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**Indian Foreign Policy — A Mirror for its Heritage and
Civilization**

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Let me say at the outset that the content of my talk is at odds with the title of the seminar session, which is: “Gandhian Thought in Indian Civilization”. In its practice of foreign policy, particularly in nuclear weapon policy, India seems to have strayed far from the values that Gandhiji espoused — though he was not an absolute pacifist. I cannot square the circle, to argue that which cannot be sustained by logic. Perhaps the simplest answer that can be given is that Gandhiji’s thoughts do not provide a direct or principal basis for the conduct of external policy for any state.

The notion of self-defense and armed struggle was not alien to Gandhiji. There was always a strong streak of pragmatism and practicality in his actions; during the Boer War in South Africa, he actively helped in mobilizing Indians to join the war effort; during World War I he helped raise an ambulance unit on the premise of a joint fight against a greater evil, for which he received a British award that he later renounced. We should also remember that at the height of the 1942 Quit India movement, Gandhiji took the stand that only free India was in a position to participate in World War II.

Speaking in the Constituent Assembly on 8 March 1948 Jawaharlal Nehru described Indian foreign policy in these words: “It is not wise to put all our eggs in one basket...our policy from the point of view of opportunism, if you like, is a straightforward, honest policy, an independent policy is best.” Nehru’s acclaimed biographer S Gopal describes non-alignment, as it was then conceived, as “not so much as a code of conduct, as a technique to be tested by results”.¹ It is another matter that some years later this developed into a Non-Aligned Movement, led by

Nasser, Nehru and Tito, and with evolution in international affairs, we are back now to the start, to the original concept of independent action. To go back to the theme of pragmatism, may I cite a note that Nehru wrote on 18 January, 1947, while he led the Interim Government that prepared the way to Independence, where he described the country's foreign policy as "to some extent a continuation of British policy, to some extent a reaction against it".

The doctrine of *realpolitik* dominates international affairs today. Concepts of liberalism and humanitarian idealism seem to be on the retreat; their protagonists appear isolated, with muted voices. The expectations of the early 1990s, immediately at the end of Cold War, was that a less polarized and more harmonious new international consensus should lead to a peace dividend for all states. That hope now seems a mockery. The two big international conferences of 2002, held at Monterey, Mexico and Durban, South Africa, aimed at mobilizing fresh resources for development of poor nations and protection of the global environment, produced half-hearted, desultory promises and precious little as concrete action. Today, world peace is at risk from the complex situations over Iraq and North Korea, and the involvement of these states in programs for the development of weapons of mass destruction. Overlaid on these immediate problems are the tragic events of 9/11 and the terrorism threat that the entire world faces.

Against this background it may seem fanciful to speak of any country's foreign policy as reflecting higher and idealistic values of culture and heritage. All states find themselves tied down in everyday management of external affairs, where pragmatism and adaptation to exogenous factors is the order of the day. The pace of evolution and a gamut of pressures seldom permit to statesmen and foreign policy planners the luxury of introspective reflection or well-deliberated alignment of action to self-perceived value systems. Domestic and external issues merge into, and influence one another in complex patterns.

Therefore, let me acknowledge that if India's foreign policy demonstrates elements of its culture and heritage, this is at best an imperfect reflection, one that is constantly adapted to perceived national self-interest and to the global context. To put it another way, the best we may expect is that this self-interest is broadly pursued in an enlightened manner. This appears to hold good for all states. In the case of India we usually find that there exists an obstinate urge to rationalize actions and find justification in terms of its own higher inherited values. This is visible, for instance, if we look at the way the Indian national independence movement looked at the world from the time of World War I onwards, and perceived its own struggle against British colonialism as part of a worldwide movement for the liberation of the victims of imperialism and oppression. That universal vision led the Indian movement to internationalism; in the heat of their domestic preoccupation, it found time to study external issues and articulate Indian support for other oppressed or threatened people, whether it was the Palestinians facing eviction from their own lands in the 1920s, or Czechoslovakia confronting Hitler's demand over the Sudeten region in the late-1930s.

At a minimum, reflection on India's external conduct in terms of its own inherited fundamentals is a way of offering a fresh analytical perspective. This is my excuse for presenting this topic for today, at this seminar that the Sasakawa Peace Foundation has graciously hosted, and the invitation extended to me to speak before you. I intend to focus on four themes, tracing the way Indian concepts and policy have been shaped, and the extent of compatibility with the country's roots and history.

