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South Asian Diaspora Convention 2016:

Linking People and Ideas

Most South Asian governments organise events celebrating their respective 'diaspora'. But South Asian Diaspora Convention in Singapore is the only forum that lends this resourceful segment of migrant population, now, in some parts extending to the third generation, a regional identity. This would redound to the advantage of all concerned, and should be able to weave into a garland the manifold advantages of the commonality of identity spread across the three would-be global supra-states of the world: America, Europe and the emergent Asia.

Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

The Third South Asian Diaspora Convention, held on 18 and 19 July 2016 in Singapore, established the occasion as the signature event of the Institute of South Asian Studies. It built on the experiences drawn from two previous editions held in 2011 and 2013. Those occasions were created sufficient enthusiasm among concerned circles to enable us, this time round, to attract over 1,200 guests and 75 speakers, drawn not only from South Asia and its neighbourhood, but also from Southeast Asia, not to mention Singapore itself. The catchment area was not only geographically large, but also professionally varied. They included policy

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makers, academics, civil society ‘thought leaders’ and renowned ‘captains of industry’. Students from polytechnics and overseas Indian schools were invited and profited enormously from their interactions with others.

The overarching theme of the Convention was ‘Growth through Interaction: The South Asian Opportunity’. This was expressed through a series of plenary sessions, book launches, an inaugural keynote by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of Sri Lanka, and a gala dinner that included a ‘conversation’ with Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong that marshalled great interest. The discussions, debates, interventions, formal remarks, and interactions focussed on critical issues with regard to the politics, economics, and commerce that were likely to impact on the region’s future in the short-, middle- and long-term.

Indeed, the purposes and objectives largely achieved, were: First, to tap the vast intellectual resources of the very large South Asian diaspora that now exist in nearly every part of the world and cull from their views and ideas material to feed and inform the relevant actors in the process of the formulation of appropriate policies. Second, to buttress Singapore’s position as a hub for international commerce and as a key player in establishing business connections among the South Asian diaspora and between them and business circles in Southeast Asia and East Asia. Third, to provide opportunity to participants to forge binding and sustained relationships in order to be able to take full advantage of the economic resurgence of the South Asian region. Finally, to examine the current global matrix/backdrop against which the economic and political forces would be required to function in order to be able to do so most effectively. An add-on event was the academic Workshop on ‘Diaspora and citizenship’ to study the challenges and opportunities that migrations away from the region afford, that is expected to find fruition in a publication that would feature contributions by established scholars on the subject.

The New Global Setting

In the three years since the last SADC in 2013, the world had changed considerably in several aspects. These factors provided the matrix for the event. First, the unstoppable rise, as was seen then, of China had become more subdued (which sharpened global focus on South Asia), but not its assertiveness on both land and sea, reflected in , among others, the ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’, in consonance with President Xi Jinping’s *Zhong guo meng*, or ‘China Dream’. India, on the other hand, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite the existing gaps with

China, was enlarging its global footprint, but its market-driven growth was also exacerbating the cleavage between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Just before the SADC, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague had given its award on the South China Sea dispute, following the case lodged by the Philippines. The ruling dismissed China’s maritime claims in the area on the basis of the ‘nine-dash line’, a verdict that China dismissed as a ‘piece of waste paper’, though, privately, Beijing was reportedly demonstrating its keenness to negotiate peacefully.

Second, the phenomenon of terrorism had raised its ugly head in a destructive manner, impacting daily lives in major global cities, particularly in Europe and in Asia. It was accompanied by a burgeoning propagation of the Islamist *Wahabi/Salafi* forms of extremism, emanating from Arab regions, as opposed to the more moderate *Sufi* values as were practised in South Asia. The concept of a single *Ummah* that the Islamic State Caliphate was propounding was posing a challenge to the traditional notion of the Westphalian nation-state, especially among the Muslim-majority countries of Asia.

Third, the politics in the United States which were turning sharply divisive pointed to the possibilities of an anti-globalization-driven ‘retreat into fortress America’ syndrome, no matter which Presidential candidate wins in the November elections. This is because it is already established that nearly half of the American population entertain such predilections. This poses a challenge to the continuing US commitment to market-widening objectives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), with ramifications for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and others.

Fourth, the UK referendum recommending exit from the European Union (‘Brexit’) gave a huge leg-up to nativist nationalism, a psychological dampener to the idea of greater nationalism. Since the South Asian diaspora is largely ‘English-speaking’, there was discernible curiosity at the event as to whether such development expands the possibility of some kind of a resurgence of the Anglo-Saxon English-speaking world in the form of formal or informal regroupings of such nations.

Finally, in the face of these challenges, one positive development appeared to be the re-entry of Iran into the regional and international political scene. Its recent understanding with the West has accorded it additional political and economic clout. Iran’s participation at the SADC 2016 through its former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, at the head of a delegation of scholars and policy makers, and the deep interest they displayed in establishing linkages within the

neighbourhood through new infrastructural developments such as ports and pipelines emphasised a renewed spirit of cooperation on the part of this energy-rich nation.

