

India and the World in 2047 | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar “India and the World 2047” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on March 9, 2022, and was moderated by John Harriss, Professor Emeritus of International Studies at Simon Fraser University. The guest speakers were Suhasini Haider, Kanti Bajpai, and Rohan Samarajiva.

Transcript:

John Harriss:

Okay, lovely. Hello, good morning in- in- in Canada, good afternoon where I am here in Scotland, and good evening in I think India, Sri Lanka, and- and- and Singapore. My name is John Harris, I'm a professor emeritus of international studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, but as I said at the moment here in- here in Edinburgh. By way of introduction I think I should say something about CIRCLE, which is the organization that has set up this and other webinars on India in 2047.

Established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph, the Canada India research center for learning and engagement: CIRCLE, aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and the Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable respectful and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging topics relating to sustainability, social, and economic well-being - what's going on in- in South Asia generally.

Today's webinar is I think the fourth in a series of seminars on India in 2047 which is supported by several different departments at the University of Guelph and by the social sciences and humanities research council of Canada. What a moment this is in which to be discussing India's international relations. India and- India and the world given that as it seems to me, at least India is rather stuck between a rock and a hard place in the context of the terrible ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

I myself have, though I've studied many different aspects of politics and society, economy in India, I'm- I'm- far from being an international relations scholar, but as somebody who has been fairly closely observing active in studies of India for actually a little bit, more than half a century now I've of course observed India's international relations for quite a long time. It always seemed to me perhaps the speakers will disagree with me that India was a little bit of a backwater in international affairs, not really of- of- of huge significance, and it was only the concerns about potential actual conflict between India and Pakistan that really brought India into much prominence.

That's- that changed a lot towards the end of the 20th century, partly I think because of the- the arrival in power of the- of the BJP of India's nuclear test in 1998, and also because of the growth of the economy the way in which India became has become such a major part of the- of

the- the global economy, and I think that you know India's stance in international affairs began to be a little bit more assertive.

Though still I think characterized by what has been called strategic autonomy, which I think you know one authority on India's international relations - Raja Mohan once said is at once vague and central to India's foreign policy, the idea of strategic autonomy which in some ways I think reflects the kind of carryover of the historic Nehruvian commitment to- to non-alignment but from perhaps from strategic autonomy is there's now a much clearer I think aspiration on India's part sometimes articulated by the current minister of external affairs – Subramaniam Jaishankar, that you know India should be a leading a leading power.

I'm rather wondering myself how the way in which India is- is in such a difficult and awkward position in the context of the of the conflict in- in Ukraine reflects on this history, and on the aspirations for the- for the future. Throughout the time that I've been following what's going on in- in South Asia, I guess that another aspect of India's international relations is the very problematic relations that India has had very often with her neighbors, and I don't mean just Pakistan, but with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, Nepal, and I- I suppose that the South Asian region is still extraordinarily little integrated economically by comparison with- with other major regions. Anyway, I think that's quite enough from- from me.

My sort of way of little personal reflections on the themes for our discussion today. I'm very, very happy, I feel somewhat privileged actually to introduce our speakers today. I will introduce first Suhasini Haider, who is the diplomatic editor of the great English language newspaper - "The Hindu" Suhasini was previously a foreign affairs editor and prime-time anchor for CNN, which I think is the leading Indian 24-hour English language news channel, and there she presented the signature program "World View" with the Suhasini Haider. This followed 10 years I think, Suhasini?

Working in different ways with- with CNN international in 2015. Suhasini was the recipient of the prestigious Indian print journalism award, the Prem Bhatia and throughout her career Suhasini has covered some of the most challenging conflicts and stories in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Libya, the Lebanon and Syria, and in India, Kashmir where she was actually injured in a bomb blast in- in the year 2000. So, Suhasini thank you very much for joining us today, it's really a great pleasure to- to meet you and to- to have you here.

Second, I would like to introduce professor Kanti Bajpai, though in fact I will be asking Kanti to speak first since for rather pressing personal reasons, he may have to leave our webinar before its formal end. Kanti is one of India's most distinguished academic analysts of international relations and is now the Wilmer professor of Asian Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew school of public policy of the National University of Singapore.

He taught previously at the University of Oxford in the school of interdisciplinary area studies, and was I think a fellow of Wolfson college county? Right. And before that of course, Kanti was headmaster between 2003 and 2009 of the famous Dune School in India. One of his recent publications, surely relevant to our discussion today is entitled "India versus China: why are

they not friends?" and Kanti is a winner of the case of Romanian award for excellence in research on strategic and security issues.

Our third speaker today is Rohan Samarajiva, who's had a most interesting career. Rohan, I really enjoyed reading your CV, you've done a lot of different things but a most interesting career as an academic in the United States for quite a long time in the Netherlands, as well as in his native Sri Lanka, and he has a long history of public service in different capacities in- in Sri Lanka. Rohan is now the- the chair of an organization which has if I just go by the acronym it's LIRNE Asia, of which he was the founding chair in 2004, and the C- CEO until uh 2012.

The acronym LIRNE stands for Learning Initiatives on Reforms for Network Economies Asia, and it's an ICT policy and regulation think tank, working across the Asia-Pacific region. Based in Sri Lanka, LIRNE has a staff in the Colombo office of 15 or so people, and 30 or more... Rohan you must correct me if the information on the website is out of date- more than 30 external researchers in different parts of the world. I might just say lastly that I was intrigued that underneath the title of LIRNE is the sort of little slogan pro poor, pro market. Some of us might think that perhaps there's a kind of a contradiction between being pro-poor and pro-market, but that's perhaps a discussion for- for another day.

Thank you all three very much for- for joining us- joining us today. The sort of house rules for the webinar are that everybody please should keep themselves on mute except when... and without video except when invited to- invited to speak.

We hope very much that you will have many questions or comments for our speakers, and I'd ask you please to write your questions or comments into the chat box or otherwise, using the icon which I think is called reactions? Am I right? At the bottom of the screen you should be able to use that raised hand symbol to indicate to- to me that you have a question or would like to- or would like to speak. I think lastly I- I have to say that the event is being recorded so that it can be made available later, so now far too much of- of me.

Over to first Kanti and so professor Bajpai will speak first and I will then exceptionally ask for questions or comments to him, just in case these pressing personal matters mean that he has to- to leave the webinar early. Kanti, over to you.

Kanti Bajpai:

Thank you very much John, and very nice to see you here. I think we last saw each other you know several years ago in Singapore. Also great to see the rest of the panel and particularly to meet Rohan who I don't know. Thanks to the organizers, it's great to be on a Canadian university program. I spent six glorious years at UBC as an undergraduate and then as a graduate and all my children are UBC people, and in fact they're Canadian citizens so it's always- it's a kind of a slightly homecoming kind of feeling to- to do this and we're missing Sharada unfortunately but thanks to her as well for- for being the driving force behind this.

My topic I should just say, I'm not very well, and that's really the personal reason, so I may have to leave a little early for that reason and thank fellow panelists for allowing me to jump the

queue. Here, my topic is India and China in 2047 and I guess this entire series looks forward to the 75th year of India's independence and the question that's been set to me is India and China in 2047: "will they be friends?". This has picked up on the title of the book that John very kindly mentioned: "India versus China: why they are not friends in the present". By the way, that title was driven by my publisher. I thought it was a bit in the face, but there you are, that's marketing.