First, we should look at India's self-image as a civilization that offered a value system that was relevant to all humanity, but devoid of cultural dogmatism or exclusivity. This has produced an urge to work across cultures.

Second, we may note the political dimension of cultural plurality, leading to an impulsion to construct friendly relations around the globe.

Third, India resorted to multiple tools of diplomacy, in the process of building diversified relations with foreign states, coupled with a commitment to internationalism, in particular to the UN system, and to international law.

Fourth, we should look at India's attachment to disarmament, especially to the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons, and the contradictions this produces in India's actual possession of nuclear weapons.

I

Let us examine the first theme, the Indian self-image. From the dawn of history, India has not viewed itself as a civilization of exclusivity, or as one that offered a value system that offered a single path to human salvation. In contrast to the other great religions that embody the teaching of prophets, neither Hinduism nor Buddhism offer a book of revelations, or a single text or compilation of religious teachings. Each Asian religion manifestly asserts that there are multiple paths to wisdom; its own way offers advantages, but it is one of many. In the same spirit, these religions also do not generally prescribe mandatory ceremonies or rites, or even a single unified ritual, again opting for multiple choices. We may define this relativity and acceptance of plural diversity as an Asian quality, essentially to be found in the other Asian religions besides the two I have mentioned.

One does not have to labor the point that in our world today, acceptance of diversity and differences is crucial, to counter the disease of fundamentalism, extremism and intolerance. Professor Samuel Huntington's analysis of clash of civilizations postulates that we now live in an age where religious and cultural differences guide the international political process, and that this will lead to an inevitable confrontation between states and systems representing these divergent forces. On the basis of simplistic analysis, it is possible to view the present-day

upsurge in terrorism resulting from the activities of Al-Quaida and their evil associates, as reflecting the religious-cultural schism anticipated by Huntington. But this is dangerously misleading on fact and on the outcome that should be our objective. Such fringe extremists are far removed from the doctrine of Islam, as objective scholars of all persuasions assert. As Nobel-Laureate Amartya Sen points out, in modern society people possess multiple attributes, of which the religious or cultural identity is one of many; it is too narrow-minded to focus exclusively on a single one of these as providing the determining character. Worse, to view the world as fractured irrevocably in terms of religion holds the danger of producing reactions and counter-actions of a self-fulfilling nature.

Indian civilization speaks of the world as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, a global family. And this was in an age when there was extensive ebb and flow of ideas and peoples, into and out of India. The cultural traces of these exchanges as we find them, extend across the whole of Asia, from the furthest reaches of the East, to the South-East, the Central region, the Arabian peninsula, and across to Europe as well, especially classic Greece and Rome. North and East Africa were included as well. Trade was the other mainspring of contact, predicated on the sustenance of peace and mutual accommodation. Territorial conquest and external war has altogether been absent from the history of India's outward linkages. Territorial conquest and imperialism of any form has not been a feature of the Indian polity.

For modern India these roots have naturally led to a policy of peace, mutual accommodation and promotion of cross-cultural understanding. *Panchshila*, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that India and China jointly put forth in 1954 trace their lineage directly to the doctrine of state polity that Emperor Ashok had enunciated some 2500 years earlier. Today, these principles and values are as relevant to the conduct of states on the international canvas, as to domestic governance, to civil society and to individuals in their daily life. Harmony, so central to Japanese thinking, is now a universal goal. Perhaps

the thinkers of Asia should turn their attention to re-framing *Panchshila* to the needs of our age, in which the issues of globalization, balance between state sovereignty and universal responsibility to humanity and Mother Earth, and the optimal way to conduct the war against terrorism and provide security, dominate the global discourse.

II

May I turn to the second theme, India's posture in international affairs, which is a byproduct of the values described above. Take the issue of universalism. As I mentioned earlier, even before Independence in 1947, the leaders of the nationalist movement devoted unusual attention to the global picture, especially the situation in other parts of the world in terms of exploitation and injustice. Representatives of the Indian National Congress Party traveled to countries and regions as far apart as China and the West Indies to observe and report on the struggles for liberation and justice underway in these places. Sometimes the mainspring for action was an Indian ethnic connection, as in the places where the Indian diaspora had settled over recent centuries. But there were other places where there was no immediate self-interest, and India saw its own struggle for liberation as a component in the global interplay of ideas and forces.

