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The Taliban Takeover: Implications For South Asia

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A Message from the Director

PROFESSOR C RAJA MOHAN

Greetings from the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)!

As another year comes to an end, the world continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Singapore, though we continued to work from home, our researchers have kept abreast of important issues across South Asia.

A key development in the second half of 2021 was the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban. This has brought with it numerous challenges for the neighbouring states, including militant Islamism, emphasising the need to address ideological aspects alongside humanitarian needs. The feature story in this newsletter looks at the implications of the Taliban takeover for South Asia.

The creation of new infrastructure facilities and maintenance of the existing ones is important for the success of all developing countries. In this issue of the newsletter, we explore India's economic and infrastructure priorities, with focus on the recently announced National Monetisation Pipeline (NIP). Among others, it examines the nature and characteristics as well as strategies for the NIP programme under the Narendra Modi government.

India's neighbour, Bangladesh, is set to graduate from the United Nations (UN) list of Least Developed Countries by 2026 and this is likely to bring some fundamental economic changes with it. We recommend that Dhaka should adopt a smooth graduation transition strategy that includes a sequential free trade agreement with a domestic trade policy reform

approach to minimise potential disruptions in the long run.

Small nations are increasingly vulnerable to climate change, and the case of an island state like Sri Lanka is no different. The Gotabaya Rajapaksa government's decision to lift the ban on chemical fertilisers just days after choosing to implement organic farming illustrates that the failure of proper policy planning on environmental protection and climate change will affect Sri Lanka's economy and larger society.

The announcement of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (US) trilateral security partnership (AUKUS) is a momentous diplomatic and military development in the Indo-Pacific region. In the battle between the US and China, we contend that AUKUS will have considerable geopolitical ramifications for South and Southeast Asia.

As part of our engagements with organisations pertinent to the region, we collaborated with the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Confederation of Indian Industry as well as the Energy Studies Institute and Middle East Institute in NUS, among others. We examined such issues as Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign policy issues, Pakistan's digital transformation, challenges to energy security in Afghanistan and the emerging regional security architecture in the Andaman Sea.

We had a robust publications output in the second half of the year that addressed the latest developments in the subcontinent. Amongst these were four Special Reports, three South Asia Scans and one set

of South Asia Discussion Papers focusing on a diverse range of subjects such as the *AatmaNirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) campaign, Nepal's contributions to UN Peacekeeping, the military coup in Myanmar and Europe's role in the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. In 'The Bookshelf' segment, we continued to examine important books on contemporary South Asia through video interviews and written reviews while our podcasts provided quick analyses of recent events in the subcontinent. We have also expanded our social media presence by launching an Instagram account.

ISAS has recently witnessed some important administrative changes. In August 2021, Professor Tan Tai Yong took over as Chairman while outgoing Chairman, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, has been appointed Senior Advisor. Also, my directorship at ISAS ends in December 2021 and Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea takes over at the start of the new year. It has been a privilege for me to introduce several new initiatives at ISAS and develop a policy-relevant research agenda. I am confident that Dr Sevea will take ISAS to greater heights in the coming years.

We at ISAS are grateful for the support of all stakeholders in our endeavour to track the changing geopolitical landscape in the subcontinent. Do follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram to keep up with the latest happenings at the Institute. You can also find live streams of our public events on the ISAS Facebook page.

Wishing you a happy 2022!

The Taliban Takeover: Implications for South Asia

IMRAN AHMED



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The end of the American occupation of Afghanistan brought with it confusion and crises. Washington's commitment towards the withdrawal, reconfirmed in mid-April 2021, saw the war between the Afghan government and the Taliban escalate, with civilians in the country paying the highest price in the conflict. As offensives around some of the most populous and urbanised areas of Afghanistan intensified, including Herat, Kandahar and Lashkar Gah,

international observers and rights groups witnessed the unfolding of a dire humanitarian situation with mass civilian casualties. The World Health Organization noted a severe shortage in health services for those attempting exodus who were displaced because of the conflict, while the United Nations (UN) Security Council continued to raise concerns over human rights abuses and violations, instances of terrorism, deliberate targeted attacks against civilians and the

destruction of civilian homes and critical infrastructure, including hospitals. The war had ravaged Afghanistan.

The Joe Biden administration's emphasis on the Afghan army's superior arms, numerical strength, comprehensive training and technological advantages proved to be a decisive miscalculation in the equation of the civil war. The dramatic collapse of the Afghan forces showcased leadership

failures, corruption and nepotism within the Afghan state confirming that it was the United States (US) and international support that ultimately held the republic together. The Afghan state's failure in nation building, commanding the loyalty of its population and fostering a synergy with Afghan society also became very clear. The Taliban are not, however, a popular movement. Their infamous austere, eccentric and intolerant interpretation of Islam, coupled with a totalitarian outlook, pose an existential threat to political opponents, women and religious minorities, including Shiite Hazaras and non-Muslims. Their Pashtun base affronts other ethnic groups, and their harsh and peculiar interpretation of the *sharia* militates against the historical traditions of Islamic law in the region. Moreover, centralised rule is difficult in Afghanistan where historically regional autonomy is deeply important.

The swift and decisive fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 surprised even the most seasoned experts on Afghanistan. This perhaps surprised the Taliban as well, who scrambled to assemble an interim government, revealing fissures and divisions within as they attempted to balance pragmatism with ideological coherence. The interim cabinet did not accommodate political opponents, religious minorities or women. It was inclusive insofar as it accommodated various factions of the movement itself. As hardliners filled top positions, there was no evidence to suggest that the Taliban had broken links with al-Qaeda and other terror groups that target Western nations and their allies. The announcement of a new Taliban government then did little to soothe the international anxieties about Afghanistan, as the country plunged into economic crisis, while its people faced starvation and despair of catastrophic proportions. These developments posed difficult moral and political conundrums for the

international community. Just how to work with the Taliban without affording them political clout remains a point of ongoing contention, and who should represent Afghanistan at the UN appears to be a difficult question to answer. The UN deferred its decision on the Taliban's nominee for the ambassadorship, Suhail Shaheen. Mapping a legal space to assist Afghanistan without violating international law is now the subject of intense diplomatic debate, with the US and China clashing on a recent resolution designed to allow humanitarian relief without breaching sanctions.

The Taliban victory also poses numerous challenges for neighbouring states. Afghanistan is an important link in the mega energy projects between South and Central Asia which promise benefits to the economies and people across both regions. However, instability in Afghanistan hampers regional energy cooperation. The complex array of interconnected political, economic, security and humanitarian crises render the settlement of core issues difficult to resolve. While the Taliban have signalled an eagerness for international business engagement, the optics, ethics and risks of working or doing business with the group is problematic. No state has recognised the Taliban – not even Pakistan. Pakistan has served as an interlocuter between the Taliban and various parties in diplomatic talks and provided covert support for the Taliban's insurgency as well as public relations support for the Taliban's image makeover. Prime Minister Imran Khan, for instance, attempted to soften the belligerent image of the Taliban and framed them as liberators who were freeing Afghans from the "shackles of slavery". But a strong, independent and assertive Taliban pose a threat to Pakistan, especially if they choose to support or ally with Pakistan's enemies (particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan). A weak Taliban unable

to deliver on Islamabad's interests is also a liability, especially if they are incapable of reigning in other radical groups and risk the Taliban's members defecting to rival anti-Pakistan outfits in Afghanistan. This is a fragile balance for Pakistan to manage.

Moreover, the fall of Kabul brings home important lessons concerning militant Islamism that such movements are patient, resilient and elude control. For Pakistan, the Taliban present strategic and diplomatic opportunities as well as domestic concerns that such groups cannot be contained and that a blowback of religious conflict, Islamist militancy and sectarianism in Pakistan is the eventual outcome of nurturing militants.

The Taliban takeover raised the importance of Pakistan as the go-between and, though it is still early days, it is likely to have emboldened militant Islamist organisations to take on the Pakistani state or other South Asian states, particularly India. It must also be noted that defeats in the battlefield are often insufficient in themselves to suppress the ideological element of radical Islamism and its regrowth following periods of dormancy or state suppression. The ideological aspect must be addressed as a component and tactic of counter-terrorism measures in the South Asian states.

