

14 TH SOUTH ASIA CONFERENCE
ON
THINK20@G20: TOWARDS A RESILIENT SOUTH ASIA
17-18 JANUARY 2023

Rapporteurs' Reports

South Asia Conference (SAC) is an annual flagship event of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA). The theme for the 14th SAC was: **Think20@G20: Towards A Resilient South Asia**. The event was inaugurated by **Shri Amitabh Kant, Sherpa, G20 India** in the presence of **Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, T20 Chair of G20 India and Director General, MP-IDSA** on 17 January 2023 in the MP-IDSA Auditorium.

Inaugural Session

In his welcome remarks, Amb. Chinoy greeted the distinguished dignitaries and participants and recalled the legacy of SAC as a premier forum for discussing issues of common interest and concern in South Asia over the past 13 years. He underlined that this year the SAC acquired a distinctive flavour by seeking to complement the Think20 process under G20 presidency by India.

Amb. Chinoy described India's G20 presidency as a mass movement unlike any other presidency in the past. It has ignited the minds of millions of people in India as an opportunity to improve the future of the people in India and the world, keeping in view India's civilisational commitment of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*; that is, one earth, one family, one future.

He highlighted that the SAC aimed at deepening the understanding and cooperation on significant issues of mutual concern confronting the people of South Asia and the world. He said that the conference can be looked as a T20 side event over the next two days and it would provide an opportunity for participants from the neighbouring countries to put forward their views and suggestions on all the critical issues before the G20, especially macroeconomic and developmental issues like climate change, green transition, healthcare, digital economy and reform of the global financial institutions and multilateral institutions in general, including but not limited to, the United Nations. He stated that the region also faced other daunting challenges like poverty, natural disasters and food and energy security. These challenges, he said, were indivisible and transcended all borders. Cooperation on these issues would help achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Amb. Chinoy remarked that intra-South Asian trade was dismally poor compared to other regions like Europe and Southeast Asia. It has posed an obstacle to shared prosperity of the nations in the region and this issue needs to be addressed earnestly. He stated that the conference would discuss country perspectives on climate, economy, gender and energy and the best practices would be shared which would be beneficial for all. The deliberations will be put together in the form of an outcome report, he noted.

Shri Amitabh Kant, Sherpa, G20 India, began by reiterating that India's G20 presidency comes as the world confronts several challenges. Following the Covid-19, almost 200 million people have gone below the poverty line; 100 million have lost their jobs, and the world has regressed on its sustainable development goals (SDGs) targets. To add to that, there is a major geopolitical challenge in Europe with an impact on food, fuel and fertilisers. There exists the mammoth challenge of climate action and finance. The developed world has yet to live up to its pledge of providing US\$100 billion annually as climate finance for climate action as agreed in Copenhagen in 2009. He held that there is a vast capital available

for climate finance, yet the world needs a lot of credit enhancement, guarantees and blended finance for the funds to flow into developing countries seamlessly. This requires extensive pooling of risks which multilateral institutions like the World Bank and IMF should play. There is also the challenge of 75 countries in the world facing global debt, which has the potential to lead to the collapse of the entire global financial structure. Therefore, the world needs an entirely new financial architecture.

Shri Kant also said that India does not look at the G20 presidency as India's presidency alone but India holds it on behalf of the entire Global South. India's foremost priority at the helm of the G20 is to accelerate the pace of the global economy and push for inclusive, sustainable and resilient growth over a long period. Such growth is necessary for improving the life of citizens worldwide. India has also prioritised accelerating the pace of achieving SDGs in the context of the pandemic-induced slowdown as well as climate financing from the developed countries and multilateral financial institutions. He highlighted India's recent digital transformation by quoting the Bank of International Settlement, which said that India has achieved in seven years what would typically have taken 50 years. In contrast to the big tech model of the US and the privacy-driven but innovation-inhibiting model of European Union, India's creative and unique digital transformation model ensures that data empowerment remains with citizens while allowing for private sector innovation at the same time. India has ensured that there is a digital identity and bank account for every Indian. The fast payments made digitally in India are 11 times faster than that of the US and EU. The challenge for the world is that there are four billion people without a digital identity, two billion without a bank account and 133 countries without fast payments. Much of that depends on digital transformation to accelerate the pace of growth, making it critical for every country.

Shri Kant emphasised the importance of women-led development and India's emphasis on the same by investing in healthcare and nutrition and providing millions of women in India with a bank account. He made a case for enhanced regionalism by arguing that most growth and development occurs regionally, be it in Europe, Southeast Asia or North America. Intra-regional trade, investment and tourism are critical aspects of regionalism. He reiterated the point by saying that most foreign tourists to Paris are from the EU, in contrast to New Delhi, which caters to relatively few south Asian tourists. Intra-regional trade in South Asia is a mere five percent of the total trade of South Asian countries. He endorsed greater regional integration in South Asia and held it as critical for the region to realise the dream of economic growth and prosperity for the citizens. He set a pathway by arguing for the need to resolve differences, open their markets and allow the flow of people. This can unleash potent forces of growth for the region and lead to synergy on infrastructure, climate change, capacity development, SDGs and therefore enhance the lives of the people.

Shri Kant underlined the significance of demographic dividend in South Asia and said that the South Asians must have the foresight and perspective to appreciate their vital role in the renaissance of the global economy and that a large ratio of global workforce in the future will be from South Asia and that South Asia's young and large workforce is its strength.

In his closing remarks, Shri Kant reiterated that India's presidency of the G20 is action-oriented, forward-looking, inclusive, and it will act as the voice of everyone in South Asia and the Global South. It will be highly human-centric with the aim of making a difference and look forward to the inputs from the distinguished participants for augmenting the voice of South Asia at the global stage.

Q&A

Mr. Zaw Oo, Executive Director, Centre for Economic and Social Development, Myanmar, appreciated the speaker's passionate advocacy for regional integration while emphasising Myanmar's potential role as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Mr. Zaw asked if India's digital transformation success could be offered to some of India's neighbours to integrate the region. Lastly, Mr. Zaw underlined the need for better coordination of trade restrictions giving example of fluctuations in quota on Myanmar's

export of lentils based on the harvest in India that creates challenges for the farmers in that country. He said there needs to be better coordination of these issues for greater integration as articulated by Shri Kant.

Prof. GM Tarekul Islam, Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET, Bangladesh agreed with the speaker's assessment that the lack of regional integration in South Asia has been detrimental to its growth while inquiring about India's strategy to enhance regional integration.

Mr. Ajaya Dixit, Institute for Social and Environmental Transition & Policy Research Institute, Nepal, emphasised South Asia's Hydro-ecological connection in the context of the climate challenge and inquired about India's plan for enhancing knowledge and understanding in the same aspect.

Shri Kant in his response said that digitisation coordination is possible and desirable in the neighbourhood. He said that digital transformation requires a powerful bureaucracy, focus on governance and political will, and that has to be taken into account while considering coordination in the field. He also said that the ratio of informal to formal trade in South Asia was very high and this needed to be addressed to promote integration by addressing sticky issues like tariff barriers and regulations. The speaker stated that one of the key measures to facilitate trade was the substantial development of inland water transport systems. Lastly, Shri Kant expressed his belief and appreciation for knowledge sharing and the need to build up academic collaboration.

Report prepared by Aayush Maniktalia, Research Intern, MP-IDSA

Working Session I: Introducing T20 and G20

Chair: Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy

Participants: Amb. (Retd.) Rajiv Bhatia, Dr. Sandhya Purecha, Mr. Abhay Thakur, Prof. Harsh V. Pant, Mr. Rohan Jaitley and Ms. Sunaina Kumar.

Amb. Rajiv Bhatia, Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, began his talk by emphasising the need to view South Asia from the prism of G20 and simultaneously looking at G20 from the prism of South Asia. He brought out that despite the G20 being very significant and relevant to the needs of South Asia, the rest of the region apart from India has not been very proactive in this forum. Amb. Bhatia underscored the need for the South Asian nations to play a more active and constructive role in the G20 forum for addressing regional challenges. He stated that the priority themes of the G20 presidency of India are deeply focused on the welfare of the South Asian people.

He pointed out that in South Asia the geopolitics often trumps geoeconomic prospects of the region and said that South Asia's regional integration through economic linkages and infrastructure connectivity continues to be suboptimal due to the trust deficits among regional countries. He pointed out that this trust deficit is particularly prevalent with India's smaller neighbours such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and earlier the Maldives. Amb. Bhatia underscored that the Indian presidency of G20 has already made a difference with the convening of the Global South Summit. In his concluding remarks, Amb. Bhatia made two key recommendations. First, he stated that the definition of South Asia should be suitably aligned with that of the BIMSTEC. Second, he recommended that the BIMSTEC should be given the status of permanent guest in G20 akin to ASEAN, African Union (AU) and Nepal.

