Policy
WATCH

INDIA'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

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RAJIV GANDHI
INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

Editorial

Dear Reader,

The Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS) works on five themes:

1. Constitutional Values and Democratic Institutions
2. Growth with Employment
3. Governance and Development
4. Environment, Natural Resources and Sustainability
5. India's Place in the World.

Under the theme, India's Place in the World, there are three sub-themes:

I.   India's Neighbours - China, SAARC and ASEAN - Trade, Investment and Cultural Relations
ii. The Global Rise of Right Wing Populism - Its Impact on India
iii. Can Soft Power Enhance India's Place in the World

In terms of outputs, the following are envisaged:

•   Policy Laboratory - action research projects, to the extent possible; else participant observation in "happenings"
•   Policy Observatory - A continuous watch of events, policy pronouncements and developments on each topic, with a quarterly summary of highlights to be published under Policy Watch.
•   Policy Repertory - Occasional Papers, commissioned by outsiders, and Working Papers as well as Research Reports by staff Fellows.

This issue of Policy Watch covers two sub-themes. The first article on SDGs in South Asia, is by Dr Suraj Kumar, Senior Visiting Fellow, RGICS, based on a book he has co-authored with Dr Nitya Mohan Khemka, Cambridge University. It shows India's place in South

Asia is not a very enviable number 5, out of the 6 countries ranked. The article also gives a number of suggestions on how progress towards achieving the SDGs can be accelerated. The second set of two articles is about Can India's Place in the World be enhanced using Soft Power?

The first is the result of a Consultation on "India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities", held at RGICS on 28th November 2019, based on a specially commissioned Occasional Paper by the same title by Salil Shetty, former UN Coordinator of the Millennium Development Goals and co-authored by Tara Sahgal of the King's College, London. The full paper can be seen at https://www.rgics.org/occasional-papers/.

The second article is by Prof Somnath Ghosh, Senior Visiting Fellow, RGICS and it traces India's Place in the World from Panchsheel to RCEP, a grand survey of 70 years of India's foreign policy, with a focus on China.

We hope you enjoy reading these articles. We look forward to your feedback.

We wish a Happy New Year.

Book Release of "Social Development and the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asia, Special Indian Edition" by its Author, Dr Suraj Kumar, RGICS in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, in the presence of Shri T S Singhdeo, Minister, Planning and Rural Development, Govt of Chhattisgarh on the 5th Dec, 2019 in a function organised by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi

The book is authored by Dr Nitya Mohan Khemka, Cambridge University and Dr Suraj Kumar, Senior Visiting Fellow, RGICS.

A Glass Half Full? Policy Priorities for Social Development in South Asia[1]

Nitya Mohan Khemka[^] and Suraj Kumar[^^]

Introduction

The aspiration towards sustainable development is grounded in South Asian tradition and thought. Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on uplifting the village economy as a strategy for sustainable development as well as the dangers of unchecked growth and environmental degradation have formed the bedrock of the sustainability movement in much of South Asia.

However, progress towards these aspirations is still a work in progress and the focus on cogent public action is an imperative today – countries and regional organisations in South Asia need to go beyond brave resolutions and act in the here and now – with regular tracking and reporting on progress and conscious effort to cooperate and collaborate across the region. The luxury of distant observation is not available given the impending timeline of 2030 in the face of global warming. The point therefore is to effect systematic, collaborative and transformative action towards the realization of SDGs.

The essays in this volume have provided an assessment of how action to tackle the SDGs is addressing persistent development challenges in the South Asian sub-region. They indicate that the challenge for the social sectors in South Asia is a combination of the "unfinished tasks of the MDGs", in conjunction with several additional established objectives to be addressed under the rubric of the sustainable development goals and targets. This article presents a discussion of the principal themes that link this book together and reviews key issues raised by the contributors as a prerequisite for more effective implementation of the SDGs in South Asia. This synthesis is followed by a discussion of possible policy pathways for the SDGs in South Asia.

[1] This article is based on the last chapter of the book: Khemka, Nitya Mohan and Suraj Kumar (2020): Social Development and the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asia, Special Indian Edition, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon and New York.

Advance copies of the book were released by Dr Suraj Kumar, RGICS in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, in the presence of Shri T S Singhdeo, Minister, Planning and Rural Development, Govt of Chhattisgarh on the 5th Dec, 2019 in a function organised by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi.

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Cross-cutting Themes

The aim of this volume is to bring together several conceptual frameworks and strands of analysis in the emergent field of sustainable development research in South Asia. There are several common threads that run through this book which have been coalesced around five key themes:

1. Mainstreaming SDGs into national and subnational policies and plans
2. Resource availability and financing for the SDGs
3. Institutional framework: Implementation and coordination of SDGs
4. Quality data for analysis
5. The role of regional cooperation, partnerships and stakeholder participation in implementing the SDGs

Mainstreaming SDGs into national and subnational policies and plans

From the case-studies presented in this book, countries in South Asia have made considerable progress in mainstreaming the SDGs. Bangladesh and to some extent Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan seem to have operationalized the SDGs in a coordinated, systematic and integrated way into national planning processes. This is most deeply illustrated by Bangladesh. In India's case, the nodal planning agency, NITI Aayog, has done a considerable amount of work in mapping, visioning and creating an action agenda which acts as an enabling framework. Given India's federal structure, the formulation of SDG policy at the state level acquires salience and several Indian states have moved expeditiously to formulate SDG 2030 Vision Action Plans. For instance, the state of Maharashtra has integrated its SDG Vision document into its public policy framework via the annual economic survey and budget and is now putting into place a programme to accelerate progress towards SDGs through its Human Development Mission.

The analysis presented in the country studies indicates that SDG action needs to be facilitated by policy changes (macro-level), institutional development (meso-level) and local/community action (micro-level). For this to happen, the goals and targets need to be localized and made amenable for the cycle of planning, budgeting, monitoring and implementation.

Localisation is particularly important in the case of Nepal where the promise of decentralisation, mandated by the new Constitution, has been emphasised in the Nepalese case study. The authors refer to the 'daunting challenge' of setting up integrated planning, budgeting and implementing mechanisms to localise the SDGs at the provincial and local levels. The importance of localising SDGs has also been referred to by other countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan. This however is easier said than done because one faces the challenge of making the SDG agenda context specific at the subnational level. In other words, it would be imperative to retain the essence and interconnected-ness of the 2030 Agenda so that "business as usual" at the local level does not overpower the transformational vision. In countries such as Nepal (and Bhutan), a new or relatively recent constitutional regime maybe more able to integrate both decentralisation and the SDG Agenda into its way of working.

On the other hand, in countries like India where decentralisation is of an earlier vintage and subnational governance is driven by ongoing party politics, the challenge is to ensure that the technical guidance by national apex agencies is apolitical and objective such that a state with a different political party in power can also take the SDG 2030 agenda forward without seeing it as a political catspaw. In such contexts, the more viable strategy would be to build the SDG agenda from below, linking it with local governance institutions, both rural and urban. A more participatory approach such as people's planning in Kerala and Jan Rapat (People's Report) in Chhattisgarh may be effective vehicles for SDGs to influence planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring.

It is clear that unlike the MDGs, the SDG agenda has to be country-driven, both in contextualisation for planning and specification for implementation. Hence, it is critical to concretize very specifically what the SDGs and their action imperatives mean in the local context across social, economic and environmental dimensions. SDGs require translation for the national and subnational context. This involves national and sub-national level visioning, planning at a decentralized level, village/ locality level implementation, monitoring and evaluation and finally, a feedback loop into higher levels of governance (national and sub-national). The issue of localisation is not just about localisation of targets but also customisation or choosing different SDGs and targets to be emphasised and bringing those choices down to the local level.

Evidently, therefore, the SDGs need to be adapted to the national and sub-national levels, without diluting their spirit. The central question then becomes, how to strike a balance between prescription and implementation i.e. the normative aspects of the goals on the one hand, and the realistic situation on the ground on the other, which will not automatically adapt itself to the SDGs.

Further, while the SDGs are a new imperative, governments and other development stakeholders are not working in a tabula rasa or a vacuum in a district, state or country. There is pre-existing developmental experience in place and the SDG agenda has to merge or link with ongoing agendas whether it is state level power sector reform, human

development and infrastructure programmes. Therefore, it becomes critical to examine the successes and failures of prior government policies and how the SDG agenda intersects with these agendas of the government.

Resource availability and financing for the SDGs

Since the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa) in July 2015, world leaders have called for significant sums of money to be invested in priority areas identified in the goals and their targets. The availability and management of financial flows are critical to unlock other resources (human and physical capital) necessary to finance the 2030 agenda. According to UNCTAD the global resource requirement to finance the goals are in the order of $5-$7 trillion a year. In developing countries alone, the finance needed to fund investments in infrastructure (roads, ports, railways, water and sanitation), health, education, climate change adaptation and food security are estimated to be approximately $3.9 trillion a year. Current investments in these areas are at about $1.4 trillion which means that there is an annual funding shortfall of about $2.5 trillion over the 2015-2030 period (UNCTAD 2014).

