10-1988)



Late Mr. Shailesh Kapadia, FCA, was a Chartered Accountant by profession and was a partner of M/s G.M. Kapadia & Co. and M/s Kapadia Associates, Chartered Accountants, Mumbai.



Shailesh qualified as a Chartered Accountant in 1974 after completing his Articles with M/s Dalal & Shah and M/s G.M. Kapadia & Co., Chartered Accountants, Mumbai. Shailesh had done his schooling at Scindia School, Gwalior and he graduated in Commerce from the Sydenham College of Commerce & Economics, Mumbai, in 1970.

Shailesh enjoyed the confidence of clients, colleagues and friends. He had a charming personality and was able to achieve almost every task allotted to him. In his short but dynamic professional career, spanning over fourteen years, Shailesh held important positions in various professional and public institutions.

Shailesh's leadership qualities came to the fore when he was the President of the Bombay Chartered Accountants' Society in the year 1982-83. During his tenure he successfully organized the Third Regional Conference at Mumbai.

Shailesh was member, Institute of Fiscal Studies, U.K.; member of the Law Committee and Vice-Chairman of the Direct Taxation Committee, Indian Merchants' Chamber. He was also a Director of several public companies in India and Trustee of various public Charitable Trusts.

He regularly contributed papers on diverse subjects of professional interest at refresher courses, seminars and conferences organised by professional bodies.



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# The Global Indian Series- Geopolitical Trends and Indian Foreign Policy

**Ambassador Nirupama Rao\***

*On a career in the Indian Foreign Service, especially for women, and some of the highs during her time in the service*

It has been very rewarding representing India and in fact, may I say, engaging in high stakes diplomacy. I had a very fulfilling and action-packed career, and I would refer particularly to my postings in our neighborhood and heading our embassy in China.

Now, when it comes to the position of women in the field of Indian diplomacy and the Foreign Service,

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\* *The author is the former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador of India. This is a transcription of Ambassador Rao's perspectives articulated in a podcast with the Forum of Free Enterprise on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2025, as part of the 'Global Indian Series' which shines a light on the growing stature and influence of India in global markets, and the work that people of Indian origin are doing in critical fields of human endeavour all around the world.*

that position has evolved significantly over the decades. Women have risen steadily in the ranks. We've handled very sensitive portfolios, led with confidence, headed key embassies and missions abroad and dealt with hardcore strategic issues. We have been involved in policy making, indeed led many initiatives in the field, and in the process set new benchmarks in foreign policy leadership and in reinforcing India's global presence.

Being Foreign Secretary requires competence and commitment, and it is not just a question of gender. It requires resilience, it requires adaptability plus a deep understanding of geopolitics. This applies to men and women alike, there is no difference. But I would add that representation still has to grow for women in public service in India, and I hope that this will be an increasing trend in the future.

*On the broad sweep of relations between India and China over the past 75 years, and the quest of both countries for leadership of the global South*

When you look at the broad sweep of India-China relations over the past 75 years, we must recognize that there are striking continuities in this relationship, but also significant shifts. Strategic competition and unfortunately mistrust are givens over the whole expanse of this history. Even in the 1950s and the 1960s, the two countries were vying for leadership in a postcolonial world

and our mutual mistrust emerged quite early in the relationship with happenings in Tibet, for instance, and differences over the question of the boundary. The latter is an unresolved question to this day and the mistrust between the two sides intensified after the brief conflict of 1962, which was and remains a significant watershed in the relationship.

Despite the phase of rapprochement from the late 1980s until 2020 - 30 years of fairly stable relations - the events at Galwan in June of 2020 have only worsened relations and deepened strategic mistrust. This is despite the recent disengagement that has taken place in Eastern Ladakh. Today, both countries want to lead in the Global South. China through the Belt and Road Initiative and its economic power and influence, which are considerable, and as far as India is concerned, through our various development assistance initiatives, the Voice of the Global South Summits which we host, for instance, to our Presidency of the G20, our own discourse power, as it were. But the India-China boundary is a continuing source of tension, despite the disengagement in Eastern Ladakh. China's assertiveness, its muscularity on the Line of Actual Control, one would even call it perhaps aggression in certain sectors of the border, remains a constant source of potentially kinetic tension necessitating our own countermeasures from the military and security point of view in our border areas.

