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INDIA'S REGIONAL DIPLOMACY REACHES OUTER SPACE

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In May 2017, India launched the GSAT-9, also dubbed the South Asia Satellite, aiming to provide space-enabled services to other South Asian countries.[1] This initiative is part of New Delhi's broader effort to demonstrate India's rising global stature and the progress of its space program, while also bolstering the country's neighborhood diplomacy, enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity, and improving service delivery.

The satellite presents an intricate array of opportunities for policymakers from India and other regional states, though harnessing its prospects in a region marked by historical diplomatic and security tensions will be challenging as well.

THE SATELLITE AND INDIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD DIPLOMACY

A peaceful and prosperous neighborhood is critical for India's great power aspirations. As part of New Delhi's neighborhood-first foreign policy agenda, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has prioritized South Asia.[2] A key objective of India's foreign policy in the region is to overcome obstacles to regional integration and to broaden the scope for cooperation without appearing hegemonic. Initiatives like the South Asia Satellite provide a conducive means of pursuing these objectives. This project arguably is the first opportunity for India to harness its activities in outer space for distinct foreign policy goals.

Modi first put forward the idea of a dedicated satellite for South Asia in June 2014, barely a month after he extended a historic invitation to the leaders of all the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) states to his swearing-in ceremony. At the launch of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle, Modi urged the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to develop a satellite for SAARC member states, saying: "Today, I ask our Space community, to take up the challenge, of developing a SAARC Satellite - that we can dedicate to our neighbourhood, as a gift from India. A satellite, that provides a full range of applications and services, to all our neighbours."[3]

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The satellite, which India launched in May 2017, is a geosynchronous satellite featuring twelve Ku-band transponders to facilitate a range of communications-related and meteorological applications.[4] It has a planned mission life of more than twelve years.[5] The roughly 2-ton satellite cost an estimated 235 crore rupees (approximately $36 million), and it was built, financed, and operated by ISRO.[6] Participating states in the region only are bearing the cost of their respective ground systems, although they have been encouraged to provide feedback, voice concerns about the project, and send representatives to an intergovernmental team that will manage the satellite.[7]

SOUTH ASIAN RESPONSES

It is an axiom of international relations that the widening and deepening of institutionalized channels of consultation tend to enhance cooperation. The South Asia Satellite is meant to facilitate regional cooperation by supplementing existing mechanisms, such as the SAARC. New Delhi's decision to make the satellite's technological services widely accessible to its neighbors is expected to not only generate diplomatic goodwill toward India in the region but also to help spur economic growth.

It would, however, be nothing short of hyperbole to assert that the satellite will automatically usher in amity between India and its South Asian neighbors in the near future. Generally speaking, other South Asian states sometimes perceive India to be an overbearing power. India's involvement in South Asia has historically been marked by tensions between New Delhi's avowed principles of noninterference and sporadic external interventions in neighboring states. India has consciously sought to maintain a position of primacy in the region by entering into what it terms friendship treaties with smaller states like Bhutan and Nepal. Such treaties are meant to ensure Indian noninterference in these states' domestic affairs, encourage strategic collaboration, and facilitate certain benefits (such as aid from India) in return for a measure of Indian influence on their foreign policies.

SAARC, meanwhile, often has been mired in tensions since its establishment in 1985. There has been intermittent conflict between India and Pakistan, as well as occasional friction between India and other neighbors. In its roughly thirty years of existence, the annual SAARC Summit, usually attended by members' heads of state, has only been organized successfully eighteen times due to various political complications. The nineteenth summit—which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan in November 2016—was postponed when Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka withdrew their participation after a cross-border terrorist attack on an Indian Army camp in Kashmir by proxies from Pakistan. The Indian Army responded with punitive surgical strikes on terrorist sites along the Line of Control that demarcates the Indian- and Pakistani-controlled regions of Kashmir.[8]

