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Dr. Debak Das

Abstract

An interview of Dr. Debak Das by our Editor at Large, Elijah Kruger.

Keywords

Dr. Debak Das, Interview, Biography, Career

Publication Statement

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Dr. Debak Das

Josef Korbel School of International Studies

Elijah Kruger¹, on behalf of the Editorial Board

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1 WHERE DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL? WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN BEING A HISTORY MAJOR?

I'm originally from Kolkata in West Bengal in India. I did my schooling there, I grew up there and I went to college at a school called Presidency College, where I studied history. At that point in time, I was generally interested in history and had always been interested in different aspects of it. But it was really as I got deep into that study that I realized I was more interested in Cold War history, or modern history as we know it. That led me towards International Relations which is what I did my master's in. My master's was at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and I did an M.A. in Politics with a specialization in International Relations. That's how I got more deeply engrossed in the questions of international politics, nuclear politics, international security and as I did that, I found myself to be more and more drawn toward questions of nuclear security and disarmament. I finished my M.A. and started an M. Phil

which is kind of a research master's degree, between an M.A. and a Ph.D. I did an M. Phil in Diplomacy and Disarmament and worked on India's ballistic missile defense program. Through that process, I got to meet a lot of policymakers who were dealing with nuclear politics with a lot of engagement on India and Pakistan issues, from both sides of the border. That really got me interested in trying to understand more and learn more, of course. That's why I decided to do a Ph.D. That's also when I came to the United States. I went to Cornell University where I did my Ph.D. in the Government department.

2 WHAT LED YOU TO DU?

There are a few things that led me to DU. First of all, after I was done with my Ph.D. at Cornell, I was on the academic job market, and I was looking for a place which had a number of characteristics that the Korbel School at DU has. One of them was that I have always been interested in being engaged with the policy world. Through my graduate career, and even before that, I tried to be engaged with think tanks, and with policymakers, and learn how they think about things. So, Korbel's policy focus, in line with its deep academic engagement was one of the factors that pulled me toward the school. The other thing that I really liked about Korbel, which made me think I would be a good fit is its interdisciplinary focus. I'm from a political science department and got my Ph.D. in government, but I also do a lot of archival work and have a background in history. It was important for me to be at a department that is interdisciplinary which involves history, sociology, and policy, and has folks who are doing extremely relevant work in the broader International Studies field. It's a great and dynamic academic and intellectual community. I was drawn by that characteristic of the school. Finally, I'd say that I found the school to be aligned with the politics of a fundamental need for greater scholarship coming from the Global South. Looking to incorporate a diverse set of views, voices, visions, and scholars from these areas of the world. This is important because a large part of academia and especially Western

academia, looks very similar and talks in very similar ways. Korbel's commitment to try and break that mold and diversify the voices that are engaging in important scholarship was something that I thought was fantastic.

3 WHAT ARE YOUR TEACHING INTERESTS? WHAT ISSUES DO YOU ENJOY TEACHING?

I've taught two classes at DU that I've really enjoyed. One is a class on nuclear security and international relations, called, "Nuclear Weapons and International Security." That's a class that I taught for undergraduates. I've found that to be extremely enjoyable, mostly because I thought there was a very good understanding already among undergraduates of the topics we were talking about. In some ways, I found students to be very engaged, to be committed to the course, and doing far more background reading than I thought they would. I was very, very impressed, pleasantly surprised, and it was an absolute joy to teach. I think the students were pushing the class forward toward intellectual directions, which were at a way higher than an undergraduate class. The other class was called, "Emerging Issues in International Security," for master's students. That's also a class that I really enjoyed teaching because it talks about different issues that are important and contemporary. We started off with the Ukraine War and the return of great power politics. We also talked about nuclear security, cyber-politics, drones, AI, hypersonics, climate change, the role of the Global South in international politics, and wrapped up with the Indo-Pacific. It was a lot, but it was also important in terms of applying theory to real-world international situations. We talked about different issues, applied theories, and about policy options for each of the salient crises that are happening in the world right now. Running the Sie simulations with Dr. Hillary Matfess has been one of the highlights of my time at Korbel. Participants have been so engaged in the different scenarios that we've created, bought into the story and generally created realistic policy responses that we would expect elite policymakers to make. Curating such immersive experiences at DU has certainly been very rewarding.

4 HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT BOOK PROJECT TO A LAYMAN?

The way I describe the book project is that I'm trying to understand how states build their nuclear delivery vehicles. We know a fair bit about why states build the nuclear bomb: why they do it and how they do it. What we haven't researched as much is what they do after they build the bomb. How do they take that bomb and deliver it to another location? This question is important because as you look at international politics today, you see Iranian missile tests being important,

you see North Korea testing ICBMS and IRBMS. That really catches the eye of the international community as well as anyone engaged in the conversation of international security. South Korea is thinking about building submarine-launched ballistic missiles. It is really a question that's come up time and again and is extremely salient right now. I'm trying to understand what about the international system or the global non-proliferation order allows states to build these systems. I have three case studies in the book: India, the UK, and France. I've done archival work and interviews in all these countries, as well as the United States.

