



## RAPPORTEURS REPORT

# India & South Asia: Exploring Regional Perceptions October 30-31, 2013



## Inaugural Session



The two-day 7th South Asian Conference organized by IDSA on 30-31 October 2013 focussed on “India and South Asia: Regional Perceptions. It was attended by participants from all the SAARC countries and also from Myanmar.

In the inaugural session, in his [welcome remarks, Director General, IDSA Dr Arvind Gupta](#) set the ball rolling by saying that there were many reasons why South Asia had been lagging behind in the efforts towards regional cooperation. “One of the reasons is the negative perceptions the countries of the region have about each other.” However, despite this “the region has not remained static. Democracy has taken hold in this part of the world. South Asian countries have also done relatively well economically,” he argued.

In his [keynote address, the Defence Minister of India and President of IDSA, Shri A K Antony expressed](#) his concern over the fact that South Asia was “one of the least integrated regions of the world”, with a very small share in world economy. He held that the false perceptions that the countries in South Asia have about each other were not too favourable for regional cooperation.

He said that with 80 per cent of the regional GDP and 70 per cent of South Asia’s population, “India has an important role to play in making regional cooperation possible”. He urged the participants to note that India had assumed “responsibility to improve its relationship with neighbours” and that this policy had paid off at the bilateral levels. “India’s relationship with some countries has undergone a dramatic transformation”. He said that India had always tried to reach out to all its neighbours and engage them through political, economic, defence, and developmental cooperation” and that India was willing to “play a major role in strengthening regional infrastructure and in supporting efforts aimed at human resource development”. The Minister expressed hope that “an improvement in India’s bilateral relationships with the countries of the region will have a beneficial impact on the process of regional cooperation”.

However, he lamented at the same time that in spite of all this “India’s natural predominance is viewed with concern by some states”. Emphasising upon the need for all the states in the region to deal with mutual perceptions while conducting their foreign policies towards each other, the minister highlighted the role that think tanks, civil societies, intelligentsia and media can play. “Institutions like IDSA must strengthen the linkages with their counterparts in the region and develop collaborative research,” he said.

He expressed hope that the two day conference would prove instrumental in exploring how best can India manage or improve the perceptions among its South Asian neighbours.

## Session I: Shaping of Perceptions in South Asia

Chairperson : Professor S.D. Muni

Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka

Amb. Humayun Kabir

Dr. Pratyoush Onta

Dr. Yaqoob Khan  
Bangash



The chair [Professor S D Muni](#) in his opening remarks noted that probably till about 30 years back India did not bother about perceptions about it in the neighbourhood. However, in a changing context, the public diplomacy division in the Ministry of External Affairs is making tangible efforts to study and understand perception of countries in the neighbourhood, and has realised the need to reach out to them. India has its own way of looking at these countries, with its own angularities. However, in order to understand and further crystallize this understanding it is necessary to gauge how others perceive you.

[Ambassador \(Dr.\) Dayan Jayatilleka](#) in his paper titled, “The Geostrategic Matrix and Existential Dimensions of Sri Lanka’s Conflict, Post War Crisis and External Relations”, shared his perspectives based on Sri Lanka as India’s southern periphery and Tamil Nadu as its inner periphery and the relationship between the two peripheries and the political dynamics involved therein. According to him, the Tamil question is pivotal to Sri Lanka’s relations with India and the former ought to resolve the issue to improve its overall ties with India. At the same time, it is important for India to note that Tamil Nadu is playing a role in the ethnic issue of Sri Lanka because of so called transnational linkages. The intrusive role of a sub-state unit raises concerns about whether India policy making is constrained by the stridency shown by Tamil Nadu politicians. In Sri Lanka, it is usually felt that Tamil Nadu factor is overrated in Indian policy circles.

India, the speaker believed, had the option of giving Sri Lanka adequate support but it is somehow constrained by its own internal political dynamics. India’s support is nonetheless valuable but still inadequate. Sri Lanka held elections for the northern council but the level of participation was down rated by India. Ambassador Jayatilleka also alluded to the controversy on whether Indian Prime Minister should attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Sri Lanka. He believed there could be long term strategic implications of his absence which could not be ignored.

[Ambassador Humayun Kabir](#)’s presentation titled, “Changing relations between Bangladesh and India: Perceptions in Bangladesh”, focussed on the common aspirations and mutual understanding between the two countries. He dwelt on the perception parameters between India and Bangladesh which are defined by

geography, processes of identity formation, power setting, policy initiatives and rising economic profile of India. The interplay of these complex factors has resulted in significant consequences for the bilateral relationship and informed perceptions in Bangladesh and in India. Relations between the two countries have been uneven over the past 40 years but since 2009 there has been a fillip as a result of efforts made from both sides to explore and deepen areas of convergence of interest. Bangladesh gave India easy access route to its north eastern states and India reciprocated by extending credit line and agreeing to cooperate on utilization of common resources. However, there are certain irritants and these need to be effectively handled. To further enhance the relationship, both countries needed to be creative and adopt innovative measures to bring about greater cooperation between the two neighbours. Bangladeshis, he argued, never hesitated to reach out to friends. He acknowledged India's support during the liberation war of 1971. However, today, there is increasing realisation within Bangladesh that India is focussing more on the pursuing its traditional realist agenda than forging a stronger partnership with Bangladesh for harnessing new opportunities. Ambassador Kabir also noted that India-Bangladesh relationship needs to get rid of the binary approach of looking at it from the prism of India-Pakistan relations.