So what's my answer? will they be friends in 2047? My brief answer quick answer is no, and that's easy enough to say because given the past 60 or 70 years of India- China relations, there hasn't been a lot of friendliness there though it's not been without friendliness, but it's been rather intermittent but given 70 years of- of a fairly dark relationship much of the time one might say fairly easily that the next 25 years won't lead to any great breakthroughs.

So that's easy to say, but then the question is how to arrive at that conclusion more analytically, and here I just draw on my book which posits the four P's as the answer to why they're not friends. Perceptions, Perimeters which is just a- a fancy word for the border problem and for the Tibet problem and the two are associated, and the third is third piece partnerships and the fourth is power.

So I'm going to use that framework to project forward to 2047 to assess whether any of those and- and so my argument in the book is that any of those, but most likely interactively between the four of them that's what gives you the precipitate which is a bad relationship. I haven't put weights on these different P's that's just too difficult and I'm too lazy, but I'm going to share the four p's. The first p is perception, so since the late 19th century at least I showed that India has had a China's had a very rather negative disdainful view of India.

This came out of intellectual discussions in China about the state of India under colonial rule and the inability of Indians to unite and eject the colonials and the Chinese- Chinese intellectuals drew the lesson that India was a broken society, fatally divided and may not even really constitute a nation.

This point of view in the modern period that is after the communists have come to power have been reinforced quite tactically it seems to me by the Chinese establishment to continue to sort of put India down in international affairs. On the other side India has had pretty negative images of China as well, partly inherited from British colonial rulers, Indian troops and Indian businessmen and so on operated in China in the 19th century, and- but in any case, intellectual contact with the British I think gave them a kind of orientalist view if I could pardon that slight pun of China, and I think you know the border quarrel of course reinforced visions of the Chinese as being a kind of violent and sort of obstreperous and unwilling to really negotiate and be friendly.

Of course it's compounded by Indian social racism at home so I think quite a lot of anti as it were race their racism towards people who- who look Chinese. I mean we can see that in the treatment of people from northeastern India for instance. If we look at the world views of these two countries, I won't summarize the world views I parade through the book but what's striking

is that in contemporary China there's only one there's not a single world view that places India higher than a kind of medium power and at best a junior partner of China, and amongst the Indian world views if we take out the Tagore Gandhi cosmopolitan view of the world, then Indian world views identify China's rival, either as a neighbor on a Kothelian kind of reading all your neighbors in Kotilias, Mandala or your potential rivals if not rivals and if you take a great power view, then China has been unhelpful to India and has tried to sort of keep India down from becoming as it were a great bar, which is its destiny and I think.

So the first question is- is this likely to change and my sense is that if anything this may get worse and one of the reasons I say this is that social media, if you look at some of the studies of social media by people like Chaudhary and Simon Chen in Hong Kong and others I mean what comes through and of course I understand social media tends to be on the extreme, but the social media displays very extreme reinforced views of India as a backward rather hopeless place and there's a lot of racist commentary there as well and I think quite a lot of that replayed in- in coin by Indian social media about China. So it seems to me that there's a dynamic at work through social media that in fact is making perceptions worse rather than drawing the- the two societies together.

I mean the other forces at play but I think that's a very important. One on the perimeters there's a very complicated history of on the border and I'm not going to replay it but the salient fact is that India and China have negotiated since 1981, on the border almost without break and they are still not friends, and they haven't come to a resolution of the border and the fundamental problems are two at least.

The first is that China wants to revise what it regards as imperial and colonially imposed boundaries. India wants to stay with the status quo. So that's a very kind of a salient difference, the other is that they don't trust each other now to say that they don't trust each other is of course a bit tautological.

So you don't trust each other because you have a conflict and you have a conflict because you don't trust each other, but you tautologies can be useful the question is why they don't trust each other and I would go back to the formative years where I think on a reading of that initial history between Nehru and John Ly, Nehru and Mark Selung, they both presented rather dubious perspectives on their claims.

Each knew that the other side's claims were dubious, they assigned them to bad faith whereas in fact it might just have been that it's two new countries with two new leaderships without any great international exposure I mean Nehru was a lawyer but he was not a foreign service man, and he didn't know foreign affairs and treaties and so on and nor did Joe and Lai and Mao, who were fighting a civil war for most of the time.

Actually, they were sort of ignorant on border issues and- and I think a lot of their- their kind of prevarications and changes on the issue which led to so much distrust was out of ignorance to be to be blunt about it, but the real problem is Tibet I mean Tibet is conjoined to the border issue because that's where India meets China and while they did cooperate with- on Tibet for-

for a while, in fact looking ahead to 2047, one thing we can say for certain is that we're entering a very difficult phase on Tibet there's already as it were a transition which is that there will be a Dalai Lama inevitably with the current Dalai Lama's passing.

He's 86 years old, and by 2047 there will be either a Chinese imposed Dalai, and or a Dalai Lama chosen by the Tibetan community around the world, and India will have a very difficult choice of which Dalai Lama it's going to go from, and you can bet that Chinese pressure on India will be enormous to choose to support and accept their Dalai Lama. I always say that whenever you think India China problems at base, please think Tibet.

And so it seems to me that just running the movie forward we're entering in fact probably one of the most dangerous phases because of the Tibet problem and I'm not sanguine at all that things will have really settled down between India and China on Tibet by 2047, it really will depend on how Delhi plays it and Beijing plays it, but there are real dangers there.

The third issue which I'll leave it very briefly, is partnerships. And the two or three things to be said here is that historically, if you look at the quartet of big bars that India operated with, that is itself, China, Soviet Union Russia, and the United States, what is striking is that the only two who have never been strategic partners are India and China. So both India and China were partners with both the others, but they've never been partners together.

The only time they were partners was during the Chinese civil war and the war against Japan when India became a base of operations for the fight against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek was a bit of a friend. But other than that, they never have been. And what does that mean? That means at the highest grand strategic level of officials and politicians, they have no capital to draw on. They have no experience of and real deep understanding of each other's strategic thinking and practices, and therefore no trust.

There's no capital to drawn in a conflict to tide over bad times. What does that say about the future? What does it look like? I mean, if anything, India seems to be drifting further away from China, closer to the United States and allies without quite becoming a formal alliance partner. In IR we use- in international relations we use this term now, strategic partnerships, which is a quaint way of saying it ain't quite there in terms of full-blown alliance.

But that trend is likely to grow, and that's because- partly because- and I'm going to come to it- the power disparity between India and China, and they will have to take out insurance, and the only place to go is to the United States and its allies to do that. And at the same time, China is closer to Pakistan and of course to Russia, India increasingly will have some very difficult choices with Russia. But the Russia relationship could weaken, so you could really see India increasingly isolated from or alienated from a sort of quasi-encante of Russia, Pakistan, and China further driven into the arms of the United States and Thailand.

Last point I mean I think this is the one that's pretty well known there's a huge gap now between India and China on power, even as late as 1990 China was within shooting range of India economically but today we know that the Chinese economy is five times in their size, it's

at about 15 trillion dollars and India's about three trillion dollars nominal GDP where will they be in 25 years I mean of course it's folly to extrapolate and there are all kinds of things that could go wrong and knock the two off trajectories, but let's assume India grows at seven percent per annum, which is long term that's probably fairly sensible for 25 years.

