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Global Engagement and India's Public Diplomacy: Past, Present and Future [1]

Global engagement is an integral component of public diplomacy. In pursuit of communicating values, cultures and policies to people, engaging with people, be it state or nonstate actors, becomes imperative. Countries also have to keep in mind that global engagement is enabled to be relational, that is, they talk and listen to those being intended to be engaged with and not just be one-sided and informational.

In the run-up to the chairing of G-20 and the SCO by India in 2023, it will be helpful to look at some history of India's global engagement and its future course. In its history, there are innumerable examples through which India has engaged with the world to enable a transnational flow of ideas, culture and trade. The engagement index was an important component of the erstwhile Soft Power 30 index. In it, there are mentions of France's global engagement prowess. It was ranked very well on this front.

Global engagement has also been facilitated by individuals in Indian diplomatic history. Take the case of the *Ramayana*, India's legendary epic, where Prince Rama sent Hanuman as a 'diplomat' to Sri Lanka to understand the whereabouts of where Ravana kept Sita kidnapped, to deliver Sita a message and also understand what Ravana was scheming against the backdrop of his kidnapping and subsequent actions. King Ashoka enabled engagement with several countries that are now Buddhist, thanks to him embracing Buddhism in its entirety. He was responsible for the exportation of Buddhism from India and to date, India's connection with Buddhist countries is thriving and is a key cultural bridge. Mahatma Gandhi (non-violence), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (social justice), Hansa Mehta (equality) and M.S. Subbulakshmi (music) have all been invaluable to India in its global engagement with the world when it comes to successfully communicating what India meant and stood for.

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Several dynasties of India have also contributed to engagement with the world. The Chola dynasty enabled the export of culture and their engagement with Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka has been recorded in history. Even from the Sarasvati civilization to the Harappa and Mohenjadaro civilizations, India has always wished to reach out to and engage with the world.

Even post-independence from the period of the non-aligned movement, to voicing against apartheid, nuclear tests, liberalization and globalization reforms, the nuclear deal, the contribution of yoga and non-violence to the world to strategic autonomy of today, India has had interesting means not just restricted to these through which it has pursued global engagement and the manner in which countries have engaged with India.

With the G-20 summit, the SCO chairmanship and the accompanying events around it, India will look to plan its bilateral or multilateral global engagement strategies from short-term and long-term perspectives. Here are six ways through which India can shape and build its global engagement orientation:

First and foremost, it has to work on increasing the strength of its diplomatic corps. While there are several countries that do not actually reveal their current strength of diplomatic corps, India has to work on infusing more manpower to engage constructively. This may also include the inclusion of credible non-state actors to help the government's cause. Even though the Ministry of External Affairs of the government of India has had its tryst with the idea of lateral entry of a talented workforce, it will be worth an attempt to think through and recruit specialists in the domain of global communication and public diplomacy to focus on country-specific strategies. According to my learnings from Prof. Nick Cull at the USC Public Diplomacy program, India comes in the top 20 countries when it comes to having its own network of cultural institutes operating globally. Therefore, an annual or once-in-two-year review and evaluation of all its engagement arms, such as its embassies/high commissions, consulates, permanent missions and cultural centers will certainly help. This will help India

understand what not to do when it comes to its global engagement.

Second, think outside of the box, India has to increase its engagement with regions such as Latin America and Africa where it has planned new embassies and shed its preoccupations with China and Pakistan. No doubt it has to keep its watchful eyes over these two neighbors in particular and also has to harness its partnerships with genuine like-minded allies. In line with this, India's engagement with Brazil, Mexico and Argentina has been on the upswing. These countries are also part of the G-20. In so far as SCO is concerned, India would use the opportunity to further its engagement with Central Asia. As per India's former ambassador to the UN, Syed Akbaruddin, India at the United Nations hosted a unique summit for countries in the global south where it did not have any diplomatic presence. India has consistently strived to be the voice of the global south.

Third, India must champion the cause of engagement to "collaborate" to solve grand challenges. When it comes to challenges, we are in it together as one. Countries that work for the world and think of the world as their own are admired. To see all as one is rooted in Indian thought underlying the significance of interconnectedness. Advaita Vedanta, India's philosophical thought expounded by Adi Shankaracharya, is rooted in this phenomenon. Whether Indian spiritual thinking can contribute to the world's global engagement is something that India can initiate a discussion on.

Fourth and from a long-term perspective, India needs to focus on global engagement "relationally" in and through dialogues, not monologues. This is where Joseph Nye's concept of power "with others" not "over others" matters.

Fifth, shaping the future of digital engagement. Denmark had its first technology ambassador to Silicon Valley and Estonia introduced to the world the concept of data embassy as a unique case study. India can anchor and engage with countries to generate debates and discussions to bring about an acceptable convention on the use of social media for the future of civilization.

Sixth, India has to anchor and encourage global engagement through ideas. A healthy and pragmatic alliance of east and west should be the core objective of such engagement through ideas.