Significant ideas emanated from senior policy leaders at the SADC. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe floated the concept of a triangular partnership between Southern Indian States, Sri Lanka, and Singapore that would enhance economic cooperation between the three countries that would also have a positive impact on the Bay of Bengal trade, at the same time expanding Singapore's importance and capacity for business networking in the region. Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera welcomed all region-inspired initiatives which could provide a transparent, rules-based, institutionalised and principled means of facilitating comprehensive development. Interestingly, while supporting 'mega-trade deals' in this context, he made mention of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), now being seen as the Chinese-led (especially in pronouncements by the US Administration) counter to the US-led TPP.

A 'Digital Silk Route' and Other Ideas

Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry, S Iswaran, stressed the need for regular and deep dialogue between government leaders, policy makers, investors, and infrastructure companies, encouraging all concerned to participate in the Asia-Singapore Infrastructure Roundtable scheduled to take place next October. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan argued for a rules-based world order that would uphold and protect the privileges and rights of all states, big and small, an essential for "our very existence and relevance for the future". Referring to the 8,100-km Bay of Bengal gateway submarine cables linking several regions in Asia, he spoke of building a 'Digital Silk Route', similar to the 'Maritime Silk Route'. Singapore's Senior Minister of State, Ms Indranee Rajah, stressed how this city-state has progressively put in place an ecosystem for a comprehensive suite of international commercial 'dispute resolution services', comprising the three critical elements of arbitration, litigation and mediation. These are reflected in the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC), Singapore International Commercial Court (SICC), and the Singapore International Mediation Centre (SIMC).

The Programme contained discussions in plenary format on issues such as 'Investing in Infrastructure', 'Geo-politics of South Asia', 'Law and Business in South Asia', 'Diaspora and

Citizenship’, ‘Partnership and Education’, ‘Entrepreneurship and Start-ups’, and ‘India-China Business Dialogue: Collaboration for Mutual Growth’. There were parallel sessions, such as on ‘Regional Integration’ and ‘Captains of Industry: Catalyst for Change’. All these included ‘Question-Answer’ periods with wide audience participation. The buffet meals, a cocktail reception and the gala-dinner afforded ample opportunities for networking, which were taken advantage of. The deliberations reflected the numerous as-yet untapped opportunities to benefit from investments in infrastructure, education and healthcare in South Asia. A number of interesting specific proposals also emerged. These included the setting up of a South Asian Diaspora Secretariat, the location of a Business Council in Singapore (presumably with chapters containing a ‘critical mass’ in the regional countries, say ten members), and the establishment of a Diaspora Development Bank which could be funded, among other means, by the sizeable *Zakat* amounts, which are mandatory contributions paid by Muslims on property ownership.

Significantly the focus of this SADC went beyond just South Asia, and the Singapore connections. This time the neighbours of South Asia were also included and a bridge of sorts was sought to be built extending from Iran to China. Judging from the number and contents of correspondence that Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, the Chairman of ISAS, received from participants upon their return home, this was a great success. The Chabahar port and the gas pipeline project raised the possibility of the creation of a web of cooperation between Iran, South Asia and Southeast Asia, with Singapore acting as a hub; the various Chinese silk routes extended the potentials for ‘win-win cooperation’ among the States of the region. An important element of this session was the networking meetings on the side-lines of the Convention. For instance, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs had the opportunity to discuss co-funding of a massive energy project with potential partners. Likewise side-line meetings with leading Singaporean and Indian construction companies paved way for cooperation and collaboration in third markets like Sri Lanka and Iran.

Tangible Interactions

It would be in order indeed to reflect on what Singapore derived from hosting this and the previous two such events. First, in the demographic milieu of Singapore, South Asian immigration forms a significant component. Every broad ethnic strain of the South Asian subcontinent is represented here, and is thriving alongside the Chinese and Malay ethos in a

harmonious mix. The events enabled Singapore and the Singaporeans to be a part of the current complex and transforming story of South Asia, which should help buttress that stable equilibrium. Second, these conventions enhanced the perception about Singapore as a State that encourages one of its think tanks to act as an interlocutor linking South Asian countries among themselves, and with its neighbours as well as Singapore. If this process could be continued successfully, it would increase the stake of the wider region in Singapore's stability, security and prosperity, an important goal for any small state. Third, in practical ways, providing important linkages in terms of global finance, marketing, trade and services strengthens the position of Singapore as the preferred 'trade and business opportunity'(TBO) or collaborative investment hub for South Asia, and elevates the importance of this island republic as a 'business-matching and business-doing' centre. Finally, in straight-forward foreign policy terms, these events bring Singapore closer to the countries of South Asia like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal – all from a region of burgeoning global interest (For instance, the latest SADC accorded the Sri Lankan Prime Minister an effective platform to 'showcase' Sri Lanka to South Asians, which deepened Colombo's ties with Singapore in a greater way than otherwise would have been the case)

Most South Asian governments organise events celebrating their respective 'diaspora'. Governments are beginning to see their value as transmitters of remittance (particularly from the 'temporary diaspora' or contractual workers), as investors (particularly the more affluent and successful non-resident nationals), or even as a source of political support (which explains the frequent visits abroad by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina). But SADC in Singapore is the only forum that lends this resourceful segment of migrant population, now, in some parts extending to the third generation, a regional identity. This would redound to the advantage of all concerned, and should be able to weave into a garland the manifold advantages of the commonality of identity spread across the three would-be global supra-states of the world: America, Europe and the emergent Asia.

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