

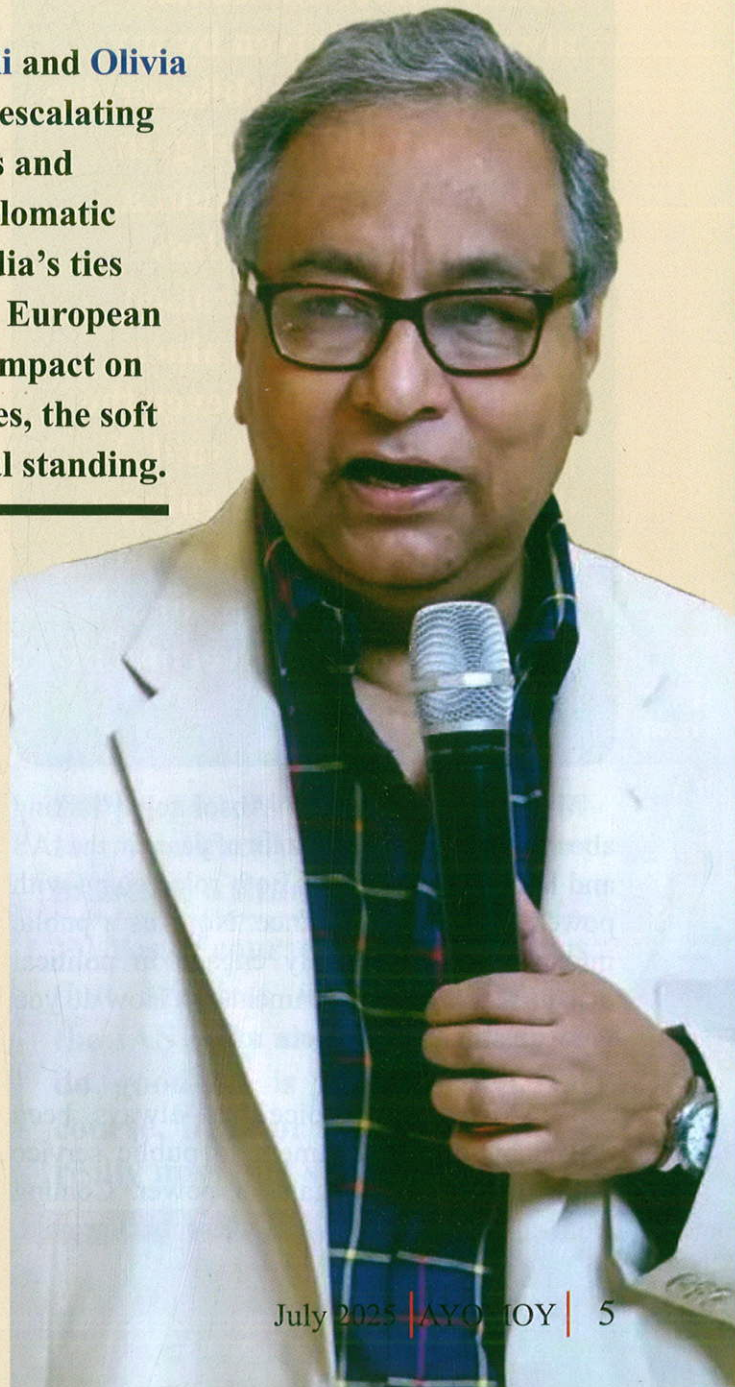
India's Diplomatic Drought Earning the Wrath of the World

A Talk with **Jawhar Sircar** on India's Foreign Policy

Jawhar Sircar speaks with **Md Kasir Ali** and **Olivia Banerjee** of **AYOMOY** to reflect on the escalating strains in India's international relations and the far-reaching consequences of its diplomatic isolation. The conversation explores India's ties with its neighbours, perceptions among European nations and the United States, and the impact on the nation's economy, cultural exchanges, the soft power of its vast diaspora, and its global standing.