India's GDP could- could go from three trillion to 16 trillion dollars which is impressive. China, let's assume China slows down as it seems to be but sustains five percent roughly over 25 years it will have a GDP of 50 trillion dollars. I mean if that's sustainable in terms of climate change and- and planetary kind of carrying capacity but just bracketing that. 50 trillion dollars, the 12 trillion dollar gap today between India and China would be 34 trillion dollars.

The military gap is not so bad over a range of systems China probably has three times the number of- of systems, and so- on except personnel we're about equal there and they may in fact have somewhat larger numbers of people bearing arms but that gap could grow and one very significant reason it could grow is of course that China spends three times last year spent three times on defense what India did its defense budget and that was probably that's probably going to be sustained partly driven by the united states and the rivalry there between China and the US. And by the way of that, China spends much less on personnel, much more on capital development capital costs and India spent 60 on personal costs right now.

So the- the long term prognostication even there is not good, although India at the moment can hold. So what's my conclusion? I mean if you take these four P's seriously, with me it's difficult to see how India and China can be friends the implication particularly the power gap I think is very important and what is that I mean very broadly as sham sarin has said a form of Indian foreign secretary it is that China doesn't see why it should concede to a power- to a country that's going to be even weaker than it is in relation to China in the future and India doesn't see how it can make even reasonable concessions without being accused by its own people of strategic surrender and appeasement. So you have a great kind of stall there, out of the power disparity.

So final thought I mean, how could they be friends in 2047, it's a bleak prospect, but I mean really flowing from this it seems to me that the one thing that India could really do something about fairly quickly is if it can bridge that power gap and the Chinese and Indians can look at each other in the eye with greater respect, and a greater sense of deterrence and- and- and so on then you know they might work their way to being friends, but otherwise 2047 I think they'll still be glaring at each other and looking sideways or over their shoulders with each other. Thank you very much.

John Harriss:

-can't unmute myself I'm sorry I have difficulty unmuting my myself there Kanti. Thank you, thank you very much. So as we said, we would like to invite questions to Kanti before I turn to other speakers. I- I am just looking for signs of hands, I think that... Okay. I have one question in the in the chat from Gopika Solanki, who says: "Under what conditions might border disputes with China be resolved, and might you comment Kanti on India's Taiwan policy going ahead".

Kanti Bajpai:

Yes, on the border as I said, I'm not optimistic I mean they've been negotiating now for 40 years. There is in fact a very reasonable deal more or less on the table it's called the swap which would be if the border problem the- the- the Chinese claims in the western sector in Aksai Chin for the Indian claims in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector we presume the middle sector has is more- more tractable as a negotiation that's been on the table since 1960 India has consistently rejected it now the Chinese have moved off it as well but to be honest it's kind of still there some version of that with some more adjustments and so forth might still be- might still be done and there the kind of as it were fly in the ointment.

There is that the- the little enclave called Tawang where there's a very famous Buddhist monastery is of course in Arunachal Pradesh in India Stook it in 1951 moving its troops in there the Chinese want it and they want it for the Tibet reason because it's very important for Tibetan Buddhism and so for the long term to integrate or more solidly integrate Tibet they've always insisted in border negotiations with India that Tibet is a very substantial claim, I'm sorry Tawang.

So I think even if the deal is kind of there and available to be finally done there's still the very naughty problem of Tawang one possibility is that it- it has some sort of international personality which is it's internationalized I mean either India or China have it but it's open to very free movement of pilgrims and- and religious figures and India and China learn to live with this kind of little anomaly pretty much forever until they do actually become friends and settle the entire border and Tawang just becomes that nice anomaly as a place of with an international personality and there are cases like this around the world.

It will take an enormously strong popular leader probably on both sides but especially in the noisy democracy that's India and I don't see such a leader on the horizon Modi might have been that leader but I don't think he's quite shown that kind of sort of fortitude either so yeah that's how it could be resolved on the Taiwan issue , it's a difficult one India has become more kind of proactive and open about its links with Taiwan since gul won 2020 the melee up there, we now do actually send an Indian foreign service officer to hold the whatever it is the trade office there which we- we didn't do so much of and so that's a little poke in the eye to the Chinese but of course if there's war over Taiwan and given India's closeness to the and membership in the quad and its increasingly Indo-pacific presence again India will be under tremendous pressure surely to play some role there even if it's a secondary role should a conflict break out and if the Chinese the Japanese the Americans the Australians and others go to the aid of- of Taiwan.

So I don't mention it here but I mean the question is a good one that's a potentially another seismic kind of event that could occur that could really derail India-China relations and I mean there are scenarios around that that the Chinese possibly if India got involved with then ask the Pakistanis or themselves open up a front against India on the border so that India was- was divided and that would place India in great difficulty a two-front war in Kashmir around Aksai China and that whole theater that would be very, very difficult for India, so I mean I guess a prediction would be that India will hope as much as possible that it doesn't get drawn in, that

there isn't war, that it doesn't get drawn in because it could find itself in- in trouble with China over it.

John Harriss:

A second question, Kanti, comes from Bharat Punjabi, and Bharat asks can the- the trump trans boundary water issue be a flashpoint between India and- and China.

Kanti Bajpai:

Yeah I think, I think not in fact as things stand, and I say this for it's been played up in the Indian media particularly a lot, and I think that problem sort of crested, and it crested because the Indian government quite sensibly in my view said a couple of things. One, over 60 percent of the waters in the Brahmaputra in particular really come from the Indian catchment area. From the rains there or subsurface water that feeds it and so on.

So really the issue of flows being interfered with by China, I mean we're not there and we may never be there given that proportion of water that comes from the Indian catchment side. The second thing that India has conceded, despite its unease is that at the moment the big dams on the Brahmaputra which by the way is called the Yalung Sangpo in Tibet as you know, those great dams are run of the river project. So the water flows through generating power and so on so forth but it hasn't yet reduced the water flow. Now, the really grim possibility- two.

One, if the Chinese build a super three gorgeous dam on the so-called great bend in the Brahmaputra, as it debusses into India I mean it will be quite a marvel of engineering but we've seen the Chinese can do it. That might cause a real problem and there's no signs of that yet although the Chinese have- have done some obviously, some recognition and planning.

The second is- you've probably heard of the great south to north river diversions that Chinese have done in three sectors. The one they really haven't done much is the sector that affects India. That is the western river diversion. That would take waters away from the Yalung Sangpo and send it northwards into the regions where water is scarce.

Again, it would be fabulous from the engineering point of view- simply a marvel if they could accomplish it, and of course then there might be significant reductions, but again you know we don't have a sense that they're very serious about that, although you get some real right-wing Chinese ex-engineers and commentators who- who kind of put it out there that China can and should do it, but I think the general view is that that's not as great a possibility as we once feared. And last point on that there is an India-China agreement as you probably know on information sharing on the river water flows, generally that- that- that protocol is generally held.

John Harriss:

Kanti, just one third question and then I think we must move on- from Sanjay Luperella: "given your analysis Kanti, what continues to drive India to resist a deeper strategic partnership with the United States. The last week has focused on India's continued reliance on Russian arms, its

historic trust in that relationship, its history of not issuing condemnation in such conflicts. How do you see the present moment evolving in the near and- and middle term?", which is really my- my point earlier about India being caught between a rock and a hard place sort of thing. Yeah.

