



ASIA MATTERS

ASIA IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS
WORKING PAPER 1

Why Asia Matters

Asia in Global Affairs



KNOWLEDGE WORLD

KW Publishers Pvt Ltd

New Delhi



Asia Matters

Asia in Global Affairs (AGA), Kolkata

Asia Matters is published bi-annually by Asia in Global Affairs (AGA), Kolkata.

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e-ISBN 978-93-89137-16-3

Published in India by Kalpana Shukla



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd

4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road

Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

Phone: +91 11 23263498/43528107

Marketing: kw@kwpub.com

Editorial: production@kwpub.com

Website: www.kwpub.com

Printed and bound in India.

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PREFACE

“Why Asia Matters” has been the topic of discussion for some years now, not just because of the projection of the twenty-first century as the Asian Century but also because of China’s emerging role in the global arena, the resilience of Asian economies in the face of a global downturn, its growing and young population, its advent as both the largest producer and consumer of goods and a plethora of other factors that would follow these developments. It is today also the space where new strategic geographies, that challenge traditional geopolitical divisions, are being imagined and where alternative economic institutions that predict a transition of the centre of global economics eastward are being framed. This transition is emerging in the background of a deep sense of dissatisfaction with globalisation, fear of immigrants and emergence of populist politics, exemplified by a growing divide between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan populations, deepening cultural differences between rural and urban populations and widening opinion among those favouring an open society that is welcoming to immigrants and other supporting closed borders. The “new world order” is in flux and as Parag Khanna in his recent book notes, *The Future is Asian*.

In recent years fundamental assumptions underlying the global world order have been politically, economically, socially and culturally challenged. Typically stable territorial formations (nation states, ideological blocks, global markets) have devolved into chaos while typically unstable extra-territorial flows (communication networks, trade arrangements, cultural codes or capital reserves) are evolving into consistent cohesions prompting the argument that globally there are shifts that are moving towards de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation at the same time. As P. Taylor argues, “The comfortable division of ideological blocs and nation states set down territorially by the Cold War is being shredded but also rewoven in the uncomfortable re-territorialization of old ethnicities and new economies.” A “new world order” is in the making proposed by a China with more involvement in global affairs, openness to immigration and with the aim of building a global community of shared interests and responsibility through

economic corridors. The corresponding reduced emphasis on the sanctity of sovereign limits, that the proposed transnational logistical arrangements would necessarily entail, has brought with it debates on how this would change the rules of the game as far as global influence is concerned. It is therefore being increasingly argued that Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) signals the anticipation of new political principles guided by connectivity and infrastructural development whereby China would become the epicentre that links Eurasia.

The “new normal,” in economic terms, on the other hand, is a position that is likely to disrupt openness to trade on the part of the world that was its most vocal proponent and its support from states like China, which is stepping into the role of “globalisation’s biggest supporter.” This was reflected in President Trump’s pull-out from the twelve nation mega trade deal (the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, which had been viewed as the means for the US to deepen economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific region) and increasing numbers of states opting to join the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Begun as a free trade agreement between the ten member states of the ASEAN and the six states with which the ASEAN has existing free trade agreement, RCEP will in all probability be expanded with the inclusion of states like Peru and Chile, bringing into question the spatial aspect of the “regional” economic partnership. This is not an isolated example. “Regional” organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) today include as its “dialogue partners” states as geographically separated as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal. It is this understanding of complex Asian regional alignments that may be the key to comprehending the success or failure of economic diplomacy supported by large-scale infrastructural projects and economic corridors that seems to be the hallmark of global politics today. As trade flows compete with military power for influence, geopolitics becomes an extension of geo-economics and infrastructural developments and institutions assume increasing significance, logistical connects will move towards creating new frontiers of governance and new peripheries on the outskirts of logistical connects. It is assumed that this will eventually create a space where the distinction between the economic and the institutional, the

public and the private, the national and the supranational, and the local and the global will blur or even vanish.

This first issue of *Asia Matters* examines this Asian centrality through a series of writings that were published as “Reflections” in the Asia in Global Affairs website: www.asiainglobalaffairs.in.

ONE OCEAN IN THE ERA OF
CONNECTIVITY

READING THE INDIAN OCEAN

Priya Singh

Oceanic Studies have both intensified and diversified considerably in recent times. There appears to be a visible revival of attention and curiosity in exploring the maritime. Academic interest and publications in the West, for long, however, had concentrated upon the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific, disregarding the Indian Ocean. The Eurocentric approach was in keeping with the tradition of designating the Indian Ocean as merely a “half ocean” or perhaps can be attributed to the fact that the Indian Ocean was negotiated and engaged predominantly by people from its littorals. In the face of insularity, Indian Ocean Studies in terms of historical imaginaries and strategic as well as political constructs has been thriving, comprising what has been termed as “subaltern cosmopolitanism” contrary to the traditional “hegemonic cosmopolitanism.”

Indian Ocean studies constitutes a somewhat contemporary, yet stimulating academic inclination, owing its realisation primarily to the invaluable rewriting of maritime studies by the likes of Michael Pearson, Kenneth McPherson, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sugata Bose, K. N. Chaudhuri, Gwynn Campbell, Randall Pouwells, Ed Simpson, Edward Alpers, Abdul Sheriff, Erik Gilbert, Marcus Vink and John Hawley among others. A plethora of research centres specialising in Indian Ocean studies have emerged across the globe and almost all major publishing houses in their Oceanic Series embrace the study of the Indian Ocean ensuing in an ever-increasing literature on the Indian Ocean world.

A significant approach in understanding the Indian Ocean world is to delve into the cultural setting of the space and study the communities that traversed through it thereby looking beyond the geographical and ecological confines and into the intricate relationship between these communities and the physical

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landscape. This methodology studies both the oceanic societies and coastal communities as well as their commercial networks and exchange systems. The emphasis therefore is on commerce, movement and mobility through the Indian Ocean and on Indian Ocean Islands and coastal regions. Perceived in the framework of possessing a continuous history, the Indian Ocean in this approach is viewed as a string of movements of both the animate and the inanimate. In contrast to being regarded as a “void,” the Indian Ocean in this paradigm is assumed as a “circulation,” facilitating an interface of the global and the local, a feature that has been characterised as “connectivity in motion”. The Indian Ocean world in this vision is understood as a space intrinsically interconnected by a shared history, geography, culture, economy, ethnicity and religion yet constituting a multilayered, heterogeneous expanse with permeable boundaries and myriad overlaps with neighbouring regions that necessitates engagements and interactions among them. The objective of this framework is to “humanise” the ocean with its attention on the “human factor”.

In contemporary times, locating islands at the core of an “empirical and methodological” research of the Indian Ocean world has gained ground where the accent is on explicating “islandness”. Ports and port cities form a key component of this approach. Within this paradigm, the term commonly used to describe ports and islands is “hub” and the activities they undertake are defined as “hubbing”. The Indian Ocean islands are diverse and dissimilar in terms of their origin (both in the historical and geographical sense) size and distance from the mainland, as such, oversimplification and broad categorisation is problematic. While some of these islands became important links in the maritime network, others with inherent possibilities (for instance, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands) were left behind. The colonial history, postcolonial reality as well as the intersection of global and local forces determine the present circumstances of the islands.

In the aftermath of the colossal Belt and Road Initiative, in particular, and the emergence of China and India, as the principal initiators and protagonists in both a rhetorical and real sense in the context of connectivity, the criticality of the Indian Ocean region has come to the fore. However, Chinese and Indian notions regarding the spatial and structural relevance and use of the Indian Ocean are at variance. China looks at the ocean as a

vacuum that has to be traversed summarily. This visualisation/perception, in turn, has ramifications with regard to the use of sovereign territorial spaces. The infrastructural linkages envisioned to fuel economic movements possess spatial structures/characteristics that can transform nations into what is termed as “logistical corridors”.

For India, on the other hand, the Indian Ocean is the primary “channel of communication” and it seeks to carry out the role of a custodian to protect what it considers as its “sphere of interest”, and the concomitant imaginary is that of islands as the hub of its connectivity archetype as an alternative to the Chinese paradigm of corridors. This vision, to some extent, originates from the Indian perception of “strategic autonomy,” which reveals India’s aversion towards tactically engaging with big and intermediate states, at the same time, its complete ease with enhancing security collaborations/alliances with lesser powers, who are significantly less influential than her. As such, the small and susceptible island states of the Indian Ocean region are deemed as appropriate allies for collaboration. India’s “spatial” conceptions/visualisations are in contrast to China’s as it aims at creating a regional economic expanse founded on the notion of the “Blue Economy.” The idea is grounded on the synchronisation between “economic development and maritime ecosystem protection”. The difference in approach can plausibly be attributed to the presence or absence of historical and cultural linkages with the island nations of the Indian Ocean.