Olivia Banerjee (OB): Hello and welcome, Jawhar Sir. Your style of writing, mixing humour with unapologetic political stance, make the world of ideas accessible and alive. Your oeuvre spans both active engagement in traditional media outlets along with sharing insights in new age digital media platforms. Just days back, you posted an A.I. generated video on your Instagram and Twitter handle about the alternative professions of politicians which is amusing and unapologetic at the same time. This approach has sort of made you comprehensible and "cool" to our generations.

Jawhar Sircar (JS): Thank you, it's very kind. But I believe we are not given any option. We are born into it, and hence I am left with no choice, but to explore the avenue.





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Md. Kasir Ali (KA): Absolutely. Talking about choice, you served a lot of years in the IAS and later as a TMC MP. Both roles come with power to shape governance. Now, as a public intellectual, you actively engage in political discourse as a media commentator. How do you view this transition in your role?

JS: My career choice has always been driven by my commitment to public service rather than financial gain or power. Coming from a disciplined middle class background,

I was raised with strong moral values where money was never the primary goal. That said, I do recognise that earning a livelihood is an important aspect of any profession, similarly so, for government service, as well. However, public service brings another dimension into play, the dynamics of power. Power, in any form, needs to be understood in its own context, it has its own genes. For instance, even a traffic controller, by virtue of their position, wields a certain degree of authority. Similarly, someone entrusted with organising a simple class picnic may exhibit dominance over their subordinates. Without a measured approach, power can shape behaviour in unexpected ways. I've myself observed how repetitive, mundane tasks, like, answering the same questions dozens of times a day, can sometimes bring out subhuman behaviour in bureaucratic roles. Here, it is never really about the individual, per se, but rather it is the systemic pressure that shapes conduct. To concern myself too, three key themes have shaped my career journey: public service, the responsible exercise of power and the role of money, as I just briefly mentioned. My transition from a bureaucratic position to a non-bureaucratic public role has been smooth because my core objectives remain unchanged, serving the public. The only difference now is that I no longer hold formal authority. That said, I've always believed that absolute power is a myth. Even in the so-called 'driver's seat', decision-makers are constantly influenced by multiple stakeholders, whether colleagues, ministers, policies or public expectations. True public service lies in navigating these complexities while staying grounded in one's position.

KA: Would you say as a man of power, you would have had more say to directly shape policies or influence a situation?

JS: Yes, of course. One of the things that are less understood about the IAS is its absolute capacity to do good—it is unparalleled. Of course, if he or she chooses to. I really miss that stake.

OB: Talking about influence, your recent article on *The Wire* has definitely made an impact, speaking volume about the power held in this transition. In that piece, you use the strong phrase “disastrous isolation”. Could you provide specific diplomatic instances or policy outcomes where this isolation has directly harmed India’s national interests in the last two to three years or the last decade?

JS: For foreign policies, today’s stance reflects certain inherent qualities that are repugnant to the international community, and that is where the isolation comes from. You have to understand that isolation stems from a process of alienation, determined by the following techniques employed now. One, there is a misplaced admiration to the extent of a sneaking jealousy for India’s growth rate, which is largely manufactured and optically inflated. In reality, growth under Modi has been slower than during the UPA era by every measurable parameter. Yet bhakts continue to believe this is India’s golden age. Rather, the current government is riding on an economic growth wave set by 1991 reforms. Growth is happening despite the government, not because of it. Second, Modi’s administration’s biggest economic intervention has been in capital infrastructure, where it has failed spectacularly, despite heavy spending. Private investment has stagnated in the last decade, while middle-class savings shrink, exposing the so-called “economic miracle” as hollow. Third, the unnecessary aggression in foreign policy, spearheaded by S. Jaishankar is backfiring. While his points may be factually

