

New Tasks for India's Foreign Policy Community

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Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to speak to you today. It is a privilege to speak to a group of such distinction, many of whom have made major contributions to our foreign and national security policy. To do so in an institution that is rapidly getting a reputation for excellence in its field is a special bonus.

I am less sure that I should also thank you for leaving the choice of topic to me, as it may have led to some confusion. Most of you are friends who have often heard my views on foreign policy. So I thought that rather than listing a series of countries and policy issues that require our attention, I might speak on the tasks that face us all in the Indian foreign policy community. In this community I include both the formal structures of government, (MEA, MOD, the armed forces, the NSCS and NSAB, etc), and the broader non-governmental or quasi-governmental infrastructure of foreign policy, (including scholars, think-tanks like yours, the media, opinion makers, and others).

Why choose this topic? We have been relatively fortunate in India in having had a broad domestic consensus for most of the last sixty years on the basic goals of Indian national security and foreign policy, and also on how to go about achieving them. There is broad agreement that the basic goal of India's external policies is to enable the transformation of India into an advanced, modern, secular, plural, and democratic society, where every Indian has the opportunity to achieve his or her potential. That broad consensus on our foreign policy goal is unlikely to change so long as we have not succeeded in

eliminating mass poverty in India, which will take some time, but could occur during our lifetimes.

That consensus on goals remains, but I am no longer sure whether there is still the same degree of agreement as in the past on how to achieve those goals in our day to day foreign policy. In other words, while the goal may be relatively constant, the hierarchy of foreign policy tasks to achieve that goal evolves continuously. It is a function of the situation we face and the means available to us. And both those have changed drastically in the recent past, with our capabilities expanding considerably and the external situation evolving so rapidly, not necessarily in a positive direction. Both the ends and means problem, and the opportunities and threats we face, have qualitatively evolved or transformed. History has accelerated, but the speed of our thought remains finite. So it may be worth reviewing or looking again at what we, the foreign policy community in India, should be doing in these circumstances.

To start off a discussion, let me list five issues that I think our broader foreign policy community should address if we wish to remain relevant.

1. The foreign policy apparatus: There is no question that our present foreign policy *apparatus* no longer suffices. It lacks sufficient capacity to cope with India's present engagement with the world, and with the challenges, crises and threats that we face. Several steps to increase Government's capacity have been taken in the last decade, beginning with the evolving National Security Council system. Last year Cabinet decided to increase MEA's size, and personnel, training and other policies have begun to be modernised. One must, however, admit that these will need time to take effect, and that the capacity to deal with catastrophic events like the 26/11 Mumbai attacks is still insufficient.

It is therefore natural that there should be receptivity to ideas and suggestions criticising India's foreign policy infrastructure, such as that by Markey earlier this year.

But I am a bit worried about the sort of suggestions that are made and the implicit assumptions behind most suggestions for change. Most suggestions seem to assume that the US pattern of think tanks, research, opinion formation and media involvement in foreign policy decision making is what we should aim at. I am not so sure that this is entirely

correct, and would argue instead that we should evolve a system that works for our situation and problems, many of which are unique.

The US infrastructure for foreign and national security policy is a historical aberration even in terms of US history – a post WWII response to an unprecedented accretion of power, some of which (nuclear weapons) was unusable in traditional ways. So new organisations were specifically set up for the purpose and worked out nuclear uses and doctrines from scratch, based on the US' unique geographical position, geopolitical leverage and choice of adversary. They, like the Marshall Plan and post-WWII international institutions, were part of an unprecedented set of peacetime defence measures by the USA for the Cold War.

And yet, if you look at major foreign policy or national security decisions taken by the US, none of them have been the product of the complex US foreign policy *apparatus* of think tanks etc. --- not the decision to drop the atom bomb, not the Kissinger-Nixon opening to China, not the reaction to the collapse of the Soviet Union, not the response to 9/11, not the decision to invade Iraq, and not the clutch of Pakistan-Afghanistan decisions since 1979. (My point is not that these were wise or unwise decisions, though we might have strong views on how these decisions affected us, but that they were made by small groups of leaders acting in secret on information that was not widely available to the foreign policy community.)

Peace, like war, is not and should not be prosecuted by committee. The traditional British system of intra-establishment foreign policy decision-making recognised this fact in its practices, when Britain was a world power. Our experience in India bears that fact out. Think of decision-making in 1971. What I know of our negotiations with China of the Boundary Peace and Tranquillity Agreement in 1993, the Free Trade Agreement with Sri Lanka in 1998, cross-LOC travel in 2004-5, and the civil nuclear initiative also confirm this.

