

Lecture

by

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on

**Challenges for India's Foreign Policy
in the Next Decade**

at

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I am delighted to be amidst you, esteemed faculty members and talented students of the Indian Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University) in order to speak and exchange views on the chosen theme. Let me, first of all, express my deep appreciation to the two institutions, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and IIT (BHU) for their collaboration in making this event happen under MEA's Distinguished Lecture Series.

To me, this is indeed a valuable opportunity to interact with young India, the leaders of tomorrow, who will contribute to building a strong, secure and developed nation in the coming decades.

This historic city played a crucial role in the recent elections. Its expected transformation in the next few years will be watched with much interest not only in India but also beyond our national frontiers.

Needed: A Conversation

In addressing you, I shall draw from my experience of four decades as a university lecturer, a professional diplomat, and a member of the strategic community of this great country. Our institution, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) – the country's oldest and prestigious foreign policy think tank, has been actively engaged in a wide range of research, outreach, external dialogue and knowledge-dissemination activities about India's role in world affairs. However, in order to have a stimulating and unrestricted conversation, I propose to speak as a keen student of international affairs and Indian Foreign Policy (IFP) rather than for a government or a specific institution.

Let me make a PowerPoint presentation that is based on the text of the Lecture I have already shared with the organizers here. I shall take about 40 minutes. Thereafter, I trust, will begin the more interesting part of our dialogue – the Q & A session.

Challenges for India and IFP

Why am I here, ready to inflict a discourse on foreign policy before students of engineering and technology? Should they be interested in what I have to say? Does the theme of today's lecture matter to you?

I wish to begin by making a basic and obvious point: challenges for the IFP are the challenges, both internal and external, faced by our nation today. The raison d'être of IFP is to help the country in addressing them effectively and successfully. At the same time, foreign policy makers and practitioners of diplomacy – a key instrument through which foreign policy goals are achieved – have also the obligation to monitor, respond and, where possible, mould the international environment so that India's national interests are secured in an enlightened manner. Other instruments too are needed and deployed: military power, economic strength, covert action, soft power and, above all, a judicious combination of them all, which then becomes smart power.

The biggest challenge for us is to determine the right mix of policy instruments in a fast-changing, dynamic, complex and multi-polar world. Moreover, as a nation, we have to continue mastering the need to balance our external relationships even as our worldview expands. The art of balancing is central not only to the management of foreign policy, but to the governance itself, especially of a country as vast, diverse and demanding as India is.

Each of you, I am sure, can produce your own list of major challenges facing the country today. We may assume that the following elements will figure on most people's lists: faster, broader and more equitable economic development that creates jobs, expands the triple segments of agriculture, manufacturing and services, improves infrastructure including supply of clean air, water and power; better governance through more efficient delivery of services by central, state and local governments; reduction in corruption; effective countering of terrorism and other threats to internal security; marked improvement in diverse sectors such as healthcare, education, environment, women safety and empowerment etc; and perceptible enhancement in economic, military and diplomatic strength so that India emerges as a Great Power.

All this and more was apparently encapsulated in the slogan 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas.' The mantra appealed to the electorate sufficiently for it to give a clear majority to a single political party in the Lok Sabha. This has happened for the first time since 1985. The true mission of IFP will be to serve as a chief enabler for transforming the country's socio-economic landscape in the next decade. Since a sharp increase in economic growth and ability to avoid international conflicts is crucial to this mission, India would have to lay special stress on

ensuring a peaceful environment in its region and beyond, and it will also need to utilize the tool of economic diplomacy optimally.

India has been undergoing a multi-faceted transformation at a fast pace. It is experiencing simultaneously, as a former minister of external affairs put it, “an urban revolution, industrial revolution, social revolution and democratic revolution.” Our polity has generally been driven by democratic consensus, but of late it has become far more combative and less patient. The ‘revolution of popular expectations’, about which social scientists wrote for long, is now upon us. Our ‘aspirational generation’ wants basic needs fulfilled in the shortest possible time. Our political leaders, civil servants, diplomats and other members of the elite will need to remember and internalise this constantly.

Evolution and Philosophy

In 67 years since independence, our foreign policy has evolved through various phases. A quick look at its development may be helpful in understanding the present state of play and the future trajectory.

