Infrastructure, Energy, Connectivity: Agenda for India’s Economic Diplomacy

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Prologue

The discovery of the planet through the ages was largely driven by trade and economic reasons. In India, diplomacy took on a new meaning around three decades ago when commerce, economics and trade were given renewed emphasis. The Author acquired considerable experience, while in the Foreign Service, during his various assignments abroad.

He highlights the new challenges in diplomacy, particularly in infrastructure development, energy security, connectivity and trade & commerce. He suggests that there should be closer synergy between the various arms of the government (including the MEA), closer interaction between our Ambassadors/Diplomats with CEOs of the PSUs and more exposure to indigenous R&D efforts. In fact, not only the young diplomats but the middle and senior diplomats too should be ‘trained’ in economic diplomacy.

By all accounts, in view of the double digit growth forecasts for India, this would certainly be necessary and most timely.

- Editor

Introduction

Traditionally, diplomacy deals with big issues such as war and peace, it being essentially the art of negotiation through which diplomats strive to avert the former and safeguard and promote the latter. The role of diplomacy has, however, undergone a major transformation in recent times. As governments around the world began to focus on development as the key goal of governance, their instruments, including the civil service and the diplomatic service, were called upon to re-orient themselves. Diplomats still handle issues of war and peace and many other political issues, but they now need to devote much more time, energy and intellectual resources to the over-arching goal of identifying and pursuing a country’s economic interests with a view to securing its overall socio-economic development. This applies to diplomats of the developed world, but even more so to diplomats of developing countries. India has undoubtedly been a leader in executing this re-orientation of its diplomacy. The question is: are we changing fast enough and in a sufficiently effective manner or do we need to pause, review and improve our performance as a nation in this particular domain?
In this dissertation, it will be the endeavour to examine and answer the above question. It may be apt to recall one’s own experience of a thirty seven year long career in the Indian Foreign Service in order to illustrate the nature and scope of the above-mentioned re-orientation. One shall then proceed to analyze how infrastructure development, energy security, and ‘connectivity’ in the broader sense of the term have become principal priorities for our foreign policy as well as diplomatic discourse and action. Some useful details pertaining to the issues under discussion in respect of specific regions such as our neighbourhood and extended neighbourhood will be factored in. The article will draw some conclusions which may trigger further debate and hopefully even appropriate action in future.

A Diplomatic Journey

After completing two years of training in India, the author left for Paris in 1974; full of enthusiasm but with very little diplomatic experience. In those days, the most coveted portfolio in an Embassy was political work, with cultural, commercial and consular work being considered as less attractive. One got a taste of it all in small helpings in a phased manner. In those days very few Missions – only those located in Western capitals – did ‘economic’ work, mainly comprising efforts to secure grants, concessional loans and food aid. Many more Missions did ‘commercial’ work which essentially involved promotion of our exports.

During 1970s, the Foreign Service showed limited time and flair for commercial work, with the result that there was a serious move to set up a separate Commercial Service to be manned by Administrative Service officers. It was a serious wake-up call which was not ignored by the Ministry. After spending a few years at another station, and then in Delhi, the author was accredited to the European Community (EC) in Brussels where most of the next three years were spent in managing a structured and comprehensive programme of trade and investment promotion in the EC region. This was a valuable education and exposure about the needs and challenges faced by India Inc. during the Eighties.

After a few years in Jakarta and in Delhi again, the author was in Toronto as the Consul General in the mid-1990s. This was the exciting period when India’s economic reforms, launched in 1991, began to show results. The world, including Canada Inc. was watching. One was engaged almost full-time in projecting the achievements and needs of the Indian economy, exploring new markets, attracting fresh investment and technology transfers for our companies. In this task, the business segment of the Indian Diaspora, especially the Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce, became an extremely helpful partner for the Consulate. Above all, the CG & the consuls found an enjoyable and productive task for themselves, i.e., of speaking regularly at Business Chambers, Banks, Universities and Think Tanks in a sincere drive to convince critics and skeptics that India was now decidedly on the path of speedy development. Gradually but surely, our argument that the strategy of reforms
and liberalization was anchored in broad national consensus and that, India would not turn back in spite of frequent change of governments, began to bring down the walls of doubt and misgiving.