Dr. Sandhya Purecha, Chair W20, brought out that the key objective of the engagement group of W20 is to ensure that the G20 leaders' joint declaration includes commitments to promote gender equality, economic empowerment and political representation for women. She said that India's vision through W20

is to create a world where every woman lives with dignity and the mission is to remove all gender barriers for promoting women-led development. Dr. Purecha enumerated five priority areas of W20 which included, (i) focus on grassroots-level leadership, (ii) promoting women entrepreneurship, (iii) bridging the gender divide, (iv) engaging in capacity development and (v) addressing the issue of climate change. She concluded by stating that India was committed to creating an ecosystem where women could thrive and transform the lives of others by actively participating in governance in the developing countries.

Mr. Abhay Thakur, Additional Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs and Sous-Sherpa, G20 India began his talk by highlighting the multitude of challenges that South Asia was facing at the moment. He stated that these very challenges offered opportunities for South Asian nations to collaborate and achieve durable solutions. He brought out that India's presidency of G20 provided India and the countries in the region with a unique opportunity to impart a South Asian narrative within the G20. He also underscored that the participation of Bangladesh in the G20 would further amplify the South Asian perspective in the forum. Mr. Thakur brought out that the prospects of India's contribution to the developing nations of both South Asia and G20 came from its own developmental experiences, which included India's pursuit of technology transformation through digital means, public infrastructure and inclusive and resilient development. He underlined that the region was particularly vulnerable to climate change and India's achievement of SDGs could immensely benefit the entire region. He held that conversations within the G20/T20 on green development and climate finances were of particular relevance to South Asia. Mr. Thakur said that so far, within the G20 climate change had not been covered adequately from a demand and development perspective. As a result, India's approach in the G20 has been to make a major difference by bringing the perspectives of South Asia and the entire Global South to the centre stage. He brought out that India had been playing a proactive role in the financing and development of large-scale projects on renewable energy, connectivity and sustainable infrastructure development across South Asia. He concluded that through India's presidency of G20, the South Asian priorities and aspirations could be brought to the forefront.

Prof. Harsh V. Pant of the Observer Research Foundation and Co-Chair of T20 Task Force 7 "Towards Reformed Multilateralism" began his talk by bringing into perspective India's success in voicing the concerns of the Global South in various international forums despite the world's focus on the ongoing great power contestations. He said that the global geopolitical order is likely to undergo major structural changes and it would deeply impact South Asia and emphasised that it was important for South Asian scholars to undertake due efforts to promote regional integration. He said that over the past few years, the focus had considerably shifted from SAARC to BIMSTEC for promoting regional integration in South Asia. Prof. Pant underscored that the various multilateral issues that confronted South Asia required creative solutions through effective regional consensus and cooperation. He highlighted that greater deliverables could be achieved even through coalitions and *ad hoc* cooperation mechanisms formed to address collective issues and interests. He noted that as the Indo-Pacific becomes the focus of global geopolitics and geoeconomics, it would have major implications for South Asia's future. Therefore, he concluded, that South Asia's future is intricately linked to the future of the Indo-Pacific and forums like T20 are bound to play a crucial role in facilitating ideational exchange between the nations of these regions.

Mr. Rohan Jaitley, Member, Core Group of Think 20 India, began his talk by focusing on the challenges faced by the global economy. He brought out that the revolutions in India's digital infrastructure that started a few years ago were instrumental in sustaining the nation through the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr. Jaitley highlighted various aspects of India's digital infrastructure including accessibility and legal dimensions like privacy and safety. He noted that the possible recession and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine would hugely disrupt the supply chains. He informed the audience that T20 under the chairmanship of Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy had been ideating to find solutions to a plethora of issues that are confronted by the developing world. He concluded by stating that "one earth, one family, one

future” is the mantra for India’s presidency of the G20 and India would ensure that the voice of the South Asian countries is heard by the World.

Ms. Sunaina Kumar, Executive Director, T20 Secretariat at Observer Research Foundation, offered a glimpse of the various activities that were being undertaken by Think 20 since India assumed the presidency of G20. She stated that there were seven task forces of T20 that covered some of the most critical ideas under India’s presidency of the G20. These included policies on macroeconomics, digital public infrastructure, values for wellbeing, green transition, rescuing the global financial order, SDGs for 2030, transforming global institutions and establishment of G20 research forums. She then went on to highlight the various important events that had happened so far under the ambit of T20 and informed the audience about the programmes and events that were scheduled in the upcoming months. She also brought out the new initiatives of the T20 that had been taken up under India’s presidency including the creation of a portal and websites for interacting with the youth and the general public.

Takeaways

- South Asia’s future is intricately linked to the future of the Indo-Pacific and forums like T20 are bound to play a crucial role in facilitating ideational exchange between the nations of these regions.
- The definition of South Asia should be suitably aligned with the jurisdiction of BIMSTEC.
- India’s contribution to the developing nations of both South Asia and G20 come from its own developmental experiences, which include experiences gained by India’s pursuit of technology transformation through digital means, public infrastructure and inclusive and resilient development.
- Greater deliverables could be achieved through coalitions and *ad hoc* cooperation mechanisms formed to address collective issues and interests.

Report prepared by Dr. R. Vignesh, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA

Special Session

Ambassadors’ Interaction

Chair: Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy

Participants: Amb. Shankar Prasad Sharma, Ambassador of Nepal to India, Amb. Md. Mustafizur Rahman, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India, Mr. Niluka Kadurugamuwa, Deputy High Commissioner, High Commission of Sri Lanka in India, Amb. Abhay Thakur, Sous Sherpa, G20.

Amb. Shankar Prasad Sharma, Ambassador of Nepal to India congratulated India on assuming G20 presidency and wished India well in its attempt to work towards inclusive growth and resilient economy in the world and letting the voice of global South heard in the G20 forum. He said that India could share its success stories with countries in the region and as an economic power house it can contribute to growth in entire South Asia. India has a large middle class. It has made commendable progress in the technological realm and its interdependence with most countries in the region makes its growth story linked to prosperity of everybody in the region. The best practices in the region need to be shared and India could take the lead by helping its neighbours build digital infrastructure for generating biometric-based identity cards to enable governments to target their vulnerable groups efficiently and make

governance more inclusive reducing the exclusion error substantially. From climate change perspective also the experience of India, a country of continental proportions with diverse climatic conditions, can be of great help to all its neighbours. Prime Minister Modi's announcement to establish the "Global South Centre of Excellence", he said, would be of enormous value to all countries in South Asia. Regional electricity grid being talked about in the region and enabled by India would be helpful for Nepal.

Amb. Md. Mustafizur Rahman, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India said India's 'neighbourhood first' policy has been regarded well by all countries in the region. He said India can play a crucial role in shaping debates on issues that are increasingly becoming important for the region. Its G20 presidency offered an opportunity for South Asian countries to flag issues of importance which could be fed into the G20 track for greater benefit of the people. According to him, areas where G20 presidency could contribute included the following: (i) *Climate change*, because 62 million South Asians are likely to be displaced by 2050 and there is a need to minimise the funding gaps and bring in the loss and damage fund as decided in COP 27 in Sharm-e-Sheikh. Climate vulnerable countries must be provided with financial, technological and technical support in their effort to transit to low-carbon sustainable economies; (ii) *Healthcare*: Universal, timely and equitable access to health technologies, vaccines and other health products. (iii) *Technology and Innovation*: Full potential of digital technology remains untapped for the region. It should remain accessible, affordable and available to all. Bridging the digital divide would facilitate seamless trade and commerce among the nations across the globe and not in the region alone and lastly, (iv) *Global Supply Chains*: There is a need to keep the markets open for each other to ensure smooth, timely and predictable supply of essential goods and services.

Mr. Niluka Kadurugamuwa, Deputy High Commissioner, High Commission of Sri Lanka in India held that Sri Lanka faced many crises in recent years including the economic crisis and the Easter bombings. He praised India for extending critical help during the recent financial crises. It provided financial help by way of line of credit, currency swap and deferment of payments, talked to international financial institutions like IMF on behalf of Sri Lanka, positively engaged itself in the debt-restructuring process, invested in tourism, power and energy and infrastructure sectors, and provided access to its market. India took the lead to rescue Sri Lanka from the crisis. This could be projected as a model and a template in the G20 conversations for helping vulnerable economies in other regions as well.