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AUKUS and Implications for South and Southeast Asia

YOGESH JOSHI

The announcement of the Australia-United-Kingdom (UK)-United States (US) trilateral security partnership called AUKUS is perhaps the most stunning diplomatic and military development in the Indo-Pacific in the last decade. Although Washington's provision of nuclear submarines to Canberra was the most debated aspect of the AUKUS, the partnership is much more than that. AUKUS is a comprehensive strategic pact among three Anglo-Saxon allies in the region, potentially covering the sharing of a swath of security and defence-related sciences and technologies as well as industrial bases and supply chains. Not without reason, therefore, *The Economist* has called the deal the "most important geopolitical shift" in the Indo-Pacific. Singapore's former diplomat and former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bilahari Kausikan, has termed it a "seismic shift in the post-Cold war period." AUKUS not only has tremendous significance for the unfolding great power rivalry between the US and China but it also impacts the strategy and calculation of all other actors in the Indo-Pacific, particularly those in South and Southeast Asia.

AUKUS has raised heckles among the Southeast Asian countries. First, as nuclear submarines become the primary weapon of choice in the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia will be their immediate area of operations. China's aggressive naval and fishing operations in the South China Sea have already threatened their

maritime interests. Aggressive naval balancing by the Quad countries will increase the risks of accidental and inadvertent escalation, resulting in further loss of sovereign decision-making.

Second, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) relatively muted response to Chinese aggression and its disunity in facing Chinese power has created rifts among the Southeast Asian states. ASEAN has criticised the Quad's earlier attempts to establish a direct dialogue with other ASEAN countries such as Vietnam. Even AUKUS has elicited mixed responses from the region: while Malaysia and Indonesia have criticised the deal, Vietnam and the Philippines have been relatively more welcoming in their approach. As the US-China rivalry heats up, ASEAN faces serious internal divisions.

Lastly, new and expanding security institutions like the AUKUS and the Quad reduce the reliance and importance of ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, in managing the region's economic and security landscape. ASEAN's centrality, which all major powers often echo, is increasingly becoming the collateral damage of the Sino-US rivalry. In some sense, AUKUS is the most recent yet the most emphatic signal of growing skepticism among many Indo-Pacific countries on ASEAN's effectiveness or intentions to counter China's assertiveness in the region. As ASEAN's institutionalism has failed, the balance of power

approach is the only recourse available to the US, its allies and partners.

As far as South Asia is concerned, New Delhi – even when it has not made any official comments on AUKUS – must feel relieved for three reasons. AUKUS is a statement of purpose of the US' intent to safeguard its primacy in the region; New Delhi can, therefore, continue to bank on its significant alignment with Washington to take care of its China problem. In short, President Joe Biden has reaffirmed the US' intent to challenge China's rise, which complicates matters for Beijing but reassures New Delhi of constant American help in the military and diplomatic balancing of China. Second, even when the US has been reluctant to offer India nuclear propulsion technology, AUKUS signifies that Washington is now ready to give up its decade-old insistence on non-proliferation to help its allies and partners. It also translates into a long-term possibility of India obtaining more complex military technology from the US – and, at the very least, the mere gesture of US assistance will help it get better bargains from both Russia and France. Lastly, Australia's augmented capabilities will help India's cause in the Indian Ocean. Friendly naval assets in the Indian Ocean will only complicate China's maritime rise.

From a strict balance of arms perspective, the best case for India would be for the People's Liberation Army (Navy) to get



Photo courtesy of [www.flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/) (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith)

bogged down against American, Japanese and Australian naval assets in Northeast and Southeast Asia, thus relieving pressure on India in the Indian Ocean and allowing India to regain its maritime supremacy there. The underside for India could be a relative decrease in the Quad's military importance if it is relegated to shoulder the burden of non-traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS may come to represent a security core with the Quad. However, this might be compensated by bilateral security relationships among the Quad countries. In the last four years, the Quad's resurgence has been phenomenal. The Malabar series of naval exercises are back in operation, with significant developments on logistical

support, intelligence sharing and interoperability between the navies of the Quad countries. The Quad's militarisation is a work in progress, and its future trajectory will be highly contingent upon China's behaviour.

With AUKUS, the US has employed its significant advantage in arms and allies over China to maintain its primacy in the Indo-Pacific.

This battle of the giants does not augur well for the smaller states in Southeast Asia, who for long have practised a hedging strategy and have benefitted from the benign competition between the US and China. As this competition turns hot, the Southeast Asian countries will be forced to choose sides. Moreover, institutions like ASEAN will lose their

relevance. South Asia, dominated by India, observes AUKUS with great relief. All US attempts to hem China's ascendance automatically help India by diverting China's attention and engaging China's military power. AUKUS has varied consequences for actors in the Indo-Pacific region.

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India's Economic and Infrastructure Priorities

AMITENDU PALIT

The creation of new infrastructure facilities and maintaining existing ones are important priorities for all economies. The priority becomes particularly critical for a large emerging market like India. A country like India – given its large geographic size and more than a billion population – needs to continuously pursue the task of building new infrastructure while taking care to ensure that existing infrastructure services remain functional and at optimum capacities.

Apart from expanding public services for the large population, infrastructure becomes a virtuous force multiplier for generating jobs and income. Investments in infrastructure, particularly public investments, generate new jobs, thereby creating new incomes and making a positive impact on its gross domestic product growth rate. Studies on the economic impact of infrastructure in India advance this argument powerfully.

Poor infrastructure has been one of the biggest supply side

problems in India. It affects industrial and business productivity by increasing production costs and making local producers uncompetitive in the global market. It is, therefore, intuitive that bridging the infrastructure deficit will greatly improve industrial and manufacturing prospects, which would, in turn, make India an attractive destination for industrial investments.

Successive governments in India have prioritised the development of infrastructure across a wide range of



Photo courtesy of the Facebook page of NITI Aayog

sectors. These include roads, ports, shipping, railways, civil aviation, electricity, telecommunications, data service provisions, urban infrastructure, sanitation and drinking water facilities. The current government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also continued this emphasis through the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP).

First articulated by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Union Budget for fiscal year 2020, the final report of the NIP was released on 29 April 2020. The initiative was formally launched in August 2020 as India's latest comprehensive and overarching push to build world-class infrastructure in the country. The NIP comprises more than 9,000 projects (both greenfield and brownfield) with an aggregate value of almost US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.05 billion). It is a comprehensive register of upcoming and existing infrastructure projects in the country, whose simultaneous development and upgrading are to be the goals to make India's infrastructure top-class, modern and resilient. Specific government committees are monitoring the progress of projects under the NIP and are looking into the challenging prospect of raising resources for them.

An important aspect of the NIP is its evolving character. It will keep on including projects as and when they come up, and projects, once implemented, will drop out of the registry. The emphasis on simultaneity and the understanding that infrastructure development in India is a comprehensive process that needs to be taken forward with the involvement of multiple ministries and departments is a novel approach. In this respect, this could be defined as a first-of-its-kind initiative.

A critical issue in the successful implementation of the NIP is the government's ability in mobilising finances. In this respect, again, the

NIP has been different in making the private sector an important stakeholder in the exercise. The funding of various projects in the NIP are to be shared between the central government (39 per cent), state governments (40 per cent) and the private sector (21 per cent). The sharing among the three stakeholders is to be organised through three specific strategies: creating an institutional structure for mobilising project financing; increasing the share of capital expenditure in central and state budgets; and monetising infrastructure assets.

The first of the three strategies mentioned above involve establishing a development finance institution. This is proposed to be achieved through the establishment of a National Bank for Financing Infrastructure Development. The second strategy would require the allotment of greater resources by the central and state governments to capital expenditures in their respective budgets. The latest Union Budget envisaged a more than 30 per cent step-up in annual capital expenditure in this regard.

The most interesting announcement on infrastructure financing has come through the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP). The NMP identifies a list of existing brownfield infrastructure assets that the central government intends to monetise. It expects to do so by inviting the private sector through established concession agreements that function on the Build-Own-Operate basis. For these assets, the ownership will continue to be with the government. The private operator will run and maintain the assets for a specified number of years before handing them over to the government.

The purported innovation in the NMP is to engage private enterprises to run public infrastructure assets that currently provide a variety of services to people. These are in

roads, railways, telecom, oil and gas, electricity and many others. By being in an operational state, the assets can yield and generate revenues, particularly if they are brought to the public with greater efficiency.

