

# ISAS Brief

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## India's Regional Role: Perceptions, Potentials and Prognosis

*India's regional role reflects a gap in its ability to find fruition in consonance with its potentials and capabilities. This gap needs to be closed, and those in power in New Delhi need to address this issue in right earnest.*

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>

Bhabani Sengupta, a well-known Indian political analyst, in a noteworthy piece some years ago, argued with a modicum of reason, that the Indian elephant cannot become a mouse but its challenge with regard to the smaller South Asian neighbours remained in its ability to make big look beautiful. In the halcyon days of New Delhi's burgeoning global influence – at a time when Sengupta was most productive in his writings – with India liberating Bangladesh in 1971 and acquiring a moral high plane on most global issues, New Delhi appeared to be on course to achieving that difficult objective. Over time, however, a sense of exhaustion seemed to descend on its enthusiasm to retain the high moral ground it had acquired with much relentless effort and a fortuitous combination of luck and labour, as well as years of deft diplomacy conducted by men and women of sense and sagacity. As if acknowledging the Heraclitus thesis that the world is in a state of flux, and no one steps into the same river

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twice, New Delhi now seems to be content to wade into waters far downstream in the flow of its aspirations.

There is, of course, a multiplicity of reasons for this, not all emanating in India itself. These are global, regional and domestic. The global would be the change of guards in the White House in Washington from those with a heightened intellectual appreciation of India (the George Bushes, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama) to those with more dollar-and-cents-driven predilection (Donald Trump and his cohorts). This is coupled with a general decline of America itself, or, at any rate, with its gradual withdrawal from the global scene and dissociation from value-related causes, as is being signalled by the Trump Administration. The regional would be an assertive policy in the neighbourhood by China, India's traditional regional rival. Beijing tends to wean away India's neighbours with cash and credit, and by the allurements of the benefits of initiatives such as the 'One Belt, One Road', coupled with sales of advanced military hardware, that India finds unable to match. The domestic reasons would be the increasing tendency of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to look inwards and underscore nationalistic majoritarian-driven values such as 'Hindutva' as opposed to the broader, cosmopolitan and more general secular ethos of his Congress predecessors in office. This narrowing interest, while attracting popularity at home and winning elections in the Indian states for the BJP, is beginning to widen the gulf with the Muslim-majority countries of South Asia.

In all fairness to him, Modi's desire to forge closer ties with neighbours in the region was genuine. It came through clearly when he invited all his South Asian colleagues to his inaugural on 26 May 2014. They came, some with ardour that was baffling (Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka had to contend with opposition at home for having accepted the invitation). However, eventually, as was perhaps wont to happen, one witnessed the triumph of experience over hope. The 'Deep State' in Pakistan was unpersuaded of the need for any change of policy towards India. The problems within Kashmir fanned the fuel in terms of negative public opinion among the Pakistani population. India's linkages with the Madhesi population in Nepal's Terai plains led to several issues, including economic blockages of the goods flow into Nepal, which were highly resented by the Nepalese. The Sri Lankan government adopted the policy of running with the hare and hunting with the hound, between China and India, to advance its perceived national interest.

Even the old faithful, Bhutan, was hesitant to play ball. It seemed chary of being ‘guided’ by India in terms of its foreign policy (in consonance with the terms of a bilateral agreement) as evident in its position on the recent Doklam standoff between India and China. Only Bangladesh remained a solid friend.

The friendship with Bangladesh is now coming under some threat. This is largely due to the current Rohingya crisis. From the last week of August 2017 till writing, 400,000 Rohingya people fled the Rakhine region in Myanmar, alleging severe repression by military authorities, into Bangladesh, joining the 300,000 who had sought refuge earlier. Despite the enormous resultant pressure on the Bangladeshi economy, Dhaka, and in particular Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, have displayed immense generosity and won global plaudits by according them relief and succour. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the principal elected civilian in the Myanmar government, drew enormous public criticism globally for her failure to effectively prevent the exodus, which the United Nations (UN) officials are now calling “a text-book example of ethnic cleansing”.<sup>2</sup> If proven to be a fact, it would technically constitute a war crime, meriting international sanctions and application of UN principles such as the responsibility to protect (a form of international intervention). The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has adopted a very strong position on this issue, and revived a rare function of his office by making a referral of this issue to the Security Council.

The entire issue has placed India, in general, and the Modi government, in particular, between Scylla and Charybdis. India, as a major regional protagonist, would be expected to play a role in defusing the worsening crisis. It is not just a humanitarian problem, but also one of regional security as well, as the displaced Rohingya population provide a perfect catchment group for recruitment by radicalised extremists. There is already a resistance movement in Rakhine known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which may be on the way to becoming a long-lasting insurgency. However, there is no evidence of its affiliation with global terrorist organisations as of now.

Bangladeshis not only feel deep empathy for the Rohingyas, but are also ready to back Hasina completely on this. Nations fashion values out of the experience of what they see as

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Nebehay and Simon Lewis, “UN says violence against Rohingya a ‘textbook’ example of ethnic cleansing”, *Reuters*, 11 September 2017.

their finest hour as Bangladeshis view their liberation war in 1971. Hasina's father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had led the charge then, and many feel his daughter is well poised to do so now. Amidst this, Bangladeshis, across the broad spectrum, are deeply disappointed by the Modi government's lack of any kind of positive (in their view) role.

Perhaps such an Indian role will come, and Bangladeshis would be waiting. Meanwhile, India has, sadly, gone unrecognised as a major global player by the UN when no Indian was included in a list of 18 significant public persons nominated to the Secretary General's High Level Mediation Panel named in September 2017. India's huge potentials should not merit any kind of marginalisation in the region or the world.

This paper ends with a footnote with regard to the influential Sengupta who wanted India to be seen as big but beautiful by its neighbours. Many of the policies of India's then-Prime Minister I K Gujral in 1997 were said to be influenced by this liberal intellectual. However, when the prime minister appointed him an Officer on Special Duty in his office, there was a huge outcry among the bureaucracy and the parliamentarians. Within days of taking charge of his responsibilities, this champion of the so-called 'Gujral Doctrine', so popular in India's vicinity, was unceremoniously forced to resign, and he died unsung, at 89, in 2011. His life should not be a cause for pessimism, but, most certainly, should be an invitation to sober reflection.

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