
Civilizational Dialogue in Conduct of International Diplomacy

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Summary

This article by AMB Prof.(Dr.) Suresh Goel is a blend of his experience and analytical vigor in a wide panorama spanning through both historical and geographical spheres. The author was the ambassador in countries viz. Singapore, Malaysia, Egypt, South Africa and headed Permanent Mission of India to UNO, USA. He, a skillful diplomat and an excellent scholar, defines diplomacy as the soft skill to find positive and agreeable solutions amidst conflicting cultural and economic, social and political interest groups. The article defines soft diplomacy being used at various levels e.g. state diplomacy, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. India's strength of diplomacy has been built through cultural exchange from ancient time at least five millennia of Indian history. Through assimilation of divergent socio religious culture such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, India's national conscience is created which is now the strength of her cultural diplomacy to build relations within and across nations with divergent interests. The author quotes from Upanishad and Spiritual speech of Sri Vivekananda to explain Indian ethos of positive cultural relations. In this paper, he cites examples of successful diplomatic efforts initiated by India in the different countries.

Wikipedia defines diplomacy as the art and practice of negotiations between representatives of states. It usually refers to international diplomacy; the conduct of international relations through the intercession of professional diplomats with regard to the issues of peace-making, trade, war, economics, culture, environment and human rights. In an informal and social sense, diplomacy is the employment of tact to gain strategic advantage or to find mutually acceptable solutions to a common challenge. One set of tools being a phrasing /formulation of views in a non-confrontational or polite manner.

1. The description goes on to underline various aspects of diplomacy such as informal diplomacy, track two diplomacy, preventive diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, monetary diplomacy, gun boat diplomacy, appeasement and nuclear diplomacy.

2. Having described diplomacy as employment of tact and formulation of views in a non-confrontational manner, inclusion of gun power

diplomacy which is coercive in nature can only be considered an aberration to be attributed to the recent global trends where use of force or application of power has been misconstrued as a diplomatic practice.

3. Diplomats will be quick to point out without any ambivalence that coercive tactics or military power should intervene only when diplomacy fails and further underline that in view of the high cost of coercive measures which include actions such as military intervention or indirect and covert means, the diplomatic process should be given primacy in conducting international relations.4. C h i n a ,

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India and Egypt have been the most ancient civilizations to have practiced diplomacy as an art of statecraft. Chanakya who was the principal advisor to Chandragupta Maurya in the 3rd century BC, wrote Arthashastra articulating how the wise king practices diplomacy to check-mate his adversaries and enemies through various diplomatic means including formation of alliances through a process of accommodating alien interests as far as possible in which Ambassadors negotiated with representatives of other kingdoms by building on common interests and concerns.

5. The ancient scripture of Mahabharata itself is an eloquent text on diplomatic practices by all protagonists including Krishna above all to achieve the political aims of Pandavas in building a prosperous empire and the great war of Mahabharata itself became an instrument of state objectives after successful diplomatic efforts to build an alliance against the Kauravas and apparent collapse of negotiations for peace even after significant concessions from Pandavas.

6. The inclusion of public diplomacy as a type of diplomacy to exercise influence, communicating with the general public in another manner, rather than attempting to influence the national government directly is a later entry into the field of diplomacy in view of almost revolutionary expansion and modernization in the art of communication both through technology and the growing sophistication in articulation of positions. Therefore, creation of public opinion through use of information technology including face book and twitter has added a new dimension in influencing the official policies. The track two diplomacy has emerged as another way of using informal negotiations in which academics, retired officials, public figures and social activists engage in dialogue to build confidence or explore alternative ideas for conflict resolution in an environment away from the formal, inflexible and seemingly hard line non-negotiable official positions.

7. The essential point here is that diplomacy involves tactful negotiations or conversations to achieve strategic objectives and to find mutually acceptable solutions.

8. Keeping this in our focus, it is not surprising that cultural issues should have been included as

objectives of diplomatic efforts. In fact, on the obverse side, culture plays an important role in promoting tactful conversations or negotiations, and therefore it is surprising that cultural techniques have not been included as an effective instrument of diplomacy.

