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INTERVIEW



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“If you asked any Indian official to name our number one security threat, it would have to be terrorism”

CONVERSATION WITH SHASHI THAROOR

Last January 16th, 2010, CIDOB organised in Barcelona a new edition of its annual international conference War and Peace for the 21st Century, this year under the title of “A new Multilateralism for a Multipolar world”. One of the participants was Shashi Tharoor and Jordi Vaquer, Director of CIDOB, took the advantage of his presence the conference to ask him a few questions about different aspects of India’s emerging role in the international arena.

Shashi Tharoor is the current Minister of State for External Affairs of India, who served previously as the UN Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information, during the term of Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and is also a prolific author, columnist, journalist and human-rights advocate



Shashi Tharoor and Jordi Vaquer. Palau de Pedralbes, Barcelona.

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Jordi Vaquer: War and Peace in the 21st Century, the international seminar in which you took part, has been focusing in the last decade on global issues. Security has been at the centre of most debates, and we have witnessed how this word, Security, means very diverse things to different actors. What are the issues that India perceives as major threats to its own security?

Shashi Tharoor: We see two kinds of major threats in our own environment, and one of them is unfortunately the result of our own direct experience in the last 15 or 20 years: terrorism. This threat, in our case, has come from across the border, essentially inflicted by elements based in Pakistan. Initially, it seemed as an instrument of state policy, by people in Pakistan who wanted to use terrorism as a tool because of their inability to succeed through conventional warfare. This became the strategy of choice. Consequently a lot of our security energies have been directed towards counterterrorism and defence against terrorism. What happened in Mumbai on 26th November 2008 was the worst example of how bad this can be, and it was a deep shock to our security system.

On the other hand, we are not unconscious of the more general threats such as natural disasters, unexpected crises or even state failure. The environment is a major issue for us. Population movements that derive from these other kinds of threats are a great concern to India: we have had a lot of people crossing our borders from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka during recent troubles in those countries. Other issues, such as drug traffic, may not feature at the top of our agenda, but we cannot be indifferent to them. We could go on identifying other threat such as epidemic disease – there is no meaningful protection against viruses from other parts of the world without international coordination – and we are conscious of them all. But if you asked any Indian official to name our number one security threat, it would have to be terrorism.

JV: You mentioned the countries around India. Do you think cooperation in the South Asian region can solve these challenges, including fight against terrorism?

ST: We seek to have good neighbourly relations with all our partners of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, but relations with Pakistan are particularly difficult. We are in the absurd position that we have given most favoured nation trading stages to Pakistan in 1995 and they still have not reciprocated. It is the only example in the world of a one-sided most favoured nation arrangement, and that is a symptom of the unfortunate policy-making from Pakistan which has prevented closer regional integration. We are prisoners of our own geography; we cannot do that kind of regionalism without regional partners willing to cooperate. But increasingly all the others are anxious to move ahead and there is serious discussion of a South Asian free trade area agreement, possibly South Asian customs union, even a single currency one day. Therefore all it will take, it seems to me, is for Pakistan to come onboard; the rest of the group is ready to set sail.

JV: Consequently Pakistan is in itself the big question mark. Whether Pakistan goes in one direction or the other will have big impacts in global issues, such as the relationship between the West and Islam, but also on regional security in South Asia. How do you see this future evolution of Pakistan?

ST: With anxiety, but obviously also with the hope that they will be able to overcome their troubles; they have a number of internal problems, some of which sadly were of their own creation. There is the famous tale of Dr. Frankenstein, which teaches us that those who create monsters must not assume such monsters will always remain under their control. We do not feel any *schadenfreude* about this. It is a great misfortune that these destructive tendencies have been given such a free hand because, in our view, Pakistan's internal enemies are an expression of the same tendencies that have threatened our lives and wellbeing. We would hope that a responsible Pakistani State would want to join hands with India, rather than shielding or protecting evildoers that can be so detrimental. One cannot say 'we will only attack those who threaten us but we will neglect those who threaten India'. The distinction is unworkable, since this is an indivisible enemy. That's why we certainly trust that we can work together.