It is interesting that as far as the running of the NMP is concerned, the central government has not ventured into the option of outright disinvestment or sale of government assets. The latter is expected to acquire a wide-ranging character in the foreseeable future. This is evident from the government making it clear that it will limit its exclusive ownership of state-owned undertakings to a well-defined strategic list, comprising enterprises across sectors that are sensitive and are of high national interest. However, the subject and plan of disinvestment have been kept separate from that of the NMP.

The success of the NMP in implementing its projects will be known in the course of time. What is important, however, is to note that the imperative of creating a vast range of new infrastructure assets, and making the existing ones more productive and efficient, has made the Indian government think 'out of the box'. If the thinking succeeds in encouraging the private sector to become a prominent part of infrastructure development in India, then there might be much for other infrastructure-deficit emerging markets to learn.

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Sri Lanka's Climate Vulnerability: Need to Walk the Talk

CHULANEE ATTANAYAKE



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

In May 2021, as part of its ambitious plan to become the world's first organic farming country, Sri Lanka announced a complete ban on the import of chemical fertilisers. Though this led to widespread protests from the farming community during the Global Climate Summit on 1 November 2021, Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa defended his decision to restrict the import of chemical fertilisers, while emphasising that this would create opportunities for innovation and

investment in organic agriculture. However, the government revoked the ban on 24 November 2021. Agriculture Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage explained that while the ban was partially lifted and that the private sector could import chemical fertilisers, weedicides and pesticides, the government would continue to promote green farming.

After the government's overnight imposition of the ban on the import of chemical fertilisers, farmers

and activists raised concerns over the country's overall agricultural production and food security. As was rightly predicted, agricultural output drastically declined in the past few months, leading to challenges for food security in the country. This is an example of how the failure of proper policy planning on environmental protection and climate change could have both economic and social ramifications.

Sri Lanka's Climate Change Risk

With its rich biodiversity and diverse natural environments, Sri Lanka is a beautiful destination point. Yet, it is also among the most vulnerable to climate change. According to the Asian Development Bank, Sri Lanka's temperature rise is projected to be marginally lower than the global average. However, the rise in minimum temperatures is projected to be faster than the rise in average temperatures. It is thus predicted that Sri Lanka will be threatened by extreme heat; the number of days surpassing 35°C might rise from a baseline of 20 days to more than 100 days by the 2090s. The Global Climate Risk Index ranked Sri Lanka at 30th in 2019 among the countries that suffered most from extreme weather events, and, in 2017, it was the second-worst hit country from climate-related calamities. Flash floods and prolonged droughts are much higher and more frequent in Sri Lanka than in other countries. For instance, heavy rains, landslides and floods in May 2017 displaced over 600,000 people and resulted in 246 deaths. Heat stress due to temperature increases and extreme rainfall anomalies expose the island to extreme conditions that put it at high risk. Such climate events threaten health and living standards, particularly for agriculture and outdoor labourers in urban areas. These changes are expected to affect food security, as mentioned, as well as important economic sectors like tourism, commercial agriculture and manufacturing.

According to available research, Sri Lanka's average annual loss from natural disasters between 1998 and 2012 was US\$380 million (S\$520.63 million), with losses due to floods, landslides, droughts and storms accounting for 74 per cent of the losses. The upsurge in temperature and rainfall patterns have severely affected the agriculture industry. Against this backdrop, addressing climate change has been a priority for every Sri Lankan government.

The Promise of Climate Change Adaptation

Over the years, successive Sri Lankan governments have taken measures to mitigate the climate risk and adapt. Amidst rising concerns about global climate change impact, 12 policy documents were released between 1992 and 2017 to address climate change-related challenges. These included the National Environmental Action Plan, National Environment Policy in 2003 and the Capacity Assessment and Action Plan for Developing Capacity for Compliance with Global Conventions on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Land Degradation in 2007. In March 2008, the Sri Lanka Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment established the Climate Change Secretariat. These policies and initiatives were expected to implement coordinated intergovernmental programmes with limited financial and technical capacities to address climate adaptation and mitigation.

These measures were expected to accelerate under Gotabaya, who carried out the first-ever 'Zero Carbon Presidential Election Campaign' in Sri Lanka's history. His election campaign emphasised a sustainable environmental policy to ensure environmental conservation and implementing balanced social and economic practices towards sustainable development. Following up on his promises in May 2021, a 46-member Presidential Task Force on 'Creating a Green Sri Lanka with Sustainable Solutions to Climate Change' was appointed to prepare a roadmap for the complete transition from chemical farming to organic farming using organic fertiliser products instead of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. Furthermore, his government imposed overnight restrictions and banned the import of fertilisers and agrochemicals, including insecticides and herbicides, while promoting organic agriculture.

Most recently, during the United Nations Climate Conference in Glasgow (COP26), Gotabaya made ambitious promises to reduce carbon emissions and move towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, while increasing carbon sequestration capacity by seven per cent by 2030. While talking of co-leading the 'Global Energy Compact for No New Coal Power', he further pledged to increase the contribution of renewable energy sources to 70 per cent of national energy needs by 2030 and to take steps to phase out the use of fossil fuels.

However, the question is whether Sri Lanka can actually walk the talk. Despite his promise to protect the country's forest cover, Gotabaya has transferred non-protected forests, known as other state forests, to regional authorities to release them for agriculture and development. Environmental activists have heavily criticised the move as it will encourage unregulated logging in high biodiversity areas. They also criticised the government's decision to impose overnight restrictions on agrochemicals without considering larger consequences.

Thus, if Sri Lanka follows the promises made during the COP26, it will require not just gestures and a policy document. The government should invest in research and development regarding climate adaptation and mitigation activities. As promised in the election manifesto, environmental education should be prioritised at school and higher education levels. Most importantly, the government and institutions should commit to following the action plan to achieve its climate adaptation target and create a sustainable society.

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Changing Trade Winds: Bangladesh Pushes for FTAs

MOHAMMAD MASUDUR RAHMAN



Photo courtesy of the Facebook page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan

Bangladesh has made significant progress in its export-led growth and has been a frontrunner in South Asia, with a steady average economic growth rate of about 6.5 per cent over the last decade. It is set to graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) category by 2026. The country aims to become an upper middle-income country by 2031 and a developed nation by 2041. Given the impending graduation, Bangladesh should have a smooth graduation transition strategy in place so that potential

disruptions from graduation are minimised and its long-term goals are realised.

Graduating from an LDC status means Bangladesh will lose preferential market access and preferential rules of origin in the most developed and developing markets. The country will face stricter competition for market access with Vietnam, India, Indonesia, China and several others, as these countries have free trade agreements (FTAs) with many developed countries.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh is actively exploring its FTA options. An FTA not only removes trade barriers but also builds greater confidence and transparency among the partner states and reflects a positive image globally to attract foreign direct investment.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh's average trade-to-gross domestic product ratio has been about 35 per cent, which shows that the country is deeply integrated with the global economy. Following an export boom

in the last 10 years, Bangladesh's total trade in goods and services increased from US\$20 billion (S\$26.9 billion) in 2000 to US\$110 billion (S\$148 billion) in the 2021 fiscal year – a growth of over five times in 20 years. Notwithstanding this, the level of Bangladesh's trade is much lower than some other emerging economies such as Vietnam, India and China, suggesting that an enormous part of Bangladesh's trade potential is largely unrealised.

Some of the key constraints that Bangladesh faces in realising its trade potential include high trade costs induced by relatively high tariffs and non-tariff measures (NTMs) as well as other trade restrictions such as very limited trade facilitation. The average trade-weighted tariff applied by Bangladesh has decreased moderately from 24 per cent in 2000 to nine per cent in 2020. Import duty is still a major source of fiscal revenue, but the elimination of tariffs could have a larger benefit to its economy and outweigh this temporary revenue loss. Tariff elimination is expected to boost the country's industrial productivity, lower production costs and make the Bangladesh economy globally competitive. In addition, Bangladesh imposes a range of different para tariffs and NTMs, as shown in the Bangladesh Import Policy Order. The average *ad valorem* tariff equivalent of NTMs is about 200 per cent of Bangladesh imports. Limited trade facilitation is a major concern for Bangladesh. Out of 56 trade facilitation implementation programmes of the World Trade Organization, only 50 per cent are fully implemented currently.

