Shivshankar Menon on World Order, China, and a “World Adrift” | Horns of a Dilemma

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Welcome to *Horns of A Dilemma*, the podcast of the *Texas National Security Review*. I'm Sheena Chesnut Greitens, the editor-in-chief of *TNSR*, and today I'm joined by the chair of our editorial board, Dr. Frank Gavin. We're pleased to have joining us today, Shivshankar Menon, chair of the Ashoka Center for China Studies in New Delhi, and a former National Security Advisor to the Indian Prime Minister. He's joining us today to talk about his *TNSR* article, "A New World Order? Be Careful What You Wish For," which can be found in Volume 9, Issue 1, of the *Texas National Security Review*. Welcome to the show.

Shivshankar Menon: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Frank Gavin: It's great to be here, especially with you Shankar, someone who I consider a great friend, and who I've admired for quite a long time, and I do want to get into this fascinating article. But I wonder, you've had such a fascinating career in diplomacy and statecraft. I wonder if you could share with our listeners a little bit about some of that extraordinary history, and how you became a diplomat, and how you became interested in these questions, and what were some of your more interesting posts and experiences.

Shivshankar Menon: Well, I wandered into diplomacy. Actually, it wasn't my first choice. I thought I was going to do a PhD on ancient India and ancient China. But, you know, the late sixties, early seventies, I wanted to see China, because to study China without seeing China seemed wrong, and there were only two ways of doing that.

One was to become a Maoist guerilla and go underground. The other was to become an Indian diplomat, so I chose the easy way. I did the exam, got in, I was lucky, and they sent me to China, and the first job they gave me was analyzing Chinese internal politics. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, I went in 1974, to Beijing.

You know, this is when Mao died, Zhou died, the Gang of Four, Deng came back. I mean, it was such a rich diet, that I got hooked. And I was lucky. I mean, I was sent back to China three times on posting, dealt with China so I could indulge my interest, my passion, and I can't say I regretted a moment of it. I was also lucky because I, you know, worked around China, as well in Japan, and then did several years of atomic energy, for years in Vienna, and the mission to the IAEA. And then in the commission at home. I can only say I was lucky to have a job which I enjoyed, which got me out and about traveling, seeing the world, meeting interesting people.

That's the advantage of being a diplomat. You tend to work with interesting and intelligent people most of the time. I was posted as ambassador to Israel, Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan. And each one was different, and each one was a challenge, but it was fun. So that's it. That's really all I can tell you about myself, but I count myself truly lucky.

Frank Gavin: It's an extraordinary background, and while I do want to get into the article, you told me recently about a book you're working on, and your family's engagement with China. Maybe you could briefly tell us about this, because I found it utterly fascinating.

Shivshankar Menon: Well, you know, my grandfather was sent to China in 1943 during the war, as what they call, the Agent General of the Government of India to China, because India wasn't independent, couldn't have an Ambassador. They had to find a title, and they thought Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek would welcome another general. So they sent him.

And between 1943 and 2014, I think there were only four years when one of us, my grandfather, my father, my father-in-law, my uncle and me, wasn't either in China, or dealing with China. So I thought I'd try and write a sort of family biography, or the family in China. Try and put it together, but I'm still getting my head around how to do this.

Frank Gavin: I can't wait to read it. It's gonna be an amazing read.

Shivshankar Menon: I can't wait to write it.

Frank Gavin: Well, hopefully we can publish excerpts of it because it's always fascinating. How did you come to decide to write a piece on world order, or to think about world order? I mean, this is clearly a topic so many people are writing about it, you know, you have such an interesting, much different take

than other people, which I want to get to, but what sort of inspired just the idea of diving into the topic?

Shivshankar Menon: I think it's this increasing sort of sense of uncertainty. People seem, and this has been going on since 2008, and an increasing nostalgia for a sort of vanished golden age, as if there was some time when everything was wonderful, when things were easy, when life was predictable, and somehow that didn't seem right to me.

Both seemed a bit dangerous to me. Because I, you know, thinking about it, I realized that we'd constructed this mythology of world orders, which were really an exception in historical terms. When you think across time, across broader stretches of time. And the nostalgia especially seemed dangerous to me, because it seemed to me that it would lead people to do things which wouldn't fit with the times, and therefore you were essentially fighting against the grain of history, and you would end up doing foolish things.