The magnitude of the problem of financing for the SDGs is brought out by commentator after commentator in this book. Given the fact that there are financial challenges to the achievement of SDGs in the ordinary course, a strategy based upon the immediate deployment of universal public provision of essential goods and services would require even deeper thinking about the galvanising of financial resources.

The country case studies in this book provide various estimates of the scale of public resources available to finance the SDGs and estimate the additional resources required to cover the shortfall. The authors of the case-study on Bangladesh go as far as to say that financing presents 'the greatest challenge [the country] will face in terms of the SDGs'. The total additional synchronized cost for all 17 goals in Bangladesh is estimated to be 28.1% of the projected national GDP in FY 2030. In Nepal, the funding requirement is estimated to be up to 50% of the GDP. In India, various estimates have pitched the shortfall at $ 8.5 trillion (minimalist estimation given the lack of data) over the mandated 15 years (DevAlt 2015).

The SDGs will require a step change in public and private investments needed to catalyze the achievements of the goals. In this regard, the contributors to this volume recognize that there is an urgent need to re-assess the availability and management of resources and to evolve innovative financing strategies in key social sectors.

Institutional framework: Implementation and coordination of SDGs

The contributors point out that while the SDGs set a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, the achievement in South Asia of targets under the SDGs is currently under way with diverse institutional arrangements and disparate levels of capacity to plan, budget, implement and monitor. In order to achieve convergence for SDGs, there has to be a systematic review of the institutions in place in each country that ensures the cycles of planning, implementation, monitoring and review, as well as the lack of incentives/ disincentives within the system to implement the 2030 Agenda.

With respect to the management, coordination and leadership around SDG implementation, Bangladesh appears to have rolled out the SDG response in a synchronised and systemic manner. As indicated in the case studies, Nepal and Pakistan

have also made a significant attempt. Bangladesh, India and Nepal have all involved their Supreme Audit Institutions (SAI) to conduct a performance audit of governmental preparedness to implement the SDGs. This audit assesses the extent to which the government has adapted the SDGs into its national policy, the financial resources identified and secured to implement the SDGs and the mechanisms to monitor, review and report on progress on the goals in each national context. The ability to assess must be matched by the capacity to implement and deliver in a holistic and transformational manner. Analyses of Nepal point out to government capacity as a challenge and poor human capital at local level as a binding constraint. This is confronted directly by Nepal's ongoing process of decentralisation and devolution of funds, functions and functionaries. Sri Lanka has an established constitutional structure and much better human capital but institutional coherence is the major challenge given ethnic cleavages and fractured micro-politics. In both contexts, the deployment of technology in a universally accessible manner holds much promise as a solution to the problem of silos, remote-ness and rent-seeking behaviour in the distribution of welfare benefits.

Quality data for analysis

An important issue that has been raised by our contributors is the lack of quality data, which can hamper timely monitoring and evaluation of programmes, prevent the specific targeting of interventions and hinder policy development. Effective planning, follow-up and review of the SDG agenda requires the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of an unprecedented amount of data at local, national, regional and global levels and by multiple stakeholders. The paucity of data has been raised as an issue explicitly in the country case studies which draws attention to the lack of gender disaggregated data. An analysis of the challenges articulated by South Asian countries (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Bangladesh) in their Voluntary National Reports, shows the lack of quality data to monitor SDG achievements and recommends 'to strengthen domestic capacity in this regard' .

Additionally, while the problems relating to the disaggregation and desegregation of data continue from the MDG period, several new challenges have emerged. The expanded remit of the newly framed goals entails getting information on a range of indicators that have not been collected by the statistical system and its organisations. For example, governments are required to locate data with respect to the indicators such as 'intimate partner violence' and 'better information about reproductive rights for young girls' which is hard to report on. There is also a lack of clarity as to who will report, what the frequency of reporting would be and how the ethics of the person are maintained while reporting the information. The statistical system needs to address these points.

With respect to global reporting, the United Nations has set up the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. Under the 2030 Agenda, member states are encouraged to conduct regular national reviews (Voluntary National Review- VNR) of the SDG agendas. These voluntary, state-led reviews are meant to be submitted to the HLPF annually and facilitate sharing of best practices with a view to accelerating the progress on the SDGs. Thus far, not all countries in South Asia have prepared VNRs. Further, while there is an UN-led mechanism at the global level for reviewing national progress, corresponding to the global processes, there need to be mechanisms for review at the national and local levels for countries in South Asia. This requires the modernisation and capacity building of national statistical authorities in order that they are able to generate

statistics in the calculation of SDG indicators. These global and country-level initiatives need to be translated at the local level so that the data becomes a trigger for action.

There is also a need to strengthen data systems as a result of sub-national and local level planning for SDGs. This includes putting in place reporting mechanisms, capacity building at the sub-national and local levels, management of SDG knowledge networks and improved statistical systems to cope with the unprecedented demand for data required to monitor the SDGs. Localizing SDGs also requires investing in capacity to analyze the "big data" that every large or small organization generates but is often is unable to capture. The technology exists but is "absent" in the sense that it is not deployed for use. In fact, new forms of technology including the internet of things (IOT), big data, artificial intelligence and social media, presents a unique opportunity to mine data sources in novel ways. It is critical that such data is utilized to assess progress on SDGs.

The role of regional cooperation, partnerships and stakeholder participation in implementing the SDGs

Accelerated social development in South Asia is imperative for the region to get on track to achieve the SDGs. However, divergence in performance between countries is compounded by significant geographical disparities within countries and increasing inequality and wealth concentration. A few authors point out that given the similar initial conditions as well as the shared economic and administrative challenges of the countries in South Asia, it is critical to have a coordinated, strategic vision for the SDGs at the regional level that can complement the national vision.

The optimizers for regional cooperation require examining the SDGs from the point of view of what can be achieved regionally and therefore, which SDGs are impacted. Regional cooperation and integration are important for several reasons including food and energy security and sustainability. 'While the 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes the role of regional cooperation for SDG 1.b (regional frameworks for poverty reduction), SDG 2.5 (regional seed banks), SDG 9.1 (regional and cross-border infrastructure), SDG

11.a (regional development planning), and SDG 17 (regional development partnership), regional cooperation would be critical for achieving a number of other goals and targets including SDG 3 (to address cross-border spread of disease), SDG 7 (regional energy security, SDG 8 (regional value chains for job creation and economic growth) and SDG 9 (sustainable industrialization), for SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15 (environment and climate change), and for SDG 16 (for addressing illicit financial flows and cross-border crime, drugs smuggling and terrorism). Enhanced regional cooperation on social sectors can help in the sharing of learnings and best practices as well as build a common pool of capacity development human resources and funds to draw upon as and when needed. Existing intergovernmental mechanism for regional cooperation must be supplemented by knowledge networks, expert rosters, media and working groups that galvanize focused public action.

Partnership and stakeholder participation have been mentioned as a core theme in the case study on Bangladesh. It is here where context and current baseline matter. Bangladesh with its unique combination of civil society activism and government authoritarianism typical of unitary government is able to integrate SDGs with its national plan and budget under the Five Point Framework. In India, with a large and influential private/ public enterprise sector, the Global Compact approach can leverage both financial and policy input resources from outside the government budget and implementation system. Corporate Social Responsibility and new models of social business can have a much greater traction in a rapidly growing multi-trillion-dollar economy. South-South cooperation is much in vogue in India and this can be leveraged to foster greater regional cooperation within South Asia.

The analysis in this book also flags the need for more efficient resource allocation, greater accountability, advocacy at the regional and global level as also more effective partnerships between government, civil society and the private sector, coherence around national policies, grassroots mobilization and participation. Additionally, resource mobilization for SDGs also requires a reassessment of the range of stakeholders that get energized by the SDG agenda. There is a big role for NGOs, philanthropists and businesses via corporate social responsibility. The sustainability of the SDGs should be built in to the mandate of civil society organizations and corporate groups.

Causality

The symbiotic nature of the development goals underlines the need for cross-institutional, cross-sectoral and cross-goal thinking. For instance, the objective of ending poverty in all its forms requires not only steps to bring down income poverty (whether the global poverty line of USD 1.25 per day or national poverty line) to nearly zero but also expanding social protection coverage, financial inclusion and rights over land, water and forests as well as increased resource mobilization globally for anti-poverty programmes.

It is worth emphasizing that there is less than expected correlation between levels of per capita income and degree of development on the one hand and the achievement of the SDGs on the other. There are variations in the 2015 baseline given the uneven progress in South Asia with regard to MDGs – countries like Bangladesh have made huge progress in social sectors during the MDG period, including on gender indicators, whereas other countries like India have made huge leaps in economic growth but still have very large

pockets of poverty and a considerable deficit when it comes to child mortality, reproductive health, levels of learning and violence against women.

