

International Affairs

Interview Answers - Bharath Kumaran M

Q1: How does the Russia-Ukraine war impact India?

India faces a genuine strategic challenge: maintain neutrality while navigating great power expectations.

Direct impacts on India:

1. Energy vulnerability:

- Russia sanctions disrupted oil supplies (India's largest source)
- Oil prices spiked from \$60 to \$130/barrel
- Inflation in India rose directly (oil-indexed economy)
- India negotiated discount Russian oil (partially mitigated impact)

2. Defense and weapons:

- 60-70% of Indian military equipment from Russia
- Sanctions limit spare parts, upgrade availability
- Forces India to diversify suppliers (US, Israel, France)
- Transition cost: billions in new weapons systems

3. Food security:

- Ukraine exports wheat, corn (important for developing nations)
- Food prices spiked 10-15% in India
- Poor households disproportionately impacted

4. Semiconductor shortage:

- Both Russia and Ukraine key semiconductor supply nodes
- Global chip shortage (partially war-driven)
- India's IT industry faced supply challenges

5. Remittances:

- Indians working in Russia/Ukraine: ~200,000
- Some faced evacuation challenges
- Remittance uncertainty

India's diplomatic position:

Why neutrality made sense:

- Russia: Historical ally, defense supplier, energy partner
- Ukraine: Limited strategic relationship
- US pressure: Expected India to align with West
- Strategic autonomy: Defined as India's foreign policy principle

Costs of neutrality:

- Western criticism (US particularly critical)
- Reputation damage internationally (moral ambiguity)
- Pressure from QUAD partners (US, Japan, Australia)
- Pakistan leverage: West critical of India while India supports Russia

India's voting pattern:

- UN General Assembly: Abstained on Russia aggression resolutions
- This position drew criticism from Western democracies
- But enabled maintaining Russia relationship

Long-term implications for India:

1. Energy strategy shift:

- Accelerating renewable energy (reduce oil dependency)
- LNG diversification (Australia, US supply)

- Eventual goal: Reduce Russia dependency

2. Defense diversification:

- Increasing defense indigenization
- More weapons procurement from US, Israel, France
- Reduces Russia dependency (positive: less leverage over India)

3. Strategic positioning:

- Indo-Pacific strategy gains importance (vs. Russia focus)
- QUAD becomes more significant (Japan, Australia counterbalance)
- China containment becomes more explicit

4. Regional balance:

- Pakistan uses India-Russia friction
- Bangladesh, Nepal recalibrate with India
- Central Asian positioning shifts

My perspective:

India's neutrality was **pragmatic** not moral. India:

1. Protected national interest (energy, defense)
2. Maintained strategic autonomy (resisted pressure)
3. Didn't take sides in others' conflict
4. Preserved optionality

However, complete neutrality costs reputation (international democracies expect liberal democracies to align on principle). India must balance:

- Pragmatism (national interest)
- Principle (democratic values)
- Autonomy (independence from pressure)

What I'd do differently:

Instead of silent abstention, India could:

1. Publicly acknowledge moral principle (condemn invasion)
2. Explain why not joining sanctions (national interest)
3. Propose constructive solutions (mediation, humanitarian support)
4. Signal evolution toward Western alignment while maintaining independence

This balances principle + pragmatism + autonomy.

Q2: What is India's stand on global conflicts?

India's position is fundamentally: "Respect sovereignty, minimize direct intervention."

India's conflict doctrine:

Core principles:

1. **Non-interference:** Stay out of other nations' internal conflicts
2. **Bilateral resolution:** Conflicts best solved by parties involved
3. **UN framework:** Use international institutions, not unilateral force
4. **Pragmatism:** Align with interests, not ideology
5. **Strategic autonomy:** Independent judgment, not pressure

India's positions on specific conflicts:

Israel-Palestine:

- Recognition of Palestine statehood (voted for UN recognition)
- No formal relationship with Palestine (relations with Israel instead)
- Principle: Two-state solution, but limited active engagement
- Pragmatism: Israel is defense supplier, technology partner

Syria:

- Abstains on UNSC resolutions
- Maintains diplomatic relations with Assad regime
- Doesn't condemn Russian/Iranian intervention

- Limited humanitarian response

Yemen:

