

Domestic Roots of Foreign Policy

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[Speaking Notes]

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1. Introduction

It is good to be back among the clan, even as a former member in an outside job. Since I now speak as NSA, I thought I would speak on the domestic roots of our foreign policy.

We often say that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. Let us consider whether that is so in the Indian case, and, if so, what sort of foreign policy that would require of us.

2. Domestic Tasks

Our primary domestic task is to transform India into a developed country. You know the sums. We need at least twenty years of ten percent GDP growth to eliminate mass poverty in India. That requires **a peaceful periphery and an absence of foreign entanglements** for a considerable period of time. In other words we need to engage with our smaller neighbours in our own interest, even without reciprocity from them, and despite their lack of appreciation of what we do. If by this process we can integrate them with the Indian economy we would have managed to erase some of the negative effects of the multiple partitions of the subcontinent in the middle of the last century, and would have freed ourselves to begin achieving something of our real potential. If we could also become net providers of security to the region around us in the Indian sub-continent and the Indian Ocean we would have in large measure undone some of the strategic consequences of Partition and the Chinese entry into Tibet, (which cut us off from Central Asia, for instance). These are propositions that some of us have considerable trouble with. But the practice of such a policy in the last decade or so with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar,

Afghanistan, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan has resulted in far better outcomes than our policies towards these neighbours of the fifties and sixties did.

Our domestic transformation also requires that we seek, to the extent possible, to create **a supportive external environment** for the transformation of India. That may not be entirely within our capacity for a long while to come. Certainly the world economic crisis has made the external environment less supportive than it was in the nineties and early part of this decade. To some extent it has accelerated existing trends like the relative rise of China. At the same time the crisis has increased uncertainty in the international system. The same stimulus steps that successfully converted a possible depression into recession in 2008-9 have magnified the very imbalances of savings and consumption that led to the crisis in the first place. It is in this unpropitious external environment that we must seek abroad what we need for India's rapid development, i.e. technology, capital, access to markets, energy and raw materials.

Up to this point I think the argument for an Indian foreign policy as an extension of domestic politics and economics is fairly direct and probably widely accepted.

3. Domestic Imperatives

But it gets more complicated when we look at whether and to what extent our foreign policy meets the demands of our domestic security. Let us examine some of those domestic imperatives.

- (i) **Left Wing Extremism (LWE)** is today our major internal challenge. It is so far only an internal challenge, but not for want of trying to establish links abroad. The CPI (Maoist) has attempted to contact the LTTE, Nepal Maoists and ULFA to facilitate contact with possible outside support. That they have failed so far should not lull us into thinking that they will never succeed. The ISI has

been trying to establish contact with the Maoists through our Diaspora in the Gulf.

To place this phenomenon in context, since the coalescence of Naxal groups in late 2004, LWE has consolidated itself in a continuous swathe of territory from Nepal to South India. Last year LWE accounted for violent acts in 11 states affecting 357 police stations.

LWE propaganda has successfully painted the Indian state as anti-tribal and wanting to take away forest and mineral wealth in collusion with MNCs, leaving tribals with no choice but to rise up in arms. The fact is that the Forest Rights Act passed by the last UPA government was a landmark law granting nearly one million tribals permanent terminal rights. The new mining law proposes a definite say and share for the local community. The Rehabilitation and Resettlement and Land Acquisition Acts also make consultations with and the concurrence of local bodies mandatory. NREGA has covered the entire country and poorer areas have gained. We should not conflate tribals with LWE.

I mention this because it is essential that we equip ourselves to deal with negative publicity about our social and other failings or weaknesses. I anticipate that these attacks will grow in the future. Already, caste is being raised as an example of racism in some international bodies. If we maintain our present rapid growth trajectory we must be prepared for the envy and resentment that any such shift in the balance of power will inevitably arouse, both from existing power holders and from those left behind. China was fortunate to time her rise at a time when the world economy was expanding rapidly, and when existing power holders like the US first saw advantage in a stronger China for their anti-Soviet purposes. Later the imbalance of power during the US' unipolar moment was so great that the rise of China did not seem threatening. On the other hand we are growing when the world economy is much less buoyant and the West has lost confidence, and we are in a world where power is much more evenly

distributed between the major powers. They will therefore be much more sensitive. We are unlikely to enjoy the twenty year free run that China enjoyed, and must be prepared for a much more complicated international environment in which we must achieve India's transformation.

