

## Diplomat should be permanent optimist

### Open Collar Interview № 66 with Ambassador Venkatesh Varma

**EDITORIAL:** The new guest of PIR Center's Open Collar Interview is **Ambassador Venkatesh Varma**, distinguished fellow at the Vivekananda International Foundation, visiting faculty at the Kautilya School of Public Policy, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of India to the Russian Federation (2018–2021), member of PIR Center's Advisory Board.



In this interview, Ambassador Varma told us about his dream to join the Indian Foreign Service and the stages of his professional life that he overcame to achieve it. We talked about the peculiarities of a diplomat's work, about building a balance between work and life, personal values and priorities. In addition, the issues of strategic partnership between India and Russia, as well as the transformation of India's place in the global nuclear order, could not be ignored. In conclusion, Ambassador Varma gave some valuable advice to young specialists in the international relations sphere.

The interview was conducted and prepared by **Veronika Terpugova**, PIR Center Education & Training Program Intern.

#### **A dream to join the diplomatic service**

I come from the southern part of India. Hyderabad is my place of birth and where I am now settled after retiring from the Indian diplomatic service.

It was always my professional dream to join the diplomatic service. I had a very strong interest in matters related to history, political science, international relations, global trends, issues of war and peace, and issues of development. These were the major drivers that I followed through my college education.

I was educated at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, which is one of the best universities in India in the field of international relations. I obtained my MA and MPhil degrees. My MPhil thesis was on a comparative study of the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 in terms of diplomacy and strategy, i.e. how India conducted itself in these two different wars. Thus, I had a little bit of a background before I joined the diplomatic service in arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament studies, broadly called *strategic studies*. In India, if you are to use American parlance, it's called *strategic studies*. If you are to use Russian parlance, it's called *military studies* or *military-technical studies*.

So, I've had an interest in strategic studies, and after I finished my MPhil, I joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1988. I would say it was a very happy experience for me to join a professional service, something that I had been preparing for in the previous years. It was also the time when India and the whole world were changing. Joining the Indian Foreign Service at a time of great change was, I think, a very exciting moment.

## **On choosing to study the Russian language**

To join the Indian Foreign Service, there is a very competitive exam — there are more than 500 000 applications, of which only ten are selected any one year. Now the numbers are slightly larger, there are about 30 selected candidates, but in the year when I joined the Foreign Service, only ten candidates were selected. It was a very prestigious form of service in the Indian government.

In the Indian Foreign Service, you are required to learn one foreign language. In my case, since I was also at the top of my group of officers, I could choose any foreign language, and I chose Russian. Russia, then the Soviet Union, has always occupied a very important place in Indian foreign policy. One of the skills that you were required to acquire when joining the Foreign Service was the ability to understand foreign cultures and foreign languages as part of your diplomatic training.

Of course, the service itself is very competitive, and there are many obstacles in the way, but if you are persistent, you prepare well, and you're committed to achieving your objectives, I think, success will always come your way.

## **Chapters of professional life**

My service in the Indian Foreign Service can be described in three parts. For one third of my career, I worked in India. I was in the office of the Minister of External Affairs and in the office of the Prime Minister. I also headed the Disarmament and Nonproliferation Division in the Ministry of External Affairs. Another one third I spent in Russia, where I did three stints. In 1990-1992, I was there when the Soviet Union broke up and the Russian Federation and other countries came into being. Thereafter, I was posted to Tashkent, the capital of newly independent Uzbekistan. Then I worked in Russia as a Political Counsellor in 2000-2003, when President Putin just came into office and India and Russia established strategic partnerships in October 2000. And lastly, I was Ambassador of India to Russia in 2018-2021, when Prime Minister Modi visited Vladivostok, and we had the opportunity to take India's relations with Russia to the next high level.

