

INTERESTING TIMES

Welcome to the Indian Century

India is winning the standoff between America and China.

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Hosted by **Ross Douthat**

Produced by **Victoria Chamberlin**

Mr. Douthat is a columnist and the host of the “Interesting Times” podcast.

Right now, 21st-century geopolitics seems like it’s defined by the struggle between America and China.

But the major power with the world’s fastest growing economy and largest population isn’t China. It’s India.

And right now, India has a unique role in global politics, doing deals with Europe one day and with Donald Trump the next, all while maintaining a strong partnership with Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

Its large and spreading diaspora gives it a unique cultural influence around the world, one that may only increase as other major powers grow old and people remain India’s most important export. My guest today is a prominent international relations scholar, Amitav Acharya, who’s written about what he calls a multiplex world order. A future where diverse powers compete to shape the world.

I wanted to talk to him about India’s role in this order and also whether there might be an Indian century waiting to be born.

Below is an edited transcript of an episode of “Interesting Times.” We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so using the player above or on the NYTimes app, Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.

Ross Douthat: Amitav Acharya, welcome to “Interesting Times.”

Amitav Acharya: Thank you very much. I’m glad to be here.

Douthat: So I want to talk today about two big related subjects: India as a great power in its own right, and also the impact of the Indian diaspora — of India coming to the U.S. — on the entire world.

But I thought we could start with the story of the last 25 years that a lot of Americans who think about the world and great power competition have in their minds. It’s a story where both India and China have modernized, have developed, have grown, but China has had the faster path. China has roared to global prominence, and India has taken a slower path.

Could you talk about India’s path to development and power over the last couple decades and what that looks like?

Acharya: I think you’re absolutely right that India’s path to economic development, even a strategic role, is slower to evolve.

But let’s not forget history. India was actually a major power. And India actually had a much bigger imprint, at least on Asian international relations, in the 1940s and ’50s, when China was just getting settled into its Communist government. Then India and China almost went parallel in terms of development, but then China took off.

So there is always this India–China narrative comparing these two. Economically, China has done very well and reduced poverty a lot more than India. But India hasn’t done that badly the last few years. Its growth rates are actually higher than China. But it started on a lower base. And India has maintained its open political system, democracy, despite some hiccups and problems.

The main problem with India has been generating employment. This is a challenge for the current government. But I think if the Indians can take advantage of the trade agreements — for example, having more access to the European market, which they never had before, reconciling with the United States and having a fairly good trade deal for India — I think that India can overcome the crisis of the global economy and also in some ways become a little more self-reliant. I think that would be the best-case scenario.

Douthat: Talk about demographics — this is a frequent obsession on the show. One of the striking things about the Chinese position right now is that China's birth rate has collapsed, whereas India, while its birth rate has declined, is entering into what often gets called a demographic dividend sweet spot, which is the period when you have a large young population, and you don't have a large older population to support, which is going to be China's big, big problem. Why does India have a demographic advantage over China right now?

Acharya: Because China is, of course, now paying the price of a very strict one-child policy, and India never had the one-child policy. So India has more of a younger population coming up.

But that can be a mixed blessing, because you have to find jobs for these people, to satisfy these people. India has to improve its educational infrastructure and employment possibilities; that's not a given. But India is more open to integration into the global markets now. So with that trade deal, nobody would've thought that's possible.

So if India can integrate itself more into the supply chain — and it can never be like the factory of the world like China is — but in terms of a combined package of services, technology and manufacturing, India can do quite well.

Douthat: Describe the trade deal that India has just made with Europe, because it's really quite distinctive. I think the European leader, Ursula von der Leyen [president of the European Commission], described it as the mother of all trade

deals, which is not normal European lingo. It has to do with opening markets and opening migration. It's going to allow probably for more Indian migration into Europe. What does this mean for India and the world?

Acharya: I think it's a godsend blessing for Europe at the right time, when they're facing all these tariffs and threats from the United States, because both India and the European Union are on the receiving end of Trump.

For Indians, it's a bit of a surprise in the long term. India has been very protectionist, but I think it opens up Indian exports a lot more and clears a new market at a time when the American market is shrinking for Indians. The European Union doesn't have 19 percent or 18 percent tariffs on Indian exports. Indian exporters will be very happy to have that.

