

THE NEEDLE'S EYE Will India ever learn to speak loudly – and carry a small stick?

# Punching Below Our Weight



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Earlier this month, the United Nations issued its first set of 'diya' postage stamps to mark Diwali and the triumph of good over evil. It was a nice gesture — and I possess a sheet of the stamps — but a reminder of the continuing conundrum of why India punches far below its weight in the world's arena.

The Narendra Modi government has worked to keep India's flag flying on a number of issues: global terrorism, climate change and renewable energy. The prime minister is a tireless traveller and defacto foreign minister, and never misses an opportunity to attend a major international conference. But has the fastest growing economy and second most populous country become the indisputable world leader on anything beyond International Yoga Day and the International Solar Alliance?

Despite talk about our commitment to a more equitable world order, we are content with cheerleading from the sidelines. Meanwhile, India's desire for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) is increasingly becoming irrelevant, alongside hackneyed definitions of multilateralism.

As an aside, we do poorly at winning more committed friends. India does not have diplomatic missions in 70 of its fellow 192 UN member countries. Three years after an impressive summit in New Delhi attended by all 54 African leaders,

India has missions in only 29 African countries. (China has missions in 50.)

Although migration is an international crisis, India is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, or its 1967 Protocol. So, it does not have a clearly defined asylum policy although it shelters migrants from some neighbours. It recently broke its good record of non-refoulement — the practice of not forcing refugees or asylum-seekers to return to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution — by repatriating seven Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

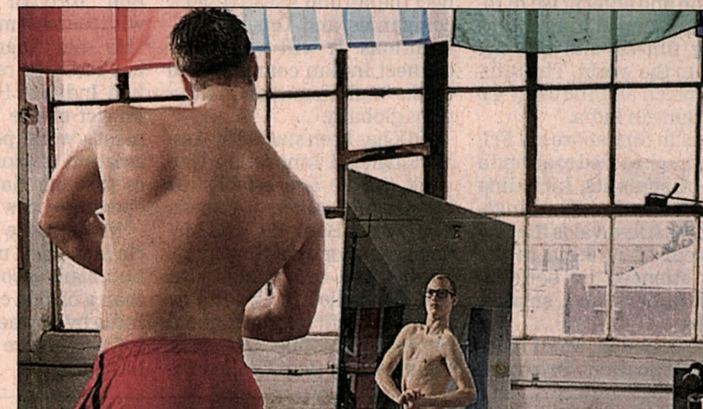
Collaboration and cooperation are at their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War. "The domains of maritime, outer space and cyberspace are the principal channels of flow of goods, capital, data, people and ideas — all of which are key factors in our interconnectedness," Indian ambassador to the UN Syed Akbaruddin told UNSC last week.

## Glacial Pace in 2018

How prepared are we for the warp speed at which the world economy is changing? Are we able to anticipate the future of work, the blurring concept of mobility, and the seamlessness of enterprise? Do we have eyes and ears around the world feeding a giant resolve to be the most fleet-footed and sharp-edged 'emerged' nation?

The answer is a dismal 'no'. We continue to trundle along with our own brand of intellectual jugaad. We have hoary, not hefty institutions. We will be racing to adapt and adopt, and we will be hard put to innovate and be world leaders in areas like artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics if we remain insular and inward-looking. We cannot just conjure up a vast army of hungry raptors on the prowl.

Let's look at multilateralism, the bedrock on which post-World War 2 political and economic stability was built.



Mirror, mirror, on the global wall...

We started off brilliantly in the postcolonial world with initiatives like the Asian Relations Meeting in New Delhi in 1947, and the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955. But with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a Cold War relic, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), a dysfunctional gaggle, India is consigned to lightweight presence at meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec).

China has outflanked us with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), although we are trying gamely to counter with the clunkily named 'Bimstec' — the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Could we at least try and reinvent diplomacy for our century? Perish the thought. The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is minuscule for a nation our size. Japan's external publicity budget is larger than the entire budget of India's ministry of external affairs.

A parliamentary standing committee listed 19 recommendations in August 2016 to expand India's diplomatic corps through lateral entry from other government ministries, the recruitment of academic and domain experts on competitively paid long-term con-

tracts, and the expansion of training in skills and foreign languages. It noted with alarm that against a 'sanctioned strength' of 912, there were only 770 IFS officers, and rapped the government on its knuckles for not even undertaking a mandated two-yearly review of resources over the previous 12 years.

In January this year, the committee noted in an action taken report that the government had accepted only eight of its 19 recommendations. It rejected the government's replies on seven points, and it was absent the ministry's replies on four.

## Watching the World Go By

The world is not waiting for us. Denmark, for example, has set up an Innovation Centre in Silicon Valley to "build bridges between companies, research institutions and capital" in the two countries. Switzerland's network of science and technology (S&T) outposts, swissnex, with offices in the tech and innovation hubs of Boston, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai and Bangalore, is managed by the country's foreign ministry. It runs on a public-private collaboration and funding model that links research and science and technology education to 20 S&T offices and counsellors in its embassies.

When are we going to get up off our hands?

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