

Speech at Egmont (4th May)
Indian Foreign Policy – Recent trends

Good afternoon!

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Embassy of India, Brussels, I take this opportunity to welcome everyone here. I would like to thank the Egmont Institute and the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences for joining us in organizing this event, which is to mark the twin anniversaries we are celebrating this year : the 75th anniversary of India's Independence or the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav; and the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and Belgium, which followed immediately after India's independence.

I also take this opportunity to extend my special thanks to Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, and Prof. Dr. Philippe De Maeyer. They have lent their whole-hearted support and academic heft to this conference. I also welcome all the distinguished Speakers on the panels. And I thank you all for joining us today.

As we look at the global landscape, today, we have to accept that it has only become more complex and challenging than just a year or two ago. If Brexit, Trumpism and return of strategic competition between the US and China were considered disruptive, the impact of Covid, the Afghanistan situation, the sharpening Indo-Pacific dynamic and most recently the Ukraine crisis has taken us to the next level of uncertainty and unpredictability in the global system. As a leading Indian expert has observed, we are going through a phase which lies between the two orders – a phase when the previous order is waning even as a new one is yet to emerge. Competition and contestation seems to be the natural order of the day. And the end to all of this is nowhere in sight yet. This highly dynamic yet turbulent phase imposes a need for new levels of adaptability and nimbleness in crafting ones responses and building new strategies.

The recent trends in the Indian foreign policy needs to be seen in this context. The canvass is getting wider and contours are changing fairly rapidly, even as some of its elements and foundations may be slower in adjusting. Even at the risk of simplification, let me just dwell on some clearly discernible trends – many of which have existed before but have got stronger with time and others that have emerged more recently in response to new and constantly evolving challenges.

First, we are witnessing an unprecedented level of energy and activism in Indian foreign policy. This has been part of the so-called Modi Doctrine from day one. But we are now seeing this reach new levels even by our recent high standards. Let me illustrate with a few examples. Since the onset of the Ukraine conflict alone, we have seen summits with PMs of Japan, Australia, and the UK. We have had a QUAD summit between leaders of India, the US, Japan and Australia. We hosted the

President of the European Commission on her first visit to India last week. Prime Minister Modi, himself, is travelling, as we speak, to Germany and France and to Denmark where he would attend a summit with all the 5 Nordic counterparts. The President of India, too, has visited Turkmenistan and the Netherlands last month. At the level of Foreign Ministers, Minister Jaishankar has met almost all of his EU-27 counterparts in the first four months of 2022. Besides, we just had 13 Foreign Ministers visit India for the Raisina Dialogue last week, 7 of which were from Europe. Of course, our outreach has extended beyond Europe. We had the 2+2 India-US meeting last month. Visits to neighbours in South Asia by our Foreign Minister has also now become routine. The last 8 years have also seen some old regional summits continue even as new ones too have been added – this includes India-Africa, India-CARICOM, India-Central Asia, India-ASEAN, India-Nordic, India-Pacific Islands and so on. We even had the first-ever India-EU27 summit last year in May. In terms of canvass alone, in the last 8 years under the Modi Government, we have covered each and every member of the UN by a visit at least at the Ministerial level. Some of these have been first ever visits and others have happened after decades.

Second, we are witnessing new levels of Indian resourcefulness in more ways than one. We have opened 22 new Embassies, including 18 in Africa and 2 each in Europe and Latin America taking the total number of Embassies and Consulates to well beyond 200. We have upped our development partnership to unprecedented levels – India's loan and grant assistance has reached over 10 billion USD and commitments for concessional lines of credit exceed 30 billion USD. These support increasingly complex infrastructure and connectivity initiatives, which are being implemented at a faster pace than ever before, mainly in Asia and Africa. We have been the first responder to natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific region helping countries during distress – not only those in South Asia but also as far as Fiji and Mauritius. We were also the first to send supplies to Sri Lanka following their financial crisis last month. We are helping Afghanistan with wheat supplies to mitigate the threat of starvation there and have also sent medical supplies even though it remains under Taliban control. During the covid pandemic, we sent medical supplies to over 135 countries. We were amongst the first suppliers of vaccines to small and vulnerable countries. It is notable that all the vaccines administered in Afghanistan so far have come from India. To add to this is the recent example of evacuation of Indian students from Ukraine. Instead of letting them become refugees and adding to the burden in Europe, we undertook rescue operations that saw us evacuate 23000 Indians, mainly students, and including citizens of 18 other countries. This was done through 90 flights over a period of 10 days. I can provide many more examples of this new resourcefulness of our foreign policy. This is not to say that resources are not scarce any more but to say that we have found better and efficient ways of delivery, timely action and greater impact.