**Dr Pratyoush Onta's** paper, "Does Academia matter to the shaping of mutual perceptions in South Asia?" dealt with fundamental issues raising questions on the respective state of research in India and Nepal regarding each other. He argued that ideally academia should contribute to policy formulation but this was not the case presently. According to Dr Onta, being surrounded by India on three sides, it is imperative for Nepal to study India in closely. However, due to lack of adequate infrastructure and environment and state of social science practices in research institutions, India studies in Nepal has not flourished. There have been no efforts in Nepal at the government level to establish research centres which could study various aspects on India. On the other side in India, Nepal studies first began in the late 1950s when the School of International Studies was established in Delhi in 1955. During the next five years, the Indian School of International Studies, Nepal Studies conducted research on the political history of Nepal, on Indo-Nepal relations and on contemporary political developments. These issues still dominate the thematic focus of Nepal Studies in India. Dr Onta noted that the role of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) in promoting the South Asian Studies within in South Asia has not been disappointing. The generic work generated under SAARC has not helped much as the approach is largely broad and does not get into details hence inadequate to facilitate serious scholarship amongst members of academia of the region. In this regard, a long-term solution could be achieved by beginning to invest in institutions – universities and research centres. The role of media, he believed, is significant in drawing attention towards the lack of knowledge and information in the region amongst countries of the region. Dr Onta urged the governments, regional organisations and international agencies to support initiatives which could better knowledge exchange and cooperation. Without this, academia cannot either be strengthened or expected to play a key role in influencing perceptions and ideas about each other.

**Dr Yaqoob Khan Bangash's** presentation titled, "Not India': Pakistan, India and the Self" captured contemporary trends in Pakistan regarding India and the related issues. He argued that there was a definite decline in the level of animosity regarding India amongst Pakistanis, especially among the the youth. The present generation of people in Pakistan thinks more in terms of moving on rather than remaining confined to historical issues. Dr Bangash asserted that interest in Kashmir issue within Pakistan was on the wane. He noted that Pakistan was studied widely in India and it was a subject which commanded lot of academic interest. However, in Pakistan there was not much interest in studying India and Indian politics in detail. Dr Bangash referred to Pakistan's evolution as a Muslim state and later into an Islamic state. He referred to the basic dilemma the non-Muslims faced in the newly created state who were confused as to whether one has to be a Muslim to be called a Pakistani, whether Hindus or other minorities in Pakistan could call themselves Pakistani. He argued that in Pakistan, perceptions regarding India have been formed mainly by the kind of knowledge imparted through school and college text books and information emanating via media. The text books in Pakistan have been essentially anti India in approach leading to mind sets

indoctrinated by hatred towards India. This further led to formation of perceptions which are rather extremist and far from reality. There are media houses in Pakistan which feed anti-India sentiments especially in the vernacular medium. However, in the present context, media has diversified and organisations such as the Jung group and its media channel, the *Geo TV* have shown considerable commitment to forge peace and trust between the two neighbours. The Jung group in collaboration with the Times of India group initiated the *Aman ki Asha* project, a commendable effort in this direction. However, within Pakistan there have been constituencies which are severely opposed to such peace initiatives, alleging that the media house propagating peace with India have been funded by the United States and the United Kingdom.

Dr Bangash also discussed India Pakistan dynamic at the ideological level— how Pakistan has tried to carve its identity different from India, a land dominated by the Hindus. Pakistan views itself as a Muslim, religion centric country based on the two nation theory. One of the objectives of studying history in Pakistan has been to understand the difference between Hindus and Muslims. There have been distortion of facts: how in the aftermath of partition the Muslims helped Hindus in Pakistan but the Hindus in India did not help the Muslims who stayed behind; stories of how the Muslims are being killed in Kashmir by India. Dissemination of such divisive versions of history has complicated Pakistani thinking on India. India is perceived as the enemy and the soldiers who are killed in fighting with India are the greatest and triumphed heroes in Pakistan. Pakistan believes India has not been able to come to terms with partition.

On the academic side, Dr Bangash pointed that that Pakistan does not engage with studies in modern India. This he believed was a major drawback in the academic curriculum there. He urged that India should make sincere efforts to correct the perception in Pakistan by it would never take over and that it has the potentiality of not being an enemy. Additionally, he suggested, both countries need to move forward capitalizing on the shared links and areas of common interests. Both India and Pakistan should do away with primordial issues which have held back improvement of bilateral relations. Both countries need to take concreted measures to correct the course of future relationship and for this one of the prerequisite is to allow free flow of ideas and respect for scholarship apart from the establishment narrative.

## Main Points that emerged from the discussion

During the question and answer session, several questions were raised.: Some of the discussants drew the attention of the audience to the lack of independent thinking in policy making circles, and dominance of either members of the government or former government officials leaving little scope for fresh ideas and perceptions. It was held that academic NGOs could infiltrate the policy circles to bring diversity and objectivity into policy making. Amongst countries in the neighbourhood, it is always good to hear the other side, even if the views are mostly hostile. There is basic a dilemma between facts and interpretation and one needs to deal with it for better understanding. With the evolution in the Indian political system and beginning of era of coalition politics, India as the largest country in the region could think in terms of collaborating with the neighbours and offer opportunities for better life benefitting from trade and economic exchange. India being a big country should play a leading role as to how do we live with each other peacefully and benefit mutually.

