

INDIA MUST RETURN TO TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

The target audiences of Indian diplomacy's public articulation and responses are changing radically as shown by the [statement of the Ministry of External Affairs \(MEA\)](#), of February 3, on singer [Rihanna's tweet](#). The direction of Indian diplomacy's external publicity is no longer confined to other governments, international organisations, external and domestic political and business elites, and conference halls and negotiating tables. It now extends to [international "celebrities"](#), some of whose status is determined very largely by their pop star status. It also seeks to take into account apparent and latent sentiment on the Indian streets not only to clarify India's diplomatic positions or refute allegations and misperceptions but also to whip up sentiment on issues important to the government. Finally, it aims to forcefully convey to foreign audiences, India's unwillingness to accept perceived or real interference in the country's domestic affairs.

This development is part of the government's impatience with the norms of old-fashioned diplomacy. It is in keeping with the emphasis on establishing a personal rapport with global leaders and what has been often stressed by the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar — the need to take risks to advance Indian positions and interests. Thus, new and assertive norms are being adopted which, at least till now, have demonstrated a disdain for international liberal opinion. It is beyond dispute that new directions for Indian diplomacy, in form as well as in substance, should be constantly sought. But the test of innovation can only be one: is it more effective in advancing Indian objectives?

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It is on this basis that the MEA statement and the widespread social media activity that followed need to be judged. While the statement's origin will not be authoritatively known, it can be legitimately surmised that it was/could not have been through the normal processes of the MEA. Hence, it would have been on the basis of a political decision. The hash tags attached to the statements lend credence to this view as also the intensely orchestrated social media response from Indian personalities to tweets by Ms. Rihanna and others. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in building public opinion; all governments as well as groups do so. It is part of the global political and diplomatic processes but must be part of a careful strategy to achieve objectives. Otherwise, it can be counter-productive.

[Mr. Jaishankar tweeted](#) after the MEA statement: "Motivated campaigns targeting India will never succeed. We have the self-confidence today to hold our own. This India will push back". These combative words require a sober analysis.

There is little doubt that Khalistani groups in western countries would have sensed an opportunity to fish in troubled waters of the farmers' agitation in the Punjab. There should also be no doubt that the Pakistani generals, who have continuously sought to keep the embers of the Khalistan movement warm, would be looking for opportunities to create trouble. This is notwithstanding that the patriotism of Indian Sikhs and their contributions to the nation are beyond question. Thus, it would not be surprising at all if there are "motivated campaigns" against India under way on these issues.

Mr. Jaishankar's assertion that the India of today is self-confident to hold its own is of course true, but it can be argued that right from Independence, India has displayed the self-assurance not to take things lying down; only the methods may have been different. Again, there can be no

quarrel with the External Affairs Minister's warning that India will "push back". The issue is not about should India "push back" but how and against what and whom. The answers to these questions hold the keys to the effectiveness of diplomacy whose ultimate target audience has to be not domestic sectional interests but global opinion and in the context of India's external interests.

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In this context, a look at the way the Narendra Modi government handled criticism from liberal sections abroad, of the administrative steps taken in Jammu and Kashmir after the [constitutional changes of August 2019](#) and the [Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act \(CAA\)](#), and the protests that followed, are instructive. India then refused to purposefully engage its international liberal critics though it publicly asserted security concerns for the administrative steps and laid stress on the point that the CAA did not impinge on the rights of the Indian minorities. Indeed, the government treated its global media critics with disdain, with Mr. Jaishankar emphasising that India's reputation was not decided by a 'newspaper in New York'. Certainly, there was no frenzied response on social media to the allegations against the government on human rights matters through all these episodes.

On this occasion, was the severe response to Ms. Rihanna's tweet on account of her large social media following while the popular reach of global liberal opinion especially in the Trumpian era was limited? Was the object to deter foreign critics from lending their names to "manipulated campaigns"? Was it thought that if more celebrities joined, the farmers' protest would be energised? If these were the thoughts behind the decision then there is a need to check if it succeeded or gave an oxygen boost to the Rihanna tweet.

Also, it is difficult to imagine that foreign critics like Ms. Rihanna, or for that matter of the [Greta Thunberg](#) kind, would be deterred by a concerted [Indian pushback](#) of the nature that has been undertaken. In the days of conventional diplomacy, the Rihanna tweet would have perhaps been just ignored, at least officially. But now 'the times they are a-changin'. So, is what the MEA doing headed in the right direction? Perhaps, the erudite External Affairs Minister should ponder over this, and in doing so also take into account his earlier avatar, as a diplomat.

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The Delhi police have filed a first information report (FIR) against unknown persons who prepared a 'toolkit' which was attached to the first tweet of Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg. The FIR revealed that those undertaking "motivated campaigns" were actively undertaking efforts to embarrass and even harm India through the farmers' protest. A benign view of their objectives can be dismissed.

India should of course press the governments concerned, especially of Canada, to take action against Khalistani elements. The fact though is that these countries, Canada in particular, have shown scant regard for Indian concerns on this account and it is unlikely that they will change course now. Through all this the question that still remains is whether the social storm unleashed in India after the Rihanna tweet would deter other foreign celebrities from pursuing the now amended 'toolkit'. And when have criminal cases based on this kind of an FIR ever reached fruition?

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Finally, it is not the Rihanna-like celebrities who will pose the real challenge in the coming

months to the Narendra Modi government, but liberal opinion in democratic western societies. And, it will have far more traction with the advent of the Joe Biden administration in the United States. A pointer is the interaction of top U.S. Congress members in the India Caucus had, recently; asking India to ensure that “norms of democracy are maintained and peaceful protests and demonstrations be allowed”, with this being conveyed to India’s Ambassador to the U.S., Taranjit Singh Sandhu. The government would be now conscious of engaging international liberal opinion rather than merely dismissing it. This does not imply coming under pressure on matters of critical importance to Indian interests. But it does mean taking recourse to traditional diplomacy even if it is stodgy and unappealing to sections of nationalist Indian opinion.

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