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THE GREAT MARITIME GAME

Anita Sengupta

A rather prosaic definition of the Indo-Pacific notes “... sometimes known as the Indo-West Pacific, it is a bio-geographic region of Earth’s seas, comprising the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the seas connecting the two in the general area of Indonesia. It does not include the temperate and polar regions of the Indian and Pacific oceans, nor the Tropical Eastern Pacific, along the Pacific coast of the Americas.” Strategic analysts on the other hand delimit the Indo-Pacific arena as stretching from the Indian Ocean (bound by the east coast of Africa) through the equatorial seas around the Indonesian archipelago, the South China Sea, all the way to the Pacific Ocean (bound by the west coast of North America). The term recently emerged in strategic discourse as a substitute for the more established Asia-Pacific with the renaming of the US Pacific Command (PACOM) as the US Indo-Pacific Command (IPACOM). While this change could be merely symbolic, reflecting the reality of the area that the command was responsible for anyway, the possibilities of the extension of IPACOM to the east coast of Africa remains a distinct possibility and assumes strategic relevance.

The Indian rhetoric is based on the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the importance of oceans to security and commerce and India’s role within the broader region. This was articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, where he clarified that this was neither a strategy nor an exclusive club. He described it as a “natural region” ranging “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas” and argued that it should be “free, open, and inclusive”; grounded in “rules and norms ... based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few”; and characterised by respect for international law, including

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freedom of navigation and overflight. He went on to stress that it was not in conflict with ASEAN unity and centrality. While the articulation of the Indo-Pacific as a strategy to balance Chinese influence over the oceans was implicit in this discourse, the downplaying of the concept by the Chinese is a clear indication that the openness of the policy is in contradiction to their policy in stretches like the South China Sea. In response, the number of strategic dialogues, intelligence sharing mechanisms, military exercises, and defence compacts involving large and medium powers in the Indo-Pacific—including India—have rapidly multiplied.

The twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in October 2013 during a speech to the Indonesian Parliament. The route of this Maritime Silk Road goes through cities of Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Haikou, Beihai, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Colombo, Kolkata, Nairobi, Athens and Venice. The maritime areas of this Maritime Silk Road include the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Indian strategic thinking identifies the Maritime Route as a repackaging of the “string of pearls” strategy, a position reflected in C. Raja Mohan’s *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (2012) where he argues that the land competition between China and India will spill now out to the ocean and the Indo-Pacific is becoming a new geographical space for this contest.

The Indian alternative has been to focus on the eastern and western reaches of the Indian Ocean and the subcontinental landmass south of Eurasia but linked to it. The development of a network of Indian Ocean ports to serve as regional shipping hubs for littoral states with connecting highways and rail routes would mean leveraging India’s location in one of the most strategic stretches of ocean space. The launching of a Spice Route, Cotton Route and the Mausam Project, all of which are attempts to tie together countries around the Indian Ocean assumes significant in this context. At the macro level the aim of Project Mausam is to reconnect and re-establish communication between countries of the Indian Ocean world which would lead to enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns while at the micro level the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu. The aim is not just to examine connections

that linked parts of the Indian Ocean littoral but also the connections of these coastal centres to their hinterlands. The “Spice Project” aims to explore the multifaceted Indo-Pacific Ocean World collating archaeological and historical research to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean—extending from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago. The broader aim is to connect these with “Information Silk Route” where telecom connectivity between the countries would be made possible. Partly propelled by the advancement in informational technology in India and partly by the fact that connectivity on the ground has been restricted by political connections these strategies need to be visualised as integrated aspects of both domestic and foreign policy.

In a recent article, Samir Saran (“Eurasia: Larger than Indo-Pacific—Liberal world must stand up and be counted, or step aside and watch Pax Sinica unfold,” *Times of India*, June 4, 2018), however, argues that efforts to shift global centrality to the “Indo-Pacific” remain an insufficient response to China’s spectacular measures to connect Europe and Asia. Reiterating Macinder’s position he contends that Eurasia remains the “supercontinent” and the new world order will be defined by who manages it and how it is managed. It is in this supercontinent that the future of democracy, of free markets and global security arrangements will be decided. Having assessed that the divide between Europe and Asia is artificial, China has moved towards the creation of a network of connectivity projects that have diluted the significance of subregions and upset power arrangements. He argues that an open Indo-Pacific vision is an insufficient response to China’s relentless pursuit of building infrastructure, facilitating trade and creating alternative global institutions across Eurasia.

Nicholas Spykman once observed that “Every Foreign Office, whatever may be the atlas it uses, operates mentally with a different map of the world.” For the modern Indian state, it was recognised from the start that India was geopolitically located at the crossroads of several subregions. In Nehru’s words, “India is situated geographically in such a way that we just cannot escape anything that happens in Western Asia, in Central Asia, in Eastern Asia or South-East Asia.” A rejuvenated China has negotiated

what will probably be a decades-long process of constructing new lines of communication to the subregions of Asia. For China, it is incidental that India lies on the crossroads of Chinese Silk Routes. For India, however, this dynamic holds the potential to reshape its entire periphery and impact India's own role in Southern Asia calling for enhanced engagement and expanded presence.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE

INFRASTRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND THE PEOPLE

Priya Singh

Infrastructure, in a sense, primarily comprises physical components. As such it should essentially concern “architects, engineers, investors, and political representatives,” eliciting interest among citizens only if a project directly affects them either adversely or advantageously and perhaps if a project is conspicuous and considered newsworthy. However, there is an equally significant story behind the apparent/obvious that awaits narration: the nature of the investment process; the contributing and consequential “political, socio-economic, institutional, technical” as well as “environmental” factors and their interplay. In other words, the administration or governance of infrastructure comprises an important area of study/analysis.

Providing infrastructure is a crucial activity for any government. Appropriate designing and execution of infrastructures, like “roadways, railways, energy networks, water systems and communication lines,” facilitates the delivery of essential public commodities as connectivity is enhanced. As a result it also accelerates overall production and economic development. However, establishing good infrastructure within the estimated period of time and in the process avoiding rescheduling, mounting expenses and inferior quality is a challenging task. In contemporary times the situation has become even more convoluted because of the cumulative impact of ever-increasing aspirations as well as expertise, complicated tools and an often fluctuating/unpredictable political and social environment.

Administering infrastructure in present times implies the establishment of an intricate network of infrastructure dependent on innovative and at times unproven equipment and knowledge. Financial constrictions and the complicated as well as intricate character of modern-day infrastructure

prompts private sector participation, which in turn comes with both multiple openings as well as liabilities that require governmental control. In a changed, and increasingly more expectant, data-driven economy and target oriented policymaking environment, the time span for execution of projects is not unlimited. Infrastructure, which in the past had very little relevance for mainstream politics, has become politicised. This has at times manifested itself rather unexpectedly, in persistent confrontations against various projects.

In short, the enterprise of “public physical infrastructure” that is imperative both in the economic and social perspective is confronted with a contradictory set of circumstances. The states have increasingly become more dependent on private agencies, yet they are as vital for infrastructure as infrastructure is for their survival. Bereft of the monetary, supervisory, and harmonising role of governments, investment in infrastructure would in all probability not materialise. As such, despite their presence not being palpable, governments are in fact grappling with the process of governing infrastructure and governing it amicably as well as appropriately. The issues in contention encompass the proverbial escalating costs, delays and “corrupt practices” such as the use of inferior quality products often culminating in mishaps. This though more prevalent in developing societies is not completely absent in developed ones. The situation is rather far removed from one that displays cost-effective employment of innately restricted assets. Governing infrastructure has evolved into a multifaceted, problematic and ambitious activity.

Globally, urbanisation has been rapid and extensive. More than half of the world’s population lives in urban areas. It is estimated that 55 per cent of the world’s population dwells in urban expanses, a fraction that is expected to rise to 66 per cent by 2050 (UN approximations). This, in turn, has given rise to thickly populated megacities. The concomitants of urbanisation are an upsurge in the demand for improved infrastructures along with better governance of infrastructures. With the numerical rise of the middle class and the propertied, growth of the service sector, rising educational qualifications as well as advances in environmental technology, the articulation for infrastructural development has acquired new dimensions.