Jawaharlal Nehru undoubtedly left an indelible imprint on the way India saw, interpreted and chose to connect with the colonial and post-colonial world. Perhaps three key elements defined his world view: Asian unity, Panchsheel or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and Non-Alignment which promoted the notion of Afro-Asian solidarity and opposition to the alliance-based politics of the Cold War. Nehru’s successors, especially Indira Gandhi, learnt from his experience – both positive and negative – and strove to shift to a policy anchored in pragmatism, while adhering to the Nehruvian set of values and principles.

It was in the decades after the Cold War’s end in 1989-91 that India embarked on effecting substantive changes in its foreign policy, particularly during the innings of Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. These included the initiative to re-build relations with the West, balance the West Asia policy by developing cooperation with Israel, launch the Look East Policy, and conduct the nuclear tests in May 1998, thereby turning India into a nuclear-weapon state.

In the past decade, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's foreign policy, anchored in the concept of 'strategic autonomy', displayed five fundamental features, as below:

- 1) India's relations with the world were increasingly defined by its development priorities;
- 2) Greater integration with world economy would benefit India ;
- 3) India sought stable, long-term and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and strove to create a global economic and security environment that was beneficial to all nations;
- 4) Indian subcontinent's shared destiny required greater regional cooperation and connectivity;
- 5) Foreign policy was not defined merely by our interests, but also by the values dear to our people. The then National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon, stated in December 2013: "We seem to use multilateralism for our values and bilateralism for our interests."

In this backdrop, we may turn to examine the thinking of present leaders on foreign policy. They have been critical of some aspects of the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's policy, while lauding the conduct of foreign policy during the tenure of the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. In a major lecture in Chennai in October 2013, Sri Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, stressed that the pillars of foreign policy should be strategy and security. Portraying Sri Vajpayee as the devotee of '*Shakti and Shanti*' (Power and Peace), he called for working together "for a bold India and a better world, a harmonious neighbourhood and a happier world, a strong Asia and a safer world." The first address to the Parliament by President Pranab Mukherjee on 9 June 2014 reflected the new government's considered approach. It highlighted its commitment to the vision of "a strong India, self-reliant and self-confident India, regaining the rightful place in the comity of nations." He elaborated it further: "We will pursue our international engagement based on enlightened national interest, connecting the strength of our values with pragmatism, leading to a doctrine of mutually beneficial relationships."

As the new government nearly completed its first sixty days in power, Srimati Sushma Swaraj, the minister of external affairs, shed more light on this subject. Briefing the Parliament on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the BRICS Summit, she stated on 23 July 2014 that it was essential for the government "to pursue pro-active and broad-based international

engagement to advance our national development and security and to fulfill our international responsibilities to build a peaceful and prosperous world.” Like the president earlier, she spoke of “special emphasis” that would be placed on building cooperation with “our neighbourhood, stretching from West Asia to East Asia.”

Neighbourhood

The critical importance of peace, security and economic development in our immediate neighbourhood and its impact on India's capability to play an influential, global role is widely understood. South Asia has rightly been a top priority for the new government. Its remarkable decision to invite South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders and the prime minister of Mauritius to the swearing-in ceremony, followed by visits of India's prime minister and the external affairs minister to neighbouring countries, reflects it.

As this constructive approach continues, it can reasonably be hoped that by the time the government completes its first year in office in May 2015, not only our leaders may have visited all the neighbouring countries (including Pakistan), but they might also succeed in imparting new substance and energy to our relationships in the region.

In order to achieve this goal, India should consider plucking a few low-hanging fruits. These are: clearing legislation in the Parliament for the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh and its speedy implementation; addressing the fishermen's problems pertaining to India-Sri Lanka relations through astute management and allocation of adequate funds; and keeping Myanmar under close, friendly watch, considering the marked deterioration in relations between the government-military camp and National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi. We should urge reconciliation, but failing this, our approach should be to continue working with those in power and also supporting pro-democracy forces. On Afghanistan, we have to find practical ways to help nurture its security, economic progress and nation-building as international forces withdraw. Concerning Nepal, the attempt should be to persuade its political parties to develop national consensus on constitution-making and simultaneously proceed with new initiatives to strengthen cooperation with India. As regards Pakistan, a dialogue needs to begin soon. Movement on simpler, trade cooperation issues should also be encouraged, even as we insist that Pakistan must afford us satisfaction on combating terrorism that targets India.