Much of the irritation within the Indian foreign policy community arises from a fundamental confusion about the role of the foreign policy infrastructure and think tanks. Many of us assume, perhaps because our infrastructure is still filled with retired civil servants, that our function is

to second guess government, or to tell government what to do and how to do it. (It must be hard to break the habits of a lifetime). Instead, in a democracy like ours, the primary functions of think tanks and the foreign policy infrastructure should be the in-depth and non-partisan study and examination of major policy issues, intra-elite communication, and ascertaining and informing/forming public opinion. There are certain foreign policy problems that are best identified and analysed in committee and with a much broader and deeper effort than government is capable of. (The whole question of the utility and role of nuclear weapons, and of the nature of force in today's politics, needs much more serious examination than governments or armed forces with their vested institutional interests are capable of.)

My plea would therefore be that we should rethink the role and nature of our national security and foreign policy infrastructure, both within and outside government, devising something that works for us in our situation, rather than imitating other people's exceptional responses to their peculiar or specific problems.

To begin with there should be much more communication between different components of our foreign policy and security communities. There is very little at present and what there is often produces some heat but little light.

The other immediate step we could undertake would be to work on our strategic communication or projection of India's world view and key interests. The democratic and sometimes anarchic way in which we do so often confuses not just our enemies but our friends.

The other tasks that I would suggest are four clusters of problems which impact us in ways specific to ourselves, and where we have unique interests which may or may not be in congruence with what other powers prefer and what therefore engages academics and think tanks abroad.

2. Our Strategic Situation:

The first among these is our strategic situation in the most heavily nuclearised neighbourhood in the world; where non-state actors are

increasingly powerful, (and even state actors behave as non-state actors do); where several powers are rising simultaneously in a crowded environment; and where competition is only restrained by these powers' domestic preoccupations and perceived interests rather than by any institutional structures or memories of the benefits of cooperative behaviour. We must understand the shifting capabilities of other powers in Asia and the effect it has on our security.

Consider just one instance, namely, China's decision to move rapidly ahead to MIRV her missiles. This affects strategic stability and deterrence in Asia and the world, as does its decision to test anti-satellite weapons. Should all the affected powers react individually, it may well increase systemic instability. If they act together or seem to, it would feed China's fear of encirclement and justify an accelerated Chinese ASAT programme, bringing about precisely the outcome that other powers wish to prevent. Your institute, with its wealth of knowledge and experience in this area, is probably best placed to study these questions and to understand and explain their ramifications.

I can almost hear you say that what prevents analysis by you of such strategic issues facing India is the fact that this information is too closely held and is not widely shared within the country, even with those who held the highest security clearances in the past. This is a real dilemma, and one that we still have to find a proper solution to. Security demands secrecy; deterrence requires transparency. Carrying on as we are, with information too tightly held, leads to situations like the Santhanam affair. (I personally see no reason to doubt the word and arguments of present and past Chairmen of the AEC.) But whatever the rights or wrongs of the technical arguments, the affair Santhanam serves no conceivable national interest. It can certainly be said to have grave effects on our credibility as a state and to cast doubt on the efficacy of our deterrence.

The other strategic question is our disarmament and non-proliferation positions now that we are a declared nuclear weapon state, recognised as such de facto by much of the international community. We have two issues here. One is the presentational one where we are accused of freeloading on existing regimes without joining them. But the more

significant issue is whether the existing regimes address our security concerns, and what we should do about that. My own feeling is that the regimes do not address our security issues such as Pakistani proliferation, possible new weapon states in Asia and the multiple conventional and non-conventional threats to our security. In addition, existing discourse promises no way forward to nuclear disarmament. But if the regime does not address our issues, it still has some limited utility for us. We would be much worse off without it, and have an interest in not opposing it or acting in contravention of it, as successive Indian governments of various hues have recognised. We also clearly have an interest in improving the regime, and if possible working out a new paradigm with the other powers which would improve our security. If we do not do so, and act as if the global nuclear debate is irrelevant to our situation, we risk being irrelevant to the world's concerns.

Such big strategic questions, of which there are many, are created by the speed with which the situation is changing around us. They merit far more rigorous analysis, and considerably more education of public opinion than we have attempted so far. They reflect the influence that technology is having on strategy, and the need for us to build up our own expertise about this interface.

It is also important to get a sense of whether the regional and international situation is improving or not, of whether it helps us in the achievement of our common goal, India's transformation. My own feeling is that it is not. Recent developments in Asia itself have not helped. Besides, the global economic crisis still has a long way to go before we can assert that its structural causes have been addressed. In the meantime its geopolitical effects will be adverse from our point of view.

We also seem to make the rather facile assumption that we are a status quo power externally. This is a big change from how we saw our place in the world until the early eighties. This may have been a useful working hypothesis in the last few decades, so long as we were bent on avoiding external entanglements. But if the external environment is actually deteriorating we may have to revisit this assumption. Today India's growth and change requires us to be even more connected to and

involved with the world. I am therefore no longer sure that we are truly a *status quoist* power, or can be one if we wish to maintain the momentum of domestic growth and change.

