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Kishan S Rana: The truth about summits

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Major and minor capitals around the world witness a procession of foreign leaders that descend into countries from their special aircraft, typically during that location's salubrious season. Sometimes 100 business chief executives and planeloads of journalists are part of the accompanying entourage. Our man-in-the-street wonders at the cost and asks: is there a purpose? Or are these holidays on the public tab?

In Delhi we recently witnessed a remarkable constellation: a symbolic but important visit in December 2013 by the Japanese Emperor, who travels overseas but rarely, followed just a month later by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, chief guest at our 2014 Republic Day celebrations. Apart from such tightly scripted 'bilaterals', leaders engage in other kinds of travel: foreign visits to attend regional and global meetings (which also produce lots of bilateral meetings, and informal encounters 'on the margins'); informal or 'stopover' visits that are usually stripped of all ceremonial (Libya's Gaddafi took this genre to a new level with his famous unscheduled 'drop in' visits that drove Arab counterparts to exasperation); bilateral visits that are tagged on at the start or end of multilateral meetings; and complex multi-country tours that require tight planning.

Let us focus here on how bilateral summits are used to productive purpose. Simply put, such summits should be treated as building blocks in a long-term, multifaceted and continuous process, not as standalone or unique events, however important or glamorous they may seem at the moment when they are played out. A retired IFS colleague recently put it pithily: in India we tend to treat summit meetings of our leaders "as events, and not as part of a process". It brought to mind what a senior MEA official had told a closed-door meeting few years back: we have become event managers, and sometimes find little time for holistically managing relationships with foreign countries.

* Bilateral summits divide into four clear stages; all four are crucial. These are: the conception, the 'why' (reason for choice of that foreign country, the objectives and the priority given); the preparation, the 'how' (examining the past bilateral record, selecting attainable targets, agreements under negotiation that should be signed during the visit); the content, the 'what' (how the targets will be reached, anticipation of what the other side will seek, drafting of the speeches and the

expected joint documents); the follow-up, the 'where next' (including communicating results to all stakeholders, establishing a process to supervise the implementation of the decisions, identifying future objectives). Overworked foreign ministries focus too little on the first two stages, and tend particularly to neglect the final stage. Comprehensive planning is vital.

* Plan bilateral visits to fit foreign policy priorities, in the choice of countries, the duration, and the content. Memories are long over what might be perceived as a slight, however unintended. We are sometimes over-zealous in seeking a special element for our leaders, such as an honorary doctorate or a speech at that parliament; what counts more is a thoughtful gesture that a visiting leader makes. Visiting Fiji in September 1981, Indira Gandhi drank deeply of the bitter ceremonial drink offered at a public arrival ceremony attended by thousands; Fijians still remember that. On the flip side, Indian prime ministerial bilateral visits to neighbouring countries (as distinct from visits for regional meetings) are infrequent; Manmohan Singh's September 2011 trip to Dhaka was the first by an Indian PM in 12 years. Journeys even to major Southeast Asian states have been rare and often of very short duration. A contrast: Japanese PM Shinzo Abe managed to visit all 10 Asean capitals in his first year in office. China's president and Party leader, Xi Jinping, visited 14 countries in his first 15 months in office. India's only two prime ministerial visits to Nigeria, arguably Africa's most important country, were by Nehru in 1962 and Dr Singh in 2007; the only bilateral prime ministerial visit to Mexico was by Nehru in 1961 (Indira Gandhi in 1981, Rajiv Gandhi in 1986 and Dr Singh in 2012 travelled to Mexico for multilateral meetings). Key point: foreign visits are a vital investment in building relations.

* Treat the summit as integral to a relation-building process. When P V Narasimha Rao committed himself to visiting Germany in February 1994 he told a meeting in mid-1993: we usually hold a preparatory meeting a few days before each visit, when it is too late to plan or make changes; let us hold this meeting in October and decide what we want out of the talks. Alas, such advance work supervised by the leader is not our norm. A bigger failure is in the follow-up, which necessarily involves multi-ministry actions; at different times Indian prime ministers have spoken of oversight by the PM's Office of implementation of summit decisions, but no regular implementation mechanism exists.

* In an inclusive, multi-stakeholder environment, what were earlier treated as peripheral activities are now at centre-stage. The accompanying delegation and its composition - specially selected businessmen, members of parliament or social activists - now make or break a summit, as do the selection of site visits, and public communication through the media. In part, summits are also public theatre.

A little-noted aspect of summits is that leaders have an opportunity to take each other's measure, and sometimes, real friendships are established. Heads of state and government are human, and their affinities also play their role in international

affairs. Are embassies and foreign ministries sidelined in such encounters? That may appear to be the case, when leaders meet *tete-a-tete*, and get into a relationship where they directly communicate with one another. But in almost all inter-state situations, it is the established diplomatic machinery that handles the follow-up, and when problems come up, has to pick up the pieces and put the relationship back on track.

[The writer, a former ambassador, is now a honorary fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi]