There are synergies across goals as well as inherent contradictions. For instance, there is a strong correlation between SDGs and gender in both causal directions indicating interdependency between gender and other SDGs. 'Gender inequalities are multidimensional and intersecting; hence, they impact and are impacted by many of the goals in addition to goal 5.' The inverse relationship between economic growth and environment presents a contradiction to policy makers. Similarly, the link between increasing decent work standards on the one hand and issues relating to informality and costs of social reproduction on the other if often problematic. A holistic policy framework and resorting to public pressure to resolve these contradictions is needed. However, as pointed out in the case study on Pakistan, resorting to popular pressure is not always easy to accomplish, as politicians are reliant on short-termism and looking for quick electoral gains.

Policy Priorities for the SDGs in South Asia

It is clear that if the SDGs have to be binding imperatives till 2030 then we need to build up a more systematic model than is currently the case. In terms of further analytical work, the following steps would require consideration:

- **Strategic assessment of** the context in South Asia: This involves analyzing trends and drivers of possible future scenarios and examining regional interdependencies. This can include examination of possible shocks, risks and opportunities.

- **Prioritization of** issues that need to be addressed with a sustainability lens including identification of populations, demographic cohorts, ethnic groups, and geographical areas that need to be addressed immediately, given the SDG credo of leaving no one behind and reaching the last first. Seven key strategic priorities have been identified that can accelerate a virtuous cycle of spill over so that progress in one goal can precipitate progress in others.

- **Conduct** gap assessment using modelling techniques for achieving specific SDGs, including techniques such as back-casting. Back-casting or reverse projection is a planning method that starts with defining a desirable future and then works backwards to identify policies and programmes that will connect the future to the present. While doing this exercise, also one can examine gaps in the related statistical systems.

- **Specification** of decisions and actions, based on the gap assessments, that are required to be taken by all stakeholders. These could include:

  - Identifying and scaling up the accelerators within regional and country programmes for achievement of SDG targets.

  - Development of an effective communication plan for the SDGs in South Asia to ensure greater participation of communities, local governance institutions, civil society, private and public sector, media and academia for improved implementation and monitoring of the goals.

  - Improving efficiency of public service delivery by increase in productivity and reduction in costs of delivery and better targeting of population groups that are the most marginalised and vulnerable (These population groups could include rural populations, women and children, migrants, people living in remote areas or conflict-affected areas, persons with disabilities, minorities, indigenous people/ "tribals").

  - Identifying and introducing technological innovations in public service delivery some of which have already been adopted in some areas but would require scaling up across countries.

  - Identifying policy or regulatory constraints affecting service delivery and designing steps for removing/ reducing these.

- **Identification** of collaborative action by institutions, departments, agencies and development partners which are critical for planned interventions. In doing so, to also identify the coordination mechanism to promote and incentivise convergence and its required mind-set and behaviour change.

- **Adoption** of monitorable indicators for each of the goals which should assume the 2015 value as the baseline and the projected value as a target for 2030. This would include realistic projections for the intermediate time points.

- **Enumeration** of steps to be taken by departments and agencies for timely, disaggregated and reliable data availability for the SDG indicators.

- **Provision of** practical incentives to ensure that the data is captured from Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) based software being developed by various departments for data integrity and consistency and is available on real-time basis.

- **Linkage** of SDG indicators database to Geographic Information System (GIS) and a regional SDG dashboard to suggest a road map to implement the 2030 Agenda.

- **Financing of the SDGs:** Earlier aid flows were directed through the UN, Bretton Woods Institutions and other multilateral development finance institutions, along with bilateral programmes. Today, the "Global South" exemplified in developing countries' partnerships such as BRICS, SCO and other platforms, has acquired greater prominence, financial clout and role in global development dialogue. The new multilateral institutions (such as the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS Bank which are capitalised larger than the World Bank Group) have a significant role to play in financing SDGs and providing stability to the world economy as growth strategies are calibrated to account for environmental sustainability and climate change. It will be useful to assess the trends thus far and identify the road ahead for SDG financing, including leveraging these institutions to strengthen domestic resource mobilisation from the private sector.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals set an inclusive, sustainable and integrated vision for global action over the next 15 years. By balancing economic growth, social justice and environmental conservation alongside peace, human rights and partnerships, the agenda breaks meaningful new ground. The promise of the SDGs is great and the current data indicate the prospects for achievement are substantial. Performance therefore must go beyond the business as usual and each stakeholder must be brought on board to understand the urgency of achieving the goals.

SDGs in South Asia are informed by the unfinished MDG agenda, yet go beyond it in the sense not only of new challenges in social sectors but also the inter-penetration between social development, economic growth, environment and challenges of ensuring justice for all, peace and improved governance, especially for the most disadvantaged social groups and communities. Leaving no one behind necessarily entails reaching the last first. For this to happen, one needs to pinpoint policy measures, institutional capacity development strategies and more effective local service delivery to meet the SDGs- all within a regional cooperation framework. Further work in the series on SDGs in South Asia will therefore focus on the economic development goals and then the environment and climate change related goals. Only then will one complete a 360-degree holistic and convergent overview of sustainable development in South Asia.

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Policy Consultation on India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities

Engaging participants during the Consultation organized at RGICS on 28th November, 2019.

Consultation on "India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities"

RGICS Team*

A Consultation was held on the above topic on November 28, 2019 at the RGICS, based on a paper commissioned by the RGICS written by Mr Salil Shetty and Ms Tara Sahgal. The following is background note, followed by a report on the Consultation. The paper is at https://www.rgics.org/occasional-papers/.

Background

Coined by Joseph S Nye, Jr. in the late 1980s, the term "soft power" is still invoked in foreign policy debates. Soft power is the ability of a country to attract and persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion; while hard power is the ability to coerce arising out of a country's military or economic might. Nye holds that the culture, ideals, and values of United States have been extraordinarily important in helping Washington attract partners and supporters. When policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, soft power is enhanced. In this context, it is good to remember that Nye served as a former assistant secretary of defense. Nye does not deny the importance of maintaining the military strength of United States, "but power comes in many guises; and soft power is not weakness. It is a form of power and the failure to incorporate it in our national strategy is a serious mistake". Nye acknowledges the critical role of non-state actors like companies, foundations, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society in shaping long-term attitudes and preferences. Evidently, Nye is not oblivious of the importance of hard power, and argues that successful states need both hard and soft power.

Much later, in the Preface to his 2004 book, *Soft Power – The Means to Success in World Politics,* Nye laments: "Some have misunderstood it, misused and trivialized it as merely the influence of Coca-Cola, Hollywood, blue jeans, and money. Even more frustrating has been to watch some policy makers ignore the importance of our soft power and make us all pay the price by unnecessarily squandering it." And he goes on to contend that some leaders do not understand the crucial importance of soft power in the re-ordered post-September 11 world. Of course, hard power remains crucial in a world of states trying to guard their independence and of non-state groups willing to turn to violence. But according to Nye, the neo-conservatives are making a major miscalculation; they focus

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too heavily on using America's military power to force other nations to do what US wants, and they pay too little heed to America's soft power. Nye does acknowledge the limits of soft power: it tends to diffuse effects on the outside world and is not easily wielded to achieve specific outcomes. Indeed, societies often embrace American values and culture but resist US foreign policies. But overall, Nye's message is that US security hinges as much on soft power as hard power:

"It is soft power that will help prevent terrorists from recruiting supporters from among the moderate majority. And it is soft power that will help us deal with critical global issues that require multilateral cooperation among states. That is why it is so essential that America better understands and applies our soft power."

Three Developments: Rise of Populism, Ascendency of China, and Changes in Bases of Soft Power

In its August 2018 issue, *Foreign Policy* published an *article,* "The Rise and Fall of Soft Power" with the subtitle that Joseph Nye's concept has lost relevance, but China could bring it back. The article *was adapted from a lecture* given by Eric Li - venture capitalist and political scientist based in Shanghai. Among other things, Li makes three interesting observations. The first is the rise of populism (though Li doesn't use the term as such) in the form of anti-liberal governing majorities in such developed countries as Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and the United States. This he attributes to the failure of neoliberal economic revolution, which was part and parcel of the soft power era but which weakened states instead of strengthening them. In other words, soft power as conceptualized by Nye is a thing of the past. And if America was the major proponent of soft power earlier, today it is biggest player of the hard power game: *"fire and fury to North Korea, trade wars on everyone, gutting the WTO, and using domestic laws to punish foreign companies for doing business with a third country."*

The second is not just the "astonishing" ascendency of China at a speed and scale not witnessed in human history; it is the manner in which it achieved this. It rejected Western definitions of democracy, freedom, and human rights, and it retained and strengthened its one-party political system. *"It engineered its own highly complex transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, yet it refused to allow the market to rise above the state. In fact, the state remained the primary shaper of China's economy."* So, within forty years, it turned from a poor agrarian backwater into the largest industrial economy in the world by purchasing power parity; and in the process lifted 700 million people out of poverty. Today, it is the largest trading nation in the world.