Consequently, varied forms of infrastructures and their development find space in the study of infrastructures, be it development infrastructures, urban infrastructures, energy infrastructures, environmental infrastructures and digital infrastructures.

Infrastructures have in fact developed into definite and persuasive sites for social science research. As the contest for infrastructural investment acquires an almost frantic dimension and as global leaders strive for the most effectual methods to facilitate the flow of energy, goods and money, concurrently, vast numbers of people are being excluded by “trade corridors, securitized production sites and privatized service provisions.” They then attempt to create their own opportunities that overlap, dislocate or else involve the exhaustive investments that habitually reconstruct their worlds. Under these circumstances, the constant then is an intersection of the projects of the influential and the arrangements of the marginalised in the present-day enterprise to control the future.

LADAKH REVISITED: Does the Road to Economic Prosperity Necessarily Dilute a Way of Life that has Sustained a Population Through Generations?

Prajna Sen

The name Ladakh immediately conjures up romantic images of a remote land of majestic mountain ranges in shades of barren brown and towering snow-capped peaks; sweeping expanses of cold desert sand and starkly rocky slopes, meandering rivers through lush valleys and dramatic gorges; sparkling lakes of crystal clear water and a mystical and stoic people who live off this land and are content in their way of life that does not seem to have changed much in the last two hundred-odd years.

As such, Ladakh was predominantly the paradise destination for outdoor enthusiasts, nature lovers and trekkers since it was opened up for tourists in 1974. In fact six years ago when I first landed in Leh airport with a group of women travellers, I was amazed to see how incongruous and tame our suitcases appeared on the baggage carousel in comparison to the rucksacks, climbing equipment, cycles and camping gear of other travellers. In some ways, perhaps, Ladakh is in danger of becoming a victim to its own breathtaking beauty.

The emerging trend for adventure seekers and travellers today is more of car bound travel, mostly cars and bikes, though I did see some doughty cyclists, not Indians, even at Khardungla pass at 17,982 feet, and admired their levels of fitness and capacity for roughing it out. The tourists are visiting in droves; the summer tourist season now extends to October. There is even

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a winter season for the diehards, the Chador trek, which is skating on the frozen Zanskar river in the remote Zanskar valley, or searching for snow leopards in wildlife sanctuaries.

The boom in tourism has certainly aided the economic prosperity of many Ladakhis at least in the Leh district. The single winding market street of six years ago has now been widened, flattened, tiled and made only for pedestrian traffic. There are benches to relax on and a plethora of restaurants to suit different budgets. I cannot remember climbing too many stairs or riding lifts to upper floors to access shops and cafes earlier. Kashmiri traders in shawls and carpets say that business in Leh is much better than in Srinagar. Car parks and taxi stands are overflowing. On one of the days of special significance to Buddhists, there were makeshift tents put up by rural cooperatives and local women briskly selling their products to both tourists and locals alike. In 2012, there was one Tibetan refugee market housed in an enormous tin shed, now there are Tibetan refugee mini markets lurking in more than one corner of the main market!

In addition to the bazaar beautification, for the more discerning upmarket traveller, there are smaller restaurants in other neighbourhoods and adjacent villages that grow their own vegetables and fruits, menus are exotic and not necessarily ethnic, boutique shops selling designer clothes made from Ladakhi fabrics, and boutique hotels that are renovated traditional homes. As per the law of the land the owner has to be a local but I am not sure who are benefiting from the profits as the staff appears to be mostly from other states. None of these establishments had been observed on my earlier visit. I was left wondering whether this problem of unequal distribution of profits could lead to future social unrest.

The problem could go beyond an unequal distribution of profits, however. Those not part of the tourism boom could become economically worse off just by living the way they are. Historically, subsistence agriculture, pastoral herding and community interdependence have been major components of the society and economy. The reciprocal relations of mutual aid could be broken down by the extension of the monetary economy, and tourists' demands for scarce resources could drive up the prices of local goods.

However, I was surprised to see a lot of construction activity in the villages through which I travelled. I also observed shops selling building materials in remote locations. On enquiring with the locals I was told that in addition to the tourism industry, the army employs local young men in winter in Siachen because of their expertise in surviving in the severely harsh weather conditions, and pays them well. This assurance of year-round income has brought relief to many villagers. The number of small cars plying up and down high mountain roads and the burgeoning school buildings are also testimony to the relative prosperity of the local population in the villages. Ladakh incidentally has a high literacy rate though heavily skewed towards males.

In 2012, our team of travellers was very impressed by the cleanliness in Leh and its surrounding areas. There was not a whiff of multicoloured plastic except for the very occasional tetrapack discarded by an irresponsible outsider. We were told that the then 40-year-old king (symbolic even before independence because Ladakh was annexed by the king of Kashmir in the nineteenth century) runs a rehabilitation centre for the disabled which supplies paper bags to most of the shops, and that Ladakhis were immensely aware of conservation and ecology. Sadly, there is more than enough plastic garbage on the wayside even when driving through remote areas devoid of human habitation for miles on end. Does this imply a proliferation of ecologically unaware tourists and an impossibility to monitor such vast areas, or are social values changing? On the upside I heard for myself a mobile campaign by the district administration exhorting citizens to dispose of their waste in the correct manner.

Located at the crossroads of India, China and Pakistan, Ladakh is of immense geostrategic importance and the presence of the Indian army patrolling and protecting its borders is proof of that. In January 2018, the Union Cabinet approved the construction of the Zojila Pass tunnel at an estimated cost of Rs 6,089 crore which will reduce the travel time through the pass from three and a half hours to fifteen minutes. The objective of the pass would be to ensure all-weather connectivity of Leh and Kashmir, and the government envisions that this would in turn result in a boost in local employment and businesses.

As Ladakh opens up to the outside world and new horizons, it is impractical to expect the Ladakhi youth to remain content with their traditional way of life. It is not just the delicate ecology of the area that is threatened; it is also the social fabric and cultural identity of an age-old community that is questioned. To attain that perfect balance, there have been some positive responses. The Ladakh Ecological Development Group, the Ladakh Project, the Students' Educational & Cultural Movement of Ladakh and the Association of Buddhist Monasteries, among others, have been doing some good work.

While I was in Ladakh last month, the Hemis Monastery was organising the Naropa festival celebrating the life and legacy of the famous Buddhist scholar. Along with chanting lamas, Buddhist religious dances, making of sand mandalas, thangka painting demonstrations and traditional archery competitions, there was also a concert of Bollywood singers ranging from Sonu Nigam to Papon and Kailash Kher! Images remain of young monks in trendy sunglasses drinking coffee and in deep conversation with the faithful. I was regaled with an anecdote by a friend who runs a camp on the outskirts of Leh. When the Dalai Lama came to visit in July he stayed nearby (not next door), and sent messages himself if any of the residents was listening to music too loudly or too late in the night! Perhaps this is the right way to find the ideal balance ... through social engagement and respectful discourse.

THE CONSOLIDATING EAST AND
MULTILATERALISM

THE “SHANGHAI SPIRIT”

Anita Sengupta

The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit held in Qingdao (China) with India and Pakistan as full members was attended, among others, by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain. A euphoric Chinese media hailed it as a commitment to multilateralism by more than half of the global community and a reiteration of the “Shanghai spirit” based on mutual benefit, equal consultation, respect for diverse civilisations and pursuit of common development. Reflecting this positive note the global media highlighted the sharp contrast between two iconic images, one from the G7 meeting in Charlevoix (Canada) of a defiant US President confronting a combative Angela Merkel juxtaposed against the smiling SCO group led by Chinese President Xi and Russian President Putin. While the US President instructed US representatives not to endorse the G7 final statement, the SCO was reported to have managed an “almost” unanimous one with India opting out of extending support to the Belt and Road Initiative and non-signatories opting out of support for non-proliferation. A “breaking apart of the West” and a “consolidating East” dominated headlines and was identified as the marker of the emerging global scenario.

