India's Foreign Policy

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Thank you for asking me to speak to you today on India's Foreign Policy. It is an honour and intimidating to be asked back to one's alma mater. It has been thirty-nine years since I left Delhi University and it is impressive that it looks much better than my memory of it.

I thought that I would try to discuss what foreign policy is, then speak of independent India's experience of conducting foreign policy, and finally try to foresee what our foreign policy may look like in future. After that I would be most interested in hearing your views and comments.

What is Foreign Policy?

The hardest question for a professional diplomat like me to answer is, "What is it that you actually do?" The simple answer is that we implement the country's foreign policy. Which invariably invites the question, "What is foreign policy?"

Perhaps the simplest definition of foreign policy is that it is the attempt by a state to maximize its national interest in the external or international environment. Even this simple definition suggests some of the complexity of this attempt. The definition assumes a commonly agreed

definition of the national interest in the country. This is not always true. Secondly, foreign policy is an ends and means problem, a problem of achieving certain national goals with the limited means available. Unlike domestic policy, the attempt to attain one's goals has to be made in an environment which is largely outside of one's own control. Thirdly, and again unlike domestic policy, this attempt is made in competition with other states who are seeking the same goals for themselves, sometimes at your expense. For instance, if any one state in the international system attains absolute security for itself, there would be absolute insecurity for every other state in the world. So merely maximizing one's own interest competitively will not suffice. One needs to include some measure of cooperation, or at least of alliance building or working together. Of the two basic goals of the state, security and prosperity, one, security, is often presented as a zero sum game. The other, prosperity, requires states to cooperate with each other. Both goals can therefore pull one's foreign policy in opposite directions.

And this competition and cooperation with other states to maximize one's own interests takes place in a perpetually changing external environment and while the states themselves gain and lose relative and absolute power. As they change, states change or modify their definitions of national interest. Even the domestic mainsprings of external policy shift. Some factors that one expects to remain constant undergo change. History is redefined continuously by all political systems. And immutable facts of geography are made less or more relevant by advances in technology and ideology. This is why attempts to analyze foreign policy require the use of dynamic concepts like the balance of power, game theory, and such like.

For a practitioner or diplomat, it is in the analysis and working of these changes that the opportunities, threats and joys of diplomacy and foreign policy lie. My generation has been fortunate in having lived through the fastest ever period of change in India's history. For a diplomat, it has

been an amazing transformation of India, its place in the world, and the foreign policy that we can now aspire to practice.

Let us look at the Indian foreign policy experience.

The Beginnings

There have been diplomats and diplomacy since time immemorial. By some accounts Hanuman was our first Ambassador to Sri Lanka and Krishna one of our first known envoys. But foreign policy as it is now understood is a function of the modern state system. One can therefore legitimately speak of late medieval Indian foreign policy. But just when the modern Westphalian state system, based on the nation state, came into existence in the eighteenth century, India was losing the attributes of sovereignty and her capacity for an independent foreign policy. So long as India was not an independent actor on the world stage, imperial British interests prevailed over Indian interests. When strong personalities like Curzon tried to assert what they saw as Indian interests, as he did in 1904 by sending Younghusband on his Tibetan expedition, London rapidly reined him in, forcing him to give up his gains in the Chumbi valley and Tibet in order to preserve the overall British interest in keeping China on her side against the Russians. So, while the Government of India had a Foreign and Political Department from 1834 onwards, its primary functions were to deal with the Indian princes, (as representative of the paramount power), and to handle British-Indian commercial and mercantile interests in the Gulf and the immediate neighborhood of India.