- (i) **Terrorism** is the other major challenge we face, both its external aspects and its internal ramifications. After Mumbai we initiated a series of steps to build counter-terrorism capacity, augment intelligence, raise special forces, impart better training and take counter-terrorism measures. As a result, save for one incident, the last twenty one months have been remarkably free of terrorist attacks in India. We now have effective and practical counter-terrorism cooperation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan and will build on this.

But there is no let up in the attempts to infiltrate terrorists into India or to instigate attacks in India, and Pakistan is the source of most of these. Pakistan affects us directly in at least three different ways: our efforts to counter terrorism, the situation in J&K, and her attempts to dabble in communal harmony in India. She seeks to use our diaspora (Muslim and Sikh) and the territory of our smaller neighbours, and we have to build our defences abroad. Pakistan's attempts either result from or are amplified by her dysfunctional internal condition and the dominant role of the Pakistan Army in her politics. Pakistan has worked over time to make Afghanistan a subset of the Pakistan problem for us and the world, trying to bring its Taliban proxies to power in Kabul and to entangle us on the ground in a protracted struggle against Pashtoon nationalism. This attempt has back-fired on Pakistan and today threatens Pakistan's own integrity, has drawn in US troops, and led to the Pakistan government's writ not running over 60% of her territory.

We today face a different Taliban and a different LeT from the past. Terrorist groups such as the Afghan Taliban, Al Qaeda,

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Mohammad and the LeT train together, operate together and are ideologically fused. The TTP today, unlike the Taliban 10 years ago, are ready to bomb their coreligionists in their mosques and, (with the exception of the LeT), attack Pakistani establishment targets. Their sense of Afghan or Pakistani or even Pashtun nationalism is very weak compared to their commitment to global jihad, Khilafat, and creating a Salafi or Wahabi *ummah*.

I mention this because no matter what the future holds in Afghanistan, whether there is a partial or complete US withdrawal or whether there is a binary civil war as we saw before, Pakistani hostility and the new shape of jihadi forces are facts that we will have to contend with. Equally, the last nine years have seen the emergence of new leaders and new interests and forces within Afghanistan. We will continue to work with all those in and around Afghanistan who share our goals. Personally, I think that Pakistan has, once again, over-reached herself, creating negative effects for India but a disastrous quagmire for herself in Afghanistan.

- (ii) **J&K** brings together many of these elements, of cross border terrorism, of Pakistani attempts to destroy communal harmony in India, and of the internal consequences of differential development. The Pakistan Army has little or no interest in stabilising the situation in J&K. It uses J&K and tension with India to justify its hold on power and the purse strings in Pakistan. Given Pakistan's own precarious condition she has chosen the low cost option of trying to rekindle the pro-*azadi* movement of 1989. Once again J&K police personnel and their families have been targeted and mosques are sought to be taken over. As in the political protests in 1989 pro-*Azadi* slogans are being broadcast from mosques and religious shrines. Minorities are singled out and threatened to convert to Islam. The protests are encouraged by SAS Geelani, Chairman of the APHC(G) whose pro-Pakistani

leanings are well known. Known militants have been involved in ensuring attendance at rallies. Overall it is clear that Islamabad is focussing on re-generating a pro-*Azadi* political movement in the valley to refocus international attention on the Kashmir issue. It seems apparent that this will continue at least until the Obama visit in November.

