



New realities mean that we need a fresh approach

Mr Keith Didcock

Given our historic links with India, it is easy for the UK to feel complacent about the future of Indo-British relations. A seamless transition from rosy memories of the sunset of empire to Bend It Like Beckham and Bride and Prejudice suggest that the relationship can continue to glide smoothly along, accommodating changing fashions as it goes. The world, however, is changing and Indo-British relations are being shaped by two forces which mean that the UK's approach to its relations with India must change too.

First, substantive strategic discussions about issues of global concern have migrated upwards from the UK to the level of the EU. In typically thorough EU fashion, the EU-India summits held annually since 2000 have left hardly a realm of political or economic activity untouched. There is now a summit, forum, working group or round table on everything from maritime affairs, civil aviation and space, through to the environment, the Millennium Development Goals and nanotechnology.

As a result of the fifth EU-India summit in The Hague last November, the EU and India have now agreed to co-operate on the level of Strategic Partnership and are working on an Action Plan and Joint EU Indian Political Declaration to be finalised at this year's summit in India. Such ties are a reflection of the similarities, both in terms of outlook and structure, between the EU and India. The common commitment to democracy, international law, human rights, economic liberalisation and development goals makes the EU and India natural partners for strategic co-operation. Together, they represent the two great political laboratories of the latter half of the twentieth century – albeit that they are in some senses mirror images of each other. In India, a 'Centre' was created to build an Indian nation, which formed a union over time; in Europe, European nations began creating their own version of a union and over time have created their own 'Centre'. Neither project is complete but each can learn a number of lessons from the other and share experience of common issues, such as democratic deficit, competing claims of federalism and regional/national autonomy and the demands of presiding over multiple cultures, religions and languages within an open, tolerant and secular framework.

Within this context, India is a country that could, despite its geographical location, be a candidate member of the EU. Perhaps, as these two political experiments evolve through the twenty first century, such an idea may not be as outlandish as it appears. The EU's focus on its relations with India could become the cornerstone of its international cooperation over the coming decades. The EU and India could form a massive demographic and trading alliance of two emerging powers both searching for their role within the international firmament, both with a commitment to a similar set of values.

India is certainly acquiring the accoutrements of major power status: a growing economy, a large military budget, large population and a reputation for technological innovation. But it is also building its soft power resources as an upholder of international norms, as a major contributor to UN peacekeeping efforts, and as a growing cultural magnet (built partly on the cultural appetite of its vast diaspora). One of the results of this is that, at present, the major actors on the world stage – including the EU and India – are hedging their positions, aware that the current unipolar world is unsustainable in the long term, aware that new powers are emerging and aware too that the international frameworks which seek to manage global affairs will need to change to accommodate new realities. These realities will likely see a new geo-strategic geometry of a Big Four: the US, India, China and the EU. Whilst the EU can only play its part if it manages to align the interests of its member states, it is improbable that either the UK (or France) can remain major powers in their own right in the long term. This clearly has implication for the UK.

So as India recalibrates its diplomacy to new strategic realities, the UK must carve out a new niche for itself. Of course, the UK would like to continue to promote itself as India's economic, political and cultural gateway

into Europe. The UK is the second largest investor in India, bilateral trade is worth £5 billion per annum and the UK attracts 60 per cent of all Indian investment into Europe. Last year the two countries announced the establishment of a Joint Economic and Trade Committee to further these strong ties. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister to London last September, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's visit to India in February of this year and even the recent visit to India of the new EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson have all enhanced Indo-British political contacts.

The UK has approximately 1.3 million citizens of Indian origin and 500,000 Indians visit the UK every year with 400,000 Britons visiting India. All of these facts testify to the current vibrancy of ties between the two countries.

And yet culturally and politically there is a sense that India's attention may slowly be wandering elsewhere. This is the second force reshaping Indo-British relations. The passage of time since Independence and the forces of globalisation mean that India's commitments, interests and outlook require it to focus on more than just the UK. As Parag Khanna states in a new publication by the Foreign Policy Centre (India as a New Global Leader), India's diaspora has become a "networked borderless global polity" with interests across the world. There are some 20 million Indians abroad and nearly 50 countries with Indian populations of 10,000 or more. In this context, the UK – despite its large Indian community – is no longer the only natural hub for NRIs. There is a new generation of leaders emerging in the economic and cultural spheres that has not had direct relations with the UK and has no shared memory of the colonial period. Many young educated middle class Indians are more familiar with the US than the UK and find Silicon Valley more alluring than Sheffield.

So it is time to accept that we can no longer congratulate ourselves on our deep ties with India when in reality we are only ever engaging with the educated English-speaking elite. India's huge population contains over one billion people speaking hundreds of languages and dialects. Only four percent of Indians speak English. There are some 15 official languages and over 20 languages spoken by a million people or more. This makes India one of the most challenging countries in the world with which to engage effectively.

Practical measures the UK can take to consolidate its interests in India include, first, leveraging our position as the largest aid donor to India. Over time India's requirement for aid will diminish but, in the meantime, the UK can maintain its position as India's premier partner in this area in promoting the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Second, in order to maintain the strength of our economic ties, the UK should continue to push the Indian Government on issues such as streamlining bureaucracy for business, financial sector reform and the promotion of clean energy technology and resurrecting its stalled privatisation programme. Producing an enabling commercial environment in India is crucial to the continuing vitality of bilateral trade links. Third, the UK must act to promote itself as a key interlocutor between India and Europe. This will require a more effective UK strategy to convince non-European allies and partners that we are serious and committed members of the EU.

But in the longer term, we need to become far more sophisticated in our approach and recognise that to communicate with India as a whole, we need new strategies. This means that additional resources need to be focused on India and they need to be focused in a new way. The UK currently has High Commission offices in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata; Trade Offices in Bangalore, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad; DfID works with the state governments of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa; and British Council has offices and libraries in eleven cities stretching from Thiruvananthapuram to Chandigarh and Ahmedabad to Kolkata.

These resources need to be co-ordinated to deliver a new public diplomacy strategy for the UK in India – one which accommodates the enormous diversity of India and builds on the relationships that currently exist. We must recognise that old relationships need to be built anew, with a new generation of Indians, for many of whom English is an unknown language and the UK very much a foreign land. A new UK public diplomacy for India need not start with a blank canvas but new realities mean that we need a fresh approach.

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