So that's really what led me to start thinking about it. And then of course, what about India's place in this? Because for India, it's been very important, as we try to transform India into a modern, more prosperous country, what kind of world are we operating in? We can't do that alone. The world really matters to us, and matters increasingly as we get increasingly integrated. So that's what really brought me to think about this problem.

Frank Gavin: There are two really important points, and I wonder how they relate, and how they're separate.

One is this nostalgia that we feel for a past that actually wasn't accurate, right? And you make it very clear in the article, that this so-called “Golden Age,” was not golden for everybody. In fact, for most of the world's population that generated problems, and that even for those who thought they benefited from, they have a tendency to forget. So I'm interested, is that just something that human beings are inclined to do?

And the other really powerful point is that world orders are the exception, not the rule. They are anomalous, and as you show really brilliantly in the article, when it does emerge, it's because of a particular set of circumstances.

Both of these excellent points really cut against, I think, what's fair to say, the prevailing arguments that we hear, particularly in places like London or Washington. How are those arguments related, and why do you think people

engage in both this nostalgia, in this false nostalgia, and this sort of notion that world order is kind of a normal fact of life that should be aspired to?

Shivshankar Menon: Well, I think it's a reassuring thought, right? And certainly those who exercise power in the order would spread the idea that the order is essential, that you need stability, that you need peace. And the fact is, that if you look at the period since World War II, we did experience a tremendous improvement in human welfare, economically, and in various ways, in terms of what science, medicine did for people's longevity.

People live longer, healthier, more prosperous, better lives, than ever before. More people on Earth than ever before. And now do you ascribe that to a world order or not? And that's really the question and that, frankly, I don't have an answer to that. But the fact is that, when people look back at the period since World War II, many people talk of the long peace. But for those of us in maritime Asia, frankly, these were not very peaceful years. They were peaceful in Europe. They were peaceful, you know, across the Atlantic for the US, for Europe, but in "the killing fields of Asia," as Chamberlain calls them, 1,200 people died every day during the Cold War, every day for 45 years. And that's something.

And I think this leads to this problem that we face today. There are large sections of humanity, many countries in the world, who are unsatisfied with the way the world runs. Who feel unsatisfied enough, to want to join something, like over 40 countries want to join BRICS, for instance, an organization which has produced no known outcomes economically, politically, but why do they want to join it, then? I think it's just this unease with the way the world is run, and the way the world works. Whereas there's another huge section of the world which thinks that, look, the world was run perfectly and worked very well. We need to go back to that, and that's where the nostalgia comes in, and where therefore you have people pulling in opposite directions.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: I would love to get to a deeper set of questions about how India views this, and what you think India's role is likely to be, or should be in this current moment of disorder, as you characterize it in the article. But I wanted to ask you, given your deep experience in, with Chinese politics, to ask you about what you are observing with respect to China's engagement with global order right now, because I've been really struck in the past six months.

If you look at the military parade that was held in Beijing last fall, to some other parts of Chinese rhetoric about world politics. China is both positioning itself as

a defender of the post-1945 order in some respects, and clearly, deeply dissatisfied with that order in others. And so you think about something like the Global Security Initiative, which, you know, China says it has gotten sort of positive statements of support, or appreciation, from over a hundred countries, despite not really knowing what they're signing up for, in supporting that initiative.

But I think that speaks to a similar phenomenon, as you were talking about with BRICS, this dissatisfaction, or unease, with the current order, but then you see great powers like China, that are positioning themselves almost simultaneously as a defender of certain parts of the world order, and pushing for revision, or change in others. And I'm curious if you have thoughts on how we explain, or how we should understand that tension, given how much you know about Beijing, and about the way it makes policy.

Shivshankar Menon: That's a fascinating question because I think the Chinese, yes, present themselves as defenders of the post-World War II order. In fact, almost as the last defenders of it, that everybody else seems to have abandoned it, but they seem to have their own definition of what the order was, and that's slightly different from everyone else's experience of it, or everyone else's definition of it.

So I think that's one set of fascinating questions. But quite apart from that, I think for a practitioner like me, the question is, yeah, what are they going to do about it? Do they want an alternate order of their own, which they run? Are they the new British Empire, the new USA? Or are they reverting to tradition now?

You know, I trained as a historian. I tend to think in those terms, and if they're reverting to tradition, and the tradition that they've invented for themselves actually, they're more likely to seek adjustments in the present order, and to create situations where there's sort of anticipatory compliance with China's interests and wishes.

