

Understanding the Calculus of Smaller South Asian Countries as India Rises

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- On January 13, 2020, Brookings India hosted the seventh edition of its Foreign Policy & Security Tiffin Talk series, which features scholars presenting their evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.
- **Ms. Nilanthi Samaranayake**, Director of the Strategy and Policy Analysis program at CNA, a non-profit research organization in the Washington DC area, presented her research, based on case studies, which analyzed the foreign policy responses of smaller South Asian countries (i.e. Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives) towards India's rise in the region.
- The lead discussants were **Prof. S. D. Muni**, Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), and **Dr. Deep Pal**, Non Resident Fellow, The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR).
- The discussion was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Brookings India. In attendance were officials from the Lok Sabha and the Headquarters of the Integrated Defense Staff, members from the National Security Advisory Board, scholars from India's leading think tanks and universities, leading journalists and civil society.

The Calculus of Smaller South Asian Countries

Samaranayake began her presentation by situating her project in the context of India's increasing political, economic, and military capabilities over the past decade. Smaller South Asian countries (SSAs), Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives, did not react uniformly or predictably to Indian ascendancy in their foreign policy decisions. She said "I think there is essentially a puzzle at the core... why aren't we seeing the five smaller countries of South Asia bandwagon or align with India as structural realism would anticipate?"

She explained that these countries' actions were typically seen through the prism of larger countries, specifically India. However, this approach overlooks SSAs own autonomy and the diverse factors affecting their decision-making processes. Her research is trying to shift the focus from India to the SSAs themselves

Endogenous and Exogenous Factors

As the panel discussion commenced, participants pointed out the effect of domestic politics on foreign policy decision-making. They highlighted that autonomy is determined by internal decision-making processes and dynamics of a country. Further discussion ensued on the role of media, namely the Indian media and how it projects Indian foreign policy to its domestic base. This became important to examine in light of how the Indian domestic agenda often influences its foreign policy objectives, thus shaping how it responds to crises. One participant provided the example of Nepal and Sri Lanka where they said "The Indian media played a big role in making the Indian response seem bigger than it was in terms of assistance." The panel agreed that

and see what is driving their foreign policy decision-making. The project uses 30 case studies to examine instances of SSAs either balancing or aligning with India economically, militarily, or diplomatically. She outlined her research methodology and shared five case studies from her ongoing work with the panel: Maldives' cancellation of the GMR airport project, Chinese submarine visits to Sri Lanka, Bhutan's non-ratification of the BBIN Motor Vehicles agreement, Nepal's trade and transit agreement with China, and Bangladesh's Sonadia port project.

Thus far, her research has found that the causal factors of decision-making have clustered around SSA specific factors rather than factors linked to India. She highlighted that the anomalies in decision-making often occurred amidst a change in leadership, either in the SSA or India.

the Indian media tends to magnify India's role in responding to these crises; however, every country is likely to do this when playing to its domestic audience. Participants also cautioned against the dangers of politicising foreign policy within the neighborhood. Samaranayake pointed out that her research was within the context of Indian ascendancy but cognizant of a rising China. SSAs are often engaged in a balancing act between China and India. Resultantly, their actions can be difficult to predict, but their historical relationships can be helpful in evaluating their actions. The panel also differentiated between analyzing SSAs as dyads versus studying them as a discrete block.

An Evolving Neighborhood

The participants, in their discussion of South Asia as a region, noted that the region is in a continual flux, adjusting and adapting to present realities. Specifically, the panel questioned the study's definition of "South Asia" as a whole and the decision to exclude Afghanistan and include Bangladesh as an SSA. Samaranayake explained that she classified Afghanistan in frontier South Asia, stressing its late entry into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). She further emphasised the essential consideration in the choice of SSAs being countries where India had the capacity to shape

and influence policy. Conversely, on Bangladesh's inclusion as an SSA, one participant noted that "Bangladesh's GDP has overtaken Pakistan's. In that sense, Bangladesh is now moving out of the trajectory of a so-called small state." Samaranayake conceded this point but reiterated that India continued to maintain the ability to influence and affect policy in Bangladesh. The case study from Bangladesh showed that in cancelling the Sonadia port project, it resisted China for Indian favor. Of the five case studies presented, Bangladesh's case was one of aligning with, rather than balancing against India.

Non-Traditional Factors in Decision-Making

The central focus of Samaranayake's analysis is the idea that traditional factors and theory are insufficient to adequately explain the foreign policy decisions of SSAs. For example, in the case study for Bhutan, she examined its decision to not ratify the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, owing to concerns over the environment rather than conventional foreign policy factors. One participant explained that internal factors like the nation's strong taxi lobby and concerns over the tourism sector played a major part in the non-ratification.

Another non-traditional factor discussed was identity, and how identity is perceived domestically. The presence of Assamese

people on Bhutanese soil coming from free movement agreements may not be in the interest of the Bhutanese government. Countries' own identities dictate decision-making on certain issues. For domestic reasons, on some matters, SSAs benefit from being perceived as close to India, while on others they may want to be perceived as distant. The historical significance of this was emphasised with the case of Nepal, where a discussant recalled "Despite not having relationships with China, Mahendra [Bir Bikram Shah] realized he could play China in his relationship with India." The participants noted that this is a balancing act that SSAs have been engaged in since the 1950s.



(From L to R): Dr. Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy, Brookings India; Ms. Nilanthi Samaranayake, Director of the Strategy and Policy Analysis program at CNA; Dr. Deep Pal, Non Resident Fellow, The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR); Professor S. D. Muni, Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).

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