## **India-Russia strategic partnership**

Of course, India-Russia relations are very important for both countries. It's a strategic partnership, which has many components. There are political relations, defense, energy, science and technology, economic trade, culture. We also work together in international fora, such as the G20, the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, etc. India and Russia also cooperate in major international projects, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Eastern Maritime Corridor from Chennai to Vladivostok, and there are many other examples. As regards nuclear energy and space, Russia is also a very strong partner for India. It is constructing six nuclear power reactors in Kudankulam, South India. India has also greatly benefited from cooperation with Russia in the space field, including in the training of manned space missions.

## **Transformation of India's place in the global nuclear order**

During the other third of my career, I've dealt with nuclear issues, especially arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament. I've been posted three times to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. I have done more than ten First Committees and half a dozen UNDC meetings. I was part of the two Groups of Governmental Experts. Presently, I'm also a member of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters.

One of the major initiatives in which I was involved was the India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, which began in 2005 and was completed around 2008-2009. It entailed a fundamental transformation of India's place in the global nuclear order. As you would be aware, for 30 years, India was outside of the nuclear order because as it had chosen, for valid historical reasons, not to sign the NPT. At the same time, we were quite supportive of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The main question of the India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative was balancing the nonproliferation objectives with India's increased interest in nuclear energy in a manner that would strengthen both India's nuclear energy security and the international nonproliferation regime.

It was, in fact, the biggest diplomatic negotiation that India had ever conducted with any country or any set of countries. It was not just the India-US Civil Nuclear Initiative. It also involved negotiations with the other members of the P5, which are Russia, France, the UK and China, as well as negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. There were more than 15 different sets of negotiations, and I was fortunate to be part of a dozen of them. I was fortunate to see up close some of the most intense negotiations that India has ever conducted with the nuclear powers.

Having separated India's civil and military nuclear programs, we negotiated the 123 Agreement. We also approached the IAEA to negotiate an India-specific Safeguards Agreement and an India-specific Additional Protocol. In both of these cases, India offered a number of steps that would be in a manner strengthening the nonproliferation regime. In return, the NSG took a decision to lift the restriction, which was imposed in 1992, on applying the full-scope safeguards requirement for the purposes of nuclear trade and commerce between the NSG countries and India. This was a major breakthrough. In fact, it was a breakthrough, not only in terms of nonproliferation. It was the end of nuclear apartheid against India.

India joined the international nuclear mainstream and became an active member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. We also have active cooperation and a dialogue with the NSG. Subsequently, India also became a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group, and the Wassenaar Arrangement. We are not yet members of the NSG, though we have expressed our interest in doing so.

These negotiations were the defining element of my professional work, as they helped my country – India – find its rightful place in the international nuclear order.

### **Very qualified professional and talented people**

In all this, we had the occasion to deal with a number of very qualified professional diplomats and experts in the nuclear field. I can mention a few names that come to mind. Mr. **EI Baradei**, Director General of the IAEA, was a great support for India in strengthening its relations with the Agency. US Undersecretary Mr. John **Rood** along with Mr. Dick **Stratford** (*Director of the Office of Nuclear Energy, Safety and Security, Bureau of International Security and Non-Proliferation, U.S. Department of State — editor's note*) were part of the negotiating team from the US side. I also remember Ms. Rose **Gottmoeller** (*American diplomat, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security at the U.S. State Department (2012-2016) — editor's note*) and Dr. Bob **Einhorn** (*Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, member of PIR Center's Advisory Board — editor's note*), with both of whom we worked in the past. We also negotiated with the support of our partners from Russia, the UK, and France.

I've met a number of very distinguished Russian diplomats: top of my list is H.E. Sergey **Ryabkov**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, for whom I have the highest level of professional and personal respect, as well as H.E. Anatoly **Antonov**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the

Russian Federation to the United States, and H.E. Sergey **Kiselev**, his Deputy, both very good friends of mine; Ambassador **Kislyak**, Ambassador **Berdennikov**, and, of course, my good friend H.E. Vladimir **Yermakov**, Director of the Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Foreign Ministry. I've met experts not only from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, but also from the Ministry of Defense and Rosatom, which have always provided very professional cooperation and support. I would like to mention Mr. **Rumyantsev**, former Director General of Rosatom, and Mr. **Likhachev**, current Director General of Rosatom, who is also a good personal friend of mine.

