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**Building Relations Through Multi-Format Dialogue:
Trends in Bilateral Diplomacy¹**

Kishan S Rana, a former Ambassador, is Senior Fellow at the DiploFoundation, Malta and Geneva; Professor Emeritus at the Foreign Service Institute, New Delhi and Honorary Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

A new feature of international relations in our time is a speeding up in the application of innovations. Some of these take advantage of the increasingly plural nature of the diplomatic process, especially the participation of non-state actors in the building of closer relations with foreign states. One instance is the emergence of several tracks in the discussions among states, at bilateral and at regional levels. Many regional organizations now routinely involve ‘wise men’ in recommending new actions, and for the drafting of major documents that are subsequently taken up by the member-governments, for inter-government dialogue and adoption. Former French president Giscard d’Estaing headed the team that produced the first draft of the ill-fated EU Constitution, while the ASEAN Charter was similarly the work of a group of Asian advisers, principally drawn from outside the governments. Such activities reflect the opening up of the process of international relations, and recognition by governments that they obtain multiple benefits from such inputs.

INDIA-GERMANY EXPERIENCE

In September 1991, Germany and India jointly launched a small innovation. During Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao’s visit to Germany, the two countries decided to create a bilateral ‘eminent persons’ (EP) group, as an experiment. The simple objective was to bring in eminent non-official personalities as advisers, tasked to generate new

¹ This essay is based on an article titled ‘A Diplomatic Innovation’, published in *Business Standard* in 2002.

ideas, with the aim of diversifying and deepening the relations between the two countries. In late 1988, a plan to create a similar group had been discussed between late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Ronald Reagan, during the Indian PM's visit to Washington DC. Henry Kissinger had even agreed to head it on the US side (as he disclosed subsequently), but the plan was not implemented. It seems that New Delhi was slow in nominating an Indian co-chair, and the proposal fell by the wayside after Rajiv Gandhi lost the election the following year.

Other countries have used similar formats, where the official channels of inter-governmental communication are supplemented by bringing into bilateral exchanges distinguished individuals, drawn from different walks of life, who are not inhibited by convention or hierarchy. Several Western countries have long used such special mechanism for consultations that weave together different kinds of entities and institutions. One example is the 'Atlantic Bridge' established by the US and Germany in the 1950s, for partnership between different agencies, official and non-official, of the two countries. UK and Germany have another annual mechanism of their own, the Koenigswinter group, which involves about 80 scholars and others on each side; they meet in different committees and groups. The Pugwash Conference specialises in disarmament and security affairs, and played a unique role in sustaining East-West dialogue in the Cold War years, that worked at a wider level than bilateral relationships between pairs of countries.

The India-Germany Consultative Group (IGCG) came into existence in 1992. I had the good fortune to work for the first meeting of the group that was held in Bonn in September that year, during the time I served as the Indian envoy to Germany (1992-95), and I remained a non-official member of the group for another three years after I retired in 1995.

How have such groups developed since the early 1990s? Both Germany and India have set up similar EP groups with several other partner countries. India created a bilateral 'forum' with France around 1995, and this was shortly followed with a 'round

table' with UK, and another EP group with China. 'UK-Japan 21st Century Group' reports to the two prime ministers. India and Japan have also created a new style EP group a few years back.² Germany has used the success of IGCG to create new dialogue mechanisms with China, Japan, Brazil, and Egypt, plus a wider entity that reaches out to all the ASEAN states. One learns informally that Berlin and New Delhi consider IGCG to be one of their best.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The above experience begs the question: what makes a productive EP group, and how does such an entity contribute to building productive bilateral relations?

First, one should build diversity and depth into the EP membership on each side. It is customary to ask the EP group to work on the full range of subjects that feature in a relationship. Typically, this covers political, economic, cultural, media, education, science and technology, and people-to-people exchange. Accordingly, the 12 to 20 members from each side are drawn from these specialties, but it helps to have a preponderance of businessmen. Experience has shown that public-spirited businessmen are often the best drivers of productive discussions, even in relation to sectors that do not directly relate to the economic sector. On each subject, it is the specialists who lead the discussion, which are typically conducted in the group as a whole, usually over a period of two days. Among themselves, these eminent persons produce cross-fertilization of ideas. 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 them. Wise selection of the co-chair is obviously important.