Rather than taking on the responsibilities of running a new world order on their own. I mean, if you think of the US after World War II, the US paid huge prices to establish and run that, manage that order. Was willing to open her markets to the rest of the world, was willing to actually run a financial system, which also benefited others. Worked very closely with developing countries for decolonization, for the dismantling of the old European colonial empires. The US actually has paid prices for the order that she ran after World War II, and I'm not sure that China, so far, has shown the willingness to, when you look at the Global Security Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative and so on.

To the outsider, it looks like, well, motherhood and apple pie. You know, there's a lot of abstract nouns there, all of which sound good, but what it actually means in practice, you really have no way of telling, except by looking at China's actual behavior, of doing what the Chinese say, which is to look at their actions rather than listening to their words.

Judging by that, I think it still has to be proved whether China is willing to assume the responsibilities, the costs, and the burdens of actually running an order, or building an alternate order. What she's done is, where existing institutions have not worked in her favor, she's built new institutions. But otherwise, she's tried to modify the behavior of other actors in the international system to suit herself.

I think we saw a good example of that in China–Canada relations over the last few years, where they've got the Canadians to lower tariffs on Chinese EVs. And in return they make certain, but they created a situation, frankly, they may not have created it entirely. They were helped, but they got a situation which they then used, and I think that's where, I think, we should expect Chinese activism, rather than in the attempt to reproduce previous, the last two world orders.

Frank Gavin: I was very struck by your point about tradition, how historians go back to tradition, and you very effectively talk about how India and China and others have thought about engaging with the world through tradition, and how the notion of world order building–and this very much plays off Sheena's excellent question.

Could you tell the audience a little bit about how you think about the tradition both in India and in China, and thinking about engaging the world, and how it's different, or contrasts with this sort of world order mania that we hear about, all the time, in places like Washington?

Shivshankar Menon: Well it's interesting. If you go back in history, all the way back to Kautilya, say to Chanakya, who now has become, you know, important to Indian strategic thinking. He thinks of the world as having all kinds of states. I mean kingdoms, tribal, confederation, city states, you name it. And for him, the world is, it's multiple.

And his whole book is about, how do you make alliances in that situation? How do you measure a state's strength? How do you work with others in an international situation? Whereas if you look at the Chinese tradition, and not just, but all, most of it, it's essentially a unitary view of the work. I mean, there's

heaven, there's a son of heaven, and there's earth, and frankly, the only limits on the son of heaven, are the limits of the extent of his power.

But wherever civilization reaches, and civilization is defined as Chinese, as *wen hua*, as Chinese literacy, then frankly, it's a single universe. So the temptation to a world order is actually stronger in the Chinese tradition. But that idea of universal kingship, which was fairly common in the ancient world across the board, I think was then modified obviously by their experience, and especially by the Western impact. So if you look at Indian and Chinese thinking today, it's not what it was. But the roots are still there. And the predisposition to go back to those roots, or at least to invent those roots and to claim tradition as authority, is still strong.

Don't forget that nationalisms in both countries have used history, and constructed history, and the imagined past, to achieve their purposes. And in fact, it's one of the gifts the West gave us in some ways. But today it works to affect how we look at world order. For India, we've always had a considerable debate within India, about what sort of world works for us. Now, given our own plural, diverse nature, we tend to look for a similar world outside. Think it'll be better if the world is democratically run.

I tend to see that, at least for China, you know, and the US also constructed essentially a democratic ideal of a world order, a plural one, as President Kennedy said. But, for China, I'm not so sure that that's the way they see world order. They see it much more in a hierarchical order sense, rather than as how the world is run. You know, Frank, you make a very useful distinction between the international system and world order. And I think that's something we need to remember, because how people react to the international system is tactical.

They look at their interests, they see where they can further their interests, but world order is, an actual ordering of the world, of trying to run everyone's affairs, and telling everyone how to run their affairs. And it needs a certain legitimacy. It also needs a certain basis in power. And I'm not sure that today's world, the distribution of power, supports a world order anymore.

If you go back to the Cold War, the 50s, you know, between them, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviet Union and the US basically, had over 80% of the world's economic and military power. Today, I don't think the alliances count for what they did anyway, the Warsaw Pact is gone, NATO, if you judge by what happened in Davos, let's see where it's going.

But today, China and the US together, account for less than 50% of world GDP, and about the same proportion of world military power. That's not a stable basis for a world order. A world order requires a huge imbalance in power and a preponderance, the sort of thing that the US enjoyed after World War II there, or the British Empire had, or the Mongols in the 13th century.