Given these constraints and the impending graduation, Bangladesh has to ensure its market access either under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) plus to the European Union (EU) market or by signing a preferential

or free trade agreement with the EU and other leading trading partners. Bangladesh has benefitted significantly from the EU preferential treatment over the decades, even in the post-Multi Fiber Agreement era. Bangladesh's exports to the EU amounted to US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.02 billion) in 2001, which increased to US\$26 billion (S\$35 billion) in 2019. The utilisation rate of the GSP in the EU market is about 96 per cent, which indicates that Bangladesh has been very successful in exporting its garment products there. However, this also suggests that Bangladesh is highly dependent on the EU's GSP, and any preference erosion will have a tremendous negative impact on Bangladesh exports to the EU. However, the EU and the United Kingdom have extended the Everything But Arms arrangement for an additional three years after graduation.

Hence, to offset the challenges of graduation, Bangladesh should have a comprehensive smooth transition strategy. The country should try to ensure its continued access to the EU market, a key export destination of Bangladesh. The GSP plus could be an option to ensure market access in the EU.

Different preferential arrangements or FTAs with the East Asian countries will play a key role in integrating Bangladesh into the East Asian supply chain. Currently, Bangladesh does not have any bilateral FTAs. It has signed two regional trade deals: the South Asia Free Trade Agreement and the Asia Pacific Trade Agreement. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation FTA is still under negotiation. Recently, the country signed a Preferential Trade Agreement with Bhutan. An FTA negotiation with Nepal is also in the final stages. However, talks with Turkey have been stuck for quite some time. Presently, Bangladesh is also actively considering FTAs with Malaysia, Thailand and India.

A sequential FTA strategy with domestic trade policy reform is critical for its long-term market access plan. The FTA strategy should be integrated into the national policy agenda, especially in the Fifth Five-Year Plan and the long-term Perspective Plan. Bangladesh should develop a dedicated FTA negotiation team that could lead the FTA negotiations over the years. Coordination among different ministries and departments plays a vital role in bringing all stakeholders onto the same page when differing views are prominent among different stakeholders.

Aside from these measures, the country needs to play an active role in the WTO to ensure preferential treatment, including intellectual property rights, after graduation. Bangladesh should submit a solid proposal on challenges which graduating LDCs face in their smooth graduation and play an active role in the upcoming 12th WTO's Ministerial Conference (MC12) in Geneva and the Fifth United Nations Conference on LDCs in January 2022.

Dr Mohammad Masudur Rahman is a Visiting Research Fellow at ISAS. He can be contacted at isasmr@nus.edu.sg.

An Interview with ISAS' New Chairman, Professor Tan Tai Yong

JOHN VATER

Professor Tan Tai Yong took over as Chairman of the Management Board at ISAS in August 2021 from Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, who stepped down after serving as Chairman since the Institute's inception in July 2004. Professor Tan was also the first Director at ISAS alongside being appointed as a member of the Management Board in August 2004 and then as Deputy Chairman in August 2018.

Mr Vater caught up with the new ISAS Chairman for his views and perspectives on the Institute as well as his plans to further ISAS' reputation and brand name.

1. When ISAS was founded in 2004, you were its first Acting Director. How did you become involved with ISAS? How has the Institute progressed over the last 18 years? And how has your experience been?

Professor Tan: I was approached by Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, who was tasked to set up the Institute as the inaugural Chairman of the Management Board in 2003/04. I was then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and he asked if I could assist him in getting the Institute started. Given my own academic interests, I welcomed the idea of a research institute that would be dedicated to the study of South Asia and agreed to assist him in the endeavour.

However, as I was already quite busy being the dean of a large faculty, I told him that I would do this for six months, to help him get the Institute off the ground; thereafter, the Institute should be able to find a full-time Director and hire the necessary staff. But, as things turned out, the initial six-month commitment turned into a long-term association, and I never

left ISAS. I have since taken on various positions – Acting Director, Director, Management Board member, Deputy Chairman and now Chairman.

The Institute started in a small corner of the Business School at NUS in 2004 with only two persons – an Acting Director (me) and a Senior Administrator (Mr Hernaikh Singh, who is now Deputy Director). It has made tremendous strides since then. It is now a full-fledged research institute with a strong international reputation for its studies on South Asia.

2. You assumed the chairmanship of ISAS in August 2021. What are some of your plans and directions for the Institute?

Professor Tan: ISAS has been on a good trajectory and has established itself as a highly respected organisation. I hope it will continue to build on its many strengths and persist with rigorous and relevant research. ISAS' reputation has been built on the quality of its research faculty and output, as well as the relevance of its programmes. We must continue to do well in these areas and be

valuable to our stakeholders. We need to leverage on our position in Southeast Asia to serve as an effective interlocutor between South and Southeast Asia and contribute to the strengthening of linkages between these two regions.

3. The Institute has a new Director who will join in January 2022. Can you perhaps share more about the thinking behind his selection, and what are some of your expectations in this regard?

Professor Tan: We were looking for a strong leader who is a renowned scholar, has a good track record as an academic and is familiar with the priorities of ISAS and the contexts in which it operates.

Ideally, the Director should understand our position and interest as a Singaporean and Southeast Asian research institute. I am happy that the new Director, Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea, has these attributes.



4. How do average Singaporeans view South Asia? Has that view changed since the setting up of ISAS? What more can be done to get Singaporeans interested in the region?

Professor Tan: It is difficult to say. We have a sizeable South Asian community in Singapore, so there are natural socio-cultural ties with the region. I believe many Singaporeans understand the economic importance of the region and appreciate its geostrategic relevance. However, while there might be awareness, I am not sure if knowledge of the region is sufficiently deep and extensive. Perhaps greater engagement on all fronts, especially strengthening of economic and business ties, would contribute to greater Singaporean interests in South Asia.

5. Why should the South Asian region deserve attention? And what would you say are the research areas in which our stakeholders are most interested?

Professor Tan: As mentioned above, the region has economic and geostrategic relevance to us in Singapore and Southeast Asia, and it is important that we keep informed and stay engaged with South Asia. Trade and economics, domestic political developments, emerging technologies, security, major power interactions in the region, maritime and military engagements across the Indo-Pacific – these are some of the areas we need to stay interested in.

6. What are your hopes and aspirations for ISAS?

Professor Tan: ISAS is in a very good position now, but we must not be satisfied and complacent. There is always room for improvement. ISAS has come a long way since 2004 and we need to keep on a good trajectory. I would like ISAS to be recognised internationally as the place that scholars and policy-makers will think of when they are looking for high quality, insightful and relevant studies on South Asia.

Mr John Vater is a Research Associate and Deputy Editor at ISAS. He can be reached at johnvater@nus.edu.sg.

ISAS Welcomes its Fifth Director

ISAS is pleased to announce the appointment of Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea as its fifth Director with effect from 1 January 2022. He takes over from Professor C Raja Mohan who helmed the institute since May 2018.

Associate Professor Sevea is an internationally recognised scholar of contemporary and modern South Asia whose core research focuses on South Asian politics, social and political thought and governance. He has held many academic positions and is the author of several notable publications. Along with this directorship, he will concurrently be a Visiting Associate Professor with the Department of History at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Associate Professor Sevea's association with ISAS began in 2018 when he joined the team as a Visiting Research Associate

Professor. He brings with him strong and deep connections with the academic community in Singapore and beyond. He was a faculty member and the Coordinator of the Contemporary Islam Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University from 2008 to 2011. Subsequently, from 2012 to 2021, he was an Associate Professor with the Department of History at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. He is the current Vice-President of the American Institute of Pakistan Studies and serves on the committee of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Associate Professor Sevea holds a DPhil in History from the University of Oxford. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in History from NUS and a master's degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.



The ISAS Management Board and team look forward to working with Associate Professor Sevea in taking ISAS to higher levels in the coming years.

New ISAS Senior Advisor



ISAS has appointed Ambassador Gopinath Pillai as its Senior Advisor with effect from October 2021. He is ISAS' founding Chairman and served in the office from July 2004 to July 2021.

The Institute deeply values Ambassador Pillai's knowledge of the South Asian region, and his continued support will be important to further develop ISAS as a global hub of research in contemporary South Asia. His many decades of experience in dealing with different segments of Indian and South Asian politics, society and business, as well as knowledge and understanding of the Indian subcontinent, are relevant to the Institute's stakeholders, constituents and staff.

As Senior Advisor, Ambassador Pillai will provide advice to the Institute's Management Board, Executive Committee and management; meet with and offer views and perspectives to local and overseas senior public and private sector officials on ISAS' behalf; assist the Institute to connect Singapore to South Asia and beyond; and provide mentorship and contribute to developing ISAS as a global hub of research in contemporary South Asia.

