



Institute of National Security Studies

“Revival of South Asian solidarity: Smoothing rough spots of Multilateralism.”

Press Release

Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka; think tank on national security functioning under the aegis of Ministry of Defence, organized a Security Salon on “Revival of South Asian solidarity: Smoothing rough spots of Multilateralism,” as a virtual session on July 13, 2021 at 1000-1130 hours. The Guest Speaker of the occasion was Professor S.D. Muni, Professor Emeritus at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Professor Rohan Gunaratna, Honorary Professor at Sir General John Kotelawala Defence University, welcomed the Guest Speaker and took an approach towards the dialogue on the potential threats which hinders the effective cooperation of South Asia. The event was a closed-door discussion and valuable outputs were rendered by the audience; inclusive of representatives of all security forces, diplomatic corps, academia, representatives of local and foreign think tanks and other invitees.

The bottom-line of the discussion on South Asian solidarity was tri-fold. The most prominent determinant factor affecting the South Asian solidarity was the Indo-Pakistan tensions. It was observed that any effective progression of cooperation in the region is bound to be dragged into the matrices of the Indo-Pakistan tensions. Attempting to dissect the paradigm of the imperially inherited conflict, Guest speaker presented the internal dynamics of the two states. Though leadership in Pakistan were inclined to a peace settlement several times, institutionalization of enmity within the military has hindered the success of any such initiatives. Within the Indian context, the contemporary tug-of-war between Secularism and Sectarian texture of Indian politics has nursed anti-Pakistan forces, with little tolerance towards acts of bilateral cooperation.

As per Professor Muni, skepticism of South Asian states towards the Indian approach of Multilateralism was a major obstruction to South Asian solidarity. In this regard, he set straight the fact of the evident highest population, territory and economic trajectories of India in comparison to its neighbors. Hence, the Guest Speaker established the fact that the fear of an Indian hegemony is stemmed from the said structural anomaly of the South Asian power polarization. The non-reciprocal approach of the Gujral Doctrine, PM Vajpayee’s notion of shared prosperity

and PM Modi's neighborhood first policy was taken as corroborations to validate the Indian commitment towards Regionalism. Yet, an important reservation was established in this regard. The Guest Speaker stated that though India hails the idea of Multilateralism, such efforts will not gain ground compromising its vital interests. However, lack of the delivery deficit of the Indian Foreign Policy has hindered the harnessing of Multilateralism. As Professor Muni has identified the tardy progress of the of initiatives and visions of India has not only blocked effective integration, but has also eroded the Indian leadership role in the region.

What might be seemed on the surface as Indian interventionism, according to the Speaker was the forced entanglement of India into the internal affairs of other South Asian states. Inevitable propinquity of India to its neighbors and spill over effect were pointed as reasons for the cause of such quagmires.

The proactive role of extra-regional powers in South Asia was labelled as a catalyst for the ignite of suspicions of the South Asian neighbors towards India. Therein, the role of the most prominent extra-regional powers in the region was equated with Hegemonic Multilateralism. This existed during the cold war era, where orientation of the cooperation was decided on the terms laid by the leading power. The speaker brought out similar characters of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as most of its developmental engagements with smaller South Asian states are unilaterally decided by China.

The underlying tone of the discussion was focused on addressing the misconceptions of South Asian states towards the hegemony of India. It was also highlighted that India needs to deliver more comprehensively in their Foreign Policy, by maintaining an accommodative position towards its neighbors.