Frank Gavin: I think what's so interesting about that, in your article, is that it's this balance between a nation, an empire, a civilization's history and inclinations which vary, and then these material power aspects, and your essay beautifully balances them both. And I wonder how you think about that mix, right?

Because right off the bat you've explained how India, China, the United States and your piece, to make it very clear, Great Britain, had different traditions, and histories, and thoughts, and inclinations, and temperaments, towards the world. And that's one variable. And the other variable is of course, how much power you have to affect things.

And there's a kind of a second question related to that. Because as I was reflecting on your thoughts about China and the United States, it occurred to me that the United States has always had a kind of actual ambivalence towards order building. That how it feels today, that we may look at the way the United States behaved, let's say from the late 40s, with some interruptions, right, in the 1970s, and then at the end of the Cold War, there were certainly debates that the United States may not be as enthusiastic about order building as we think, it may actually have a view, somewhere in its history, more similar to India's.

So I guess those are the two questions–how the inclination, and your wonderful point about tradition, relates to material capabilities in terms of what shapes those things; and whether or not, when I read your essay, if you agree, that it actually helped me rethink how the United States has thought about this question of ordering.

Shivshankar Menon: Actually, it's interesting that you mention US ambivalence. Some of the US' attractiveness, soft power, actually comes from that very ambivalence. Which bits of US culture spread the fastest? Coca-Cola, blue jeans, and rock and roll, right? These are all the things your mother told you to stay away from.

They're all symbols of rebellion, and the US offered, as an ideal, democracy, freedom, and rebellion, at the same time. So that ambivalence that you talk about, is actually a strength, and is attractive to people who don't want to be part of some rigid order, established by somebody else, in their sole interest.

So, it's an interesting question that you raise because, it seems to me, that today we're in a situation where the US is no longer offering an idea of an order. And I think the world is a much more complicated place with China rising, with India much more powerful than she's ever been in history, with other countries asserting their own agency.

You've heard Canada speaking of the role of middle powers. So the international situation I think, has evolved to a point where maybe, you know, maybe this is wise of the US, not to speak of an order at this stage. Because I don't see an order emerging out of the international situation as we have it today.

The question is, can we think of an order in the future? Is there an order coming later? I don't know. I find it hard to see that at a time when all the great powers are revisionist, in one way or the other. You know, whether it's the US, I mean– "Make America Great Again." The "again" itself suggests a form of revisionism, or "Build Back Better" was the same.

It's the same when Xi Jinping speaks of China's "Great Rejuvenation." I mean, "re," you know, this is a mythical past. And this idea actually seems to be common across the board, whether it's India, whether it's Russia. Wherever you look, so I'm not sure. As I said, neither the distribution power, nor the ideologies that people are today at least adopting, suggest an early return to another world order.

This, for me as an Indian, is unfortunate. Because as a result of the globalization decades, and certainly the opening up that we did since 1991 onwards, today more than half of India's GDP is the external sector. We need the world, whether it's, you know, for capital, for technology, for you, name it, for access to markets, for commodities, in terms of non-ferrous metals, et cetera, in order to transform India.

And we're not the only ones. I mean China too, if you think of it, 25% of what China eats is imported. She imports six times the ips that she exports. She depends on the world for energy, for commodities, access to markets, because exports still matter considerably, I mean, with a surplus of $1.2 trillion last year.

So you now have a situation which is very different from anything that we've ever known before, where we are inextricably bound to each other in a globalized economy, but we're running local politics. And politics has sort of fragmented us into, so the politics is pulling us in the opposite direction from the globalized economy, and the rules of that economy are being renegotiated as

we speak. We no longer run an international trading system based on MFN, which was the basis of much of what we were doing for decades.

Therefore for me, this is a time change, but it's also therefore a time of hope, because this is a time when you can actually make a difference. Where ideas make a difference, and where I think people like you Frank, and you Sheena, can actually change policy, and direct, and give people ideas of what they can do, and handle things better.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Let me ask you about a discussion that has become more prominent, especially in Washington DC, and in US circles but, to some extent in the global conversation, in the aftermath of the American strike in Venezuela. And that's this discussion of whether or not we are moving toward a pattern in world politics that's characterized by spheres of influence again.