Amb. Abhay Thakur, Sous Sherpa of the G20 India, thanked the ambassadors for their praise of India as the G20 chair and said that he noticed a great deal of convergence between the priority areas India has identified for itself as G20 chair and the suggestions of the participants from the neighbourhood in the conference and they pertained to energy, climate finance, digital technology, multilateralism and debt issues. He would take it as a vote of confidence on the type of priorities that India has selected for discussion in G20. He said that we should not lose sight of the fact that four developing countries are chairing G20 in a row—Indonesia, India, Brazil and South Africa. Rather than making India's G20 presidency as an one year one-off affair, as a region South Asia should be prepared to stay connected very closely to the G20 process and continue to voice our concerns and priorities in a likeminded way. He said that G20 operated by consensus and on debt challenges we need to be very cautious about not projecting bilateral experiences onto the G20 forum.

Working Session II: Country Perspective on Climate, Economic, Gender & Energy

Chair: Prof. Mahendra P. Lama

Participants: Dr. Sharmin Neeormi, Mr. Dil Bahadur Rahut, Mr. Anushka Wijesinha, Dr. Zaw Naing

The Chair of the session **Prof. Mahendra P. Lama** introduced the panel and the theme of non-traditional security issues in South Asia including climate, gender, and energy. He noted that South Asia was currently facing new kinds of non-traditional issues which was no more limited to natural disaster or cross border terrorism. These challenges include gene piracy, displacement and water insecurity discourses. All these issues are new to this region. Therefore, the orthodox variety of regionalism and regional cooperation institutions are inept to deal with these novel issues. A new regionality or neo-regionalism initiative is required in South Asia to deal with these issues. Traditional diplomacy would not be able to deal with these issues at the regional levels, he said. Talking on the traditional understanding of regionalism, Professor Lama noted that it was primarily focused on trade, preferential trade agreements, free trade, custom unions, common markets and regional integration and there was a need for experts on various areas to deal with the newer issues at a different level.

The first panellist **Dr. Sharmin Neelormi** spoke on the topic "Concern Regarding Food Security under Climate Change: Bangladesh Perspectives." She highlighted the recent economic progress in the backdrop of high poverty incidence experienced by Bangladesh. She highlighted the initiatives taken by the Bangladesh Government to deal with poverty and ensure improved health security and per capita income. She said that during the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh faced certain challenges but it performed relatively well and better compared to many other countries in the region.

Dr. Neelormi raised the issue of water supply and its impact on food security of the country. Bangladesh is an agrarian country, and a large section of society is directly or indirectly dependent on this sector both for food and employment. Agriculture contributes around 14 percent to the Bangladesh's GDP but the employment in this sector is around 44 per cent. The participation of women in the agriculture sector has increased in recent decades. She also mentioned that due to climate change, the agricultural sector in Bangladesh had been greatly affected. Too much water in the monsoon season and too little water in the dry season has impacted the production capabilities. The involvement of women in the agriculture sector has also made women vulnerable to loss of livelihood. The water security issue needs to be discussed at the regional and bilateral level because its impact will not be limited to Bangladesh alone. The issues like cyclone and the development of early warning systems and real time data sharing will help in dealing with the crisis. Countries in the region should come up with a collective framework to deal with these challenges.

Mr. Dil Bahadur Rahut spoke on "Non-Traditional Security Challenge for Bhutan and Policy Option" emphasising the need of prioritising the non-traditional security issues in the region. He discussed the need of working collectively towards prosperity of the region by ensuring food, health, and access to clean energy in the entire South Asian region. A national policy alone cannot deal with all these issues and Mr. Rahut stressed on the need for a collective framework to meet with regional non-traditional security issues.

Mr. Anushka Wijesinha in his presentation titled: "Canary in the Coal Mine? Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis and Wider Implications" discussed the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka and its implications for the region. He brought out in detail the reasons behind the deterioration of Sri Lankan economy. He noted certain policies like the Agro-chemical ban resulted in the collapse of agriculture in the country. The impact of Covid-19 on tourism and artificial manipulations in the currency values were some of the reasons behind the collapse of Sri Lankan economy. Mr. Wijesinha further noted that while some of the recent policies collapsed the economy completely, the process of deterioration started long back. He identified the flawed post-war growth model, debts for dud projects (like lotus tower), corruption and nepotism as the primary reasons leading to the present crisis. He also stressed that the debts are not bad per se but debt for bad investment was bad. He held that economic and political reforms were the need of the hour to deal with the current issues faced by Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Government failed

to get IMF bailout package on time. Pakistan is also going through economic crisis similar to Sri Lanka. Regional countries should step in to resolve such crisis at their level. India is consistently putting efforts to bring Sri Lanka out of this crisis.

Dr. Zaw Naing's presentation titled "Myanmar at the Crossroads, and Implications for India, South Asia and G20" discussed the recent political instability in Myanmar and its implications for the region. He said that the arrival of military government in power destabilised the country and, sooner or later, it would have a spill-over effect on the entire region. The influx of refugees and emergence of armed militant groups are few of the myriad challenges the region might face in the next few years. Dr. Naing emphasised that India should use its diplomatic power to bring about normalcy in Myanmar. Historically, India has contributed towards building of democratic institutions in Myanmar.

Report prepared by Mr. Afroz Khan, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA

Working Session III: Country Perspective on Climate, Economic, Gender & Energy

Chair: Dr. Uttam Sinha, MP-IDSA, Co-Chair of T20 Task Force 6 on 'Accelerating SDGs'
Speakers: Dr. Ajaya Dikshit, Ms. Ngu Wah Win, Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka and Ms. Aishath Shina

In this session, the speakers elaborated upon the theme of "Country Perspective on Climate, Economic, Gender & Energy". The session was chaired by Dr. Uttam Sinha who welcomed the speakers and began the session by quoting an ancient Indian saying; *Aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah*, which means that knowledge should flow from all directions.

The Chair highlighted that in line with the theme of G20, "One Earth, One Family, One Future", we should also have a theme for the region and that should be "One Region, One Response", which is difficult to achieve but something we must consider. There is a collective desire for an integrated South Asian region which has not been achieved as yet. It is important for the people of the region to understand why integration has failed in South Asia. The chair underlined the important role played by 'Bilateralism' in achieving integration in South Asia. He stated that even though 'Regionalism' was desirable, it was only possible through bilateralism. All the issues being addressed during India's G20 presidency can be plugged in through the bilateral mechanisms. There is a considerable scope for, and confidence in, building a regional network. "We cannot sidestep bilateralism to achieve regionalism", he emphasised.

The first speaker of the session, Dr. Ajaya Dikshit, spoke on "Resilience Across Boundaries: Challenges of Small River Basins in the Ganga Plain in the Age of Climate Change". He highlighted that when we speak about Climate Change, we must address the three important pillars pertaining to Climate Change, i.e., Mitigation, Adaptation, & Loss and Damages. Mitigation deals with bringing down the carbon emissions whereas Adaptation addresses issues pertaining to water as a resource. After COP 27 the agenda of Loss and Damages has also gained significant attention. Dr. Dikshit talked about adaptation and small rivers in the Ganga basin that flow from Nepal into Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. He highlighted the importance of these rivers in the Ganga Basin and the various multi-hydro-meteorological hazards faced by the basin such as rising heat, cold wave, sand casting and border inundation etc.

Dr. Dikshit stated that the small rivers in the Ganga Basin are gradually vanishing and it was imperative to stop that from happening. He underlined the five pillars of resilience namely, (i) users and managers, (ii) exposure to climate hazards, (iii) national ecosystem, (iv) infrastructure and (v) rules and policies. He concluded by offering what he called the 'guiding philosophy' for river conservation: he stated that rivers

need space to flow freely and emphasised upon the maintenance of flood evacuation routes, conservation of space, promoting recharge, separation of waste cycle and hydrological cycles, making water studies interdisciplinary etc.

Dr. Sinha added to the insightful presentation by Dr. Dikshit by highlighting the interdependence between South Asian countries in terms of water resources and the emergence of hydro-political-security complexes. He underlined the special relationship between India and Nepal, emphasising upon the bilateral approach to maximise mutual benefits.