Kanti Bajpai:

Yeah, I mean I think the- the- the relationship with the United States obviously has improved greatly, unprecedented over 70 years or so in terms of how close we are. But notice that there are all kinds of things that divide us there have been issues related to work visas which is kind of resolved now but it was a- a problem there are issues related to trade, the Americans complain about access to the Indian market and so on and there are tariffs on both sides so the Indians have complaints too.

There's the issue of American investments into India, which the Americans also complain about saying that things are vetted too much and the system is too slow and so- so forth. So there's an economic grievance I think on both sides. Then there are issues related to third parties of course- the Russia problem, the problem over Iran. Now to some extent those- the Americans have been somewhat more understanding about that if there's an- if the Iran nuclear deal is revived then, India might be on easier wicket with the Iranians, but at the moment again dealing with the Iranians which India in a sense must because of Pakistan energy issues, access to central Asia through Iran and so on.

It's a- it's an important opportunity for India strategically, but again it's difficult with the Americans over there and there's Pakistan. I mean again and again and again, every time we think that we can go- blow past the Pakistan problem with the Americans, it comes back and that's driven by many things about Pakistan. Its location, its importance in the Muslim world, the fact that it's a nuclear weapons power that could collapse, and that would be a calamity for everyone, that it harbors extremists, that it was next to Afghanistan where the Americans fought for 20 years and even the fact that it is in fact- that it is close to China, and that makes it a country that the Americans don't want to altogether lose to China.

So I think we in India think that the only importance of Pakistan is to China, to India in or the Americans use Pakistan against India periodically when they don't like us, but in fact the Americans and the Chinese have stakes in Pakistan which go well beyond just the India issue. So that's another point of difference with the Americans they've been differences over the Indo-pacific when Modi came to Shangri-la and spoke the first Indian prime minister to speak there, he said about the free and open Indo-pacific.

Yeah great, free and open, but also inclusive and pretty much everyone at least in east Asia read that as: "oh by the way this is not directed at China", and it raised eyebrows including in Japan by the way. So we're not exactly on the same page on the quad and on the Indo-pacific, and we could say more about the differences on the focus of those two organizations, which also I think India is not quite on board with. So you know there are differences there too.

John Harriss:

Thank you, very much I'm sorry to interrupt you but-

Kanti Bajpai:

That's fine.

John Harriss:

-of time pressing on and thank you very much. I must say for a man who's not very well this has been a real tour de force. Thank you very much indeed, I hope that we- you may be able to stay with us and- and come back in later but thank you very much indeed. And so I turn now to Suhasini for your- for your contribution to our discussions.

Suhasini Haidar:

Thank you so much Professor Harris and thank you so much to the center for inviting me to speak. I should say right at the top, I am not an academic, I essentially cover diplomacy on a day-to-day basis so it's a lot more about how things are practiced, and my view might be a little too close to the subject in- in- in how I present it, but the subject that I was asked to speak about: Indian foreign policy in 2047 - a hundred years after India's independence. How do we see India's foreign policy?

Then the question that aligned or balanced could not have been, I mean we discussed the this lecture I think for the first time in October last year and no one could have imagined that it would play out the way it has right now, and as Professor Harris said, we're sitting in this situation when it comes to the Ukraine where the world is watching what every country does. There is now a real "with us or against us" view from both Moscow as well as Washington and Brussels and- and Berlin, which kind of looks at which way the world is- is going, every vote at the United Nations has in a sense been recorded.

In India, I can tell you from my reading of the international press has been- has not come in for a lot of applause given that it has in seven consecutive votes across UN platforms, voted to abstain. So I'm going to explain a little bit about what this abstention means, what does balance mean, what does neutrality mean, what does non-alignment mean, and finally Professor Harris said, the word strategic autonomy are really, and how it will play out in 2047, which is not that far away. It's just about 25 years.

A word about India's foreign policy over the decades, and Professor Harris in his introduction spoke a little bit about the idea that India's first prime minister formulated this policy he was of course India's prime minister for a decade and more- and had already given contours of India's policy. Non-alignment for example is seen as this non-aligned movement it's seen as the same thing but actually non-alignment showed up in 1946, when the constituent debates were going on and when prime minister then, prime minister designate almost acting prime minister Diwali was asked to give a lecture on what India's independent India's foreign policy would be, and he speaks about non-alignment right there.

So while it is easy to conflate the two and then talk about the non-aligned movement, which is a group of 100 plus motley countries around the world that really hasn't gone anywhere and now hardly ever meets even, or has a common position on anything. The fact is that non-alignment was enshrined in India's independence.

So 100 years later is that idea going to survive? That's one of the questions we need to look-look at and as India's foreign policy extended, there was a much more critical eye on non-alignment. There were those who said that non-alignment constrained India's options, that it was not able to take positions on right versus wrong because it was in this non-aligned movement basket along with countries like Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Egypt and others.

There were those who said that after 1971 and India's signing of the soviet treaty, which was essentially done in the middle of this of the Bangladesh war, subject of another discussion sometime. But there are those who said India wasn't even very non-aligned, it was in fact quite closely aligned to Russia, although India has always said it does not do alliances, it doesn't call itself an ally of a country.

And then there are those who say that non-alignment essentially dropped India of the idea that it could become this big power at the United Nations and India has consistently lost out on the ability to join the top- the global high table if you like, the permanent five of the security council, and we can- we can- we can have a debate about that as well. Years ago, I heard a debater trying to do something very difficult, to oppose the motion that had been put before the house which was the- the motion was united we stand divided we fall.

Now you can imagine that's very difficult proposition to counter. So what he did was he stood up and away from the lectern and said: "now watch. if I stand with my legs apart, I am actually stable whereas if I put my feet too closely together, I am going to topple over" and I could say very much that the question about whether India should be aligned or balanced was seen very much in the same way by India's foreign policy founding fathers, so not just Mr. Nehru, but the entire foreign policy establishment at the time, where they clearly seems to suggest that balanced we stand- India stands and aligned we simply topple over.

So when we look at where this foreign policy of India is now headed and I do want to spend most of what's left of my time to really talk about the future. I would say very clearly that India's foreign policy posture in 2047- I- 25 years from now and a hundred years after independence will be premised on five different areas and five different, very, very distinct silos that we need to look at a little more closely. The first is the level of disintegration of the global order and I'm already assuming here that the global order as we know it, the post-1945 world order has already begun to disintegrate.

If you needed any proof, you could see what happened in the UN security council over the past two weeks when even as the UN security council, the most powerful five countries in the world sitting amongst the other 10 were discussing the issue of Ukraine that president Putin actually announced the decision to launch military operations in Ukraine- it showed a complete lack of respect if you like for this order anymore, and I will say Mr. Putin is not [indiscernible] whether

it was the U.S. war in 2003, and here I will differ with I- I think it was Kanti who spoke about the idea of India not taking positions on these difficult issues, but in 2003 India actually not only opposed the U.S. war in Iraq, India had a parliamentary resolution against it.