Ambassador Pillai's appointment is for a three-year term. We look forward to his further contributions to the Institute.

New Research Staff at ISAS

ISAS would like to extend a warm welcome to its scholars who came on board in 2021:



Dr Gyanesh Kudaisya

(Joined on 1 August 2021)

Visiting Research Associate Professor
University of Cambridge
PhD in South Asian History

Areas of Focus: Contemporary Indian History; Region-making in Contemporary India; Partition and its Aftermath in South Asia; and the Region of Uttar Pradesh: Issues of Long-Term Historical Change



Dr Imran Ahmed

(Joined on 12 April 2021)

Visiting Research Fellow
University of New England (Australia)
PhD in History, Politics and Law

Areas of Focus: Religion, Law and Politics in South Asia; Constitution-making, Legal Pluralism and Democratic Institutions; and Islam in the Modern World



Ms Claudia Chia Yi En

(Joined on 5 January 2021)

Research Analyst
National University of Singapore
Master by Research in South Asian Studies

Area of Focus: India-Pakistan Relations; Border Studies; Partition Historiography; and Indian and South Asian Politics



Ms Divya Murali

(Joined on 2 February 2021)

Research Analyst
Madras School of Economics
Master in Economics

Areas of Focus: Economics, Governance and Policy; and Issues and Challenges of Indian Economic Policy and Process



Ms Kunthavi Kalachelvam

(Joined on 2 August 2021)

Research Analyst
Singapore Institute of Management –
University of London
Bachelor of Science in International Relations

Areas of Focus: Afghanistan and South Asian Politics; Democracy and State Building; and Gender and International Relations



Ms Shavinyaa Vijaykumarr

(Joined on 2 August 2021)

Research Analyst
National University of Singapore
Bachelor of Social Sciences in Political Science

Areas of Focus: Key Issues in Domestic Politics of South Asia; State of Democratic and Public Institutions in South Asia; Social Media – Impact on Society, Politics and Governance; and South Asian Diaspora and Transnationalism



Mr Anirudh Srivathsan

(Joined on 1 November 2021)

Research Analyst
SOAS University of London
Bachelor of Arts in International Relations

Areas of Focus: Decoloniality in the South Asian Region; International Relations of South Asia; South Asian Diaspora and Transnationalism; and Politics of Caste and Religion

The Institute looks forward to their contributions in promoting the understanding of the South Asian region, and in communicating knowledge and insights about it to policymakers, the business community, academia and civil society, in Singapore and beyond.

ISAS Appoints Non-Resident Fellows

As part of a new effort to strengthen our work and widen our reach, ISAS initiated the ISAS Non-Resident Fellowship. The aim of this fellowship is to bring together a vibrant community of scholars, analysts, journalists and practitioners on South Asia from around the world.

ISAS extends a warm welcome to the following recently-appointed fellows:

Non-Resident Fellows



Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed

Research Fellow
Alfred Deakin Institute
Deakin University
Australia



Dr Jasnea Sarma

Lecturer of Political Geography
Department of Geography
University of Zurich
Switzerland



Dr Ayesha Siddiqa

Senior Fellow, War Studies Department
Kings College, London
United Kingdom



Mr Shafqat Munir

Research Fellow and Head
Bangladesh Centre for Terrorism Research
Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security
Studies
Dhaka, Bangladesh

The Institute looks forward to engaging the fellows in our events and other activities in Singapore and South Asia, in areas of mutual interest. We deeply value their knowledge of the subcontinent and seek their support in developing ISAS as a global hub of research in contemporary South Asia.

ISAS Internship Programme 2021

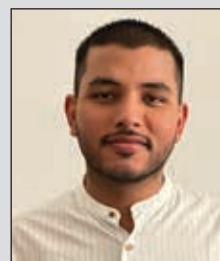
ISAS offers research internships to students who are keen on furthering their academic and research interest in South Asia. This fulfills ISAS' educational role of nurturing students to develop greater awareness and understanding of the region. The internship also serves as a testing ground for potential research analyst appointments at the Institute.

In the second half of 2021, ISAS hosted the following interns:



Mr Anshumaan Mishra

National Law University, Odisha
Fourth Year – Bachelor of Arts and
Bachelor of Law
Internship Duration: 30 August 2021 –
19 November 2021



Mr Anurag Tiwary

National Law University, Visakhapatnam
Final Year – Bachelor of Arts and
Bachelor of Law
Internship Duration: 22 November 2021 –
18 February 2022



Ms Ashmita Rana

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
Final Year – Master of Arts
Internship Duration: 27 September 2021 –
24 December 2021

During their internship, these students participated in ISAS' seminars and events, where they interacted with local and overseas-based participants. They also collated data and provided research assistance to their supervisors at ISAS as well as worked on joint papers with the ISAS researchers.

ISAS Recent Events

30 JUN
1 JUL

ISAS-UOS Conference (Webinar) City and Environmental History in Colonial and Post-colonial South Asia



ISAS partnered with the University of Southampton (UOS), England, to organise a two-day conference from 30 June 2021 to 1 July 2021 titled 'The City and Environmental History in Colonial and Post-colonial South Asia'.

The event was divided into four panels – Colonial South Asian Cities and Environment; Environment in Colonial and Post-colonial South Asia; Climate Change and Cities in South Asia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives; and Managing Rivers in Colonial and Post-colonial South Asia. The conference brought together a group

of distinguished panellists to initiate a conversation between urban and environmental history, and the interdependence between the two areas of study.

The discussions encompassed case studies of major metropolitan cities in the subcontinent while also looking at smaller cities. The panellists noted that over the years, environmental and urban history have emerged as two significant domains of research in South Asia, carving a niche for themselves as subjects independent of each other. However, the experts also addressed the interdependence between the two domains. They noted that the issues of governance, infrastructure and urban expansion have both direct and indirect implications on the environment. They agreed on the importance of studying the measures adopted by the colonial government for urban planning to understand the present environmental condition, such as the effects of its introduction of various infrastructure projects like railways and canals.

The papers presented at the conference will be compiled into an edited volume titled *The City and Environmental History in Colonial and Post-Colonial South Asia*.

22
JUL

ISAS Roundtable (Webinar) Himalayan Politic: Emerging Security Challenges



In July 2021, ISAS organised two roundtables on the Himalayas. The first on 22 July 2021 discussed the evolving geopolitics in the Himalayan region. Titled 'Himalayan Geopolitics: Emerging Security Challenges', it revolved around the debate concerning security in the Himalayan region.

The speakers highlighted the penetration of state sovereignty in the Himalayas, largely due to advancements in technology and connectivity as well as

countries' increasing interactions along their Himalayan borders, which has given rise to territorial confrontations. They noted that the notions of Sinophobia and Pak-phobia have largely influenced the contemporary study of and concerns for the region. Moreover, the regional narrative has also been influenced by the United States' (US) competition with China, which has necessitated a strategic rethink of Himalayan geopolitics in South Asia. They also highlighted how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambition to turn India into a world power has redefined its relations with both the US and China.

In addition, the speakers discussed the anthropological aspects concerning the Himalayan region. By mostly considering cartographic fixation, the study of the region has been overburdened with the concerns of the state, instead of people, culture, market and ecology.

The second roundtable on 'Water Politics in the Himalayas' was held on 26 July 2021. It focused on the changing relationships between South Asian countries due to the growing water stress in the region.

6
SEP

ISAS Lecture (Webinar)

One Year into the SLPP Parliamentary Victory: Sri Lanka's Domestic Political and Economic Issues



ISAS organised a lecture series themed 'One Year into the SLPP Parliamentary Victory' in September 2021.

The first lecture, titled 'Sri Lanka's Domestic Political and Economic Issues', was held on 6 September 2021. Mr D E W Gunasekera, former Cabinet Minister and Member of Parliament, gave an overview of the main economic

challenges that Sri Lanka currently faces and outlined the domestic political obstacles that the government confronts.

Mr Gunasekera highlighted Sri Lanka's two main economic challenges – the dwindling government revenue and the debt crisis. He argued that the liberalisation of the economy from 1977 and the subsequent abolishment of various forms of taxes caused a steady decline in government revenue and that a decisive change in the Sri Lankan economic trajectory is therefore needed to rectify this problem. He also addressed the dire debt situation confronting Sri Lanka, stating that the country should turn to its powerful Asian counterparts, rather than the International Monetary Fund, for assistance. He concluded by bringing attention to the positive steps that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has taken with regard to reforms in the constitution, elections law and education.