What remained unsaid is that not just the optics, but by nature the two organisations (apart from being groups of states led by global leaders) are different in nature. What is now the G7 began as a gathering of financial officials in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis. The first summit brought together France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and United States who were joined in 1976 by Canada. The group represented the world’s top economies united by the so-called liberal world order and democratic government. Russia’s addition was an ambitious exercise which ended ostensibly with the annexation of Crimea but mostly because Russia

did not ascribe to the political culture of the rest of the group. The G7, while formalised in annual summits, remains a gathering of global leaders with shared interests and influence in global affairs. The SCO, a more institutionalised organisation that emerged with the intent of settling border disputes between China and the newly independent Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, developed as a mechanism to deal with an ever expanding domain from trade to terrorism and culture. As its ambit increased so did its membership of associated states. Reflecting a “new normal” in international relations, it today includes as its “dialogue partners” states as geographically separated as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal reflecting economic diplomacy supported by large-scale infrastructural projects and economic corridors that seems to be the hallmark of global politics today.

For a number of years the inclusion of India and Pakistan as permanent members of the SCO had been withheld as there was apprehension that the conflicting positions of the two South Asian neighbours on a number of issues would negatively affect the functioning of the organisation. Their entry this year as full members was seen to hail a new era, not only for multilateralism but also in terms of their bilateral relations. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang in the weekend following the summit remarked:

“We know there are existing and historical, unresolved issues and conflicts between Pakistan and India. But I think after their joining of the SCO, maybe we can say that their relationship might be better as the grouping provides a better platform and opportunities for building the relations between them. Because, when joining the SCO, a series of agreements had to be signed and pledges had to be made. One of the key pillars (of joining the SCO) is to keep good and friendly relations and they should not see each other as opponents, much less enemies. Because they have signed these agreements, they shoulder a responsibility for implementing them.”

The reference is to the series of multilateral meetings on various issues attended by India and Pakistan that preceded the summit. Whether this heralds a new era of informal diplomacy, to deal with contentious bilateral issues that reflect deep national concerns and interests, remains to be seen, however, it does reflect Chinese aspirations to be the “conscience keeper” in

the region. Similarly, comments in the *Global Times* that the SCO provides “multilateral guarantee” for India’s connectivity with Central Asia via Pakistan is a reflection of China’s involvement in global affairs, with the aim of building a global community of shared interests and responsibility through transport and trade corridors.

This consensus on the building of a global community of shared interests, at least as far as the SCO is concerned, is mainly determined by China and Russia which while differing over the exact purpose and scope of the organisation have shared positions that was echoed in both Xi and Putin’s statements. It was also reflected in the fact that despite the expanded presence the two official languages of the organisation remain Russian and Chinese. The SCO and the emerging confluence of the Eurasian Economic Community with the BRI is also the effect of the emerging trade war between China and the United States on the one hand and the fact that Moscow has been at odds with Washington particularly since the Ukrainian crisis when diplomatic and economic sanctions were imposed against Russia by the West led by US. Moscow’s tensions with Washington have also intensified in the Middle East. In this background Sino-Russia relations have taken a positive spin. And this in turn is echoed in the absolute unity behind Chinese endeavours by declarations supporting the Belt and Road Initiative in recent SCO summits.

Fresh initiatives in Sino-Indian ties were seen as another positive aspect in the backdrop of China’s trade war with the US. BRICS and SCO have been identified as the two multilateral institutions through which Sino-Indian relationship would progress. The June 9 meeting between Modi and Xi on the sidelines of the SCO summit was noted to have covered key aspects of the bilateral engagement reflecting the resolve of the two countries to reset their relations and bring “trust” back to their ties. The meeting was said to have been held in a cordial atmosphere with the promise of high-level exchanges, new trade goals and people-to-people exchanges led by the two foreign ministries. A new trade target, an agreement on continuing to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra, enhancing agricultural exports including non-Basmati rice, was some of the official takeaways from the summit. Critics however commented on the fact that China has

already constructed three dams on the Brahmaputra, making the sharing of hydrological data a formality and that a market for non-Basmati rice will first have to be created in China before there is scope for export.

Reports from China indicate that through the “Shanghai Spirit” that transcends concepts of the clash of civilisations, a “new world order” is in the making. Proposed by a China, with *increased involvement in global affairs, it aims to build a global community of shared* interests and responsibility through economic corridors. The corresponding reduced emphasis on the sanctity of sovereign limits, that the proposed large-scale logistical arrangements would necessarily entail, however, brings with it debates on how this would change the rules of the game as far as global influence is concerned.

DOES BRICS MATTER?

Anita Sengupta

BRICS emerged from a market driven intellectual inspiration to bring together a group of states with diverse history, size, economic profiles, political systems, national preferences and strategic cultures for what former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh aspired would be a meeting of equitable partners for a just and fair management of the global community of nations. The anticipation of a “just, fair and equitable order” still seems to be the abiding expectation from the group along with policy coordination that would restructure outmoded economic and political institutions and global governance structures in a world that seems to be rapidly moving towards de-globalisation (particularly due to decisions from its most vocal proponents in the West). While commitment to “enhancement of the voice and representation of BRICS economies in global economic governance” along with a call to implement the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and common positions on Syria, Afghanistan and North Korea were duly articulated in the course of the 9th Summit in Xiamen, the intensifying competition over common strategic spaces, the drifting apart of a long-term relationship and political and economic instability in two other states were the realities in the background of which the Summit was held.

The low-key character of the initial BRICS meetings, mostly on the sidelines of other multilateral summits like the UN and G20, moreover, is in sharp contrast to the spectacle that marks the Summits today. The spectacle itself is not without significance, and increased media exposure of those who exercise political power means that gestures and gimmicks are now symbolically constituted and examined. So, the fact that the group photograph of the five leaders at the Summit was preceded by a handshake between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping made more headlines than the more substantive part of the proceedings

which resulted in the signing of four agreements—BRICS Action Agenda on Economic and Trade Cooperation, BRICS Action Plan on Innovation Cooperation, Strategic Framework of BRICS Customs Cooperation and Memorandum of Understanding between the BRICS Business Council and New Development Bank on Strategic Cooperation or NDB, a multilateral development bank set up by BRICS. The interpretation of the symbolic, however, is not uncontested. While the handshake initially seemed to have symbolised the official seal on the “expeditious disengagement” at Doklam it is now clear that Doklam itself was peripheral to China’s wider geo-economic and strategic vision where India has a significant part.

There is today an infrastructural logic to most global political events and the significance of the “infrastructural alliance,” where the strength of ties is measured by connectivity and volumes of flows, is significantly higher than disputed strips of land and encounters over varying perceptions of political frontiers and frontiers of influence. China’s overtures to India during the Summit are easy to comprehend if one takes note of the growing alignments between India, the US, Japan and Vietnam. The increasing US-India engagement and the strategic implications of the US seeking Indian assistance for a reinvigorated effort to stabilise Afghanistan has not been lost on China which views this as a concern as it does the deterioration of US-Pakistan relations and the continued American presence in Afghanistan. But, most importantly, there is recognition of the fact that antagonism with India hinders both the One Belt One Road (OBOR) corridors and brings into question the working of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. AIIB supports China’s logistic vision of Belt and Road with the aim of bringing South Asian economies closer to China, Central Asia and West Asia and eventually also Europe and Africa.

As an initiative OBOR is projected as an instrument to create a continuous land and maritime zone where countries will pursue convergent economic policies, underpinned by physical infrastructure and supported by trade and financial flows. The OBOR policy document further states that the initiative is designed to uphold “open world economy and the spirit of open regionalism,” an obvious one-time counter to the more exclusive and now defunct US-proposed mega-economic blocks, the Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP). Deeper economic integration within Asia is embedded in the larger framework of China's attempt to build rail, road and port infrastructures across Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, thereby dramatically shortening cargo transport time between Asia and Europe/the Middle East and Africa. OBOR has a transcontinental (Silk Road Economic Belt) and maritime (Maritime Silk Route) component. From the Chinese perspective OBOR is projected to be a "game changer" which will eventually transform the way in which global politics would be shaped.

The BRICS expectation was that since all member states were interested in a more equitable global economic order they would become the harbinger of a new matrix of global governance in trade, energy and climate change. What makes global headlines today however is a reiteration of the same selective list of "terror networks" that had been identified in the post 9/11 scenario with a few recent exceptions—the Taliban, Islamic State/DAISH, Al-Qaida and its affiliates, including Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, TTP and Hizb ut-Tahrir and the meagre amount that China has offered (about \$80 million) for BRICS cooperation plans that pales into insignificance in terms of its commitment of \$124 billion for the Belt and Road Initiative. As the requirement for formulating a concerted strategy for negotiations with "industrialised" West is reduced due to deep contradictions within them the rhetorical character of the grouping for member states that seem to be striking their own individual paths of development and negotiating their own "crises" seems to be ascendant.

