



Opening Remarks by Gen. (Dr.) V.K. Singh (Retd.) Minister of State for External Affairs at Mid Term Press Conference on January 04, 2017

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First of all, let me take the opportunity to extend to you the New Year Greetings of the entire Ministry. Thank you for joining us for this Press Conference on the MEA's work over the last two and a half years. As you know, the External Affairs Minister usually does a Press Conference once every year. However, given that we have crossed the mid-term of our Government, this is undoubtedly a special occasion - it is both an opportunity to reflect upon both our achievements and to take stock of our goals going forward. Though EAM, Smt Sushma Swaraj ji, could not be here herself, she conveys her New Year greetings to all of you.

Under the inspiring leadership of our EAM, over the last two and half years, the MEA has not only shown itself adept at the advancement of our foreign policy goals, but also as a caring Ministry that has set a new template for the delivery of public services. Prosperity and security are the two bookends on which we have framed our foreign policy. What we have sought across the world are partnerships of prosperity - through new synergies in our flagships programmes - from investment and infrastructure, from railways and transport, Smart Cities and Skill India, Digital India and Clean Ganga, the primary aim of our external partnerships has been the growth and development of India. Led by the Prime Minister, our Government's efforts at engaging the Diaspora has been a true game-changer, even while we have consistently sought to go to the aid of Indians in distress abroad.

Allow me here to go into some of the key aspects of our achievements and initiatives, and then there would be time for a Q&A session.

I. Sampark and Samvad

As all of you know, at each of the previous press conferences, we have begun with Sampark and Samvad - the fundamental basis on which this Ministry and our Government has conducted its engagement with the world. Each year we have sought to widen the circle of friends and partners - the visits of the President, Vice President, Prime Minister, the EAM and ourselves to countries large and small have been geared to this goal. As the EAM had mentioned in her last Annual Briefing, our objective is to engage, at least at the Ministerial level, with all the 192 countries of the United Nations, and we are well on course to do so soon.

A key part of our sustained foreign engagements have in fact been back at home - through Summits and Conferences where India has played host. As recently as October, our Chairmanship of BRICS culminated in the Annual Summit in Goa, held in conjunction with the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit. Both were a resounding success for our diplomacy on the global stage, and this was followed by the Heart of Asia Ministerial in Amritsar, a multilateral that affirmed India's commitment to partnering Afghanistan in its transitions. These conferences underlined the region's aspiration for greater connectivity, a process in which India has played its due part.

Even before 2016, we had seen the IAFS-III Summit which, for the first time saw the participation of 54 African countries, which unveiled a dynamic and transformative agenda of resurgence between India and the nations of Africa. IAFS itself was preceded by two landmark Summits with the Pacific Island nations (FIPIC), one in Fiji and the second in India in Jaipur - these events were a testament to our outreach to many of the smaller nations and our willingness to build a new paradigm of South-South cooperation. In addition, the 10th Vishwa Hindi Sammelan last year in Bhopal was another landmark event, with 7000 delegates representing the largest ever participation, that strengthened our association with the Hindi speaking communities of the world.

There were other firsts too: EAM met all the Foreign Ministers of the Arab World in the new Ministerial format under the India-Arab Cooperation Forum. Rashtrapati's visits to Palestine, Israel and Jordan followed by the Prime Minister's journeys to UAE, Iran, Saudi Arabia and

Qatar have rejuvenated our age old ties with West Asia and the Gulf. The landmark Chabahar trilateral agreement between India, Afghanistan and Iran promises to be a game-changer for connecting India with our extended neighborhood, including Central Asia and Russia.

As you are all aware, one of the guiding mantras of our Government in respect of foreign policy has been the principle of Neighbourhood First. In the last two years, we have seen a sustained demonstration of this principle not only when it came to formal diplomatic engagements but also at times of distress and need. Whether it was the water crisis in Maldives, or floods in Sri Lanka, or Operation Maitri – our largest disaster relief effort abroad – in Nepal after the earthquake, we have extended a helping hand to all those who needed it. The Prime Minister has travelled to almost all the countries in the region, while the EAM, my colleague and I have made journeys to all them. Many of the visits by the Prime Minister were in fact the first in many years – with Nepal after 17 years, with Sri Lanka after 28 years. The landmark Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh is merely one example of an agreement that bears the mark of history. The inauguration of the new Parliament building in Kabul and the India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam, housing projects in Jaffna, a state of the art trauma centre in Kathmandu, progress on power projects with Bhutan, practical cooperation in transit and connectivity with Bangladesh and the larger BBIN grouping, the trilateral highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Project with Myanmar, lines of credit and scholarships for many countries in the region – all are testament to the paradigm of ties that India seeks in South Asia. Of course, this is predicated on safety and security in South Asia that is important if we are to see progress and development.