The unintended benefit from this absence of an indigenous foreign policy tradition became apparent when the freedom movement began to think of national issues. As early as 1927 it was possible for Jawaharlal Nehru to start describing a purely Indian view of the world. In July 1938, when it was highly unfashionable to do so, he was speaking of both

fascism and imperialism in the same breath, refusing to choose between them, and to start saying what India's foreign policy would be. By January 1947, these thoughts had coalesced in a letter to KPS Menon into a doctrine, non-alignment, which seemed best designed to meet independent India's needs in the bipolar world she found herself in. Nehru said:

> *"Our general policy is to avoid entanglement in power politics and not to join any group of powers as against any other group. The two leading groups today are the Russian bloc and the Anglo-American bloc. We must be friends to both and yet not join either. Both America and Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of each other as well as of other countries. This makes our path difficult and we may well be suspected by each of leaning towards the other. This cannot be helped."*

At Independence

When India became independent in 1947, our economy had not grown for over fifty years, while population was growing at over 3% a year. The average Indian could expect to live for 26 years, and only 14% of Indians could read. What had once been one of the richest, most advanced and industrialized nations in the world had been reduced by two centuries of colonialism into one of the poorest and most backward countries, de-industrialized and stagnant. From accounting along with China for two-thirds of world industrial production in 1750, by 1947 India's share of world industrial product was negligible.

It was therefore natural and clear that the primary purpose of independent India's foreign policy was to enable the domestic transformation of India from a poor and backward society into one which could offer its people their basic needs and an opportunity to achieve their potential. And this had to be attempted in the Cold War world, divided between two heavily armed and hostile camps, each led by a superpower,

and each saying that if you were not with them you were against them. It took courage and vision to choose, as Nehru and the leadership did then, not to join either camp and to opt for non-alignment, to retain the choice to judge each issue on its merits and on how it affected India's interests rather than those of an alliance or its leaders. Having fought so hard for our freedom, we were not ready to abdicate our independence of judgment to others.

India's immediate foreign policy objectives in 1947 were therefore a peaceful environment, strategic space and autonomy, free of entanglement in Cold War conflicts or alliances, while we concentrated on our domestic tasks of integration and nation building. Non-alignment, as this policy came to be called was the ability to judge issues on their merits and their effect on India's interests or, as our first Prime Minister Nehru used to say, 'enlightened self-interest'. Indian nationalism has not been based on a shared language or common religion or ethnic identity. As we sought to build a plural, democratic, secular and tolerant society of our own, it was natural that we would look for and promote the same values abroad.

Our foreign policy experience can probably be divided into three broad roughly twenty year periods: 1950-1971, 1971-1991 and 1991 onwards till today.

1950-1971

Non-alignment as a policy was a practical and strategic choice, but was soon put to the test by the alliances. It was denounced by John Foster Dulles as immoral, and Stalin had strong words to say about it too. Our neighbours were rapidly enrolled in the competing alliance systems – China by the Soviet Union and Pakistan by the US.

Our attempt was to enlarge the area of peace, of those states willing to coexist peacefully despite ideological and other differences, enabling us to concentrate on our own development. Hence the very early summoning of the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947, our activism at the Bandung Afro-Asian conference, our reliance on the UN, and the institutionalization of the Non-Aligned movement in the sixties.

Throughout this early period, our means were limited, our goals were primarily domestic, and our aspirations were local. The foreign policy challenges that we faced, such as having a border with China for the first time in our history after China moved into Tibet, could not be addressed with any tools other than diplomacy because of the simple fact that we had no others. Our primary focus was domestic, and at no stage in this period did we spend more than 3% of our GDP on defence. It was this desire to escape external distractions that accounts for some of the tactical choices in handling issues like the India-China boundary, resulting in the short but sharp and salutary conflict of 1962.

Our preoccupations were with the consequences of Partition and the uniquely complicated birth of the independent Indian state. The J&K issue itself, which was with us from the birth of the Republic of India, was one consequence of that birth. One of our first tasks was also to compress into a few years what history takes centuries to do for most other states – agreeing and settling boundaries with our neighbours. In a major diplomatic achievement, we agreed all our land boundaries except those with China (and between Pakistan and our state of J&K) within thirty years. We have also agreed all our maritime boundaries except for those with Pakistan in Sir Creek and Bangladesh.

<u>1971-1991</u>

By the early seventies, the steady development of India, (which even at 3.5% p.a. was faster than that achieved by Britain for most of her industrial revolution), had created capacities and relative strengths that were dramatically revealed in the 1971 war. The liberation of Bangladesh was equally a liberation for India. For the first time in centuries, India had on her own and without relying on external imperial power crafted a political outcome in our neighborhood, despite the opposition of a superpower and a large and militarized neighbor. That we could do so was also tribute to Mrs. Indira Gandhi's political skills and willingness to take risks. The diplomatic task was primarily to hold the ring internationally by winning over public opinion for a just cause and averting actions by others which would prevent us from assisting the birth of Bangladesh.