India should come across as a partner in development and growth agenda. With Sri Lanka, India needs to diversify its approach and help in the devolution process, as overemphasizing the Tamil issue could be detrimental and counterproductive. Both India and Bangladesh need to follow a consistent and positive approach towards each other. India must invest in the peace constituency in Pakistan. Pakistan, on its part, must try to change perceptions of youth at the ground level especially in a time frame of next 5 to 10 years. A lot is changing in Pakistan and this is the time for India to capitalise on every possible window of opportunity, which may not exist for long.

There should be concerted efforts from all countries in the south Asian region to promote growth and stability. Young generation should be engaged and heard. There should be uninterrupted access to media and entertainment sources amongst countries in the neighbourhood which would go a long way in shaping perceptions on either side. Efforts should be made to improve living standards amongst poorer sections of society across the region. The countries of South Asia need to come together to walk towards the realm of economic transformation sorting out issues of regional differences.

***Report prepared by Priyanka Singh***

## Session II: Mutual Perceptions and Inter-State Relations

Chairperson : Professor Veena Sikri

Dr. Davood Moradian

Dr. Dinesh Bhattarai

Mr. M. Ashique Rahman

Prof. Partha S. Ghosh



The session II of the conference was on “Mutual Perceptions and Inter-state Relations.” This session was chaired by [Prof. Veena Sikri](#). In her introductory remark Prof. Sikri said that in south Asia it is inter-state relations that is affecting mutual perceptions. She said that text books often shape perceptions and impressions gathered by young minds from there is not easy to change. To deal with such problem, France and Germany have come together and changed their text books. Some such effort is warranted in the South Asian region. In today’s world, sovereignty cannot be taken as a given. Interdependence is the norm. She also talked about the role of religion in shaping exclusive identities and held that this was creating false divisions among the people in the region. She argued that religion should be part of one’s identity rather than define it entirely. Religion should unite rather than divide. She pointed out that economic growth and prosperity were important, and in this context connectivity was important and imperative for regional cooperation.

The first paper in the session was presented by [Dr. Dawood Moradian](#). The title of his paper was “India and Afghanistan: Unrealised Opportunities.” He began by calling India a reluctant power which was more popular in Afghanistan than even the Afghan government. He gave three reasons for India being a strategic partner – there is a convergence of values, both the countries lay emphasis on pluralism, and they have similar views on regional cooperation. He was of the opinion that India was keen to be seen as a development partner and not as a strategic partner even if the two countries have signed a strategic partnership agreement. According to him, India does not seem to be too much interested in security cooperation which is the basis of any strategic relationship. He expressed his inability to understand India’s reluctance to engage Afghanistan on security issues. He also observed that India’s Afghan policy was not an independent policy and was often affected by its concerns about Pakistan and the US. He also pointed out that there was a socialization gap between India and Afghanistan. He gave five reasons for India’s reluctance to engage Afghanistan– Gandhian legacy, internal political transition after India’s economic rise, lack of self-confidence, resource constraint and inefficiency of the Indian bureaucracy. He ended his paper by saying that there was a need for trust building and Afghanistan will always remain a friend of India. He also felt that India was more capable of playing a regional role.

The next paper “Nepal-India Relations: Changing Dynamics” was presented by [Dr. Dinesh Bhattarai](#). He said that India and Nepal share an intimate, multi-faceted and complex relationship. It is a geographical reality that Nepal shares border with both India and China. In present times, India and China are the growth centres of the world. But Nepal which is making a democratic transition remains one of the poorest countries of the world. He talked of power shift to Asia and rising living standards of people. But unfortunately Nepal has been left untouched by this economic development and remittances still contribute about 25 percent of the GDP. He said that democracy was trying to get a foothold in Nepal. Talking of perception and reality he mentioned that there was a growing gap. As a result Nepal sees hand of India in all its problems. He also questioned the conduct of the Nepali leadership who were indulging in doublespeak. When out of power they become aggressive but while in power they are submissive. Talking of recent developments he said that communists in Nepal thrive on anti-Indianism. He concluded by highlighting the need for increased people to people contact to dispel misunderstandings about each other. He also suggested that socio-economic transformation in Nepal should be expedited within the democratic framework. Leaders of both India and Nepal should talk frankly and address issues. Most importantly, Nepalese leaders should separate personal interests from national interests.

The third paper “Rising India and Bangladesh-India Relations: Mutual Perceptions and Expectations” was presented by [Mr. M. Ashique Rahman](#). He said relationship with India was the cornerstone of the Bangladeshi foreign policy. But it has many obstacles and in that perceptions play an important role. After giving a brief overview of Bangladesh-India relations he discussed Bangladeshi perceptions and expectations from a rising India. He also talked about the process of perception formation in Bangladesh vis-à-vis India and contemporary drivers of perception formation. He mentioned that media plays the most significant role in shaping people’s perception. He also talked about role of Indian media and role of civil society in perception formation. He ended by saying that now positive developments were taking place due to tremendous achievement in the tenure of present government. He also appreciated relaxation in visa regime by India and its energy cooperation with Bangladesh.