But the point was that here you had the UN security council being completely disregarded as the U.S. did and then later as the Saudi coalition did in Yemen. They didn't wait for a UN mandate to go ahead. We saw a mandate for Libya, which was a responsibility to protect mandate given by the UN security council very rapidly turned into a regime change mandate that ended up with the brutal killing of Gaddafi.

So we have seen the disintegration of the global order if it is represented by the writ of the UN and its most powerful body, the UNSC. We've also seen a disintegration in- just in the recent weeks of basic principles nuclear safety for example disregarded by Russia as it went in to take over Ukraine's nuclear reactors and the Chernobyl area. Whether or not that leads to a real problem, the fact that this was done so callously or without regard to the concerns of the world should worry us all. The disregard to the creation of refugees over the last 20 years, which conflict has not created refugees, and this is against the tenants that we have all signed on to. The global war and terrorism cast aside.

There in Canada I'm sure you see it, we saw in the UK where foreign secretary Liz Truss actually said that they would actually support foreign fighters going into the Ukraine and taking up arms on behalf of the Ukrainian government after a call by President Zelenskyy. But isn't this one of the tenets of the global war on terror, that you don't have non-state actors playing out in these conflicts.

I know these are all gray areas but I'm just saying that little by little we're seeing that global world order in a sense whittle away and disintegrate, and where India stands in 2047 will be a very, very important part of that, and I can go on about the economic world order that is disintegrating as well the WTO means nothing, the kind of sanctions we've seen put on by the west on Russia the- the shutting down of McDonald's and Pepsi and Coke and cutting Russia out of Swift, banning banks.

All done very unilaterally, not done through any global organization or platform to the point that we are now seeing a kind of cultural world order disintegration as well when you have artists being asked to either stand against Mr. Putin's actions or face being sacked in Munich, in New York and the liberal world capitals- this is not just to say that there isn't a problem to start with Russia's actions, I'm just saying that in the response to Russia's action, we have not seen the world order being held up or strengthened and therefore I would say that India's role not just as an abstentionist power or a power that wants to be neutral in some ways.

India's role in 2047 will be very much decide on the world stage if it chooses to strengthen this world order, or if it decides that it now needs to work with one or the other pole in a bipolar or slightly larger maybe multiple or tripolar world that should follow. The second big place where I think India's foreign policy will be chosen is what happens with big power rivalry. Four years

ago I wrote this piece, and I- I pulled it out again today just talking about the idea that there was no more a la carte options for India.

That the world was growing so polar- polarized that it was not possible for India to say I will take a little bit of this from you and a little bit of this from you and- and keep my strategic autonomy and my independence in there. Everybody is giving you buffet options whether it is on defense, whether it is on economic issues, whether it is on even other areas like nuclear issues which I'll come to in just a bit.

What we are seeing is that this big power rivalry is deciding India's own foreign policy posture very much when it comes to the us versus China as Kanti put so beautifully. The fact is India doesn't have as much of a difficulty in deciding one or the other particularly given China's actions against India at the border in the last two years, but when it comes to U.S. versus Russia again becomes very difficult. What happens if the sanctions we have seen continue and lead in fact to a dollar world and a non-dollar world being created. Where will India stand over there?

So I think these are questions that are going to come up with the- the reason I'd use the- compared it to a buffet option versus an a la carte option was actually because India was deciding to join the Shanghai cooperation organization around the same time that it was actually joining the quad. And it just seemed quite interesting that India would be part of a grouping on its continental sphere with Russia, with China, with Pakistan, Afghanistan central Asian countries, and in the maritime sphere be standing alongside the U.S., Australia and Japan and- and I said there is this famous saying that "where you- where you stand- how you- where you stand is decided by where you sit" but India seems to be sitting in a lot of places right now, so where it stands is a big question.

The third area, and I know Rohan is going to speak much more about this is India's relations with the neighbor and there is a big choice to me. India and now I speak as an Indian from inside India, we have always seen our neighborhood unfortunately as a kind of ring of fire around India. That there's always a problem in our neighborhood and India has to somehow leap outside this ring of fire in order to make its choices for the high table, or to be in some way represent- represent have a larger representation on the world stage.

The truth is that it is- this is a very, very interesting choice and this is a choice the Modi government will have to make in the next few years, and any other government that follows them as well. Can you actually sit at the high table just as India, just as an India with a 1.3 billion-1.4 billion people population, GDP that's increasing. Or is the interest in India going to only follow if it is truly representative of its region.

At present, if you keep- even if you keep Pakistan out, India is not seen as the arbiter of its region's destiny as it once was, and I think this is a very important area for India and you know we were discussing earlier how at the UN general assembly, the south Asian subcontinent did not vote together. I mean there are countries that voted alongside India to abstain, there are countries that voted alongside the U.S. who voted yes to the resolution, but it wasn't- it wasn't

a comprehensive, collective effort and that's just a small example of where south Asia is fragmenting.

In fact I should say in- in debates inside India both the idea of being part of the non-aligned movement has been cast aside, but also being a part of the south Asian association for regional cooperation has been cast aside as well, and I think very much that India's relations with the neighborhood in 2047 will be decided really by three very quick points I'll make.

One is dealing with the big brother-little brother issue with its neighbors. It will need to resolve its border disputes with each of these countries and by that I mean territory disputes for example with Sri Lanka. it's more about fishing and waters. With Bangladesh, we have been able to reduce the kind of disputes at the boundary. With Nepal, they're in danger of growing into much larger issues to Pakistan of course and so forth.

The second is that the US-China rivalry is growing in south Asia, in the subcontinent and I know Rohan's paper deals a little bit with it, so I won't go any further but to say that this will be a challenge to India which was originally seen as the preeminent sphere, I mean had this preeminent sphere of influence. And the third is going to be whether India can shine by its power of example. In the subcontinent, neighbors of India have always looked up to India.

Even if they didn't do what India did or even if they didn't actually agree with India, the leaders didn't agree with India, India had a certain power of example a certain aspirational power a certain soft power. Some of it came from the opportunities it provided from the economy but also because India was a country that held every religion, every language, every bit of culture, food- that one of its neighbors did. There was always that connection. Now if in one of these areas, a neighbor begins to feel estranged, I think this is going to be another challenge for India.

The fourth very quickly will be- that will decide India's foreign policy position in 2047 will be its position on global issues that are now growing. Things we never used to speak about like climate change. Will India keep its net zero commitments for example on pollution? Will India really be able to cut its carbon footprint? A nuclear non-proliferation, this is another issue where many are going to come to see whether India takes a position of leadership in the foreign policy sphere or not.

And the fifth, and this is perhaps the most difficult one to really speak about because it's not about foreign policy at all. India is foreign, the old saying that foreign policy of any country is basically domestic policy with its hat on. But the truth is on a much deeper level India's foreign policy in 2047 will be very much decided by its domestic politics in the next decade or so.

Most of you are aware of what is happening inside India in terms of the polarization, in terms of the fear of communal forces taking over, the fear of a much more majoritarian kind of outlook for India. One that seeks to not only subsume many of the- many of the diverse parts of India into the idea of one country which has a very, very strong center, but also the kind of other parts of democracy, the media freedoms, the freedom of NGOs to operate, the- the freedom for criticism really.

So those are- those are areas where India's foreign policy will also be decided. It- if India can stay committed to the principles that perhaps it has come through nearly 75 years with of being a secular democratic inclusive, liberal, pluralistic country, then perhaps it has the chance to remain in that balanced sphere.