The J&K unrest driven by the JEI has shown an ability to use net-based techniques to spread the impression of a state in complete anarchy, where the populace is seething with rage against Indian occupation. Try typing “Kashmir” on YouTube and see what comes up. (We need an effective answer to this.) The fact, however, is that the agitation this year has not touched either Jammu or Ladakh or Shia Kargil, and that 3 of the 8 districts in the Valley are also untouched. The *Amarnath yatra* with a record 457,324 pilgrims (compared to 392,000 last year) has just been completed successfully without incident. The agitation runs counter to inclusive Sufi Kashmiriyat and the interests of several communities that make up the ethnic patchwork that is J&K.

- (iii) **The communal situation** in India is also something that we need to be aware of. One of the social consequences of rapid economic growth is the increasing distance between communities in our society. Not only do they benefit at different rates from growth, but their awareness of deprivation grows along with their expanding expectations. So far our political system has been successful in keeping communal violence under check. Immediate strong state responses, as in Kandhmal, and a zero tolerance policy have borne fruit in the last year. A new bill on Communal Violence is on the anvil.

- (iv) **The situation in the North-East** has improved drastically. 2010 has seen a dramatic decline in the number of incidents and deaths, even though Manipur and Assam have been affected by long blockades and intermittent violence and governance is a

major problem. We are in talks with a large number of groups, and ULFA too may soon come to the table. Strong actions by the Bangladesh Government have forced Indian insurgent groups (IIGs) including ULFA, NDFB, Meitei UGs and others operating in Bangladesh to take shelter elsewhere or to shift their camps and presence to more inaccessible areas and to Myanmar. The ULFA C-in-C, Paresh Barua, who operated from Bangladesh for over a decade, is reported to have moved out. Several other senior IIG leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa, Chairman of ULFA, and Ranjan Daimary, President of the NDFB/AT were arrested by the BSF along the border with the assistance of BD Security Forces.

IIG camps in populated areas such as Sylhet, Sherpur, Moulvi Bazaar, and Hobiganj have been dismantled by Bangladesh Security Forces. It is likely that these actions by the BD Government have forced the IIGs to step up their efforts to forge tactical alliances with similarly targeted fundamentalist groups like the HuJI, JMB and LeT in Bangladesh.

However, middle and lower level functionaries and groups in Bangladesh continue to provide patronage to these groups. It may take some time before political directives at higher levels percolate down and make an impact in remote areas where these groups operate.

- (v) In **Nepal** continuing political uncertainty over the last 14 years has led to a considerable increase in Nepalese migration into India going as far as Myanmar. [There are as many as 250,000 Nepalese migrants in North Myanmar today.] This has immediate security and political implications for politics and security in Sikkim, Darjeeling, the Dooars, Arunachal Pradesh and the entire Northeast.

4. Domestic Preferences

I have gone through these domestic security concerns in some detail to show that there is really no clear boundary or line between internal security issues and foreign policy, and that you, as Indian diplomats abroad, have a function to play in our attempts to deal with them.

But equally, the India you now represent has changed in fundamental ways and I think that this needs to be reflected in how you represent India.

5. The India you represent

(i) For one, India is now a declared **nuclear weapon state**. This fact has been recognized *de facto* by most of the world, as the NSG exemption permitting nuclear cooperation with India showed. Our strategic posture too has evolved. Today, in practice, we behave like a NWS signatory of the NPT. In fact we are stricter about the export of nuclear material and equipment than some of them, we implement a voluntary moratorium on testing like them, and we have gone further than most of them by declaring that we will not be the first to use nuclear weapons against a NNWS. (We therefore no longer need to storm the Bastille of nuclear disarmament.) As a NWS, we are particularly sensitive to the strategic nuclear balance within which we operate, particularly since Pakistan claims to compensate for an alleged conventional imbalance and fear of our Cold Start Doctrine by threatening the first use of nuclear weapons against us. We are also very aware of the Chinese role in enabling the Pakistani strategic programme. Our other concern should be the effect on West Asia of an Iranian nuclear bomb, since states like Saudi Arabia have made it clear that they must then have one of their own. But the real answers to these issues are not to be found in international treaties or in actions by other states but in our own strength and capability. In that respect, although we do not talk about it, we are not wanting.