correct, diplomacy demands tact, something he severely lacks. Jaishankar snaps at journalists and foreign counterparts, with the bluntness of an army general, not the sugary finesse expected of a diplomat. A foreign minister’s job is to sugarcoat hard truths, not amplify hostility. Fourth, there are a series of decisions that have isolated India on a global stage, particularly Modi’s indirect support to Russia, during the Ukraine War. While India’s votes at the UN may carry a little practical weight, they send a clear signal that New Delhi is willing to side with aggressors for the sake of profit. Our stand on Russian aggression was a very very unpopular one and this was done for the private refiners of India to hoard profits. Added to that, what I see, whenever Modi goes to a foreign country, he wants his adrenaline to spike and fills the stadium with people, shouting “Modi, Modi!” How does that feel? Now imagine if the Bangladeshi Prime Minister came to India and gathered a stadium full of Bangladeshi people chanting his or her name. How would Indians react to that? Another major concern is the rise of the aggressive Hindu. Historically, Hinduism was seen to be less confrontational than Islam. Islam was perceived as a threat by the West,

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but Hinduism was not viewed that way, until now. The new Hindu assertiveness, the grand displays of Hindu pride and splendour, like building mammoth showy temples in foreign countries, is raising alarms. It's not necessarily about the intent behind these actions, but the symbolism they carry.

OB: Your article surely brings some important questions to reflect upon. However, you initially suggested in it that it is unlikely that India would be invited to the G7 summit in Canada, yet Prime Minister Modi arrived there on Tuesday. What scenario do you think explains this shift?

JS: Even when Modi was invited, India was clearly not given the visibility or importance it deserved. Look, at what happened was one, India was placed in the second row alongside Ukraine's Zelenskyy, hardly the front-and-center treatment you'd expect for the leader of the world's largest democracy. Secondly, even after the India-Pakistan war strike, Asif Munir, Pakistan's army chief, was being hosted a personal lunch with President Trump. Meanwhile, India's engagement was reduced to a 26-minute long-distance phone

call at Calgary, something that could have been done easily from New Delhi. Out of which, half the time was wasted on



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—JS

interpretation. What's the message? I don't care enough to meet you properly. Also, on the very day Modi was invited, the UN Secretary council made Pakistan the vice-chair of the counter-terrorism group and the chair of the Taliban sanctions committee. A slap

in the face, given Pakistan's record.

KA: India has been popularising a narrative of a rising, influential India ("Vishwaguru") on the world stage, citing successes like the G20 Presidency and various multilateral engagements. This has been popularised enough on media outlets, with Government's advertising expenditure expected to reach ₹25276.83 crores, as seen from the 2025-26 budget estimate of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. How do you reconcile this official narrative with your assessment of a nation spiraling into isolation? Are these diplomatic events mere optics that mask a deeper strategic erosion?

JS: The official figure only tells a part of the story. In reality, it's much worse. Having worked in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, I've seen firsthand how symbolism is weaponized. When Modi's face is placed on LPG cylinders and governmental welfare schemes, it's not just branding, it's political semiotics at play. Now, look at the G-7 Summit. India was reduced to a mere spectator. What did we gain? No tangible benefits, no strategic endorsements, no

meaningful support against terrorism, so what was the point of being there. Let's be clear. India may be the world's fourth largest economy, but we also have the highest number of people living below the poverty line. Our per capita income is lower than every single G20 nation. A truly progressive country attracts talent and investment, but who are we attracting? Only Bangladeshis. And meanwhile, the legitimate Bengali Muslims are being branded as "Bangladeshi infiltrators" and persecuted.

OB: India's relation has been based on strategic autonomy so far, be it Nehru's approach in the Korean War and the Japanese Peace Treaty, in early 1950s or Indira Gandhi's clear stand during 1971 Bangladesh War. Has this recent more pronounced national ideation affected key players in the immediate neighborhood, in the Global South? Does India suffer from hubris in believing that, as it rubs shoulders with the crème de la crème of the world's most powerful capitalist nations, it has a safety net against isolation from its immediate neighbors?

