Modi’s all hands on deck approach is a novelty

By Sreeram Chaulia, 14-Jan-2019

Now foreign trips of the President, the Vice-President, or the Lok Sabha Speaker are substantive rather than ceremonial or symbolic

The days when foreign trips of the President, the Vice-President, or the Speaker of India’s lower house of Parliament, the Lok Sabha, were dismissed as ceremonial or symbolic jaunts are over. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership, India’s constitutional apparatus is effectively contributing to its international strategy. The growing frequency of overseas tours by VIPs during Modi’s tenure reflects a less-known but emerging trend. While the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) design and execute India’s foreign policy, instruments from other arms of the Indian government can play favourable roles to advance our national interests abroad. Modi realized this potential and has fully tapped into it to ensure that high office-holders in India’s parliamentary democracy bring breadth, depth and intensity to our international partnership-building.

Force multipliers The President, Vice-President, and Lok Sabha Speaker are boosters of Indian foreign policy in ways that are not adequately appreciated. They establish our international presence and demonstrate our seriousness. If someone of the stature of a President or Vice-President is in a particular country or at a multilateral forum, it signals that India honours that nation or group and is committed to it. Foreign interlocutors feel more satisfied if they meet someone of high governmental protocol from India. While the delegations that accompany the dignitaries usually have MEA officials, the impact is bigger when high functionaries directly convey messages to their foreign counterparts in one-on-one settings. This ‘all hands on deck’ foreign policy approach of Modi has spread India’s profile to far corners of Africa. In the first four years of the Modi government, India managed an unprecedented 23 outgoing visits to Africa at the level of President, Vice-President and Prime Minister.

The ‘Team India’ approach has filled gaps in our Africa strategy, which used to be piecemeal and limited in geographical scope before Modi came to the helm. Modi has used the President and the Vice-President as eminent emissaries, curtain raisers or follow-up acts before or after visits by himself or his External Affairs Ministers in countries and regions where India has strategic interests. In some cases, the additional VIP hands have been tasked to smooth over tensions between India and select countries. Diplomatic sensitivities must be dealt at the highest level of India’s state system. A President or Vice-President of India, unlike run-of-the-mill career diplomats, can help pacify anti-India sentiments in chosen countries through personal touch. For example, the Modi government sent Kovind to Mauritius in March 2018 at a time when there was domestic...
resistance in that geopolitically salient Indian Ocean country against giving India the right to develop military installations in the Agalega Islands.

The Indian President’s presence in Port Louis and his announcement of new financial packages for Mauritius’ defence capabilities made a difference at a tense moment. In July 2017, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan was dispatched as head of a delegation of MPs to Russia. Her visit reinforced India’s message that Pakistan was posing a threat to the entire international community through its sponsorship of fundamentalist terrorist outfits. In person, she conveyed New Delhi’s concerns that Moscow should be wary of undertaking defence cooperation with Islamabad. Mahajan also lauded the Indo-Russian Federation Friendship Group set up in the Russian Duma and announced a similar initiative in the Indian Parliament.

While there is total support for India at the level of the Russian executive, i.e. President Vladimir Putin, it is necessary for India to also build camaraderie and appreciation with legislators so that there is unanimity in all segments of Russia’s body politic to privilege Indian interests. When abroad, a Lok Sabha Speaker or Members of Parliament showcase India’s democracy where all stakeholders work in unison to achieve foreign policy goals. Active involvement of these public officials in events like the Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) builds a variety of connections among lawmakers across the world and generates goodwill for India at a multi-partisan political level abroad. The more MPs and Speakers of India’s bicameral legislature are employed as extra team members of our foreign policy, the thicker the relationships which India can leverage for its economic and strategic gain. ‘PMO & MEA Plus’ Model Apart from optics and strategic advantages, the ‘PMO & MEA Plus’ strategy entails soft power benefits.

Promoting people-to-people ties and cultural diplomacy is integral to how the President, Vice-President, and Lok Sabha Speaker interact with partners abroad. They often attend showpiece events on behalf of the government of India and meet citizens of other countries to forge lasting friendships and impress upon ordinary people that India respects them. For instance, Venkaiah Naidu went to Chicago, USA, in September 2018 for the World Hindu Congress and left a deep impression on attendees from 60 countries. While Modi is the undisputed champion and darling of the Indian diaspora, his own hectic schedule does not permit presence at each and every global conclave. The division of labour he has worked out with the President and Vice-President to shoulder public diplomacy work is smart thinking.

Sustainers of Foreign Policy While big-ticket deals and breakthroughs are trumpeted when Modi is abroad, the steady oiling of relationships with strategic partners is necessary for sustained relationships to be built. Continuity of dialogue and face-to-face powwows at the highest level are essential for India to climb up the ranks of diplomatically proactive powers. This crucial function of continuity is being fulfilled by Kovind, Naidu and Mahajan as part and parcel of Modi’s foreign policy vision to utilise all levers within India’s governmental apparatus for enhancing its international influence. If India under Modi has broken fresh ground in reaching out to small and distant countries where we previously lacked high-level visibility, the lacuna has been filled thanks to the inclusive ‘PMO and MEA Plus’ model. Given India’s clearly delineated constitutional mandates and responsibilities, the PMO has been in the driver’s seat on foreign policy matters.

Under a hyperactive globetrotter like Modi, the Prime Minister is indeed our principal strategist and diplomatic icon. But his international mission has been buttressed by unsung heroes like Kovind, Naidu and Mahajan. They are certainly not makers of Indian diplomacy but are carrying it forward like catalysts who understand that the prestige of their offices can be astutely harnessed. The VIP team work in foreign policy that Modi has optimised in his first term deserves recognition as one element in India’s multidimensional quest for great power status. Much more of this phenomenon is needed in years to come
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