The next speaker Ms. Ngu Wah Win spoke on the topic of "Irregular Migration and Informal Remittances: Emerging non-traditional security threats in conflict prone Myanmar". Ms. Win highlighted that Myanmar had the second largest out-migration ratio in Southeast Asia with a large volume of migrant workers migrating to neighbouring ASEAN countries. These migrants send back home remittances which are used for daily consumption, saving and education. Many of these migrants use informal networks to send remittances back home. These remittances are usually used for food, consumption or coping up with conflict, thereby limiting its contribution towards development of the communities, due to which, the households remain poor, unemployed and therefore all this leads to repetition of the cycle of migration. The speaker also highlighted that these informal remittances also contribute to illicit trade and black economy. She underlined their role as a non-traditional security threat to Myanmar as well as the neighbouring countries. She stated that remittances served as an essential social safety net for the households dependent upon these remittances in Myanmar. The survey that she had undertaken also revealed that the remittances do not contribute to sustained social recovery of conflict-affected households in Myanmar. She concluded by giving policy recommendations for India, as the current leader of the G20. She stated that irregular migration and informal remittances can be managed by leveraging remittances for development and designing incentive schemes for formal remittances and legal migrations. She emphasised that remittances must be complemented with social and humanitarian cash transfer programs.

Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka from Sri Lanka spoke on the topic of "Gender Equality and Decent work through Sri Lanka's Multiple crisis". She provided a background to Sri Lanka's multiple crises and highlighted the challenge faced by the island country. She said the Lankan economy needed to grow amidst an impending global recession. She claimed that the crisis had impacted the women adversely and aggravated the gender inequality situation in the country. Women's employment dropped by 22 per cent as compared to 8 per cent for men. She highlighted that most Sri Lankan women were either unable or unwilling to engage in paid work.

Dr. Gunatilaka presented a graph which illustrated that women were concentrated far more densely in the lower wage ranges (except in the public sector) than men in Sri Lanka and they had to face several obstacles if they chose to work because of social, economic and cultural constraints. According to her, the general perception about gender roles also limits women's participation in the workforce. She concluded by giving policy recommendations to enhance the role of women in the workforce which included bringing about reforms in the labour laws that facilitate flexible working hours, maternity benefits etc; and adopting macroeconomic policies that spur export-led economic growth and enhance productive efficiency. She highlighted the strategic importance of SMEs, female entrepreneurship, ownership, management etc and advocated for skill enhancement measures for women.

Ms. Aishath Shina from Maldives spoke on "Challenges faced by Women leaders in higher education institutions in the Maldives". Dr. Shina began by giving a background on the evolution of position of women in Maldives in the last 20 years. She stated that there is an increasing prevalence of women at all levels of education as well as employment which enables women to seek for leadership positions in

all sectors. The speaker highlighted that the women's representation in government and civil services has improved over the years. She said that the Decentralisation Act that came out recently in Maldives, mandated a minimum of 33 per cent women representation in the local government. However, at the same time women are facing several religious, social, organisational, and personal challenges. Even though women's enrolment in higher education has increased over the years, women are still underrepresented in major decision-making platforms as well as leadership roles, which indicates the underutilization of workforce's potential. Ms. Shina concluded by stating that the lack of women in higher education management and leadership positions reflected the presence of a patriarchal culture in South Asia. The working environment for women is classified as unwelcoming owing to factors such as stereotyping, extensive teaching workloads etc. Such mindset has to go to bring women at par with men in society, he affirmed.

Report prepared by Ms. Priya, Research Intern, MP-IDSA

Special Session

Lecture by Mr. Tetsushi Sonobe on Outlook of T7 Japan on G20 Process

Chair: Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, DG MP-IDSA

The session was moderated by Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy who introduced the theme and the speaker Mr. Tetsushi Sonobe, Dean and CEO of the ADBI and Chair of the Think 7. He said that the G7 presidency of Japan was important for India which recently assumed presidency of the G20. Without consensus between the two major global groupings, one cannot find a solution to major challenges which have been discussed in the previous sessions of the conference, he noted.

Mr. Tetsushi Sonobe started his presentation by introducing Think 7 (T7). He stated that T7 aimed at "addressing crises, reigniting sustainable development, and bridging G7 and G20 through close collaboration of T7 and T20". He shared Japan's views on India's leadership of G20 and hoped India's presidency of the same will be inclusive and dynamic. While deliberating on the subject, he shared Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida's views on G7. He noted that the G7 countries needed to strengthen their commitment towards economically underdeveloped nations of the Global South to deal with various challenges facing the international community. Japan should more closely engage with the Global South in areas such as climate change, energy, food security, health and development, he noted.

He said that the theme of India's G20 Presidency-- "One Earth, One Family, One Future"-- was inclusive, ambitious, decisive and action-oriented and India was clear about its policy priorities. While talking about Indonesia's Presidency of G20, Mr. Sonobe noted it was successful primarily due to two reasons, namely, low expectations and the regional economy. The low expectation was an outcome of fear of the disintegration of G20. Another reason was Xi Jinping's cold attitude towards Russia after the Ukraine War, which made Indonesia nervous until mid-summer (2022). In addition, he held that Prime Minister Modi's remark "it's not an era for war", provided an impetus for the G20 process anchored by Indonesia.

The regional economy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) helped Indonesia in running its G20 presidency successfully. After the G20, Indonesia has also received chairmanship of ASEAN 2023 which has allowed Indonesia to connect with other parts of the world such as the US and Europe. According to Mr. Sonobe, Indonesia's success and Prime Minister Modi's influence have raised the world's expectations from India.

Mr. Sonobe further observed that India's G20 Presidency would accelerate new ideas and collective action to address some of the major global issues. Also, the collaboration between T20 and T7 will help

in addressing major challenges together. Both the groupings could highlight major issues that can be addressed by global leaders. With regard to India-Japan cooperation, the speaker noted that both countries share good relations and have similar thinking; therefore, G7 and G20 have a huge potential to work together.

Summing up the special address, Ambassador Chinoy noted that Japan's credibility and greatness made it a worthwhile partner for India to collaborate with and work together.

Report prepared by Dr. Jatin Kumar, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA

Special Session Keynote Address by Amb. Harsh Vardhan Shringla

Amb. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Chief Coordinator for India's G20 Presidency in 2023 delivered the keynote address in the 14th South Asia Conference on 17 January 2023. This session was moderated by Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, T20 Chair of G20 India and Director General MP-IDSA.

While extending a warm welcome to Amb. Shringla, **Amb. Chinoy** gave a glimpse of the deliberations of the first day of the 14th SAC underlining the key take aways from the discussions such as the need for greater regional integration in South Asia and the enthusiasm for India's G20 presidency among the nations of South Asia and the Global South to bring positive changes in the lives of the people in this region.

Amb. Shringla began the address by highlighting that for India, South Asia and the developing world, the ongoing India presidency of G20 is a significant moment in the history of this influential grouping because this is the first time that three countries from the Global South would have the opportunity to preside over the G20 and set its agenda for the future. He underlined that the Government of India had made considerable efforts to take the G20 presidency to the people of India by organising G20 events across the country, and at the same time, gave representation to the voices of the Global South by organising the voices of the Global South Summit. He said that during its presidency, India would organise about 200 meetings in 56 locations apart from hundreds of side events. These meetings are intended to ensure higher level of participation. In order to make the G20 Summit a truly inclusive event, various outreach programmes are being conducted through schools, universities and research institutions, he noted.

As G20 president, India looks forward to considering the views of every developing nation along with the other core members of G20, he informed the audience and said that India had invited Bangladesh, Mauritius, the UAE, Oman, Nigeria and Egypt as invitees for the G20 Summit to be held in September 2023. Among other invitees are International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. Amb. Shringla said that Covid-19 had proven the limitations of systems such as the UN, World Bank and IMF. He pointed out that India had performed well during the pandemic and there was an opportunity for India to use the occasion of G20 to push for a stronger mandate for the IMF, World Bank and other partner institutions to garner more resources and increase their lending abilities. These issues are to be addressed as India's neighbours and other developing countries face serious economic and environmental challenges.

The keynote address broadly outlined India's priorities for the G20 Summit including climate change and sustainable development that are significant for the prosperity and well-being of the people. He suggested that amidst the rising issue of scarce resources, the idea of a "circular economy" could be put into practice to realise the sustainable development goals in the region and beyond.

Amb. Shringla pointed out that integration of South Asia was a significant priority for G20 Presidency. He drew attention to the fact of South Asia was one of the least integrated regions in the world and the low volume of intra-South Asian trade. He put forward a broad range of issues on which India looks forward to work on, i.e., roads, rails, waterways, and airways. Amb. Shringla pointed out other means of connectivity such as in the field of energy, people-to-people contact and the internet, all of which make the notion of integration holistic. As Amb. Shringla put it, in the last eight years India had tripled its line of credit which had led to a tripling of the number of projects in South Asia. The 62 projects that India run focus on building vital connectivity through rail, road and shipping routes along with port building and other infrastructures.