There was this discussion of the Don-roe doctrine, which I understand has now appeared in some formal US diplomatic documents. There is, you know, this discussion of whether or not we are experiencing a resurgence of great power politics, such that the world will sort of be best understood through this old paradigm of spheres of influence.

And I wanted to ask you, first of all, if you think that is inaccurate or a helpful way of understanding what we're seeing in the current global environment. But then second, where does that leave a country like India?

Shivshankar Menon: I'm not sure that a globalized economy permits clear spheres of influence. You know, because that's essentially a political divvying up of the world, and I'm not sure that a) the globalized economy, b) today's technologies. When you look at military technologies, they recognize no such boundaries, whether it's missiles, whether it's, you know, nuclear weapons.

So for me it's unlikely that, you know, history repeats itself, or that you have perfect analogies. People speak of the period before World War I, you know, these are not perfect analogies for where we are today. I mean, the world has changed, so I am a bit hesitant of putting those kinds of labels.

I'm nervous of calling it a multipolar world too, for the same reason. It's not a Cold War world. It's not, you know, I can, there are many things I can say it's not. How do I describe it? That's the problem. I mean, I call it a world adrift, otherwise, I used to say a world between orders, but since I'm no longer sure, there's another order coming.

So I would call it a world adrift, but that doesn't really frighten me too much. Where does it leave India? My mantra is–issue-based coalitions of the willing and able–that depending on the issue, you'll get a different set of actors who have an interest, and who are capable of doing something about it, whether it's, you look at maritime security, for instance.

It's one set of actors in the Indo-Pacific who work together. There's a quad, there's India, the US, Japan, Australia, but when it comes to cybersecurity, you have a whole different set of actors. When it comes to energy security, you'd look at a different set of actors.

So none of these things are permanent. None of their boundaries are clear. States can be on different sides on different issues. So you have this kind of variable geometry today, which operates. For India, it means hard work, but it also means lifetime employment for diplomats.

Frank Gavin: Shankar, I love the phrase, "world adrift," but it brings up two images. One, when I think of the more optimistic side, I think of being adrift in a pool, laying maybe with a nice adult beverage, no thought in the world, just relaxing. But then if I move that from that nice pool where things are contained, and I move to an ocean where I don't know where I am, that I'm adrift and I'm at loose ends, and I'm in a world of fear and uncertainty, being adrift perhaps is not so good.

And I was thinking of the challenge with adrift. You very brilliantly talked about the power of globalization, which generates many of the good parts, appealing, adrift, the sort of material plenty, the greatly improved outcomes, but also the sense of turbulence, and fear, and uncertainty, and how globalization, in your view, fits into that ordering instinct. Can you continue to have the benefits of globalization that, as you correctly point out, have generated some extraordinary outcomes, but have also left us feeling unnerved, unmoored, unattached, and may have brought about some of the recidivist, nationalist issues that you point out?

How do you think about these powerful forces of globalization? And again, how perhaps in the past this was thought, of what's different this time, and how in your mind those two phenomena work together?

Shivshankar Menon: Yeah, that's very hard to say, because it seems to me that even the sort of populism, nativism, whatever the isolationist sentiment that we see politically, and the politics of emotion, for instance, that we see in so many of our countries. I think that itself is a result of globalization.

And certainly in societies like mine, it's the urbanization, the removal of people from, you know, traditional clan, family, village, and the visibility that globalization has brought, or IT has brought, to everybody. They can see what's happening around them in the world, create aspirations. And that has led to actually the use of hyper nationalist politics in some of our countries.

So in some ways these are very linked. I mean, globalization has had both effects. It's had these economic benefits and material benefits, but it's also created the politics which are actually threatening those benefits. So I can't predict where it'll go, frankly, and I don't think anybody knows. But I do see the material benefits of globalization limiting what states have done, and this is why I think it's a very different situation from just pre-World War I, or other periods.

Why does China want you to believe that she respects, or at least projects the idea that she was respecting sanctions on Russia? Because she has much bigger stakes in the Western economy. And why, for instance, does India compensate for her absence from all the large economic groupings? We're not part of RCEP we have, or CPTPP, or any of the others, we're about to sign a broad-based trade and investment agreement with the EU tomorrow.

The EU is the chief guest at our Republic day, today. So I think this tension between nationalist politics, almost nativist politics, and this looking inwards protectionism, and understanding that our interest lies in integrating economically, and working with the rest of the world–this is true of India, it's true of the US, it's true of China, it's true of every country. And I don't see how we're going to work our way out of this very easily, because giving up the economics of it would affect the political future of those who do so, and vice versa.

