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Press Release

Lecture by Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs of India on " Broad Canvas of Indian Diplomacy during the Pandemic"

I thank the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and its Director-General, Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan for organizing this interaction on the 'Broad Canvas of Indian Diplomacy during the Pandemic'. I am happy to note that we are joined today by panellists from renowned Universities and institutions from different parts of the country.

2. It is a great privilege for me to speak today at the ICWA. A nation is known by its institutions. Institutions represent our aspirations and also our realities. The ICWA, one of the premier think tanks in our country and region, is something that all of us can take some legitimate pride in. Its roots go back to the years before Independence. That India would have a role in world affairs would have been little more than an aspiration at that time. We were still a colony. India's Independence, the trauma of Partition, and the struggles of emerging nationhood were in the future. India has come a long way since then. Our journey has been difficult and many more challenges lie ahead. There is, however, much to be proud of. We are a country with a track record of resilience, achievement, and constant endeavour. We remain an aspirational country. We remain a country that wants to make a difference. We remain a country that will not be daunted by the challenges before us.

3. We meet in very difficult times. 2020 has been a challenging year. We are living through the greatest shock to the international system since the Second World War. The current situation began as a health event, comparable or more severe to the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918. It expanded into an economic disruption, a geopolitical shock, and a social challenge of a magnitude that none of us have experienced in our memories. Over 800,000 lives have been lost. Countless livelihoods have been lost.

4. You are all also aware of developments on our Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. This is one of the most serious challenges facing us in recent years with casualties on this border after over 40 years. We are engaged with China both through the military and diplomatic channels on this and remain firmly committed to resolving all outstanding issues through dialogue. We can come back to this during the interaction.

5. COVID-19 has presented us with extraordinary challenges. Every facet of our national life is affected by the complexities and difficulties of the situation. Indian diplomacy and our external policies are no exception.

6. How we deal with these immense difficulties – and whether we are able to transform some of them into opportunities – will influence our future trajectory as a nation.

7. The pandemic and the lock-downs that it produced have made us take a closer look at some of the fundamental drivers of globalization. We have also been forced to think about other impulses that have shaped or underlie the current global political and economic order. It has focused our thoughts.

8. Our thinking on how we approach our relationship with the international community was articulated by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in his interventions in recent virtual NAM and G20 summits. The Prime Minister pointed out that the pandemic had demonstrated the deficiencies and the limitations of the existing international system. A narrowly economic agenda has defined globalization so far. We had cooperated amongst ourselves with the motive of balancing competing individual interests, rather than to advance the collective interests of all humankind. The Prime Minister called for a people-centric approach to globalization and international cooperation.

9. India has long been a constructive actor in the shaping of a people-centric international order. We have shared our developmental experience with partner countries in the Global South. We have undertaken humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations beyond our immediate neighbourhood, in countries as geographically diverse as Indonesia, Yemen, Iraq, and Mozambique. We have assisted a number of our friends and partners during the current pandemic. We have catalysed the emergence of international organizations with constructive, forward-facing agendas such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

10. Our efforts to shape global thinking and project our perspectives have continued through the pandemic. Apart from the G20 and Non-Aligned Movement virtual summits, the Prime Minister also took an early initiative in convening a virtual meeting of South Asian leaders. He held his first bilateral virtual summit with the Australian Prime Minister. This was followed by an India-EU Summit. He addressed a High-Level Segment of UN ECOSOC, virtually addressed the Global Vaccine Summit, and digitally inaugurated the new Supreme Court building in Mauritius jointly with the Prime Minister of Mauritius. All of this is over and above 64 conversations the Prime Minister has had with his counterparts from different countries over phone and video.

11. India’s counsel, its experience and perspectives, and the Prime Minister’s personal statesmanship have found appreciation and resonance in bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral platforms.

12. The External Affairs Minister has, during the pandemic, spoken with around 80 of his counterparts. He has digitally attended BRICS, SCO, and RIC Ministerials and a joint meeting with his counterparts from the US, Australia, Japan, Brazil, and South Korea.

13. I have spoken and consulted regularly with my colleagues and counterparts in other Foreign Offices and continue to do so.

14. It would therefore be fair to say that we have been at the forefront of digital diplomacy. We have been agile and versatile in our efforts to generate and maintain diplomatic momentum.

15. India is a country with global interests. Our economy, and therefore our material wellbeing, is plugged into global supply chains. We view the world as a borderless economy with an interlinked marketplace.