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Shashi Tharoor during the conference..

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JV: And do you think that the Pakistani democrats are strong enough to win in the end?

ST: At the moment, the Pakistani democrats are obviously the civilian government as well. In other words, the government is a civilian government elected by the people. At the same time we are aware that, in the entire history of Pakistan, no civilian government has been allowed to complete its term of office. The army has always been a very strong force, not only in the years when it ruled directly –the majority since Pakistan's independence. When it was not ruling directly, it still was a very considerable power behind. Clearly, in analysing Pakistan you cannot overlook the significance, the power and the authority of the army. Having said that, I think it is clear that it would be in the interest of all if the democratic and civilian forces were able to assert complete control and were able to focus on the challenges of their own country's development and the wellbeing of their own people, rather than facing military adventures.

JV: Going back to the major threat you mentioned, terrorism, which dragged the United States and its allies into Afghanistan. What are India's main hopes and fears about Afghanistan? What can India contribute to the situation?

ST: We are very concerned about Afghanistan. It is an significant neighbour for us and a country with which we have historically enjoyed a close and friendly relationship. We want to see the Afghan people succeed in their efforts to combat violence of all sorts and to develop in a normal way. Our contribution has been in form of development cooperation. Afghanistan receives our largest single development assistance programme anywhere in the world. We have already spent 1.2 billion US dollars in Afghanistan and we are probably the 3rd or 4th largest world donor for Afghanistan. We support very strongly Afghan people's right to determine their own political destiny, free of political pressure from armed elements, and we are working closely with the Afghan government in areas that they judge necessary.

We have done things that others have found very difficult to do, such as building roads, hospitals, clinics and schools. We even installed power transmission lines at 3,000 meters altitude and, as a result, and thanks to Indian engineers undertaking an extremely perilous task, for the 1st time since 1982 today Kabul enjoys 24 hours electricity a day. As a result of our efforts, little girls can go to school, Afghan men and women can go to a hospital and be treated and people have electricity in their homes to live a normal life. We even built a 208 kilometres highway right across southern Afghanistan. All this is a contribution to giving Afghans a chance to live a normal life, which they deserve by all means.

JV: Moving further west, Iran is also a security concern to many countries. Do you think the present Western approach to non proliferation has any chance to succeed?

ST: On this issue we have taken the view that, although Iran, like every country, has a sovereign right to peacefully develop nuclear energy, it certainly has an obligation as a signatory of the non-proliferation treaty to fulfil its solemn undertaking to the international community. Therefore, when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was concerned that Iran was concealing material information about its activities, India did not hesitate – not once but three times – to vote critically against Iran in the IAEA board of governors. We are not a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty because we consider it a discriminatory and flawed treaty, but we are not proliferators. We feel very strongly that the conduct of nuclear research and the development of nuclear facilities should be done in a very responsible manner. The adoption of nuclear weapons by many countries is certainly not desirable and we remain fundamentally committed to our traditional position in favour of universal nuclear disarmament. If all countries that possess nuclear weapons agreed jointly to give them up, we would be amongst them. But we simply cannot accept an arrangement under which only a few countries have something that others cannot have. That was called Apartheid in South Africa, we resisted it there, and we will resist it in the nuclear world as well.

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JV: India's voice is increasingly heard on security issues, but also in many other issues in the international scene. The current crisis has been heralded as a turning point in the redistribution of power currently happening on a world scale. How did India take this global economic crisis? Has it been a symptom of something that was already happening, or has it really been a turning point?

ST: Obviously we are very concerned about the global economic crisis, particularly since we have become a much globalised economy by our standards – we were quite protectionist for many decades. Yet, the global economic crisis did not hit us as much as it did to other countries, for the reason that we are still not an export dependent economy. The bulk of our GDP consists of Indians producing goods and services for other Indians, and that was able to continue. But, obviously, we feel, in an interdependent world, that the well-being of one is the well-being of all and we do not want to see Europe, the US and other countries suffer in the global economic crisis.