We are at a moment actually, but this is also an opportunity. When I look at South Asia, for instance, we have a poly-crisis in South Asia, where four of the seven countries in the South Asian regional cooperation are talking to the IMF, or have adjustment programs already. But this is also an opportunity for us to actually integrate our economies and work together, and to open up, and we're willing to do things in crisis, which we can't do normally in normal times, which we find difficult politically in normal times.

So, for me, it's a glass half full, and where it'll end, I don't know. That's an unsatisfactory answer, I realize. I'd like to ask you where you think it's going.

Frank Gavin: I think it was a brilliant answer, and it leads to sort of a follow up, which is, as I think about you laying out the benefits and challenges of

globalization, with the benefits and challenges of order. I think maybe one of the ways to think about it, and this was clearly something that's in the tradition, in histories, that you mentioned in India, of how to best balance and capture the obvious benefits that come from global engagement, while recognizing their costs, some of which are collective, and we have to work together.

And it got me thinking about how we obsess over the security order. But there's many different parts of this order, right? There's many different parts, whether it's, you think of India being a pharmaceutical power, right? And how unbelievably essential that is to global wellbeing, or becoming an IT power, and how in a world of science and knowledge, this globalization has been a multiplier. And the last thing you would want to do is to impede that, and you probably do need some rules. On the other hand, you don't want something that is this overarching, compelled notion of–your political system has to be like this.

So you have to choose this person as an ally and an enemy. And that is what's so, I think, compelling about the vision you lay out and the piece, how you balance and get those benefits in a time where people do feel great uncertainty. And so, is there a way, in your view, of separating out some of those things that you mentioned?

The sort of positive things at a time where there's increased security concerns, or are they always going to be bundled together? I mean, India has to think about this all the time in its relations with the country you know best, China, where there are, there's deep security competition, deep history, but also incredible benefits to engagement.

How should ordering think about that?

Shivshankar Menon: Well, historically, they've always gone together. Times of great political uncertainty and instability, along with great intellectual, technological, scientific advance. If you go all the way back to the axial age, to the 6th, 5th century BC, go back to Abbasid, look at Song China. When China was divided, and weak, and you know, still you had paper money, the compass, gunpowder, I mean, it's right through history. You think of pre-modern Europe, and that's 400 years of war, and the Industrial Revolution, at the same time.

So, I don't think you can ever reconcile the two, but my only point is don't be frightened of this, just use the opportunity. And be willing to accept that, yes, today we're in a time of disorder, and let's deal with this, and let's make the best of this, and let's produce good outcomes out of it. That in the past periods of

disorder have actually led to progress, and to considerable progress, to accelerated progress.

Maybe not in some linear sense, but certainly to jumps in human welfare. That would be my attitude. I don't think there's a resolution to this.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So I love that point about your article, this sort of coexistence of, you know, political churn and technological innovation progress, that comes from disrupting old paradigms across the board.

I guess I wanted to ask you then, where is the room for opportunity here? So, your article mentions that this is a moment where people thinking about what's possible, can potentially have a bigger impact than potentially at other, more ordered, or more structured moments in human history. So I was curious where you see the biggest potential. It's really easy to look at the world today, and be as an individual, or from the perspective of any given country, very anxious about the costs and the risks of the instability.

And we see that in rhetoric from China's comments about, you know, sort of the risks, and the tensions in the international environment increasing, to a lot of the political discourse in the United States, and in Europe. So I wanted to ask you, maybe I'm just looking for a silver lining here, but it sounds like you also see potential for progress. On the political side, how do you find that, how do you look for that? How do you understand and identify the opportunity?

Shivshankar Menon: Well, politically, I think, you know, I'm not sure that the political opportunities really are at home–in India, for instance, for people to see how linked we are to the world today. You look at Indian history, frankly, it's the bits of India which were most connected with the world, and the periods when India was most engaged with the rest of the world, trading both east and west, that India was most prosperous, and did best. And, you know, the chaos actually leads people to see this, to see that in some ways.

And politically, I think the real pressure that this exerts on political leaders to deliver progress at home, to improve the welfare of their own people, is actually not bad as a spur to the right kind of action.

If you look at it globally though, you're undergoing an energy revolution. You have today thanks to, well, medicine, to biology, you have huge advances in human health, and these are spreading, even though there might be commercial, and other interests, in keeping it limited. But in today's world, frankly, these things can't be kept limited or controlled anymore.