As part of your professional work, you meet good and very talented people. In the nature of this work, these partnerships are invaluable in building trust and confidence on matters of importance for both countries as well as for the international community — these are built not over weeks and months but over years and decades.

### **PIR Center as a platform for dialogue**

My association with PIR Center is very old. When I was first posted to Moscow, PIR Center had not been established yet. Following my work at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, I was posted back to Moscow in 2000-2003. That is when I was able to establish very good professional and personal relations with the team of PIR Center.

The central figure then and now has always been Dr. Vladimir **Orlov** (*PIR Center Founding Director, Professor at MGIMO University — editor's note*). Volodya is my very dear friend. We have, in a sense, grown up professionally together. I have to mention the great contribution of other friends: Ambassador Roland **Timerbaev** (*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the USSR and then Russia, Chairman of PIR Center's Executive Board (1999-2010) (1927-2019) — editor's note*), who I knew from my previous posting, General Evgeny **Buzhinskiy** (*Chairman of PIR Center's Executive Board — editor's note*), who is still very active and I have always learnt a lot from him, Dr. Elena **Chernenko** (*Special Correspondent of Kommersant Daily, member of PIR Center's Executive Board — editor's note*), one of the best experts in nonproliferation in the journalism field, Dr. Dmitri **Trenin** (*Lead Researcher at the Section for Non-Proliferation and Arms Limitation of the Center for International Security of IMEMO RAS, Research Professor at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at HSE University, member of PIR Center's Executive Board — editor's note*), whom I greatly respect.



*Sergey Semenov, Dr. Elena Chernenko, Dr. Vladimir Orlov, Amb. D.B. Venkatesh Varma, Gen. Evgeny Buzhinskiy, Andrey Baklitskiy. The 110th Summer Session of the “Trialogue” Club International on the topic “New Strategic Equation: Variables Outside Russian-American Relations and Multilateral Disarmament”, July 15, 2021.*

In 2001-2003, I was a member of a Group of Governmental Experts on Disarmament and Nonproliferation Education, which was headed by Ambassador Miguel **Marín Bosch**. Dr. Vladimir Orlov and Dr. William **Potter** (*Director of James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Professor at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, USA — editor’s note*) actively participated in the program, which allowed us to create yet another set of commonalities.

During my tenure as Ambassador in Moscow, I had extremely good personal relations with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, who I think is one of the most accomplished diplomats in the field of arms control and nonproliferation. He also looks after Russia’s relations with the United States of America.

I must say that the quality of professional work that is done both in the Foreign Ministry and in the think tanks, particularly in PIR Center, is of world-class standards. I have greatly benefited from my cooperation with the Center, and I can tell you why it is so important. Firstly, it provides a platform for dialogue and understanding, staying professional in its work. It brings together expertise and allows you to meet very good Russian experts as well as diplomats from other countries. In 2000-2003, PIR Center used to host, I think, every few weeks a breakfast meeting, which was a very attractive and popular venue for the exchange of views on a number of issues. At the PIR Center’s activities, I met a number of foreign diplomats from Latin America, Switzerland, France, etc. who subsequently became very senior in their own positions. Secondly, PIR Center’s publications. The *Security Index* is a very well-established journal. It brings together strong Russian expertise from an international perspective. In the field of disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation, it is very important not only to understand the national perspectives but also to put them in the international context. No country can seek and hope to gain absolute security at the expense of the security of other countries. Security is always to be built with two hands. Of course, there’s always a competitive element, but it also requires a cooperative one.

It is important for PIR Center to reinvent itself. We are looking at new challenges. So, you need new analysis, new methods of work, and new analytical tools, while preserving what has already

proven to be good. I think it is wrong to say that what has been achieved in the past is redundant or useless. Yet it would also be a mistake to think that the status quo would be preserved forever.