The Asian Relations Conference held at New Delhi in March 1946 projected a pan-Asian vision. At its inauguration, Nehru declared: "An Indian, wherever he may go in Asia, feels a sense of kinship with the land he visits and the people he meets...For too long we in Asia have been petitioners in Western courts and chancelleries. That story must now belong to the past. We are prepared to stand on our own feet and cooperate with all others who are prepared to cooperate with us. We do not intend to be the plaything of others." As we shall see, this latter theme became the *leitmotif* of India's external posture, but unfortunately Asia did not remain the prime area of focus, in real terms.

India's Independence came at a time when the international system was coalescing into the Cold War that was to reign for over four decades. In several major statements in 1946, as the head of the interim government that handled the transfer of power immediately prior to Independence, our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru declared that India was not to be "a satellite of another nation", or as a "pawn in the hands of great powers". This led India to non-alignment, as a policy prescription for itself. As Nehru said in a speech on All India Radio on September 7, 1946: "We propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another, which has led in the past to wars." In those words we find an echo of the same sentiments that animated that other great democracy, the United States, in the early years of its independence, when Thomas Jefferson declared that his county sought "peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations — entangling alliances with none!"

It is important to distinguish this original concept of a single country's foreign policy, from what eventually became the Non-Aligned Movement of Third World states, as a result of dialogue between its founders in those years, culminating in the first NAM Conference at Belgrade in 1960. That movement was a product of the two-bloc system, but paradoxically it became a bloc itself, and went on to develop its own distortions, in the shape of a *de facto* tilt towards the socialist countries. Indian policy on concrete issues, such as Soviet actions against Hungary in 1956, reflected that tilt, however it was rationalized at the time. Yet, as one of the leaders, India resisted formalization of the NAM "bloc" by resisting efforts by other leading states to create a permanent NAM secretariat that would have put the final seal on its bloc character.

In the radically changed environment after 1991, there remains virtually no difference between NAM as a political movement and the G-77 as a group of some 110 developing states that share common economic and social problems, and demand a fair share in a globalized world. India remains active in both the groups, but it also perceives more clearly than before that there is strong

differentiation of interests among all the members of that family. We realize that the posture of bloc bargaining, and the quasi-ideological confrontation with the West, the hallmark of the 1970s and the 1980s were extremely unproductive. India, like most other developing countries, now accepts that the solution to international political, economic and social challenges can only come through a non-doctrinaire process of dialogue and engagement, based on mutual accommodation. Further, while profound problems of structural differences persist between rich and poor nations, it is infinitely more productive to build issue-specific coalitions with like-minded states, enlisting also in this process also the non-state actors at home and abroad.

Clearly, in this fashion, India has returned to its roots, a universal vision in foreign policy. We see this most clearly in the quality and depth of its external relations. Since the early 1990s there is new vigor to Asia policy, resulting from a conscious desire to create meaningful political understanding, supported by diversified economic, cultural and other links. ASEAN is the high priority. Similar vigor is evident in the flowering of relations in West, Central and South-East Asia. With China the differences over the border issue have been put aside, and today inhibit neither an explosive growth in economic exchanges, nor a multidimensional new political dialogue founded on expanding understanding. It would be logical to speak of India-Japan relations at this juncture, but I have taken the liberty of shifting this topic to the end of this paper.

In Africa and Latin America, the quest for trade and investments is India's foreign policy driver, aiming also at re-valorizing the political relations that have always existed with these distant regions. In the relationship with the US, both sides have cast aside past suspicions and uni-dimensionalism, where differences on one set of issues blocked the entire interchanges that should have logically developed between these two large democracies. The intensity and content of this political relationship is better than at any time in the history of our republic. Our challenge here is to fashion a level of economic exchanges — in trade, technology

and investments — that lives up to the promised potential. The burgeoning Indo-American community that makes its home in the US, now approaching 2 million in number, is a powerful factor in the new dynamism. Relations with other great powers, the EU and its leading member-states and Russia, are equally undergoing diversification and growth.

Today's global matrix shows a hybrid character, where the political and military might of the US as the single "hyperpower" co-exists with polycentric structures, in terms of the softer power of economics, technology and the social, demographic and other relevant forces. Further, this structure evolves continually, in what is also a very volatile world. It makes good sense for India to build direct as well as cross-relationships with all the major and middle powers, and to leverage its own strengths in a non-doctrinaire manner, working towards peace and security in its own region and the world.