And that leads Li to his final observation about the changes in the bases of soft power. Li notes that the phenomenal achievements of China could be the content of a new kind of soft power. First, in soft power terms, China did not agree to want what the West wanted—culturally, ideologically, or institutionally. Second, it leveraged its massive capital and capacity in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative to drive infrastructure-led development in other countries to spur economic growth that would ultimately benefit China itself. Third, soft power has assumed formal recognition as an instrument of state policy, with the third plenary session of 18th CPC devoting an entire session on using Chinese cultural power as a means to extend its soft power across the world, with President Xi Jinping stating that time has come for China to use its soft power underscoring the "Chinese narrative". Finally – and this is perhaps the most important one – it called for "a community of shared destiny", in which nations may follow their own

development paths while working to increase interconnectedness. As Xi Jinping put it: *"You don't have to want to be like us, you don't have to want what we want; you can participate in a new form of globalization while retaining your own culture, ideology, and institutions."* This, according to Li, is in many ways the opposite of Nye's formulation. Actually, Li holds that while the West linked soft power and liberalism, that coupling was never necessary. While there is no illusion in Beijing that any kind of soft power can exist and succeed without hard power, China's proposition is more accommodating of differences.

India's Emergent Position on Soft Power

A survey of the top 30 countries of soft power in 2018 conducted by the USC Centre on Public Diplomacy gave the number one ranking to the UK with an 80.55 score. India, with a score of 40.65, did not enter the shortlist. *Brookings India,* an independent, non-partisan public policy research organisation based in New Delhi offers some explanations. Firstly, any measure of soft power that compares countries on a per capita basis is bound to favour developed states over developing ones such as India. So while India has more UNESCO World Heritage sites than all but five other countries, and more public policy think tanks than any country outside the United States, China, and United Kingdom, but it still fares poorly on tourism and education on a per capita basis. Secondly, India rates badly on any measure of state-driven cultural diffusion rather than more organic and natural private sector and citizen-led efforts.

Still, India has a reasonably good track record of leveraging its culture, political values, and foreign policy for national objectives. There was also a strong moral streak in India's external engagement during the Cold War, helped in part by its self-perception as a pluralistic but postcolonial democracy. Similarly, India's principled boycott of South Africa for its racist Apartheid policies won it respect from post-colonial states across Africa. As a democracy with a rich culture and a modicum of principle in its international engagement, it has often benefited in real, tangible ways from its soft power.

But that's like going back in history. In contemporary setting, unlike the case of China where the all-powerful CPC and President Xi Jinping have made categorical statements about the country's soft power, no official position on soft power is visible in India. However, there was extensive media coverage of Foreign Minister S Jaishankar's interactions with government and opinion makers during his recent trip to US in September 2019, with one Washington based columnist captioning her dispatch as *"Jaishankar defines India's place in the new world".* While one gets no inkling about the Indian state's position on soft or hard power, Jaishankar did explain how India sees the world – a fluid array of multiple poles where convergence is possible but not congruence, where it is natural to engage with the US, China and Russia all at the same time. Further, India will demand a greater voice; it will engage more but also hedge enough to have a bargaining hand, and it will be more nationalistic but also more internationalist.

Consultation

With above as background, we are in an informed position to appreciate the Consultation on Soft Power held at RGICS on 28th November, 2019. The Consultation began with Salil Shetty making a presentation of the paper, "Can India do more to leverage its soft power?" co-authored by Tara Sahgal. While this paper appears as a separate piece in this issue of Policy Watch, below we present the gist but more importantly the observations and comments of the experts who had gathered for the Consultation.

At the outset, Shetty provided three reasons for discussing soft power now: change in global power dynamics with the decline of the US; rise of China as the second global superpower and its aggressive positioning in U.N. processes; and new aggressive Indian Hindu regime. The objective of the paper was to identify some key opportunities and challenges for India's soft power in today's context

Shetty categorized the major sources of India's soft power into two categories: non-state driven and state- driven. In the former category fell yoga, diaspora, medicine, education, Bollywood, TV and culture; while space diplomacy, tourism, diplomatic outreach, Panchsheel and non-alignment and democracy fell in the state-driven category. Key areas of opportunity in the state driven category in the area of space diplomacy were Mangalyaan mission (2013) and launch of 104 satellites in a single rocket (2017), with India providing cost-effective alternatives to developing countries to launch satellites. While India's civilization provided spiritual and cultural connect with other nations (e.g. the Buddha Trail), increased tourism can lead to both increased revenue and an increased dissemination of Indian culture. Key areas of opportunity in the non-state category were the diaspora with CEOs of corporate giants such as Microsoft and Google, and Indian art and culture being popularised by fashion designers. Then there were Indian soap operas with popularity of shows such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Bahu Thi* and *Balika Vadhu,* while a recent poll revealed that one in six Vietnamese people view India in a favourable light.

Coming to India's influence in the world, Shetty held that while India has immense potential, the reality is that its influence does not match its resources. Research such as the Power Index published by the Lowy Institute ranked India fourth for overall power in the world; surprisingly, it is in the sphere of diplomatic influence and people-to-people diplomacy that India falls short of countries such as Japan and China. It is for these reasons that in the Power Index, India is regarded as an "under-achiever"– a country

whose resources far outweigh its influence. Shetty shared a diagram which showed that despite India having a vast number of resources, coming close to China and the USA, its influence remains much lesser as compared to countries with lesser resources. Why is this the case? Shetty tried to answer this through their primary research. Findings from primary research indicated two challenges to soft power. The first was religious intolerance which ranked very high (5 on a 6-point scale), followed by barriers to free speech. Caste conflicts also ranked high (4 out of 6).

Their primary research also identified four domestic challenges that affect India's soft power: abrogation of Article 370 and subsequently India's strained relationship with the people of J&K; economic slowdown; rise of hate crimes; and military pressure.

India's relationship with its neighbours was also seen as a major concern. The following five aspects were identified. First was India's big-brother attitude in South Asia as a source of nervousness and tension for many. Second was Indo-Pak relations at an all-time low. Third was the relationship with Bangladesh, especially the implications of India's implementation of NRC. Fourth was the impact of the blockade of 2015 on Nepal. And finally, we have China's expanding footprint in the region.

Salil Shetty raised the following key questions for discussion:

- How can India overcome these challenges, and can it do so under the current regime?
- Do the participants agree with the framing of the problem, the challenges and the opportunities for India's soft power?
- Is there any important element or angle that has been missed?
- Within the current reality, are there any other creative opportunities to maximise India's soft power?
- Should further work be commissioned on this subject?

Prof. Partha S Ghosh, former Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and currently Senior Fellow, Institute of Social sciences was the first to respond and in a very detailed manner. He started by saying that soft power is enhanced by hard power, but the latter has to be tempered. But this had to be seen in the context of "structure of decision making in the arena of foreign policy" - where academics are a part of foreign policy formulation and practice. In the US, academics move from universities to State Department or Department of Defense and vice-versa. But not so in India. As illustration, he took Henry Kissinger's name. In the same vein he said, academics are not taken seriously, except from the field of science and technology.

He added that many influential people simply don't give any credence to soft power with the result that public diplomacy is missing in India. This was not just with External Affairs, but key ministries in India treat foreign scholars shabbily. In contrast, take Fulbright Fellowship of US. The impact of the Fulbright program of the US is enormous in building elite goodwill as Fulbright scholars are likely to have a more positive view of America which might help America in many ways later. But we have no idea how to build *social capital.* ICSSR International Program for PhD and post Doctorate scholars was not workable due to Visa problems.

Later, Prof. Ghosh drew the linkage of soft power with hard power, adding the imagery that soft power goes with masculinity, as when a weak man talks goodie-goodie, it doesn't wash. But when a strong man presents a soft side, it counts. But no matter what, actions and words must go together.

On the aspect of diaspora, he held that it is a double-edged sword. Indian diaspora in the US, being second richest, can be very vulnerable (e.g. the people of Japanese origin in the US during World War II). Many view the 'Howdy Modi' event in Houston with trepidation, as it appears for the first time, an India Prime Minister has interfered in US's internal political affairs. Tomorrow, things may boomerang badly if things go wrong.

Referring to the bureaucratic approach to visas for scholars, which did not make sense, Prof. Ghosh gave an example, of the denial of visa to a Pakistani lady, married to a German, who taught yoga in Germany. She wanted to come to India to upgrade her skills, but was denied visa. Prof. Ghosh maintained that these bureaucrats don't realise that a Pakistani lady teaching yoga is a better ambassador for yoga and India's soft power than an Indian teaching yoga.