The last speaker of the session was [Prof. Partha Ghosh](#) who spoke on “Perceptions and Memories: Making Sense of Bangladesh’s India Outlook”. He said that in international relations collective memory was very important. But in south Asia debate over partition has not ended and all the states are going through a complex process of state formation. Even after seven decades Hindu-Muslim relations form core of it. He pointed out that we take the Bangladeshi society in a dichotomous mode which is not true. The approach of Bengali versus Bangladesh nationalism is too simplistic. He also talked about the role of Bangladeshi history starting from the colonial period.

In the question and answer session several questions were raised. IDSA Director General Dr. Arvind Gupta mentioned that sensitivity towards India’s interest has not been sufficiently debated. He felt that India’s neighbours do not show sufficient concern for India’s security interests. In response Dr. Bhattarai said that India’s neighbours must remain sensitive to India’s security interests and Nepal will never ignore it. Similar sentiments were expressed by other panelists.

## Session III: Perceptions on Regional Cooperation

Chairperson : Ambassador Sheel Kant Sharma

Prof. S.D. Muni

Mr. Khadim Hussain

Prof. I.N. Mukherji

Dr. Nagesh Kumar

Mr. G. I. Lynn  
Ockersz



This session was chaired by [Amb. Sheel Kant Sharma](#). He said that there is a lot of expectation from SAARC to foster close ties between the countries of the region. SAARC has remained a governmental initiative. Various summits reflect the growing concern of member states on various issues that confronts the region. Regional cooperation has also expanded over the period of time.

[Prof S.D.Muni](#) in his paper titled “China and South Asian Cooperation” focussed on China’s role in South Asia. He pointed out that many of India’s neighbours forcefully argue for an increasing role of China in the SAARC region as a counter weight to India’s increasing influence. China and India are observers in SAARC and SCO respectively and this reflects the changing perception of India and China towards each other regarding their role in regional forums. He further stressed that relations between India and China are also changing. Trade between the two countries are growing. India has actively taken advantage of China’s economic growth as the trade between the two states have flourished. The Corporate sector in India has shown more positive interest towards China and thereby influenced the dealing with China factor and India’s ‘Look East Policy’.

China’s interest in South Asia has increased after the takeover of Tibet in 1951 when China became a direct neighbour of the countries of South Asia. This shaped its policies towards South Asia. China requires the support of Pakistan and Nepal in order to defend the vulnerability of Xinjiang and Tibet which constitute core interest of China. In the 1990s, keeping in mind the economic development in Yunnan province, China was engaged in infrastructure development in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. In the context of these three provinces of China, South Asian states become very important to China.

Another aspect that has informed China’s policy towards South Asia is its energy trade through the Indian Ocean. It has built ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh secure its energy supplies. China’s

'Malacca Dilemma' is influenced by the Increase in Indo-US cooperation and India's engagement in the infrastructure development in Andaman Nicobar Islands.

India's neighbouring states argument for the membership of China in SAARC portraying the magnitude to which the growth of the forum can be achieved will only do good to China by tilting the balance of benefits and will make the other member states dependant on China as China is focussed on core interests rather than regional integration and development.

**Mr. Khadim Hussain**, from the institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, presented a paper titled, "Way Forward to Regional Cooperation in South Asia". He argued that people of Pakistan and India are victimised by narratives of States. However, people of Pakistan over the last 5 to 10 years have stopped buying the argument put forward by the Pakistan Military that India is its eternal enemy. The Pakistan military dictators have been successful to curb people's aspiration for peace and cooperation with India given the historical animosity and lack of people to people contact.

The formation of SAARC is a milestone for developing the people's aspiration to provide a platform to discuss problems and issues confronting the region. It also provides opportunity to discuss bilateral issues. End of Cold War also provided opportunities for peace. People to people normalisation were able to break stereotyping to certain extent even though the efforts were diluted by the 1998 nuclear testing and the Kargil episode. The 9/11 incident has now posed new threat in form of terrorism and radicalism. This threat is now spreading from Afghanistan to Pakistan and will soon reach rest of South Asia.

Regional cooperation is growing and is gaining strength due to globalisation and the presence of global governance regime like the WTO. Regionalism is also interlinked to the notion of security in one form or other which would help to address several Non-Traditional security threats that requires close cooperation between the states.

Regionalism also prevents smaller economy being run over by large economies and corporate giants. Promotion of peace constituency or peace movement with the help of civil societies is a key aspect for the way forward in India's relationship with Pakistan in order to achieve greater regional integration in the South Asia region. The relationship between India and Pakistan can be improved through people to people contacts, Friendship portals, promotion of e-business, health visas and also through same media accessibility in both countries.

**Dr. I.N Mukherji**, well known expert on South Asian economic issues and Senior Consultant with the RIS, New Delhi, in his paper titled "India's Trade with South Asian Neighbours: Perceptions and Reality with Special Reference to India-Pakistan Trade", argued that trade imbalances is key to understand India-Pakistan relation vis-a-vis rest of the world.

Pakistan trade with China is increasing and the Pakistan trade deficit with China is four times more than that with India. Pakistan imports capital goods from China and consumer goods from India. Several perceptions which are almost non-existent hinder the trade relationship between India and Pakistan. Pakistan offers duty free trade to China and not to India. Therefore, China is likely to have advantage over India on its trade with Pakistan.

The way forward to improve the trade relationship between India and Pakistan is by removal of several Non Tariff Barriers (NTB) which hinders the prospect of normalisation of trade.