The BRICS declaration on terrorism was followed by President Trump's accusations that Islamabad harbours militants attacking US and Afghan troops and subsequent Chinese attempts to dissociate from the statement. The fallout of this on China's relations with Pakistan and Pakistan's reactions to the 2017 BRICS Summit will be the subject of the following *Reflections*.

A CATCH-22 SITUATION

Priya Singh

We ... express concern on the security situation in the region and violence caused by the Taliban, ISIL/DAISH, Al-Qaida and its affiliates including Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, TTP and Hizb ut-Tabrir. We deplore all terrorist attacks worldwide, including attacks in BRICS countries, and condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations wherever committed and by whomsoever and stress that there can be no justification whatsoever for any act of terrorism. We reaffirm that those responsible for committing, organizing, or supporting terrorist acts must be held accountable. Recalling the primary leading role and responsibility of states in preventing and countering terrorism, we stress the necessity to develop international cooperation, in accordance with the principles of international law, including that of sovereign equality of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. (BRICS Leaders Xiamen Declaration, September 4, 2017)

For the first time in its somewhat chequered history, the leaders of the BRICS nations explicitly spelled out that the militant groups supposedly based in Pakistan posed a threat to regional security and urged that the benefactors be held responsible. The remark was made in the context of the situation in Afghanistan, a geostrategic asset for connectivity projects and a nation waiting anxiously to join the club. The remark as expected aroused a considerable degree of attention, consternation and apprehension in both China and Pakistan. There was, as they say, a churning within.

The *Dawn* in its immediate appraisal of the BRICS declaration urged the state to embark on a comprehensive and concerted policy of combating insurgent groups operating from within its soil if it wants to “remain on the right side of international opinion.” While there was a consensus that India’s presence in the forum must have persuaded the semantic, however, there was

also the realisation that Brazil, China, Russia and South Africa could have echoed the same only if it were based on a genuine degree of conviction and apprehension of their own. Pakistan would therefore benefit in not treating it as an anomaly that could be attributed to the misgivings of the United States, Afghanistan and India. While acknowledging the effort and advances made by Pakistan in fighting radicalism and insurgency within, there was recognition and admittance of the fundamental incongruity at the crux of the nation's efforts to contest militant violence, radicalism and fanaticism, that is, a reluctance to accept the policies of the past, and a continuing discriminatory method to combat militancy, which is perceived to have compounded the problem. The suggestion therefore was that devoid of a candid "reckoning with the past," the repositioning of the state from one that reinforced jihad under the aegis of the Cold War to one that recognises and acknowledges the great price that it exacted on "Pakistan's economy, society and position in the international community" could not be accomplished. Besides without admitting that Pakistan's performance in combating violence, militancy and fanaticism within its soil has been rather inconsistent and insufficient, any substantive and real success in all probability is highly unlikely. The opinion piece could be an aberration in the midst of a plethora of nationalist and parochial responses to the BRICS statement, it however does indicate anxieties regarding Pakistan's global standing; an inclination towards a self-critique as well as a suggestion and desire to introspect.

China's assent in stating that militant groups within Pakistan pose a threat to regional peace and security has become a subject of analysis within the country. There have been criticisms, somewhat unusual in the country, as well as appreciation for the same. According to Hu Shisheng, director of the state-run China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, the decision could annoy Pakistan and could very well affect its relations with China. It also implies testing times for the Chinese diplomats as a great amount of convincing may be required to appease Pakistan, a crucial player in the Belt and Road Initiative, by way of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Shisheng questioned the decision and the logic behind identifying the Haqqani network, symbolising the Afghan Taliban that functions in Afghanistan as it could make "China's role in Afghan political reconciliation

process more difficult,” or in fact impossible. His primary contention and criticism was the lack of preparation and consultation with Pakistan citing that groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami that operates from Pakistan were in fact more lethal as well as responsible for the attack on Chinese nationals in Baluchistan. Shisheng assumed that this may have been an instance of a trade-off so as to include terror outfits such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, “which is active in its restive Xinjiang region.” What irked the Chinese academic was what he perceives as a success for India. Conversely, another Chinese analyst, Wang Dehua of the Institute for South and Central Asian Studies at the Shanghai Municipal Centre for International Studies, was supportive of the BRICS declaration, stating “to successfully counter all kinds of terrorism, the first important concern is violence caused by the Taliban, ISIS, al-Qaida and its affiliates” and that a consensus was imperative with regard to which terrorists should be targeted. In his opinion the BRICS nations would be well advised to embrace an inclusive attitude to counter terrorism.

The fact of the matter is that it is uncertain times for the BRICS initiative in terms of its economic prowess as a bloc as well as that of its constituent members, the supposed key factor in bringing the otherwise somewhat dissimilar group together. Political differences were a given. To add to the uncertainty is China’s global aspirations commensurate with its economic weightage within the forum and otherwise and the regional competition with India over connectivity. While India has begun its pursuit of alternative allies such as the United States and Japan in a bid to neutralise the “China factor,” even as its age-old ties with Russia appears to have encountered an adversary in the form of the changing Sino-Russian relations, it would be interesting to observe how China contends with the situation and its probable consequences for its “all-weather” friend, Pakistan.

PROTESTS AND MOVEMENTS

SUMMER OF PROTESTS

Anita Sengupta

The appointment of Serzh Sargsyan as Prime Minister after two terms as Armenian President was the current “tipping point” in Armenian popular politics that saw demonstrators pouring into the streets of Yerevan. Reminiscent of the Arab Spring in 2010, youth protesters marched through the streets of the capital with the slogan “Nikhol for Prime Minister” and demanded not just the resignation of Sargsyan as Prime Minister but also the ouster of the Republican Party which has dominated the Armenian Parliament for more than twenty years. The protests that culminated in the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan on April 23 was led by Nikhol Pashinian, a former journalist and founder of Civil Contract, an opposition party. It was his call for demonstrations against the Prime Minister’s appointment which morphed into a mass street movement that was subsequently joined by other parties. Sargsyan’s plans to remain in power indefinitely became unpopular enough to warrant the creation of a united forum across the political spectrum involving people from different social classes and including unarmed soldiers.

Identified as Transcaucasian, Armenia is small country with a majority of its 11 million ethnic community living as far-flung diasporas. The 3 million Armenians, who live within the geographical limits of the state, are contained within a typical post-Soviet system that can be identified as neither authoritarian nor democratic. Since 1999, the Republican Party of Armenia has dominated Armenian politics, with Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharian serving as President. In April 2018 when his second term as President expired there was an attempt to retain Sargsyan as Prime Minister, with a changed constitution, where the role of the President would be downgraded and the head of the government would become the de facto leader of the country. Earlier in 2014 Sargsyan had publicly stated that

he would not take the position of Prime Minister, so his motivations for accepting the position remain unclear. While the decision of the Party to sacrifice Sargsyan can be explained as a bid to hold on to power, Sargsyan's unexpected resignation, without resort to violence, less than a week after changing his job in the face of street protests by groups that had barely any representation in Parliament is more difficult to explain.

This, moreover, is not the first time that the youth in Armenia have taken to the streets. A significant portion of the people in Armenia live below the poverty line and apprehension of government neglect of popular social and economic interests have led to frequent protests in recent years. In 2013, there were protests against the government's decision to join the Russia-led Eurasian Union rather than the European Union. In 2014 there were protests against questionable pension reforms. In 2015, there was widespread public reaction to a proposed hike in electricity rates, and "Electric Yerevan," as the movement came to be known, was characterised as "new," "unprecedented" and "revolutionary".

What stands out in the course of the recent Armenian protests is the unusual lack of debate on which external power acted as the catalyst. Along with this has come the recognition that these were just "Armenian" protests that would have limited repercussions beyond its borders. The protests were not analysed as an expression of the rejection of either Russia or the European Union and Russia has responded with uncharacteristic restraint and noted that the protests are a "domestic issue". Russian lawmakers and commentators have expressed support for Armenia regardless of its leader indicating a depth of relationship based on Russian control over much of the Armenian economy that Sargsyan's resignation is unlikely to change. In any case Pashinian has clearly stated that the domestic changes would not affect external relations and Armenian foreign policy orientation.

