

Interactive Session with Dr. Shashi Tharoor

Question: Dr. Tharoor what are the mistakes we did in the last 50 years, which we should avoid in meeting the challenges you mentioned.

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: I am convinced that you are trying to get me into trouble. The right thing to say is that we made no mistakes in the last 50 years. I am the only one who makes mistakes!

We have done well, we need to do better. That was essentially the thrust of my message. We have laid down a foundation; there is a great deal need to do to adapt it to the realities that are coming up. I think that if you are going to read between the lines of what I have said, I think the Foundation will be publishing my lecture; you will implicitly see where I think we could do things differently.

Question: How is it that a boyish looking face, a perennially eligible bachelor, how is it that such profound thoughts can be given by a person like you?

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: That question does not really expect an answer. But I take it as a very generous compliment. I am grateful. I have to confess that I spent a rather intense period of time acquiring some erudition in international affairs. One does not always have an opportunity to inflict it on such a responsive audience. Thank you very much.

Question: Thank you for your speech. How far do you subscribe to the statement of former Defense Minister that China is a real threat?

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: I haven't heard that statement; I would rather not be seen as commenting on a statement I haven't heard. But, I would say that whenever we speak of relations with China we should balance perceptions of threat with perceptions of opportunity. My objective understanding is that, on the negative side of the ledger, we still have with

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China an unresolved border, not only the longest unresolved frontier in the world, but China's only unsettled border, it settled its borders with all its other neighbours, except us. That is certainly troubling because the persistence of disagreement on any border, historically, has often led to conflict. But on the positive side of the ledger, which people sometimes don't look at, there has been a willingness for the last three decades or more, to put the border on the backburner, as it were, and to proceed with progress on a whole variety of fronts. Today as I mentioned in my remarks, China is our largest single trading partner, admittedly if you don't count trade in services with the US or trade in oil with the UAE, but still China is our largest trading partner. We have seven thousand Indian students studying there now; companies like Infosys and Wipro have opened branches in Shanghai that are thriving; Chinese companies are hiring people in Chennai; I won't embarrass Anand Mahindra who I believe is here, by talking about the extraordinary things that his company has done, designing vehicles, tractors and jeeps here in India, manufacturing them in China and selling them to the Americans. But I can give you a different example - the famous Apple iPod, which was actually designed by a Hyderabad company called PortalPlayer, manufactured in China and sold in America. So these kinds of synergies and cooperations suggest that we have opportunities to work together with the Chinese. And I believe that if we took the trouble to understand each other a bit better, there is really not enough I think of Indians studying China, there is even less of Chinese studying India, we could eliminate the perception of danger and threat in this relationship. Because, in fact, the complementarities between our two countries are actually quite significant and there are a lot of things we could do together, which at the moment we are not doing enough of.

Question: I believe that even in the face of encouraging economic stability something that you cannot ignore in a country like India is the unstable political climate. You spoke about connecting 500 million Indians to their own country and bringing them to the forefront. But when you are talking

about this, what about a large chunk of our population in the North East that you are very conveniently ignoring under the guise of an act like AFSPA (The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act)? Are we not going to integrate them to our country? What is your comment?

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: I think your heart is in the right place, but I am not sure your facts totally justify your assumption that we are keeping them aside. I say this simply because I actually visited the North East quite recently; I really care about that part of world and I do believe that many of our policies are a little better than your question implies. I am not denying some of the concerns that you have reflected. There is no question that the progress that should have been made in terms of development has been held back by a number of factors, including, sadly, insurrections in those areas. But, we do have, for example, a very serious attempt underway to open up the parts of areas bordering our neighbours in the North East. In other words, opening up, for example, trade and road links all the way from the North East through Burma (Myanmar) into Thailand and Malaysia, rather than having a purely Delhi or Mumbai or Chennai centered view of trading links. This is a very conscious part of our North East policy; the government is putting money behind this; we now have actually engaged in cooperative ventures with our neighbours in that region in order to benefit both our population in the North East as well as open up the country's trading opportunities. So, I think you are being a little unfair in implying that we are simply ignoring or neglecting that area. As you know we even have a Minister for the North East, something which we don't have for any other regions of our country. So, for all of those reasons I would say that the picture is perhaps not as negative as your question suggests, but I would agree with you that a lot still needs to be done and that not enough has been done so far. Certainly there are students from the North East who come to Delhi to study; perhaps even in Mumbai, and who feel, to some degree, that they are treated as if they are foreigners rather than parts of our own cultural imagination. I think it is extremely important that all of us in India wake up

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to greater awareness of the North East and of our fellow citizens from there so that we can work together and live together and, equally, prosper together.

Question: Moving from North East to North West, what do you see happening in the next twelve months when President Obama says he is going to leave Afghanistan and this part of the world to its fate, what should India be doing to protect its own interests more actively than it is doing now?