There will also be more investment with the European Union — when it has this trade deal, there will be more investment coming into India as well. It's a great opportunity for India and very timely, but politically also.

Douthat: And more migration, right?

Acharya: Yeah.

Douthat: Which gives you potentially the sweet spot, where India has this potential demographic dividend, but, as you said, India also has unemployment problems. But if you can have more migration to Europe, then maybe the unemployment problems are not as big?

Acharya: Especially when the migration of Indians in the United States is under question because of all these restrictions on H-1B, but that's only one in all-over restrictions on migration. Yes.

Douthat: So we're talking in a context where the Indian government has just negotiated successive trade deals. There's been a deal of some kind with Donald Trump, with the United States. But in terms of Indian companies and Indian products — if you're in Europe or if you're in the United States, you probably have

more of a sense of Chinese East Asian companies as exporters, as people you buy from. What are the companies in India? What are the industries where you would imagine a more open India ends up having more of an imprint on the West?

Acharya: When it comes to Europe, I think it will be agricultural products, textiles and mechanical goods. I think ultimately we will see India moving up the supply chain, just like China did, and also provide Europe with a whole range of products. It could be minerals.

To me, the India-E.U. deal is a very political thing. The significance is more political than economic. Suddenly you have the psychological effect of creating such a large market between the European Union, which is a considerable economic power, and India.

There would be, of course, a further evolution, but I think that India is basically going to import more high technology things from Europe, especially aircraft. They're already importing automobiles. And India has been actually investing in iron and steel, for example, in Europe. And the French have invested in aluminum in India.

But I think this will be more of a resource cum industrial mix rather than a very high tech or purely agricultural or resource export from India to Europe.

Douthat: So it seems like India has a substantial distance to go to get to anything like the point where China is, in terms of being an industrial powerhouse shipping things to the rest of the world. But maybe India's strength lies, then, as a center of power for groups that don't want to be dominated either by China or the United States.

Acharya: Yeah, I agree. But let's keep in mind that China was not always like that. A lot of the exports from China to the rest of the world were actually in terms of products that were built with technology that was borrowed from outside. For example, China can now export fast trains. But originally, it got the technology from Germany and Japan. So what I'm talking about is that India could do the same thing.

One of the problems of the Indian economy is that it has not been integrated well into the global supply chain because of protectionism. There is a political argument, an ideological argument in India about having big corporations, foreign corporations. But Europeans may be more acceptable now than American corporations.

Now it has a chance to have more investment and then use that to move up the supply chain and move up the industrial scale. Also in the services sector, in which India is very, very well endowed, especially the high-technology services sector

So this is an opportunity. India is not going to have the industrial revolution like China had — that stage has passed. It's not going to become the factory of the world like China has become. That window has closed. But the next stage of economic development, a combination of industrial and high technology services — India still needs to find that niche and still move off from exporting raw materials or textiles and the like.

Douthat: Tell me about India's relationship with Russia.

Acharya: Very close. People, especially in the United States, don't understand it. It goes back to the '70s, when the United States and India, after having a fairly good start, actually went to different camps. The U.S. supported Pakistan, and India had to look to Russia for help.

The 1971 India-Pakistan war over Bangladesh was a turning point, where Nixon and Kissinger deployed the Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, and India had to conclude a defense treaty with the Soviet Union. So that memory remains.

And the Soviet Union — now, of course, Russia — became the largest supplier of defense equipment to India. So the Russians have been fairly reliable and fairly friendly partners with India for a very long time.

There is a historical memory that is in some ways sentimental, I would say. I grew up in India during the Soviet Union and I have felt that the Indian view of the Soviet Union was nothing like the Western view. It was seen as friendly, much

more benign than many of the former colonial powers or the United States. So that remains.

Douthat: How does that translate into the Putin era?

Acharya: OK, the Putin era — India has continued because it's dependent on Russia for weapons. The new element is energy dependence — India did not actually import a lot of oil from Russia until the Ukraine war. Most of the Indian supply of oil came from the Middle East. But when the Ukraine war started, Russia started selling discounted oil, so India became heavily reliant on Russian oil. That's not permanent. That can change.