JS: India's foreign policy begins with Nehru, who emerged as the de facto leader of the Third World. Despite leaders, like Nasser, Sukarno, Tito, and even Mao, Nehru stood out. However, he gradually lost his moral stature due to his tilt towards the Soviet block. Non-alignment started shifting. It was a natural outcome, as developing countries had only two choices: one, opening up their economy to post-colonial capital or protecting their people through equity based policies. Under Indira Gandhi, India firmly aligned with the Soviet Union. Though the West disliked her, she remained unfazed and pursued the boldest foreign policy India has ever seen. She was feared by the West and didn't flinch. Post-Indira, from Rajiv Gandhi to Narashima Rao, the context changed. The Soviet Union had

collapsed by then, and there was no Third World or Non-alignment movement left to lead. During this time, India underwent major economic reforms which slowly earned its global respect. When Manmohan Singh dismantled the Permit Raj, I was deeply involved in the process. The economic liberalisation unleashed powerful forces, bringing in new players and transforming industries. The telecom and aviation sector stand as clear examples of this shift. If the government had tried to control these sectors under the old systemic rules, it would have led to chaos. However, the class that benefited from the 1991 reforms was definitely more ruthless. It was consumed by profit and power and often restored to corruption. The government now favours and runs on the whims and demands of its capitalist cronies. Rather than maintaining a friendly foreign face, it focuses only on its overwhelming self-image. This pride started during the Rajiv era ('Mera Bharat Mahan' was the slogan), but still it was self-aware, positive

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and taken with some humility. Now it has taken an aggressive character, which has dissociated India from all its allies, who view India as aggressive.

KA: Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar in his books, *Why Bharat Matters* and *The India Way* wrote, "this is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support." What do you think of this statement?

JS: These are all pious statements, but encapsulate just mere fantasies. In reality, we are ruefully far behind.

KA: To think further, has the recent, more pronounced tilt towards the United States and the Quad framework inadvertently weakened this autonomy and alienated traditional partners like Russia, also the key players in the Global South, we just touched upon?

JS: India has annoyed Putin enough. But Putin knows that he can't lose one of its biggest supporters, thus he overlooks those annoyances, to put it shortly.

OB: So, how has India's foreign policy establishment, the diplomats and bureaucrats within the Ministry of External Affairs, responded to the political direction of foreign policy? Has there been an internal pushback or a realignment of diplomatic strategy to fit a new, more ideological mold?

JS: Every Indian foreign office has effectively become a pro-Hindutva outlet, there's no denying that. Several Indian Foreign Services (IFS) officers do not like it. The IFS operates

like a small family, where everyone knows exactly which policies members have to toe.

OB: Can we say Jaishankar is bullying his colleagues into absolute governmental compliance?

JS: Absolutely, he was brought in precisely to enforce total obedience to the regime's agenda. In any other administration, there's usually some tension between the foreign minister and the foreign secretary, a healthy check and balance. The foreign secretary often used to play up to the prime minister and the secretary office held their own views which often contradicted the foreign minister. History lends us several instances, one prominent one being Sushma Swaraj, one of the most capable foreign ministers we've had, yet she was routinely sidelined by the foreign secretary. But now? The tension is gone as Jaishankar merges the role of being a foreign secretary and foreign minister

KA: Looking at our immediate neighborhood, where do you see the most significant diplomatic failure?

JS: Bangladesh will be the first name to appear, where we have turned a friendly nation into a resentful neighbour through sheer arrogance and we have earned their wrath. We have performed three unforgivable sins, which I have also mentioned in my recent article on India-Bangladesh relations too. First, we Indians have imbibed a delusion of eternal gratitude as perpetual debt of Bangladeshis. No nation will kneel forever for past favours. Second, we have supported an absolutely corrupt and autocratic regime for years. Third, we cannot expect the Bangladeshis to tolerate the terror that the current Indian regime has been orchestrating against Muslims—terror that we have been

both spontaneously and deliberately promoting for the past ten years. Now the damage is done. Bangladesh is gone and is estranged—at least for now. Having Bhutan as the only friendly neighbour is not so effective.