All the countries of the region, barring one, have demonstrated their willingness to stand together against the menace of terrorism that could undermine their collective hopes. India too, has shown that we will not back down in the face of assaults against the security of our people, the prosperity of the region and the interests of the international community. The aim of the surgical strikes that we conducted was to convey to Pakistan that we will not countenance continued terrorism as the new normal in our relationship. Our own good faith has been amply demonstrated time and again through repeated initiatives to normalize the relationship. However, as we have often stated, talks and terror cannot go together.

Our priorities in South Asia have not distanced us from our friends and partners in other parts of the world. The steady growth in our ties, overcoming ‘the hesitations of history’ with the US, has been a matter of satisfaction as much as the consolidation of our traditional partnerships with Russia, France, the UK and EU. We continue to expand the broad range of our ties with China, particularly through people-to-people connections and the expansion of Chinese investments to India, even as we seek common ground on concerns. Outside the P-5, our partnerships with nations such as Japan and Germany have been fruitful and mutually beneficial, as has been our continued engagement with countries of Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and Central Europe. The conversion of the Look East policy to Act East policy, and the establishment of a separate Mission to ASEAN and the EAS, has reinvigorated our ties with the region, bringing closer the promise of an Asian Century.

Shaping the Global Agenda

Even as we have widened the ambit of *sampark* and *samvad*, India’s voice on the global stage has found new resonance – not only to support positive initiatives but to lead the way in proposing solutions of our own. From PM Modi’s first G20 Summit, where his intervention ensured that the issue of black money formed a part of the final document, India has sought new ways to articulate and advance its core interests.

With national security as a paramount interest, India has placed terror front and centre of the issues on the global stage. We were able to decisively defeat attempts at the glorification of terrorists and terrorism. India’s efforts to forge long-term and effective counter-terror cooperation with countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, US, France, Germany and others have dovetailed with the growing consensus that we have managed to build on the critically important Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. India also played a key role in revision of the High Risk Area by the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.

India’s credible voice at the Paris COP-21 negotiations ensured the centrality of the principle of common but differentiated responsibility and our right to development without compromising on the critical need to combat climate change. Keeping our promise, on the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, India deposited its instrument of ratification. On renewable energy, India has led the way, building the International Solar Alliance, and in just a year, opening the framework agreement for signature. The opening of the ISA framework agreement for signature within 41 days of finalizing the text of the agreement is a record in itself.

India’s non-proliferation credentials were confirmed with membership of the MTCR in 2016 and our joining Hague Code of Conduct, even as we continued constructive engagement with our partners for membership of the other export control regimes.

The signing of the Memorandum of Association with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2016 has paved the way for India's full-fledged membership of this key regional organization.

Even on the cultural side, India has articulated a new global consciousness. On PM Modi's initiative, 21st June was declared as International Day of Yoga by the United Nations, a resolution co-sponsored by a record 177 nations and supported by all. Celebrated in virtually every UN member country for 2 years running, the IDY has gained unprecedented recognition, transforming India's ancient practice into a global movement.

II. Diplomacy for Development

As I had mentioned at the outset, our diplomatic engagements have a direct relevance for our domestic development. One key indicator of our diplomatic success has been the increase in FDI into India. In 2014-15 alone, FDI inflows were at \$45 billion, and for 2015-16 this has increased to \$55 billion. Overall FDI inflows have increased more than 43% for the two-year period as against the two years preceding this Government. We have moved up in a host of other economic indicators - having been ranked the most attractive investment destination by global agencies as per Ernst & Young, and jumping 32 spots in the WEF's global competitiveness index.

The flagship initiatives of the Government have provided the conceptual basis through which partnerships have been forged. MEA has acted as the principal facilitator and enabler, catalyzing old partnerships and incubating new ones - making the pitch for India's market opportunities which is then carried forward by line Ministries and partner organization.

In each of the key areas of our development, our efforts have crystallized through MoUs that have been signed or commercial deals that have been struck. Allow me to give you a few illustrative examples - Infrastructure Investment funds have been launched with commitments by major economies like UAE, USA, UK and Japan, complemented by private sector arrangements. In railways and transport, the High Speed Rail project between Mumbai and Ahmedabad is well on track in addition to a number of infrastructure related projects with Japan. The world's first ever "masala" bond issued by HDFC and NTPC for infrastructure was listed on London Stock Exchange. 12 cities have been identified for Smart city partnerships with US, France, Germany and the UK, while sister city agreements share developments experiences. The Make in India programme has attracted global attention, whether through Japan launching a \$12 billion Special Finance Facility or through tie ups with Germany's Fraunhofer society, or through defence agreements such as between India and Russia on the joint production of Kamov 226 helicopters.