3. China's Rise:

The major strategic challenge for us and the world in the first half of the century is probably the rise of China. But recent historical analogies, (such as the rise of Germany in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, or of Japan in the early twentieth century), are inexact. The closest parallel is probably the rise of the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, while she was bound economically to the European powers she replaced, particularly Britain. But even here the parallels are not exact: this present transition is accelerated in time, the interrelationships are more complex, the Asian stage is far more crowded, and the strategic cultures involved are quite different.

I think it is time that we took the Chinese at their own word. We are dealing with a new China, the product of reform and the open door. And our China policy must evolve in keeping with the pace of change in China and Asia. I have argued before that there are areas of both congruence and competition between India and China, and that these are no longer what they were twenty years ago. To oversimplify, we have considerable economic complementarity, congruence on most global issues, and differences of substance, emphasis, and approach on issues in our immediate neighbourhoods. New bilateral issues like upstream uses of rivers flowing into India will be the litmus test of China's changing behaviour *vis a vis* India. The international context may no longer be so helpful to India-China relations. But so long as we are each preoccupied with our domestic situations and reforms and seek to avoid external distractions the relationship should be manageable, and the bilateral issues can be addressed and solutions sought.

4. Pakistan-Afghanistan:

No matter how complex the rise of China, it is amenable to the traditional tools that states use between themselves. In China we are dealing with the oldest bureaucracy and one of the longest continuous traditions of statecraft in the world. No strategic culture has been more studied than China's, (though whether that has led to better understanding is an open question).

None of this is true to our west. In Pakistan, in particular, we are dealing with a creeping tide of anarchy that has reached our borders, and with multiple power centres, including powerful non-state actors, (and state actors who act as if they were non-state actors). We know the issues, having cried ourselves hoarse about them for some time – jihadi terrorism, loose nuclear weapons and proliferation, the Pakistan Army's tactic of charging strategic rent, Pakistan's communalisation of politics and relations with India, and so on and so forth. But we still do not have a single school devoted to the study of the causes of these phenomena on our doorstep, let alone the beginnings of an explanation other than hostility and bad temperament on the other side of the border.

If the US, on the other side of the world, revises her Af-Pak strategy within six months of its announcement by a new President, we, sitting in the region itself, should be reviewing it every day.

On Afghanistan the rhetoric of despair is getting louder. We are being told by the pundits that Afghanistan has never been occupied by any foreign power in its history. This would come as quite a surprise to Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, the Mughals and the Safavids. Sadly, voices in India are also questioning why we are involved in Afghanistan at all.

We must find responses outside the traditional state repertoire to this phenomenon, and this is where the broader foreign policy community can make a significant contribution. To expect government to think outside the box is an oxymoron. But to expect the foreign policy community to do more than to cry wolf is, to my mind, justified.

My point here, as elsewhere, is that there is more heat than light in what we as a community produce on the Pakistan-Afghanistan problem. There is much less analysis of what we face, and why it has come about, and much more shrill propagandistic rhetoric decrying Pakistani perfidy. That battle has been fought and won and serves little purpose. The rest of the world knows of Pakistan's perfidy but continues to use the Pak Army and state for their own purposes. What we need is a real explanation for what we are seeing evolve around us, from which we can draw the right conclusions for ourselves.

5. The Indian Subcontinent:

It is often said that we live in a difficult neighbourhood. But that is only half the truth. Despite multiple political transitions in the subcontinent's countries, this is one region which has continued to grow economically in the midst of a global recession. Much of this is because these economies are more linked to India's than the official figures would have you believe. And in this itself one can see the potential of economic integration in our region. Besides, what we often ignore is the fact that this is a region which has more in common in terms of language, culture, religion and other human aspects than almost any other region that you can name.

It is also clearly in our own interest that we work with our neighbours to build a peaceful periphery within which to build our nation. This subcontinent is where we live, where we face immediate difficulties, and where we must seize our opportunities and neutralise our enemies. A peaceful periphery is essential to our own future. And yet we have no public institutions specifically devoted to the study of the diplomacy or economic potential and integration of the Indian subcontinent. No wonder it is now called South Asia.

You might ask me why I have not listed climate change, energy security, relations with major powers like the USA, and several other questions here. The five issues I have mentioned require India-specific examination and solutions, and only we can devise them. If we have broad consensus on the basic goals of our external policies, how to achieve them, and arrive at a

common understanding of the situation in which we operate, then other countries and issues are relatively easier, amenable to the standard instruments of state diplomacy, and could be dealt with as they contribute to India's transformation. As India evolves into a full spectrum power, everything will be our business. But what I have tried to outline are some of the new tasks that affect India uniquely that we need to consider and tackle.

Thank you for your patient hearing. I would be delighted to hear your views and to discuss these ideas.