If on the other hand, it chooses not or events take over and India chooses one way or the other, it might well find that its power is whittled to the point it needs to be aligned. It could be aligned with one side we've already seen the kind of closeness that India has had with the west, but on the other it might find a greater comfort with other powers that are much more authoritarian, and are much more comfortable to be, so- so I'm going to stop over here and I'm happy to take questions about where we see the country moving in the next 25 years.

John Harriss:

Suhasini, thank you very, very much for such a- an all-encompassing view of the foreign policy issues that India confronts. Thank you very much. And now we turn for a view a little bit from the outside, the Palk Strait isn't very wide but, a view from outside- outside India. Rohan over to you, thank you.

Rohan Samarajiva:

Thank you very much. I'm happy to join in this conversation and particularly maybe even in your well-researched investigation of my past, you miss the fact that I'm actually a graduate of Simon Fraser university. So we have a very strong- British Columbia exactly.

John Harriss:

I- I meant to say to Kanti too they had the wrong university....

Rohan Samarajiva:

The topic I had chosen or had worked out was India in 2047 at the center of an interdependent neighborhood. Well one of- one of these nights I just woke up and I said damn, you've got to have some exceptions to this neighborhood story. You got to take Pakistan and China out, they are also neighbors. So obviously we'll have to take them out I think I don't need to explain why we need to take them out of the conversation.

China has been already dealt with by Kanti and Pakistan is a special case. We'll have to deal with it separately. So when you take those countries out, it looks like... the key determinant is I think the kind of thing that Kanti was talking about with regard to- to China and India that this proportion of power of population of just sheer size, military power, etc...

You have that enormously with the- the rest of us, so while Bangladesh is big, it's you could still say that it's quite disproportionate being surrounded on all sides by- by- by- by India, while the others of course are grossly disproportionate. So there's this asymmetry of relationships, is the central element of this of these relationships.

So in addition to that- so that makes it difficult, that whole thing. In addition to that there is this question of- I think Kanti made some mention of the mandala theory but the mandala theory in its more modern manifestation it goes as follows. Which is well, your neighbors are your natural enemies. but the minorities who are living inside your neighbors are your natural allies and the majorities sort of follow and become natural enemies, which is kind of difficult to work out a reasonable working arrangement based on that kind of thinking. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking is still prevalent in New Delhi circles.

So when you combine that with- with from the other side- various historical grievances I mean I sometimes feel like I'm still fighting the battles of the 12th century with regard to the Chola invasion, so some guy who did- came and broke some irrigation tanks here right? So with this historical grievances, yes we have a situation where this is the least integrated region in the world, and which also happens to be a very large concentration of poor people. We might be competing with Africa on some of these criteria, but we are really up there in terms of numbers of poor people, and I think this pandemic may be maybe pushing us even further down that road.

Now, my claim is that there are some green shoots developing which have the potential of getting over some of these problems and giving us a more integrated, connected, region building in certain aspects of mutual interdependency, and getting us all out of this problem of poverty and dependence and so on that we are stuck in, including India. So what are these- I will- in the rest of the time that I have, I will talk about these two things.

One is what are the green shoots, and where do we have sort of the wrong kinds of dependence, where things have gone wrong, so I won't only be show you the optimistic view, but also show you what the wrong areas are and in all these cases I'm using actual examples. So let's first look at the little country of Bhutan, which is seven hundred thousand people, less than a million or whatever. Seventy eighty percent of the government's revenue comes from one export, the export I used to actually joke to them that they were actually exporting gravity but it's export of electricity.

So the water comes down the Himalayas, turns turbines makes electricity and it's purchased by India. So, there was that incident- the first election, well actually the second election where at the time of the election there was this unexplained withholding of subsidized cooking gas supplies which, a lot of people interpreted as sort of putting the finger on the on the scale and tipping the election in one direction or another.

Now interestingly, the electricity supply issue was never during this entire period, where the dependency is much greater I mean the Bhutanese economy wouldn't exist without this right. It's the primary export, it's the primary source of revenue for the government, etc... But it has not been touched, so is there a difference between these two relationships? because there are those who are making money shipping this stuff into Bhutan, but that's a very narrow localized constituency.

While on the other hand, if India were to say: "oh we are not taking your electricity", large parts of Orissa, west Bengal, Jharkhand, etc... would be in the dark or would be having greater load shedding. So you could say that in a way that's as an example of a workable, mutual interdependency relationship such as what you find between say Denmark and- and Norway with regard to wind power going in one direction and hydro power coming in the other direction and things like that, right.

The other example is less well-known. It's the fact that India actually buys massive amounts of internet bandwidth from Bangladesh. People have this sort of stereotypical image of Bangladesh. What are they doing selling bandwidth to India? After all, India is a super-power and what is little Bangladesh doing? It so happens that most of the cables to do internet, the kind of things that we are using now, you really need good connectivity, resilient redundant connectivity, to the sort of metaphorical or cloud. Data centers located all over the world.

Most of the Indian- most of the cables that come into India come on the west coast—one of a few coming into Chennai, but you know it's pretty much blank after in the same way with the ports, it's the eastern seaboard is not very well developed. While Bangladesh, which was a sort of a newcomer to this which only got its first cable in 2005 or six, and now has two cables going out across the Bay of Bengal, and these are international consortium cables quite reliable, quite modern and so on, and I can remember actually having a conversation with some people at the department of communication and they're saying Rohan, what do you think what about our northeastern area where connectivity is very poor and yeah talk to the Bangladesh really. Bangladesh has obviously talked, they move that kind of traffic and perhaps even from west Bengal down into their cables, and they send it out.

So one could argue that if Bangladesh got mad with India for whatever reason, they could cut off- make a problem for India with regard to its internet connectivity for that corner. One could say well that doesn't really matter, not much attention is paid to internet connectivity in that part anyway, but on the other hand, Bangladesh would lose an enormous source of revenue for its- for that kind of infrastructure that it's developing.

Now, we then look at transportation where we have an even more interesting and perhaps intriguing possibility where currently there is the second largest Indian port or port serving India is actually located in Sri Lanka. So depending on how you count, one year it's Navasheva another year it's Colombo, and since 70-75 percent of the traffic going through of the containers going through Colombo, are coming from or going to India, it becomes the second largest Indian port.

Now, this is kind of intriguing because there's all kinds of people interested in India, one of the terminals is controlled by a Chinese zone company and so on and so forth. If India were to- to see seriously try to develop an alternative to this, which is not very easy because developing a hub is not simply building civil works and dredging and so on, which is also a problem because the- the mother Ganga keeps pushing silt down and various ports that people think they're going to build get silted up even in Sri Lanka.

So it's not simply that you can just build a port, but beyond building a port, a hub is about economies of networking, it's because people ships are coming in that it becomes attractive, and because ships are coming in more ships keep coming in. So once a hub develops it's not that easy to tip it and to develop another different one. Though every time before an election we have Tamil Nādu politicians, Kerala politicians, etc... "Oh! We don't want to be giving this money to those Sri Lankans, we want to have the container port in our territory itself."