- Abstains on UNSC resolutions
- Watches Saudi intervention passively
- Concern: Houthi-Iran alignment affects India
- Limited public position

Myanmar:

- Elected to UNSC (2021-22)
- Critiqued military coup (but weakly)
- Continued military engagement
- Pragmatism: Myanmar is strategic neighbor

Afghanistan:

- Active presence pre-Taliban
- Limited capacity post-Taliban Taliban
- Concerned about Pakistan leverage
- Humanitarian engagement (but limited military)

India's conflict constraints:

1. Military capacity limits:

- Cannot project force globally
- Even regional conflicts require partnership
- Focuses on near-abroad (South Asia, Indian Ocean)

2. Internal priorities:

- Poverty reduction, education, healthcare compete for resources
- Internal security issues (terrorism, separatism) take precedence
- Economic development primary focus

3. Strategic autonomy requirement:

- Cannot join every Western intervention
- Maintains Russia relationship (energy, defense)
- Doesn't want to be West's South Asian proxy

What India's approach should be:

1. Consistency principle:

- Apply same standards to similar conflicts
- Avoid double standards (supporting allies, condemning others)

2. Humanitarian focus:

- Where intervening, emphasize humanitarian dimensions
- Medical aid, refugee support, reconstruction
- Soft power through assistance

3. Institutional approach:

- Work through UN, regional organizations
- Multilateral, not unilateral
- Reduce unilateral intervention appearance

4. Mediation capacity:

- Neutral stakeholder perception enables mediation
- Could pursue peace efforts (hasn't historically)
- Regional conflicts (Iran-Saudi, Israel-Palestine) potential areas

My perspective:

India's conflict stance is **pragmatic realism**—pursue national interest while respecting others' sovereignty. This is rational but sometimes appears morally ambiguous.

The tension: If every country pursues narrow national interest, collective action on grave abuses becomes impossible. Yet if India joins Western interventions, it becomes proxy and loses autonomy.

What I'd do:

1. **Maintain strategic autonomy** (firm)
2. **Add moral voice** (principle without intervention)
3. **Enhance mediation capacity** (active not passive)
4. **Strengthen humanitarian response** (aligned with neutrality)
5. **Build coalition on specific issues** (humanitarian intervention consensus)

This balances pragmatism + principle + autonomy.

Q3: How important is Indo-US relationship?

Critically important and increasingly so, despite historical mistrust.

Historical context:

Pre-1991:

- Cold War alignment differences (Soviet-aligned India vs. US-aligned Pakistan)
- Suspicion mutual (India: US imperialist; US: India socialist)
- Limited engagement, significant friction

Post-1991:

- Economic liberalization opened India to US engagement
- Technology sector boom created US-India IT relationship
- Education: Indian students in US universities
- Defense interest: Post-9/11, US needed India for terrorism fight

Why Indo-US increasingly important:

1. Geopolitical balance:

- US needs India to balance China's rise
- India needs US technology, defense partnership
- QUAD (US, Japan, Australia, India) central to Indo-Pacific strategy

2. Economic complementarity:

- US: World's largest economy, tech leader
- India: World's largest IT services provider, manufacturing alternative
- Trade: \$150+ billion annually (growing)

3. Technology partnership:

- Indian IT companies (Infosys, TCS) serve US companies
- US tech companies (Microsoft, Google, Apple) outsource to India
- AI, semiconductor cooperation emerging

4. Defense and security:

- US provides fighter jets, naval vessels, surveillance systems
- India hosts US Navy presence (strategic locations)
- Counter-terrorism collaboration (especially post-9/11)

5. Strategic autonomy enhancement:

- US partnership enables India's independence from China/Russia
- If India forced to choose US/China: Likely chooses US (democracies, shared values)

Current challenges in Indo-US relationship:

1. Trust deficit:

- Decades of suspicion not entirely healed
- Still diverging interests in some areas (climate finance, IP laws)
- Language barriers (cultural differences)

2. Pakistan imbroglio:

- US maintains Pakistan partnership (historically)
- India wants US to pressure Pakistan on terrorism
- US sees Pakistan value for Afghanistan access, Taliban relations

3. Trade friction:

- US demands IP protection enforcement (Indian pharma opposes)