Amb. Shringla suggested that for further integration of the region a network of rails running from Dhaka to Delhi, gas connectivity through pipelines and power transmission lines, most of which were being proposed by India. For instance, he said, the Raxaul–Kathmandu railway line was a proposed cross-border railway project between India and Nepal. Concerning power transmission lines, he stated that India would be looking forward to efficient and environment-friendly ways to transfer power to Bangladesh when various hydroelectric projects in the Northeast region of India get realised and that India also looks forward to becoming a “connecting link” in the supply of power to other South Asian countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

He also held that power transmission could be realised between India and Sri Lanka through under-sea cables which was a commercially viable option. He stressed greater people-to-people connectivity for all types of tourism, restructuring visa policies and indicated how this practice had been effective in the case of Bangladesh as the number of visas issued per annum in Bangladesh rose from 5 lakhs to 18 lakhs in a matter of a year and a half.

Amb. Shringla noted that integrated border check posts between Myanmar, Nepal and Bangladesh are already in operation along with discussions on removal of non-tariff barriers for seamless movement of goods and people. He emphasised that these crucial steps were necessary from the Indian side as a “game changer” for the economy of South Asia as a whole. Integration through new technologies was another major area where India ought to play a bigger role. He stated that as part of its priorities for the G20 Presidency, India was seeking ways to ensure greater internet connectivity with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan along with increased cooperation in areas of 5G and artificial intelligence. He also stated that under PM Narendra Modi, South Asia has assumed India’s strongest priority be it in providing required vaccines for Covid-19 to its neighbours for the first six months, supply of medicines and transfer of liquid oxygen. He informed the audience how Saudi Arabia, the then G20 President, had convened a meeting to discuss the Covid-19 crisis at the proposal of PM Modi which was extraordinary in itself as it was the first of its kind in the forum as it was not an issue that was strictly related to economic or financial issues.

Amb. Shringla offered a few policy recommendations to other South Asian countries highlighting the importance of regional integration and asked them to focus on shared concerns and opportunities. He suggested a few ways to achieve prosperity and well-being of the people which included providing skill training and opportunities. He stressed the importance of the flow of ideas among different countries as it was great for understanding each other. This, he said, could be achieved through education tourism.

Lastly, he pointed to the process of financial inclusion that India had started to provide direct benefits to the vulnerable sections of society through digitalisation of its financial infrastructure. He stated that India was willing and ready to share its experience of financial inclusion with the rest of the world as part of its commitments to the global good. He ended his keynote address by reiterating India’s strong commitment to its South Asian neighbours, the Global South and the global commons with an intention to work with a

human-centric approach within the ambit of the theme of *vasudaiva kutumbakam*; that is, one earth, one family, one future.

Following the keynote address, **Amb. Chinoy** highlighted the two key takeaways from his address. He observed how both infrastructure and people-to-people connectivity were crucial for South Asia. He also suggested a few policy recommendations like working together with South Asian countries to create a new integrated approach and devise a regional strategy to address the issue of regional countries accessing enough fuel, food and fertilizer for their people. Apart from this, Amb. Chinoy pointed out how India along with other South Asian countries, was working together on shared socio-economical indices.

This was followed by a lively Q&A session. Responding to a question on the issue of ways of working together to respond effectively to climate change, Amb. Shringla pointed out that on the problem of climate change India was taking preventive measures and was working closely with the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure to create capacities for solar energies and building disaster resilient houses. To a question on economic lessons that South Asia, in general, can learn from the Ukraine conflict, Amb. Shringla responded that “mutual support” can be taken as a lesson by South Asian countries. He suggested that mutual support can be achieved by working on confidence-building measures with a spirit of solidarity and trust. On another question about the lasting legacy of the G20 Presidency under India, Amb. Shringla stressed that G20 being a consensual process was still a work in progress and India was working together with other members and the countries in South Asia and Global South to achieve growth, sustainable lifestyle, and SDGs.

Report Prepared by Mr. Shoaib Raza, Research Intern, MP-IDSA.

Special Session

Chair: **Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy**, Director General, MP-IDSA & T20 Chair

Address: **Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar**, Principal Coordinator, C20, India's G20

Address: **Mr. Bharat Lal**, Director General, National Centre for Good Governance, India

Amb. Vijay K. Nambiar started by noting that a resilient South Asia required a strongly resilient India and added that for a resilient world there was need for a resilient United Nations (UN). He also made the following observations during the course of his address.

The response of the UN Security Council (UNSC) during the Russia-Ukraine war indicate that there are different yardsticks for great powers and rest of the UN members when it comes to upholding a state's sovereignty in the face of aggression from another state. Although there are questions raised about the credibility of the UN, it is also true that that the UN remains the only institution that represents the people of the world.

The UNSC, the cockpit of the UN, needs to recognise the interests of the powerful P-5 states to ensure the survival of the UN as a multilateral institution; at the same time, the composition of the UNSC has to reflect the changed power equation in the world and in this context, India's stake for permanent membership is not only supported by its size and influence but also its commitment to the UN principles. Despite the efforts made by the G4 and the L.69 group towards reforming the UN, the opposition of P5 has been a major obstacle. The P5 opposition has given salience to the idea that unless there is a major catastrophic event or dangerous confrontation, the P5 cannot be convinced to introduce reforms.

India's position on the UN reforms has been clearly stated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Voice of Global South summit where he talked about *Respond, Recognize, Respect and Reform*. The External

Affairs Minister S. Jaishakar has also called for a time-bound plan for reforming the UN. On the role of the developing nations in the UN, Amb. Nambiar noted the changed perception of development, especially the concept of human-centered development, visible in the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), later changed into Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He lamented how Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) couldn't take a leadership role as an Economic Council like the UNSC largely because the P3 (the US, France & Britain) put greater assent on the Bretton wood Institutions. It is in this context that the task of dealing with major financial challenges and the agenda of development moved away from the UN to G20.

On terrorism, Amb. Nambiar said that at the UN there has been a major focus on some broad-based consensus on how to tackle terrorism. But the UNGA does not agree to a broad definition of terrorism, and interests of individual P5 countries have weighed down heavily on issues of terrorist designations and blacklists. However, the recent development in which Abdul Rehman Makki, who was put on the UN blacklist implies that the pressure of the international community does make a difference.

He warned against the common mistake of understanding the human rights mechanisms as a Western agenda and argued instead that it forms a major pillar of the UN. The instances of use of the 'responsibility to protect' to bring regime changes, like in West Asia remain the only aberrations. Emphasising the works of Human Rights Council for advancing civil, political and economic rights, he noted the importance of cultural integrity of any nation. He held that it was important to recognise cultural difference and that no civilisation could claim cultural monopoly over definition of human rights.

The UN has taken up the issues of international concerns, like climate change, and accordingly it has adopted the convention on climate change the convention to combat desertification and the convention on biological diversity, which have made some major difference. On India's approach to combat climate change, Amb. Nambiar noted that despite India's support for principle of 'Common but Differentiated Responsibility', it has played a positive role in making Net Zero emission goal a reality.

The achievements of the UN through its various institutions have made the international body indispensable. What is required is reform of the basic structure of the UN to respond to emerging multipolarity. He also noted that the G20 can also provide the impetus for reforming the UN.

Mr. Bharat Lal, Director General, National Centre for Good Governance, India, in his speech underscored how water security remains critical for achieving socio-economic development as well as economic growth. Mr. Lal gave the case study of Gujarat where before the measures for ensuring water security were taken up in the year 2002, the growth rate was as low as 1.02 per cent. The growth increased in many sectors, including agriculture, industry as well as better socio-economic outcomes, once the government addressed this issue. He noted that Gujarat's experience of assuring water for each economic activity by way of capturing rain water and the related efforts to stop open defecation to ensure a clean surface have been replicated at the national level.

Mr. Lal noted that given the fact that 256 districts out of a total of 713 districts, are water-stressed, effective water management will be crucial for realising the objectives of improving per capita income, the overall quality of life, and even women skilling. He noted that if women were to spend less time and efforts in fetching water from distant places for their families, they are more likely to be educated and skilled and contribute to their family income.

He noted that though water was a state subject in India, missions like the *Jal Shakti Abhiyan* and the *Jal Jeevan Mission* aimed at providing potable water to the last Indian, have been aimed at making water everyone's business. In 2019, only 32 million households, less than 17 per cent, were having tap water connections. Since then, the percentage has gone up to 56 per cent. Clean water supply has also helped in reducing the occurrence of water borne diseases, and led to better outcomes in bringing down Infant Mortality Rate. *Namami Gange*, a mission to clean the Ganga River, and make the water potable has borne some positive results as some rare aquatic lives have returned to the river.

Mr. Lal noted that to achieve water security, emphasis was no longer on big dams but integrated water management involving recharging aquifers, open defecation free surface, and inter-basin transfers from flood-prone eastern parts to water deficient western parts of the country. The session was well appreciated by the audience.