Protests often frame a new political junction when the consciousness of fundamental change appears so it is significant that the protests have been perceived as a reflection of the emergence of a civil society within the state, which continues to remain an enigma in many post-Soviet conditions. While the protests remain a process of empowerment, the call for a "peoples' candidate" has already met with criticism from the government which has

upheld elections as the true expression of “peoples’ choice”. And while Armenia has seen recurrent protests over the last years and a proliferation of activist groups, there is also an underlying populist discourse on “national unity”, usually interpreted as support for continuity, that emerges whenever conflict erupts, as it did during the Four Day War (along the Nagorno-Karabakh line of contact) in April 2016.

However, echoing one of the protestors, it is important to keep in mind that “the question is not the park”, “the problem is not the electricity tariff” and “the issue is not about elections”. Anti-regime movements have erupted across Eurasia with Moscow and St. Petersburg witnessing localised protests of mortgage owners, protests in Azerbaijan over economic issues propelled by the falling value of its currency, protests over unpaid wages and lay-offs in Turkmenistan and protests in Uzbekistan against constant shortage of oil and gas. All of these are symbolic of deep-seated grievances and expose the fragility of regimes that have continued unchallenged for the last two decades and more.

REVISITING THE “TAHRIR MOMENT”

Priya Singh

The Arabs have predominantly been termed as unique though not in an exemplary sense. They were regarded as the typical “Other” and their existence which has been the subject/theme of various debates has often been labelled as “predicament”, “despair”, “impasse”, “lost opportunities”, and “malaise”. The euphemism for Arabs was “deficit”, which included deficits in the realm of education, infrastructure, technology, governance and in the domain of women’s empowerment. These accounts ignored the fact that Arabs had been agitating for their rights as citizens for generations. However, cultural preconceptions and political partiality impeded the ability to comprehend the scale of this cynicism. The Arabs were not an exception but the resilience of their rulers was exceptional. The symbolic initiation of the Arab uprisings of December 2010 in Tunisia and the fall of Ben Ali’s regime was hailed by many as the end of Arab exceptionalism but to the sceptics, it was a case of Tunisian exceptionalism. The ouster of Hosni Mubarak, the swift nature and the broad sweep of the protests in the Arab world appeared to indicate the contrary, perhaps signifying that the focus on the Arab world was not for reasons of war or terror but due to a widespread allegiance to and recognition of liberty (Filiu, 2011: 5, 16). It seemed to suggest the moment of a revolution.

As Alper Dede succinctly sums it while questioning “revolution as a means for change” in the context of the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011, “Besides several structural factors such as the overall inefficiency of the governments in the region, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, mass poverty, authoritarianism, and lack of democracy, two additional factors fuelled the uprisings and exacerbated the situation in the countries: (1) the availability of modern means of communication, and (2) the well-educated young masses’ high levels of frustration as a result of stagnancy and inefficiency of the

regimes whose only purpose was to maintain the status quo. Without these two factors, the large-scale uprisings on the Arab streets would not have been possible” (Dede, 2011: 23). Eric Chaney holds the enfeebling of the historical institutions by way of “education”, “secularization” and “external influences” responsible for the democratic insufficiency and therefore for the Arab uprisings (Chaney, 2012: 363-414).

Maryam Jamshidi, in his book *The Future of the Arab Spring: Civic Entrepreneurship in Politics, Art, and Technology Startups*, argues that the conventional interpretations of “revolution”, “ideology” and “democracy” require a reappraisal in the context of the Arab uprisings. He contends that there has been, “(1) an overly historicized depiction of ‘revolution’; (2) a definition of ‘ideology’ that is limited to political, religious, or economic dogmas; (3) a reading of ‘democracy’ that relies primarily on the ballot box and excludes social justice issues” (Jamshidi, 2014: 23). For Jamshidi, who has emphasized on what he terms as the “civic entrepreneurship” aspect of the Arab uprisings, it is the “evolving nature”, the “fluidity” and “subjectivity” of what constitutes and does not constitute a revolution that is more appropriate to an analysis of the Arab revolts. The Arab uprisings possessed elements of “popular involvement” and “progress” as the protests were initiated at the grassroots level and had extensive popular support. In an ideological sense, the Arab uprisings incorporated a discourse, which encompassed an array of “beliefs”, and varied, competing perspectives, akin to a “code of ethics”, which continues to mould the happenings in the region (Jamshidi, 2014: 23).

The clarion call for “dignity” best symbolised the “paradigm shift” in “thinking”, along with the demands for justice—social, political and economic, cutting across ethnic, religious divides, vividly described by Omar Kamel, an Egyptian activist, “[W]e had experienced an Egypt that we had never dared imagine; one in which we could all stand together whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, religious or secular. No matter what our political ideologies might have been, we formed a community of individuals that cared deeply for one another, one in which you knew that the man or woman standing next to you, whose name you did not happen to know, would risk his or her life to save yours” (Kamel, 2013: 29). As a concluding point, as

far as democracy is concerned, the Arab uprisings with its focus on “Bread, Freedom, and Dignity,” symbolised a demand for a distinctive, participatory form of democracy where political rights, economic opportunities and social justice are intrinsically interconnected (Jamshidi, 2014: 40-41).

The revolts of the so called “Arab Spring”, which was initiated in December 2010, galvanised the masses across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to overthrow the hitherto unchallenged autocrats. As the dissection and analysis of the uprisings began, the question that arose was what would be the enduring repercussions—a fresh and constructive chapter for the region or a fleeting pause from the authoritarian past. The evaluation of the accomplishments of the Arab uprisings has mainly focused on political and socio-economic indicators, so the emphasis has been on the multiple economic crises, the emergence of the Islamist parties, enhanced sectarianism, issues that have overwhelmed many countries in the aftermath of the upheavals. A different methodology could be productive, one which looks at the phenomenal rise in ingenious clusters, movements, organisations, start-ups, and other enterprises shaped by people at the grassroots levels to address countless political, social, economic and cultural concerns.

There has been a paradigm shift in terms of the proliferation of such groups who have contributed to what can be termed as “civic entrepreneurship,”—a citizen-propelled endeavour to activate groups to react to opportunities or calamities for the sake of enhancing collective good. It is believed that the civic entrepreneurship aspect of the Arab uprisings comprised the emergence of protest movements and generated novel approaches to political mobilisation and popular resistance, encouraged the formation of new clusters and groupings equipped to deal with local matters and generate civic involvement in regional countries and though evolved at the grassroots, they could have bearings at the national and regional level (Jamshidi, 2014: 1-2). The inability to live a dignified life compelled the people of the Arab world to protest and it is the absence of dignity which facilitates the continuance of protest movements. Tahrir gave way to the phenomena of a “New” Egypt, which quintessentially underlines the novel forms of protests that exist alongside the resurgent, overriding state, concurrently, confronting

and resisting its dominant ways. As the “deep state” becomes ingrained, protests acquire deeper connotations.

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WHY IRANIANS ARE PROTESTING? YET AGAIN

Deepika Saraswat

The ongoing round of protests in Iran began last week on Thursday in the north-eastern city of Mashhad, the burial place of the eighth Shiite Imam Reza and the most prominent Shiite pilgrimage centre in Iran. The city is a conservative bastion and stronghold of Ebrahim Raesi, the head of Asthan Quds Rezavi, the country's wealthiest and most powerful of religious foundations. He had unsuccessfully rivalled President Hassan Rouhani in last year's presidential election.

The initial protests in Mashhad involved those who had lost their savings to unlicensed credit and financial institutions before drawing the members of disgruntled working class, which continues to suffer as a result of the long-standing economic malaise afflicting the country. When the protests spread to other parts of the country including smaller towns and President Trump began to vociferously praise the protesting "brave Iranians," it seemed like a repeat of the 2009 protests, when many in the West hoped that Islamic regime was nearing its end. But the sobering truth is that mass mobilisation, both pro-government as well as anti-government, is a regular feature of Iranian political culture.

Mannoche Dorraj, a political science professor at the University of Texas points out that the Islamic Republic is a populist authoritarian theocracy that has used mass mobilisation to intimidate its political opponents and assert its authority; therefore, it is vulnerable to the demands of its constituency expressed through mass political action. It is one of the reasons why despite the pervasive security services and frequent show of coercive force to curb political dissent, the people of Iran have regularly resorted to protests to register their

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demands and needs to the holders of political power, and mass mobilisation has become embedded in the political culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Secondly, mass mobilisation in modern Iran can't be separated from the culture of revolution and the Shi'ite notion of justice, fairness, and resistance against oppression, ideals, which paradoxically constitute the revolutionary worldview of the Islamic Republic and also impel people to take collective social action against perceived failures of the same regime.