Furthermore, there is a huge imbalance in our bilateral trade, and this is something that didn't prevail in the 1960s after the war. Then, we could cut off relations altogether, or sever diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level, but today it is very different. We trade with each other and there is a huge imbalance of trade that India has with China and that has continued despite the events in Galwan, we haven't been able to do away with that. Decoupling, or derisking, has really not happened, and this has intensified the asymmetries in power and capacity between our nations. Despite our attempts to reduce dependence on China, banning Chinese apps, restricting Chinese investments, diversifying our supply chains, the situation really has not improved to our advantage.

The biggest constant today is the trust deficit in the relationship. On the Chinese side, candidly, there is a lack of transparency in approach which keeps the relationship fragile and fundamental challenges therefore remain.

The current widening gap in strategic trust between China and the United States also impacts this relationship even though we maintain our strategic autonomy. The United States sees India as a counterbalance to China and this has of course led to our deepening defence, economic and technological ties with the United States. We stand

to gain from that strategic alignment, but China is suspicious of our actions and that is another source of tension. But let us be realistic, we are not yet a complete substitute for the United States in terms of China's manufacturing ecosystem, and we must walk a fine line.

So, that is where our diplomacy is today. We continue to engage with China in multilateral forums, and plurilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. We have kept diplomatic channels open. We have a multi-aligned approach which avoids excessive dependence on the United States, but how do we navigate US-China tensions? Let us assume, for instance, that things go really badly in Taiwan; what is that going to entail in terms of our position, our reaction, and the steps we take to safeguard ourselves? These are all challenges that we face, and South Asia is also a battleground for us because China is vying for influence there and our smaller neighbors very often play the China card against us.

*On a multipolar world, and the poles towards which countries are today gravitating*

We live in a multipolar world. Somebody called it a multiplex world, with many people entering and exiting! The unipolar dominance of the United States after the end of the Cold War is clearly under stress, although the United States is still

what I would call a central power in geopolitics today. China has risen to preeminence as far as the rest of the world is concerned and is a formidable global player challenging US supremacy. So, these are clearly two poles.

The European Union is another pole of economic power and diplomatic influence, despite the war in Ukraine. Russia continues to be a key actor because of its military strength and strategic moves in global geopolitics and India, of course, has emerged as a major economy and our strategic footprint has also grown in significant measure, and this makes us a significant global player. Japan, with its leading economy status and advanced technological capabilities, is also a key influencer in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

It is worth noting that in a recent interview, the new US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, acknowledged this shift to a multipolar global configuration, when he said “it’s not normal for the world to have a unipolar power. That was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world”. Multiple great powers, as he calls it, in different parts of the planet.

Now, such a perspective from the new Trump Administration does signal a potential shift in US foreign policy moving away from post-World War

2 alliance frameworks towards a more flexible approach, acknowledging new configurations of diverse centers of global power. So, this is really a multipolar world now.

*On the relevance of non-alignment in a multipolar world*

India must navigate a complex web of relationships on the global stage. We must balance cooperation and competition. There is fierce rivalry with China, although we do exercise prudence and self-restraint in what we do. We must avail of opportunities to assert our interests on the global stage. The requirement is for nuanced diplomacy - adaptive strategies to manage the very intricate and complex dynamics in international relations.

Today, I think not about non-alignment, but about issue-based alignments, strategic partnerships with different global players. Take our relationships with Russia and the United States as examples. These reflect the embrace of strategic autonomy, independence of action, the exercise of an independent foreign policy, and pragmatic interest-based diplomacy. We maintain a lot of flexibility in our decision-making. So, non-alignment has evolved in a modern, realistic way with India leveraging multiple relationships for our economic, security and technological gains.