Report Prepared by Dr. Nazir Ahmed Mir, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA

Working Session – IV

Energy Transition, Climate Adaptability, Agricultural Produce, Water Resource and Disaster Management

Chair: Dr. P. K. Anand, Visiting Fellow, Research and Information System for Developing Countries

Participants: Mr. Dinanath Bhandari, Mr. Krishna S. Vatsa, Prof. GM Tarekul Islam, Dr. Maneesha Ramesh, Ms. Sonam Choden

Mr. Dinanath Bhandari, from Disaster Preparedness Network- Nepal (DPNet-Nepal), made a presentation titled 'Up-Scaling Local Practices: Cross-Border Flood Early Warning System', which focused on various measures undertaken by India and Nepal to address the issue of floods in border rivers between the two countries. Mr. Bhandari discussed the role of NGOs, civil society, and regional communities in supporting and helping each other in the early flood warning.

Mr. Bhandari highlighted existing flood information-sharing mechanisms between India and Nepal that have been in existence since 1970. He also highlighted the local practices for cross-border early flood warnings amongst communities. He said that with the advent of various advanced technologies, such cooperation could be enhanced where states can help each other in flood management. Citing the 2006-2007 community-centered early warning systems approach in Babai (Saryu) and Karnali (Ghagra), Mr. Bhandari mentioned that these helped in saving lives as community people sent direct information to their friends and relatives in UP, India.

Mr. Bhandari asserted that NGOs also played a crucial role in dispensing easy flow of flood-related information to the local communities. Efforts by NGOs in this regard included constituting various task forces, conducting simulation exercises and cross-border EWS coordination. In his concluding remarks, he mentioned that these existing mechanisms can be strengthened further. He called for providing more funding to NGOs dealing in flood management, enhancing bilateral collaborations between India and Nepal on flood forecasting, flood monitoring and communications. He emphasised on the institutionalisation of upstream-downstream coordination mechanisms in Cross Border Rivers between all the South Asian countries.

The second speaker of the session **Mr. Krishna S. Vatsa**, Member, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), India started his talk by highlighting the importance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He mentioned that poverty in all the South Asian States remains common which also finds its correlation with incidences of natural disasters. He mentioned that all disasters erode the assets of the people that push them towards poverty. He appreciated the fact that for the first time the G20 has a working group specifically on disaster risk reduction that reflects the vision of India's leadership. He pointed out that all the countries in the South Asian region need to come together to address disaster related issues.

According to Mr. Vatsa, India, under its G20 presidency, appears keen to work with all its neighbouring countries on disaster risk reduction issues. He talked about the importance of building disaster resilient infrastructures in South Asian countries and India could play a leading role in this endeavour. Mr Vatsa mentioned that Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) is an important milestone for India. He praised India for having enacted the Disaster Management Act, setting up Disaster Management Authority, state Disaster Management Authority and also the National Disaster Response Force. All these have enhanced and strengthened India's disaster management capability and India could share its experience and expertise in these fields with the countries in the neighbourhood, he said. The positive changes brought about by the 15th finance commission recommendation regarding the financial aspects of disaster management in India were praiseworthy, according to him. He concluded his talk by suggesting that India under its G20 presidency must seek and enable regional cooperation to address the issue of disaster management in the South Asian Region.

The Third speaker of the session **Prof. GM Tarekul Islam** from the Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET, Bangladesh gave his presentation on 'Nature-Based Solutions for Coastal Disaster Management in Bangladesh'. He started his presentation by providing an overview of the geographical and physiographical setting of Bangladesh. He mentioned that Bangladesh has one of the largest networks of rivers in the world. He highlighted that Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna (GBM) river systems drain about 1.72 million sq km of the territory while passing through Bangladesh and making it into the Bay of Bengal. Further Prof. Islam talked about various disasters in Bangladesh and pointed out that most of the disasters in the country are related to hydro-meteorological phenomena.

He also mentioned that Bangladesh lies in a hotspot of catastrophic cyclones. He discussed various options for structural interventions for coastal disaster management and mentioned that these included Seawall, Breakwater, Bulkhead, Groynes and Revetment. He mentioned that structural measures undertaken at both national and local levels to mitigate cyclones have been inadequate and often economically inefficient for developing countries.

Prof. Islam, therefore, emphasised on nature-based solutions. He observed that nature-based solutions for coastal disaster management would help mitigate climate change, lead to disaster risk reduction, food and water security, biodiversity loss, and human health. In the final part of his presentation, Prof. Islam highlighted bioengineering intervention as an effective tool for coastal protection. He finally concluded his presentation by reiterating that nature-based solutions for coastal disaster management need to be promoted amongst all the South Asian countries that could enable overall sustainable development in the region.

The chair then invited **Dr. Maneesha Ramesh**, from UNESCO chair of Experimental Learning for Sustainable Innovation and Development, India for her talk. Dr Ramesh's presentation was focused on 'Citizen Centric Sustainability & Resilience Approaches'. In her presentation, Dr. Ramesh talked about the number of initiatives undertaken by 'Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham' for developing sustainability-resilient approaches which included the 'Live-in-Labs Program' which has brought theory into practice. Dr. Ramesh mentioned that their students are working in more than 5000 villages across the country to address various water-related challenges that include water accessibility and availability to various village communities.

She also spoke about 'Empowerment Community App' developed by their students that helps in accessing and interpreting water-related information. She mentioned that this has also been processed with geo-enabled platform '*Mera Gaon, Hamara Jal*' (My Village, Our Water). This platform has enabled them in mapping out community-level socioeconomic, cultural and political dimensions of their intervention. In her concluding remarks, Dr. Ramesh said that scalable technologies and solutions for the

community needs are further required to be developed and there is an equal need for utilising local resources and existing infrastructures.

The final speaker of the session **Ms. Sonam Choden**, Regional Technical Expert for Asia in Scientific and Technical Review Panel 2023-2025 of the Ramsar Convention, made her presentation on 'The Ramsar Convention and Wetland Conservation in Asia'. She began her presentation by highlighting the importance of wetlands in preserving biodiversity and the overall sustainable development of the region. Ms. Choden argued that wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems that need to be preserved. She mentioned that healthy, functioning natural wetlands are critical to human livelihoods and sustainable development. Talking about the Ramsar Convention, Ms Choden mentioned that it is the first of the modern instruments since 1971 that seek to conserve natural resources on a global scale. She mentioned that the impacts of agriculture on wetlands, and consequences for food production are becoming more apparent. Ms. Choden said that the future of sustainable food production was dependent on the wise use of wetlands. She asserted that the transformation of agriculture was needed to reverse the trends in wetland loss and degradation. Ms. Choden highlighted that climate change, natural disaster, improper coordination between states and lack of scientific research remain key challenges in addressing the issue of wetland loss. In the final concluding remarks, she highlighted various measures to regain healthy wetlands and called for enhancing the network of Ramsar Sites and other wetland-protected areas. Some of her other key recommendations included:

1. Integrating wetlands into planning and the implementation of the sustainable development goals
2. Strengthening legal and policy arrangements.
3. Implementing Ramsar guidance to achieve wise use of wetlands.
4. Applying economic and financial incentives for communities and businesses.
5. Ensuring participation of all stakeholders in wetland management.
6. Improving national wetland inventories and tracking wetland extent.

Prepared by Mr. Bipandeep Sharma, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA.

Session-V Boosting Resilience and Regional Growth

Chair: Dr. Nisha Taneja, ICRIER, Co-Chair of T20 Task Force 7 'Towards Reformed Multilateralism'

Participants: Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Prof. S. K. Mohanty, Dr. Shankar P. Sharma, Mr. Zaw Oo, and Dr. Mahfuz Kabir

Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja started his presentation by noting that the world was in a state of poly-crisis with a sharp slowdown, higher inflation and debt crisis in developing countries. Some South Asian countries are facing debt crises. In the region, India, Bangladesh and the Maldives are in a better position than the rest. Pakistan and Sri Lanka faced terrible growth prospects. Four of the South Asian countries availed bailout packages from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The speaker commented on economic regionalism and stated that the regionalism in South East Asia was in a better shape than in other regions, with good future prospects.

Dr. Wignaraja suggested that the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) should be operationalised for a better intra-regional economic cooperation. In this regard, he gave three suggestions, i.e., (i) operationalisation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity; (ii) strengthening the BIMSTEC secretariat with a focus on Free Trade Agreements (FTA)s, and (iii) increased macro-economic cooperation within the ambit of the BIMSTEC.