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: I think we shouldn't be overly hasty in jumping to conclusions about the US intentions in Afghanistan, as you know the withdrawal was announced in Iraq but there are still American soldiers in Iraq, they are just configured and deployed differently. We have to see what exactly this withdrawal will boil down to. But we can certainly be reassured by repeated statements at all levels of the US Administration; President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and so on, who have all said that they have no desire to leave behind an Afghanistan in the hands of the Taliban. American public opinion is very much also in favour of some persistence there. I think many of you would have seen the article in today's newspaper, about the stunning, shocking, painful Time magazine cover this week of a Afghan woman with her nose cut off by the Taliban for going around without a veil on her face. The headline was something like "What will happen in Afghanistan if we leave?" That's the cover headline in the US edition of Time magazine. Public opinion is not necessarily in favour of just cutting their losses and running.

We obviously have a great stake in Afghanistan, it is a neighbouring country. We had a very distasteful experience when Afghanistan was ruled by the Taliban as pretty much a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Pakistani ISI for some years and clearly we have no desire to see a repetition of that. Equally we have had long historical and civilisational links with Afghanistan, apart from the famous connections to the Kabuliwallas and everyone else, it is a place where our historical imagination has long voyaged. That's why we have gone in very seriously with what is our largest single development

assistance programme in the world. We have spent 1.3 billion US Dollars and in fact are prepared to spend upto 2 billion. We have constructed an extraordinary road linking South West Afghanistan to Iran which will reduce the dependence of the people of that part of Afghanistan on links and road transport through Pakistan. We have been able to construct at three thousand meters height an electricity connection for Kabul, which frankly is not only an engineering marvel, but if today Kabul has twenty-four hours of electricity a day it is because of Indian engineers. We have renovated and restored girls' schools, we have built maternal and child welfare hospitals; we have done all of this. Today we are in the process of building the Afghan Parliament building. A symbol in many ways of our commitment to the kind of Afghanistan which will still remain pluralist, which will honour its own traditions, its own religious values and culture, but which shall not be a place of intolerance and medieval barbarism that briefly it had descended into. In that spirit we obviously would like to work with the rest of the international community. We know that military security cannot be our responsibility for all the obvious reasons. The Pakistanis next door will not stand for it. Frankly, the international community has not asked us and will not ask us, probably, to come in with military security. But this kind of development work we are able to do and we are doing it extremely well. So, we have a stake, we are showing our commitment to Afghanistan. We would like the rest of the international community to contribute to supporting the present Afghan State, which is, for all its flaws, a democracy. At the same time try and make it work in a way that people in Afghanistan have the right to lead decent lives without somebody coming in with a cleaver and knocking off a young girl's nose. That sort of transformation we are working for and I have no reason to believe right now that the US is about to abandon that worthy goal.

Question: As we look forward to a galloping world, what do you think we can do to resolve the energy crisis? It has seem to become a threat to international security with nuclear weaponry, countries like North Korea

and Iran with nuclear programmes that are not exactly out in the open.

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: As I said, we do need to pursue a multiplicity of energy sources. We clearly have to continue relying on our own domestic resources of coal as well as imported sources of petroleum and natural gas, there is still no escape from that. So part of our foreign policy is to cultivate relations with countries that possess these resources so that we can actually buy them from these countries. I know it sounds a bit crude, but that is what everybody has been doing, they have to do it, we have to do it too because our demand is going up. In addition to that we clearly can do a lot more to tap alternative sources of energy, that is why we have a ministry of alternative energy with Dr. Farooq Abdullah. Hydro electricity obviously with the rivers, particularly the ones coming down from the North, there again foreign policy comes in, because we can do a great deal in cooperation with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh together. Already right now with Bhutan, you know the tourism is no longer their largest single contributor to their GDP. What is? It is selling hydro-electricity to India. That is a simple example of the way in which we can use foreign policy for our own practical domestic benefit. We clearly need to develop our nuclear energy resources. As you know projections right now, those of you who heard last year's lecture by Dr. Kakodkar will tell you that we are not looking at much more than meeting about 7% of our energy needs in the next twenty years. The fact is my government has a very ambitious target, that in twenty-five years, after we came back to power last year, by 2034 we won't just increase our power generation, we will not even double it, we will go by seven times multiplication, a seven hundred percent increase in India's energy generation in the next twenty-five years is foreseen. That requires a tremendous opening up of space and opportunity. I certainly hope that some of the young people here will include someone who is a brilliant solar energy scientist who will find some way of making solar energy economical, right now it is not. That is one thing the God has given us in abundance along with brains, so let's put the two together and get some solar energy.

Question: My compliments to you on a brilliant expose on reshaping the world. I was just wondering if it is reshaping India what your views would be? I am mentioning this because you haven't touched upon Naxalism and the effect that it is going to have on our country. Just want to have your views on that.