9
SEP

ISAS Lecture (Webinar)

One Year into the SLPP Parliamentary Victory: Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy and International Relations



The second lecture in the series, 'Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy and International Relations', was held on 9 September 2021.

Dr Maneesha S Wanasinghe Pasqual, Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, spoke about the country's current foreign policy and challenges facing the nation. Dr Chulanee Attanayake, ISAS' Research Fellow, chaired the lecture.

Dr Pasqual brought attention to the statements raised in President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's manifesto and highlighted four main challenges that Sri Lanka's foreign policy aims to address – first, to effectively implement the stated outcomes of the manifesto, despite domestic challenges; second, to balance Sri Lanka's relations with its immediate neighbours, regional and major powers; third, to overcome the global economic downturn fuelled by the pandemic and Sri Lanka's country-specific debt crisis; and lastly, to overcome international pressure with regard to Sri Lanka and its human rights record.

During her remarks, Dr Pasqual stressed that Sri Lanka faces a challenge in remaining independent and neutral in its commitment to a "friendly non-aligned" foreign policy. She also mentioned that matters pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic have been prioritised in foreign relations, and that many of the problems faced by Sri Lanka are related to the pandemic.

22
SEP

ISAS Panel Discussion (Webinar) Pakistan's Digital Transformation: Past, Present and Future



ISAS, in partnership with the High Commission of Pakistan in Singapore, hosted a panel discussion on 'Pakistan's Digital Transformation – Past, Present and Future' on 22 September 2021.

The webinar explored the conditions that fuelled Pakistan's digital economy and the government's role in driving digitalisation. The panellists included Mr Shabahat Ali Shah, Former Chairman, National IT Board, Pakistan;

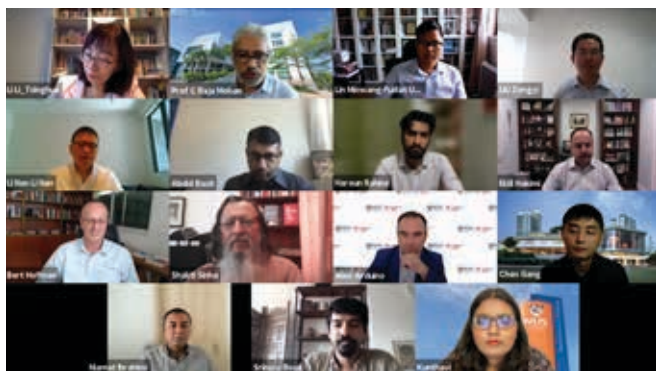
Mr Sagheer Mufti, Chief Operating Officer, Habib Bank, Pakistan; Mr Asif Saleem, Senior Director, Oracle; Mr Rehan Akhtar, Chief Digital Officer, Karandaaz Pakistan; and Ms Jehan Ara, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Katalyst Labs, Pakistan.

Mr Shah addressed the role played by the government to enhance digitisation and elaborated on its efforts to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity. Mr Mufti, from a similar technological angle, discussed the role of fintech services and electronic banking in improving service delivery. Mr Akhtar spoke on the growing e-commerce industry in Pakistan while Ms Ara contextualised the digital startup ecosystem in Pakistan. Finally, Mr Saleem highlighted the role of the Pakistani diaspora in pushing for digital transformation.

The interactive session that followed focused on topics such as challenges to sustaining the startup ecosystem in Pakistan and the role of China in Pakistan's digital growth.

24
SEP

ISAS-EAI Panel Discussion (Webinar) Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy



On 24 September 2021, ISAS and the East Asian Institute at NUS organised a closed-door roundtable on 'Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy'. The roundtable, chaired by Dr Imran Ahmed, Visiting Research Fellow, ISAS, featured panellists and discussants from various academic backgrounds.

As Afghanistan deals with the Taliban coming to power amidst the United States' (US) troop withdrawal, its regional neighbours face a new challenge: adapting to

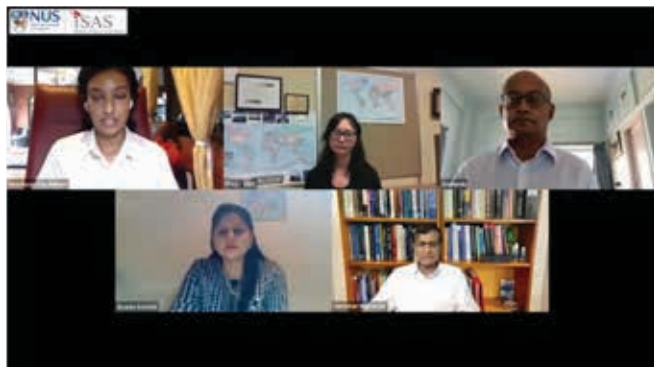
greater regional unpredictability and volatility. China is shaping up to be the next powerful actor in the region, possibly aiding in the stabilisation of Afghanistan and establishing more potent synergy in the region. After the Taliban formed an interim government and President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, China has had to re-evaluate its Afghan strategy to meet this new reality and deal with the Taliban more directly.

The participants agreed that China's Afghanistan policy would be strictly business-oriented, and that its investments would now be more strategic, given the uncertain and violent situation there. During the session, reservations were expressed regarding China's intentions in the region and how it could use the current situation to achieve more control in areas vulnerable to its national security, such as the Wakhan Corridor. While there was consensus that one would have to wait to see how China plays its cards, all agreed that its Afghanistan policy would be conditional and would be aimed satisfying China's geostrategic and economic goals.

30
SEP

ISAS-CS Panel Discussion (Webinar)

Changing Dynamics of Maritime Trade in a Post COVID-19 World: Implications for South Asia



On 30 September 2021, ISAS organised a joint webinar with the Commonwealth Secretariat titled 'Changing Dynamics of Maritime Trade in a Post COVID-19 World: Implications for South Asia'. An international trade working paper, 'Harnessing Maritime Trade for Post-COVID Recovery and Resilience-Building in the Commonwealth', authored by Dr Ganeshan Wignaraja, Non-Resident Senior Fellow, ISAS; Dr Salamat Ali, Trade Economist, Commonwealth Secretariat; and Dr Brendan Vickers, Head, International Trade Policy Section, Commonwealth Secretariat, was presented and discussed by a panel of experts.

The webinar included discussants Dr Jivanta Schottli, Assistant Professor in Indian Politics and Foreign Policy, Dublin City University, and Non-Resident Fellow, ISAS; and Dr Peggy Chen Shu-Ling, Head of Maritime and Logistics Management, National Centre for Ports and Shipping, Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania, Australia.

Dr Wignaraja and Dr Ali presented on maritime trade in the Commonwealth since the new millennium, paying particular attention to the South Asian region. They highlighted that maritime trade trends and indicators point to a recovery from the pandemic. Thereafter, Dr Chen and Dr Schottli gave their views on the findings of the paper. Dr Chen spoke about the Australia-India maritime ties and the elements needed for a resilient future port. Dr Schottli highlighted how the pandemic has exacerbated problems in an already divided international trading climate and the global economy and underscored the need for a revitalisation.

8
OCT

ISAS-RSIS-ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Workshop (Hybrid)

Regional Security Architecture in the Andaman Sea: Perspectives from ASEAN, India and Beyond



On 8 October 2021, ISAS, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute jointly hosted a workshop on the stability of the Andaman Basin amid greater geopolitical churning in the region and rising non-traditional security threats. The workshop brought together experts representing the views of extra-regional and regional powers.

Indonesia's Foreign Minister Dr R M Marty Natalegawa delivered the keynote address for the workshop. He discussed the importance of the Andaman Basin to its littoral states and possible pathways through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations framework to avoid conflict.

The first panel provided an overview of the interests of extra regional powers like the United States and China as well as those of Southeast Asia. The second panel looked at the threat perceptions of the regional littoral states and highlighted the increasing salience of non-traditional security threats to the Southeast Asian states, including trafficking and migration. Meanwhile, growing Chinese naval activity has also been a key driver for India's increasing military footprint in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The third panel explored the economic significance of the Andaman Sea to the littoral states and how resources could contribute to their economies. Finally, the fourth panel looked at the possibility of establishing regional order that could promote stability in the Andaman Basin.