With respect to India's soft power, he added that democracy and diversity have been our two big strengths. But our actions in Kashmir have shaken western powers. They may be silent, but they are not comfortable. Similarly, in spite of our "Neighborhood First" policy, we have in fact worsened our relationship with all our neighbors in the last six years. In Nepal, there is so much anger against India after the 2015 blockade because it caused such havoc in the lives of ordinary Nepalese.

In contrast, China is clear headed and does not believe in soft power. But they kept their mouth shut till they built their strength. And in this context, we don't compare with China at all. Take coal consumption, electricity consumption, number of hospital beds. The gap is in the ratio of 1:10; now probably 1:20. The important thing in reducing this gap is that if we don't accept reality, we can't improve. Later, he added that during the 50s, there was

tremendous intellectual engagement between India and China. When China realized that the Soviet model of data capturing wasn't helping them, they turned to India to learn and use statistics. Post Mao, much has changed in China, except their centralism and authoritarianism.

Finally, stitching a linkage between democratic arrangement, federalism, soft power and foreign policy, he urged the need to look back in history. For thousands of years, India has always been a federal country. There has to be some sort of consistency between our foreign policy and our social arrangements, and with our history. Our social and political systems are closer to democratic countries of the West. So, maybe we should fashion our foreign policy responses accordingly.

Continuing the debate, Prof. Mahendra Gaur added that while it is easy to organise conferences, it is very difficult to get visas for foreign scholars, especially Chinese. Extending his arguments to the sphere of education, Prof Gaur emphasized that high quality of university education is a good source of soft power. He urged the participants to think that while thousands of Indian students are going to Australia to study, why isn't one single student from Australia coming to India to study. To improve standards, encourage opening of foreign universities in India, and over time, India's soft power will improve.

Regarding neighborhood policy, Prof. Gaur said that while India is accused of interfering in neighbour's internal matters, the neighbours also use the "Big Brother" tag for leveraging their position, including for managing domestic politics. Extending his arguments on building relations with neighbours as an important source of soft power, he said that we should improve our relations with our neighbours independent of China.

In contrast, another participant, Prof. Anshu Joshi, also of Jawaharlal Nehru University, concentrated on other sources of soft power that India could leverage. First, she referred to management of environment as an element of soft power - provided we can make breakthroughs. She asked, how do we solve key problems of water, air pollution etc. so that we can attract foreign direct investment (FDI)?

Second, she referred to food and cinema as sources of soft power, and questioned whether we were leveraging these to our advantage. She gave the example of James Bond movies: while James Bond is depicted as a hero, the Russians are shown in a degrading manner. This double imagery works on the minds of people, benefitting one country at the expense of another.

Third, while yoga is being used a soft power, what about Ayurveda? The westerners are integrating ayurveda and modern medicine and they are keeping us out. So, can we use ayurveda as an official medium of medical tourism? To this, Prof. Ghosh said that while we have been Vishwa Guru in this aspect, we haven't really capitalized on this. Vijay Mahajan, CEO of RGICS added that while we have a 5,000 year tradition and North East India alone has 6,000 plant varieties, but since we don't comply with international manufacturing standards we are losing out in capturing world market and in the process missing out an opportunity to increase our soft power.

Intervening in the discussion, Ms. Shreshtha Chakrabarti, research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, drew the attention of the audience to the role of some state institutions in advancing India's soft power. Drawing on her own experience, she lamented that while

Indian Council of Cultural relations (ICCR) is designed to be the cultural ambassador of India, its functioning is bumbling. Then she added an altogether new dimension: soft power is not just to be targeted to citizens of another country. How a country treats its own diaspora is equally important. For example, the Indian diaspora in Gulf includes large number of blue collar workers and they are often in much trouble. But Indian government has done precious little.

Next, Mr Biraj Pattnaik of Amnesty South Asia, drew the attention of the audience to the linkage of the functioning of democratic institutions with the projection of soft power. In this connection he referred to the collapse of constitutional morality in our country that has reduced our standing in the eyes of neighbors. To this he added that the treatment meted out to minorities is also a big issue and is being watched by international fora.

In the final stages of the Consultation, Dr Amir Ullah Khan of RGICS pointed out a source of soft power which is on the wane of late. He said, training that India imparted to diplomats, civil servants and professionals from development sector from other developing countries had created a lot of goodwill. On a different note, he added that Indian FDI abroad is a new source of soft power.

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India's Place in the World: From Panchsheel to RCEP

Somnath Ghosh*

Abstract

Post-independence, in spite of widespread poverty and underdevelopment, India enjoyed a moral high among the comity of nations, and this was not just limited to newly independent nations. Through Panchsheel and non-alignment, India led the world to a new political and social alignment that strove for inclusiveness, peace and development. Economic cooperation and social discourse were byproducts; not the main drivers. And India's institutions and practices with all their faults and foibles, aligned with its role in the world. But gradually, three developments seem to have contributed to a paradigm shift. First is the unstated assertion of sovereign identity of India's smaller neighbours in South and South East Asia, some surpassing India in economic and HDI development. Second, while in some niche areas like space technology India has joined an elite club, the leitmotif of our social fabric has undergone a distinct shift with the world perceiving us as manifestly different from what we orchestrate. Finally, in security, economic, trade and geo-political spheres, we seem to be operating under the shadow of an all-powerful China. All these have implications for policy and practice not just at the state level but for civil society and other non-state actors.

Introduction

How do people view the United States of America? Even as other nations have progressed, it is still the world's largest economy, the world's financial hub, and the reigning military power. It has the capacity to lift other economies and the power to make and break nations. Love it or hate it, no nation can run roughshod over America.

But there's another dimension. Change the question a little bit: what attracts *people* all over the world to this country, and the complexion changes. It is seen as a potpourri of cultures from across the world where there's space for all; it is seen as a land of opportunity where one can grow and prosper, irrespective of the field one chooses. Whether universities, hospitals, museums, science and technology, America has some of the finest institutions. It is a place of freedom and equality where merit trumps everything else, in spite of occasional cases of racial discrimination. All these put together constitute the *American dream.* In pursuing this *American dream,* democracy and liberalism are so central that not only are these taken for granted, they don't even enter

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the realm of normal discourse. In short, it is the power of ideas, of values, of lived experiences, and the institutions that are created to both nurture and reflect these core elements that matter most to people.

Both the above contexts are relevant; though the significance that one may attach may vary significantly. This in turn has action consequences. For example, although Russia was part of G8, seven member countries condemned and "disinvited" Russia after it annexed the Crimean part of Ukraine in 2014, thus "contravening the principles and values on which the G7 and the G8 operate". On the other hand, there are far more instances of nation states cozying up to authoritarian states with dismal record of human right violation on the single premise of economic benefit arising out of investment and trade. Therefore, it is from both the above contexts that we will examine India's place in the world post-independence.

Panchsheel: The Dawn of an Era

Considered one of the greatest speeches of the 20th century, Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' speech delivered to Indian Constituent Assembly in the Central Hall of Parliament on the eve of India's independence on 14th August 1947 was as much directed to the world as it was to his countrymen. There was no populism in the short speech that Nehru delivered; in any case the solemnity of the occasion and the sanctity of the Constituent Assembly precluded that.

Nehru was often seen as a dreamer and an idealist, but it was his keen sense of history which made him proud of India's heritage in all possible spheres and, given that, the role it ought to play in the comity of nations. But much that Nehru was proud of India's heritage, he was also an internationalist. It was this expanse of his vision that foreclosed any hegemonic desire. So, while his 'Tryst with Destiny' speech was certainly for his countrymen who had just gained independence, it reached out to many nations. His refrain was peace, prosperity, freedom and democracy – strong ideals for many nations that were on the brink of achieving independence from foreign yoke:

"Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart… Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom, so is prosperity now, and so also is disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.

"It is a fateful moment for us in India, for all Asia and for the world. A new star rises, the star of freedom in the east, a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materialises. May the star never set and that hope never be betrayed!

"To the nations and people of the world we send greetings and pledge ourselves to cooperate with them in furthering peace, freedom and democracy."

Within years of gaining independence, India was playing a decisive role not just in shaping discourse in international relations but in determining how nations would conduct themselves in their interactions. But how could newly independent India with all its constraints of poverty and underdevelopment play an influencing role in the world? It was perhaps inevitable that Nehru, with his keen sense of history laced with idealism, would draw upon a concept which while deeply rooted in Indian tradition would be eclectic enough to be accepted by nations of diverse faith and political preferences. And that was *Panchsheel.*

While the concept of *Panchsheel* is very much rooted in Indian tradition, it saw fructification in what's popularly known as the *Panchsheel* Treaty between India and China. Technically it was an *Agreement (with exchange of notes) on trade and intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India* signed at Peking, on 29 April 1954 (United Nations: 1958) which was "based on the following principles:

  (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty,

  (2) mutual non-aggression,

  (3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs,

  (4) equality and mutual benefit, and

  (5) peaceful co-existence

To give due credit to respective parties, it was Sukarno who, in June 1945 (even before Indonesia gained independence), had enunciated five general principles similar to *Panchsheel* that he said would guide Indonesia's relations with other nations of the world. And, between December 1953 and April 1954 when the treaty was finally signed, negotiations were going on the basis of five principles of peaceful coexistence that China had brought to the negotiating table.

