

# 'The virtues of the old world order are exaggerated'

India's foreign minister is unsentimental about the fracturing of the post-1945 system. Over masala dosa in London, he talks to *Alec Russell* about his country's enduring bond with Russia, dealing with a transactional Trump – and what cricket taught him about the merits of unpredictability

A few dozen Sikh separatist activists are protesting noisily outside the central London hotel where the target of their ire is staying. On a quiet Sunday morning, their chants echo through Westminster and St James's Park. But it is going to take more than that to put India's steely and erudite foreign minister off his stride. S Jaishankar has been on something of a grand tour of the west – and at quite a time.

I have been taking "the pulse at the epicentre of the alliance", he says after slipping unobtrusively into the restaurant at the Taj Hotel. It is hard not to conclude that he has enjoyed his peripatetic 2025 immensely.

Jaishankar is India's longest-serving foreign minister since the independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru, who was prime minister and foreign minister for 17 years. In his nearly six years in office he has been a leading voice in arguing that the "liberal rules-based order" is biased and in need of a shake-up. Now he has had a ringside view for some of its most destabilising moments since it took shape 80 years ago.

His Brunch with the FT in London comes at the end of a whirlwind seven weeks taking in Donald Trump's inauguration, the Munich Security Conference, and hosting most of the European commissioners in Delhi even as Europe agonised that Trump was reading the last rites on the post-1945 western alliance. My guest cuts a dapper, elfin figure and he parries criticism like a champion fencer. As the public face of India's nationalist government, he can also have an icy tongue.

Jaishankar takes charge of the menu and orders for us both a masala dosa, the crisp fermented batter with potato, spices and chutneys, which is a staple of southern Indian breakfasts. He opts to start with a portion of *upma*, a semolina porridge. I broach the small matter of the upheaval in the western order.

"This was a long time coming," he says. "There appears to be some surprise that he [Trump] is actually doing what he said he would do. I'm not surprised. Maybe I took him more at face value . . ." Americans have become weary of global entanglements, he says, and feel the "benefits are less and the costs more" than they used to be.

"I'm not being entirely facetious, a multipolar world used to be our talking point. It's now become the American talking point."

So will he miss anything about the old order? "It's not a question of missing this or liking that. I got what I got. I'm a realist," he says. "I don't conduct foreign policy by saying I wish it could have been this or I wish we could go back or I wish this didn't happen. It's happened."

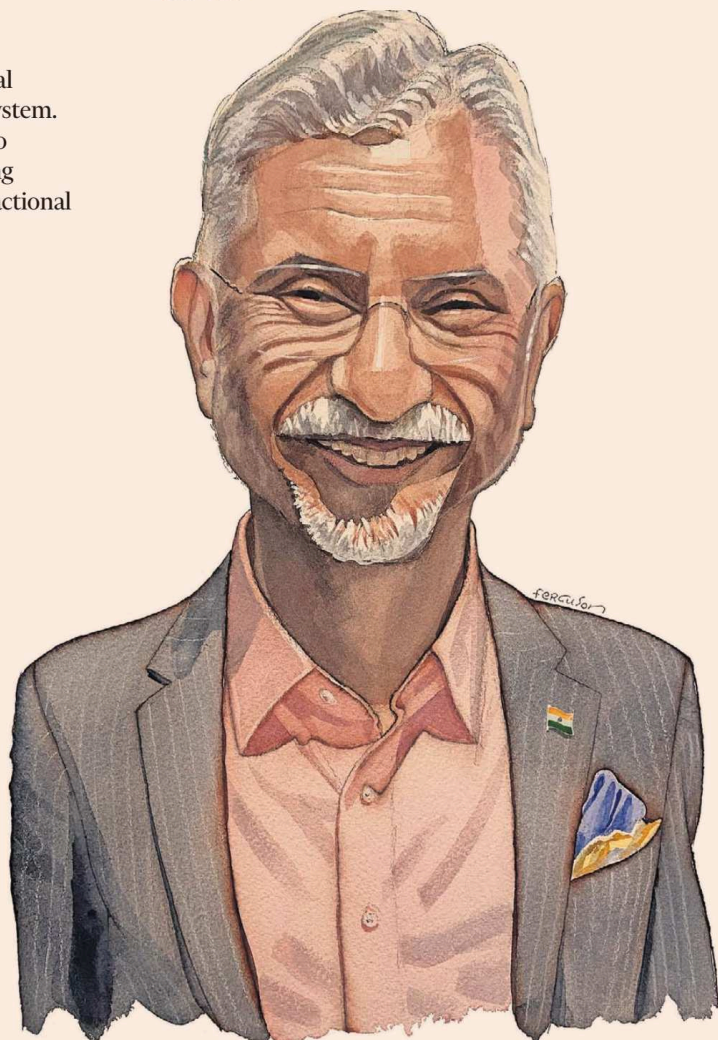
"I'm not saying everything before was entirely bad or entirely good," he adds, highlighting how India's economy has expanded in recent years to become the world's fifth-largest. "I think that's not the way reality works."