20
OCT

ISAS-MEI Panel Discussion (Webinar) Ertuğrul Goes East: Turkey Rising in South Asia



ISAS and the Middle East Institute at NUS organised a joint panel discussion titled 'Ertuğrul Goes East: Turkey Rising in South Asia' on 20 October 2021. It brought together a group of distinguished panellists which

focussed on Turkey's links with South Asia and the geopolitical impact of Ankara's changing relationship with the South Asian countries.

The panellists noted that while Turkey's engagements with countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh have seen an upward trajectory, its relationship with India has been steadily declining. They also highlighted that cultural similarity, especially the growing popularity of Turkish drama series, has played a very important role in these changing relationships. They noted how India and Turkey have an uneasy political relationship due to the latter's support for Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue and divergent views on the Gulen movement.

The panellists added that Turkey is set to become a major player in post-America Afghanistan and the region should be prepared for a rejig in bilateral ties with Turkey.

11
NOV

ISAS-NEF Roundtable (Webinar) Nepal and the World



On 11 November 2021, ISAS and the Nepal Economic Forum in Kathmandu organised a joint roundtable on 'Nepal and the World'.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted the whole world and Nepal has not be spared either. In addition, being one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, the country has been witnessing natural disasters that have impacted lives and livelihoods. However, there have also been some major innovations, youth taking leadership positions and people recalibrating their lives to move on. Externally, Nepal also faces several critical challenges, the key being managing its relationship with its two large neighbours – India and China.

The roundtable offered the platform for the participants to examine Nepal's domestic and geopolitical landscapes and international relations. It was also an opportunity to understand Nepal's priorities in these areas as the country makes its way into the new year.

The speakers opined that Nepal underplays its achievements, and that its geographical location and size have limited the scope of its overall development. They suggested Nepal could learn to transcend its geography to become an important actor in the region, Asia and the rest of the world. They added that Nepal should learn to prioritise its interests, engage with its neighbours effectively and attempt to gain maximum possible advantages in the international system.

Additionally, the speakers highlighted a number of challenges that Nepal faces which hinder its development – instable governments, changing constitutions and the United States (US)-China and India-China bilateral tensions, among others. The experts concluded that Nepal should be careful in its approach to not let its land become a battleground for the three major superpowers – the US, India and China.

2
DEC

Seventh ISAS Lecture (Webinar) **After the Pandemic: India's Economic Reform and Renewal**



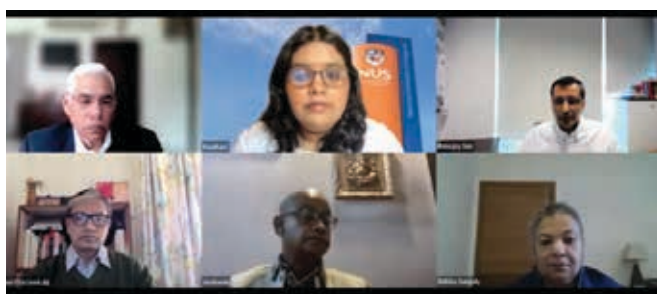
ISAS, in partnership with the High Commission of India in Singapore, jointly organised the Seventh ISAS Lecture titled 'After the Pandemic: India's Economic Reform and Renewal' on 2 December 2021.

Mr Sanjeev Sanyal, Principal Economic Advisor, Ministry of Finance, India, delivered the lecture.

Professor C Raja Mohan, Director, ISAS, offered the welcome remarks while HE Mr P Kumaran, India's High Commissioner to Singapore, delivered the opening remarks. During his lecture, Mr Sanyal explained India's post COVID-19 framework for economic recovery. Adopting a barbell strategy in framing its policy response, which included increased capital expenditure while hedging against the pandemic, he said that the response was guided by identifying COVID-19 implications as a supply shock rather than a demand shock. He explained the rationale of the response and also delved into the implications of the same in a post COVID-19 India.

7
DEC

ISAS Panel Discussion (Webinar) **Indian Farm Laws Repealed: Prospects for Agriculture and Economic Reforms**



On 7 December 2021, ISAS organised a panel discussion on 'India Farm Laws Repealed: Prospects for Agriculture and Economic Reforms'.

The panel featured Dr Ronojoy Sen, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance), ISAS; Dr Bidisha Ganguly, Chief Economist, Confederation of Indian Industry; Mr Subhomoy

Bhattacharjee, Consulting Editor, Business Standard and Dr Amitendu Palit, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Trade and Economic Policy), ISAS.

The panellists stated that the core reason for the farm laws being repealed was the difficulty in navigating a change in laws directly pertinent to workers. This was also reflected in the reform agendas of land and labour laws. The repealed farm laws proved to be a possible setback in reforming the agricultural sector in the future. It undermined the role the government plays in the overall economic reform agenda. Moving forward, discussions around reform would have to be incredibly nuanced and beneficial for everyone involved, which would be a challenging feat.

The session ended with the panellists agreeing that discussions regarding reforms need to be held internally before bills were brought to the parliament.

ISAS Events Listing (July to December 2021)

ISAS-UOS Conference	City and Environmental History in Colonial and Post-colonial South Asia	30 June – 1 July 2021
ISAS Roundtable	The Himalayas: Emerging Geopolitical and Security Challenges	22 July 2021
ISAS Roundtable	Water Politics in the Himalayas	26 July 2021
ISAS-IIT Panel Discussion	India's Economic Reforms and Implications for Trade Relations	28 July 2021
ISAS Book Discussion	A New Cold War: Henry Kissinger and the Rise of China	25 August 2021
Joint Roundtable	Bangladesh-Singapore Free Trade Agreement: Potentials and Opportunities	30 August 2021
ISAS Lecture	Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Parliamentary Victory: A Year On: Sri Lanka's Domestic, Political and Economic Issues	6 September 2021
ISAS Lecture	Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Parliamentary Victory: A Year On: Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy and International Engagement	9 September 2021
Joint Webinar	Afghanistan – The Way Forward	15 September 2021
ISAS Panel Discussion	Pakistan's Digital Transformation: Past, Present and Future	22 September 2021
ISAS-EAI Panel Discussion	Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy	24 September 2021
ISAS-CS Panel Discussion	Changing Dynamics of Maritime Trade in a Post COVID-19 World: Implications for South Asia	30 September 2021
ISAS-CII Core Group Interactive Discussion	Global Businesses in the New Normal	1 October 2021
ISAS Panel Discussion	India's National Monetisation Pipeline: Prospects and Challenges	4 October 2021
ISAS-RSIS-ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Workshop (Hybrid)	Regional Security Architecture in the Andaman Sea: Perspectives from ASEAN, India and Beyond	8 October 2021
ISAS-ESI Panel Discussion	Challenges to Regional Energy Security in Afghanistan	14 October 2021
ISAS-MEI Panel Discussion	Ertuğrul Goes East: Turkey Rising in South Asia	20 October 2021
ISAS Lecture	Pakistan's Regional Economic Integration: Challenges and Opportunities	10 November 2021
ISAS-NEF Roundtable	Nepal and the World	11 November 2021
ISAS-SPF Roundtable	The Ripple Effect: AUKUS and the Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific	29 November 2021
ISAS-PF Roundtable	Indian Investment in Colombo Port: A Game Changer in Sri Lanka's Port Industry?	1 December 2021
Seventh ISAS Lecture	After the Pandemic: India's Economic Reform and Renewal	2 December 2021
ISAS Panel Discussion	India's Farm Laws Repealed: Prospects for Agriculture and Economic Reforms	7 December 2021

Note: Webinar unless otherwise stated

LATEST SPECIAL REPORTS, SOUTH ASIAN DISCUSSION PAPERS AND SOUTH ASIA SCAN

In order to provide a more in-depth coverage of the latest developments in South Asia, ISAS brings out three long-form publications – Special Reports, South Asia Discussion Papers and the South Asia Scan.

During the second half of 2021, we brought out four Special Reports, one set of South Asia Discussion Papers and three South Asia Scans, which comprehensively looked at some of the issues pertinent to the region. These include publications that have been jointly written with partner institutes and feature scholars from diverse backgrounds or are the result of roundtable discussions.

