

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | K.S. BAJPAI

'India should not depend on other countries'

The veteran diplomat on India-Pakistan ties, India-U.S. relations, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy

KALLOL BHATTACHARJEE

K.S. Bajpai, former Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, and Ambassador to the U.S., China and Pakistan, is among the senior-most policy analysts in the country. Among his many achievements was the reopening of the Indian mission in Pakistan six years after the 1971 war. Mr. Bajpai, 90, served under three Prime Ministers – Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi – and witnessed the transformation of China during the Deng Xiaoping era and of the U.S. when Ronald Reagan was President. Excerpts from an interview:

What do you think of the election in Pakistan?

■ Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Every time something new happens in Pakistan, everyone in India starts thinking if something different can be tried this time. There were some promising sprouts in the past but they did not take us any where. I don't anticipate anything now. I don't see Pakistan accepting the Indian approach and I don't see India accepting the Pakistan approach. More problematic is the fact that we are now in a situation where the world has become volatile and turbulent. States no longer behave in the way they used to behave earlier. Ugly forces have risen within states. One can't really count on situations in which people would behave rationally.

Imran Khan has arrived. A new player has sidelined two established political parties in Pakistan. Some are saying that the military will govern by proxy now.

■ The military has always had a say in Pakistan. It was civilian rulers like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who tried to reduce the say of the military. Why should anyone expect the military to reduce its in-

fluence in Pakistan, especially since it always had that influence? Civilian rule tried to reduce the military's influence, but it is not that easy to reduce. The established parties have not disappeared from the scene but god knows what is their current strength. The more it changes, the more it remains the same. Political uncertainties of Pakistan remain what they had always been.

India's defence trade relationship has been elevated to that of a NATO-level ally of the U.S. Where are ties headed?

■ I don't have the slightest idea about what to make of the U.S. leadership and its ideas. I am totally confused about U.S. policy. I am not sure what benefit we are to get at a time when the U.S. is criticising NATO. We never had a regional order but we had a global order that has virtually disintegrated. It may mean something more as far as what we may acquire from the U.S. I don't see us becoming part of any grand strategy of the U.S. in which we have a role to play apart from the fact that we may or may not want to play that role.

What options does India

have in the current circumstances?

■ There is only one thing for India to do: build up its own strength and not depend on any other country. I have been saying this for a long time. But the way we are conducting our nation's affairs, we are unlikely to do it successfully. Neither the thinking on what we need to do nor the machinery for doing it is near up-to-date or near adequate for the extraordinarily efficient and far-reaching policies that we need.

Do you think India's internal issues are affecting its external issues more intensely now?

■ It has always been the same. Let us for once remember how unique and diverse we are. A very unique kind of strength requires a



R.V. MOORTHY

very unique efficiency in running it. So many diversities have never before constituted a democratic state. Neither our political classes nor our public opinion is adequately aware of the challenge. What worries me most is that the India that we have got is very different from what we hoped for in 1947. I am not talking about the secular and non-secular debate. We thought that by now India would be a very powerful economically forward-looking, politically stable, and internationally important state. That particular kind of India has not emerged. We are nowhere near the economic goal, nor are we anywhere near political stability. International clout is nowhere to be seen. I don't see any forces emerging that will take us towards our goal. Nothing can be done unless we change our appreciation

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of the world we live in and make ourselves fit to cope with it.

So, you think that the core concern for India is to deal with a world that has no set structure?

■ Yes. Here I would like to remind you of what Mohammed Iqbal said: "Tere barbadio ke mashware he aasmano mei, na samjho ge tho mitt jao ge, Hindustan walo, tumhari daastan tak bhi na hogi daastan mein (The sky is full of foreboding of your doom, dear Indians. If you fail to realise this, you will be erased; there will be

no trace of you all in the history books").

In recent months we have seen India's experiments with great powers through the informal summits in Wuhan in China and Sochi in Russia.

■ These are very necessary and potentially useful tools of diplomacy. How far they will be successful depends ultimately on how each state views the other. I am not sure India has come to a conclusion on how to deal with China and I am not sure China has come to the conclusion that it will be more cooperative towards us. So I feel this is a good way to keep the ball rolling but where the ball will land, I don't know.

With the emergence of China, and with the U.S. losing its grip over Asia, is looking at the U.K. and Europe an option for India?

■ I don't think the U.K. is eurocentric at the moment. Can anyone believe that a country like the U.K. has landed itself [in the Brexit situation]? I am all for having cooperation with them across multiple spheres but I do not think that can be a substitute for our own strengths. Unless we develop our core strengths, we will just drift along.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government began with a mini SAARC summit when he assumed power in 2014. As we head to the general election, what is your assessment of his foreign policy?