While working on bilateral relations, New Delhi cannot afford to ignore cooperative multilateralism in the region. The principal vehicle for this, SAARC celebrated its 25 years in 2010 on a note of cautious optimism. Since then the institution has been left languishing due to developments in Maldives and Nepal and a general absence of political will. An urgent need exists to re-invigorate SAARC through fresh and sustained endeavours to strengthen its various pillars – political dialogue; trade, investment, connectivity and economic linkages; action under Social Charter, and engagement with its multiple friends, the Observers in SAARC, so that South Asia embodies a culture of tangible cooperation rather than the traditional mindset of empty rhetoric, mutual recrimination and tensions.

Extended Neighbourhood

Other regions of Asia - West, Central and East and the Indian Ocean Rim - constitute India's extended neighbourhood. Geography has granted a critical, central location to the Indian subcontinent. India's situation and role stand enhanced because of our growing economic strength and the capability to serve as a net security provider in the maritime domain.

West Asia, supplier of the bulk of our oil and gas supplies, home to six million-strong Diaspora with its billions of dollars of remittances to India every year, and an area whose instability affects us directly, has been passing through an extremely difficult transition. Parts of the region experienced the Arab Spring since February 2011, which soon turned into a winter of discontent and bloodshed. Countries such as Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Iraq are in flux, with the state machinery facing multiple challenges ranging from insurgency and popular discord to rise of sectarianism, fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. Meanwhile, 'the mother of all Arab problems', the Israel-Palestine conflict, shows no signs of nearing a resolution. The current bloody conflict in Gaza has, in fact, aggravated it. It is, therefore, difficult to be optimistic about the immediate future of West Asia. In this situation, India would have to monitor closely the developments there and address their adverse implications. We may continue with our traditional policy to be friendly with everybody and to antagonize none, given our diverse interests spread across the volatile region. Iran, located on the periphery of West Asia, enjoys a close civilizational relationship with India, but it has been engaged in a set of complex relationships with the Arabs, the West and other powers. It too will require special handling by our country.

Central Asia comprising five countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - assumed a new salience for India's interests, following the breakup of the Soviet Union. While Russia remains a significant role player in this region, the leading trend is the massive growth of political and economic influence of China. 'Connect Central Asia' has been India's policy response that has achieved modest gains so far. South Block, the seat of MEA, would need to focus on expanding India's connectivity with this region as well as engaging China on economic cooperation and Russia on security cooperation in Central Asia.

East Asia, stretching from Myanmar to Japan and Australia, has become a priority region. Our Look East Policy (LEP) has made a valuable contribution towards deepening political, economic and security cooperation not only with the ten member-states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) but also with other players viz. US, China, Japan, Australia and South Korea. After twenty years of this policy, we have been calling for LEP 3.0, a more ambitious and determined endeavour by India to play the role of a balancer in the context of China's rise and particularly the noticeable increase in its assertiveness on South China Sea and East China Sea issues. In its diplomacy in the coming years, India would have to be both creative and firm, steadfast and resilient in order to be counted as a real player.

Other Regions

Until recently, most reviews of foreign policy challenges and priorities would stop at Asia, but India's updated worldview now includes the gradually strengthening relationships with Africa as well as Latin America. Our country played a pioneering role in Africa's de-colonization. The past relationship of political and cultural cooperation has now been extended to economic cooperation, infrastructure, education, capacity-building and coordination on global issues. Sizable financial investment through grants, loans and Lines of Credit have been made by India. Institutions such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the EXIM Bank have played a transformative role in this regard. India-Africa Forum Summits, held in 2008 and 2011, have been utilized reasonably well, despite some justified criticism. As preparations begin for the third summit, due to be held in December 2014, it is time to think of big but practical ideas aimed at enhancing India's competitiveness in Africa, as compared to China and the traditional powers.

Through a stream of high-level political visits and the distance-defying forays of India Inc, Latin America is slowly finding a place on our policy makers' radar. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Brazil in July 2014 carried this process further. At the outreach meeting between the BRICS leaders and eleven leaders of South America, he observed: "In a globalised and inter-connected world, our destinies are inter-linked." Referring to the famous poets and authors – Octavio Paz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pablo Neruda and Rabindranath Tagore, he spoke of India and South America sharing "a deep bond." He assured his interlocutors that India would work more closely with South America than ever before. In my considered view, New Delhi should start planning to host the first India-South America Forum Summit in the next 12-18 months. Meanwhile, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and ICWA have been making their own contribution and laying the groundwork for forging closer India-Latin America ties, befitting expectations of the 21st century.