**Dr. Nagesh Kumar**, Chief Economist at the UN ESCAP, argued that regionalism is a rising trend in International politics. Regional economic integrations have proved successful as smaller economies

favoured from Integrations and thereby received aid and expertise for development. He further argued that regionalism is said to be effective to tackle several vulnerabilities and risks especially relating to tackling the various Non-traditional security threats arising in the region. An integrated South Asia will be able to play due role in regional cooperation. South Asian states are emerging as dynamic players in world economy as the total trade expected to triple from \$1 trillion currently to \$3 trillion by 2017.

According to him the bulk of intraregional trade potential remains unexploited in SAARC and needs to be explored further. Smaller and poorer economies will benefit from SAFTA and liberalisation of trade under SAFTA. India-Sri Lanka FTA helped in balanced expansion of bilateral trade. Recent developments in the trade related to service sector have been helpful.

Development of trade corridors and trade hubs aides in the infrastructure development of the regions and also that of nearby zones and should be given prime consideration. Regionalism assumes criticality in external context and need to expedite the implementation of Regional Trade Agreements. Gap in the development of Infrastructure needs to be closed in the South Asia states and there is an urgent need to promote cross border movements of goods and travel within South Asian region.

**Mr. Lynn Ockersz**, Director of Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies, Colombo, argued that new institution helps countries share knowledge and technology and SAARC express potential to be successful in future. SAARC currently is functional only to the level to which its member states deem it to be.

According to him, relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial for the regional integration and performance of SAARC as the regional cooperation organisation is heavily dependent on bilateral cooperation. People-to-people contact and diplomatic initiatives need to seize the opportunity offered by the regional integrations. The governments of South Asian countries should make its people aware the importance of regional integrations in order to harness public support.

Regional development should receive priority over bilateral tiffs as the incidents in the Indo-Pak border should not hamper the cooperation in other sectors. Stepped up economic interaction are required for multilateral benefits. India, China and USA are pivot in Asia strategies and the relation among themselves and rest of the world is fundamental for the region.

He argued that India's neighbour should focus on tapping the vast opportunities available in India for mutual and multilateral benefits. States should understand the sensitivity in dealing with neighbouring states and should avoid destructive criticisms for the benefit of regional cooperation. Recurring security issues and West driven Human rights allegations against Sri Lanka and the stance of India on this issue would be crucial for Sri Lanka in particular and region in general. SAARC need to imbibe the lessons from the European Union keeping in mind the interest of its members.

## Main Points that emerged from the discussion

SAARC requires to develop a well-structured layout to discuss Non-Traditional Security Issues. Making SAARC relevant can be achieved only through the fixing of politics, both internal and external. The internal politics should be put in order by the nation states themselves.

Regional forums are important to jointly develop policies affecting the region. If SAARC fails to function, other regional alternatives need to be considered. The bureaucracies in the South Asian states are ill-equipped and have a colonial mind-set. This hampers regional cooperation in South Asia.

*Report prepared by Shyam Hari, Research Intern, IDSA*

## Session IV: India & South Asia: Perceptions and Expectations

Chairperson : General (Retd.) Ashok K. Mehta			
Mr. Shahmahmood Miakhel	Mr. Pema Tenzin	U. Denzil Abel	Mr. Mohamed Naahee Naseem



The session was chaired by **General (Retd.) Ashok K. Mehta**. The session was devoted to discussing regional perceptions about India and expectations regarding India's role in the region.

**Mr. Shahmahmood Miakhel** Country Director, USIP, Kabul, Afghanistan in his paper titled, "Seizing New Opportunity for Regional Cooperation and Understanding" began his presentation by detailing some of the many misperceptions surrounding Afghanistan in the eyes of the international community; he focussed on the imagery of a country that needed to be rebuilt from scratch, where democratic institutions have not been, and, perhaps, could not be, consolidated. The principle reason for the current circumstances in the country, he said, was the failure of internal politics. He noted that the effects of failures in governance and leadership were often and easily attributed to external forces. Speaking from conversations with scholars and others he had met during his travels, he said the idea of Afghanistan was usually limited to of pop culture depictions of the country, such as from *The Kite Runner* (a book by Khaled Hosseini) and *Kabuliwala* (an acclaimed book by Rabindranath Tagore, which was later turned into two classic Indian films). These misperceptions, or perceptions left incomplete, are a part of the psyche of the Afghan people themselves, as is the case with the masses in most countries, he said. While there have been changes in the way Afghanistan sees itself in the recent past, it is but a slow process. He stressed that "the war psyche" was hard to shake off. He suggested inculcating a "peace curriculum" into the corpus of educational texts in Afghanistan as a means to begin the process of normalising the Afghan mind set. Talking about external perceptions, he detailed anecdotal instances from his personal travels in the United States and India, that brought to light how little Afghanistan was covered in the local media of these two countries. These examples reiterated the pivotal importance of the media in influencing perceptions, a recurring theme throughout the 7th South Asia Conference. He alluded to how misperceptions in the present impede the clarification and correction of perceptions in the future, by speaking of the difficulties a traveller hoping to travel to Pakistan faces with an Indian visa on his/her passport or vice versa, thereby decreasing people to people interaction in the region and perpetuating misperceptions.