■ Each aspect is serious and deserves to be discussed separately but it all adds up to a couple of questions. When this government took over, whatever one might have

thought of its ideology or its past behaviour, a lot of us – in fact, most of us, even critics – wished the government well because we expected it to galvanise the economy and the administration. Has he done either? So, those two hopes have not been realised. We have kept going. Hundreds of millions of Indians have kept on with their jobs. So, the country keeps going but it is not going as high as its potential.

Mr. Modi recently went to Africa. He went to Latin America earlier. How well thought-out are these approaches?

■ I am sure my colleagues in the Foreign Ministry are very professional in their approach. But foreign policy cannot be handled by diplomats alone. You may establish relationships and keep relationships going but whatever commitments you make are dependent on the other arms of the government. We can go and promise banking facilities, loans, airlines, everything. Let me just talk about the people-to-people relationships. Can foreigners get visas easily for travel? The foreign office doesn't decide on visas.

These are decided by other ministries. No one wants to come because of the long time that it takes to get Indian visas. If someone wants to organise a cultural event or any other event, it takes forever to get visas. For example, you want to have a very special relationship with your neighbours – say, with Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Can you get the ministries concerned to relax the visas? It is not for the foreign office to do this. That has to be done by the Cabinet but the Cabinet doesn't seem to have the time for these things. So many of our projects are lan-

guishing because of this approach.

Some of these projects are doing very well – for instance, building of roads in Afghanistan – but look what we did in building a Parliament in Afghanistan. It took us 10 long years.

I will give you a small anecdote. I had the privilege of reopening the diplomatic mission in Pakistan (1976-80). I rented a house and enlarged it. Indira Gandhi had authorised a private architect for an impressive new building for the residence of the Indian High Commissioner in Pakistan. But 40 years later, the Indian High Commissioner continues to live in the same rented house that I had taken. There are some staff quarters that have been added. But the rented accommodation remains 40 years later. How do you carry on international relations in this situation?

That is why I say core strength is vital but peripheral power is also important. Every arm of politics has to function properly. Look at the executive, judiciary, legislature – all are in desperate need of self-improvement.

What should be done to help India adjust to the disorder in the world?

■ My basic appeal is to mobilise the immense talent that we have in this country. We have talented people in this country. Put them anywhere in the world and they come on top, but at home we seem to stifle them. Neither our concepts of policymaking nor our apparatus for performance are anywhere near the level that they ought to be if we have to meet India's external challenges. I really agree with Henry Kissinger that we are dealing with a very grave scenario.

SINGLE FILE

Friends or Seoul-mates?

With the U.S. and China playing power politics, South Korea looks to India as a viable alternative partner

RAJIV KUMAR



South Korean President Moon Jae-in's four-day state visit to India early last month came at a time when Mr. Moon's administration is seeking to upgrade India-South Korea relations.

It was evident when Mr. Moon launched a foreign initiative called New Southern Policy last year that he had decided to step up Seoul's engagement with India and the ASEAN countries. That this new engagement had a strategic element was seen when he sent a special envoy to India immediately after assuming office. That step was a first in the annals of South Korea's diplomatic history, and it demonstrated its desire to shape a new paradigm of Seoul-New Delhi relations.

Additionally, this year, South Korea set up a state-run research centre on India and ASEAN under the Korea National Diplomacy Academy, which is tasked with establishing a theoretical foundation for the Moon administration's vision to diversify strategic partnerships across the Asian region.

What lies behind Seoul's reimagined diplomatic posture towards India? In recent times, South Korea has been heavily impacted by power politics between the U.S. and China. The clash between the two countries over the deployment of the U.S. Thaad missile defence system in the Korean Peninsula set off an economic retaliation by China against South Korea, whose economy is highly dependent on the Chinese market. Further, the ongoing U.S.-China trade war has heightened uncertainty surrounding South Korea's core economic interests. This has led to Seoul reassessing risks associated with economic turbulence stemming from Chinese policies, which is a threat to the national security of South Korea in some cases.

To escape the power politics in Northeast Asia, South Korean policymakers believe that Seoul should diversify its relations with other major powers in the region, including India which they see as a viable alternative partner. During his meeting with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Mr. Moon pointed out that his government wished to elevate relations with India to the same level as with other major powers in the world – namely, the U.S., China, Japan and Russia.