In the author’s first assignment as the Head of Mission (HOM), Kenya provided an amazing opportunity to focus on the economic dimension of diplomacy. There was a perfect match between India’s capabilities and Kenya’s needs. The Indian community in Kenya was an influential driver of the Kenyan economy. The country’s Ministers of Finance, Commerce, Industry and Foreign affairs were all agreed on according a high priority to expanding economic relations with India. Their goodwill and influence were leveraged to push forward a balanced and mutually beneficial agenda of economic cooperation. The HOM, Kenya also served as India’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN-Habitat where broader interests and issues pertaining to environment and urban development were covered in depth. The concept of sustainable development i.e. ensuring economic progress of developing countries without jeopardizing the planet’s environmental resources became our mantra as India fought off many endeavours by representatives of the developed world to impose restrictions on, and obstructions to, the growth path chosen by our countries.

As the Ambassador to Myanmar from 2002-05, one had the opportunity to become deeply interested and involved in infrastructure development as a means to expand and diversify bilateral cooperation with a neighbour of strategic importance. Attempts by RITES to upgrade and improve the railway system and border roads as well as to initiate feasibility studies for Kaladan Multi-modal transport project; by TCIL to prepare and execute a project on telecom connectivity between the two countries; and by OVL, GAIL, IOC and Essar to secure more and more assets in the hydrocarbon sector: they all combined to represent a well-crafted and purposeful drive by India in the field of new economic diplomacy. Later, as Ambassador to Mexico, the author studied the oil industry, road networks, civil aviation and maritime links that had connected the country to United States and Canada, thus turning North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) into a living reality.

Finally, as High Commissioner to South Africa, one ended up devoting nearly 75% of one’s working time to economic work. Some of the highlights were: supervising a high-wattage trade and investment promotion; looking for coal, diamonds, uranium and other strategic minerals for Indian companies; sustaining interest in India of technology and services sector leaders such as Sasol and Airports Company South Africa (ACSA); forging closer linkages involving RITES and IRCON on the one hand and South Africa’s Transnet and its affiliates on the other; and initiating dialogue between companies of the two countries in the oil and gas sector.

The short point is that these personal experiences, which form part of a broader pattern and are shared widely by ones colleagues who worked along similar
lines in other regions of the world, demonstrate how significantly the diplomatic service has changed from what it did between 1950s and 1970s. The first oil crisis sharpened our awareness of the economic dimension of foreign policy. The end of the Cold War and our embarking on the path of economic reforms were the two principal triggers for this change or the re-orientation, as I termed it earlier.

Speaking at the annual conference of HOMs in Delhi in August 2009, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh highlighted the strong linkage between development and diplomacy. Full potential of economic diplomacy would have to be exploited for poverty alleviation in particular and progress and prosperity in general. He drove home the point that India’s commitment to inclusive development, in a fast changing, globalized economic environment, required its diplomats at all levels to play a pro-active role in helping India to move speedily into the 21st century.

**New Challenges**

In identifying and analyzing new challenges for economic diplomacy, it is planned to go beyond the conventional definition encompassing varied tasks such as monitoring and reporting on the economic situation of the country of one’s accreditation, projecting India as a major emerging economic power, promoting trade and investment, facilitating joint ventures and technology transfers and conducting negotiations for bilateral, regional and multilateral trade agreements at the global level.

In this context, reference needs to be made to at least three sub-themes i.e. infrastructure development, energy security, and connectivity.

**Infrastructure**

Defense experts, engineers, finance and management *gurus* use the word ‘infrastructure’ to convey different connotations, but consensus exists among them as to what it means. Essentially it refers to ‘the basic physical and organizational structures needed for the operation of a society or enterprise, or the services and facilities necessary for an economy to function.’ In simpler language, infrastructure stands for roads, railway tracks, power grids, telecommunication links, ports and airports - the essential facilities that make a society or an economy function. Most experts would also agree on a broad list of categories of infrastructure. They are: transportation, energy, water management, communications, waste management, and earth monitoring and measurement networks.