Clearly some errors were made, and those are mistakes we did not make in our own country since we took a more responsible approach to our financial regulation. We did not have toxic assets, credit default swaps or bundled mortgages, thus our banks and our financial system were not exposed to the virus that swept through Western markets. That taught us that, in some ways, the West does not have all the answers. We are aware that, in this particular occasion, serious mistakes were made in the West that affected other people who also paid the price around the world.

JV: Even before the global crisis, India was already challenging parts of the global economic governance in issues such as the voting weighting system at the IMF. Now we are witnessing some new structures consolidate, such as the G-20, and there is talk of reforming the existing bodies. Which should be the priorities in reforming global economic governance?

ST: Things have started to change. Already at the G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, in September 2009, a decision was made to transfer some of the voting rights in the IMF to developing countries. Things did not go as far as we would have liked – frankly, we would have liked double of what was achieved – but it is a beginning. We still think it does not make sense that, for example, Belgium should have the same voting weight as China, which is today, *de facto*, the second largest economy in the World. We strongly feel there should be a re-equilibration of the financial and economic governing structures and we are prepared to use our voice in that direction. We want India to be heard, but also China and others such as Brazil or South Africa. There are many developing countries which have made significant economic strides in the last few decades that are simply not reflected in an institutional architecture which was fixed in 1945.

It does not make sense that Belgium should have the same voting weight at the IMF than China, *de facto* the world's second economy

JV: One of the strengths of these new emerging economies is that they offer alternative models of growth and development, and obviously the Indian model is unique. India's spectacular growth is more connected to knowledge economy than to cheap labour. What are the keys to India's economic success?

ST: In fact, growth in India is not driven principally by cheap labour. China's growth is, but China is overwhelmingly a manufacturing success story and their exports are of manufactures. Cheap labour is a fundamental component of their cost. In our case, quality is as important as labour because, if quality was not there, you could get cheaper labour elsewhere. For example, companies that came and looked at the possibility of manufacturing computer chips, thinking that the high technology bits would be better made in India, discovered that labour was so much cheaper in Vietnam that it was better for them to go and train a few Vietnamese to do what Indians were doing than to manufacture in India. Therefore, labour costs are only a small aspect of our success story.

Our success is due to having a critical mass of highly trained engineers and scientists while, at the same time, we are very well connected: the effort in wiring and cabling of the 1990s was an asset to us. In the last decade and a half we also enjoyed one advantage (which will be less and less of an advantage with the passage of time): our English language capacity. It has contributed to our success since a lot of the demand has been driven from English speaking countries like the US.

The significant point that you made is totally correct: we are a much more knowledge and services oriented system as we rely on research and development. We are doubling our budget allocation and resources from 1% to 2% of the GDP just for research and development, and we want to be undertaking increasingly sophisticated work. Now we are amused and pleased to see very sophisticated aircraft manufacturers from the West coming to get some very complicated avionics for their wings, developed in India, because they require the temperament, the skills, the computer technology as well as the engineering ability, to do this. Our success lies on high end, high

value products, not manufacturing cheap toys or low-cost shirts, areas in which we are easily overtaken by others. Even the Chinese are selling toys in India!

JV: Another characteristic that makes India unique is that it has been so successful in keeping a vibrant democracy in place despite all the problems in development and the vast diversity of the country. Seen from Europe, though, this aspect does not seem to play a major role in Indian foreign policy in terms of portraying itself as a democratic country or trying to encourage democracy elsewhere.

ST: There are two different issues here. In terms of portraying ourselves as a democracy, we are not at all embarrassed to do so. On the contrary, we are proud of it! Our system is what it is and we are not reluctant to say that, for 62 years, we have marked and stamped the experience of democracy and we have in fact been quite open about our commitment to our system of government. That is not an issue.