9. With cultural liberalism as part of Indian ethos which not only permits a tolerant and inclusive dialogue between dissimilar ideas but also encourages ideological flexibility to absorb varying percepts including religions and philosophies, our nation has been a pioneer in the art of cultural diplomacy. The cultural diplomacy in fact must be interpreted and deployed as a civilisational dialogue which creates an alternative space in which conversations amongst nations and societies is conducted in a non-confrontational and non intrusiv manner. Cultural diplomacy further helps in creating an effective public opinion and thus supports public diplomacy as an important component in conduct of foreign policy.

10. When Upanishads gave the concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam to India and to the World; Swami Vivekananda announced the message of "ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti" at the World Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the message of global cultural space or a unity of the world away from discord of political divergences was clearly reflected in the message of peace and unity from India.

11. The strength of cultural diplomacy is that the civilizational dialogue is based on faith in commonality of human sentiments to dissipate political and economic divergences.

12. It must be understood that cultural diplomacy requires identification of common postulates and cultural ideas amongst societies and nations, and faith and understanding that these common postulates and ideas could be further explored or constructed to marginalize and even eliminate divergences of various types, and thus lead from conflicts to a common space where understanding and accommodation for each other lead to mutually acceptable compromises resolving existing conflicts and avoiding conflicts in future.

13. Let me give some illustrations here. India has made Look East or Act East Policy as the cornerstone

of its relations with ASEAN which roughly overlaps South East Asia. The modern dimension of this relationship which incorporates economic, communications, technology and several strategic aspects, is anchored in more than two millennia old interactions between the Indian sub-continent and the South East Asian region in a number of human endeavors such as commerce and culture which depend on people level interactions for success. This is eloquently visible in the magnificent architecture of Myson Valley temples in Vietnam, Angkor Vat in Cambodia, Wat Phou in Laos, Borobudur in Indonesia, performing arts traditions such as Wayang Kulit in Malaysia and Indonesia, traditions of Ramayana and Mahabharata, textiles designs such as batik, ikat, patola etc. In contrast with other neighbors in South East Asia, India has never been seen as an invader and is considered as a benign power whose presence in contemporary South East Asia will contribute positively to building peace, stability and prosperity in the region. The cultural history of India's relations with South East Asia provides it with certain strengths which reinforce India's position in relation to the presence of other powers in the region.

14. Similarly, India-Central Asia relations have deep rooted historical background in Buddhist traditions which traversed along silk route. India and Persia have shared pre-islamic history based in traditions of sasnian or sanskritic scholarship. These factors endow a certain permanence to the relations and Indian interests, and add a unique strength to our contemporary relations.

15. The projection of soft power as an instrument of diplomacy is often confused as a part of cultural diplomacy. There are several eminent personalities who consider projection of soft power diplomacy as a panacea for all possible conflicts. Shashi Tharoor has often described the popularity of Indian TV serials and Bollywood films in all parts of the world as an Indian triumph to be further explored for our strategic objectives.

16. It may not be out of place to probably analyze reasons for the almost sudden growth of western interest in soft power and cultural diplomacy. Public records suggest that the theory of clash of civilizations propounded by political scientist Samuel P Huntington postulating that differences in cultural and religious

identities will be the primary source of conflicts in the post cold war world, became the most lucid (I would describe it as insane) explanation for 9/11, the USA War in Afghanistan and in Iraq later. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power was found useful in the aftermath of the growing criticism of the western world since the wars only sharpened the differences between identities rather than their reconciliation into a global society and was considered as a viable response to the fragmentation of the society by co-opting the softer instrument of state interventions such as economic aid etc. or the non-state influences such as Bollywood operating on the margins of state influences. It is well known that independent India has been a pioneer in soft diplomacy through mechanisms such as south-south cooperation, educational and technical support through ITEC, project collaboration, LOCs, educational scholarships etc. Bollywood of course, did not need government intervention in promoting itself and raising the Indian profile at the same time.

17. It also needs to be understood that soft power may not only create illusions of national popularity but also create sub-national divisive forces acting against the Indian community. Attacks against Indian cinemas halls by religiously motivated movements in societies where fanaticism had made deep penetration in people's psyche or the problems faced by Indian community in Fiji or Uganda in the past can only be attributed to the almost terrifying and threatening popularity of the Indian masses there as well as their economic success combined with their alienation from the so called native population.