A typical, but not invariable, feature of EP groups is that key officials from both the governments join the discussions, in an *ex officio* capacity. They mainly play a listening role, helping to keep discussions on track, but do not, and should not, try to

² India and Japan had created an EP group in the late 1950s to look at the experience of each country with economic planning and policy; as a young desk officer, I saw it in action in 1966, when it had become a rather sterile discussion forum. It continues with its annual meetings even now.

drive the discussions. These officials usually include a representative of the concerned territorial department of the foreign ministry, one or more from the economic ministries, and also usually a representative from the office of the head of government—he or she plays a crucial role in ensuring the credibility and legitimacy for the group. On occasion, the non-official members, who are almost invariably strong personalities, do not hesitate to remind interventionist officials that they have other opportunities for conversations among governments, and that the EP group is not the place to re-play typical official discussions.

Second, the EP group is a brainstorming mechanism that throws up new ideas; it is not an implementation or oversight agency. It is pointless for an EP group to replicate or directly intrude into the official dialogue. For instance, after India's 1998 nuclear tests, the Indo-German Group discussed this issue and realised very rapidly that while it was good for the participants to be informed of the authoritative views of the two countries, they would do better to concentrate their own discussions on areas of direct competence. One might be tempted to think that the EP group focuses mainly on economic issues, but that is not the case, in practice. The full gamut of bilateral issues are important; for instance some European countries have found that the discussion on science and technology is especially valuable, the more so as it takes place in the presence of businessmen.

The EP group usually meets once a year, alternating between the two countries. The discussions take place in a closed-door format, and participants are enjoined not to publish the contents, in order to facilitate uninhibited exchanges. Typically, the end product of each round is an agreed paper that lists the recommendations addressed personally to the two heads of government. A few EP groups set up sub-committees that attempt to remain in contact between the sessions of the whole group, but that seldom works. For one thing, the members are busy people and can seldom spare more time than what they devote to each annual session. Governments are loath to see the EP group intrude into any kind of monitoring of their proposals. Sometimes, ideas that appear 'actionable' fall by the wayside owing to unforeseen problems, or doubt on the part of

different government agencies. In other cases, the group may broach a new subject, and step-by-step move the dialogue forward to a point where it may be passed to the governments for further action. The group may also anticipate emerging trends, and flag this for the governments.

With the Indo-German Group, at its third meeting in 1994, when I was at the Indian embassy, we produced a short 'action taken' analysis, listing all the proposals made and the manner in which implementation had proceeded; this was presented to the group as a whole. We found that around half of the ideas advanced by Group had moved forward, which was not a bad outcome, considering that some ideas needed considerable time to fructify.

Third, and this is really the key element, the EP group must have a clear mandate, to focus on recommendations, rather than engage in 'an exchange of perceptions', or sterile debate. In the case of the Indo-German group, the first two co-chairmen, the late PN Dhar and Ulrich Cartillieri (then Management Board member of the Deutsche Bank) kept closely to this focus, over-ruling any grandstanding by individuals. Dr. Cartillieri also helped by insisting that the final recommendations be kept to a maximum of a page and half, because he knew that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl would not read anything longer! Verbosity is almost always the enemy of action.

Behind such a mandate is the personal support that an EP group needs from the concerned head of government. Nothing less than that will give the group credibility, especially when the recommendations come up for consideration by the government concerned. The fact that each potential implementation agencies will have to explain their action or inaction to the office of the head of government helps to keep their eyes on the ball. Without such a commitment, the non-official members of the EP group are likely to lose interest.