(ii) Secondly, you represent a **growing economy**, which last week was on the cover of the Economist as a rival to China. But please don't let this go to your head. Most of this is in the future. For a very long time to come India will be a major economy with some influence, a very large number of poor people, and overwhelming domestic preoccupations. At one level we are victims of our own success in convincing the world that we are already an economic powerhouse. For instance, the EU now thinks it necessary to drive a truly hard bargain in the Broad-based Trade and Economic Agreement that we are negotiating with them.

(iii) One price of India's new status is that it makes us important enough to be a target of groups like Al Qaeda. You need to be much more careful about mission and personal security. I do hope that you are making progress on setting up the Diplomatic Protection Group that we had mooted after the first attack on our Kabul Embassy in July 2008.

6. China

A final word about China. You would notice from what I have said that our largest neighbour, China, brings many of these threads together. She is increasingly a factor in our strategic calculus in dealing with our neighbours, not just in Pakistan as in the past but in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and even Bhutan. Today China uses her economic strength to build presence and infrastructure in our neighbourhood, which could easily turn into political influence and ultimately military presence. As of now China seems intent on an area denial or anti-access strategy in her immediate periphery, which overlaps with ours to a considerable extent.

Though our relations have improved substantially, and our approach coincides on some international issues, significant differences remain. Both countries have decided not to let these come in the way of improved bilateral relations as they concentrate on their internal development and

transformation. China is our largest trading partner. The scope of our bilateral dialogue transcends the boundary question and includes global and regional security issues like terrorism and energy security.

Our response to the rise of China must be guided by Chinese capabilities and not only by stated intentions. We need to keep in mind the rapid military modernization and informationisation of military forces currently under-way in China.

On the border, the PLA's posture has become increasingly assertive recently. Face-offs between Indian and Chinese border troops have occurred. On occasion, Chinese UAVs have violated Indian airspace for aerial reconnaissance of Indian military positions. The qualitative change in the nature of intrusions could partly be attributed to Chinese confidence arising out of improved infrastructure across the border, and to the PLA's increasing professional autonomy.

But overall, the pattern of the India-China relationship seems stable. There is little relative change in the India-China military or strategic balance, and the international context is still supportive. But we may find a new bilateral equilibrium as both countries grow and rapidly shift their positions in the international balance of power.

7. Conclusion

My apologies for inflicting upon you what may appear a random series of thoughts on a topic that could be considered academic. I do so because no one owes us a comfortable living abroad. It is important that we of the Foreign Service understand what is our USP, what value we add to the processes of the GOI, and what our weaknesses are. What we bring to the table is a grand strategic view and an ability to conceptualize; knowledge of a world which is more and more important to India as we integrate with it; and a capacity to organize and record that is increasingly a rarity in the

Government of India. Don't underestimate this. At the rate we are going MEA will soon be the last ministry with a memory in the GOI.

What we lack is a capacity to deliver and implement what we promise, (which is used against us by others to try to take our jobs.) We also lack the professional training that would make us even better than our international competitors, and would enable us to rely on competence in addition to our undoubted individual brilliance.

But I am sure that these weaknesses too shall pass.

Thank you and all the best.

For use in extremis/under provocation:

[One final thought

Now that I am outside MEA I should tell you how you look to the rest of GOI. Increasingly, as our work becomes more esoteric and we stop working with others, not filling our posts in other ministries, we look like a closed club of privilege. Frankly, I was horrified at some of the negative comments on the Yahoo IFS group about the possibility of our using persons from other services to do jobs that we just do not have enough people for. Many of the comments were in the best traditions of trade union politics. If we do not bring value-added to the general processes of government and choose only to write briefs and issue so-called political clearances saying that we have no objection to a foreign visit, we will only cede space and competence to those who are ready to do the job and to create desired outcomes. This has already happened in areas such as petro-diplomacy which used to be exclusively our preserve twenty years ago. It is increasingly happening in defense and security. When Commerce Ministry tries to set up a parallel foreign service of its own abroad, we should read the writing on the wall, introspect and mend our ways.]