

Keynote Address by Foreign Secretary Smt. Nirupama Rao at the Symposium on “The Future of India-Pakistan Relations”

October 19, 2010

I consider it a privilege being invited to speak to such an august gathering at the Jamia Milia Islamia on a subject which is of critical importance to over a billion people of South Asia. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Vice Chancellor Najeeb Jung, who I am proud to call my friend and batchmate, my former colleagues Ambassador Satyabrata Pal and Ambassador T.C.A. Rangachari, Shri M.J. Akbar, Dr. Raja Mohan, Dr. Ajay Darshan Behera and the faculty of this reputed centre of learning for providing me an opportunity to set my sights on the future and speak on how I see the evolving paradigm of relations between the two largest countries in the South Asian sub-continent. Predicting the course of one of the most complex and unpredictable relationships in the modern era is a task that most intrepid astrologers would hesitate to undertake and ladies and gentlemen, I am no astrologer. I will however, attempt to approach the subject as a practitioner of diplomacy and international relations.

2. Six decades after the tragedy and trauma of Partition, a host of issues continue to bedevil India-Pakistan relations and cast long shadows on bilateral ties. The challenge then, is to grasp this moment in history to explore the possibility of peace in the region in the larger context of an increasingly interdependent and globalizing world. In the India-Pakistan discourse, we have literally eaten bitterness for the last sixty years and given the complexities of our ties, the task of improvement in ties is also Sisyphean. Some argue that we must induce a radical transformation of mindsets on both sides that view each other through the prism of an embittered past and entrenched hostility. This may be the conventional wisdom but is often not borne out by the behaviour of the multitudes of common people living on either side of the border. I say this in the realization that there are enough people in both countries that continue to be prisoners of the past. And yet, how does one explain the warm and spontaneous applause of thousands of spectators at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium on October 3 this year when the Pakistani contingent entered the stadium for the opening ceremony of the 19th Commonwealth Games in Delhi or the statements of support from the Pakistani sports authorities in the run up to the Games when others were vying with each other to write off the event before it had started? What explains this? On the one hand there is the push of realism that compels us to see the relationship with Pakistan as hobbled by its many limitations, while on the other hand, there is the pull of emotion, of sentiment, of the muffled footsteps of shared history that beat in our blood, that generates a response that is giving and generous.

It may be tempting to conclude that the common man desires peaceful and good neighbourly relations and that the governments of both countries are somehow impediments in achieving this cherished goal. This would be far too simplistic and naïve. While it is apparent that the people of both countries desire to live in peace and amity, yet it takes only one act of mindless terrorism, like the barbaric attack on Mumbai in November 2008, to vitiate the atmosphere and poison public perception.

3. Of course, there is the engulfing deficit of trust between the two countries that needs to be bridged. This needs to be done both at the government and people to people level. Numerous well-meaning efforts in the past have faltered and many will continue to do so in the future unless both sides show an unwavering commitment to stay the course and create a propitious and enabling environment to surmount the innumerable obstacles that are littered on the path to peace. There is no magic panacea that can make this happen. But it is incumbent on each and every one of us to persevere with patience and dedication so that future generations do not remain hostage to a poison-ridden legacy of political misunderstandings and geopolitical antagonisms.

4. The Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met on the margins of the SAARC Summit in Bhutan in April this year and agreed to normalize relations and to address the deficit of trust that exists between the two countries. Accordingly, they mandated their Foreign Ministers and Foreign Secretaries with the task of working out modalities for restoring trust and confidence in their relationship and thus paving the way for a substantive dialogue on all issues of mutual concern.

5. Pursuant to this directive, I visited Islamabad in June to prepare the ground for a subsequent visit by the External Affairs Minister to Pakistan the next month. While I do not want to dwell into the specifics of both these visits, notwithstanding the cordial and frank exchanges, our efforts to bridge the trust deficit and pave the way for a serious and comprehensive dialogue were thwarted by a level of overreach by Pakistan that complicated the

resumption of a sustained dialogue process. However, we do not view this as a set-back in our quest for peace as both sides appear to be committed to ensuring that the spirit of Thimphu is not lost. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan has accepted our invitation to visit India, dates for which will be decided through diplomatic channels. We will continue to strive for a resolution of all outstanding issues through dialogue.

6. The countries of the South Asian region have a common stake in ensuring a peaceful, stable environment that guarantees a bright and prosperous future. Democracy has infused a new vitality among all countries in the region, and brought with it a revolution of rising expectations and perceived possibilities among the peoples of South Asia. The leadership in all the countries of South Asia is obliged to concentrate on the imperative of providing inclusive and sustainable development and economic opportunities to the needier sections of their populations. This realization should also unlock bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. It informs the vision of our leadership when they seek dialogue with Pakistan. The linkages resulting from economic interaction, connectivity and people to people contacts could build the sinews of a more durable and lasting peace in which stakeholders will have a vested interest in preserving the gains of a mutually beneficial relationship. This is the call of the 21st Century.