Henry Kissinger, a renowned believer in *realpolitik*, lauded Jaishankar shortly before he died in 2023 as the practising politician most in tune with his approach. Is he happy with the idea of being a Kissingerian?

"In my part of the world that's not necessarily a compliment," he deadpans. Kissinger played a key part in restoring ties between the US and China, India's great regional rival, and backed its arch foe Pakistan in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. Jaishankar says they knew each other for many years and would talk often. "But I profoundly disagreed with him on many issues," he adds, especially on China. Kissinger became too close to Beijing, he says, and so stopped having a realist's view of it. "When you are over-invested in any relationship, it clouds your judgment."

Jaishankar is warming to his theme when his *upma* arrives. When I look surprised at the idea of having semolina for breakfast, he asks the waiter to bring me a bowl and asks if I am interested in the history of food. "The Romans were very fond of semolina," he says. "Interestingly the Russians eat a lot of semolina as well; they have porridge in the morning made out of semolina."

My bowl swiftly follows. Fortified like a Roman legionary, I quote a line from



## Lunch with the FT S Jaishankar

**TAJ HOTEL**  
54 Buckingham Gate,  
London SW1E 6AF

Upma x2	
Masala dosa x2	
Paratha	
Guava x2	
Papaya x2	
Coffee x2	
Fruit juice x2	
<b>Total (incl tax and tip)</b>	<b>£56.25</b>

his latest book, where he elaborates the "India First" foreign policy of his boss, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There he approvingly cites Ram, a god-king in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, as the epitome of a rules-based order. So given that he does seem to believe in such a system, how should a successor to the post-1945 order operate?

"If we don't have an order then you are looking at a very anarchic world . . . very Hobbesian," he says. "Unrestrained competition would add to the stresses and in some way constrain the benefits. No question there should be an order. [India wants] something more than evolutionary but which is comfortable and steady," he says. But it has to reflect the world as it is now and not as it was post-1945 when "the rules were weighted in favour of the west."

His drive to reform the global architecture such as the UN Security Council is incontestable. But his depiction of India as a wholly unthreatening actor does not appear to chime with Canada's allegations that Indian agents were linked to the assassination of a Sikh separatist activist there in 2023 – a charge that India denies.

As the US retreats, there's a stark interpretation of our world, I say: what if we are entering an age of "might is right"?

Jaishankar looks at me as a *naïf*. "There was always an element of that, that 'might is right'," he says. "I think the virtues of the old order are somewhat exaggerated. Sometimes when you are on the receiving end of the [decisions of the global order] you have a slightly different view."

Foreign policy is in the 70-year-old Jaishankar's DNA. His father was a legendary public servant, one of the most outspoken advocates of India's acquiring nuclear weapons. His son runs a think-tank in Washington DC. He himself had a glittering career as a diplomat, serving as ambassador in Beijing and Washington, before in 2015 becoming foreign secretary, the equivalent of permanent under-secretary of the UK Foreign Office. It was in that role that he caught Modi's eye.

As his *dosa* arrives – and as, on his advice, my soggy untouched one is swapped with a fresh hot version – he spoons back to growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. "He [my father] would encourage us to challenge him," he says. At some point when he was thinking of finishing a PhD, his father said, "Would you rather spend your life analysing what others have done? Or would you rather have somebody one day analyse what you have done?"

That question has piquancy today. When Jaishankar became minister of external affairs in 2019, many of Delhi's liberal intelligentsia thought that to join the government was a betrayal. His Bharatiya Janata party, which won a third term last June, pursues a Hindu nationalist agenda. What of the idea that he was selling his soul? Did he hesitate over entering politics?

"That wasn't an issue for me at all," he says. "I'm not the first guy who's done it. And I was very comfortable with the politics of my party. We were a very nationalist household and my father drilled that into us. The culture, the thinking [of the party], that was not an issue at all. I was very much in sync with that."

When I ask what he learnt from last year's election, when Modi fell short of the majority his party had coveted, Jaishankar highlights the difficulties of being an incumbent running for a third term – and the BJP's victory in three recent regional elections. Modi's opponents say he has undermined independent institutions, including the judiciary and the media. The BJP is also accused of overseeing a triumphalist Hindu majoritarian rule and riding roughshod over concerns of its large Muslim minority. I ask my guest for his response to the last Indian to have Lunch with the FT, lawyer Indira Jaising, who said "the rule of religion is replacing the rule of law."

"Other than laugh scathingly?" Jaishankar says. "We are a secular country . . . Secularism does not mean you suppress your own religion. Unfortunately . . . it became a political fashion to say that the majority should not express its faith or should keep it within itself."

"I think this belief was a very elitist view of a certain generation. I think the country has moved on and they don't seem to have understood it."

It is a familiar refrain. Modi has sometimes dismissed the Delhi chattering class as the "Khan Market gang", a reference to a high-end market. I ask if the FT is part of the gang. Jaishankar just smiles. The old Indian elite tried to imitate the west, he says, as a sign of modernity, whereas India today is more confident about being non-western but not necessarily anti-western.