The state of a country’s infrastructure is a key determinant in concluding whether it is a developed or developing economy. The moment we think of Germany, France, US and Canada, we remember the superb network of their highways as well as regional and local roads, their airports of international standards, their railway systems that are continuously upgraded. The scene in the developing world is quite different, but there are several exceptions such as Malaysia, Mexico and South Africa.
and the Gulf countries and parts of Latin America. Driving on the highway that connects Johannesburg to Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, one always experienced the same level of comfort and joy that a drive anywhere in Europe or North America would provide.

How should we evaluate the situation in India? Let us take the roads first. Roads in King Asoka’s reign must have been quite good, judging by his success in spreading his rule and Buddhist teachings to much of the country. We all are aware of Emperor Akbar’s contribution to modernizing the road system in India. But, later we missed on the Industrial Revolution and were also exploited by colonialism, although we owe a debt of gratitude to the Raj for introducing a modern railway system in India. After Independence, we tried but failed to accord adequate priority to our roads. This weakness has finally begun to be addressed in the past decade or so, but despite our recent successes such as the Golden Quadrilateral, North-South and East-West Corridors, we still have a long, long way to go. When roads are in such poor condition even in the country’s capital (except in Lutyen’s Delhi), it is easy to imagine the state in the interior of the country.

Similarly, Indian Railways have several achievements to their credit - new trains, increased haulage capacity, and ‘the Shatabdi Revolution’, but their weaknesses too stare right in our face. Those who may have visited New Delhi railway station recently can hardly forget the scenes of overcrowded platforms, inadequate seating space and other facilities for passengers.

As regards the civil aviation sector, renovation and expansion of airports in Delhi and Mumbai, construction of brand new airports in Hyderabad and Bangalore and generally our ‘open skies’ policy would be regarded as notable recent achievements. However, much work remains to be done in respect of a host of other airports in the country. As a well-known expert put it, the performance of physical infrastructure in Indian economy in last one and half decades has been “mixed and uneven.”

No analysis of the changing scene relating to infrastructure would be complete without factoring in the financial dimension. The Planning Commission had estimated that for India to secure and sustain a high growth rate, the requirement for infrastructure investment during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2011) was US$492.5 billion. The Government, thereby, planned to increase the contribution of infrastructure to GDP from 4.7% to 7.5-8% in the 11th Five Year Plan. It was envisaged that the required investment would have to come from Government, private sector, and Public-Private Partnership (PPP).

In theory, the gap between needs and actual generation of funds might perhaps be quite substantial. As to the actual achievements of targets, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation reported, through its appraisal for the period April 2009 - March 2010 that several sectors such as highways, shipping, ports, amongst
others had failed to meet the targets. For example, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) widened or upgraded 2674 km of highways in 12 months, about 15% lower than the target of 3165 km. It spent money which was about 39% lower than its target expenditure. Other sectors seem to reveal similar trends.

Knowledgeable observers argue that for infrastructure development in India, finance, in the post-reform period, has not been the main constraint. The real constraints are present elsewhere – difficulties in land acquisition, complex and slow-moving legal processes, poor productivity in construction, inadequate maintenance and, above all, the nexus involving the politician, the bureaucrat, the contractor and others that leads to corruption of unacceptable magnitude. Without addressing these constraints effectively, is it possible for India to transform its infrastructure scene fully?

Where and how do our diplomatic Missions come into this picture? One would like to offer a threefold response.

Firstly, our Missions located in capitals of the developed world need to step up their endeavours to attract investment for infrastructure development in India, not only from governments but increasingly from the private sector. It is their responsibility to persuade leading infrastructure companies to come, invest and stay in India, despite the existing constraints. Secondly, our Missions, especially in middle-sized economies which have performed better than India in infrastructure, need to look for new equipment, technologies and services that will help India to secure better results at competitive prices. Every time I travelled around in South Africa and Mexico, I saw huge, new and largely automated machines being used to build and repair roads. One hardly sees them in Delhi even as we are now into the final phase of preparations for the Commonwealth Games. Thirdly, they could help the country by keeping a close tab on infrastructure development - the actual scene, the emerging thinking about management, financial and technical aspects and best global practices, and to send in-depth reports to Government and other relevant agencies. Such efforts by our diplomats, especially if backed by our civil society, will certainly help the cause.