**Mr. Pema Tenzin** Regional Head of the Keunsel corporation Bhutan in his presentation titled, "Bhutan and its International Collaborations 2013" began by giving the audience an extensive introduction to Bhutan, going through the country's national symbols, geography and culture. He presented a short history of the country, highlighting how it is at a crossroads between two ancient civilizations. He said the country's geography "sandwiched" it between India and China, a fact that determines the way country is perceived while simultaneously determining the country's outlook on the world. He spoke of how India plays a dominant role in the psyche and daily life of Bhutan. To highlight this, he talked about the critical role India plays in sustaining the country's energy sector by importing large amounts of the hydroelectricity produced in Bhutan. He also illustrated Bhutan's economic dependence on India, indicating the country had a critical role to play in addressing the rupee shortage in Bhutan, an issue highlighted by King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in July. He also made a forceful point about the government's policy to ensure over 70 percent forest cover, alluding to the necessity of decisive policy measures in key areas in the climate debate. He said this, along with the country's focus on ensuring the gross happiness among its populace formed the pillars of the way Bhutan is perceived in the world.

**Mr. Denzil Abel** from Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies, in his presentation titled "Myanmar's Perceptions of India", traced the perception of India through the arc of Myanmar's history, beginning his analysis in antiquity. While he pointed out that Myanmar felt like an observer in South Asian intra-regional interaction in the present day, there were strong and deep links to India that date back to pre-history in law, culture, tradition and the psyche of the people. To emphasise this point, he said the name Burma was derived "Brahma desa", a reference to the Hindu god Brahma. He said these religious and cultural linkages still exist with most Myanmarese seeing India as the cradle of Buddhism, and attaching tremendous importance to Buddhist holy places such as Bodh Gaya. He pointed to a consolidation and reinforcement of cultural and economic linkages between Burma and India during pre-colonial Indian economic immigration, driven by the perception that Burma was "the golden land", the land of opportunity. He pointed out that massive Indian immigration that continued in the colonial period, compounded by British use of Indians to control affairs in fields ranging from education to law and order and the widespread misery caused to local inhabitants by Indian money lenders, fuelled a negative perception that has persisted to date. However, he said, there still exists a strong narrative of common suffering that dates back centuries between the two peoples. Indian luminaries such as Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose were held in high esteem by the people and leaders of Myanmar, for example. He spoke of an image imprinted on the bank notes and minds of Myanmar's citizens that shows General Aung San on his way to England to make a case for his country's independence in a heavy overcoat that Jawaharlal Nehru had gotten stitched for him. He pointed out that relations between both countries had seen a decline since its golden age in the post-independence period that was influenced in no small part by the intellectual affinity and kinship between Nehru and U Nu and their vision of a non-aligned bloc in a superpower dominated world. The ascendancy of Ne Win in the early '60s and his subsequent isolationism led to the isolation of the Indian and Chinese diaspora in the country, while his nationalization programme led to the emigration of almost 300,000. The relationship thereafter was one of neglect on both sides that saw periods of slight warming. The imposition of military rule and a one-party state saw India support democracy and sponsor a Security Council resolution calling for the military to respect democracy. China, however, maintained its diplomatic proximity and, consequently, enjoyed greater influence in Myanmar's affairs. Mr. Abel said trade and defence ties between India and Myanmar were normalising after Myanmar's moves towards democratization, but the dream was still to return to the post-independence "golden age".

**Mr. Mohamed Naahee Naseem** from Minivian News in his presentation titled, "Maldives' General Perceptions of India and the Role of Media", addressed the audience through an audio-video link from the Maldives. His presentation sought to detail the shift in perceptions towards India in the two years since President Nasheed was forced out of power, as well as to update members of the strategic community on recent developments surrounding the forthcoming conclusion to Presidential elections. He said India had

been integral to the development of Maldives since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1965, largely because of a multidimensional relationship that involves the exchange of skilled and semi-skilled labour and tourism flows that bolster cultural linkages and contribute to both economies. While Indian involvement has always been strongly suspected in Maldivian politics, he said the tide of perception began turning against India after the hasty eviction of Indian real estate and development company GMR, contracted to build an international airport in the country. A section of political stakeholders found it profitable to label India as an economic invader and tow an anti-India line that the government could not, or would not, counter. According to him, this anti-India rhetoric by Nasheed's rivals played a large role in degrading India's standing in Maldivian eyes. Immediately after the eviction of GMR, Maldivian media went to town with stories of Maldivians experiencing difficulties in obtaining medical visas to India, which further fed into the anti-India narrative and the pervasive disappointment with India. He said politicians who found it politically expedient wasted no time in linking the GMR eviction to the refusal of medical visas to Maldivians. Importantly, he pointed out the deep political polarization in the country has led to a parallel polarization of the media, largely impeding balanced reporting on critical issues. He said extremely high literacy rates in the country meant imbalanced reporting and the pervasiveness of biased rhetoric had a large impact on the psyche of the Maldivian people. Perceptions, he said, were easily influenced in the nascent democracy of the Maldives, where people look towards the media to reinforce political beliefs. He did, however, clarify that these incidents did not detract from overall relations between the countries which continue to have strong fundamentals. He also emphasised the central role the media will have to play in addressing the sticking points he had laid out in his talk and called for increased cooperation between the Indian mission in the Maldives and the Maldivian government to counter influences that were degrading India's popular standing in the country.