The *Agreement* by itself formalized what was already customarily operational, relating the movement of pilgrims and traders and maintenance of rest houses, but what followed was the internationalization of the *Panchsheel* principle when at the Bandug Conference of April 1955 twenty nine Afro-Asian countries participated and resolved to conduct their relations on similar lines. "The universal relevance of *Panchsheel* was emphasised when its tenets were incorporated in a resolution on peaceful co-existence presented by India, Yugoslavia and Sweden, and unanimously adopted on December 11, 1957, by the UN General Assembly. In 1961, the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Belgrade accepted *Panchsheel* as the principled core of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)."

It was certainly not easy for non-alignment to be accepted by world powers, especially United States of America. Crabb (1972) reports:

"During the 1950s the official American attitude was expressed by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' widely-circulated judgment that "neutralism is immoral" (a condemnation from which Dulles always excluded India)" (p. 298) (emphasis added).

However, by the time President Eisenhower's term ended, high-ranking American officials had come to terms with NAM. Why would Dulles exclude India from his condemnation of non-alignment? While scholars have not particularly addressed this issue, it is perhaps of India's soft power that aligned with the ethos and some of the ideals held closely by United States: namely, freedom, democracy and the creation of independent institutions.

Charting the Present

Fifty eight years after the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations adopted *Panchsheel* as the "principled core of non-aligned movement", much has changed. Today with 125 members and 20 observer countries, it is the largest grouping of states after UN. Yet for India which was one of the founding members, the interest as well as significance seems to have waned. Symbolic as it may appear, Prime Minister Modi skipped the 17th NAM Summit in Venezuela in 2016 – the first Indian Prime Minister to do so. As an encore, he skipped the next Summit again at Baku, Azerbaijan in October this year. As if explaining away the Indian PM's decision to skip the Summit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said in a statement at the NAM ministerial meet in Baku, "Long-held assumptions and alignments rooted in the legacies of colonialism and the ideology of the Cold War are making way for new configurations and partnerships", however maintaining that "India remains committed to the principles and objectives of the Non Aligned Movement, including our long-standing solidarity and support for the Palestinian cause".

Long before Jaishankar articulated the above, it would be appropriate to say that post NAM, India's concern has been to find a place *in world economy.* A significant development was the emergence of the *Four Asian Tigers.* Beginning early 1960s (mid-1950s for Hong Kong), the economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan underwent rapid industrialization and maintained exceptionally high growth rates (in excess of 7 percent a year). Industrial policies fashioned by neo-liberalism with a focus on exports and supported by low taxes and reduced state welfare were attributed to the four Asian Tigers' success. Not unnaturally perhaps, neighbouring Asian states wanted to follow suit. In 1967, ASEAN (Association of South East Nations) was formed with five member countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Seventeen years later in 1984, Brunei joined as the sixth member[2].

Not being a South East Asian country, India had no place in this configuration of ASEAN (though much later in 1992, it would become a sectoral dialogue partner and 1996, full dialogue partner). One would therefore suppose that it suited India to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 with seven other nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. But that was

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[2] Much later, four more countries joined ASEAN to take total membership to ten: Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999).

certainly not the case. From its very inception, member countries treated it with suspicion and mistrust. According to Joyeeta Bhattacharjee of the Observer Research Foundation, when SAARC was first envisioned in the late 1970s by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, the military dictator of Bangladesh, India was apprehensive

"because it perceived the grouping to be an attempt by its smaller neighbours to unite against it. The Cold War politics of the time, too, contributed to India's anxiety. India had a close relationship with the Soviet Union, and it considered Ziaur Rahman to be aligned with the West. It was, therefore, suspicious that SAARC could be an American mechanism to counter Soviet influence in the region. It feared that the association might lead to Asia's own Cold War, creating a pro-Soviet–anti-Soviet rift. This would have played against India's interest since it had close strategic ties with the Soviet Union.

Eventually, India agreed to join SAARC due to the interest expressed by the neighbouring countries. The first SAARC meeting took place in Dhaka in 1985, and there have been 18 summits till date. However, the organisation has not had a smooth run. In the 30 years of its history, annual SAARC summits have been postponed 11 times for political reasons, either bilateral or internal".

Even otherwise, the composition of the SAARC was perhaps a sure recipe for sluggish growth, if not failure. All the eight states, including India, had terrible infrastructure, sluggish growth, low HDI and lacked industrial policies that would aid rapid industrialization. There were two other problems. India was not only seen as a big brother, but with big brotherly attitude that was perceived to interfere in the internal matters of other states. Next, India's relations with Pakistan were always troubled.

So, while numerous agreements have been signed and institutional mechanisms established under SAARC, they have not been adequately implemented. The South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) is often highlighted as a prominent outcome of SAARC, but that, too, is yet to be implemented. Despite SAFTA coming into effect as early as 2006, the intra-regional trade continues to be at a meagre five percent[3]. It was therefore no surprise when former External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, called SAARC a "complete failure":

"The experiment has failed as SAARC is no longer a vibrant regional organisation like other global examples. India has a long standing trading relation with Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, but all those are bilateral ties independent of SAARC. Even with Afghanistan, which is a new entrant to SAARC, India has good relations, but that again it is independent of SAARC.
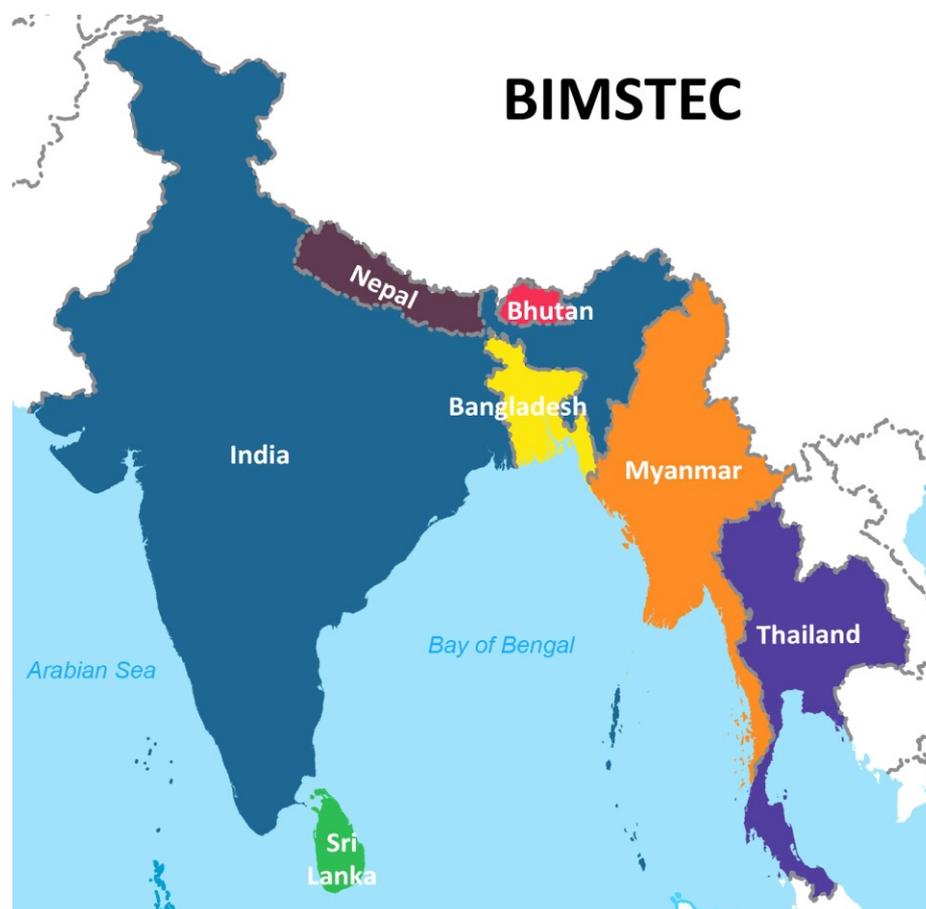
With Bangladesh, we had a rough patch when Begum Zia was the Prime Minister as they constantly raised the issue of imbalance of trade between India and Bangladesh. Even they did not allow Tata Group to invest there."[4]

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[3] See Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The search for the ideal platform for regional cooperation", https://www.orfonline.org/research/saarc-vs-bimstec-the-search-for-the-ideal-platform-for-regional-cooperation/. Accessed 27th October, 2019

[4] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/special-report/the-saarc-experiment-has-failed/articleshow/6096578.cms?from=mdr. Accessed 27th October, 2019

From SAARC to BIMSTEC

SAARC's failure led in January 1997 to the formation of *Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation* (BIST-EC), often referred to as mini SAARC. In Dec 1997, when Myanmar joined, BIST-EC was renamed BIMST-EC to reflect this inclusion. Finally, when Nepal and Bhutan joined in 2004, the acronym remained, it was renamed *Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation* (BIMSTEC). For India, BIMSTEC provided the conduit to ASEAN countries which was a major component of its Look East Policy, now rechristened 'Act East' policy[5]. However, from the trade point of view, it hasn't helped India much. This is because while BIMSTEC has helped smaller countries like Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to increase their intra-BIMSTEC trade to 59.13 percent, 36.14 percent, 18.42 percent and 11.55 percent respectively, for India and Thailand, it is around three percent of its total trade.