*On Foreign Minister Jaishankar's perspective on the need for realism in Indian foreign policy*

Somebody once said that diplomacy is life without maps. We are in some senses flying blind, and we don't have pre-drawn maps that can guide us. The Foreign Minister's views are certainly relevant because we must leverage our strengths and practice realism, pragmatic diplomacy which aligns with the evolving nature of global politics today. We must keep our eyes and ears open and be proactive. We must carve out greater strategic space for ourselves, and this requires a cocktail of unabashed opportunism and self-interest with a good infusion of principle.

It is not that we are abandoning our values and principles. After all, we are the world's largest democracy and we have values to uphold and we are a civilizational state, so that also is a matrix we cannot ignore. But we should avoid recklessness and unnecessary entanglements. We engage with all, adapt constantly, and we prioritize self-interest. This applies to every country when it comes to foreign policy. We seek opportunities in uncertainty, and we try to navigate great power rivalries without rigid alignments. That really is our position.

*On soft power, and hard power achieved through military and economic strength*

All of us are aware of the debate between hard power and soft power, and to strike a lighter note, like

love and marriage, they go together. Hard power is the decisive component in global geopolitics today, as it has always been. But how do you define soft power? It is the ability to persuade, to shape global narratives with the strength of your discourse power and the credibility you enjoy in terms of your standing among nations, the fact that you are a responsible power, and that plays a critical role too because it generates long-term influence.

India is in many ways a soft power powerhouse with our civilizational heritage, our ethos, our culture, our democracy, and our diaspora connections. But as we learn constantly from the world, this is not adequate on its own without economic and military capability. Soft power on its own does not translate into strategic influence. You must keep that in mind. It creates goodwill, and it shapes global perceptions of ourselves, but to prevent our isolation we must learn to convert our soft power into hard influence. For instance, leveraging Bollywood's reach to increase trade partnerships, or yoga diplomacy to strengthen ties with the West, or using our digital public infrastructure like UPI or space technology or vaccine diplomacy to gain a leadership position in the global South. So, the ideal balance is a combination of military and economic power that is hard power with soft power - culture, diplomacy, our democratic beliefs, the power of our example -

which together, as Sunil Khilnani would say, make for smart power.

*On ties with the United States, which is not a benign power under President Trump*

In a recent piece Martin Wolf of the Financial Times said till recently the United States was a benign hegemon implying that is not the case any longer. Take for instance the views expressed about the US Agency for International Development (USAID) by members of the Trump administration. It may be that perhaps USAID was indulging in activities it should not have, and I cannot comment on those allegations; but it was contributing about 40% of global development aid for underprivileged and marginalized communities across the world. For many of these 'poor and huddled' masses, the United States has always been the land of sweet liberty, but that is changing with USAID being fed into, as Elon Musk put it, "the woodchipper".

Many foreign policy practitioners, bureaucrats and political figures in India have personal and professional relationships with members of the new Trump administration. The relationship between India and the United States is a steadily evolving, upward oriented and robust relationship, and it is something that successive administrations and governments in Washington and New Delhi have contributed to. I believe India is well positioned

to have a good equation with the new Trump dispensation.

We will have to see, of course, how, for instance, US policy plays out on Russia-India relations. We don't know what President Trump has in mind, and I believe there are discussions ongoing about the Ukraine situation between Russia and the US. But as far as Russia-India relations are concerned, these may be less of an irritation than they were during the Biden years. We will have to see.

The US wants competing challenges to China in Asia and India fits the bill as far as that goes. At the same time, an 'America First' world view in Washington has inbuilt presumptions about American primacy. Even if Marco Rubio says he understands it is a multipolar world, but this notion of American primacy I don't believe has really gone away. That mindset is obviously there and in such a view, America versus China is a constant, and in such a context there may be questions about India's strategic autonomy, for instance, and why we have not pledged our allegiance to US interests everywhere.