7. India's advocacy of an incremental, graduated and forward-looking approach that seeks to address the deficit of trust is by no means an attempt to avoid tackling of the substantive differences that trouble relations with Pakistan. While there can be no guarantees for success, such an approach seeks to build first on what is achievable and simultaneously to also address the more intractable issues in a sustained manner. The issue of terrorism arising out of the sub-conventional conflict directed by Pakistan against India for over two decades now, cannot be ignored either. It is as substantive an issue as the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, or the issue of the Siachen Glacier.

8. As we seek to pave the way for a serious and comprehensive dialogue, how do we enlarge the constituencies of peace in both countries so that the dawn of a new era does not remain a chimera? I had earlier referred to economic linkages and enhanced people to people contacts. The task before us is to translate this on the ground to a mutually enriching and beneficial partnership for the greater good.

9. The Indian economy has grown exponentially in the last couple of decades and despite the global downturn, it continues to grow at over 8 %. While the Government is committed to inclusive growth so that the benefits of an ever expanding economy percolate down to the grassroots, we would be happy to share this growth with all our neighbours. This can only be done if we are able to promote our complementarities and link our economies to a trajectory of inclusive and incremental growth. Artificial barriers and self-defeating policies need to be struck down. The ensuing economic interaction and mutually beneficial cooperation can lift our region from the morass of poverty and deprivation and at the same time create vested interests in a shared vision of peace and prosperity for our people. Unfettered trade and investment flows coupled with freer people to people exchanges at various levels, particularly between the youth of the two countries, and better communications could help in realizing this vision.

10. Education can form a bridge in bringing together young minds in the region. Universities and academic institutions in both India and Pakistan can play an important role in creating objective understanding. The South Asian University, under the SAARC framework, provides an ideal platform to create a South Asian consciousness. The vision of a world-class South Asian University was envisaged by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka in 2005 when he stated:

“The people of our subcontinent are at the cutting edge of scientific and technological research and in the front ranks of the knowledge society across the world. Wherever an enabling environment and world-class facilities are made available to our talented people, they excel. Let this become a forum where our academicians, scholars, researchers and gifted students can work together in the service of human advancement”.

The University, which commenced its first academic session this year, has as its core objectives, building a culture of understanding and regional consciousness; nurturing a new class of liberal, bright and quality leadership; and building the capacity of the region in science, technology and other disciplines considered vital for improving the quality of life of the people. It can play a stellar role in peace building and reconciliation in the subcontinent by providing a foundation for mutual comprehension and understanding amongst our youth. We have emphasized that Pakistani students seeking admission to the SAU are entitled to the same non-

discriminatory dispensation as all other entrants to the University from other South Asian countries, and that we welcome them to come to SAU.

11. The future of India-Pakistan relations, as I see it, must be predicated on such a win-win situation where everybody has a stake in furthering the cause of peace and good neighbourly relations. It is with this vision that our Prime Minister has repeatedly reached out to Pakistan. The recent devastating floods in Pakistan provided an opportunity for us to express our solidarity with the people of Pakistan in their hour of need. Our offer of \$ 25 million was meant to alleviate the heart-wrenching suffering of the people and we are ready to do much more as a neighbour that shares a long border with Pakistan. We are ideally placed to rush badly needed relief material, food, medicines and supplies across the border to provide succour to the suffering millions. Pakistan wished us to route our assistance through the United Nations. We were ready to oblige.

12. I am not trying to predict a rose-tinted future for India-Pakistan relations. But surely, we can dare, perchance, to dream? To dream of a future where on both sides of the divide, our two countries will foster imaginative and creative approaches to tackling problems of peace and security, confidence-building in both conventional and non-conventional areas of defence, the differences over Jammu and Kashmir, and gird our relationship by a raft of clearly enunciated agreements and understandings that can bury the rusting, corrosive hatchet of sixty years and more?

13. Our relations have been encumbered by a host of missed opportunities. We compound these by refusing to learn from history and thereby condemn ourselves to replicating the past rather than unmaking it. However, to learn from history we cannot afford one-sided or biased interpretations. We must also remember that essentially, we were one people shaped from the same timber of humanity before we decided to part ways. There is a need to understand the past in a more redemptive way. Unless we rise above the present we cannot realise the future we seek. The choices for the future are stark and real. Either we learn to live together in peace and harmony or we risk imparting to future generations our differences and prejudices that will continue to divide us rather than unite us and indeed widen the gulf between us. Given the complexities of our relationship and the tortured path that we have traversed till now, it is easy to be cynical and predict a gloomy future. However, as an eternal optimist and someone who believes in the power of people to shape their destiny I feel it is incumbent on all of us to strive and achieve a peaceful and mutually reinforcing relationship that will unlock the true potential of more than a billion people for their betterment. Can we realise this goal? The answer needs to be jointly explored sooner than later or else time will pass us by and yet another opportunity would go begging. I am confident that if we are to approach this with a shared vision and a conviction of purpose, the quest for peace need not remain elusive and in the realm of our fantasy. The eyes of the rest of the world are on us as we engage in this quest.

14. That, Ladies and Gentlemen, would be my prognosis for the future of India-Pakistan relations. I would like to conclude by wishing all the participants in this symposium success in their deliberations.

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