Since the end of the cold war, when India was non-aligned but had warm ties to Moscow, Delhi has moved ever closer to the US. The bond looks set to be its tightest yet with the like-minded nationalists Trump and Modi in charge. So far India has not faced the fusillade of threats that Trump has levelled at America's traditional allies, although he has threatened to hit India with reciprocal tariffs. I flag up that Trump has called India the "biggest tariff abuser".

"We have our issues," says Jaishankar, who – unsurprisingly – is at his most emollient when it comes to talking of America. "I can see he [Trump] has his concerns." He predicts America and India will reach a trade agreement this year. Is Trump, I ask, also a realist?

He is, Jaishankar says, but "because you're a realist doesn't mean you don't have beliefs and convictions and feelings. They coexist. I do think he's a very strong nationalist and in pursuit of his nationalist goals he's very realist about many parts of the world."

So what about his unpredictability? I cite Ric Grenell, a Trump aide, who told the FT last year that "predictability is a terrible thing". Jaishankar veers off via his beloved sport, cricket, and recalls a 1950s player for England, Brian Statham, who was so good at delivering the ball in the right place that, brilliant as he was, he became predictable.

"The moment you become predictable, you've handed something over to the other side," he says.

I note the consternation of many of America's allies over the uncertainty of dealing with Trump. Could his trademark unpredictability not backfire on India? Jaishankar brushes this aside. The post-1945 western order was buttressed by treaty alliances, he says, whereas India has been pursuing a looser form of relationship, such as the Quad, the grouping of India, Japan, Australia and the US.

"You have comfort, you have commonalities. It's more like a club. You don't have legal contractual obligations with other members but it's a gathering place . . . The treaty-based concepts are typical of the old order. The new order is something more flexible."

A delicious flaky, buttery paratha has followed my *dosa*. Jaishankar orders a papaya. I raise that other go-to adjective for Trump: "transactional".

"Transactional' has become a pejorative," he says. "At the end of the day we all do transactions. I do it because that's what all of us do. I'm on record to say I have beliefs. I'm more comfortable with some countries than others. I'm not against transaction, but I'm not an advocate of being purely transactional." Beguiled by the juicy papaya in front of my guest, I order one too, and turn to the west's most neuralgic issue with India: Moscow.

India's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its decision to keep buying Russian oil have infuriated western officials. All the while, Jaishankar has stuck to his script: namely that Europe has a perspective on the war, India has its own, and also has an old link with Russia that it is not going to jettison.

"What happens is that people often try to make these big issues of principle," he says. "Usually you invoke a principle when you want to persuade or pressure somebody to do something."

When I ask whether Russia's increasing reliance on China poses a problem for India, he takes the long view. Since the mid-20th century, India's relationship with Russia has remained quite steady, he says, even as the relationships

between Russia and China, Russia and the west, and the west and China have all fluctuated. "I'm a very empirical person. If I have 80 years of data which suggest a relationship has very firm foundations I would tend to use that as a working assumption."

Three and a half thousand miles away in Dubai, India's superstar cricket team are playing in the final of the year's biggest international tournament. Jaishankar's staff are following the game on their smartphones at a nearby table. We agree on a break for a match update and order coffee.

India's boon in this age of fluid geopolitics is to be able to say to the west that it is not China – and to the rest of the world that it is not the west. Some diplomats speculate that as part of its multi-aligned formula, India is trying to improve ties with China.

Jaishankar accepts my contention that the relationship with Beijing "hasn't gone so well for us". This he blames largely on China's stance over clashes between its forces and India's on their border in 2020. "You can't have a bad situation on the border and then a good situation in the relationship. People make out as though there is something very difficult or profound that I have said. To me it's common sense."

So would it not be problematic for India, I ask, if Trump does a "big

**'It's not a question of missing this or liking that. I got what I got. I'm a realist'**

beautiful deal" with China? "Life is full of what-ifs," he says. "Sometimes they happen. Many times they don't. You don't spend life worrying about what-ifs. You spend your life preparing for what-ifs."

The wind of history is at his back for now. On the global stage, just about everyone apart from China needs India, even if it is not so easy closer to home. For Delhi, ever on its mind is the fear that China is stealing a march on it by wooing its neighbours. India backed Bangladesh's autocratic ruler Sheikh Hasina until her overthrow last August. Relations with the new order are concerning, Jaishankar concedes.

He rolls his eyes when I ask if it is not time for a grand gesture from India to Pakistan, its troubled neighbour. He is always asked this in or by Britain, he says sharply.

Outside the hotel, the activists have dispersed. Jaishankar's last engagement is to join David Lammy to watch the UK foreign secretary's football team, Tottenham Hotspur. I sense that he would rather watch the cricket unfolding on his aides' screens. (After the odd wobble India were heading for victory.) But Britain and India still have to resolve the small matter of a trade deal – which Jaishankar predicts is "within sight".

And whatever shape the field, as Jaishankar appreciates all too well, this is rather a fun time to be an Indian official on tour in the west.

*Alec Russell is the FT's foreign editor*

From ANCIENT to CONTEMPORARY  
Discover 7,000 years of ART

**TEFAF**  
ART FAIR

**MAASTRICHT**

MECC MARCH 15–20 TICKETS  
MAASTRICHT 2025 2025 TEFAF.COM