India, of course now under the Modi government, moved much closer to the U.S. than any previous government had been, and they invested a lot on this relationship. I have talked to Indian leaders and they said: This is the best relationship we've had with the U.S. in a long time.

The United States accepted India's nuclear power status. This was not Trump — it started with George W. Bush. He was hugely popular in India because of that change of policy. So with that, relations with Russia were not as special as they could have been.

India, as you know, is a nonaligned or multi-aligned country in terms of foreign policy. India felt that it could maintain good relations with its traditional partner, the Russians, and continue to get weapons. India wanted to maintain that relationship and diplomatic support from Russia, but at the same time cultivate closer relations with the U.S.

So you can say it's multi-alignment. You can say it's playing it both ways, of having your cake and eating it too.

Douthat: And how long can you do that? On the one hand, obviously there's the challenge of managing a relationship with the United States when the U.S. is supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, and when Russia seems aligned with

China against the U.S. But then, even if that shakes up a bit, as it has under Trump, and India decides to move into closer alignment with Europe. But Europe is at war with Putin.

Basically, I'm asking: Is there a way for India to have a sustainable non-American, non-Chinese bloc? Or is it always just going to lean toward Russia one moment, and lean toward the E.U. the next?

Acharya: That's a good question. First of all, the Indian policy has always been not to depend too much on one country or align with one power. So it was nonaligned. Now it's multi-aligned.

Douthat: Multi-aligned. Right.

Acharya: So I think the rationale for that is very clear, that you don't have to choose sides. You can have some benefits by having that kind of balanced relationship. But that policy would work as long as the United States doesn't say: OK, either you are with us, or you're against us.

It's only under Trump 2 that the U.S. started saying: You have to choose.

Douthat: This has been mostly about energy, saying that you need to stop buying from Russia?

Acharya: Yeah, mostly about energy. But I think there was also, even under the Biden administration, a thing where India was playing both ways. There was always the feeling of unease about India voting in the United Nations against the United States, like India's position in things like Ukraine, where India abstained.

I have always argued in some of my writings that you cannot have sustained this for too long. At some point, there will be a tension, and then you have to choose or you will get into problems. And that's exactly what has happened.

At the same time, the European Union is a relatively new thing. Moving so close to the European Union as a group — this is a very rules-bound, very conservative beast.

Douthat: [Chuckles.] The Europeans like rules. They really do.

Acharya: They also have human rights. They have democracy.

I can tell you this: I work with some NGOs in India, and many of them get grants from the European Union base, like German foundations. The rules are now so strict that everything has to be linked to human rights and democracy. And some of the foundations have closed their offices in India and moved to Nepal and other places. I think the Indians don't like that, but I think it's a smart deal.

The bottom line is that there is no reason India cannot have good relations with multiple powers. But when one of these big powers is saying that you have to choose, then it becomes complicated.

Douthat: Strategically, what does India want? Is this just a matter of, "We're not one of the superpowers, we're just trying to play the best hand we can"? Or are there a set of geopolitical objectives that India's interested in?

I think, again, Americans are accustomed to the idea that China wants Taiwan, China wants a certain kind of dominance in East Asia, China has some client states in Africa — there's a sense of Chinese grand strategy. What is Indian grand strategy?

Acharya: There is an argument that India doesn't have a grand strategy. I don't believe in that. But let me say, Indians don't want to be a superpower in the same sense as China.

I have lived in China, actually, much longer in the last 20 years than I have lived in India, and in China, there's an obsession with being No. 1. They won't say it, they won't admit it, but they compete with the United States to overtake the United States. They have all sorts of studies looking at the relative power of nations.

India has very little of that. India just wants to have status. And the keyword is status as a great power, status as respect in the international community — what it used to have. And I think that means a little more realistic view of what India can do.

On the other hand, some Indians see their economy growing. Its overtaken its former colonial master, Britain. And they see India as the largest country, No. 1 in terms of population. Many projections put India within the top three leading economies in the world, after the United States and China, or China and the United States. So they see a potential to be recognized as a great power.

However, they look around the world and they see that they're not getting that respect. And it's because everybody's obsessed with China. At the moment, China is the name of the game.