- Trade deficits complaints
- Tariff disputes on agriculture

4. Value differences:

- US internal democratic challenges (polarization, Trump era)
- Human rights concerns in India (Kashmir, Gujarat tensions)
- But both fundamentally democratic

5. Strategic misalignment on some issues:

- Iran: US wants isolation; India wants engagement
- Russia: US wants India to condemn; India maintains engagement

What strong Indo-US relationship enables:

1. China containment:

- US can't contain China alone
- India provides Indo-Pacific presence
- QUAD provides framework

2. Technology advancement:

- Indian talent, US capital/innovation
- Semiconductor collaboration
- AI development

3. Economic growth:

- Trade benefits both
- Investment flows both directions
- Supply chain diversification

4. Democratic alliance:

- Shared values (albeit imperfectly lived)
- Democratic resilience through partnership

My perspective:

Indo-US relationship is **natural and necessary** for both nations:

- India benefits: Technology, defense, economic opportunity
- US benefits: Geopolitical balance, economic access, talent

The relationship should deepen on:

1. **Pragmatic interests** (not forced ideology)
2. **Mutual benefit** (not subordination)
3. **Strategic autonomy** (India independent, not proxy)

What could strengthen the relationship:

1. **Technology transfer**: US facilitating Indian capability building
2. **Educational exchange**: More Indian students, professionals in US
3. **Defense deepening**: Joint development, not just purchases
4. **Climate partnership**: US, India leading global climate action
5. **Democratic support**: Mutual reinforcement of democratic institutions

Critical caveat: This shouldn't be at expense of India-Russia, India-Iran relationships. India's strength is in maintaining multiple partnerships, not exclusive alignment.

Q4: What is the significance of BRICS expansion?

BRICS expansion reflects declining Western unipolarity and rise of non-Western powers.

BRICS background:

Original members (2009):

- Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
- Represented emerging markets alternative to G7
- Combined: 40% world population, 25% GDP

BRICS narrative:

- Alternative to Western-dominated institutions (IMF, World Bank)
- Counter-hegemonic coalition
- Developing world voice at global table

2023 expansion:

- Added Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia
- From 5 to 11 members
- Represents geopolitical realignment

What expansion means:

1. Institutional relevance:

- BRICS bank (New Development Bank) gaining credibility
- Alternative to Western financial institutions
- Developing nations can access loans outside US/IMF leverage

2. Geopolitical shift:

- Non-Western powers gaining collective voice
- China/Russia initiative (led the expansion)
- US-led institutions becoming less exclusive

3. Multipolar world emerging:

- West no longer dominant bloc
- Middle powers asserting agency
- Coalitions more fluid (not frozen blocs)

Opportunities and challenges:

For India:

Opportunities:

- Platform for emerging market concerns
- BRICS bank offers financing alternatives
- Counterweight to Chinese hegemony (not alone)

- Economic cooperation (cheaper access to energy, resources)

Challenges:

- China dominance within BRICS growing
- India-China tensions (Himalayan border, competition)
- Expanded BRICS includes Iran (US wants India to isolate)
- Diluted influence (more members = less voice per member)
- Coordination difficulties (vastly different interests)

What BRICS expansion reveals:

1. US hegemony declining:

- Can't coerce major powers into alignment
- Alternative institutions becoming viable

2. China's power:

- Led the expansion strategy
- Building coalition alternative to US
- Challenge to US Indo-Pacific strategy

3. India's dilemma:

- Wants alternatives to Western institutions (shared with China/Russia)
- But concerns about Chinese domination in BRICS
- Balancing act between Western and non-Western alignment

Real tension in BRICS:

BRICS members have diverging interests:

- China: Wants to displace US
- India: Wants multipolar world (not Chinese unipolarity)
- Russia: Wants to restore lost influence
- Brazil, South Africa: Want development cooperation

- New members (Iran, Saudi Arabia): Want specific gains (Iran: escape sanctions, Saudi: energy cooperation)

Sustainability questions:

1. Can BRICS cohere?

- Competing interests may prevent unified action
- Unlike NATO (shared security), BRICS members lack common threat

2. Will BRICS institutions displace Western ones?

- BRICS bank growing, but World Bank, IMF still dominant
- Western institutions have path dependency
- Institutional change slower than power shift

3. What's BRICS for?

- Development cooperation? Regional issues? Counter-hegemony?
- Lack of clear purpose reduces unity

My perspective:

BRICS is **significant trend** (decline of Western dominance) but **not transformative** (won't displace Western institutions immediately).