The High Table

Debate rages among international affairs experts about the present status of India: is it a regional power, or a Great Power, or a potential Superpower? My answer would be: 'None of the above.' India today is a trans-regional power and an aspiring Great Power. For it to realise its dream to be a Great Power, it will need to significantly improve its standing on the parameters of Comprehensive National Power (CNA), especially its economic strength, infrastructure and connectivity with the neighbourhood, military capability, effectiveness of its nuclear arsenal, and also adopt a truly holistic foreign policy and national security strategy.

Nevertheless, India ranks among the leading nations of the world today. It is a member of G-20 that accounts for 85% of the Gross World Product and 80% of world trade. It is a member of BRICS which has emerged as an influential grouping of the 'Global South.' It is adequately integrated with the architecture of institutions centred around ASEAN, and as a member of East Asia Summit (EAS), it is well placed to play a vital role in the affairs of East Asia. India's candidature as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has won considerable international support, but it is unlikely to succeed as long the P-5 nations remain unwilling to share power and show a genuine desire of UN reform.

After traversing through the stages of bipolarity and unipolarity, the world has become multi-polar today, and the trend towards multi-polarity is here to stay. A shift of power from the west to the east or to the rest forms part of the geopolitical landscape. In this context, India attaches great importance to maintaining cooperative relations with all leading power centres: US, China, Russia, European Union (especially Germany, France and U.K.), and Japan. Securing an equitable and effective power balance among them (and India) will continue to be a key policy goal for New Delhi. As former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal wrote recently: “With friends we have notable differences and with adversaries we share some common ground. This means that neat foreign policy choices are not available. We need to carefully balance relations with countries of importance to us.”

Due to lack of time, it will not be possible for us to go into details of India's relations with the major powers. Suffice it is to recall here that, in the past two months, high-level dignitaries from US, Russia, China, U.K. and France have visited Delhi to interact with our new government. Our PM has met the presidents of China and Russia in Brazil. Shri Modi's summit meetings with the president of US and China and the prime minister of Japan are scheduled to take place in the coming weeks. This will be followed by his participation in G-20 and EAS summits before the year ends. Therefore, it may be asserted that the entire series of top-level interactions will help in consolidating and strengthening India's position among world powers. The present is a special moment in recent history when India needs good relations with all of them in order to promote its security-and-development agenda and apparently all of them are keen to woo India as well. Some experts tend to portray India as ‘a global swing state.’ We are a nation willing to be everyone's friend as long as our essential national interests are protected and the country's ‘strategic autonomy’ is safeguarded.

Non-Traditional Themes

International relations increasingly encompass a whole range of non-traditional themes with potential to impact on people's lives. These issues transcend national frontiers. In future, water wars may be fought; massive power shortages may occur if energy security is not ensured; feeding the world's burgeoning population could become a big issue – hence the critical importance of food security. Climate change, with its complex implications for planet's

environment and the consequential emphasis on sustainable development, has become a key segment of international narrative.

The world's need for a rules-based system for all situations where states deal with each other, ranging from international trade; use of oceans for trade, transport and resource utilization; management of another 'global common' – space; cyber security; Internet governance; and adoption of a comprehensive strategy to deal with terrorism and other cross-border crimes as well as migration will combine to define and shape future exchanges and relations among nations. These are also the issues that will affect our daily lives as we are now living in a globalized, inter-connected world. These all will be pressing challenges for India and its foreign policy in the coming decade and beyond.

Parting Thoughts

India's capability to address foreign policy challenges will be strengthened **if** our political parties and leaders show greater coherence and solidarity among themselves, rising above partisan interests to nurture national interests; **if** the government follows an integrated strategy to use smart power; and **if** policy makers become more attentive to advice emanating from our vibrant academic-strategic community.

Above all, young Indians - such as this audience - need to internalize the fundamental idea that foreign policy stakes are not foreign but central to their own interests, to their dreams, hopes and fears. Therefore, a regular endeavour to understand and study foreign policy issues and to follow international developments is no longer optional. It is mandatory, given the 21st century world in which we live, study and work.