So Indians, you can say there is a complex here. I won't say inferiority complex but it's a sense that they're not getting the fair recognition that they deserve, that's what they want.

And they thought they were on the way to get this. Then President Trump's tariffs — India getting, until now, 50 percent — is a big insult.

Douthat: But shouldn't they take it as a compliment? Trump wanted to put those tariffs on China too, right? It's a sign —

No, I'm joking, obviously. But it is, in its own way — the scale of the tariffs that Trump wants to impose on you should not necessarily be taken as an insult.

Acharya: Well, I think it's not China — it's Pakistan. Pakistan got 19 percent and Pakistan gets a visit to the White House. And India got 50 percent.

So now of course it's the other way around: India got 18 percent and Pakistan is very unhappy.

Douthat: So let's talk about, then, two concrete expressions of Indian power: The relationship with Pakistan, and the relationship with China.

Let's say we're living through a 15- to 20-year period where India's influence and power are going to increase. What does success for India look like with its less powerful, but nuclear-armed rival Pakistan, and its more powerful neighbor, China?

Acharya: This depends on whom you ask. For foreign policy—

Douthat: I'm asking you.

Acharya: OK. My sense is that for India, if India can achieve the kind of growth and become the third-largest economy, not necessarily overtaking China, but maintaining political system openness and more diplomatic influence, I think that will be quite acceptable to India.

India is not a revisionist power. India is a status quo power. So I think that's what success would mean. And domestically, at home, generate more employment. you cannot have the third-largest economy without having a sustainable employment and industrial base.

With Pakistan, it's terrorism. There is of course Kashmir and other issues, but it's all linked, from the Indian perspective, to support for terrorism. And they see that. They see the West not really understanding India's position. And then China's support for Pakistan — China is the biggest, they say, ironclad relationship with Pakistan. They see that Pakistan will not be as adventurous or as assertive vis-à-vis India without Chinese help.

That's what gets Indians angry about China. Otherwise, I don't think there is any dimension that cannot be diplomatically addressed between India and China

Douthat: What changes the situation for the better for India? Is it just economic growth? Or is there a level of military power where India thinks that it could get Pakistan isolated and force China to be friendlier?

Acharya: I think nuclear weapons play a big role here. Pakistan has nuclear weapons. But China is also a much bigger nuclear power.

For a while, Indian foreign policy moved in the direction of ignoring Pakistan and engaging China. So it's China they have to deal with. China is a true peer competitor rather than Pakistan.

Douthat: How strong is India's military apart from nuclear questions? You mentioned, obviously it's importing weapons from Russia, importing weapons from the United States. How significant a global force is the Indian military potentially?

Acharya: It depends on the location. If it comes to the Indian Ocean, which is India's backyard, Indian capabilities are very significant. In terms of the global power projection, I don't think India has the capability. India has participated in U.N. peacekeeping.

So I think India focuses on the Indian Ocean. The Chinese, of course, are building a blue-water navy, and they want to go into the Indian Ocean — they're already in the Indian Ocean. And India feels that it can act as a deterrent or counter to Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean, and Indian strategic thinking is helpful to the West.

So Indian strategic doctrine focuses, along with nuclear capability, in the power projection within the Indian Ocean.

Douthat: I want to move to culture, but let's try and make a bridge between geopolitics and culture.

Narendra Modi, the Modi government, has been in power for some time now. The Modi government is Hindu nationalist. It has a particular conception of Indian civilization rooted in Hindu religion, Hindu identity. Is there a kind of cultural geopolitics where Indian nationalists imagine themselves as dominant in a civilizational space, where all of South Asia is shaped by Hindutva, this religious ideology or political religious ideology?

Acharya: That's a very good question. Certainly, under the current ruling party, or B.J.P. — Modi's party — the B.J.P.'s ideology is based on Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva. But I think you can say that some of the domestic politics of India have moved in that direction, and it is creating a lot of concern among the Muslims, among the secular forces in India, which are still very substantial.

At the same time, the civilizational narrative you're talking about — that India is one of the great civilizations — there's a big debate in India about whether Indian civilization was born in India and went overseas and influenced the whole world —

Douthat: Yes.