KA: Beyond strategic alignments, how has this perceived isolation impacted India's economic diplomacy? Has it become more difficult for India to negotiate favorable trade deals or attract high-quality foreign investment compared to five or ten years ago? In fact the medical tourism Industry of India has suffered substantial damages. To be more specific, from Bangladesh India has welcomed as many as 4.5 lakh patients in 2023. Bangladeshi patients spend nearly US\$50-60 million of foreign exchange on medical tourism to India alone, and the larger share of it is targeted in Kolkata. But it has seen a significant dip since last August(2024) due to tension/disagreements and strict restrictions on visa and connectivity. This industry not only affects the medical revenue but also small businesses like cheap hotels and accommodations, restaurants, sim card providers and small shops.

JS: India is also suffering, day by day, in its economic growth, as a whole. The medical tourism industry of West Bengal has definitely taken a hit. But, the Centre takes perverse satisfaction in one particular state's economic decline, that is, of Bengal. By withholding MGNREGA funds and crippling the 100-day work scheme, they are forcing Bengal's labourers to migrate to other states, where they face exploitation and humiliation. This isn't just a policy, it is a punishment, and Delhi relishes every moment of it.

OB: India has long relied on soft power, its democratic credentials, cultural exports, and

large diaspora, to shape its global influence. However, with growing Hindutva influence, both abroad (with obvious national ties), and within the country have raised global scrutiny over majoritarianism, religious polarisation and democratic backsliding. Has the scrutiny led to any specific tangible diplomatic repercussions? If so, what are they?

JS: Personally, I saw a change in the early 1990s. Before that, although India was rising, its soft power credentials, like democratic ethos, even under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was not valued. India was constantly neglected in international forums. This change in value started more prominently with Manmohan Singh. India's economic weight began to command attention. We were finally heard. India was also respected for being a vibrant democracy and for its human rights movement records. Unlike authoritarian countries, India couldn't just steamroll over dissent. Look at Bengal, Nandigram and Singur, there was resistance. The world valued openness, and India as a chaotic but loveable democracy. A lumbering Second World War-era bus. Historically, India never hegemonized others. Aside from the Chola era's mercantile influence in South-east Asia and the exception of East Pakistan, India never really flexed its imperial muscles. This restraint earned respect. Even the criticism our prime minister faced from the people, both at home and abroad, was seen as a sign of a vibrant democracy that was applauded by saying, "yeh sachche dil ka hain." Post-2014, ushered in a period of overt national pride. The idea of 'India is great' has existed since Rajiv Gandhi's slogans like Mera Bharat Mahan. Back then, that pride was self-aware and humorous, reflecting warmth, confidence, and a sense of resilient optimism. Today, however, it has turned aggressive. Post-2014, the aggression of the post '91 class bolstered. The class which

has benefitted from the liberalisation reform. While 1991 reforms brought new players to the nation, expanded our economy, and invited new sectors, like telecom and aviation, towards the beginning of the last decade, the reformed changes metamorphosed into giant companies like, Reliance and produced a new class like the Adanis. Liberalisation may have opened up the sector but it did not foreclose favour-based crony capitalism. Rather, it was as instrumental to replace everyday corruption of the permit holder. Where the State earlier managed the free market, the government has now turned extremely corrupt by free market oligarchs. The capitalist class can now ask for their own government, and acquired a political character. Narendra Modi has become the face of this absolute crony capitalism in India, where policy decisions are being shaped by his government's dealings with corporate allies. The fate of the nation is being decided in closed-door interactions between Modi and his business cronies. Take for instance, the unchecked power granted to conglomerates like Adani. If they want a forest cleared for their projects, they get it cleared. Worse, and I will be upright here, the systematic liquidation of left-wing extremism in central India appears not only about restoring order, but also about facilitating unchecked mineral extraction. Parallely there has been a change in the perception of Hinduism. A tolerant religion earned the title of being authoritarian. The rapid construction of temples everywhere, this Disneyfication of Hinduism, is making people uneasy. Also, the existence of two contrasting Indias, one displayed as a rising economic power, and the other, in reality, as drowning in poverty, is undeniable. You won't find a New Yorker cleaning toilets at Kolkata's airport, but you will certainly find Indians scrubbing floors or toilets in New York. What does that say about our so-called "equal

status" on the global stage? We are still seen as a developing country ridden with poverty, not as world leaders. We have less value for our cultural exports than tiny South Korea.