There are multiple dimensions to the uptick in India-South Korea strategic ties, including working together on ensuring freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in the Indo-Pacific region; South Korea backing India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership, especially when New Delhi has faced sustained opposition from China; and both nations working with third countries on a tripartite basis for regional development, exemplified by plans for capacity-building programmes in Afghanistan. Given the immense potential for cooperation to bring about real change that could benefit India, South Korea and the broader region, Mr. Moon's visit signals a deepening of bilateral ties driven by mutual strategic interest.

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CONCEPTUAL Leaky pipeline SOCIOLOGY

This refers to the low representation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The leaky pipeline, used as a metaphor describing the loss of water flowing through a broken pipeline, has been attributed to various reasons. These include structural failures that drive women out of STEM, the problem of striking a work-life balance, and day-to-day slights that leave women feeling alienated and undervalued and push them to quit these fields. Some women interviewed in a study also mentioned sexual advances at the workplace and being forced to perform "women's work" such as clerical duties as reasons for quitting.

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NOTEBOOK

At the receiving end

Anecdotes from the DMK beat

R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN

I was not particularly happy when I was handed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) beat in 2002: a familiar sight in *The Hindu's* Chennai office was that of the stressed DMK reporter who routinely got screamed at for some news story. Over an evening beer at the Press Club, and with a few of us as audience, the reporter would vent against M. Karunanidhi. The other reason I hated the beat was that my Tamil was rudimentary, and Mr. Karunanidhi talks in riddles in Tamil. All DMK press releases were in Tamil.

Six months into the job, I realised that all the ranting – and I got a fair share in the nearly eight years I covered the party – was Mr. Karunanidhi's style of engaging with a person. This also meant a level of access that is unheard of in today's polity where politicians hire image makers to 'deal' with the

press. In exchange for tolerating a few rants, I could witness the decision-making processes at the highest levels of governance.

Mr. Karunanidhi usually did not call the newspaper's editor to lodge a complaint about a story; he engaged with the reporter instead. Sometimes, this anger spilled over to the party newspaper, *Murasoli*, where a quarter-page 'box' item would announce the infamy of the reporter about some news story that he was unhappy about. I have often been 'boxed' in *Murasoli*.

The temper was not just reserved for the media. Once, I walked into his chamber in the DMK headquarters and saw all the senior party men getting roasted together.

Between 2002 and 2010, I woke up, a minimum of three days a week, to calls from him. He once caught me in Chicago and at another time in a train as it was approaching Pa-

lakkad. It did not matter where you were, or what you did.

Once the shouting was over, I almost always reached his Gopalapuram house. Over coffee he would explain what he thought was wrong, and I would explain why I was right. He listened. I did not invent the stories, I often told him. I used the time to ask him about concepts that I could not comprehend, such as changing the school education system to an utopian *samacheer kalvi* (uniform syllabus) and about the need for *samathuvapurams* (translated loosely as villages where everyone is equal). He explained the thought behind each of these. It's another matter that many of these did not materialise in the manner that he wanted.

There were exceptions to this rule. On some days, by the time I reached his house, he would have moved on to a different topic. My day began there.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 1, 1918.

The Indian Reforms.

The European Association's preliminary statement on reform proposals declines to pass summary judgment till the fundamental question of electorates is settled. The Association is not hostile to the principals of compartmental transfer of responsibility but considers that the Indian ministers are judgeable by the attitude towards the reserved rather than the transferred subjects. The statement urges communal representation for Indians and representation of non-official Europeans supplementing commercial representation. The Association strongly disapproves changes in the Government of India till provincial experiment proves successful and condemns too rapid Indianisation of Civil Service.

Increase in Telegraph Rates.

A Press Communique [issued in Simla] says: The increasing pressure on Telegraph service due to the expansion in traffic and the inability of the department to meet this expansion owing to the shortage in material and staff, have led the Government of India to decide that as further means of relieving the pressure on the department the tariff for ordinary inland private telegrams, should be increased from eight annas for a telegram of 12 words or less, with half an anna for every additional word, to a uniform rate of one anna a word with a minimum of 12 annas, and that the rate for express telegrams should be raised from one rupee for 12 words or less with two annas for every additional word, to a uniform rate of two annas a word with minimum of Rs. 1-8-0.

DATA POINT

Commodity break-up

In India, the bulk of imported agricultural commodities in the past four years has been vegetable oils, accounting for nearly half the total imports. Marine products topped the list of agricultural exports from India. A look at the top five imports and exports among agricultural commodities