Acharya: — Or whether Indian civilization actually is kind of a hybrid. There was a pre-existing civilization in the Indus Valley, and then we had migration from the Pontic Steppes to Central Asia, Persia, and it's become a hybrid civilization — that's the view I take.

But that's not the view of some of the key members of the ruling elite or ruling party in India. And that creates aggravation and fear among the neighbors, but also within India, among the secular forces, which are still quite substantial.

Douthat: The idea that Indian civilization is something that's born in India and then spreads around the world is obviously relevant to an age when Indians have spread around the world. Modi has, I think, very explicitly talked about the Indian diaspora as a mode of Indian national influence.

But let's talk about the diaspora. Let's talk about America. You mentioned that in the United States, relations have been better than ever, up until very recently. Trump in particular spent a lot of time courting Indian American voters. He did an event with Modi in 2019 — “Howdy Modi” in Texas. It's an amazing name.

But then, in the second Trump term, there's been a swing. And it isn't just a swing where Trump is imposing tariffs on Europe. It's also a swing where there is this kind of anti-Indian backlash on the right.

Tell me where you think that comes from, but also just talk about how you think Americans see India — or see Indians, I think, is the better way to put it.

Acharya: By the way, don't forget that Modi had one of the biggest rallies right next to Madison Square Garden.

Douthat: New York as well as Texas. All the centers — yeah.

Acharya: So I think, generally, Modi has used that as a foreign policy tool. It's partly genuine, but it's also partly a significant foreign policy asset.

So how about the American perception of India? First of all, Americans don't know much about India. I'm sorry to say this. India doesn't strike American imagination the way the Chinese do, and also, in some ways actually, the way the Soviet Union did, because it was a threat for a different reason.

There are many more universities with centers for China studies, Americans going to study in China, getting trained in the language — this goes back to the Cold War period. There's nothing like that. As a professor, I can tell you that India studies nothing comparable. American students and American academic institutions, to some extent, think tanks too, are catching up now. But nothing like China.

As you know, the United States is not a country where there's a lot of interest in foreign cultures. I can tell you that I have a son who just graduated from school and they studied China, Europe, Rome, Greece. Not much about India. So that's part of the problem.

Americans don't go to India as large numbers as tourists. So because of that, we have had this relative ignorance about India and neglect of India. We talk about democracy, but the U.S. and India, the largest democracies in the world — that's rhetoric. It doesn't really translate into endearment of India in the American public imagination.

Now you did mention the Indian diaspora, which is quite influential politically, although smaller than China, but more successful economically.

Douthat: Part of my perception about the place of India in the U.S. is that there's this way in which Indian immigrants have been more successful at attaining positions of elite influence. This is most obvious maybe in Silicon Valley, but you can also see it in U.S. politics — and in both political parties. It's Vivek Ramaswamy and Usha Vance, as well as Indian Americans in the Democratic Party.

Acharya: And Kash Patel. Yeah.

Douthat: But there's a flipping back and forth, where at certain moments, Indian success drives a kind of admiration where it's like: This is the successful minority.

But then you have, especially just in the last couple years on the right, a flip against a sense that Indian Americans — that there's abuse of H-1B visas and people forming “ethnic mafias” inside Silicon Valley. That kind of narrative takes hold. How do you see that?

Acharya: I think it's a real problem. And it's partly — well, I'm not going to fault anybody, but it's partly the way the Indian diaspora, especially the tech elite in the U.S., conducts itself.

I have heard this story about Indian dominance of Silicon Valley as a factor of why many non-Indians, especially from Southeast Asia, have left Silicon Valley. So I think maybe they don't realize it, but that perception remains.

And also, maybe getting into some controversial issues here, but the H-1B visa is partly how American companies recruited them. You have, what? Seventy percent until recently of H-1B visas. This obviously creates a perception.

That's a huge number. And even though they're all qualified, that number, when it gets into the public domain, people probably did not know about it. Now it's out in the open. They think: Why should any particular minor ethnic group have a hugely disproportionate share of the visas?

So this was partly an expected reaction, especially at a time when populism is growing in the U.S. You have the base. I can tell you that the Indian diaspora that gets H-1 B visas are not taking any jobs from the kind of support base of President Trump. I think these are completely different levels of skill.