The initial responses from South Asian states to India's satellite initiative, perhaps unsurprisingly, ranged from cautious optimism to outright apprehension—a testament to India's complex relations with its neighbors. Sri Lanka was the first country to officially assent to the project, but it did not do so without expressing some apprehension. Dhaka and Kabul, meanwhile, were skeptical, although the former was eventually assuaged and brought on board. Afghanistan seemed to welcome the move, but Kabul still had not formally joined the initiative by the time the satellite was launched.[9]

In part, these misgivings may stem from regional states' concerns about the implications of the

South Asia Satellite for their own respective space endeavors. Dhaka is hoping to make progress on its own geostationary communications satellite, Bangabandhu-1, and it announced a deal with the European aerospace firm Thales Alenia Space in 2015 to build and launch it by December 2017.[10] Similarly, Afghanistan is concerned because the South Asia Satellite's position overlaps with the orbital slot of its own communications satellite, Afghansat 1, which has been in operation since 2014.[11]

Pakistan's reaction to the South Asia Satellite has been particularly noteworthy. Despite initial displays of enthusiasm, Islamabad soon expressed misgivings about the satellite's implications for the security of Pakistan's telecommunications sector, a fear that underscores the historical animosity between India and Pakistan. Islamabad mistakenly feared that India's effective control over the communications satellite could allow New Delhi to intercept Pakistani satellite communications for strategic purposes.[12]

Pakistan, however, didn't need to be apprehensive about its data security since it need not have used the joint satellite for secure communications.[13] It would have been free to route its civilian communications through the South Asia Satellite and use a separate, secure satellite for its strategic communications. Furthermore, military satellite communications are mostly channeled through X band (super high frequency) or occasionally through specific segments of ultra high frequency (UHF) band or Ka band frequencies; in contrast, the GSAT-9 relies on Ku-band frequencies, which are typically used for civilian and commercial broadcast and are not suitable for military communications. Beyond that, India would not need to rely on the highly publicized GSAT-9 for espionage purposes, given India's existing technical intelligence capabilities. Interestingly, after the launch of the satellite, the Pakistani Foreign Office asserted that concerns over espionage were "unfounded" and instead cited India's refusal to collaborate as the reason for Pakistan's eventual withdrawal from the project.[14] The fledgling Pakistani Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission is the only South Asian space program apart from ISRO with satellite launch capabilities, but its technology, financial position, and management remain severely deficient.[15]

In June 2015, Pakistan offered to provide technical and financial assistance for the satellite project and then asked that the project be brought under SAARC authority.[16] India rejected both offers and continued to proceed on the project, since New Delhi held that the satellite was an Indian gift and, therefore, not a SAARC satellite per se but an Indian satellite for SAARC. Similarly, in August of that same year, the SAARC Secretariat based in Kathmandu sought to refer the project to SAARC's Technical Committee on Science and Technology.[17] Not only did the secretariat lack the technical and managerial skills and facilities for an endeavor of this scale, but such a move had the potential to bog the project down with bureaucratic red tape. Consequently, India turned down the secretariat's proposal as well. It was later announced that Pakistan had opted out of the project in March 2016.[18] The joint project, initially named the SAARC Satellite, was renamed the South Asia Satellite.

It is evident from India's approach to the satellite that New Delhi conceives of the project as an Indian satellite for SAARC rather than a SAARC satellite. Pakistan's reaction to the South Asia Satellite prompted India to clarify that it would go ahead with the project regardless of who was on board, a move that epitomizes a growing tendency of the Modi administration to bypass Pakistan when it comes to initiatives for regional cooperation. Similarly, in 2015, New Delhi utilized a subregional mechanism between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal to ink

a motor vehicle agreement after Islamabad objected to a similar road connectivity initiative during the 2014 SAARC Summit.[19]

More broadly, in a marked departure from past practice, Indian diplomacy seems to be showing signs of prioritizing practical foreign policy outcomes at the expense of procedure. While Indian diplomacy had previously shown a long-standing tendency to pursue lofty goals or abstract ideals, India's foreign policy is now increasingly marked by more tangible outcomes. This transformation has been in the making for some time, and the South Asia Satellite is a testament to this shift. For instance, India has held regular consultations with its South Asian neighbors about their specific technological and developmental requirements for the South Asia Satellite.