South Asia, our immediate neighborhood, is the one area where at first sight, Indian policy has produced poor results. The reason is the impasse with Pakistan, where the latter perceives that settlement of the dispute over Kashmir as the absolute precondition to any improvement in relations. The Indian view is that in Kashmir the root problem is Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism, which continues despite assurances that country has given to the US and others in the transformed world climate after the post-9/11 global crackdown against terrorism. Every initiative that India has taken to build mutual confidence through trade, people-to-people contact, cultural ties and the like remains blocked as irrelevant by our neighbor, which shows no interest in the step-by-step, graduated process of conflict resolution, which is the international norm. Pakistan's self-image as a Muslim homeland on the subcontinent seems to find unacceptable a secular and multi-ethnic India, whose billion-strong population includes over 140 million Muslims.

The world should be able to judge as to which of these national narratives is more appropriate to the promotion of peace, understanding and harmony in the world. My personal view is that while India has no choice but to deal with the terrorism threat that Pakistan poses, it should put this relationship on the back-burner, to await evolution of events and the emergence of a more realistic appreciation of self-interest in that country.

One direct consequence of blocked India-Pakistan relations has been the atrophy of our regional cooperation institution, SAARC, failure in developing mutually beneficial cooperation. For instance, how can “South Asia Free Trade Area” even begin to take off in implementing tariff preferences, when our neighbor subjects Indian exports to unilateral restrictions of a kind that even Cold War opponents did not practice, by refusing standard MFN treatment, in defiance of WTO obligations? One result: India has now established new bilateral free trade arrangements with Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, in effect bypassing SAARC. Further, new cross-regional cooperation is under development, such as that envisioned by BIMST-EC, which links Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and the creation of another cooperative network among the states that lie in the river-basins of the Ganga and the Mekong.

III

The third theme that flows from the above is India’s posture towards the UN system and multilateralism, and its utilization of a full range of diplomacy tools in building its international relations.

From the outset, India has been an active contributor to virtually all the activities of the UN system, embracing it as an article of faith, and an instrument for the construction of a better world. In *Discovery of India* that Nehru wrote while he was an involuntary guest in British colonial jail in 1942-44, he declares: “There seemed to be something unique about the continuity of a cultural tradition

through five thousand years of history...For any subject country national freedom must be the first and clearest urge; for India with her intense sense of identity and a past heritage it may be doubly so...Nevertheless India...has great faith in her acceptance of interaction and the coordination, and even to some extent the subordination, of the independent nation state to a global organization.”² This is a remarkably prescient assertion, anticipating the kind of interdependence that globalization has now brought, and the voluntary restraint that the nation-state must accept on its own sovereignty, for the common good of the world community.

The catalogue of India’s consistently active role in the UN and its agencies, and other multilateral organizations is long and does not bear repetition. One example: it has been among the foremost contributors to UN peacekeeping activities in all kinds of danger situations around the world. So too has been its endorsement of the rule of law in world affairs, and a dynamic role in the development of international law.

Let us consider the indigenous Indian diplomatic tradition. The Indian epics as well as historical records narrate an extensive use of the methods of diplomacy. The treatise *Arthashastra*,³ compiled in the 3rd century BC by Chanakya, teacher to King Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya dynasty, anticipates much of the concepts of statecraft of Machiavelli. He postulates that the interests of the state and the king provide the first imperatives of foreign policy, ahead of morality, though morality and justice are necessary in the life of the state. Even in India we do not pay sufficient attention to this aspect of our own heritage, and it should not surprise us that little of this is known abroad.

IV

As a fourth theme, let me turn to India’s nuclear policy, which took shape immediately after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki holocausts of 1945. The original

hallmark was strong advocacy of disarmament and abolition of nuclear weapons. Today, India is *de facto* a nuclear power. How are the contradictions to be understood? Or is it plain hypocrisy?