Thirdly, the spread of internet has provided a new and effective instrument for mass mobilisation by the youth; as a result, protests, once triggered in one city, quickly snowball in numbers. According to statistics by Iran's Ministry of Communications, there were 47 million Iranians using mobile internet, making the internet penetration rate of about 58 per cent. Internet has surely opened the public space beyond the control of authoritarian regimes and it is for this reason that government blocks internet and social media in its attempt to shut down protests.

In Iran, mass mobilisations are also instrumentalised in its complex factional struggle for power. The current round of protests has been supported by conservatives, leaving President Rouhani appealing for unity and urging Iran's political and military forces to speak in "one voice" to ensure the "[survival of] the political system, national interest and stability of our country and the region."

Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, founder of the Europe-Iran Forum—a platform for business diplomacy between Iran and Europe—observes, "it seems that country's forgotten men and women may be mobilising to ensure that their voices are heard in Iran and around the world. There is a growing consensus that the protests are comprised primarily of members of working class, who are most vulnerable to chronic unemployment and a rise in the cost of living."

The increase in food and fuel prices and slashing of state subsidies under the austerity measures undertaken by the Rouhani administration when coupled with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, and especially high youth unemployment of 29 per cent, has swelled the numbers of those falling in the vulnerable class. If the urban and the highly educated upper and middle classes have brought moderates to

power and have constituted the constituency of the reform movement and civil society, the underclass has often thrown its lot with the conservatives and hardliners, such as Ahmadinejad, who remains a popular figure among this section. It only makes sense that the protests were triggered in the conservative bastion of Mashhad and not in hyper-urban Tehran. Iranians know that theirs is a resource-rich country and therefore they can't be resigned to a life of economic misery, especially when they see that their country is engaged in a costly geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Kingdom.

In times of economic downturn, low oil-export revenue and dampening prospects of economic revival in light of the US about-turn on the nuclear deal and spectre of reimposition of sanctions, Iranian people are increasingly unwilling to bail out expensive geopolitical games that the Iranian state is playing in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere. “*Na Gaza, na Lebnaan, Jaanam fedaaye Iran*” (Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, will sacrifice my life for Iran) and “Death to the Dictator”, the popular slogans of the Green Movement of 2009 have made a return.

Slogans such as these squarely question the pan-Islamist narrative of resistance exploited by the regime to produce legitimacy at the expense of the needs of the national citizenry. It is the perpetuation of authoritarian populist theocracy and the overriding powers of the “religious jurist” that fuel the undying popular desire for democracy and freedom. The Iranian youth born after the Islamic revolution and the turmoil of Iran-Iraq war are not enthralled with the ideological revolutionary worldview of the regime and instead want an end to the economic duress inflicted by decades of sanctions and American hostility towards Iran.

Even if it were economic woes of the marginalised that triggered the protests, they have quickly snowballed into political protests drawing students and youth including large numbers of women. The fact that the protests are leaderless and the cities reporting protest casualties—Najafabad and Shahin Shar in Isfahan province and the town of Tuyserkan in Hamadan province—are small towns with populations less than two lakhs clearly indicate that the protests are spontaneous and not manipulated by external forces which have resorted to bandwagoning

with certain oppositional figures to further their agenda of regime change. However, one thing is certain that the American exuberance over Iranian protests would be used by the government to suppress protests while urging unity and warning against falling prey to enemy plots.

FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH TO THE
GLOBAL NORTH? MIGRATION,
MOBILITY AND MIGRATION
GOVERNANCE

GLOBAL MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Anita Sengupta

Migrant narratives normally appear briefly after two types of incidents—tragedies and reports on radicalisation. In January this year when a bus carrying more than 50 Uzbek migrant workers on their way to Russia burst into flames on the Kazakh border, desperate migrant journeys emerged briefly in the news. Similarly, after the metro bombings in St. Petersburg in 2017 migration as a potential source of radicalisation brought into focus the inevitability of the migration-security nexus and the assumption that the “cost” associated with migration is that of the state alone. This of course is a misnomer which then leads to a search for global migration governance with the assumption that it is states which through international cooperation can maximise the benefits and minimise the costs associated with migration.

In response to this a manifesto on humane mobility underlines that a “reimagining of migration” is required to take note of the fact that it is people on the move who are required to be at the centre of the migration debate and the decision-making process, not the exclusionary sovereign rights of states. The need of the hour is to develop more inclusive and creative ways of dealing with human mobility that takes note of individuals, communities and organisations that live and work in the “spaces of displacement”. It goes on to underline that here individual narratives assume relevance as reductionist categories limit the understanding of complex migration journeys. It is within this context that identification of communities and groups at risk in countries of origin, on smuggling networks and on how potential migrants assess and reassess their chances of the movement becoming significant.

The discussion assumes relevance in the background of the discussions on Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration held at Marrakesh on December 10-11, 2018, where a massive group of world population is

being treated as whole thereby reducing the significance of both individual narratives and journeys but also the variety of protection modes that are offered in Asian states, the multiple ways in which receiving societies deal with the influx and resultant manifold refugee experiences. Among the many issues that require identification, migrant smuggling networks and how they operate within different environments is increasingly assuming relevance. While multiple terms are used by national legislature and international bodies to define smuggling of migrants, UN Smuggling Protocol defines it as: “Procurement in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit of the illegal entry of a person into a State of which the person is not a national or permanent resident.” Migrant narratives, on the other hand, illustrate the complexities of multiple migrant experiences but also the fact that these complexities are specific to regions thereby bringing into question the “whole of society approach” that the Global Compact articulates. The discussion that follows illustrates this in the Central Asian case.

Central Asian states, like many others, are migrant origin, migrant destination and transit states and both the geopolitical location of the region as well as its porous borders have made the region prone to irregular movements. Smuggling of migrants is not a widely researched subject in Central Asia since smuggling of migrants within the Central Asian states is not a widespread activity because of visa free travel for limited periods being legal except in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. However, Central Asia is the route through which migrants from South and South East Asia or Afghanistan travel further west. While there is a general acceptance of the fact that it requires critical analysis, data on migrant smuggling remains under-reported. Most of the data is either based on the few interceptions that happen at borders or in narratives about migrant lives that have been collected through ethnographic studies and/or in the media and internet. Also when irregular migrants are intercepted at the borders there is little information about whether their movement was supported by facilitators.

In the Central Asian situation the facilitators are in most cases a complex network of people who support the entire process from illegal entry to extended stays and provision of accommodation and employment and can

include officials. In any case most of the focus of state and non-state actors remains on trafficking of persons and little attention is paid to identifying networks that facilitate the process of migrant smuggling. Collection of reliable data about migrant smuggling is also challenged by the fact that in most cases the migrant himself is an accomplice and neither the migrant nor the smuggler wish to be detected. The multiple networks and complicated routes along which this movement happens, given the difficult terrain on the one hand and established routes on the other, also prove to be a hindrance. There are numerous stories of Central Asian migrants who pay intermediaries at borders to move them across but are subsequently faced with adverse situations beyond their control. Trafficking and forced labour are particularly severe abuses of exceptional violation, but non-payment of wages is rampant, by private and state employers alike. Migrant workers typically do not know when they will be paid, how much they will be paid, or even if they will be paid. Most do not have written contracts and labour relations are governed by verbal agreements. Since the practices of non-payment or delayed payment are so pervasive, many workers feel they have no choice but to remain at a job for weeks or months in hopes of one day receiving all or some of the wages owed to them. So the voluntary nature of the movement may change upon arrival at the destination. While migrant smuggling as a transnational phenomenon is generally identified as a crime against the state, in cases where the migrants are misled by the intermediaries their rights may be violated and it becomes a human rights issue.