Third, there is a new approach in India to working on global issues and challenges. They are increasingly seen as one that is in sync with our national interests. Old

approaches that saw it from a narrower prism have been replaced by a broader, more global vision. Nowhere else is this in evidence better than on the issue of climate change. After spearheading the success of the Paris Climate Change conference in 2015, the Indian Prime Minister has launched two global platforms: first is the international solar alliance, which now has been joined by 103 countries; and second the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. The idea is to pool efforts, create a scale and transfer the benefits of sustainable practices to smaller and developing countries. As regards India's own commitments at Paris, we have already fulfilled some highly ambitious ones such as achieving the level of 40% of our energy production from non-fossil sources. India has also been rated as the only G20 country which remains on track to fulfill all its Paris commitments. At the COP-26 in Glasgow in November last year, Prime Minister raised India's ambitions further, including among others, a commitment to source 50% of its energy from non-fossil sources and to produce 500 GW of energy from renewable sources by 2030. Despite India remaining a developing country with strong growth prospects for another three decades, the Prime Minister also pledged to make India net zero by 2070, a goal far more ambitious than seen elsewhere, including in the developed world. India has recognized the existential nature of the climate crisis and has been willing to undertake ambitious targets to help itself and by implication help the world to combat it. However, our calls for making available more finance and technology have not met with equally strong response from the developed world.

Another area where a more constructive approach is reflected is in the Indian response to the covid pandemic at the global level. We supplied essential drugs to large parts of the world emerging as a pharmacy of the world. We were also able to ramp up our production of masks, PPEs, Ventilators etc., in a short period emerging as suppliers to large parts of the world from a situation when we did not produce these at all. Once the vaccines were ready, we were amongst the first suppliers to small and vulnerable countries. We have also continued to work for IPR waivers for vaccines. To demonstrate that we are committed ourselves to share the technology or the best practice we possess, we have provided our digital platforms developed in the context of fight against the pandemic to all countries readily waiving IPR for the benefit of the less capable countries. We will remain committed to creating such public commons and offering them for the larger well-being of humanity and in particular the countries of the South. This is the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam or the World is One Family, a part of our ancient heritage, which guides our approach to the rest of the World.

Fourth, in terms of responding to regional challenges, India has been a pioneer, when it comes to developing the Indo-Pacific approach. Not many seem aware that India was the only major country not to send a representative to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017. While doing so, India had spoken in favour of connectivity and infrastructure initiatives and outlined the basic principles that must guide us in undertaking such activities globally. I must say that we are glad to see more and

more adherents to this approach across the globe. Even the EU has now come aboard through its own Indo-Pacific strategy, the Global Gateway and India-EU connectivity partnership. This vision which developed later into India's Indo-Pacific approach is based on an appreciation that interests and challenges in the Indian and Pacific Oceans are seamless, interlinked and interrelated. India has pursued this approach by positioning itself as a net provider of security, a first responder and an important development partner for the countries in the region. Our efforts are directed at building capacity in the maritime domain in addition to the broader defence sphere among the countries in the region. I have already mentioned that we have brought more resources to bear on the region to serve as a development partner. This is an area where we are also working with other like-minded partners such as the EU, the US, Japan and Australia. We have sought to work on our Indo-Pacific vision through a variety of existing mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN, the ARF, ADMM+, the IORA and IONS. There are also the existing bilateral relationships in the region, including with our BIMSTEC partners, Indian Ocean Island states, European partners such as France and the EU and others such as Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia and the rest of the ASEAN. And then there are different QUADS – first the more well-known QUAD, which includes India, the US, Japan and Australia; the second more recent one which includes India, the US, the UAE and Israel; and third and the most recent which includes India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius. There are other trilaterals and plurilaterals as well and my next point is related to them.

In a world where existing multilateral frameworks have remained under stress, India has increasingly emerged, as our EAM has described “an industry leader” in terms of its participation in minilaterals of different sizes and shapes. Apart from the quads mentioned earlier, India is also part of the SCO, and the BRICS. The G20 is yet another - a most pertinent reminder that larger constellations of great powers now determine global affairs than was the case earlier. There are also some temporary formations, for example, the quad of India, the EU, the US and RSA, which are looking into WTO reforms agenda as part of the upcoming MC-12. The idea everywhere is the same – like-minded countries with similar interests or shared values or both coalescing to promote limited objectives in a more coherent format. As my Minister for External Affairs has stated in a different context, this is a 21st century way of responding to a diversified, dispersed and constantly evolving global scenario. One must however remember that this is a response that will be temporary – more durable solutions would need to come from the traditional multilateral frameworks like the UN and the WTO. But they must also be reformed to reflect today's power dynamics and retooled with instruments that are suited to meet today's challenges. They have remained moored in old structures and instrumentalities with the result that they have been seen to be largely absent or scarcely effective in the most critical of times such as the ongoing covid pandemic or the more recent Ukraine crisis.