The role of civil society, in the above context, should be to raise public awareness on a fundamental issue: that we Indians want world-class infrastructure for India, in the whole of India, and that we want it now. Our favourite *chalta hai* stance will have to be jettisoned for good. Sharp increase in awareness of this kind, backed by vigilant public opinion and purposeful pro-activism that must follow it, is bound to create sufficient pressure on the Government to move faster in the direction of giving modern infrastructure to the country which it rightly deserves.

**Energy Security**

Another major challenge is to strive for long-term energy security for India, which is fired by the vision of 9-10% GDP growth rate in the next two decades or more. Clearly, this question is imbued with both internal and external ramifications,
with a direct bearing on the country’s diplomacy that is increasingly viewed as an instrument of shaping as well as implementing economic policy. Consequently, MEA stays in constant dialogue and interaction with key stakeholders at home and with relevant players abroad through its Missions. It is in this backdrop that it has set up a new Energy Security Division, with the aim to help the country achieve energy security.

The central point is that India is an energy-deficit country; the speedy growth path of its economy demands more, not fewer, resources; and the inclusive model of development entails taking energy to a vast magnitude of people who still live without modern forms of clean energy. Hence a comprehensive approach, focused on increase in production at home as well as in imports from and acquisitions abroad; on a multi-sectoral perspective that covers not only coal, oil and gas but also renewable and non-conventional energy; and on enhancing efficiency and conservation, is indispensable. Besides, the energy policy should be seen to be sensitive to climate change concerns, both internally and globally. The Government has evidently been engaged in this mission. Its endeavours have met with some success, but much more would be needed. It is worth mentioning that, according to the International Energy Agency, our dependence on foreign oil imports is set to increase from the present of over 65% to 91.6% by 2020, an alarming figure indeed.

Looking at the external sector closely, it is creditable of our PSUs and private sector companies to have worked hard to contain our oil/gas imports from the traditional markets, mainly the Gulf and Iran. Further, they have succeeded in developing new sources in other countries through acquisitions and joint ventures. These are: Russia, Vietnam, Central Asia, Venezuela and Africa (especially Nigeria, Sudan, Libya, Angola, Ivory Coast and Ghana). Media has been full of stories about foreign visits by CEOs of our major oil and gas corporates (e.g. OVL, IOC, GAIL, Reliance and Essar etc) and resultant agreements, but one of the biggest untold stories relates to behind-the-scene role played by our diplomatic Missions in helping Indian companies achieve their goals. Increased coordination and synergy involving Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, MEA and major industry players is absolutely essential for India to consolidate and expand the arc of its successes in the past decade.

My considered opinion is that, in our quest for new gas/oil equity abroad, we should follow a path different from the one adopted by the Chinese Government and companies. In Africa particularly, we cannot afford to be stuck with an image of ‘extractive’ or ‘exploitative’ nation (such as our neighbour or the former colonial masters.) We have no choice but to craft and pursue a partnership-oriented approach. This will entail India assisting African countries (from where it seeks hydrocarbon and other natural resources) by bringing in new investments and technology, creating employment, ensuring value addition locally and imparting necessary training skills to local entrepreneurs. During my three-year tenure in South Africa, India’s imports of coal shot up six times to about $750 million, but repeated signals received by us were
clear on one basic point: South Africa has the potential to export much more coal, provided Indian investors would come forward to work as long-term partners. Our success in creating linkages for other strategic minerals too came with a similar message.

The imperatives of energy security demand that our diplomatic representatives abroad should be constantly on the lookout for new energy assets. These assets should include not only properties in the hydrocarbon sector, but also new and clean energy technologies. Identifying them, establishing their relevance to our needs, and recommending a way to obtain them for Indian companies represent our constant goal. For, after all, the Government is committed to supplying industry, enterprises and domestic households with safe, clean and convenient forms of energy at affordable prices. This task cannot be accomplished satisfactorily unless a more collaborative mindset involving our diplomats abroad as well as our energy specialists and energy entrepreneurs at home is developed.