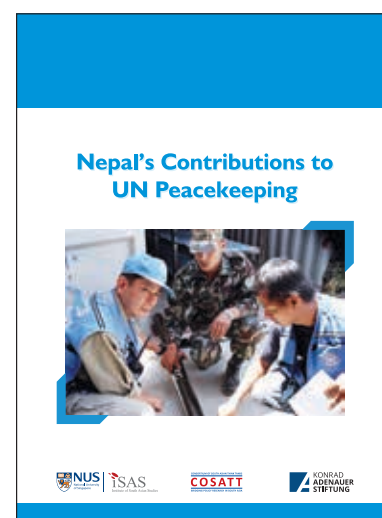
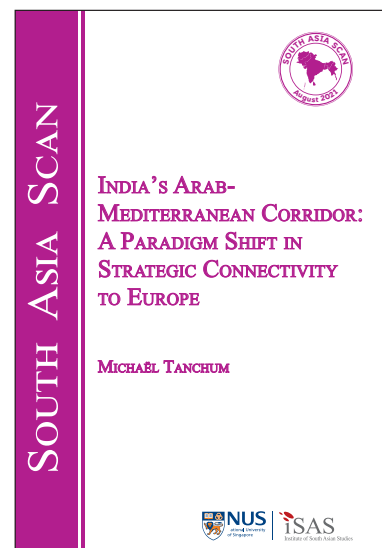
One of the significant developments this year was the coup d'état in Myanmar, whereby the democratically elected government was replaced by military rule. External scholar Sasiwan Chingchit's South Asia Scan, *Myanmar's Relations with China and India: The ASEAN Perspective*, looked at how the Southeast Asian countries viewed Myanmar's relationship with its two large neighbours and the extent to which its engagements with these two are in line with that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Remaining with ASEAN, another key geopolitical development that impacted the region was the consolidation of the Quadrilateral Security Alliance (Quad) featuring India, the United States, Australia and Japan. In collaboration with Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), Tokyo, Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev authored *The Quad and ASEAN: Perceptions of India, Japan and Southeast Asia*, which was the result of a roundtable discussion. It analysed the perceptions of India and Japan on ASEAN and the Quad as well as ASEAN's perception about the Quad by examining the interactions between the two as regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific and the challenges that arise from their interactions.

Our latest set of South Asia Discussion Papers, edited by the same authors mentioned above, brought together several European and Indo-Pacific perspectives on Europe's tilt towards the region. *Securing the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Cooperation between Asia and Europe* looks at the potential role the latter could play in the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, since the European powers have realised that the region is too important to be left either to the bipolar Sino-American contest or the Indo-Pacific's regional powers.

Another strategic shift is the emergence of India's Arab-Mediterranean corridor to Europe. In an issue of the South Asia Scan, Michaël Tanchum looks at this emerging multi-modal, commercial corridor that could radically reconfigure trade patterns between the Indian Ocean Region, the Middle East and Europe. *India's Arab-Mediterranean Corridor: A Paradigm Shift in Strategic Connectivity to Europe* emphasises how this new connectivity could reshape India's role in the Eurasian economic order.

The following three Special Reports are the outcomes of two separate roundtable discussions. The first – *India, Singapore and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence*, written by Karthik Nachiappan and Nishant Rajeev – is a joint publication with Ananta Centre, New Delhi. While India launched the 'AI for All' initiative in 2018, the Singapore



government has unveiled its 'National Artificial Intelligence Strategy'. This report evaluates the various challenges arising out of the deployment of artificial intelligence.

The second report looks at the ambitious *AatmaNirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan* (Self-Reliant India) campaign announced by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2020 to help the country overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. *India's Self-Reliance Initiative: Old Idea or New Direction* by Ronojoy Sen and Vani Swarupa Murali assesses the mixed response to this campaign, and whether this was a return to the erstwhile protectionist policies of the 'Licence Raj' or a shift in focus to local industry and indigenous modes of production in an echo of the independence-era idea of *Swadeshi*.

Turning to India's neighbours, ISAS, in collaboration with the Consortium of South Asia Think Tanks and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, discussed *Nepal's Contributions to UN Peacekeeping*. While Nepalese peacekeepers have served in peace building efforts across the world, regrettably little critical analysis has been done on their contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions, even as the contours of peacekeeping duties and missions, and the expectations thereof from nations providing the troops, are evolving. This report specifically assesses Nepal's participation in peacekeeping missions from three broad perspectives: international relations, international security and domestic politics.

Sri Lankan scholar Daniel Alphonsus conducted the first-ever systematic review of Sri Lanka's defence budget. This South Asia Scan, *Sri Lanka's Post-War Defence Budget: Overspending and Underprotection*, highlights that Sri Lanka spends too much on defence and spends its defence budget inefficiently. It also briefly discusses potential positive externalities arising from more rational spending and offers an overview of its national security threats, problems with defence planning and recommendations for their resolution.

Books

Ball, Desmond; Beraud-Sudreau, Lucie; Huxley, Tim; C, Raja Mohan; and Taylor, Brendan, *Asia's New Geopolitics: Military Power and Regional Order*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021

South Asian Discussion Papers

Securing the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Cooperation between Asia and Europe, Edited by Yogesh Joshi, Research Fellow, ISAS; Ippeita Nishida, Senior Research Fellow, International Peace and Security Department, Sasakawa Peace Foundation; and Nishant Rajeev, Research Analyst, ISAS, December 2021

South Asia Scan

Chingchit, Sasiwan, South Asia Scan No. 13 – *Myanmar's Relations with China and India: The ASEAN Perspective*. Institute of South Asian Studies, July 2021

Tanchum, Michael, South Asia Scan No. 14 – *India's Arab-Mediterranean Corridor: A Paradigm Shift in Strategic Connectivity to Europe*. Institute of South Asian Studies, August 2021

Alphonsus, Daniel, South Asia Scan No. 15 – *Sri Lanka's Post-War Defence Budget: Overspending and Underprotection*. Institute of South Asian Studies, November 2021

Special Reports

India, Singapore and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, Dr Karthik Nachiappan, Research Fellow, ISAS; and Mr Nishant Rajeev, Research Analyst, ISAS, 9 September 2021

The Quad and ASEAN: Perceptions of India, Japan and Southeast Asia, Dr Yogesh Joshi, Research Fellow, ISAS; Mr Ippeita Nishida, Senior Research Fellow, International Peace and Security Department, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan; and Mr Nishant Rajeev, Research Analyst, ISAS, 18 October 2021

India's Self-Reliance Initiative: Old Idea or New Direction, Dr Ronojoy Sen, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance), ISAS; and Ms Vani Swarupa Murali, PhD student, South Asian Studies Programme, NUS, 28 October 2021

Nepal's Contributions to UN Peacekeeping, ISAS, Consortium of South Asia Think Tanks and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 27 December 2021

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Working Papers

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347	Bangladesh's Graduation: Challenges and Imperatives to Continued International Support Measures, HE Md Mustafizur Rahman, Bangladesh's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Offices, World Trade Organization and other international organisations in Geneva, 22 July 2021

- 348** India's Evolving Afghan Policy amidst US Withdrawal, Dr Vinay Kaura, Assistant Professor, Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Rajasthan, India, 4 August 2021
- 349** Direct Action and Emancipation: The Politics of the Shiv Sena Women's Wing, Ms Stacy Fernandes, former Research Intern, ISAS; and Dr Amit Ranjan, Research Fellow, ISAS, 6 August 2021
- 350** Student Mobility in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia: Trends and Impact of COVID-19, Dr Amitendu Palit, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Trade and Economic Policy), ISAS; Ms Divya Murali, Research Analyst, ISAS; and Ms Mekhla Jha, Student Research Assistant, ISAS, 7 September 2021
- 351** Russia-Pakistan Economic Relations: Energy Partnership and the China Factor, Ms Claudia Chia, Research Analyst, ISAS; and Mr Zheng Haiqi, Visiting Research Scholar, ISAS, 6 October 2021
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The Bookshelf

- Shivshankar Menon. *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Penguin Random House, 2021. (Reviewed by Dr Yogesh Joshi, 22 July 2021)
- Kanti Bajpai. *India Versus China: Why They Are Not Friends*. HarperCollins, 2021. (Reviewed by Dr Yogesh Joshi, 29 July 2021)
- Vijay Gokhale. *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India*. Penguin Random House, 2021. (Reviewed by Professor C Raja Mohan, 13 August 2021)
- Mohammed Zeeshan. *Flying Blind: India's Quest for Global Leadership*. Penguin Random House, 2021. (Reviewed by Ms Nithya Subramanian, 20 August 2021)
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- Zahid Hussain. *No-Win War: The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow*. Oxford University Press, 2021. (Reviewed by Professor C Raja Mohan, 11 October 2021)
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