## Main points that emerged from the discussion

A few key points regarding what India should do during the current transition period in Afghanistan, Myanmar's democratic transition and Myanmar's lack of air and road connectivity with India emerged. Regarding Afghan expectations of India, India could not be seen as helping Afghanistan too much prior to the 2014 elections, as this would be perceived negatively by Pakistan. Maintaining the appearance of impartiality before and during the elections was crucial. India's assistance, be it in training or the exchange of election officials, would be better served after elections were successfully concluded. On connectivity between India and Myanmar, the lack of air routes between the two countries is because it is economically unviable given current demand, rather than it being a manifestation of diplomatic distance between the countries. Connectivity via roads is also affected because of a lack of funds.

The chairperson in his closing remarks commented on the processes of democratisation underway in countries of the region. He opined that Aung San Suu Kyi would return to power once democracy took roots completely and the constitution was changed. He said Myanmar holding the chair of ASEAN was a tribute to the country's transformation.

***Report prepared by Aditya Valiathan Pillai, Research Intern, IDSA***

## Session V: Managing Perceptions: The Way Forward



Eminent scholars from South Asia discussed the way forward on removing negative perceptions about one another in the region. The session was chaired by [Dr Arvind Gupta](#), Director General of IDSA. In his opening remarks, Dr Gupta revisited major points made during the conference and observed that perceptions are shaped by many factors. Negative perceptions are often more significant than positive perceptions. The perceptions are negative in South Asia because of historical baggage, internal political developments that affect each other, poor knowledge about each other, India's size and preponderance, failure of regional integration and, most importantly, the role of media in shaping perceptions, as well as discussions in the social media. The growing foot-print of China in the region is another important factor. India is perceived by its neighbours as a reluctant power. However, there are positive perceptions about India as a rising power. India should help its neighbours in building capacity to create positive perceptions. A rising, caring, strong and capable India willing to share its prosperity with others in the region will definitely improve perceptions about it in the region. However, there are diverse views on India.

He further pointed out that some good suggestions were made on how to create positive perceptions. Dr Gupta appreciated suggestions from [Mr. Khadim Hussain](#) from Pakistan about the need for creating a peace constituency in various countries. There should be emphasis on strengthening people-to-people contact by relaxing visa rules. India should play a lead role in facilitating more dialogue and discussion in this regard. India should shed its reluctance and take a leadership role in the region. Regionalisation of UN peace keeping by linking it to SAARC charter was another constructive suggestion which could be considered. He also said that despite inhibitions there are many positives like continuation of unhindered people-to-people contacts, cultural linkages, and growing emphasis on pluralism in the region.

[Dr. Yaqoob Khan Bangash](#) from Pakistan said that there is a feeling in Pakistan that India has not accepted its existence. Therefore, first, India must convey diplomatically that it accepts Pakistan's existence. That will help improve the relations.. Second, Mumbai attacks have changed India's attitude towards Pakistan. Yet, Pakistan is now the biggest victim of terrorism with state institutions being attacked. India should understand that Pakistan has lost control over its home-grown terrorist groups. Therefore, some kind of help and support is required from the Indian side for the Pakistan state to deal with internal threats effectively. Third, India should help strengthen Pakistan, especially by extending intellectual support to deal with terrorism. A destabilised and terrorist prone Pakistan will impact India too. Lastly, provincialise some contacts, for instance, promoting cooperation between Indian and Pakistan Punjab. Both the countries should strengthen their contacts at all levels, and especially in the border region. There should be an opening up of academic institutions, especially at the university level. Students from Pakistan are interested in studying in India. A number of India's neighbours at this moment are apprehensive about it.

Therefore, the global image of India needs to be utilised to create a better perception about India among the neighbours.

**Mr. Shahmahmood Miakhel** from Afghanistan observed that misperceptions are not created in a day. It will take time to remove them. Commercial media can play an important role in this regard. Neighbours should co-operate with each other to stabilise and consolidate democratic institutions. That will reduce the role of military in some countries in the region. There is a need for establishing joint ventures between countries. Rather than looking at common culture and heritage as an obstacle to regional cooperation, we should use culture and values as assets. The diplomatic corps of countries of the region are not well prepared to deal with the issues of the 21st century. The states in the region should promote 'peace education' in the schools and encourage peace tours by students to build peace networks, especially among the younger population in different countries. This will help in removing negative perceptions.

**Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka** from Sri Lanka suggested that public intellectuals played a critical role in shaping perceptions. That key constituency should be nurtured. 'Public intellectuals' should be identified. The role of opinion makers has become even more strategic now. It is a paradox that in spite of a great degree of commonality among states, and cultural interconnections, regional cooperation has not gathered momentum in South Asia. Links between people at the political level have thinned out. The national audience should be the target constituency. Therefore, there is a need to re-establish informal contacts among public intellectuals and opinion makers.