My hunch is that the Government of India and Prime Minister Modi will be careful to avoid false steps with the new Trump administration, at least initially. The real challenge, though, will be tensions over trade. President Trump wants a fairer trade

relationship, as he calls it. He wants India to reduce tariffs and increase imports of American products, particularly defense equipment. Furthermore, US immigration policies and potential restrictions on H1B visas may be a source of strain, as would the US pressuring India to align with its foreign policy objectives. The opportunities are, of course, in areas such as defence cooperation, energy partnerships including the import of natural gas from the US and working together to counter China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific, where the US views India as a pivotal partner.

#### *On the relevance of BRICS*

When you talk of a voice for the global South, there is a lot that organizations like BRICS can do. Take, for instance, the United States withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO), which is unfortunate because US support for global health was extremely critical and significant. But now that it has happened, this may be a time to introspect, and to review what can be done to address the situation. There has been a call for countries of the Global South, and India as a leader, to launch initiatives to increase their contributions to WHO, to come up with strategies to address the lacunae in global health policy today. These are opportunities. Similarly, with the dismantling of USAID, some analysts have spoken about how this should be

an opportunity for addressing poverty alleviation for the rest of the world. There is a new multipolar multilateralism that we need on these issues.

So far as President Trump's negative comments about a BRICS currency are concerned, we know that he has been talking about potential challenges to the US dollar's dominance as the world's primary reserve currency. American geopolitical leverage derives in a very big way from the dollar's central role in global trade and finance. The BRICS nations, and this is probably what President Trump was looking at, represent a substantial part of the global GDP and population today. The BRICS nations seek to enhance the representation and influence of emerging economies in global institutions and want to reduce dependence on Western markets and strengthen trade and investment ties among themselves. There have been discussions about a common BRICS currency, but these seem to be nowhere near fruition.

BRICS nations, of course, trade among themselves, and have sought to establish alternative payment systems to the US dollar. But that is not a concerted move towards de-dollarization, because the US dollar accounts for 88% of global currency exchange according to the Atlantic Council in Washington, and 59% of global currency reserves. Around one fifth of global trade was conducted in

non-dollar currencies in 2023, and BRICS countries are increasingly trading in their national currencies between each other; for instance, Russia and China settle their trade in rubles and Chinese yuan today. US sanctions on Russia and Iran may be a reason for China to seek financial independence from the dollar, but of course, China also has its own aspirations and ideas and vision, if you can call it that, about global dominance. It is a mixed picture, and President Trump, by calling out the BRICS, is of course issuing a warning, but I don't think the situation really warrants such a warning, now.

*On the threat to multilateralism and the relevance of the United Nations*

I do not believe the time has come for us to give up our belief and our convictions about the work of the United Nations. Leave aside for a moment the Security Council and the gridlock that you see there, daily, the development work that the United Nations has done over the years and the contributions it has made to world progress cannot be denied. So, I see a lot of relevance for the United Nations in the future also.

But let me add that multilateralism is encountering very strong headwinds today and you see it from the new Trump administration. You may argue that it is a victim of polarization within the

United States itself, or that it is caught up in rising great power competition, or the trend towards unilateral actions by many major powers that are diametrically opposed. These same nations shout from the rooftops about adherence to a rule-based international order, but their actions belie that, and bypassing international institutions when decisions do not align with their interest is a kind of repetitive behavior of these major powers.

The UN Security Council is crying out for reform. Its structure remains unchanged, and the post-World War 2 order is unaltered despite all the transformations you see on the global scene. Trade wars have rendered the World Trade Organization weak and ineffective, with powerful countries resorting to economic protectionism, unilateral tariffs and sanctions. But this cannot mean the end of multilateralism, because all of us in the global community have a stake. That is why we have organizations like BRICS and the G20, reflecting multipolar multilateralism.