Providing gainful through imparting skills training to 400 million people over the next decade through Skill India has advanced through partnerships with countries like Canada, Japan and under the aegis of India's GIAN programme, as has private sector partnerships in Digital India. PM Modi led new thinking on Energy Security through the Launch of International Solar alliance, while continuing to secure civil nuclear and Uranium pacts with Japan, UK, Canada, Australia and France, among others. \$5.5 billion investments in major producing fields in Russia (Vankor) will also contribute over 10 mmt of crude to our energy security.

These agreements have also gone in hand in hand with measures to enhance effective investments such as the Amendment of Double Taxation Avoidance Convention with Mauritius.

III. Diaspora and Emergency Relief

The security of India has gone hand in hand with the protection and safety of Indians abroad. The welfare of our citizens, whether they are in Baghdad or Brisbane, has been the guiding priority of our Government over the last 31 months, and we have consciously placed it front and centre of our foreign policy. We have let our actions speak louder than our words ever could - in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, South Sudan and in the wider Gulf region, and Europe and the Americas. We have done so, not only based on the principle that Indians abroad must benefit from the protection of the Indian state but also on the broader notion that each human life is sacred. It is this that motivated the rescue of 1947 Foreign Nationals from 48 countries stranded in Yemen, and many foreign nationals from Nepal following the earthquake in Nepal.

At the same time, we have quietly plugged away at resolving long pending problems - the protection of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, harassment from unscrupulous employers, entrapment by devious agents, visas that are dishonoured and contracts that are cast aside - the resolution of these problems has been a matter of personal concern for the Ministry. The power of social media has brought the Government closer to many of the individual stories of anguish and distress - you are already aware of the extraordinary work the EAM continues to do on Twitter - whether it is the case of Geeta, brought back from Pakistan or Judith D'Souza from Afghanistan, she has demonstrated that the foreign ministry can in fact touch every

human life. The institutional mechanisms that we have created, from e-migrate to MADAD, and recently Twitter Seva have been adopted widely and will go a long way in ensuring our Missions abroad are a home away from home.

So, for the first time in many years there is a closer integration between the overall objectives of our foreign policy and our engagement with the Diaspora community, a fact that is attested to by the Prime Minister's outreach through community events in his visits abroad, the merger between MOIA and MEA, and the inauguration of the first ever centre for the Diaspora in India – the Pravasi Bhartiya Kendra in New Delhi. We are also preparing later this week for the 14th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Bangalore, the culmination of a new format of continuous engagements and focused debate over the last two years. The Indian diaspora is set to scale up their contribution to the mission of remaking India through enthusiastic participation in 'Swachh Bharat', 'Make in India', 'Skill India' and "Clean Ganga."

IV. Passport Services

Let me finally talk a little about an extraordinary achievement of the Ministry over the last two and a half years – the revolution in Passport services, implemented through the Passport Seva Project. I am sure that you yourself or someone you know would have had the experience of how easy it is to acquire a passport these days. Leading the way in good governance initiatives, the MEA has proved that even the task of delivering 3.91 crore passports over 2 and half years can be done with efficiency, marrying state-of-the-art technology with people friendly services. The Passport Seva System has emerged as India's largest e-governance initiative synonymous with speed, accuracy and transparency. Our network of Passport Services has been extended with the setting up of 88 Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs), including an additional 11 covering all the North Eastern States.

The expansion of centres has gone hand in hand with simplifying procedures and easing access. For the first time, a five-day window is available for citizens to choose appointments of their convenience. During the last two years, most of the Police Districts have been integrated with the Passport Seva system digitally for expeditious Police Verification. We have launched a Mobile App, 'mPassport Police' for seamless and paperless generation of PVR. Over the past two years, 197 passport camps and 736 Melas have also been held to process large number of applications.

As you already know, citizens can now acquire a fresh passport under the normal category in a week, if their applications are accompanied by three basic documents. These three documents include copies of Aadhaar card, electoral photo identity card (EPIC) and PAN card, besides an affidavit in the prescribed format (declaration of citizenship, family details and no criminal record). We have just also announced a further liberalization in the passport rules for the benefit of the citizens.

Conclusion

For those of you who have been actively following our foreign policy initiatives, there can be no doubt as to what our diplomacy has achieved over the last 31 months. Whether at the bilateral, multilateral level or the public level (through the projection of India's civilizational ethos through celebrations like the International Day of Yoga) India stands proud on the global stage today. Clearly, a new consciousness is emerging about our country, and what we stand for.

I am sure that the years ahead will see an even greater flowering of our diplomatic endeavours and even more win-win international partnerships, truly exemplifying our guiding motto of Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas.

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