Prime Minister Modi has shown a clear preference to BIMSTEC over SAARC. Five years ago, his oath taking ceremony was witnessed by top SAARC leaders. The occasion was the showpiece event of PM Modi's neighbourhood diplomacy. It began with optimism particularly in the context of Pakistan. It was followed by unusual gestures including a mid-air diversion to then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's family function and an unscheduled meeting during Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Kazakhstan's capital Astana in 2017. But this year, he invited the leaders of BIMSTEC countries, extending it to Kyrgyzstan President and Mauritian premier for his swearing-in as prime minister on May 30, 2019.

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[5] As we shall see later, this stance has been seriously dented by its refusal to sign the RCEP treaty almost at the last moment.

According to reports[6], BIMSTEC was not on PM Modi's agenda till September 2016, when Pakistan-based terrorists targeted the Uri base camp of the army. Uri terror attack jolted Modi government's trust in Pakistani leadership of fighting terror. In October 2016, he had hosted an outreach summit with BIMSTEC leaders during BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in Goa. This was the first big push under the Modi government to India-BIMSTEC relationship. So, when the Modi government boycotted November 2016 SAARC summit in Islamabad, almost all BIMSTEC countries supported India. Summit was postponed, Pakistan stood isolated in the grouping and India claimed diplomatic victory on the issue of terrorism.

But how far both SAARC and BIMSTEC worked can be seen from Some may dismiss the above lament – if one may say so – with the same nonchalance as the development in Nepal when after wrapping up his India visit, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, travelled to Kathmandu for a two-day State visit. A visit which according to Hindustan Times editorial

"has qualitatively changed the nature of bilateral ties. China and Nepal declared themselves "strategic partners" for the first time… Nepal has also changed externally. Nationally – defined as resistance to India – has deepened. And its political elite has sought to reduce dependence on Delhi, while enhancing linkages with Beijing… New Delhi (should) be worried. Its political mismanagement of Nepal, failure to deliver on projects, and inconsistent policymaking has, in no small measure, created this new strategic dynamic."

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Meanwhile, in 2001 the SCO had already been formed by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrygzstan, Russia, Tajikstan & Uzbekistan. What's noteworthy is that by 2007 the SCO had initiated over twenty large-scale projects related to transportation, energy and telecommunications and held regular meetings on security, military, defence, and foreign affairs. It was only in June 2017 that India and Pakistan officially joined SCO as full members. So, first time after NAM, here is China and India "pitted" in the same bloc.

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[6] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/story-behind-narendra-modi-s-shift-from-saarc-to-bimstec-1536707-2019-05-28

But China's growth story has been phenomenal. As per latest World Bank figures, China remains the world's second largest economy; and with India slipping to the seventh position behind United Kingdom and France, China's GDP is 4.99 times more than India's. That gives China the scope to play decisive role in world affairs which it has been doing aggressively over the past few years. In short, China is everywhere. Many Indians would be tempted to emulate the Chinese story of growth to provide India that extra muscle to graduate from a regional to a global power. In a short but brilliant piece of incisive writing, a young Indian historian has cautioned why imitating the Chinese state may be catastrophic for India (Ghosh, 2019). Being a one-party authoritarian state, China could script its economic miracle on the back of some of the most repressive anti-people actions that resulted in untold misery to millions of ordinary Chinese. The story continues to this day, with *The Guardian* reporting that China is holding one million people, mostly ethnic Uighurs, in internment camps in Xinjiang, prompting more than twenty countries writing to top United Nations human rights officials condemning China's treatment of Uighur and other minorities in the western Xinjiang region.

We concentrate on the geopolitical dimensions that would help us locate India's place in the world; bypassing the details of specific aspects of large-scale projects related to transportation, energy and telecommunications and regular meetings of security, military, defense, foreign affairs, economic, cultural, banking and other officials from its member states. To begin with, some analysts focus only on what the SCO purports to achieve. For example, Alimov (2018) holds that the modern system of international relations remains in a state of imbalance as it passes through a stage of profound transformation and painful evolutionary development. Globalisation has emerged as the main trend in international relations and continues to deepen the intertwining of relations between countries and regions of the world. He sees the SCO as a model of interstate interaction that can provide an "institutional platform" for broad regional economic cooperation; the compatibility of SCO member states' initiatives and development strategies, and (therefore within that) the "implementation of China's One Belt, One Road initiative with the potential to form an overarching partnership between countries of Eurasia and Asia-Pacific region".

However, the roots of and motivation for establishing SCO has been well captured by Rakhimov (2010). According to him, in 1996, the Presidents of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan established the "Shanghai Five" in order to resolve border disputes and to reduce the armed forces along their borders. The process started in 1996 and at a meeting in Shanghai on 15 June 2001 these countries founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Shanghai Convention was to "combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism". Now, these are the "three evils" from the Chinese perspective; therefore the stamp of China in establishing SCO couldn't be more emphatic (pp. 97-98).

Similarly, Miller (2014) holds that the SCO has demonstrated a growing interest in and ability to conduct such functions of a specific and limited type. These functions within the SCO seem to fall almost entirely within a Chinese anti-terror paradigm which is meant to deal with the "three evils" as defined by the Chinese government as "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". Moreover, all the original member states of SCO face the question of regime stability. And according to Friedrichs (2012), "SCO buttresses regime stability" (p. 760). Since SCO states face ethno-religious, labour,

human rights and demographic/popular unrest, much of the security posture of the grouping is towards these issues (Miller, p. 21). Not surprisingly, Human Rights Watch has criticized counter-terrorism cooperation by members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in targeting the three evils, accusing the members' governments of violating international laws regarding human rights.

But Dadabadev (2018) throws light on another dimension. According to him, while Chinese officials have been at pains to explain away the charge of "expansion of China" with the assertion that their actions benefit all parties, many Central Asian (CA) nations "feel that the announced goal of improving the livelihood of people... could be threatened by the economic and cultural expansion of an economically, politically and demographically superior power" of China. Quoting experts, Dadabadev points out that in terms of economic structures and the capabilities of CA states, many regard these initiatives as largely benefitting China, "using the resources and territory of the smaller CA states but producing very marginal growth or income-generating effects for them". In particular, reference is made to previous transportation infrastructure development designed to transport CA oil and gas to China which also paved the way for the "expanded penetration of cheap Chinese consumer goods into the CA region, leaving little opportunity for local production capacities to develop" (p. 37).

Why Russia has played along has also been well captured by Dadabadev (ibid). He holds that alignment between the development strategies of Russia and China in the field of global, and bilateral relations lays the foundation of successful cooperation between a number of countries. But this development has been in the context of "United States' shaky position as a global superpower, Russia's revival, China's rise, the exhaustion of the West's outdated liberal development model, the deadlock on global development issues, and the fight against terrorism – in a word, all of the issues resulting from the world's unbalanced and unequal development" (p. 94).

But Malle (2017) provides another perspective. According to him, China-Russia cooperative behaviour is rooted in hard economic interests which can be satisfied amongst them and not by other members of BRICS or SCO. According to Malle,

"the two countries are moving towards cooperative behaviour by threading a web of different paths: from interstate deals to companies' joint ventures, from costly deals in energy and access of China to strategic branches to arms trade formerly banned, from coordination on infrastructural products to joint participation in financing transport routes in backward areas, from dependence on the dollar to national payment systems and increased use of own currencies in mutual transactions." (p. 148)

Nonetheless Russia, in its bid to reclaim its lost glory, has had to concede space to China. In "Shanghai-ed into Cooperation: Framing China's Socialization of Central Asia", Emilian Kavalski (2010) unpacks the "spheres of influence" of the Chinese state and convincingly argues that Beijing has made inroads into formerly Soviet territory. For China, SCO is an instrument in this process of expansion.

It is unlikely that the political establishment and the mandarins in South Block are oblivious of such dynamics. In diplomacy, however, benign statements are often made which may not reflect hard realities. For example, while delivering a speech at Carnegie Endowment of International Peace in Washington DC on June 27, 2005, then Defense

Minister Pranab Mukherjee had harped on the importance of central Asia because of strategic location – Tajikistan was after all so close to Greater Kashmir - and of its energy resources. Therefore, restoring traditional linkages with its extended neighborhood in Central Asia has been one of the primary strategic priorities of the government. However, Sachdeva (2006) asserts that with no direct road or transportation access plus difficult market conditions, India was never really part of any completion there, though he does note the success of Indian tycoon, Lakshmi Mittal in Kazakhstan.