You've seen what DeepSeek did and had to go open source, right? But why did they go open source, not out of love for the world, because they were in competition–because of partly the chaos–led them to do the right thing, from the world's point of view. So I see that kind of opportunity, rather than an immediate political opportunity, to impose order and stability. I'm not sure that we'll get very much stability. That doesn't mean that I think that war is imminent tomorrow. This is not a Hobbesian world. As Frank reminded me, I could still get onto a plane in Delhi, come here to the US, and you know, everything worked.

Whether it was immigration, whether it was all the engineering that went into the plane, everything worked. There's still fundamental rules of the road, which I think exist, and there is an order of sorts. So it's not complete chaos or anarchy. It's not a Hobbesian world. Besides, the great paths have selfish interest in respecting some rules of the road, whether it's freedom of navigation on the high seas, even the South China Sea, which is highly disputed.

Basically, there's still freedom of navigation there, because it's in everybody's interest, so far. The trouble will be when somebody decides it isn't, but that hasn't happened yet. So, I think we, when we say world order, I think that's a different order of problems. That's a different issue from the kinds of opportunities that we have at various other levels.

Frank Gavin: This is fascinating, Shankar, I could talk to you forever about these things. I was thinking that one of the reasons I love talking to you so much is because I don't know if we would necessarily describe ourselves as optimists, but we're not pessimists. Our good friend Jim Steinberg, I think, who has a more darker view of the world and recent events–certainly accuses me of that. And I think it's more a healthy, historical sense, that we've seen many of these things before, and that different cultures and civilizations have grappled with far greater things.

One thing I do find both hope and worry about, and I know you think about this a lot, because you teach, and you're a mentor to young people, and there is this sense of both excitement and anxiety. And I wonder both how you see the younger generations when they're in your classroom, or maybe people starting out in their diplomatic careers in India and around the world, and what message you would give to them, or what message you do give to them?

Shivshankar Menon: Well they're a very different generation from ours. You know, my generation came to, well, awareness, in the 60s. That wasn't a very settled, orderly time at all, but we were highly political, and saw the world in

political terms, I think. Today, I think the students I teach, certainly the undergraduates, and some of the others as well, are much more skilled, much more aware of the world, and they're much more knowledgeable.

They've had to compete to get where they are, I mean, to an extent that none of us ever had to, no previous generations I think had to. But the result is, I think my job is to actually get them to realize that, you know, life is unpredictable.

You can't just, you know, build a CV and plan the rest of your life. As John Lennon said, “life is what happens to you while you're making plans,” right? So, and to get them somehow to expand that, and to accept the idea of luck as well. I find that's the one thing that I would tell them. That and accept luck.

I mean, if it's luck, try your luck. Why not? Maybe you're lucky, you know, but accept the fact that sometimes you are going to fail. I think the trouble is we've created such a competitive environment for the next generation, that failure is no longer an option for them–whether it's getting into college, whether it's you know, in fact, all the way from kindergarten onwards.

So the other thing is, of course, that as a practitioner, you know, I find that theory is so seductive, that I often have to bring them back to reality, and to tell them that theory is useful to teach you how to think about reality, but it isn't everything. This is a generation which is highly intelligent, and as I said, has skills and awareness that no previous generation has had. And therefore the seductiveness, special seductiveness of theory.

But that's a practitioner speaking.

Frank Gavin: I think it's a very wise practitioner, a very wise, thoughtful person speaking, and again, just an extraordinary piece. All of our listeners should read Shankar's "A New World Order? Careful What You Wish For." It's just absolutely terrific and I'm still thinking about it, having read it three or four times already.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Likewise, it was a pleasure to edit and to work on, and we're delighted to have it appear in the *Texas National Review*. It really is a thought provoking piece for the moment we're living in.

Shivshankar Menon: Thank you very much.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Thanks for joining us on *Horns of a Dilemma*, the podcast of the *Texas National Security Review*. Our guest today has been

Shivshankar Menon, author of the article, "A New World Order? Careful What You Wish For," which as always can be accessed for free on our website, *TNSR*.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please be sure to subscribe and leave a review wherever you get your podcast.

And you can always find more of our work at *TNSR*.org. Today's episode was produced by *TNSR* Digital and Technical Manager Jordan Morning, and made possible by the University of Texas System. This is Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Frank Gavin. Thanks for listening.