But the question of promoting democracy elsewhere, that is a separate issue, and there India has been a little more modest. We have not been absent from this effort. We are a member of the conference on democracies and, at least until very recently, we were the largest donor alongside the USA for the United Nations Democracy Fund, which is transferring funds to developing countries and countries in transition to democratise. Consequently, we are not at all absent from that task. But, by and large, we reckon our system is best shown as an example to the world by doing it better for ourselves rather than becoming missionaries for our values to other countries. We feel that countries, particularly developing countries, do not appreciate being told by other countries what to do. They only recently won their sovereignty, and it is important for them to preserve their independence of thought and action. For that reason, we in India have tended to be a little modest about preaching to others. We want to run a system that is democratic and we are not pretending we are perfect. We are improving everyday in our own country, every time we have an election. It is a world record for the largest single exercise in democratic franchising anywhere on the globe each time, and it continues! We had 714 million registered voters in this year's election; the next one will be even larger, because we have so many more voters coming of age.

We believe that, if others watch what we are doing, they will see there is an example here not only of democracy as such but also democracy as an instrument for the management of diversity. We are an extremely diverse country: religions, class, creed, ethnicities, languages, all sorts of differences. And we have been able to keep everybody together through the process of determining their own destiny by democracy. For example, our 2004 election was won by a political party led by a Roman Catholic woman of Italian descent who then made way for a Sikh to be sworn in as Prime Minister by a Muslim president in a country which is 81% Hindu. Now, which example in the world can show up the strengths of democracy in managing diversity better than that?

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JV: 'United in diversity' is precisely the motto of the European Union. How do you see the role the European Union is playing in re-shaping global governance?

ST: I think the European Union has actually been exemplary in terms of its support of multi-lateralism. In my UN experience, I acknowledged that Europe was a very constructive voice for multi-lateral engagement on a host of issues. And, of course Europe, particularly in the good days, was also generous in backing its support with financial and particularly development assistance. So I am not one of those as critical of the European Union. I think that Europe truly has been doing well in the world stage. Obviously, the European experiment is still a work in progress. As a political entity, Europe still has multiple voices and multiple opinions, and that also means that very often countries deal with individual European countries on political issues and international politics more than with the European Union as a whole. I do not have the impression that the recent changes in Europe are going to transform that reality very quickly. But I would not be critical of either the European Union as a community or as individual European countries; because I do believe that they have stood for democratic principles in the world and for the use of multi-lateral procedures and multi-lateral processes in a multi-polar global system. And that is something we are well disposed towards.

JV: If this has been Europe's contribution, what have been India's main contributions, and what are the priority areas where you think you should be leading?

ST: We have contributed to a multilateral world system throughout our independent history. For example, we have been the leading peacekeeping country in the world, even at the risk of the lives of our soldiers in countries far away from any direct national interest. We have been a fairly significant voice for a more equitable world order in trade talks, financial issues and other economic matters. We have tried to be constructive in the multilateral system on specific problems on the political side. For instance, we were the first country to raise the issue of Apartheid and racial discrimination in South Africa, where we fought hard until its population succeeded in changing the regime. Also on the political side, another major Indian effort was the promotion of decolonisation throughout the first decades of the UN.

Nowadays we are never absent from the negotiation table. Whether it is environmental issues, urbanisation, human settlements, all sorts of topics, you will find that India has consistently attempted to cooperate with the rest of the world system. India's record as a multi-lateral player speaks for itself sufficiently that we would be in a position to continue playing such a role with enhanced responsibility in a reformed United Nations and a reformed global government structure.

JV: One last question: would that mean a permanent seat at the UN Security Council?

ST: We think that is what India, and not only India, deserves. After all, the Security Council reflects the geopolitical realities of 65 years ago. This means that five countries have permanent seats on the Security Council because they happened to win a war 65 years ago. That kind of logic does not make much sense in today's world. We need new thinking and it can come from countries like India, but also from others. We have been cooperating with Germany, Japan, Brazil and now increasingly with South Africa in challenging this situation. Other countries are also making a substantial contribution that needs to be recognised.