Now, the question is that the efficiencies and the connectivity that you get from this I are quite substantial. So why give up on this? Now for the Sri Lankans, it would be pretty much a disaster if India were to pull out and say: "we are not sending any of our containers over there", because then this would become a backwater. Once upon a time long, long ago, people used to come to Colombo to get air- get flights to go to Europe. It was a hub people used to come from Singapore to Colombo. Now we go to Singapore to get flights to go to Europe.

So hubs- hub status can be lost depending on technology, depending on mismanagement, etc... So there is that possibility that this could go, but on the other hand there is also the possibility that even if India is serious about developing a robust relationship between this rather sensitively located neighbor, the- in the words of a senior foreign policy analyst, the Immobile aircraft carrier parked 24 kilometers off the coast of India. It might be useful to- to develop this web of interdependence, and now of course there are some conversations about extending that to the energy side as well that I'm involved in.

So, I think there are these sort of positive signs, but we should not be all rosy-eyed about this because of the experience with cooking gas in Bhutan and then of course the well what many of us call the blockade but some people tell me not to use the word. The blockade of Nepal with regard to the constitution, etc... So there are these pros and cons, but I believe that for people like me who's working on connectivity trade and so on and want to see a more integrated and cohesive and developed and flourishing region, I prefer to look at the [indiscernible] truths rather than the fear-mongering. So I'll stop there.

John Harriss:

Thank you very much thank you very much for such an interesting- an interesting perspective, it's really- I had really no idea just how important the Colombo port is to India or the other points that you that you have raised and so it does suggest that there is- there is a more happening that is helping to build ties of interdependence across the region which, is really good to- to hear of so can I ask whether there are any hands up.

I don't think I see any hands up at the moment, but I have a question which I think really is for Suhasini from Bharat Punjabi again, yeah it's an interesting point, "what are the steps being taken to improve the capacity and resource base of the Indian foreign service. India still has fewer diplomats than countries of- of a similar size". Yeah, I mean the Indian foreign services I think has historically been very poorly resourced. Is that changing that Suhasini?

Suhasini Haidar:

Well currently the numbers are between 800 and 1000, they're a little more now but given how many they have taken from other services, but they remain very small and they are often compared, very famously compared by Shashi, targets book to Singapore. With- with no prejudice to Singapore is very, very vibrant diplomacy the fact is that there is a shift now, there is a desire to take in more there are lateral entrance being allowed which weren't allowed before in the foreign service.

We're also seeing that somehow the infrastructure is actually going first and then people are being brought to fill it. So for example in in Africa I think we have increased the number of consulates by about 15, which means that you are bringing in news more officers to- to- to- to deal with that and to deal with all the new push areas for the government in particular, but I think the point is well made by Mr. Punjab. Diplomats are in fact very, very over if you like, overstretched because they are smaller in numbers.

I think the one place where you're seeing a real increase though is the idea that while the ambassador in an embassy is often- is more often than not a diplomat, you will see the commercial counselors and other areas being taken much more by ancillary or lateral entrance than we have seen in the past. It's still not- it still doesn't cover the gap but- but that is- that is one of the if I may say it's- it's a- it's a weak point but it's not an overriding weak point in the sense that when India needs diplomats in a certain area they're able to get them there, right.

John Harriss:

Thank you may I just- there are some more questions in the chat box, but I wonder if I might just stick a- a little or in myself. I- I was very happy Suhasini that you with your fifth point, the- the great importance of domestic politics the domestic scene for foreign policy and I think you made a reference in passing to India's soft power suggesting that soft power has at times in the past certainly been considerable.

Hasn't India's soft power really completely gone for a burden now, given what is happening domestically, given the extent or the implications of majoritarianism the sort of treatment that is being- been mated out to- to minorities which has attracted in increasing attention. I mean I- I- I wish I could be more feel more positive about the possibilities for India exercising soft power, I mean what is your view on this?

Suhasini Haidar:

Well, it's certainly an area of concern but I- I- I wouldn't completely rule out the idea that India has within it, the capacity and the power to shift back to a center every time you see it push out to one extreme or the other. There is no question that the- the kind of majoritarian forces we have seen unleashed in the country over the past eight years, who have obviously been encouraged by the kind of leadership and the kind of election results that the ruling party has seen is a cause for concern, but we find that you know in an entire interconnected world there are so many areas of pushback.

There are not just the institutions within the country that should be pushing back that aren't always doing their job, but they do they do push back in a certain sense. But I think what's happened in the last few years, and I deal with it really from a foreign policy point is that people are seeing that everything is a two-way street in an increasingly interconnected world it is not possible for you to say my problems within my country stay within my country, but I can have an opinion about every other country around me.

It is not possible in the last few years, we have seen for example prime minister Modi really playing up the value of the diaspora the Indian diaspora and by that I mean non-Indian people of Indian origin around the world without facing a pushback of their own from the that very community.

After all, the pushback to the citizenship amendment came from Indians and different capitals of the world. The push back to the agricultural bill, obviously there were a lot of protests within India and those were there for everyone to see, the kind of pushback the government faced. And- and we saw that again it was the international diaspora that really pitched it.

I'm sure in Canada it became an extremely controversial thing and of course there are many here who think they've had the last laugh after seeing Mr. Trudeau deal with his truckers after telling India to be kinder, but the point is that it cuts both ways and the same is true of Mr. Trudeau's remarks that it always cuts both ways. In a more interconnected world, it is not possible to say that my problems are mine alone. So what I'm trying to say is that there has been pushback on the citizenship amendment act, and not many might know that while the act was passed in parliament, it became a law.

In December of 2019, we actually have not seen it being implemented yet it has not you know, three years later the rules for it have not been framed by the government and while they give one excuse or another once it was because of corona sometimes it's because of something else, the fact remains that they have not yet been able to implement it. The agricultural bill the government actually had to move backwards on.

Now when it comes to the treatment of minorities and obviously this is going to be an- an outstanding concern really particularly for this government and particularly for Mr. Modi, who has faced this for most of his political career given the Gujarat riots of 2002 in which he was in many ways held responsible and then he lost his visa to the United States- there was a visa ban on him for ten years so the fact is that there is always going to be that question, but the fact that there is that question is to my mind the reason to that there will always be a pushback.

People will always come in with new ideas to try and say no, no we got it wrong in the past, this is really the way populism works on that principle. Populism works on the principle of an anti-elite, anti-minority, anti-globalization, anti-migration kind of structure and it's not just India that has seen it so many countries around the world elected populist governments over the last decade. So I think that the fact remains that we have to keep hoping, and that there will be a push back and that there will be a world, that there will be an ideal world if you like that people will look towards. They might not accomplish it; we're all flawed democracies-

John Harriss:

I'm so sorry to interrupt you but I I'm very, very conscious of time whizzing at whizzing past and there are other questions, and I should give some time to- to them. One question again from Gopika Solanki... I think this is a question which any one of you might like to address: "how do we see India's relationship with Myanmar/Burma in the context of relationships with its neighborhood". I don't know Rohan whether you have any thoughts on that one-

Rohan Samarajiva:

Yes! When one says south Asia, one tends not to include Burma but, one has to. I mean it's a- it's a country with the land border with India, and interestingly the- you have the phenomenon of Vim-stick, which is I think so I talked about Sark being moth-balled. I sometimes think it should be moth-balled, but the- the- the pity is that the alternative, which was sort of there for the taking, which was around the Bay of Bengal, which was historically a dynamic region which had a certain integrity, the- this of the Chola Sea.