Soon thereafter, in 1974 India tested a nuclear explosive device, in what was described as a peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE). The world led by the Nuclear Weapon States reacted by forming a nuclear cartel, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and by cutting off nuclear cooperation with India unless she agreed to forego a nuclear weapons programme and put all her nuclear facilities under international safeguards to guarantee that commitment. As the nuclear weapon states were not willing to do the same themselves, we refused to do so, suffering the consequences of technology denial regimes for our growth and development. But at that stage we lacked the relative power or capability to do more than to suffer in silence while keeping our options open. (This in itself was more than most other states managed).

1991-2009

The true realization of our foreign policy potential had to wait for the end of the bipolar world in 1989 and our economic reform policies, opening up the Indian economy to the world. Historically speaking, India has been most prosperous and stable when she has been most connected with the rest of the world.

In many ways, the period after 1991 has been the most favorable to our quest to develop India. The post Cold War external environment of a globalizing world, without rival political alliances, gave India the opportunity to improve relations with all the major powers. The risk of a direct conflict between two or more major powers had also diminished due to the interdependence created by globalization. And the strength of capital and trade flows was directly beneficial to emerging economies like India, China and others. We saw the evolving situation as one in which there is an opportunity for India. The consistent objective of our foreign policy was and remains poverty eradication and rapid and inclusive economic development. If we are to eradicate mass poverty by 2020, we need to keep growing our economy at 8-10% each year. This requires a peaceful and supportive global environment in general and a peaceful periphery in particular. The period since 1991 has therefore seen a much more active Indian engagement with the neighbours, whether through repeated attempts by successive governments to improve relations with Pakistan, or the border related CBMs with China, or free trade agreements with neighbours starting with Sri Lanka in 1998, or the Ganga Waters Treaty with Bangladesh.

The period since 1991 has been a period of remarkable change in the scale of our ambitions, and in our capacity to seek to achieve them. The international situation made possible the rapid development of our relationships with each of the major powers. Equally important was another necessary condition which gave India space to work in: India's rapid economic and social transformation. As a result of twenty five years of 6% growth and our reforms since 1991, India is today in a position to engage with the world in an unprecedented manner. Our engagement with the global economy is growing rapidly, with trade in goods and services now exceeding US$ 330 billion. Our needs from the world have changed, as has our capability. India can do and consider things that we could not do or consider twenty years ago. This is reflected in how India perceives its

own future, its ties with its neighbourhood and its approach to the larger international order.

The contrast between the world's reaction to the 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests is instructive. And finally in 2008 we were able not only to break out of our nuclear isolation but to rewrite the rules in our favour by working with others to enable the NSG decision permitting international civil nuclear cooperation with India.

Today's World

Today, however, it seems that we may be on the cusp of another change in the nature of the world situation. Looking at the world from India, it often seems that we are witness to the collapse of the Westphalian state system and a redistribution in the global balance of power leading to the rise of major new powers and forces. The twin processes of the world economic crisis and economic inter-dependence have resulted in a situation where Cold War concepts like containment have very little relevance and where no power is insulated from global developments. The interdependence brought about by globalization imposes limits beyond which tensions among the major powers are unlikely to escalate. But equally, no one power can hope to solve issues by itself, no matter how powerful it is. What seems likely, and is in fact happening in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, is that major powers come together to form coalitions to deal with issues where they have a convergence of interests, despite differences on other issues or in broader approach. In other words, what we see is the emergence of a global order marked by the preponderance of several major powers, with minimal likelihood of direct conflict amongst these powers, but where both cooperation and competition among them are intense. The result is a de-hyphenation of relationships with each other, of each major power engaging with and competing with all the others, in a situation that might perhaps be described as "general un-alignment".