The digital economy, AI governance, cyber security, climate finance - these are all issues where you need multilateral cooperation and therefore also more representation for the global South. Let me take the example of India. It played a very major role in the establishment of the International Solar Alliance, again, a multilateral grouping. It drove this initiative outside traditional Western dominated structures of

multilateralism. So, there is a way forward on this. On global health cooperation, involving the global South with India's encouragement \_this is an opportunity for our foreign policy mandarins. After the US withdrawal from the WHO, that is another area where we must get to work. Similarly, the US withdrawal from other multilateral institutions should spur us to build new structures of cooperation for issues such as development finance, debt relief and digital infrastructure creation. Maybe this is a new inflection point for the global community and multilateralism needs a reset.

### *On climate change*

The issue of climate change, especially for developing countries, is a question of our survival and our future destiny and our progress and development. This is not something we can afford to disregard, and it has to become an article of faith in what we do as policy practitioners trying to build global cooperation on tackling climate change.

India has set up the International Solar Alliance, and places emphasis on renewables in its energy mix. We have consistently spoken about the need for climate finance for developing countries that are affected by climate change, and the need for the developed world to be able to contribute to this in significant measure.

We are all affected by the fallout of climate change. Take the melting of glaciers and look at what is happening in the Arctic. That has become a scene of geopolitical rivalry. Climate change will lead to the intensification of geopolitical rivalries and the possibility of conflict, and refugee flows that are already creating the disruptions you see around the world. I really hope that the Western countries, and the United States as a leader, can take a more composite, comprehensive and holistic view of these issues. The United States has, under Mr. Trump's second Presidency, withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement - that really challenges prospects to assure a multilateral coming together and cooperation to fight climate change.

*On the opportunity within the global South to create more optimism about the future, similar to the excitement created at the 1955 Bandung Conference held in the wake of decolonization*

The Bandung Conference really did mark a moment of great hope and optimism for a newly decolonizing world. Many newly independent countries hoped to shape their destinies outside the confines of the Cold War and superpower rivalry. They underlined the critical importance of territorial integrity, sovereignty, non-aggression and peaceful coexistence. But that sense of idealism and optimism did not last long because

economic struggles intensified, and inequalities deepened. There was also a setback because of the India-China conflict - both countries were leaders of the developing world. As the world grew increasingly fragmented, the developing countries were marginalized in global governance.

How do we restore that sense of optimism? We need a redefinition of shared goals, of collective purpose. 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges like the technology gap, climate finance and global trade imbalances all stare us in the face. Cooperation within the Global South is very much a part of this process. There is a lot of room for foreign policy initiatives in this regard, and India is poised to be a global leader, and this is what I call smart power. We have to lead a campaign for the reform of global institutions. This must become one of those points that we continually emphasize and act upon.

Developing countries cannot just be suppliers of raw materials to the rich world, they must develop their own manufacturing ecosystems. Regional trading alliances must be developed and consolidated. Debt traps have sucked in several countries from the Global South, and they have come under geopolitical pressure from the developed world. A country like India is increasingly able to help - look at the help we gave Sri Lanka when it faced its economic crisis a few years ago. We can be changemakers in this regard, and we

can be everything that China is not by virtue of the example that we set. This is where very pragmatic, issue-based diplomacy can be practiced. We could be leaders of the Global South, and we need leaders, in fact, who are cast in the mold of the visionaries who led the developing countries in the Bandung era, like Jawaharlal Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah, Sukarno, Nasser and many more.