The real question: Will BRICS enable genuine multipolar world, or will it just be another China-led bloc?

For India specifically:

BRICS valuable for:

- Alternative financing
- Bargaining power
- Non-Western partnership

But India should maintain:

- Multiple partnerships (West, Russia, ASEAN, Gulf)
- Strategic autonomy

- Not exclusive alignment with BRICS

What India should do in BRICS:

1. **Lead development agenda:** Position India as voice for actual development cooperation
 2. **Counterweight China:** Build India-Brazil-South Africa coalition within BRICS
 3. **Pragmatic engagement:** Use for benefit, maintain other partnerships
 4. **Institutional focus:** Strengthen BRICS institutions (New Development Bank)
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Q5: How does China's slowdown affect India?

China's slowdown is potentially both opportunity and risk for India.

Current Chinese economic situation:

Growth deceleration:

- 2020s: 3-4% growth (vs. historical 8-10%)
- Causes: Demographic decline, property crisis, technology constraints, US technology restrictions
- Zero-COVID impact: Production disruptions, investment uncertainty

What China's slowdown means globally:

1. Commodity prices:

- China: World's largest commodity importer
- Slowdown = lower commodity demand
- Prices for oil, metals, minerals fall
- India benefits: Lower oil prices, lower inflation

2. Supply chain shifts:

- Chinese factories less competitive
- Manufacturing shifts to Vietnam, India
- India opportunity: Attract FDI to replace China

3. Financial pressure:

- Chinese lending to developing nations slowing
- Belt & Road Initiative (infrastructure) stalling
- Countries with Chinese debt face restructuring

4. Regional influence:

- China less able to economically pressure neighbors
- Regional autonomy increases
- India's influence increases relatively

India-specific impacts:

Positive:

1. Manufacturing opportunity:

- "China+1" strategy (companies diversify from China)
- India positioned to attract manufacturing FDI
- PLI (Production-Linked Incentive) scheme times well
- Could add millions of manufacturing jobs

2. Technology opportunity:

- Chinese tech companies less threatening
- Indian IT industry gains relative advantage
- Startup ecosystem gains momentum

3. Geopolitical space:

- China's military spending pressured (economic constraints)
- Indo-Pacific strategy space increases
- QUAD gains importance (without simultaneous Chinese assertiveness)

4. Commodity pricing:

- Oil below \$60/barrel (vs. \$120+) helps inflation
- Metals prices lower (benefits consumption)

- Agricultural exports get better prices (India exporter)

5. Debt relief opportunity:

- Belt & Road countries negotiating favorable terms
- India not in debt trap, but observes precedent

Negative:

1. Competitive manufacturing threat:

- China becoming efficiency/cost leader (cutting corners)
- Competing on low-cost manufacturing harder for India

2. Global demand weakness:

- Chinese slowdown signals global slowdown
- India's export markets weaken
- Growth trajectory challenges

3. Geopolitical stability:

- Economically desperate China might take geopolitical risks
- Border tensions potential (desperate regimes take risks)
- Instability risk higher

4. Technology competition:

- Chinese government directing companies for strategic goals
- Non-market competition in semiconductor, AI
- India still playing catch-up

Real opportunities for India:

1. Manufacturing relocation:

- Companies moving production from China to India
- Apple, Samsung, others exploring India
- Could create 10M+ manufacturing jobs over 10 years

2. Supply chain reshoring:

- Western companies reducing China dependency
- India positioned for nearshoring (proximity to markets)
- Defense, semiconductor, pharma opportunities

3. Technology leap:

- AI, semiconductor design: India could compete
- Startup ecosystem scaling rapidly
- Government investment increasing

4. Export markets:

- India gaining export share from China
- Pharmaceuticals, IT services, agricultural products
- Could increase exports by \$50-100B over 5 years

What India should do:

1. Infrastructure readiness:

- Ports, roads, power for manufacturing
- Government accelerating (Gati-Shakti initiative positive)