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: The fact is that our domestic challenges are enormous. They really call for a totally different conceptual framework from what I was talking about. Since you mentioned Naxalism, I will talk about that specifically. I do believe that there are people in our society who feel disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded from the opportunities that, for example, are so readily seized upon by people in Mumbai. Now, whether these people are left out on a class basis as the Left would suggest, where they are left out on a geographical basis, whether they are being left out on the basis of ethnicity, the whole argument about the tribals being excluded, the fact is we have people in our country who feel excluded. Among the great challenges of our democracy is to include those who perceive themselves to be excluded and to ensure that through the process of inclusion our democracy gives them opportunities for their own betterment and their own self advancement. It is simple and obvious, but it is essential. In the case of the Maoist insurgency which is now affecting a 125 districts out of 625 districts in India (affecting in varying degrees, in some cases very seriously affected, in some cases we count the district because one police station was attacked or one mine was blown up on road or whatever.) In those situations we are looking at people who have decided that democracy doesn't offer them the means to seek this inclusion and this advancement and therefore they have concluded that taking up arms is their way to compensate for this perceived exclusion. That is obviously wrong, it is wrong at various levels, it is wrong theoretically, ideologically, constitutionally, it is also wrong practically, because taking up arms is only going to destroy, it is not going to create, they are not going to be able to create institutions that can actually deliver a sense of belonging and

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economic advancement to the people in whose name they claim to be acting. So, I do believe that in the short term we have to deal as our government is doing with this as first and foremost a law and order challenge. But I also agree that we must never lose sight of the fact that the reasons these people have been able to fish in troubled waters, have been able to recruit some of these young men and give them guns, is because of this perception of being left out of the developmental agenda. So we should make sure that development follows peace. But I don't think that there should be a serious debate about whether it should be law and order or development, which should come first. Development will not come as long as the areas where you want to develop are being infested by people with guns and bombs. Very simply, the government alone cannot develop India anymore. The challenge is that we need the private sector to come in. The private sector, all of you sitting here are not going to invest in a war zone. So clearly you need to bring peace to these areas and then invite you all with generous concessions, tax breaks or tax holidays, whatever, so that if you come and invest in these areas, if you give jobs in these areas we will treat you better than if you went into this in Mumbai or Chennai. It won't be easy, it will call for a certain amount of political flexibility and imagination. But without development there is a risk that you pacify an area and it becomes troubled again. So we do need to do both. I am afraid, right now, we have to solve the law and order challenge first. One general observation that I briefly alluded to in my remarks is that of course there is an integral link between violence, in many societies, not just our own, and lack of economic opportunity. Because the fertile recruiting ground for all manner of insurgent movements, terrorist movement and so on, is unemployed young men. It is as simple as that. Have a thriving economy in which people can be absorbed for employment purposes and you will no longer have to worry about terrorism, violence and Maoism.

Question: Because we followed a non-alignment policy for the first two and a half decades of our independence, we somehow developed a bureaucracy, a Foreign Service bureaucracy, (a) which never had a full appreciation of the economic reality of the country and (b) they also somehow kept themselves away from the domestic political realities of the country. I am not asking this question as part of the old IAS / IFS debate, honestly I believe that, excepting in the last five years, our foreign policy mandarins have not really taken interest in promoting India's domestic economic development goals through the foreign policy. Would you please comment on this?

Response from Dr. Shashi Tharoor: I think that has changed, perhaps if you had asked me this question two years ago I might have answered it differently. But I have now seen them at close quarters, I have actually for eleven months worked with many of these officers. Of course, I have also seen, in my service abroad, a large number of our missions. If that concern was real in the past, it has been overtaken, I am sure there may still be a few die-hards who see things in the very statist terms, but by and large many of our missions do see themselves as envoys of India's economic transformation. More and more Ambassadors are spending larger proportions of their time in promoting India's economic relations with other countries, in facilitating the visits of business corporations in foreign countries to our country. And I can tell you, for example, in my, I guess I can call it leadership of our Africa efforts, I had a tremendous network of Foreign Service staff who were completely committed with me to seeing Africa Policy having gone well beyond the days of rhetorical commitment to anti-colonialism, non-alignment and so on, seeing Africa policy as something directly linked to economic advancement in Africa and economic opportunities for Indian businesses. I think your perception is a little out-of-date. I do believe that there are lots of bright committed, aware Foreign Service Officers now, including some of the very senior levels who are now in positions of authority. Without disagreeing with you, there may be some contemporaries of Mr. Doshi or a few years behind him, who perhaps still

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had that perspective that you mentioned. I would say that they are being significantly out numbered by a new approach and a new ethos in our governmental system. You are seeing more politicians who think and talk like this to you.

Thank you very much.