

## **Focus : Kishan S Rana**

### **Ke'EP' up the good work**

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### **An Indian innovation in the diplomatic arena deserves greater emulation**

In 1991, India launched a small innovation in the way diplomatic relations are conducted with individual foreign countries. During Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's visit to Germany that year, in talks with Chancellor Helmut Kohl, he made a proposal, and the two countries decided to create a bilateral "eminent person"(EP) group, as an experiment.

The objective was to harness eminent non-official personalities to generate new ideas, using this to enrich relations between the countries. Some years earlier, a plan to create a similar group had been discussed between the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Reagan. Henry Kissinger had even agreed to head it on the US side, but the plan was not pursued. We do not know if this was due to inertia or doubts on the Indian side or some other difficulty.

The concept is not new, that the formal machinery and official channels of inter-governmental communication can be supplemented by bringing into the exchanges distinguished individuals, who are not inhibited by convention or hierarchy. Western countries have had such special mechanisms for consultation and for creating cooperative networks that weave together different kinds of entities and institutions. One example is the "Atlantic Bridge" that the US and Germany created soon after World War II, for partnerships between different agencies, official and non-official, of the two countries.

A different kind of example is the Pugwash Conference that specialises in disarmament and security affairs and played a unique role in sustaining East-West dialogue in the Cold War years. In sectors like the environment, we have the global "epistemic communities" that reach out to key players in different countries and involve them as eventual catalysts for change in their own countries.

On a strictly bilateral plane, in the mid-1950s, India and Japan established a special group of eminent economists, businessmen and others, to exchange views on the national planning experience of each side.

The group met annually, alternating between New Delhi and Tokyo. I attended the meeting in 1966 as a young desk-officer in the ministry of external affairs (MEA) and saw that it had degenerated into a sterile exchange, a kind of dialogue of the deaf, with the Japanese side gently complaining of the controls and barriers of the Indian "licence raj" and especially, at that time, of the fear of nationalisation that inhibited fresh investments from abroad, and the Indian side stone-walling defensively, justifying the economic policies of the time.

Strangely, that particular group has lingered on over the years, thus proving that it is hard for the government to kill an agency or group, once created.

The India-Germany Consultative Group (IGCG), created in 1992, has involved India with a similar "forum" with France and a "roundtable" with the UK. India and Japan have also created a new-style EP group a year back. Similarly, Germany has used the success of the IGCG and has created new dialogue mechanisms with China, Japan, Brazil, and Egypt, plus a wide-based entity with all the Asean states. What are the factors behind its success?

First, a good EP group must be driven by a clear mandate. On the basis of the 1991 decision, the IGCG was asked to come up with practical ideas that would advance relations between India and Germany. The first set of co-chairmen on both sides, P N Dhar and Ulrich Cartillieri (then a management board member of Deutsche Bank) kept to this focus, overruling any grandstanding! I imagine that Cartillieri also helped, insisting that the final recommendations be kept to a maximum of a page and half because the German Chancellor would not read anything longer!

Second, much hinges on the individuals selected, the variety of their backgrounds, and the interest they take in what is truly a pro bono activity for most of them. Given that today, economics is the driver of most external relations, and offers the best potential for accretion, it helps to draw around half the members from business, finance and related fields. The remainder from other sectors such as culture, the media, science and technology, academia and area expertise and public life in general provide the leavening. And as the group meets over the years, a kind of chemistry also develops.

It is important to rotate the members and bring in fresh blood without destroying continuity. A total of around 15 to 20 members on each side is practical, because too large a number becomes unwieldy. A typical meeting lasts a maximum of two days; some EP groups create sub-committees, or charge a

member with following up on a particular initiative. The group acts as a brains trust; implementation is left to the official machinery.

Third, the officials of the two foreign ministries and the other agencies that serve on such EP groups in an ex officio provide meaningful support without attempting to “drive” the discussions or recommendations. This demands firmness by the co-chairs and flexibility by the officials and the ambassadors of the two countries, who are also involved substantively. It is pointless for an EP group to replicate official dialogue (after the 1998 nuclear tests, the IGCG discussed the issue and realised that it was good to be informed of the views of both sides, but that it was even better to concentrate on areas of direct competence). At the same time, the EP group is not a “track two” mechanism: we might give it the appellation of “track one-and-half”!

Fourth, using this format yields dividends. On one’s own side, it exposes a wider circle of agents to the manner in which relations are developing with the partner country concerned. This precisely matches the reality today that the foreign ministry is no longer the monopolist of foreign affairs, and involving other functional ministries that are heavily engaged with one or another country in EP groups is a way of practicing internal outreach. Both at home and in the target country, it helps create favourable constituencies among non-state actors, who too have a real capacity today to build external ties. Businessmen, scientists and media practitioners can all widen their perspective. In effect, they become allies in relationship building.

How can this methodology be further harnessed to serve Indian interests? First, it is essential for us to extend the practice to some of our neighbours. Some will surely argue that there may not exist sufficient plurality in external affairs participation or decision-making in this or that country. We deal with a dynamic world and there is a pluralisation process underway in all countries. It is always good to have a wide circle of constituents involved in this process.

Second, some imagination in the selection of members in EP groups helps. The frequent Indian geriatric principle is not the only one that should be used, nor the method of offering a co-chairmanship as a consolation prize to those who have earned retirement from public duties! When we ignore this, we produce a mismatch with the members of the other side in the EP group. This erodes the group’s functional utility.

Third, the MEA still retains the mindset of a monopolist, and blocks the participation of

representatives of ministries like commerce and industry. This is shortsighted, because practising inclusiveness would expose these ministries to the wider issues in each relationship. The MEA needs these ministries as allies, not as turf-adversaries.

To conclude, this is innovation at work. The elaboration of the EP method has taken place outside the gaze of diplomacy theorists and most practitioners. Best of all, it conforms to some dominant trends in international affairs of our times: the breaking down of the role of foreign ministries as the exclusive "gate-keeper" to external relations and the entry of non-state players such as the media, think tanks and others into international affairs. We should be glad about India's role.

*(The writer was **former ambassador to Germany** and is **author of Inside Diplomacy and Bilateral Diplomacy**)*