

A visit that enshrined diplomacy as spectacle...

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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 a hundred business chief executives, and one or more planeloads of journalists are part of the accompanying entourage. Our man-in-street wonders at the cost and asks: is there a purpose? Or are these holidays on the public tab? Jaded journalists invent terms such as 'designer diplomacy' and 'concorde diplomacy', in essence questioning the value of such summit encounters.

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, and for the dignitary, become a whirlwind tour. We have left out here shuttle visits (where a leader undertakes a series of quick meetings to countries locked in dispute), as also attendance at inaugural and other ceremonies, and even funeral visits that sometimes produce remarkable encounters between leaders. (Remember Ambassador Sheel Haksar's graphic account of the 1978 Morarji Desai-Zia encounter at the funeral of Kenyatta in Nairobi, in *The Ambassador's Club?*)

Let us focus here on how bilateral summits are used to productive purpose, illustrating that techniques with examples. 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. One may think this is blindingly obvious! Alas, basic truths are so often missed. During an oral history recording session last month a retired IFS colleague put it in pithy terms: in India we tend to treat summit meetings of our leaders 'as events, and not as part of a process'. It brought to mind a what an MEA senior 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’ (what is needed, examining the past bilateral record, selecting attainable targets, agreements under negotiation that should be signed during the visit, who should be included in the delegation,); 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 neighboring 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 South East Asian states have been rare and often of very short duration. A contrast: Japanese PM 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 Manmohan Singh in 2007; the only bilateral prime ministerial visits to Mexico was by Nehru in 1961 (Indira Gandhi in 1981, Rajiv Gandhi in 1986 and Manmohan Singh in 2012 traveled 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 PM Narsimha 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 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 center-stage, including: the accompanying delegation, and its composition; the inclusion of a specially selected group of businessmen; taking with the leader other public figures, be it members of parliament, or social activists, and leaders of role of leader's spouse, selection of site visits, and public communication, now make or break a summit. The **media** are at center-stage, as information multipliers, and as channels for **public diplomacy**, aimed at home and external audiences; their smart use is one of the keys to public impact (Rana, *Foreign visits and the headlines*, 23 Feb 2013). *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.