Not the Bay of Bengal in the old days, so Bimstec was there, and if you look at sort of my interest and the idea of sort of connectivity, infrastructure connectivity, economic activity being integrated that then leading to more political benefits, that old iron and gold, steel community leading to the European Union story, which it has got its weaknesses I know I'm not- I'm not going to say that is a model that will work in all places at all times but, it's as a sign of hope as a as a trajectory.

So if one could argue that that is more realistic around Bay of Bengal, where which was a very dynamic trading community, lots of movement during colonial times across the waters, but then it all went cold after the second world war and independence in fact. So the question of Integrating Myanmar into this conversation, into the newly developing dynamics in the in the Bay of Bengal region now have become of course problematic because of the military coup but then my reading of it is that military coup probably is not sustainable, and Myanmar will have to come back into the committee of nations.

They can't be in this limbo for- for too long. So if you look at it that way, then you have I would have come up with more examples about the canal project where basically Burmese support would be used to through a canal to supply the seven sisters and so on. So, that whole interdependency argument which I was developing could be developed in regard to- to Myanmar as well.

John Harriss:

Thank you, that's a very, very in the connect the sort of comparison with the European island steel communities- very interesting one. We're getting very close to the end of our time, so I think rather than I mean actually Rohan's answer just now has and in a sense anticipated one of the questions which is there: "how do you view India in 2047 with respect to Sark, Bimstek and lora?", that's a question which I think Rohan has now partly addressed.

There are other questions still standing as well: "is India's foreign policy to different neighbors decided by its domestic North-South divide? How do different state interests come into- into determining India's foreign policy?", but I don't think we've really got time now to address that- that question. I'd really just like to ask each of our speakers for a- for perhaps- for a final- a final reflection a final word in the light of the discussions that we- that we've had and the questions that have been asked. So perhaps may I come back Kanti and ask you for a- for a last word, I- I- I it's lovely to see that you're still there and I hope you're feeling better.

Kanti Bajpai:

Yeah somewhat yeah thank you, no I mean I just really enjoyed the discussion and Suhasini, and Rohan's interventions my PhD was on Sark actually, the one the thing that everybody wants to moth-ball and so I guess I- I don't see that much of a possibility and I think these more sectoral ones, India with two or three Sark members and so on is really the way to develop and I think the government's doing that.

Just a quick word on the foreign service, I think so actually mentioned Singapore- Singapore only has 35 embassies, so those seven or 800 officers are distributed over, whereas we have about 150 of them so we're very, very short changed them and in terms of capacity in the embassies out there except for the very big ones, but the overall sense I have of the discussion- last point is that 1947 is quite a long time ago, but clearly they're going to be some very enduring challenges that we are seeing even now that will be on the table in in 2047 and I really thank Rohan and Suhasini for tabling those. I think they're really pretty monumental and important so thanks very much for having me.

John Harriss:

Thank you, thank you very much Kanti. Suhasini.

Suhasini Haidar:

Professor Harris you began in the right at the start by saying the fact India's voice was not so well known in the past few decades, and in the last few years you've heard it becoming much, much more robust and the external offense minister Esther Shankar speaking about India now being able to say it wants to be a leading power.

But the truth is, and I do beg to defer from you that India has always punched above its weight because if you were to look at a country that has the kind of demographic challenges that India has, that has the economic, that has the poverty which is of course part of the legacy from our colonial past, that with all of these challenges India has actually had a voice much larger than perhaps another country with all of these challenges would have had, and that's where I think 2047 will really be an area- I said this earlier, where you have to decide can India seek that high table without being a representative of its entire region, without being someone who sees its neighborhood as a force multiplier rather than right now, kind of the ball and chains around India that they see a lot of the neighborhood.

Can India choose between, can India sit at the high table and basically raise its own voice and say here's what I demand here's what I need, or does it need to continue to be in a sense seen as the voice of the voiceless around the world- the global south, which has held India in good stead, and I can tell you that in terms of goodwill around the world we might scoff at the ideas of non-alignment and or India's old foreign policy shibboleths.

They in fact- the foreign minister often calls them the shibboleths of the past the truth is that there is no country in the world where you can go where you don't feel an immediate goodwill for India because of that past, because of this idea that India stood as a kind of voice for the voiceless, a middle power that actually took so many other countries interests along with its own. So I know a lot of this sounds idealistic, and we live in the world of real policy, but I think the ideas of the future the ideas of India at a hundred years must be seen from the prism of some amount of idealism. If we are to engage otherwise everything is simply transactional.

John Harriss:

Thank you very much for a very nicely delivered stinging rebuttal of my- of my initial remarks. That's lovely and thank you so much Suhasini for- for participating in- in our event today, it's really been wonderful listening to you. Thank you so much. And I turn at last for- for the last word to Rohan.

Rohan Samarajiva:

let me say a couple of things about soft power. I think it's- it's far too early to write off India's soft power. I mean there are no great beacons of democracy, secularism, there are no good guys in the left in the world. Some people think they are good guys but they're not, even- even the nice nation of Canada has got burial yards in native people schools, I mean everybody's got problems right, nobody's perfect. So when Narendra Modi comes and talks to us about Buddhism and the- the- the values of Buddhism and how much he values Buddhism you almost feel like wow, and the Chinese also trying to own Buddhism as a cultural trope.

I mean it still goes on and remember this is not about just statesmen it's about and it's about [indiscernible], it's about cricket, and it's about you know it's- it's a whole lot of things that knit this place together because one of my favorite stories is about- I mean even though little Sri Lanka is I mean we are tiny but we are still in the first five of countries sending tourists into India. Why?

Because we sent so many pilgrims to India right, so it shouldn't be that for such a large country that we should be in the top five right? But we are. But that's the way it is in this- in these parts, so I think it's far too easy to- to- too soon to write those off. I think in terms of the future, not the immediate present but if in terms of the future we have these two trajectories.

I don't think there are straight line extrapolations work, I mean I would disagree with some of Kanti's comments because I think there is still too much straight line there aren't these quantitative jumps discontinuities in the analysis with regard to the economy and so on where

it's possible that China's economy will come down, or it cannot keep growing in that same way and India's could flower. Those are possibilities.

So given that- and I think I- I agree with so it's this whole idea how can India be a great power without having a consolation of supportive states, a region that is basically in sync and whether that region should include Pakistan, I think not, I think let's cut the red, put the red cut line and say that's that and then let's move on to the other things. So the Bay of Bengal I think is a very interesting artefact and more closer relationships with southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and so on. I think these are all possibilities.

So if you look at that trajectory, then my argument about infrastructure connectivity becoming central to the to the entire relationship. What do I want India to do? Just move a little faster, because you get a sense of things great ideas but very slow movement so if we can have a little bit more energy from the Indian side I think a lot of these things will get straightened out. Thank you.

John Harriss:

Thank you, Thank you very much, it's very interesting last reflections. So fine I must draw the our discussion to a close. So, for one last time thank you very, very much thank you Kanti, and thank you Rohan for such a very interesting set of presentations. Thank you all and now have a good rest of the evening or a good day wherever you are in the world. Thank you very much indeed.

Suhasini Haidar:

Thank you.

John Harriss:

Lovely.

[End of Transcript]