*A message for young people to broaden their horizons*

As a young person, I had this thirst for knowing what was going on in the outside world and learning also from what was happening there. I really believe young people must stay connected with the world outside and stay abreast of international trends, whether political, whether economic, whether cultural, whether environmental. To navigate the complexities of the world we live in, you need that kind of horizon building, and travelling abroad helps to widen perspectives. It makes you more open minded, and I have always felt there is nothing more tragic than the tragedy of the closed mind. We need open mindedness, we need resilience, we need to be innovative, tolerant, adaptable. We need to create a new generation of citizens who are globally literate and widely travelled. Travel enables you to see things at first hand and not understand them only through hearsay. For example, why does Germany excel in manufacturing? Why does Singapore lead in urban planning? Or how

is Rwanda becoming a technology hub? How can we inspire solutions like those countries in our own neck of the woods.

Building a personal network of relationships across countries can also help future personal development. It can help business opportunities, career opportunities, and you can also build social and economic intelligence through this process. Of course, not all of us can travel, we are a poor country, and there may be economic constraints. For those who cannot travel, most have smartphones and Wi-Fi connectivity these days, and I would suggest tracking global economic, political, technology and other trends through Google News alerts, YouTube channels, social media like X (Twitter), and electronic media like Channel News Asia, the BBC, Al Jazeera. We also have newspapers like The Mint, The Indian Express or The Hindu, and there is also the regional language press; I come from Kerala, and we have such a vibrant Malayalam press. Young people can also participate in online events like the UN Youth Assembly or the Harvard Model UN or the TEDx Global Summits, which allow remote participation. They can join LinkedIn Groups or Reddit Groups relating to international careers, take advantage of exchange programs like the Fulbright or Chevening or Erasmus Fellowships, and explore remote working opportunities. Many choices are available today. Stay globally engaged is my advice to young people, because the world is moving towards multipolarity, and our young

people must be globally aware and become bridge builders across divides. And do contemplate a career in the Foreign Service!

*On cross-border terrorism*

Our people have been victims of cross-border terrorism, and this has been a critical obstacle in our relationship with Pakistan. It has prevented dialogue and normalization of relations between our two countries. This is something we have constantly emphasized to Pakistan.

We have been leading the world community in fighting this scourge and resisting it. Our efforts continue to ensure that the United Nations comes up with a Comprehensive Convention against terrorism and while we have still not achieved that goal, that doesn't mean we have given up on it. Countering terrorism is very much a pillar of our foreign policy and all the efforts that we make for a more peaceful world oriented towards development. That is what people need. People do not need violence. People do not need conflict. People say a vociferous no to terrorism.

*On the South Asian Symphony Foundation set up by Ambassador Rao and her husband, Sudhakar Rao*

Our purpose in setting up this Trust was to promote dialogue and mutual understanding and harmony, to begin with among the people of South Asia. This is a youth centered initiative, to connect people in

India with the global community of persons of Indian and South Asian origin. We have a huge diaspora running into millions across the surface of the Earth, and this Trust that we set up sees music as a medium in the creation of a South Asian identity that speaks to the rest of the world and where India plays a leading role at the level of ordinary citizens. There is no government involvement, this is the work of ordinary citizens to promote the ideals of peace and non-violence that India has stood for. We have created this South Asian Symphony Orchestra, with musicians drawn from across the world, and our concerts are called Peace Notes. (In fact, Peace Notes has now been registered as a trademark). We wish to unite people across borders, and a recent World Bank study of our foundation called our orchestra a baton for cooperation and a unique initiative by and for the people.

**[Note on Ambassador Rao - During her four-decade long diplomatic career, Ambassador Rao was India's first woman's spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs, the first Indian Woman High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and the first Indian Woman Ambassador to the People's Republic of China. She served as India's Foreign Secretary, after which she was appointed as India's Ambassador to the United States.]**

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*The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily those of the Forum of Free Enterprise.*

*“People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good”.*

**- Eugene Black**  
Former President,  
World Bank  
(1949-1962)

# FORUM

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In recent years the Forum has also been focusing on the youth with a view to developing good and well-informed citizenship. A number of youth activities including elocution contests and leadership training camps are organised every year towards this goal.

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