Unlike the political establishment and foreign office mandarins, independent analysts are not constrained to air their views. Thus according to Adityanjee (2011), there is a very clear cut pattern to Chinese geo-political endeavors. China is behaving as a classical hegemon that is determined to prevent emergence of a rival power by any means. He notes that despite India's serious reservations,

"China manipulated the SAARC process to enter as an observer, on an Invitation from Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. When India wanted to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the full membership was frozen and India was again hyphenated with Pakistan and Iran as an observer. China is the only country among the P5 nations that has yet to endorse India's candidature for the permanent membership of the UNSC. This, even though China has been making noises about harmony, democracy and consensus building in the UNSC reform process. This will help the Coffee Group (so-called United for Consensus group) orchestrated by Pakistan."

BRICS and RCEP

In this globalized world where economies of nation states are intertwined, India has to deal with other nations and, most notably, China. It is in this context it would be instructive to examine the forums of *BRICS* (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and *RCEP* (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) where the dynamics of geopolitics and economics play out in sufficient measure. According to Maitra (2013):

"It is well known, that the primary drivers behind the ideation in the BRICS are Russia and China. Russia wants to bandwagon with China to balance the influence of United States. The motivation and Great power nostalgia of Russian elite is simple enough to fathom. The Chinese interest is however far more complex. As a growing hegemon, China actually has interest in Africa, both geo-politically and economically. The resources of Africa are mostly still unexplored, and the market potential of cheap Chinese manufactured goods is enormous. This however comes at a time, when China is increasingly viewed with suspicion in Africa. The last couple of years have seen the murder of Chinese engineers by disgruntled and exploited African labourers, incessant strikes in Chinese operated industries and mines, and the now infamous op-ed by Lamido Sanusi, the governor of Central Bank of Nigeria, where he accused China of having neo-colonial ambitions. China now wants to portray itself as a benevolent and altruistic force, and therefore wanted to soothe Africa under the BRICS front. India, for all its independent and non-aligned foreign policy, is legitimizing Chinese actions."

It therefore comes as no surprise that in one of the sideline events of the 8th BRICS Summit held in India in October 2016 which included the first trade fair of the BRICS countries, China skipped the event over trade barriers, but was read in the media in India as a snub amidst a diplomatic row following the latter's veto over India's request to name JeM leader Masood Azhar to the UN as a "designated terrorist."

On the issue of militancy there was controversy, particularly in light of the aftermath of the 2016 Uri attack and the 2016 Kashmir unrest. While Modi said that BRICS members "agreed that those who nurture, shelter, support and sponsor such forces of violence and terror are as much a threat to us as the terrorists themselves", the final communique did not mention such a consensus or the words "nurture," "shelter" or "sponsor."Modi had said, without naming any state: "Tragically, the mother-ship of terrorism is a country in India's neighborhood."Pakistan then said that Indian leaders were misleading BRICS members. Likewise, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said: "Everyone knows that India and Pakistan are victims of terrorism. Pakistan has made huge efforts and great sacrifices in fighting terrorism. I think the international community should respect this. We also oppose the linking of terrorism to any specific country, ethnicity or religion. This is China's consistent position". She added that China would support its "all-weather ally" amid a campaign by India to isolate Pakistan. Meanwhile, China also did not budge on its stance over both rejecting India's bid for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and over the UNSC veto.

And while Modi was due to meet Putin and Jinping the day before the summit started, on the way to the summit, Jinping stopped in Bangladesh and oversaw deals worth US$13.6 billion being signed, as well as US$20 billion in loan agreements. Following the summit, India and Myanmar's representatives met in New Delhi and signed three MOUs: on cooperation in the power sector; on banking supervision between the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of Myanmar; and on designing an academic and professional building programme for the insurance industry of Myanmar.

India's position with respect to RCEP has finally put paid to India's quest to find its place in world economy. The RCEP includes the 10 ASEAN countries along with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. While negotiations began in 2012 and were originally expected to finish by the end of 2015, it was only this month in November 2019 that the Treaty was to be signed. But almost at the last moment, India decided not

to sign the treaty saying that it is detrimental to India's interests. It has massive trade deficits with almost all economic powerhouses of the world. Of the fifteen RCEP countries, India has serious trade deficits with at least eleven, which has almost doubled in the last five-six years - from $54 billion in 2013-14 to $105 billion in 2018-19. And of this, China accounts for $53 billion. The upshot of India pulling out of RCEP has been aptly analysed by Pratap Bhanu Mehta:

"Both the supporters of the decision and those disappointed by it are, in fact, arguing on the same ground. For supporters of the RCEP, the decision not to join it seems like an admission of defeat, an acknowledgement that India is simply not in a position to compete strongly in the global economy, without risking serious trade imbalances and domestic economic disruption. Those opposing it are also, for the most part, saying the same thing: India is not ready. The price of joining will be too high.

"[T]he idea that you can define strategic ambitions far in excess of your economic clout is deeply misplaced, and all our pretensions in that regard, like "Look East," now "Indo-Pacific", always had a ring of exuberant hollowness to them... "The best thing Modi might have done for India is that he has made it clear that we are, in the end, a modest power with much to be modest about."

Concluding Remarks

While every country has to deal with issues of realpolitik, balance the advantages of membership of multilateral or regional bloc with building strong bilateral relations with relevant others, the question of a defining identity would need to be addressed. For, it is that identity that gives a nation a defining place in the world. For India, does its membership in SCO compromise its legitimacy in the world? The answer to this question would lie in exploring whether the essential tenets of governance and on which its domestic policies rest are in consonance with its stance in international relations.

It is in this context that the first references to *Panchsheel* were made. The 1954 Agreement with China is not so much important for allowing pilgrims and petty traders to travel to each other's country. The spirit was; which was in consonance with Indian culture and governance system. And that led to NAM. It was this alignment of India's cultural and political identity with other nations that pivoted India in leadership space in international relations. Freedom, democracy, liberalism, giving legitimacy and space to minorities and dissenters alike – with all its warts - were part of India's social and political fabric. It was India's "soft power" that ensured India's place in the world. In the same vein, it is difficult to imagine the equivalence of a Great Leap Forward in India that killed about 30 million ordinary citizens in China, much less the mowing down of dissenters as at Tian'anmen Square.

In contrast, what has been the leitmotif of East Asian Tigers or Central Asian nations? Jorg Friedrichs quotes David Arase, "The political traits of what might be called East Asian developmentalism have been development before democracy, policy making by professional bureaucracy insulated from civil society by a political class; and the exclusion of independent critics, labour and consumer interests in order to speed capital formation and growth" (pp. 759-60). Similarly, Ambrosio (2008) holds that

"while the conventional approach has been to examine whether, how, and under what circumstances do international organizations promote democracy, he finds that

international organizations like SCO sustain autocracy by going a step further by utilizing multilateral cooperation to defend themselves against regional or global democratic trends. As such the "Shanghai Spirit" may be a sign of things to come as autocratic leaders become more bold in their rejection of democratic norms."

In a democracy, while the technicalities of foreign policy may be etched out by mandarins and experts, these must align with the people's aspirations, culture, and political preferences – with a good dose of civil society activism. In this context it is good to recall Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who coined the term "soft power". Nye (1990) quotes Ralf Dahrendorf `"[it is] relevant that millions of people all over the world would wish to live in the United States and that indeed people are prepared to risk their lives in order to get there". Maintaining this appeal is important." (p. 170). When ideals are an important source of power, the classic distinction between realpolitik and liberalism becomes blurred. The realist who focuses only on the balance of hard power will miss the power of transnational ideas.

Nye also says that insecurity breeds nationalistic and protectionist policies that could constrain the US ability to cope with issues created by growing international interdependence. Walker (2016) however identifies four devious stratagems authoritarian regimes like China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela undertake to hijack the concept of "soft power". This they do by manipulation of the internet, establishment of pseudo- civil society organizations, `zombie' election monitors that turn in results very different from what the electorates vote for, and sophisticated state-run propaganda.

Do we then want to etch a place in the world by becoming a hegemon? Since the first step to becoming a hegemon is to achieve a dizzying pace in economic development and capital formation, which seems to be increasingly less likely. Irrespective of our pace of economic development, do we use our "soft power" to be a beacon of hope to mankind and in alignment with our socio-cultural values? But even this hope is under strain as the leitmotif of our social fabric has undergone a distinct shift with the world perceiving us as manifestly different from what we orchestrate. It is an open question to what extent recent trends towards majoritarianism and some controversial constitutional developments - affect the moral high that India enjoyed in the comity of nations.

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