Commenting on India's G20 presidency, the speaker expected that G20 should make concrete commitments to help poor countries navigate the economic fallout from the Ukraine war and hoped that Russia would refrain from use of nuclear weapons. The G20 should help tackle the serious debt crisis in developing countries and should keep global trade flowing. It should assume a more proactive role with regard to reforms in the world trading system, including within the WTO.

Dr. Shankar P. Sharma spoke about growth and debt problems of South Asia and what could be done for further regional cooperation. He said that South Asian economic growth depended mainly on India and accelerating growth in India would help other South Asian countries. However, he claimed that India's economic growth had declined on account of reduced rate of capital formation, and low Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) rates compared to other emerging Asian economies such as Vietnam. India was lagging in manufacturing. Much of the investment in manufacturing export sector that came out of China had gone to Vietnam, with India receiving only 10 per cent of such investment. The speaker contended that many high-technology companies wanted to invest in India and India should therefore continue with infrastructure expansion and play a role in assuring strong supply chains in South Asia.

Dr. Sharma suggested an action plan for increased South Asian economic growth. He supported the idea of operationalisation of a unified electricity grid for South Asia and emphasised on connectivity between the South Asian countries with a special focus on the border points. He opined that the non-tariff barriers should be removed. He advised that the concept of 'One South Asia for Tourism' has the potential for economic growth and employment generation across the region. The *Ramayana* and Buddhist circuits were steps in the right direction. Talking about the debt problem, the speaker cautioned that the lender and borrower should understand the nature and composition of the debt and credit exposure. He noted that the Sri Lanka and Nepal in their post-conflict phase had received substantial funding from the Paris-club, which had lent massively in the name of reconstruction. He cautioned that sustainable growth requires that countries prioritise government expenditure and watch out for debt-to-GDP ratio.

Prof. S.K. Mohanty made a presentation on 'Resurging South Asia in Crisis – Recession to Recovery'. He claimed that in recent decades, the region grew very fast with many low-income countries graduating to middle-income country status. However, there was pessimism vis-à-vis the economic prospects of South Asia with World Bank always comparing the region with Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Prof. Mohanty, South Asia's growth rate was higher compared to many regions across the world and the present economic crisis in some of the countries was only short-term in nature. Corroborating his point, he showed that the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of several vibrant regions was less than the combined GDP of South Asia.

He said that the region registered a trade deficit in the goods sector and a surplus in the services sector. Thus, the trade deficit of the region was narrow than many other regions. Commenting on the intra-regional trade, the speaker claimed that the intra-regional trade in South Asia varied during different timeframes. The intra-regional trade was low before the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed while 1989-2004 saw an impressive growth rate of 6.1 per cent. Post the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), the intra-regional trade grew for three years between 2003 and 2006. Prof. Mohanty disagreed with the observation that the intra-regional trade was lower on

account of the region producing similar products for exports. He claimed that the trade in agriculture had the potential to spur regional trade. Prepared food, fruits and vegetables could be priority for regional trade. Specific sectoral liberalisation would help the cause of regional growth.

Prof. Mohanty claimed that the bilateral trade deficit was not a matter of concern if that reduced the overall trade deficit of the region. Most South Asian countries are both importers and exporters of technology-intensive goods. The region indulged in rapid trade liberalisation between 2000 and 2007. But the pace decreased post-2008 recession. The service sector was constantly growing as compared to the trade in goods. The regional potential vis-à-vis FDI flows were yet to be tapped. Talking about Greenfield investments, Prof. Mohanty claimed that India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had invested in the neighbouring South Asian countries, however, there was a scope for further improvement. The region had large export potential which was yet to be tapped. Regional agriculture-based value-chain should be the engine to increase intra-regional trade, he added.

Dr. Zaw Oo shared his perspective on 'Economic Emergencies of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Regional Initiatives on Debt Relief'. His presentation was premised on the assumption of a looming economic crisis in the LDCs in 2023. He called upon India to provide relief to debt-burdened economies in the region through various G20 initiatives such as Common Framework for Debt Treatments (CFDT). Given the experience of stabilising the economy of Sri Lanka, the speaker urged India to extend similar help to Myanmar. On the resilience of Myanmar's economy despite the Covid-19 challenge, Dr. Oo noted that an economic collapse had been averted not by competence of managers but the people of Myanmar, mainly the farmers, urban manufacturers, especially textile workers and migrants who worked neighbouring countries such as Thailand. For all three human elements, he expected India to help the country in various ways. India could relax restrictions on agricultural trade and support Myanmar in cotton seed development, so that Myanmar-based garment industry can use locally produced raw material and emerge more export competitive. New Delhi could also help Myanmar with fintech solutions for remittances.

However, Dr. Oo predicted major challenges to Myanmar economy in 2023 because of a sudden decision of the Central Bank of Myanmar to control capital outflows and lower the interest rates, leaving the economy in a freefall state. Additionally, the blacklisting of Myanmar in December 2022 by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) added to its woes. Thus, Dr. Oo charted a clear role for India as a 'frontline' state in dealing with economic crisis in Myanmar, which will otherwise result in a variety of non-traditional threats for the country. He argued that China's role in debt relief scheme has been less cooperative and wondered if India could take up the role of a facilitator for an international conference on Myanmar focussing on managing economic crisis and a political dialogue under the G20 CFDT.

Dr. Mahfuz Kabir made a presentation on 'Towards Resilient Growth at Turbulent Times: Lessons from Good Practices for Deepening Regional Economic Integration for South Asia'. He argued that like many other parts of the world, South Asia was passing through a turbulent time as countries were exposed to unprecedented back-to-back effects of Covid-19 and the Ukraine conflict. He noted that during the pandemic, Bangladesh experienced reverse migration, wherein people left cities for rural areas fuelling a temporary increase of poverty and unemployment. It impacted many South Asian countries including Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The Small and Medium Enterprises are recovering from the temporary impact of the COVID-19. Bangladesh also received an IMF loan of US\$4.5 billion. However, the country had taken a few measures to overcome the challenge including selective austerity measures, investment in climate change adaptation and mitigation, expansion of social protection coverages, investment in growth-enhancing mega projects and investment in human development among others. Dr. Kabir noted problems in energy supply chains and how Bangladesh was undertaking aggressive investment in renewables and

visions of a circular economy. On opportunities in India-Bangladesh ties, the speaker proposed coordination in the monetary policies, and cooperation in gig economy and the Sundarbans.

Key Takeaways

- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) should be operationalised for better intra-regional cooperation.
- The G20 should help tackle the serious debt crises in developing countries and should aim at keeping the global trade flowing in an uninterrupted manner.
- Much of the investment that left China went to Vietnam instead of coming to India.
- The countries that borrow should understand the nature and composition of the debt. The terms and conditions of the repayment should be adequately understood. Otherwise, the countries are likely to face debt problems.
- In the last couple of decades, the region grew very fast with many low-income countries graduating to middle-income country status. South Asia growth rate was higher than the growth rate of so many regions across the world.
- India can help Myanmar with food security, financial advice from the Reserve Bank of India and through various multilateral initiatives such as G20 and the BIMSTEC.
- Bangladesh had taken a few measures to overcome the challenge including selective austerity measures, investment in climate change adaptation and mitigation, expansion of social protection coverages, investment in growth-enhancing mega projects and investment in human development among others.

Report prepared by Mr. Niranjan Chandrashekhar Oak, Research Analyst, MP-IDSA.

Concluding Session: Looking Ahead

The final session of the 14th South Asia Conference titled “Final Session: Looking Ahead” was chaired by **Amb. Muktesh K. Pardeshi**, *Officer on Special Duty G20 Secretariat, India*. The panelists included experts from across India's neighbouring countries – **Dr. Sharminde Neelormi** (Bangladesh), **Maj. Gen. Moosa Ali Jaleel** (Retd.) (Maldives), **Mr. Sunil KC** (Nepal), **Amb. Bernard Goonetilleke** (Sri Lanka) and **Dr. Zaw Naing** (Myanmar). The session was followed by an engaging and interactive Q/A session. The concluding remarks to the conference was delivered by Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, *Director General, MP-IDSA*. The Vote of Thanks was presented by the Conference Coordinator Dr. Gulbin Sultana, *Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA*.

The session drew attention to some of the pertinent issues that were discussed over the two days, such as the importance of regional integration, efforts to reduce trust deficit between the countries, and vulnerabilities facing South Asia especially non-traditional security threats such as climate change. The panelists proposed an efficient and coordinated utilisation of the region's water and energy resources as well as increasing intra-regional trade as the way forward besides efforts to continue to work on issues of common interest. The inclusive approach of India's G20 presidency and its significance for the region was appreciated by all participants. Other key inputs included cooperation between central banks in the region and creation of an institutional architecture for facing non-traditional security threats. The concluding remarks underscored the dysfunctionality of multilateral organisations, trend of issue-based alignments and expansion of the grouping in the prevalent world order.