18. In contra juxtaposition, cultural diplomacy focuses on not just the role of soft power but integration of societies and dialogues between them to support the political dialogue rather than conflict driven policy structures.

19. The strategy of culture has been the guiding element of Indian philosophy throughout its early history as reflected in Vedic literature and has been used to advantage through at least five millennia of Indian history as is evident in Greek incursions into India about 2500 years ago, the assimilation of Islamic architecture and ideas not only in the visible forms of Indian culture but also its national conscience, or before that the spread of religions, architectural and

cultural influences between India and Southeast Asia. Silk route along which traversed not only goods and people but which become the artery for flow of civilizational ideas including Buddhism between Central Asia, India, and China is a bright example of the use of strategy of culture to bring together vastly divergent societies into one vibrantly growing people. With its traditions of inclusiveness, and capacity to absorb a variety of identities even co-opting at different times, the Indian culture has distinguished itself into a civilizational entity which is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic and yet is distinctly Indian. Our cultural complexion today is neither Vedic nor Islamic nor Christian. It is not Aryan or this or that. Everything or anything that has ever been brought to India, again the vaguely defined landmass of the sub-continent, has become part of the Indianness without losing its original identity.

20. India with its more than five millennia of civilization, is fortunate to have both developed culture of strategizing its civilizational behavior as well as developing the use of culture to overcome the effects of differentiation within the society and amongst societies. Mahabharata is a bright example of the culture of strategy in which the single minded pursuit for power and territory led to the construction of a society in which every action of an individual needed to be explained on the basis of objectives as defined by each of them for their own larger objectives of the society. Some individuals were criticized because their objectives were seen to focus on limited selfish gains while other like Pandavas put their objectives in the larger framework of the gain for the society. The whole Mahabharata including Geeta is the bright example of defining the ideal of progress of a group or growth of individuals. Bhagavatgeeta, my source of inspiration is not a book of devotion to God but incisive and clinical description of the role of individuals in the society, bereft of all sentiments, or emotions for the good of both the individual and the society.

21. Kerala is uniquely situated to contribute to the idea of cultural diplomacy because of its ancient history of accommodating and absorbing variety of foreign influences.

22. Aryans are considered to have arrived in Kerala in 300 BC. According to some historians, Kerala had trade relations with the Indus Valley Civilisation

as far back as 3000 BC. Dravadians arrived in Kerala in 700 BC. The first impact of Christianity in India came through St. Thomas who arrived in AD 50. The trade with the Roman Empire began in 45 AD. Islam arrived in Kerala almost immediately after its advent in Mecca when Cheraman Perumal visited Mecca in the 7th century. It was Adi Shankaracharya from Kerala who gave the concept of a unitary world through the philosophy of advaita. The beautiful concept of advaita helped societies by transcending the narrow selfishness of Ekam to the unification of all living beings into a global good by underlining the Upanishadic concept of Aham Brahm Asmi, tattwam Asi. During the period of Vijayanagara Empire, Kerala was trading with South East Asia along with China for both the spices and textiles.

23. Several examples can be given at this stage of the various events and ideas to illustrate how this cultural dialogue has helped in facilitating the overall relations of India with other countries:

- i) Civilisational dialogue between India and South East Asia conference organized in Patna in 2002;
- ii) A choreography of Indian and South East Asian performing arts to mark the India-ASEAN Summit in 2012;
- iii) The Sufi festival to underline the idea that this form of art is more devotional rather than affiliation with a particular religious thought or confinement by geo-political boundaries;
- iv) Jazz festival which brings India and Western groups together every year;
- v) A conference on globalization of culture in Paris;
- vi) Several conferences on Buddhism and Hindu philosophy in South East Asia.

24. All these have contributed immensely in bridging and enhancing understandings, diminishing fissiparous differences and enhancing the prospects of compromise.

25. It must be added in the final analysis that cultural diplomacy is non-coercive and pragmatic

process to promote dialogue and understandings, enhancing the process of compromises and mapping mutually acceptable solutions. However, just as power of military interventions remain the final resort after diplomacy fails, Cultural diplomacy on its own is not enough and can only work in tandem with other

instruments of diplomacy to open a space in which the dangers of confrontation and conflict decline to give chance to peaceful solutions and encourage competition as the path towards global success and prosperity.