Finally, we should also consider the limitations of the EP group. It works well when a bilateral relationship offers real, untapped potential for growth. But it makes little

sense to proliferate such groups to cover those countries with which either a relationship is ‘saturated’ or offers limited scope. Further, since it is the foreign ministry that is typically the manager of the EP group, one would not normally expand the number beyond what is manageable. It may also be useful to consider a sunset clause for such groups, either by giving a mandate that is limited in time, say of five or six years, or winding them up when the sponsoring governments feel that they have achieved their purpose.

We should note that such an EP group is *not* a ‘track two’ mechanism; it lies along what many call ‘track one-and-half’. It walks on a tightrope, seeking autonomy, and at the same time sustaining credibility with the government; if it gets too close to the official track, it loses value. Nor can it afford to stray too far from what the governments consider as acceptable. This element sometimes come to the fore in the case of EP groups with a country such as China, where non-official participants remain inhibited in advancing their own ideas, and often tend to repackage the official viewpoint in their contributions. That does not make for effective outcomes. It is the constant interaction between the eminent persons and the foreign ministry, each working in an autonomous manner that produces optimal results.

VARIATIONS

Thailand and Australia have a bilateral arrangement for annual discussion, established some years back, which involves the two foreign ministers, who lead diversified groups drawn from academia, science and other fields of public activity, for quiet discussions; businessmen are not included. In effect this blends the official and non-official tracks, and seems to work rather well. More information on this group is not available. It is entirely possible that other groups of a comparable nature exist, operated by countries in South East Asia, a region that has tended to be very innovative in its diplomacy methods.

China and Japan have come up with a different formula, under which the vice-foreign ministers meet, outside the capital and usually at holiday resorts, for ‘informal’

discussions. This is no more than a variation on the usual formula of official discussions—including what is called ‘foreign ministry consultations’ which are led by the permanent secretary level officials, who discuss bilateral issues as well as regional and international subjects. By using the format of informal discussion, states that have a number of complex problems are able to discuss problem issues in a quasi-off-the-record manner.

The range and modalities of ‘back-channel’ contacts pursued by countries facing contentious issues is limited only by their imagination. India and Pakistan have used a wide range of officials, personal emissaries, and quasi-authorised intermediaries for probing each other’s intentions, and floating trial balloons. The main advantage of such dialogue is flexibility, and deniability, which is important if there is premature leakage of the formulas that are discussed by such emissaries. Such activities belong to the well-established modes of conflict resolution.

We might also consider here the annual international conferences that many countries organise; Boao by China, Ditchley by the UK, Langkawi by Malaysia, and Shangri-La by Singapore. They expose the participants, official and non-official, to a range of issues, and create a regional or global forum for participatory discussions among them. These are a form of public-private partnerships. These dialogue processes, and the interaction among thinktanks and scholars, contribute to the plural and increasingly open diplomatic activities. One of the features of good governance in foreign affairs is the existence of a diverse ‘international affairs community’, made up of non-officials, including academics and scholars, media specialist and commentators, retired officials (civil and military), all working on the basis of epistemic communities and autonomous institutions, offering a menu of policy options to the decision makers. No less vital is their role in the development and articulation of public discourse on foreign affairs issues. External affairs are truly too important to be left to official representatives.

BUSINESS GROUPS

Another new trend is for businessmen, usually working in the name of chambers of commerce and industry associations, to sometimes create bilateral discussion groups that deliberately address political, economic policy and societal issues that go beyond the direct business domain. This may take place under the patronage of the concerned heads of government—which indirectly gives legitimacy to the wide agendas that they address. They are often called ‘joint business councils’ and meeting on a more or less annual cycle, they bring together businessmen to take up issues of direct concern to themselves.³ Typically, they do not include officials, though they report to their respective governments, as per the arrangements made by each side. They may take up issues that they perceive as a roadblock to closer relations, and even consider matters relating to international economic policy, such as WTO or global finance issues. Like the EP groups, these reflect the enlarged participation of non-official actors in subjects that in the past would have been seen as the exclusive preserve of governments.