2. Regulatory clarity:

- Stable labor laws, land availability
- Clear property rights, contract enforcement
- Still challenging (vs. China's authoritarian clarity)

3. Skill development:

- Manufacturing requires technical skills
- School-to-work pipeline needs investment
- Vocational training emphasis

4. FDI attraction:

- Marketing India as China alternative
- Tax incentives for strategic sectors
- Selective rather than all manufacturing (avoid low-wage trap)

5. Geopolitical positioning:

- Strength from China's weakness
- Indo-Pacific leadership opportunities
- But shouldn't provoke desperate China

My perspective:

China's slowdown is **golden window** for India—once-in-a-generation opportunity to capture manufacturing, talent, market share from China.

But windows close. India must:

1. **Act quickly** (other countries competing)
2. **Invest in infrastructure** (before FDI opportunities fade)
3. **Build competitiveness** (cost alone insufficient; quality matters)
4. **Strategic positioning** (use opportunity wisely, not recklessly antagonizing China)

This could be India's decade—or India could miss the opportunity if government doesn't execute well.

Q6: Is multilateralism weakening globally?

Yes, but unevenly—varying by institution and region.

Signs of multilateralism weakness:

1. Trade liberalization reversing:

- US withdrawal from TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership)
- WTO paralyzed (Appellate Body non-functional)
- Protectionism rising (Trump, COVID responses)

2. UN effectiveness declining:

- Security Council paralyzed (veto power abuse)
- General Assembly often symbolic
- Humanitarian efforts insufficient

3. Treaty commitments ignored:

- Paris Climate Agreement: US withdrew, rejoined
- Iran Nuclear Deal: US withdrew
- International Court: Some nations ignore rulings

4. Regional multilateralism failing:

- SAARC (South Asian Association): Non-functional (India-Pakistan tensions)
- ASEAN consensus norm eroding
- African Union weak enforcement

5. Unilateralism rising:

- US military interventions without authorization
- China's unilateral actions (South China Sea)
- Russia's Ukraine invasion

Why multilateralism weakening:

1. Power asymmetry:

- Great powers don't need multilateral consensus
- Can act unilaterally, deal with consequences
- Incentive to preserve multilateralism disappears

2. Institutional weakness:

- Veto powers enable paralysis
- Enforcement mechanisms insufficient
- Consensus requirement enables obstruction

3. Proliferation of issues:

- Traditional institutions designed for trade, security
- New issues (climate, cyber, pandemics) strain institutions
- Institutional adaptation slow

4. Ideological divergence:

- Liberal order vs. authoritarian alternatives
- Democratic consensus impossible
- Values-based splits replace interests-based coalitions

For India:

Multilateralism benefits India:

- Smaller power thrives in rule-based system
- WTO, UN enable Indian voice
- Climate institutions enable climate finance
- UNCLOS protects maritime interests

Multilateralism challenges India:

- Permanent Security Council seat enables others' influence
- Climate commitments constrain energy options
- IP rules restrict pharma innovation
- Migration restrictions limit worker remittances

What India should do:

1. Strengthen regional multilateralism:

- Revive SAARC (with Pakistan cooperation)
- Lead BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan)
- Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

2. Reform global institutions:

- Push for UN Security Council expansion (India permanent seat)
- WTO reform to make it functional

- Climate finance increase (India still developing)

3. Selective multilateralism:

- Join beneficial institutions
- Opt out of restrictive ones
- Maintain strategic autonomy

4. Build new multilateral forms:

- QUAD development (security, technology, economics)
- Coalition-based on specific issues (not universal membership)
- Informal networks (more flexible than formal institutions)

My perspective:

Multilateralism is under stress but not disappearing. It's **fragmenting into regional/issue-specific forms** rather than universal institutions.

This creates space for India to:

1. Lead regional institutions
2. Join issue-specific coalitions
3. Maintain strategic autonomy
4. Gradually build influence

The old UN-centric multilateralism is transitioning; India should navigate this transition actively, not passively.

Q7: What role do defense partnerships play in India's strategy?

Defense partnerships are core to India's strategic autonomy and security.

