

Nov 04, 2016 by *Madhurjya Kotoky*

Facilitating Internal Foreign Policy Dialogue in India ^[1]

Rarely has the Indian government discussed matters of foreign relations with its citizens. Foreign policy, for a long time in India, has remained a preserve of the elites. The only foreign policy issue that might have sparked an interest in the average Indian, is its nation's relations with Pakistan. Furthermore, this interest might only be true for an Indian living in the North. An Indian living nearly 3,000 kilometers away from Pakistan in India's northeast, with no historical experience, would have little interest in its country's relationship with Pakistan. Developments in international politics in recent times point towards a possible change in how India conducts its foreign policy.

Recent significant issues like the formalization of The Group of Twenty (G-20), climate change debates, global terrorism emanating from South Asia, peace building in Afghanistan, the democratization of Myanmar, and the steady rise of China has seen India to be an important player in international politics that cannot be ignored. For the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of the Government of India, this newfound prominence has meant increasing responsibilities and accountability. Many of these issues will have significant domestic repercussions and the MEA may find itself answerable to domestic audiences. The democratization of Myanmar, for example, will have significant implications on India's "Look East" policy, insurgencies in North East India, narcotics trafficking, and people to people contact between Nagaland, Manipur, and Myanmar. Domestic outreach is crucial for the MEA to partner with the people in the conduct of foreign policy, and soon will be a significant component of India's public diplomacy activities. At least this is what I have understood based on my attendance of some recent PD conferences in New Delhi.

Domestic outreach as a component of PD can be contextualized in what Jan Melissen, Director of the Clingendael Diplomatic Studies Programme at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, calls one of the most salient transformational developments in diplomacy - "societization of diplomacy." With the emergence of various actors and non-state players in international politics, the boundaries between international and domestic publics and policy spheres have become increasingly blurred. In addition, the democratization of information through new communication technologies has greatly empowered these non-state actors, elevating their role and legitimacy in international politics. A significant example of domestic outreach in Asia has been set by Thailand through the "Roving Buakeaw Project" which allows the government to take account of public opinion when formulating foreign policy.

Coming back to India, the MEA on its part has initiated "The MEA Distinguished Lecture Series on India's foreign policy." The lecture series is organized by the Public Diplomacy Division to facilitate discussion regarding foreign policy outside New Delhi's power corridors. Through this program, Indian diplomats' travel throughout the country, participating in discussions across leading academic institutions within India. Though Indian diplomats consistently speak at foreign university campuses and to think tanks around the world, this is

the first time that MEA has undertaken such an exercise internally. Since its inception in 2010, nearly 40 lectures have been organized across different regions of India. The PD division has also made the lecture series available online to facilitate greater citizen participation. This is a significant new element in the conduct of Indian foreign policy and is an important initiative towards facilitating an internal foreign policy dialogue in India.