16. This global spread of interests and stakes makes us vulnerable on many fronts. Paradoxically, it also opens our eyes to opportunities. Empirically speaking, all crises are succeeded by periods of growth. The Great Depression and the Second World War were followed by a period of secular and sustained economic growth. All four major recessions in the post-World War II era were followed by a similar trend. We have witnessed transformational changes in medical science and public health after major health crises.

17. This crisis too will create opportunities and we would like to be in a position to benefit from them. One of our priorities is to make India, in the words of Prime Minister, the "nerve centre of global supply chains". This is also in line with his vision of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'. The Ministry of External Affairs is actively engaged with the other concerned Ministries in promoting India as an alternative manufacturing hub and an innovation destination. Our network of diplomatic missions and posts, in consultation with various stakeholders, is identifying export and investment opportunities for our businesses in various countries. We have reached out to and are in touch with global business entities that seek to diversify their manufacturing locations.

18. A preliminary assessment indicates that in the short term we can enhance our global presence in sectors where we have been traditionally strong such as textiles and apparels, pharmaceutical, gems and jewellery, chemicals, etc.. We can increase production in these sectors to cater to both local and global demand. In the medium and long term, we must move up the value chain in sectors such as electronics, pharma, engineering, design outsourcing, and so on. Eventually, our aim should be high value-added activities. We also need to work on the development of cutting edge technologies and intellectual property across industries.

19. There are areas that have seen growth even through this pandemic. The digital space is one such. You would have noted the large investments by global technology majors – US$ 10 billion by Google, US $5 billion by Facebook, and USD 1.2 billion by Mubadala, the UAE Sovereign Wealth Fund– in India. We have strong credentials in this area. The JAM trinity - Jan Dhan, Adhaar, and Mobile – pioneered by this government has set the stage for a fintech revolution. Prime Minister had earlier launched a global digital platform, APIX, to connect Fintech companies and financial institutions. We are also working with several countries on making our digital payment systems interoperable. Our payment systems, such as the RuPay card, have already been launched in Singapore, Bhutan, the UAE, and Bahrain.

20. It would be important to highlight the importance of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan in a forum such as this. I have earlier stated my views on this Abhiyaan and on Atmanirbharata and I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate some of its salient features.

Aatmanirbharta is not seeking self-centred arrangements. Its essential aim is to ensure India's position as a key participant in global supply chains. Through building capacities at home, we can also contribute to mitigating disruptions in global markets. It is important to identify products and commodities where India has the ability or potential to expand domestic production and enhance global availability. There is no contradiction between an India that is building its own economic capacities, and an India that is looking to play a bigger role in global business, trade, and innovation.

Ladies and Gentlemen

21. India has always believed that it is a part of a larger community of nations. We realize, in the spirit of "Vasudaiva Kutumbakam", that our well-being is intrinsically linked to the collective well-being. We also believe in the principle of "Nishkama Karma", that good needs to be done for its own sake.

22. We put these teachings into practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. India's role as a "pharmacy of the world" has come into focus during this crisis. We have a world-class pharmaceutical industry that is the producer of choice for critical medications with brand recognition in all geographies and markets. The pandemic produced an explosion in demand for drugs such as Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and Paracetamol produced in India.

23. In a coordinated response involving several branches of government and multiple private sector pharma companies, India was able to supply, after ensuring adequate domestic stockpiles, large volumes of these drugs to friends and consumers across the world. In the face of daunting logistical challenges imposed by the lockdown, Indian drugs, and medical supplies reached more than 150 countries.

24. Mission Sagar, Operation Sanjeevani, the deployment of medical Rapid Response Teams for COVID assistance in several countries, the linking of health professionals, and the pooling of health capacities are not just independent and isolated facts but represent our central beliefs and aspirations. They reflect the Prime Minister's vision of putting people at the centre of our efforts for global cooperation. In line with this vision, India went out of its way to positively contribute to global health security in the midst of the pandemic. We took a far-sighted view to be a responsible actor on the global stage in these very difficult circumstances. This has elevated India's international standing and will continue to stand us in good stead in the post-pandemic world.

25. The novel coronavirus outbreak has come as a major geopolitical shock and will have a long term impact on world politics. We are likely to see changes in hard and soft power balances; the emergence of new multilateral conversations and changes in the relative strength of stakeholders in these conversations; and greater dispersal of power, resources, and capacity across the world.

26. India's choices, challenges, and opportunities in this new global environment will also be affected.

27. Some things, however, will not change. The fundamental orientation of our policy remains Neighbourhood First. We have demonstrated the priority accorded to our neighbours in South Asia at the highest levels. This was also evident during the current crisis when the Prime

Minister's first regional/global engagement on COVID-19 was with the leaders of South Asia. I may point out that my first visit after the pandemic was to our neighbour and close friend Bangladesh.