Amb. Muktesh K. Pardeshi, in his remarks stated that India has assumed the G20 presidency at a challenging time. He highlighted that India had taken a broad-based deliberative approach beyond the member states. He remarked that India's G20 presidency was a unique opportunity to impart a Global South and South Asian narrative to the emerging global consensus. Underscoring the geopolitical reality of the region, he stated that South Asia's integration through economic linkages and infrastructure connectivity remains suboptimal due to trust deficit. At the same time, he noted that G20 was a normative body which can provide impetus for collective action to deal with shared challenges.

Dr. Sharmin Neelormi, Professor, Dept. of Economics, University of Jahangirnagar, Bangladesh, began her talk by appreciating the vision of India's G20 presidency and acknowledged its efforts to include views from the South Asian neighbourhood in the process. She underscored the need to work on mistrust among the countries in the region. Mentioning conventional and non-conventional conflicts, she suggested that think-tanks in the region could collaborate with one another and discuss and raise issues of common concern with the government and policymakers. She stressed that it was important not to downplay conventional security issues such as the Rohingya crisis, which required a harmonious if not homogenous efforts at the regional level. If left unaddressed conventional security issues can fuel mistrust. Dr. Neelormi stated that in short-term, both Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna valley and Indus valley nation can take collective decision to work in the direction of food security and sustaining current levels of engagement and ensuring there is no deterioration. According to her, the long-term vision for regional cooperation includes working on energy security, especially solar and wind energy projects; promote forward-looking thinking on technology transfer issues, medical interventions and sanitation technology. On synergy in climate action, she observed that the climate change issues faced by India, Mexico, South Africa, Brazil and China are vastly different from the issues faced by smaller nations such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. She advocated regional solutions especially disaster risk reduction and also loss and damage financing.

In his talk **Maj. Gen. Moosa Ali Jaleel (Retd.)**, *Former Defence Minister and Former CDF, Maldives*, acknowledged Prime Minister Narendra Modi's neighbourhood first policy and inclusive South Asia approach. Recognising the non-traditional security challenges facing the region, he alluded to the climate-change related threats facing Maldives as a low-lying island nation, such as climate change, human trafficking and transnational crime among others. He also noted the importance of developing a regional approach to deal with what he called negative spillovers of globalisation, such as the presence of some 50,000 undocumented expatriates in the Maldives. He also noted the issue of terrorism, and efforts to bring back Maldivian citizens from conflict theatres such as Syria. He highlighted that tourism industry, which contributes to 20 per cent of country's GDP could become further lucrative with investment flows from South and Southeast Asian countries. He also flagged the issue of heavy taxation in European markets for the fisheries industry. Maj. Gen. Jaleel underlined that the primary concern remains dealing with the after-effects of a probable mega-Tsunami situation in Maldives.

Mr. Sunil KC, AIDIA, Nepal, noted that the delays in regional integration programme and vulnerability of South Asia due to poor economic and social infrastructure have emerged as key themes during the two days of the conference. He observed that pressing issues necessitate regional integration which could be achieved through a robust forum as the existing BIMSTEC and the BBIN arrangement need a fresh momentum. Observing the raising importance of 'green energy', he argued that it can facilitate regional integration and help us build a resilient South Asia. Mr. Sunil assessed power trade between Nepal, which is a major hydropower producer, and consuming states like Bangladesh, Bhutan and India, and called it a low-hanging fruit endorsing the vision of dynamic sub-regional cooperation. He remarked that much of the power trade currently happens at bilateral level and can be upgraded to regional level with exporting power from surplus nations such as Nepal to Bangladesh and Bhutan through Indian transmission lines. He also called for exploring possibilities of a consortium between India, Nepal and Bangladesh to facilitate integrated investment in power production and power transmission.

Amb. Bernard Goonetilleke, Chairman, Pathfinder Foundation, Sri Lanka, said that despite the gloomy global economic outlook, India possessed the resources and capability to play a proactive role in global economic recovery. He presented a contrast between Southeast Asia and South Asia and stated that the latter had failed in augmenting intra-regional trade and held that India has a big role to play here. On debt sustainability, he noted India's support especially India's assurances to the IMF on Sri Lanka's debt restricting plan and signing of MoUs on renewable energy. He noted that India's G20 presidency allows it to propose a template to help vulnerable economies. He underlined the need for India-Sri Lanka cooperation on renewable energy production and the importance of FDIs for the same. On institutional frameworks for deepening economic integration, India's alignment of South Asia with BIMSTEC requires consideration.

Dr. Zaw Naing, Managing Director, Mandalay Technology, Myanmar expressed great appreciation on India's efforts in the region, its G20 presidency and robust think-tank culture. Recognising India's leading role on many fronts including human resource management and development, he cautioned India on the challenges lying ahead. Dr. Naing shed light on various areas of India-Myanmar cooperation that could be significantly improved such as capacity building of think-tanks in Myanmar; India's capability as a regional enabler in water resource management; a competitive market mechanism for solar energy and India's potential in the area such as production of electric vehicles by Mahindra; India's leadership in digital transformation; its leading role in education and healthcare, and the potential for India's educational institutions to attract students from around the region.

The final session was followed by a vibrant and interactive **Q/A Session** which focussed on bringing about changes in the existing regional financial arrangements and looked at the possibilities of enabling forward-looking financial institutional frameworks in the region like BBIN and BIMSTEC, discussed the limitations of nature-based solutions in conservation of wetlands, SAARC food bank and food security. The possibility of cooperation between Central banks in the region was also raised during this session. It was underscored that under its G20 presidency, India could take up the issue of debt relief mechanisms under the task force dealing with finance issues. It was highlighted that the engagement groups under India's G20 presidency could focus on the need for working out institutional debts; and the importance of working on mutually beneficial issues such as water-sharing and climate change. It was underlined that an institutional architecture for non-traditional security threats would increase trust between the countries.

The **Concluding Remarks** to the conference was delivered by **Amb. Sujan R Chinoy**, Director General, MP-IDSA. He said that the ideas distilled during the two days of deliberations would be channelized to the G20 leadership through the T20 track. Mentioning the dysfunctionality of SAARC which was discussed in the conference, he explained that dysfunctionality of multilateral organisations was not limited to the South Asian body alone and the impasse exists even in apex institutions including in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). He highlighted the trend towards strengthening bilateralism, regionalism and pluri-lateralism. Amb. Chinoy remarked that we live in a world of multiple alignments, often referred to as issue-based alignments. Therefore, the T20 seeks to engage as broadly as possible. He shared about T20 plans to engage with universities across India as well as internationally including Kigali, Sydney, Rome and Tokyo. Amb. Chinoy proposed the creation of a virtual SAC alumni group for continuous exchange of ideas among scholars from the region.

The 14th South Asia Conference came to a close with the **Vote of Thanks** presented by the Conference Coordinator, **Dr. Gulbin Sultana**, Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations

On India's G20 Presidency and the Think20:

- India's G20 presidency is a unique opportunity to impart a global south and South Asian narrative to the global consensus.
- India could focus on the threat of climate change and rising sea levels for low-lying island countries in the region, particularly Maldives.
- Various regional panellists appreciated India's vision for its G20 presidency and acknowledged its efforts to include the South Asian neighbourhood.
- It was suggested that the G20 could consider expanding rail and road infrastructure in the region.
- India's G20 presidency could strengthen institutional architecture and governance on all important issues.
- Under its G20 presidency, India could take up the issue of debt relief mechanisms under the task force dealing with financial issues.
- India could explore the possibility of continued working on some of the key aspects as some issues have an extended shelf life (beyond September 2023).

On South Asia

- South Asian countries must prioritise cooperation over competition and engage in sharing experiences.
- In the short-term, the countries must focus on maintaining and sustaining current levels of engagement.
- In the long-term, the regional countries must work on energy security, technology transfer issues, medical interventions and sanitation technology.
- It must be noted that a major concern in the region is a mega-Tsunami situation in Maldives. The speaker called for regional assistance on the same.
- A possibility of consortium between India, Nepal and Bangladesh to facilitate investment integration could be explored.
- Improving bilateral energy trade would enhance regional integration.
- India plays a significant role in the economic development of the region.
- An institutional architecture for non-traditional security threats would increase trust between the countries.
- Explore the possibility of cooperation between Central banks in the region and a regional financial framework.
- The dysfunctionality of regional organisations is not new and unique to SAARC.

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