The context is vital to explaining this radical evolution in India's actions. One, India vigorously championed the cause of nuclear disarmament, advocating an end to all nuclear tests, in the period up to and beyond the first Chinese nuclear weapon test of 1964. It found that this advocacy fell on completely deaf ears. At the same time the security environment for India became progressively difficult with the advancement of the weapon programs of other countries. Two, India opted to stay out of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the ground that it was discriminatory between states that possessed nuclear weapons and those that did not; it imposed no binding obligations on the former to carry out effective disarmament. Three, from the early years of Independence India had embarked on the peaceful exploitation of nuclear energy, since its endowment of energy resources, required that it must exploit nuclear energy for power generation. But these peaceful programs came under increasing restriction in the wake of the NPT. Four, in 1974, India exploded a nuclear device underground, in what it called a "peaceful" test, yet in an act of self-restraint, a nuclear weapons development program did not follow. Five, in the early 1990s India actively participated in the negotiations for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, but eventually opted to stay out of CTBT, on the ground that it had to keep open its nuclear option. Six, taking into account the development of the weapons program of Pakistan, much of it based on clandestine acquisition of nuclear and related missile technology, India concluded that it had no option but to develop its own weapons. But it made the commitment that no further nuclear tests would be carried out after those of May 1998, and that it would practice a "no first use" doctrine.

In addition, a few other basic points should be considered.

- India is not under the security umbrella of any nuclear weapon state. It has no option but to take responsibility for its own safety. The creation of a credible minimum deterrence has been its aim, not a continuing weapons program.
- It has actively implemented non-proliferation regulations in dealings with other states, conforming to the NPT conditions, plus the rules of missile non-proliferation and other control regimes, even though it is not a member of these groups.
- It remains committed to the Rajiv Gandhi proposals of 1988 for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, provided such a time-bound plan is accepted by all weapon-states after due negotiation.

It is a harsh truth that India has found qualitative change in relations with virtually each major power after the nuclear tests. Contrast this with its exclusion in the immediately preceding years from instances such as APEC, and ASEM. This is the way the international system works.

V

Before concluding, let me turn to the important theme of our bilateral relations. Since our Independence, India and Japan have enjoyed friendly ties, reflecting our inherited past. We were able to swiftly put aside the legacy of World War II. Beginning with the 1980s, Japan became India's largest aid donor. But we do not seem to have moved beyond a kind of formalism in the real content of our relations, especially in the political domain. And trade and investments, while showing growth, have still lagged much behind what observers on both sides identify as the real potential. In a recent study, an Indian scholar has aptly called this a "low intensity relationship".⁴ Let me offer two examples of the challenge.

In 1998-99 a German management consultancy company and the Confederation of Indian Industry carried out a detailed survey of top Indian CEOs to gauge the country's business culture; the results are summarized in a book that I co-authored.⁵ It produced the surprising result that Japan — and Russia — were perceived by them as the most difficult countries to do business. For all our vaunted shared cultural history, huge misperceptions persist. We concluded that Indian business has to work harder to overcome the stereotypes.

India and Japan have now put in place a new “eminent persons group”, composed of public figures, businessmen, scholars and others, as a kind of non-official supplement to the official dialogue track. During my assignment in Germany I was involved with the launch and operation of a similar EP group, and served on it for five years after that. Both India and Germany found the group to be exceptionally effective; the success ingredient was its exclusive focus on producing concrete suggestions for improving the bilateral relationship. Such EP groups are a recent innovation, in effect a form of public diplomacy. They are truly productive only if they function autonomously, neither replicating the official exchanges, nor lapsing into an exchange of polite speeches or aimless dialogue.

I am a novice to Japan, but it seems that despite our shared heritage, we have not been able to establish practical, result-oriented, mutually beneficial understanding, among our policy-makers, businessmen academics or others. We are nice to one another, but the exchanges are far short of the potential. We need to move beyond the surface level to the inner core of two-way comprehension. The baggage of the Cold War and the debate between the merits of capitalism and socialism are now behind us. Opportunities in the economic arena, knowledge industry, research and people exchanges are unprecedented. A new impulsion in bilateral relations, which would also contribute to regional and global understanding, is surely overdue. I hope that my remarks help to draw attention to our bilateral relationship, whose promise is far greater than its present day reality.

¹ S Gopal, *Nehru*, Volume II, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1979).

² Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, (Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1946).

³ Edited and translated by LN Rangarajan, *Arthashastra*, (New Delhi, 1987).

⁴ Purnendra Jain, *India's Calculus of Japan's Foreign Policy in Pacific Asia*, essay in *Japan's Asia Policy: Revival and Response*, ed. Takashi Ignouchi, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002).

⁵ *Managing Corporate Culture: Leveraging Cultural Diversity to Give India a Global Competitive Edge*, Ulrich, Chaudhry and Rana (Palgrave, New Delhi, 2000).