28. Another important pillar of our foreign policy is Act East through which we have given a renewed push to enhancing ties with the ASEAN countries. We have a growing dialogue with these countries through multiple channels. The External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, at a recent meeting of Indian and ASEAN think tanks, said that "ASEAN is one of the crossroads of the global economy. India is the fifth-largest economy in the world. We are not only proximate to each other but together help shape Asia and the world. It is important that at this juncture, we put our heads together."

29. We have strengthened our partnerships in the Indian Ocean region under the Prime Minister's vision of 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' or SAGAR.

30. In the past five years, Think West – our outreach to the Gulf and West Asian countries – has become an increasingly important pillar of our foreign policy. In the pandemic period, our partners in the Gulf and West Asia have cooperated with us unstintingly, to mutual benefit, and with the enhancement of mutual trust. Our engagement with Africa has also intensified as never before with over 30 visits to African countries at the level of the President, Vice President, and Prime Minister. Over two-thirds of India's Lines of Credit in the past decade have been offered to African countries.

31. We have also increasingly taken on the role of the net security provider in our neighbourhood and beyond. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated our willingness and capabilities to support our friends and partners in this difficult period, especially when capacity of several countries to deal with the pandemic has been constrained.

32. Our commitment and our engagement with our key bilateral partners continues. I have already mentioned the India-EU virtual summit. I have also referred to the operational tempo, through digital means, of our diplomacy during the pandemic. These include multiple meetings at multiple levels with our key partners across the world. I will not read out the list of such conversations but a perusal will convey a broad idea of our important diplomatic accounts.

33. We see a lot of opportunities in our immediate neighbourhood. There are also challenges. We will work appropriately to resolve these. It must be noted, however, that our capacities and resources are growing and we will always be prepared to adopt the necessary strategies and tactics as required.

34. I have earlier mentioned the Prime Minister's participation in G20, NAM and UN meetings. I have also referred to the EAM's participation in the BRICS, SCO and RIC meetings. We are committed multilateralists and our engagement with multilateral and plurilateral systems is growing.

35. I would like, at this point, to again quote the Prime Minister. Speaking at the high level segment of UN ECOSOC he said, "India firmly believes that the path to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity is through multilateralism. As children of planet Earth, we must join hands to address our common challenges and achieve our common goals. However,

multilateralism needs to represent the reality of the contemporary world. Only reformed multilateralism, with a reformed United Nations at its centre, can meet the aspirations of humanity."

36. We have a challenging and busy agenda in the coming years. On our 75th anniversary, India will be a member of the UN Security Council and the President of the G20. In the next two years, we will hold the presidencies of the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. All this is recognition of our enhanced global standing and also provides opportunities for us to convey our perceptions, our expectations and our priorities – not just for ourselves but for our shared world.

37. We deploy large amounts of resources through development partnerships with our friends. This is a practical demonstration of our goodwill and our capacities and of our belief in the principle of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas". Development partnership is a work in progress and we are taking a close look at how we can calibrate partnerships and meet the needs of our friends as per their priorities and preferred roadmaps. Our focus will continue to be on executing viable projects and on strengthening capacities in local communities.

38. Terrorism remains a growing and resistant threat with radical ideologies continuing to generate violence and insecurity. As a country that has suffered for long from cross-border terrorism, we have been steadfast in seeking action against terrorists and their sponsors. While our efforts in this regard have found increased global support, we need to ensure the world follows an undifferentiated and unambiguous approach to terrorism. The politicization of global mechanisms such as UN listings needs to be avoided. We need to ensure that the global community finalizes the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

39. We also have to deal with non-traditional security challenges such as bio-threats and the requirements of safe and reliable cyber commons.

40. We were reminded in the midst of the crisis of the vital role that our diplomatic missions and posts abroad play, in a sense, as first responders to Indians abroad. As a Ministry, we remain committed to providing timely, effective, and efficient public services, and being responsive to the needs of our citizens abroad.

41. In this context, I would like to end by drawing your attention to the Vande Bharat Mission. More than 1.2 million Indians have returned to India during the pandemic through land, sea, and air. This is the largest such exercise undertaken by the government involving multiple stakeholders, multiple phases, multiple transportation networks, and multiple destinations and points of origin. We continue to work hard to ensure that no one gets left behind.

42. If I had to leave you with a concluding thought, it would be with a quote from Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. He prayed not to be sheltered from danger but to be without fear in facing it. Those words are so appropriate today. These are not normal times. We did not choose to be here. But now that we are, we will do our best to adapt and advance.

Thank you.