In an essay that is to be published shortly in a collection of Indian experiences with economic diplomacy,⁴ Tarun Das, Chief Mentor of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), has written about the bilateral ‘strategic dialogue’ mechanism that Indian industry has established with key partners such as France, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and the US (this ended in 2008). Das writes: the dialogue ‘covers all aspects of the bilateral relationship—defence, security, terrorism, politics, economy, trade/investment, technology (including nuclear and space), energy/environment, health, education, regional issues, etc. Whatever is relevant is included, not necessarily in the agenda of every meeting...the membership is mixed...the chair is usually a former ambassador...’ At the start of each session, the group calls on the head of government in the capital concerned and also meets the key ministers. The discussions are off the record, and robust in character. The aim is to generate mutual understanding, and to report to the government. It may be added that unlike in the case of the EP groups that function under the sponsorship of the governments concerned, serving officials do not join these groups.

³ In India, by tradition, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) handles all the bilateral JBCs; a total of over 50 are active.

⁴ This book is under finalization, to be published by the well-known Indian NGO, CUTS, Jaipur, by the end of 2008.

It is also important to note that such groups are different from ‘joint business councils’ and other business exchanges, in the wide agendas that are addressed by the ‘strategic dialogue’ groups. One has to admire the vision that drives such non-official initiatives.

More than any other component of external relationships, economics today permeates everything, in much the same fashion as politics has always done. Given the fact that the drivers of economic relations are the entrepreneurs and the captains of business, the public-private mechanism described in this essay acknowledges their legitimate role in the shaping of bilateral relations, and in the search for effective solutions to global issues, political, environmental and societal. Thus EP groups conform to the trend towards multi-stakeholder diplomacy, even while governments remain in the driving seat in external policy making.

We should not be surprised at the way business acts as an active participant in bilateral relations across a wide canvas, especially between pairs of countries that either share a special connection and/or want to give new impetus to their mutual exchanges. At the multilateral level, we witness the same phenomenon at the annual Davos meetings of the World Economic Forum where typically more than 30 heads of government and scores of ministers rub shoulders with business leaders, academics, NGO heads, and other public figures, again affirming the plural nature of today’s diplomatic process. It takes time and effort, and serendipity, to develop such non-official discussion venues. One is struck by the fact of relative paucity of such venues and institutions in the countries of the third world. ASEAN is one of the rarities among regional organizations, in having taken considerable effort in developing its own discussion locations, and the institutional arrangements that take advantage of this.

ADVANTAGES

What do governments gain from EP groups, and from strategic dialogue that is driven by business leaders, and others drawn from public life? For one thing, diplomacy is more plural today than it used to be, compared with even a decade back. At multilateral fora

such as the World Bank and the WTO we have seen the manner in which governments now make space for varied actors, especially the civil society organizations and NGOs, international and domestic, and representatives of business and industry. For the foreign ministry and the government, the different kinds of EP groups give them a ‘legitimate’, sustained connection with a broad range of non-state personalities. Their involvement in key bilateral relations gives the foreign ministry the insight that comes from these diverse societal perspectives. Additionally, these actors are able to leverage their own experience to serve the wider objectives of the country. In the reverse direction, their connection with the MFA motivates these individuals to appreciate the holistic nature of bilateral relationships, and learn something of the bilateral and international issues that lie outside their own specialties.

Often, these non-official persons have their own overseas connections that governments may not be able to match. They also have wider freedom of action. Smart diplomacy is inclusive by definition, and uses such a wide range of connections to national purposes. India’s experience, after its nuclear tests of 1998 has been well-documented, when the government reached out to its business associations, CII and its counterpart FICCI, which is the apex Indian agency of the community of chambers of commerce. They were harnessed to cultivate US congressional leaders, to invite them to India and showcase the business and political opportunities that a globalizing India offered.⁵ This lobbying played a vital role in persuading this important segment of the US political trinity, to work for an end the policy of economic sanctions that the US government had applied, as it was required under US domestic law.

