

## **THE MEDIA, PUBLIC OPINION & DIPLOMACY**

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The India-Pakistan Summit at Agra has sharply focussed attention on media management at such events. The inconclusive result, reflected in the inability of the two sides to finalize a joint declaration has been blamed by some, in part, to President Musharraf's visually incisive July 16 breakfast encounter with Indian editors. We have one point of remarkable contrast in the statements of the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan at their separate post-Summit press conferences. Declared Jaswant Singh at Agra on the morning of July 17: "When it comes to bilateral or international issues, we do not and cannot negotiate through the media". Abdul Sattar asserted a differing perspective at his press conference held some hours later in Islamabad: "In contemporary diplomacy it is impossible to separate official talks from interviews with the media". Leaving out the other Indo-Pak elements, what are the issues at stake here? Do they matter?

Let us first clarify one peripheral point – probably of transitory importance – that our media engaged in "hype" and overkill, before and at the Summit. Clearly, for much of the time at Agra, the news channels engaged in live broadcasts had time on their hands and filled it unwisely with repetitive and often vacuous comment. Just as the Kargil clashes of 1998 were the nation's first live major warfare episode played out under the media glare, the Agra Summit was India's first diplomatic encounter peopled by an assertive and plural Fourth Estate, where the electronic journalists used their cousins of the print journals as "force multipliers". Clearly the media made mistakes, but we of the sub-continent are fast learners, and one assumes that the lessons will be factored into the next event.

Preoccupation with these details should not distract attention from the fact that there is now in India a demanding public opinion, not always well informed and often prone to emotion, but always inquisitive. This is in parallel with the situation around the world, and owes to the communications revolution, as well as the "democratization phenomenon" in foreign affairs, visible in locations as far apart as the 1999 WTO conference at Seattle, and China after the spy plane incident earlier this year. In effect, major issues in external relations are driven by the internal dynamic within states. Foreign policy has become inseparable from domestic policy.

When even dictatorships are forced to take the opinion of home constituencies into account, how can a democracy do any less? The issue is not one of pandering to the media, but using the tools available in the negotiation process, plus accountability to domestic public opinion. Public diplomacy is at center-stage.

International relations theorist Robert Putnam has conceptualized the impact this produces on negotiations in the shape of an elegant “Two Level Game” theory (*Double Edged Diplomacy*, Ed. Evans, Jackson & Putnam, UC Press, Berkeley, 1993). Statesmen now operate at two tables, the international and domestic “Diplomatic tactics and strategies are constrained simultaneously by what the other states will accept and domestic constituencies will ratify”. Further, in the diplomatic negotiation one has to “take into account and, if possible, influence the expected reaction of other actors, both at home and abroad”. One can also target policies at domestic groups in foreign countries and seek allies “behind the back” of the negotiating partner. This involves control over information, resources and agenda setting.

International bargaining is presented as a process of complex interdependence that not only constrains statesmen but also creates new perspectives for creative statecraft. There is a process of virtually seamless interaction between the negotiation and the use of public opinion to influence that process. The statesman’s strategies are double-edged, and he remains the decisive actor.

Certainly, to draw a heavy veil over an international dialogue that is underway, and to exercise self-restraint is one option. It may even be a joint or mutually agreed strategy where delicate issues are at stake, and premature disclosure may compromise a process of unfreezing set blocked or frozen postures. There is also much room for secret initial contacts, away from the public gaze. A case in point is the Norway inspired Oslo dialogue in 1992, that de-blocked the Israel-Palestine dialogue. But if there is no prior agreement between the parties involved, then a unilateral refusal to play the Two Level Game leaves the field clear for the other side. This asymmetry is obviously disadvantageous.

There is ample precedent, plus practical experience in Indian diplomacy, in the use of mid-negotiation comment, attributed disclosures and deep background briefings, during a bilateral or multilateral event, to convey signals and to influence the negotiation process itself.

What is new is that thanks to the TV that brings events into every home in real time, the feedback loop is shorter than ever. Public opinion is both vocal and demands instant gratification.

One might argue that between our two countries, the more open Indian society gives an uneven playing field advantage for the Pakistan leadership. That is a fact of life, but we live in a dynamic world and the internal constituencies within Pakistan offer their own evolving potential. And even if we downplay their importance, the domestic Indian constituency is reasoning enough for alert initiatives of our own.

Much more than for Pakistan, this poses sharp challenge for Indian statesmen. It calls for new tools, pragmatic flexibility and clear lines of communication authority. We learnt at the time of the nuclear tests of May 1998 of the perils of sloppy drafting of diplomatic messages and confused signals by political spokesmen. There is much to be said for the use of high-level and authoritative officials as front-office briefing personnel. They are unlikely to bring into the process their personal agendas or personalities. Of course, the background voices that speak in non-attributed backgrounders may belong to political levels, provided they speak to a unified national purpose, in careful orchestration.

We have mastered this well in the past, and can do it even better in the future. Using this set of options responds not only to the demands of our public opinion, but also harnesses the complex foreign-domestic interaction potential of the Two Level Game. Refusal to play the game can only be at our own cost.

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