In the Central Asian scenario the story may be complicated by the fact that in addition to the “smuggler”, intermediaries are often involved in the process. The United Nations Protocol identifies producing fraudulent travel or identity documents, enabling a person who is not a national or a permanent resident to remain in the state without necessary documents and acting as an accomplice in migrant smuggling as falling within the purview of migrant smuggling. In Central Asia scenario all of these are involved and migrant smuggling is a complex process with interrelated layers operating at various levels. Most migrant stories bring to the forefront the fact that there are well-established systems of acquiring fraudulent documents and aiding migrants in overstaying their visa periods. Bhavna Dave in “Getting

by as a Gastarbeiter in Kazakhstan” talks about Gulnara whose husband is a policeman and who owns three retail outlets at Barakholka (a large market in the outskirts of Almaty). One is leased to a Kyrgyz woman, who together with members of her extended family (shuttling back and forth between Almaty and Bishkek to manage their legal status), sells garments made in Bishkek. Her husband drives a taxi between Almaty and Bishkek, and also carries passports of fellow Kyrgyz migrants to secure a new migration card. The other two are leased to Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants selling fruit and vegetables. Gulnara is a “fixer” who recognises that her business interests and the well-being of the migrants are interlinked. She also runs a marriage agency that helps migrants obtain citizenship or residency in Kazakhstan through marriage.

Given the porous nature of the borders it is not surprising that much of the research that examines migrant smuggling through the region records this movement from South and South East Asia through the Central Asian region and then onward to Russia and Western Europe. Most of the migrants enter Central Asia on valid student, tourist and business visas where the migrants are advised to incorrectly state the reason for their travel. Smuggled migrants generally arrive in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan first and then travel through Kazakhstan and Russia to Europe. Very often established routes for smuggling contraband arms and drugs are used for the transit of irregular migrants. A price is also set for this and non-payment or fraud on the part of the smuggler means that the migrant finds himself stranded between borders. However, lack of proper documentation is also a major reason for illegal transit as is the very large numbers of people who travel as labourers. Since they rarely have legally binding work contracts their movements are irregular and often unregistered in the system.

Many migrant workers speak of having specific and highly coordinated routes and routines, knowing parts of the city that are “safe” and districts in which their own unfamiliarity and the lack of acquaintances amongst the local police force render them vulnerable to arbitrary document checks. Deportations, whilst not common, are frequent enough for every migrant worker to know someone who had been unceremoniously deported from

Russia. They thus represented a very real risk; particularly at times when terrorist threat gives “securitisation” a distinctly racial twist.

Migrant smuggling is thus a larger issue than just the transit of migrants across porous borders in the region. It involves formal and informal arrangements at borders, an intricate network of facilitators at various points along the border and within the states and finally trans-border arrangements that move beyond the Central Asian region. The process also involves attitudes of people who live along the borders as well as those of border guards on each side. As a study on the Tajik Afghan border demonstrates smuggling and trafficking along the borders is an everyday affair and very often customs agents and border guards tend to follow informal institutional norms or unwritten agreements rather than written rules. This is the complex ground reality that most commentaries on global migration governance, ignore, making it problematic at various levels but mostly because it overlooks the multifaceted and complex processes of displacement. Whether it is acceptance in a new society as refugees, migrants, and guest workers, or returning home to post-conflict situations, each scenario involves both specific physical challenges and difficult encounters with broader political communities. The systemic denial of access to rights, or, their selective attribution, calls for a re-evaluation that links forced migration, labour studies, citizenship and rights debates rather than isolating the migrant experience.

NURTURING A NEW “NAKBA”?

Priya Singh

The UN partition plan was resisted by the Palestinians who initiated the 1948 war. The decision did not emanate purely out of a sense of revulsion for Jews or discontentment with the plan itself. The primary reason for resistance was their reluctance to consent to an existence of exile, alienation and exclusion to gratify a collective arriving from beyond its borders, asserting a home, from which they had ostensibly drifted in times gone by. Recognition of the Zionist assertion inevitably implied expulsion of the Palestinian population. In 1948, Jews did not constitute a majority in Palestine. For the establishment of a Jewish democratic state, it was imperative for the Jews to constitute a majority. This, in turn, connoted the expulsion, displacement and dispossession of the 750,000 Palestinian inhabitants of the land. This would have been the case even if they had approved the partition plan and had not proclaimed war on the newly created Jewish state of Israel (Siegman, 2018: 17).

Thus 1948 came to be recognised as the year of the Palestine *Nakba* (Catastrophe), the displacement of the Palestinians and the fragmentation and “de-Arabisation” of what used to signify “historic Palestine”. The process of “de-Palestinisation” was a corollary of the war of 1948. In the words of Elias Sanbar, “That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries ... ‘The Palestinian people does not exist’, said the new masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms, as either ‘refugees’, or in the case of a small minority that had managed to escape the generalised expulsion, ‘Israeli Arabs’. A long absence was beginning” (Masalha, 2012: 4). Sanbar was responding to the comment made by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, “There was no such thing as a Palestinian people ... It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist” (Masalha, 2012: 4-5).

Israel habitually contends that it has a right to exist, a claim that is founded on the presence of a powerful army and backed by a robust equation with a geographically remote power, the United States. Nonetheless, it is not supported by both the people inhabiting within the boundaries on which the state has been instituted and those who have a genuine claim to live within the frontiers. In the case of Israel the word “democracy” thus becomes, in the opinion of many, a fabrication, not merely on grounds of intolerance towards and bias against Palestinians residing in the state or due to the deprivation/denial of basic rights to the Palestinians inhabiting the lands grabbed in 1967. It is a misrepresentation for the reason that in 1948 the first step of the Israeli government was the eviction of the bulk of the populace residing on the land it had captured. They were deprived of their right to vote and reside on the territory upon which they had an innate and legitimate claim.

Israel’s claim to be a “democracy” is a highly contested one and it is perceived as an unusual example. It was an exception, to some an aberration from its inception. It symbolised a “settler-state” created/instituted not in the background of “imperialism” but in an epoch of “decolonisation and self-determination” (Salt, 2018). The terms commonly used to describe the state by its critics are, “ethnic cleansing’, ‘settler-colonisation’, ‘Apartheid/ Separation Wall’, ‘de-Arabisation’, ‘ethnocracy’, ‘memoricide’, ‘politicide’ and ‘toponymicide’” (Masalha, 2012: 11).

Kimmerling observes, “The Israeli state, like many other immigrant-settler societies, was born in sin, on the ruins of another culture, one which suffered politicide and a partial ethnic cleansing, even though the new state did not succeed in annihilating the rival aboriginal culture as many other immigrant-settler societies have done” (Kimmerling, 2003: 214–15). Therefore despite attempts by the state at creating a homogeneous political space, a Hebrew and Israeli culture, the native/indigenous way of life persisted notwithstanding the dispersal and disintegration of the Palestinian society and populace across the Middle East and the world at large, in the aftermath of the *Nakba*.

An illustration of the determined effort to resist the obliteration of the indigenous presence is the commemoration of the *Nakba* by way

of the observance of the *Nakba* day. 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the *Nakba* and May 15, as is the case each year, was observed as the *Nakba* day. The difference this year was that this remarkable day also witnessed another remarkable event, the “display” of the US embassy being opened in Jerusalem (Al Quds), considered as an “occupied city under international law.” Simultaneously, as the festivities marking 70 years of the creation of the Israeli state and the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem took place, Palestinian protestors were bearing the brunt of the mighty Israeli state on the “other side of the Gaza fence line” as they proceeded with the “Great March of Return” (Amjad, 2018).

An important aspect that needs to be highlighted in this context is the real fact of the Gazan situation. The use of the term “border” to designate the 1949 ceasefire line that separates Gaza from Israel is fiercely contested by the Palestinians. It is this separation that the Palestinian protestors seek to eradicate through the “Great March of Return” wherein they attempt to cross the fence despite obvious jeopardy to their lives. Israel categorises it as a border and as such adopts a “policy of open-fire” towards the demonstrators of the march on the grounds of safeguarding its independence and for reasons of security while contending that as it has no settlements in the territory since 2005 and no longer occupies it, consequently it has no obligation towards it. The reality, according to Palestinian opinion is that the so-called border consists of an armed web of “naval ships, barbed wire, electronic barriers, lethal no-man zones, and surveillance systems that function as the fence of an open-air prison” (Amjad, 2018). In other words, Israel continues to regulate the everyday existence of Gaza’s population as it manipulates the flow of people and goods. The occupation thus continues behind the veil of preservation of the territory of the Israeli state. In turn, overt and hostile protests gain momentum as old ruptures are reinforced and new faultlines emerge.

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ISBN 978-93-89137-16-3



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