KA: Based on its current policies and attitude, what do you think India's near future looks like?

JS: As a student of history, I can tell you that any nation that has risen to the top in the last five or six centuries of human civilization has suffered rivers of blood or has caused rivers of blood. You take examples of the Ottomans, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Greeks—every country goes through a cycle of rise and fall. And during the rise, they go through a lot of wars. We, as Indians, have never had such a situation of passing through blood on that scale. The Chinese went through a series of horrendous occupations—the Koreans, the Manchurian Empire, the so-called White Devils, the Nanjing Massacre, the Opium Wars, a sponsored regime, and then occupation by Japan—the entire thing has been through bloodshed. And then, the chaotic experiments of the great leap and cultural revolt of Mao Zedong. So it is a civilisation wielded by the crucible of fire. The USA has not been bombed except by Osama bin Laden but there are generations of US soldiers who lost their lives in wars. There is rarely a British family that did not lose a son. During the World Wars, London was levelled to the ground. We, on the other hand, have been mercifully spared from that kind of historical cruelty. Even our neighbour Bangladesh has gone through a taste of blood. But after that apocalyptic phase, the nation rose.

KA: So you're saying that if we follow the cyclical nature of history, India will face bloodshed in the near future?

JS: I am not wishing it—for God's sake—but

history tells me that it is one of the inevitable roads to greatness. In the near future, if India gets involved in cataclysmic wars, bloodshed, loss, expenses, starvation and the entire nation will be involved—not just soldiers. But out of all that, India may rise as a more powerful nation. And the current government or its policies will have very little to do with it. Yes, it sounds apocalyptic, but this is just how the course of history has been running.

OB: We were hoping to gain suggestions about possible policy corrections. Many Indian states share borders and complementary relations with neighboring countries. But central government policies have created tensions between respective bordering states and their international neighbours. What reconciliation measures could help federal and state governments reach consensus when dealing with neighboring nations?

JS: To ensure policy correction, my first appeal will be to befriend Bangladesh, to move beyond historical grievances and engage pragmatically. As for India, hardline Hindutva factions need Pakistan as a perpetual adversary to sustain their political narrative. Remember, how Pulwama conveniently emerged before the 2019 elections? The boldest strategic move today would be forging an Indo-Chini bhai bhai (friendship and brotherhood) workable partnership with China. The world would take notice. We must collaborate in the Asia-Pacific space while playing the long game. But this relationship must be built on equal terms, not subservience.

KA: If you were to advise a course correction,

what are the top two or three politically difficult, and perhaps domestically unpopular, steps the Indian government must take immediately to begin repairing its international relationships and credibility?

JS: First, we need to end the institutionalized minority-bashing. The relentless demonisation of Muslims, amplified by BJP's IT cell and fuelled by bhakt fodder, has turned India into a global pariah, leading to an estrangement with Bangladesh for their religious background. Secondly, we should acknowledge China's rise without insecurity as strategic humility could prevent our geopolitical irrelevance.

OB: Which specific relationships, be it with a neighboring country or a global power, do you believe are salvageable in the short term, and which ones require a long-term, fundamental rethinking of India's approach?

JS: India's foreign policy is in a state of disarray. Look at BRICS, we have managed to alienate every key player. Tensions with China, an increasingly ambiguous relationship with Russia, clashes with South Africa over Gaza, and uncertain ties with present Brazil. At this point, more than focussing on any other nation per se, I think the most pragmatic near-future move should be to reset relations with China, it is the only immediate salvageable option among major powers. In the long-run, India needs a complete overhaul of its strategic approach and maintain respectable distance from an unnecessarily aggressive Trump led USA. ■

(Olivia Banerjee, Master's graduate, Presidency University and Md Kasir Ali, PhD scholar, West Bengal State University.)