

Opening Statement

by

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia

Director General, ICWA

at

'India-Egypt Dialogue: Present Realities and Future Prospects'

at

Sapru Hous, New Delhi

October 16, 2012

Ambassador Dr. El Sayed Amin Shalaby, Executive Director of Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA); H.E. Ambassador Khaled El Bakley, Egypt's Ambassador in India; Shri Rajeev Shahare, Joint Secretary, MEA; distinguished members of the Egyptian and Indian delegations; ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by extending a warm and indeed brotherly welcome to the esteemed delegation from Egypt, representing ECFA. We meet today to hold what promises to be important and productive deliberations on a whole range of subjects that are of great interest to our countries and regions. Our Dialogue takes place at a time of momentous developments that underline the vast potential for expansion of mutual understanding and cooperation between India and Egypt, two ancient civilizations linked through a long history of contacts and strong mutuality of interests.

2. This Track II dialogue takes place in an atmosphere of warm friendship and constructive candour and will be based on a mutually agreed Agenda. The basic purpose of our Dialogue is two-fold: firstly, to help our participants here, the key members of our respective strategic communities, to deepen understanding of our respective perspectives on various issues, and, secondly, to expand convergences, narrow divergences and craft a consensus on steps needed for greater cooperation in future. For this to be achieved, we - the Indian side - would be willing to listen as well as articulate our viewpoint before our guests and brothers from Egypt.

3. We have deep respect and consideration for ECFA which has been doing a wonderful job, since its establishment in 1999, to project Egypt's relations with its external partners. We at ICWA feel privileged to be one of them. ICWA, as you are aware, is this country's oldest and prestigious think tank on foreign policy and international relations. Established in 1943 i.e. four years before India's independence, under the inspiration of Jawaharlal Nehru, it has contributed immensely to the study, research, public debate and outreach activities pertaining to its central mandate. It

continues to perform its role as ‘an institution of national importance’, the special status bestowed upon to it by the Parliament of India. It is supported by the Ministry of External Affairs, but it enjoys optimal autonomy in thought, programming and action. More importantly, it was this institution which originally nurtured the idea of Asian unity and Afro-Asian solidarity, harbingers of the Bandung Conference and eventually the Non-Aligned Movement. In the birth and evolution of NAM Prime Minister Nehru and President Nasser played a historic and transformative role.

4. Our dialogue today will no doubt begin with an overview of the international situation. In the global outlook presented by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the opening of the UN General Assembly in September 2012, he sounded an alarm about ‘our directions as a human family’, warning the world about implications of the unbridled war in Syria, the unresolved Palestinian statehood issue, Israel-Iran confrontation and angry demonstrations over an anti-Muslim video. In his wide-ranging appraisal of the world situation, he also highlighted the inadequacy of global action on climate change, food security, the nuclear issue and the political and economic crisis in Africa, south of Sahara. In addition, I am sure that these and many other issues interest us today, such as the question of UN reforms, international economic governance structures, the role and functioning of several regional groupings, terrorism and piracy. Let us talk about them all and discover how our perceptions converge.

5. As we focus on our regions in particular, our side will have an opportunity to sensitize you about India’s expanding world-view. In this context, relations with our South Asian neighbours are important and they show continuing consolidation. A strong view prevails in South Asia that our security and development are interlinked, and that they both can be deepened through the path of expanded cooperation. There is no doubt, however, that some problems still afflict our relations with a few

neighbours, but the central point is that India is continuously engaged in addressing them through dialogue, both at bilateral SAARC levels.

6. Looking at your region as a whole where India has vital interests, our strategic community is deeply curious and perhaps concerned about several specific issues. Developments in the Arab world in the past two years have changed the contours of political and socio-cultural landscape of the region. The Arab Spring, a historical phenomenon, has introduced representative and accountable governments in some countries and transitional arrangements in others that would lead to democratic rule. As the world's largest and successful democracy, India warmly welcomes the triumph of democratic forces in Egypt in particular and wishes to share its experience and expertise appropriately. But, there is also anxiety about some facets of the Arab Spring. A leading Indian foreign policy expert has referred to 'a much darker and destructive aspect to this political transformation.' We shall prefer to hear you, dear friends, with deep interest and attention on this subject.

7. We should also exchange views on other issues such as Syria, especially progress in the Egyptian peace initiative and mediation efforts by the Arab League, building up of Israel-Iran tensions, and the Palestine issue. On the last question, you are no doubt aware of the state visit to India in September 2012 of President Mahmoud Abbas when India reiterated its firm support for the struggle of Palestinian people to achieve a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognized borders, side by side and at peace with Israel. India also supports Palestine's bid to secure the non-member state status at UN.

8. Our conference will also focus on evaluating the current state of India-Egypt relations in all their dimensions. Egypt, being the most vital player in the region in terms of military power, strategic location and human resources, enjoys special

significance for India. Its historic relationship with India, running from ancient times to the modern era, through NAM period and the post-Cold War era, now needs to be re-looked and refined, in light of the changing matrix in the region. Our relationship is excellent, but can it not be strengthened further? What are the promising areas and our specific, practical suggestions to secure this goal?

9. I am confident that participants from both sides will share their views frankly and constructively. We are here to generate fresh ideas that can be fed into Track-I dialogue in order to help policy makers as well as to inform and enlighten public opinion so that we could embark on a new and more promising era in India-Egypt relations. Emerging political trends seem to offer enticing opportunities to our countries, which should be seized upon for renewing an age-old relationship. This needs to be done with a mix of imagination and vigour.

10. Finally, it is hoped that all of us will stay here throughout the day and will also remain available for the concluding session at 1700 hrs. At that juncture, we hope to reach some fruitful findings, draw clear conclusions, and decide on how to carry forward our noble mission in future.

11. Let me now introduce our delegation to you.