### **The way diplomacy operates**

To achieve excellence in this field of diplomacy and expertise in this field of arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation, it is important to maintain a certain professional discipline in one's approach and attitude. Professional discipline involves a constant process of learning and relearning. The job of a diplomat is to exercise empathy, not sympathy, by trying to understand from the perspectives of other countries how they see their security problems and their security interests. Like every profession, it also requires specific qualities and skills: dedication, perseverance, and the ability to build bridges. Diplomats should be permanent optimists. However difficult the situation is, we should never lose a sense of possibility and a sense of optimism. Most importantly, one should be passionate about the values this work entails.

The issues of war and peace are as old as human history. Diplomacy in this field is vitally important for building a stable international security order, a stable nuclear order, and a stable nonproliferation order, which will then create the basis for security at lower and lower levels of armaments, the basis to pursue the ultimate objective of disarmament. These value-driven objectives have to be married with realism. You may have the best intentions, but they need to remain practical and verifiable on the ground.

Diplomacy can take place not only vis-à-vis your partners from other countries but also within your own country. As a diplomat, you should have good relations with your Ministry of Defense, your atomic energy community, space community, scientific community, and, most importantly, the community of experts from think tanks, universities, etc. It is also important to learn from those who have dealt with very big issues in the past, who may not be in service anymore but can still share their perspectives. We need to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Every generation has to learn its own lessons. We cannot say that the way arms control was conducted in the 1960-1970s can be readily applied in 2024. The world is different. At that time, it was bipolar in terms of nuclear deterrence, now it is almost multipolar. The arms control concepts have to be adapted to establish strategic stability, which also involves linkages with cyber and outer space. New technologies are coming up with respect to artificial intelligence, quantum computing, synthesis between biology and chemistry, etc. These show the necessity for the whole disarmament and nonproliferation community to work together.

### **Practical matters should always be balanced with life values**

I think one should have varied and persistent interests. If you are committed to your objectives, any temporary difficulties can be handled. Practical matters should always be balanced with life values. It is these values that give you the mental stamina to deal with long-term issues.

Being in the diplomatic service, you have the opportunity to travel widely and meet people from different countries. If you are open to learning from others, it's greatly enriching and enlivening. Besides, commitment to your country is also an inspiration because what you do indeed matters to your country and your people.

### **Music preferences and book recommendations**

When working, I normally listen to Mozart. Very soft and rhythmic music is good while reading something. Reading, in its turn, is always good for inspiration and new ideas. It is said that if you

want new ideas, then read old books. It's good to read about people who have been very active and big stalwarts in the field of diplomacy. Look at Kissinger, Lavrov, Genscher, or Baker. Read about how arms control negotiations were done during the Cold War period. Keep your mind open, and do not be swept away by anyone. You keep your own personality, but you enrich your mindset by reading what others have written and by the inspiration that they provide. Also, draw inspiration from the culture and civilizational values of your country, but always in association with respect for other cultures and civilizations.

### **A strong heart and a strong will**

Arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation is a very exciting and important field. It is a field where what you do is of vital importance to your country, but what you do for your country can also be of vital importance to international peace and security. It is a very challenging field, so you should have a strong heart and a strong will. Be assured that on this journey you will meet professionals from other countries who are equally good, or in some cases, even better. To stay competitive in your field over a period of time requires that a person combine both diplomatic professionalism and expertise and the best way for diplomats to keep up with the expertise is to be in touch with good think tanks and good research bodies, like PIR Center.



*The 110th Summer Session of the “Trialogue” Club International on the topic “New Strategic Equation: Variables Outside Russian-American Relations and Multilateral Disarmament”, July 15, 2021.*

I would like to congratulate PIR Center, its director Dr. Vladimir Orlov and the professional staff, including young specialists, on their success in being a platform for building friendships, both professional and personal, from which I myself have greatly benefited over time. As we move on, new challenges arise. My generation has seen its part. Now it is time for the new generation to take this process forward. I would like to express my best wishes for every success to Dr. Orlov and to all the experts at PIR Center.

**Interview: Veronika Terpugova**

**Editors: Veronika Terpugova, Ksenia Mineeva**