5 IS THERE ANY OTHER RESEARCH THAT YOU'RE CURRENTLY WORKING ON THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

I'll mention two co-authored projects that I'm working on. One is related to the nuclear world and my book. This is about the question of definitions and how things get defined in international law. I've found through my research that the term "nuclear weapons" is not defined in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and it's not defined in the treaty to ban nuclear weapons. This leads to the question of why do important things that a treaty is trying to address or constrain the spread of, not get defined? This is a paper that I'm co-authoring with Dr. J. Luis Rodriguez, at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford (CISAC). We just presented the paper at the International Studies Association conference. The other project that I'll mention is one with Dr. Shubha Kamala Prasad at the Hertie school in Berlin. We're working on a paper about whether public opinion matters in democracies in the non-Western world when it comes to security issues. There's a lot of work in Western democracies that look at public opinion and how that might shape policy. We're interested in the democracies that are in the non-Western world and whether they operate in similar ways or if there are important differences there. The paper is on the intersection of democratic thought and values and how it intersects with international security.

6 HAS THERE BEEN A DEFINING MOMENT IN YOUR CAREER?

I spent a couple of years at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford, and I found my experience there to be extremely formative in many ways. It was an excellent experience with the most supportive and collaborative set of academics. Scholars who were in political science, in history, in anthropology, as well as nuclear scientists that came together in the same community and supported each other's work. This was all in the middle of the pandemic, making it all the more special to be around this extraordinary

Faculty Spotlight

group of individuals. That really shaped my intellectual growth and opened me up to a bunch of different outlooks. It was definitely a career highlight and critical formative experience.

7 WHERE WAS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE TO CONDUCT ARCHIVAL RESEARCH?

My favorite spot to conduct archival research is India. It's one of those places that is not necessarily easy to conduct research, but it is very rewarding. There are all kinds of historical details that have come at me, regarding different issues. Not just about my own research but about adjacent political issues that I've always found fascinating. From personal letters that politicians are writing to each other or to high-level bureaucrats and generals to others. Things that you don't read in the history books or aren't common knowledge. While that's true of most archival research, I've found that archival work in India has been rewarding because of the different aspects of the Indian history that I am interested in. You stop thinking of historical personalities as these distant characters or people in the newspapers and start thinking of them as people who might be doing similar things as you. One of my favorite things that I've found in Indian archives was about this diplomat called T.N. Kaul an Indian Foreign Secretary who was the ambassador of India to the United States and later the USSR. I found an article about him hosting dinners. It was an interview with him, where there were these recipes that he had written for a magazine, and they were in the archives. One could go out and cook these recipes if they wanted to!

8 WHAT TWO OR THREE ISSUES DO YOU THINK ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO KEEP THEIR EYE ON AROUND THE WORLD?

The first would be nuclear weapons and the potential for their use and escalation, particularly in Ukraine, but also in other theatres. The reason I say this is because it's important for us to think of nuclear weapons as being potentially used in a battlefield, but also their accidental use leading to nuclear escalation. Last year, India accidentally launched a missile into Pakistan. It wasn't loaded of course but it could easily have been misconstrued as being an attack. The second issue is artificial intelligence and how there is a revolution that, in many ways is coming not just to the world of international security but also the broader world, writ large. Things are changing in small but important ways. I think it's going to be very interesting to see how these technologies level up, how we respond to them, how we might deal with cyber issues, or how the day-to-day military world might change due to AI. Finally,

the third issue people should pay attention to is non-western approaches to international relations. In the context of the Ukraine war, if you look at the number of countries that abstained or have not really condemned Russia's invasion, it makes you think, "What is going on here?" Why is it that so many countries in the non-Western world are not aligned with what we think are straightforward political stances to take? I think we don't understand what is going on because we don't pay attention to local and regional politics that inform a lot of political positions that non-Western states take. To some extent, it is Western hubris. To some extent, it's this idea that great powers matter and other don't, which to me, are very limiting ways of looking at the world and understanding international politics.

9 WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN NOT CONDUCTING RESEARCH OR TEACHING?

This relates to something we talked about earlier. I enjoy cooking. Hence, finding an ambassador's recipe in the middle of the archives is an intersection of the personal and professional. I tend to cook as a form of unwinding. Whipping up different kinds of recipes from different cuisines is always challenging and enjoyable and takes your mind off things.

10 RECOMMEND ONE PODCAST AND ONE BOOK FOR PEOPLE INTERESTED IN THE FIELD

Let me give you two book recommendations and a podcast recommendation. The first book is called, *Command and Control* by Eric Schlosser. It talks about different nuclear accidents that have taken place in the United States. You tend to think of the United States as a nuclear force that is extremely professional and top-of-the-line. There's no doubt that they are but it shows that even a force that is as disciplined as the United States could have massive lapses in handling nuclear weapons. It is a sobering read, but also very interesting. It talks about the time that the United States nearly had its most powerful nuclear bomb explode in rural Arkansas in an ICBM silo. The second book I enjoyed recently is a book by Togzhan Kassenova called *Atomic Steppe*. It's about Kazakhstan inheriting nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union that had just collapsed, and the processes that led to Kazakhstan giving up nuclear weapons. A podcast recommendation is called *Press the Button from the Ploughshares Fund*. It's one of those podcasts that deals with the latest developments in international security on a weekly basis.