India's defense partnerships:

United States:

- Fighter jets (F/A-18 Super Hornet evaluation)
- Naval systems (Aegis, combat management systems)
- Surveillance systems
- Logistics sharing agreement
- Growing defense technology cooperation

Russia:

- 60-70% of military equipment (historical)
- Su-30 fighter jets production
- Nuclear submarine technology
- Missile systems (BrahMos, S-400)
- Still largest supplier despite diversification

Israel:

- Defense electronics
- Air defense systems (Spyder, David's Sling)
- Missile technology
- Drone/surveillance systems
- Growing cooperation

France:

- Fighter jets (Rafale acquisition)
- Naval systems
- Submarine technology
- Nuclear cooperation history

Japan:

- Maritime partnership (coast guard cooperation)
- Amphibious capability development
- Technology sharing
- QUAD framework cooperation

Why defense partnerships matter:

1. Strategic autonomy:

- Multiple suppliers prevent leverage
- No single supplier can coerce policy
- Negotiating power increases

2. Capability development:

- Western technology complements Russian
- Israeli electronics + Russian missiles = effective systems
- Technology diversity = resilience

3. Deterrence:

- Credible military capability deters aggression
- Defense partnerships enable capability
- Critical for China deterrence

4. Geopolitical positioning:

- Partnerships signal alignments
- US, Japan partnerships: Indo-Pacific leadership
- Russia partnerships: Strategic autonomy
- Israel partnerships: Technology access

Current defense partnership challenges:

1. US reliability:

- Political change causes policy shifts
- Trump presidency showed withdrawal risk
- India needs long-term reliability assurance

2. Russia limitations:

- Technology aging (reliance on outdated systems)
- Sanctions limiting capability transfer

- Need to diversify away

3. China competition:

- India-China border tensions make defense critical
- India needs modern systems quickly
- Development timelines may be too slow

4. Technology transfer restrictions:

- US reluctant to transfer sensitive tech to India
- India wants indigenous capability
- Partnership v. indigenous tension

5. Cost constraints:

- Defense budget limited
- Multiple partnerships expensive
- Procurement efficiency challenge

What strong defense partnerships enable:

1. **China deterrence:** Credible military capability prevents Chinese aggression
2. **Regional stability:** India capacity provides regional security umbrella
3. **Maritime security:** Indian Navy protecting Indian Ocean trade
4. **Counter-terrorism:** Capability to fight non-state actors
5. **Geopolitical influence:** Military capacity = diplomatic influence

India's defense partnership strategy should be:

1. Diversification:

- Continue multiple suppliers (US, Russia, Israel, France, Japan)
- Avoid dependency on single supplier
- Balance partnerships

2. Technology seeking:

- Emphasize technology transfer in partnerships

- Build indigenous capability over time
- Eventually reduce import dependency

3. Geographic balance:

- Western partnerships: Technology, capability
- Russian partnerships: Continuity, strategic signaling
- Regional partnerships: QUAD, SAARC cooperation

4. Domestic capacity building:

- DRDO (Defense Research Development Organization) strengthening
- Private defense sector development
- Reduce import dependency

5. Transparency and civilian control:

- Defense partnerships under civilian democratic control
- Parliamentary oversight
- Prevent military-industrial complex dominance

My perspective:

Defense partnerships are **essential** for India's security and regional role. But they must serve Indian interests, not become vehicles for alignment with external powers.

India should:

1. **Actively manage** partnerships (not passive recipient)
 2. **Seek capability** (not just weapons purchases)
 3. **Maintain autonomy** (don't become proxy)
 4. **Build domestically** (reduce import dependency over time)
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Final thought on international affairs:

India's international position is unique:

- Large enough to matter globally
- Emerging enough to offer growth opportunities
- Democratic enough to partner with West
- Independent enough to maintain autonomy

The challenge: **Preserving autonomy while navigating great power competition.**

The opportunity: **Leverage this position to shape multipolar world order.**

India's success depends on:

1. **Economic growth** (economic power → geopolitical influence)
2. **Military capability** (deterrence → regional stability)
3. **Institutional strength** (democracy resilience → global influence)
4. **Diplomatic skill** (managing multiple partnerships → maximum benefit)
5. **Clear strategy** (not reactive, but proactive in shaping outcomes)

The next 20 years will determine whether India becomes a global power or remains a large regional power.