But certainly it creates the perception of one ethnic group benefiting from American largesse at the expense of Americans. And I think that it can be addressed and I think maybe some reform there could be useful.

There are other ways for Indians to come in. Not all Indians, initially when they came to the U.S., came on the H-1B visa. People forget that narrative. Everything focuses on the Silicon Valley H-1B.

I think the main thing is that the political climate in the U.S. has narrowed populism. There's an overall anti-immigrant sentiment. A few years ago, during Covid, it was the Chinese. The Chinese brought Covid into the U.S., and now Indians are taking jobs away from Americans. So this is very political.

Douthat: Do you think that there is a natural political or ideological direction the Indian diaspora in the U.S. takes? Historically, Indian Americans have tended to vote for the Democrats, like most immigrant groups. The Trump administration definitely courted them. You have prominent Indian American Republicans. But if you were placing a bet on the political direction of the Indian American community, what would you —

Acharya: OK, without going into specific numbers here, I can only talk about my own observation. I think I've seen very successful Democrats who are of Indian origin and very successful Republicans of Indian origin. But what actually strikes me is I have seen more Indian Americans or Americans of Indian origin — meaning they might have been born in the United States, but they are ethnically Indian — have become more conservative.

Douthat: Why?

Acharya: If you want me to speculate —

Douthat: Yes.

Acharya: I would say that it's always a bit easier to — the American public has turned, except in the liberal Eastern states and California. If you're living in the Deep South — and a lot of Indians are there — you feel more at home identifying with the Republican narrative, the conservative narrative. And also, politicians in the U.S. being hard-line conservative, saying very anti-immigrant things, identifying with a very conservative agenda probably gets you more assimilated.

Douthat: I think your point about assimilation is well taken. I think people — liberals and progressives — sometimes underestimate how embracing a certain kind of nationalism as an outsider can be a way to assimilate, which is why it's not always the case that immigrants or minorities are just natural liberals.

Does the European landscape look different? In the U.K., you have a lot of Indians in elite roles. Now that Europe is opening further, do you see the Indian diaspora playing a big role in the European landscape? How does it look different from the U.S.?

Acharya: Well, Europe is a much older society, right? It's a much older civilization than the United States. The United States still is a migrant community. With a respect to the Native Americans, it is a new society. It doesn't have the same traditions, religions, and same monuments, for example, that you can go back and say: Oh, this is the Christian emperor so and so.

That's why the U.S. provides much more of a broad space for adaptation and assimilation. It is, in a sense, an immigrant society and being American means being a little bit of everything. Europe is still very traditional in that sense.

I think the United States, unless there is a social revolution here and a revival of Christianity, the Indian community in the U.S. will also become more open-minded and more assimilated, the way American society generally is.

It'll certainly not be able to do the same thing in Europe, with the possible exception of Britain, where as you know, there's a large Indian community, but there's also a large Pakistani community.

Douthat: So part of what's fascinating to me about the European deal is that, one, Europe needs people more than the U.S. does. Europe is older, has lower birthrates. There's more of a need for immigrants in Europe than in the U.S.

Europe has had a very difficult experience assimilating immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. And you have much starker conflicts in Europe between native populations and Muslim immigrants. So now, it's like Europe is saying: Well, we're going to take a lot more immigrants from India.

And so you're creating, it seems, almost a fascinating triangle there between native populations, Muslim immigrants, Middle East, North Africa, and then potentially Indian immigrants as well. That just seems like a very potentially volatile mix.

Acharya: I'm a little more optimistic.

Douthat: OK.

Acharya: First of all, Europe cannot compete with Australia, Canada, or the United States.

Douthat: As potential destinations that Indians want to go to?

Acharya: Yeah. It takes much longer, is much harder. I lived in Britain, worked there. I got an H-1B visa and then got one of those genius visas to settle here. Much easier — until now.

Europe also has social resistance to immigration, and that's not just [toward] Muslims. To some extent, for anybody coming from outside. They want to preserve their own culture and hate us a lot more because they see themselves as a very traditional society, going back much longer than, say, the United States.