As my sixth point, let me briefly touch on a description of India's approaches and priorities in a more geographical construct. It goes without saying that India's foreign policy attention first and foremost resides in its immediate periphery – a policy we have long described as neighbourhood first. This is a policy based on non-reciprocity and general generosity towards India's immediate and smaller neighbours – something that I can say India demonstrates to a higher degree than other large countries. This has meant unilateral openings in the trade sphere, genuine and generous support for development endeavours and being the first responder in crisis and distress situations. This approach has been largely successful except of course in Pakistan. Here cross border terrorism and institutional hostility in their ruling establishment towards India has isolated them and hindered positive development of relations between the two countries. I must also mention Afghanistan, where recent developments raise genuine fears of ominous prospects, but which worryingly seem to be fast receding from our attention.

Beyond South Asia, we have our extended neighbourhood both on our eastern and western flanks. Our Look East policy, which has now become Act East policy, is of older vintage. It started immediately after economic reforms in early 1990s with a view to open up to the region to leverage its expertise to advance India's economic growth and reform. However, more recently it has acquired a stronger security and strategic element. The region is now a cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific vision where ASEAN unity and centrality is an important aspiration. Today, we trade more with the region than we do with countries to our west. However, our FTAs concluded more than a decade ago are in need of an update. There is also a distinct emphasis on connectivity in the region with Bangladesh and Myanmar serving as a gateway to connect mainly India's north-eastern states with the broader region.

It is on our western flank, however, that more dramatic shifts have occurred in recent years. There has been a qualitative growth in our ties with UAE and Saudi Arabia even as we have continued to build relations with Iran on the one hand and Israel on the other. Our traditional energy and diaspora interests remain important but broader trade, economic, security and strategic elements have now entered the equation significantly. India has concluded an FTA with the UAE earlier this year and begun negotiations with Israel and the GCC as well. The region has also emerged as a significant investor and a growing defence partner. There is also a Central Asian pillar of our think west policy. Here, too, we have added stronger investment and development pillars to our traditional security interests in the region. A new India-Central Asia summit format has emerged as a useful mechanism to promote relations.

In many ways, the most important relationships that India has are those with the major powers especially as they have what India seeks most in bilateral relationships from other countries. At the outset, we seek a multipolar world, and this guides our approach to great powers. We have looked to build relations with all of them.

However, it would be a mistake to think that they are all equal either in terms of issues covered or comfort level that exists. The foremost growth has obviously occurred in our relations with the US, which is rated by many as the most dynamic bilateral relationship in this century. Recent trends would indicate that a similar trend of rapid growth and intensification seem to be appearing in our relations with the EU. My optimism rests on a number of counts. First, of course is growing investment at high political levels on both sides to build a stronger partnership in face of emergent global challenges. Second, resumption of trade and investment negotiations and the recent launch of the Trade and Technology Council with a view to provide the broader partnership with a political steer. And third, growing convergence on security matters, digital issues and clean energy & climate action. Our relations with Japan and Australia, too, have grown by leaps and bounds, with both economic and strategic interests converging in a uniquely synergetic way. On the other hand, our relations with Russia have remained stable over a long period, especially in the defence sphere but it has also arguably remained narrower in terms of its range. And the one with China remains the most complex and difficult. We have seen deeply concerning trends since the Chinese violated bilateral agreements on peace and tranquility on the border in early 2020. We have made it clear that we cannot have normal bilateral relations until we see a return to normal borders.

My last and seventh point relates to increasingly closer synergy in our economic strategy – both domestic and international – with our foreign policy approach. Promoting investments and attracting best technology and practices have been our endeavour for a long time. These efforts have received greater focus through a series of bold reforms, hundreds of micro-level changes to the investment ecosystem, and most recently, announcement of specific investment promotion incentives schemes, which have been hugely successful. India has emerged as leading FDI recipient during the covid pandemic. The more novel approach, however, has been with regard to negotiating new FTAs. Here we are witnessing a clear preference for FTAs with democracies and open market economies. The new commitment is demonstrated by the fact that India has already concluded FTAs with UAE and Australia, negotiations for both taking just 3 months each. India has also moved ahead with other FTAs such as with the EU, the UK and Canada in the same way. Having set a target of goods and services export of 1 trillion USD each by 2028, India is cognizant that it must open new markets which in turn would require that it also open its markets to its preferred partners. Question of trusted vectors of trade and technology partnerships and our belief that such vectors flow among democracies have also guided our approach. Growing need to build resilient supply chains is another factor. The foreign policy is also gearing to meet India's desire to turn India into more of a manufacturing hub than it has been till now. Trade and investment initiatives are now integral to our foreign policy strategy and are no longer seen purely from the economic prism. There is a distinct and broader strategic tone to them now.

I can go on adding other trends. But I think I have covered the more important ones in my view and so I will stop here. I thank all of you for your patience. I also wish you all a very productive and informed discussion ahead.

Thank You!