Another important dimension in energy security is to reduce our energy requirements where possible, and to increase energy efficiency. This again can be ensured, partly through domestic research and development and reinforced partly through our constant monitoring of newer technologies available abroad. Further, a continuous study and monitoring of good practices, particularly those followed in countries placed in similar circumstances, would also be useful.

Finally, at the macro level we need to recognize that our substantial and growing dependence on external energy sources makes us vulnerable to price and supply shocks, given by the world market periodically. In an excellent paper entitled ‘India’s Strategy towards Energy Development’, R.V. Shahi, Secretary, Ministry of Power put it: “For India it is not a question of choosing among alternate domestic energy resources but exploiting all available domestic energy resources to the maximum as long as they are competitive.” It is in this context that the recent debate and developments on nuclear energy as well as the heavy political and diplomatic investment made in securing India’s civilian nuclear cooperation agreements with US, France, Russia etc. in the past two-three years, should be viewed. The time is now ripe to speed up the implementation process so that nuclear energy provides a much higher share in domestic electricity generation than the paltry 3% at present.

Connectivity

A computer buzz word, connectivity in IT context refers to the ability of a programme, device or network to link with other programmes, devices and networks. “We cannot process your cheque because I have just lost connectivity,” said my bank manager the other day, referring to the loss of link to the bank’s server. I propose to use the term in its wider sense cutting across various sectors and to project connectivity as a package of linkages through roads, railways, air transport, telecommunication and broadband connections, oil and gas pipelines and power grids
as well as through trade, investment and comprehensive economic cooperation arrangements. Attaining multi-dimensional connectivity should, in my considered view, be an over-arching goal, particularly in relation to our immediate neighbourhood and the extended neighbourhood stretching from Central Asia to South East Asia.

South Asia, observed Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee recently, is one of the “least integrated” regions in the world. It is obviously desirable to reverse this, but is it feasible to do so in the foreseeable future? The answer might lie in our assessing the strategic, political and economic situation in the SAARC region in three different sub-sections.

Clearly, a minimal and mutually acceptable resolution of major issues relating to India-Pakistan relations is almost a pre-requisite for anyone to envisage realistically that connectivity with Pakistan can be expanded as part of India’s reach into Central Asia. Whatever has been achieved in Afghanistan in this field in recent years has generally been without our neighbour’s cooperation or support and, in fact, despite its opposition. Of course, it does not minimize the importance of our development projects in Afghanistan such as the construction of Salma Dam in Herat, the construction of a road from Zaranj to Delaram, extension of power lines from North to Central Afghanistan and to the capital, and the construction of Parliament building in Kabul. As a bilateral donor of some substance, India has already spent $1.2 billion on projects in Afghanistan. During his last visit to Delhi in April 2010, President Hamid Karzai thanked the people of India for “tremendous reconstruction assistance” given to his country. The newest member of SAARC, Afghanistan is, according to the official Indian view, “the gateway to Central Asia and beyond, to West Asia.”

In regard to our two neighbours in the north - Nepal and Bhutan - and our two neighbours in the south and south west - Sri Lanka and Maldives, the macro scene has been marked with considerable achievements in terms of strengthening connectivity, as defined above.

The most promising set of relationships, however, pertains to our neighbours in the east – Bangladesh and Myanmar. Expanding linkages with them would have been fully justified by itself, but other compelling factors, namely (i) the situation and development needs of our North East region, (ii) our commitment to ‘Look East’ policy, and (iii) the factor of China’s continuing forays into South Asia, leave us with no options. We need to match our words with action – i.e. speedy and timely action – in order to consolidate India’s integration with ASEAN, with BIMSTEC playing the role of a unique and vital link between South Asia and South East Asia.

The challenge for our diplomacy, both political and economic, is not only to keep our sights on the proposed role, but also to convince our interlocutors and partners in the region that we have the capacity and the will to deliver on our promises and agreements. Delays in some of our prime projects in the region have to be
curtailed. In this category would fall the Trilateral Highway Project (which proposes to connect Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Bagan in Myanmar) as well as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit and Transport Facility (which envisages connectivity between Indian ports on the eastern seashore and Sittwe Port in Myanmar and then through riverine transport to our North East region and road to Mizoram, thereby providing an alternate route). When such high profile projects move at a slow pace, questions regarding India’s credibility could be raised. Sustained push by our competitors, in the meantime, causes complications. In this context, one recalls with regret how we lost the natural gas pipeline project that had sought to link Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. Another thought: while adhering to all reasonable rules and regulations and principles of financial prudence, we should consider moving away from an open-ended and file-driven process which ends up impairing our national interests.