Paradoxically, some of the same forces of globalization – the evolution of technology, the mobility of capital and so on – which have led to the decline or collapse of the Westphalian state order are also the source of our greatest dangers. Our major threats today are from non-state actors, from trans-boundary effects of the collapse of the state system, or, at least, of its inadequacy.(Paradoxically, the doctrine of absolute sovereignty created by the strong European states and rulers in earlier centuries is now the last defence of the weak against the strong.)

Looking ahead, the real factors of risk that threaten systemic stability come from larger, global issues like terrorism, energy security and environmental and climate change. With globalization and the spread of technology, threats have also globalised and now span borders. These are issues that will impact directly on India's ability to grow and expand our strategic autonomy. It is also obvious that no single country can deal with these issues alone. They require global solutions.

International Terrorism

Among these global threats, international terrorism remains a major threat to peace and stability. We in India have directly suffered the consequences of the linkages and relationships among terrorist organizations, support structures and funding mechanisms, centered upon our immediate neighborhood, and transcending national borders. Any compromise with such forces, howsoever pragmatic or opportune it might appear momentarily, only encourages the forces responsible for terrorism. Large areas abutting India to the west have seen the collapse of state structures and the absence of governance or the writ of the state, with the emergence of multiple centres of power. The results, in the form of terrorism, extremism and radicalism are felt by us all in India.

Energy Security

As for energy security, this is one issue which combines an ethical challenge to all societies with an opportunity to provide for the energy so necessary for development. For India, clean, convenient and affordable energy is a critical necessity if we are to improve the lives of our people. Today, India's per-capita energy consumption is less than a third of the global average. (Our per capita consumption is only 500 kgoe compared to a global average of nearly 1800 kgoe). For India a rapid increase in energy use per capita is imperative to realize our national development goals.

Global warming and climate change require all societies to work together. While the major responsibility for the accumulation of green house gasses in the atmosphere lies with the developed countries, its adverse affects are felt most severely by developing countries like India. When we speak of 'shared responsibility', it must include the international community's shared responsibility to ensure the right to development of the developing countries. Development is the best form of adaptation to climate change.

What we seek is equitable burden-sharing. We have made it clear that India will not exceed the average of per capita GHG emissions by the industrialized countries, as we continue to pursue the growth and development that our people need.

Also, the transfer and access to clean technologies by developing countries, as global public goods on the lines of what was done for retrovirals to fight AIDS, is essential to effectively limit future GHG emissions. The IPR regime should include collaborative R&D and the sharing of the resulting IPRs.

The Future

I have tried to show you how great the change and flux in India's foreign policy has been within my own lifetime. In 1948, waving expansively at a map of the world, Nehru exclaimed to a young Indian Foreign Service officer, "We will have forty missions around the world!". Today we have one hundred and sixteen Embassies abroad.

If our foreign policy experience teaches us one thing it is that change is inevitable and rapid. There is hardly an international boundary between two states that is where it was two hundred years ago. The speed of the rise of China and India in the last quarter of the twentieth century is proof of the rapidity of change. Since the balance of power is relative, small shifts have exaggerated effects on the international system.

India's foreign policy today no longer deals only with existential threats to our security or with subsistence issues. Today our future will be determined by how effectively we adapt to change, and how we deal with cross-cutting global issues, with questions of energy security, water, low carbon growth, technology issues and so on. An open rule-based trading system is in our interest now that we have sizeable equities in international trade. We have moved from statements alone to working for and crafting desirable outcomes.

After several centuries, once again the state is not the sole or necessarily the predominant actor in the international system. In some cases, like technology, for instance, it is businesses and individuals who now determine the future, and it is these units that a successful foreign policy must now increasingly deal with.

If we are to deal with this new world and new issues, it is essential that we begin to develop our own culture and tradition of strategic thought. So long as India's situation and needs are unique, it becomes essential that we develop our own strategic culture, vocabulary and doctrine. Fortunately for us, there is no isolationist streak in our strategic thought so far. As I have said before, India's best periods in history have been when we were most connected to the world. Ironically, the greater our capabilities, the more we need the world and are integrated into it. So if anything, the joys and challenges of Indian foreign policy will only grow with time.

Thank you,