**Ambassador Humayun Kabir** from Bangladesh dwelt on how to rectify bottle-necks in Indo-Bangladesh relations. First, he stressed on the need for a big idea to be articulated, giving the example of the the Gujral Doctrine, which was considered by India's neighbours as a positive diplomatic initiative by India, and one which needed reiteration. Such policies reduce confusion about Indian intentions in the region and create positive perceptions about India. No country in the region has abandoned the Doctrine. Dr. Manmohan Singh's government tried to modify it in 2005, without changing its name and basic principles. That kind of idea is missing now. Why are we hesitant to come out with that kind of idea? Second, in the era of globalisation, the economy should be the driver of relations, and India as an economic power should focus on tapping into the South Asian market rather than being hesitant about it. India has to be generous in economic matters with its neighbours. Third, there should be harmonisation of school syllabuses. School children should be familiarised with regional culture and leaders. Cross-country study tours should be facilitated. There should be free flow of information. For example, Indian news papers are not easily available in Bangladesh. At the policy level, we can have high impact policy gatherings as European countries do. SAARC is not the appropriate forum for that. Therefore, we should create something where our leaders can meet. There should be common perception survey in South Asia and IDSA could take a lead here.

**Ambassador Phae Thann Oo** from Myanmar appreciated the fact that his country was being considered as part of South Asia. Myanmarese perception about India, he held, was very positive. Both the countries have social, cultural, religious and historical linkages. That way, Myanmar belongs to South Asia. There has been a steady growth in India-Myanmar relations since 1992-93 through exchange of high level visits and military-to-military relations. There is an effort from the Myanmar side to gradually improve its relations with South Asian countries and emerge as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN. We should inform our new generations about our past. Young generations do not know about SAARC or BIMSTEC. They believe that Myanmar only has a relationship with ASEAN. Myanmar looks both east and west. India can play a very constructive role in South Asia, and Myanmar in ASEAN. India is reluctant to get into regional development. India should use its soft power in Cambodia and Vietnam, like China. India can help to improve English language capability in South East Asia. People-to-people contact between India and Myanmar needs to be improved. Therefore, air connectivity between India and Myanmar should be

established. We should understand neighbours' sensitivities and concerns. We should build mutual respect, trust and understanding to produce positive perceptions.

The participant from Nepal, [Ambassador Dinesh Bhattarai](#) said that there were gaps between rhetoric and reality. There are misperceptions on both sides, in Nepal and in India. To correct that, there is a need to bring clarity and consistency in foreign policy. There are perceptions in Nepal that India does not have a well spelt out neighbourhood policy and the existing policy is dominated by security issues. Moreover, given the emergence of India as a global power, its role and influence in the region needs to be carefully studied. Change of attitude is required in New Delhi without compromising its national interest. It is true that misperception about India has sent Nepal back by 50 years in the field of socio-economic development, and Maoists are partly responsible for fuelling and sustaining anti-India feelings in Nepal. Similarly, rise of China and its penetration into the region must be carefully studied and analysed keeping India's concerns in mind. There should also be a common approach to terrorism in the region and we must condemn terrorism in all its manifestations.

Economically, South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world. We have to refocus on socio-economic development, either bilaterally or multilaterally. Poverty is a major issue in the region. Therefore, countries should extend their cooperation to each other for poverty reduction. Water is another issue. Countries should formulate common policies for maximum utilisation of water resources in the region. Networking amongst educational institutions, frequent meetings between prominent people, etc. is very important. In case of India-Nepal relations, migrant labour plays a major role in shaping perceptions about India in Nepal. That issue needs to be handled very carefully and in a sensitive manner. An effort should be made to monitor media regularly and provide a counter-view to people peddling negative perceptions.

[Mr. Pema Tenzin](#) from Bhutan was of the view that India-Bhutan relations are tension free and successful. He appreciated Indian contribution in the economic development of Bhutan, hinting especially at Indian investments in the hydro-electric sector. He suggested that deeper cooperation with India by other South Asian countries could bring all the SAARC countries together and enable regional cooperation. He also argued that India's neighbours should be sensitive to India's security concerns as well.

The Indian participant, **Dr Ashok K. Behuria** dwelt on the fact that there is a common feeling that solutions should be found for the negative perceptions prevailing in the region. This is a positive development. There is value in coming together. He acknowledged Ambassador Kabir's observation that India developed a 'static mind-set' towards Bangladesh in the post-1971 period. There are views that people across the globe suffer from 'govern-mentality'. However, we must also provide a counter discourse to these kinds of perceptions. He also mentioned that there are two contentious viewpoints. First, that conflicts and tensions will have to be removed before creating positive perceptions. There is a contrarian view as well. That we have to change perceptions, so that governments can take up issues in a much more constructive way. He suggested that SAARC countries need to sit down and talk to dispel negative perceptions about each other. The negative thinking at the governmental levels needs to change.

In the concluding session, participants thus discussed the ways in which countries of the region could work towards managing and improving perceptions about each other in order to enable greater regional cooperation. They held the view that it was necessary to encourage people in the region to know each other better as there is lack of understanding about each other's key concerns. A pan-South Asian effort could be initiated to reform textbooks in different countries by incorporating ideas about South Asian unity based on shared cultural and historical past and removing negative ideas about each other. Participants agreed that India's security concerns needed to be factored in by neighbouring states while framing their foreign policies. Think tanks and academia while trying to shape perceptions must rope in thought leaders and

opinion makers who can convey the noble ideas of regional cooperation in an emphatic manner. The media could be persuaded to have regular coverage of developments in different countries of the region. India's soft power can be ably used to infuse a sense of unity amongst the people in the region. There was a general perception that India is a reluctant power. The participants concurred that India must shed its inhibitions and assume a leadership role in the region to enable a genuine process of change in favour of greater regional cooperation.

*Report prepared by Dr. Nihar R. Nayak, Associate Fellow, IDSA.*