An apt demonstration of connectivity, secured through the instrumentality of dynamic diplomacy, is the much-talked about Pan-African E-Network project. Its fundamental goal is to enable Africa to enjoy the fruits of Indian expertise in two key sectors – health and education, by exploiting the full potential of ICT. The concept of the project emerged from the address delivered by President Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam before the Pan-African Parliament in Johannesburg in September 2004. The project was commissioned by MEA and executed by TCIL with remarkable speed. Its pilot phase was started in 2007 and it formal inauguration took place in February 2009 when the then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee hailed it as “a shining example of South-South cooperation.” In addition to providing tele-medicine and tele-education facilities, the project envisages provision of intra-VVIP communication links with the potential to cover all 53 African countries. It is noteworthy that 47 African countries have already signed MOUs signalling their interest in it, and the project is presently under implementation in 33 countries.

In the context of reference to Africa, it would be appropriate to mention that RITES has been another impressive success story, despite having faced some constraints. It has contributed much to the development of railway infrastructure through its dynamic business activities, consultancy and multi-dimensional interaction in Tanzania, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana and Botswana and several other countries in the continent.

It is hoped that creative minds in India would come up with more ideas for projects in future so that India’s connectivity to various regions of special interest to us, stands further expanded. This is certain to yield rich dividends for the country.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, I emphasise that in recent years India’s economic diplomacy has already moved beyond conventional commercial work and into the more fundamental areas of the economy. This welcome trend needs to be
augmented and expanded through conscious efforts and a well-crafted plan. As inputs for such a plan, the following five-point formula deserves serious consideration:

i. Closer synergy is needed at the Government level, involving MEA, other economic ministries and ministries handling matters such as infrastructure, energy, connectivity etc. as well as relevant state governments.

ii. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) involving the Government and India Inc. in pursuing national objectives should be strengthened. Inter alia, this will entail our Ambassadors working more closely with CEOs of PSUs and private sector companies which are active in the countries of their accreditation.

iii. Greater exposure is a must - of Ambassadors and other senior diplomats to developments in business, industry and R&D fields of the Indian economy through periodic visits to relevant establishments as well as their seeking similar exposure to concerned sectors in the countries where they are stationed.

iv. Training not only of young diplomats but also of middle and senior level diplomats should include concentrated and newly-designed capsules on economic diplomacy. In preparing such capsules, we should learn from the experience of a number of countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Mexico, Brazil, Iran and South Africa.

v. Finally, India Inc. needs to become more professional in its business approach while operating abroad. In-depth preparation prior to visits abroad; cordiality and business acumen, blended with humility, while negotiating and closing business deals; and sustained follow-up after visits are some of the basic ingredients which get ignored even now, leading to poor impressions being created in many quarters. Our business representatives should grow out of the mindset of the past and start playing the role expected of those belonging to the second fastest growing economy in the world. Happily many major Indian companies are already comfortable in this role. Their examples should be emulated by others.

Nearly 35 years ago when I left the shores of India as a young diplomat, I discovered quickly that there was much respect and admiration for our ancient culture and our unique and successful freedom struggle, and yet we were seen as a country with a begging bowl. The world has changed immensely since then and so has India. In the past decade, as I worked and travelled in four continents – Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, I found that the international community’s perception of India had improved vastly. Often, while journeying through remote provinces of Mexico and South Africa, I would be asked the same question again and again: “How did India do
it (i.e. achieve such economic and technological success)?” Responding with a mixture of self-confidence and candour, I always conveyed a basic message: we are proud of our achievements which resulted from our enlightened policies and actions, but we are conscious that we have miles to go before we can fulfill the minimum expectations of all our people.

The fundamental challenge for top managers of Indian economy as well as economic diplomacy in the 21st century is to remember this basic message and to prepare themselves suitably for the gigantic tasks and struggles that lie ahead.

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