You also have to look at the supply side. Maybe Indians still think of the United States and also Canada as a more open opportunity. There are many more opportunities here. This might all change, but there are many more opportunities for them. There's still talk about the American Dream, despite what has happened in the last year or so.

I don't think Europe can compete. Even the U.K.

Douthat: But even if the Indian government feels like it has a really strong interest in encouraging immigration to Europe? This has been offered to me as one of the solutions to the unemployment problems you mentioned, that maybe the Modi government or Indian government might say: Well, we have a lot of unemployed young men, and it wouldn't be the worst thing if they went and worked in Europe.

Acharya: They might think of that, but this will be heavily resisted because they will see that it's basically passing the buck to Europe. So the challenge for the Modi government is to create more opportunities and bring the diaspora back to India.

And some people are now talking about whether with the H-1B visa crisis, many of the Indians are going back. I've seen this in social media talks that maybe it's time to go back home. For these people it may be easier to get jobs because they are already well trained. But what about the rural Indians who are looking for jobs? I think we have to expand the economy, and that's the challenge.

So if any government, whether Modi or a successor, tries to export its problem to Europe, it is not going to succeed because most Indians, they will keep a foot on both sides — they will keep a foot in India, and they'll keep a foot in the immigrant country. But I think given a chance to come back and have a reasonably good life in India, they'll come back to India.

Douthat: What does India want from its diaspora?

Acharya: Get money.

Douthat: Get money?

Acharya: Yeah, it's a big export for India. But they also want loyalty. Loyalty meaning always thinking of Indian interests. India has facilitated, in some ways, allowing people with Indian connections born in India to go back and live in India. So India definitely wants them.

Douthat: Does India want its diaspora to make Europe or the United States or any other democratic country more sympathetic to India?

Acharya: Oh yeah. That's definitely the policy of the current government.

Douthat: Yes.

Acharya: There's absolutely no question about. But why not? Why can't you do that? We have examples of the Jewish diaspora supporting Israel. We have examples of the Irish—

Douthat: I'm not offering this as criticism. I'm offering it in terms of an understanding of the future.

Acharya: I can say that that's true, but it's not the only reason. The economic financial side is very important.

Secondly, it comes and goes with who is in power. In fact, I've seen former Indian leaders going to Africa and other places say: You should identify with the aspirations of your own country — people like Nehru, to counter that kind of immigrant nationalism, pro-Indian nationalism in other countries, because they know that this will create tensions and this will also become an anti-Indian thing like what happened in Uganda, for example, when Indians were expelled.

So I think there will be a limit. But currently, it is an instrument of foreign policy.

Douthat: Pull up to close. It's 2060. Everything has gone as well for India as could be imagined in that time. How would you describe the Indian place in the world, in that future?

Acharya: If everything goes well, I still think India will be the third-largest economy and not the top economy. There have been some studies that put India as the No. 1 economy, overtaking the United States and China. But the gap between India and China will be less — much less — and possibly, the gap between India and the United States will be much less.

India's main problem is not human resources or lack of talent. It's the domestic politics. India has serious domestic fractures and frictions. So I would worry a bit about India continuing as a united, integrated country. I'm optimistic it will, but we cannot take it for granted. But if India does that, it'll be one of the most respected powers in the world. It will not only have hard power, but also a lot of soft power. That's the very optimistic scenario.

The pessimistic scenario will be domestic breakdown in India, turning very nationalistic, war with Pakistan that damages both the countries very seriously, and also China.

I'm an optimist and I think India has the resources, the population base, and the human talent. I think generally it'll be very beneficial. India will not be a divisive country in the world order, I can tell you that. I don't see that, as far as the diaspora is concerned. They want to mix with people. They want to make a contribution. They want to be recognized. They want to get respect. So I think they will be a very unifying force, even for the West. They will be an asset to the West. If that sounds too optimistic, maybe I am an optimist.

Douthat: That's a good place to end. Amitav Acharya, thank you so much for joining.

Acharya: Thank you very much.



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Thoughts? Email us at interestingtimes@nytimes.com.

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Ross Douthat has been an Opinion columnist for The Times since 2009. He is also the host of the Opinion podcast “Interesting Times.” He is the author, most recently, of “Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Reli
@DouthatNYT • Facebook