For the foreign ministry, the involvement of influential personalities in different bilateral relationships is a *potential* asset, which becomes operational only when the ministry reaches out to them, and takes advantage of the diverse connections that each of them possesses. One can visualise the MFA holding informal group consultations with them, which happens usually at the stage of preparations in advance of the annual EP

⁵ See Rana, *Asian Diplomacy: The Foreign Ministries of China, India, Japan, Singapore and Thailand* (DiploFoundation, Malta and Geneva, 2007; Oxford Press, New Delhi, 2008), Chapter 3.

group session. The co-chair of the group on one's own side serves as the point of contact for this purpose. Again, the extent to which this happens depends on the MFA's determination to use these options in its domestic outreach.

At the other end, for the embassy based in the capital of a country with which an EP group mechanism exists, the members of the group, both one's own and those belonging to the partner country, are on offer as natural allies in the embassy's permanent tasks of 'outreach' and 'promotion'.⁶ Individually, and as a collective group, the members of the EP group belonging to the partner country are usually available to the envoy and his embassy team for all the varied activities that are undertaken by a proactive embassy, to extend and diversify linkages in the political, economic, and the soft diplomacy segments. Similarly, the EP group members from the home country are dependable friends for the same purpose. Given that practical diplomacy is more and more about building networks, and winning influence, all the EP group members are partners of choice for these purposes.

It is surprising that outside of Europe and in a handful of other countries, rather few foreign ministries have used EP group formula.⁷ The notion of a 'strategic dialogue' driven by a non-official entity is even more novel, and perhaps not easy to establish, unless a strong relationship of mutual confidence exists with one's own business leaders. ASEAN and the African Union (AU), and other regional groups, have used eminent personalities in their respective areas for the study of complex issues, and to offer recommendations. However, such groups have seldom been used for bilateral purposes. The method is equally unknown in Latin America. This is one more instance of inadequate exchange of experience among diplomatic establishments, to say nothing of

⁶ This is based on the author's experience in Germany. For instance the German academics and scientists provided valuable insight into that country's system, and became catalysts for useful new initiatives. In the same way the business leaders and the media personalities were of great use in promotional activities, in the different German states. See Rana, *The 21st Century Ambassador* (2004).

⁷ This observation is based on exchanges with students belonging to different foreign ministries, in the internet-based teaching I have carried out over the past nine years, as a faculty member of DiploFoundation (www.diplomacy.edu). Few of them had heard of EP groups being used in the manner described here.

mutual learning or bench marking.⁸ The exception is the European Union where some—if not all—member states meet periodically to exchange experience on diplomacy management.

In the case of India, which has officially-sponsored EP groups with at least six countries (in addition to the business-led ‘strategic partnerships’ narrated above), it is striking that this bilateral EP mechanism does not as yet cover any immediate neighbour, other than China. India has multiple ‘track two’ dialogue processes with Pakistan, and to a lesser extent with Bangladesh; the Indian government funds some of these, and almost all of them report to New Delhi on the outcome. However, when it comes to EP groups, India has nothing in South Asia at a bilateral level, though the SAARC—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation—has used EP groups to brainstorm on specific issues, on a regional basis.

A further point regarding the EP groups in which India participates. The Ministry of External Affairs retains the old-fashioned mindset of a foreign affairs monopolist, and does not encourage participation in its EP groups by the representatives of other Ministries, like Commerce, Industry or Finance.⁹ This is shortsighted, because bringing more such agencies into the dialogue process would expose these ministries to the wider issues in each important bilateral relationship. The Indian MEA has not fully understood that it needs these key ministries as allies, not as turf-adversaries. In fact, the EP group also serves indirectly as a mechanism for the foreign ministry’s domestic outreach.

To sum up, the EP group is an interesting addition to the arsenal of options that are available in the pursuit of bilateral diplomacy. When supported by the two governments concerned, and given the other essential conditions for effective work as set out above, it contributes significantly to the growth of relations. Other kinds of business-

⁸ This point comes across powerfully in comparative studies of foreign ministries, including my book *Asian Diplomacy*, (2007).

⁹ One consequence is asymmetry in the composition of groups, because the other side usually has representative of several other ministries, among the officials who hold watching briefs in such groups.

driven groups, which need to function under the benevolence of governments, but not their direct participation, are useful variations on the standard EP format.