This has been a welcome break from the past. A wide chasm has often existed between New Delhi's promises and its performance in the region. Even the launch of the South Asia Satellite, initially slated for December 2016, was plagued by delays.[20] Such setbacks risk undermining the credibility of Indian diplomatic overtures in an era in which global politics evolves by the day, if not by the hour. These kinds of pitfalls need to be minimized and managed more adroitly if India expects to be taken more seriously to a degree commensurate to the expanding potential of New Delhi's economic, military, and soft power.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

At present, the South Asia Satellite stands to benefit Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Bhutan and the Maldives will likely benefit the most because, unlike the other South Asian states, they do not currently have space programs of their own.[21] Afghanistan has not made a formal commitment yet, but efforts are still under way to bring Kabul on board.[22]

The South Asia Satellite aims to enhance bilateral and multilateral engagement and cooperation. But although participating states stand to benefit from a range of services, a complete picture of the ventures that the satellite will make possible or the interstate negotiations such cooperation will entail has not emerged in the public domain yet. From available official documents and media reports, it is fair to assume that the satellite's primary function is to improve connectivity and the delivery of public services. The Indian government's statement marking the launch of the satellite mentioned that it would pave the way for direct-to-home television, Internet connectivity, tele-education, telemedicine, and disaster management support during natural disasters.[23] The satellite is also expected to help support meteorological applications, fishing and agricultural advisory notices, and natural resource mapping. Given South Asia's geographical and geological diversity and the high frequency of natural disasters like cyclones and earthquakes in the region, space-enabled services that augment natural resource management and disaster response will benefit affected states immensely.

The South Asia Satellite should be the first step toward making sure that such potential cooperation abounds. For example, satellite-enabled projects that involve cross-border management of common resources and other challenges could potentially greatly improve regional cooperation with minimal political costs. There are significant geographical features in South Asia that transcend political boundaries, such as the Himalayan Mountains, the Thar Desert, the Bay of Bengal, the Sundarbans forest, transboundary rivers,

and coastlines. Joint projects could help mitigate environmental degradation and weather-related disasters in these areas.

Other specific Indian space projects could also be reconfigured to benefit other South Asian states. For instance, the Indian OceanSat-1, a remote-sensing satellite designed for ocean research, helped increase fishing yields almost twofold between 1999 and 2009, while satellite-enabled Cyclone Warning Centers have prevented the loss of life and livelihood on India's cyclone-prone eastern coast.[24] Projects like these can be adapted to benefit other littoral states in the Indian Ocean. Satellite images and remote-sensing facilities in India also have helped improve understanding of the declining snow cover of the Himalayan Mountains, measure forest cover, prevent forest fires, support projects related to urban planning and rural land use, and determine the likelihood of natural disasters occurring.[25] ISRO's 461 Village Resource Centers provide several space technology–enabled services like telemedicine, tele-education, telefisheries, agriculture-related advisories, land and water resource management, and skill development and vocational training for India's rural populations.[26]

Such initiatives can be studied for replication in other South Asian states given that the Indian space program is hailed as a pioneer in the developmental applications of space technology. India has already offered South Asian states free positioning services through its regional navigational system, as well as the use of its satellite-based GPS navigational system.[27] Making the constellation of Indian satellites dedicated to this navigational system work with the South Asia Satellite would be a logical future step toward further regional connectedness.

Given all this potential, India is well-placed to explore these opportunities to provide greater benefits to its South Asian neighbors. The South Asia Satellite should be part of coherent, regular steps to expand the scope of cooperation and mutual assistance in the Indian subcontinent. Investments in space technology typically have a multiplier effect on countries' gross national product, so efforts to identify potential cooperative avenues of mutual interest through joint working groups are likely to be welcomed in other South Asian capitals.[28]

The South Asia Satellite may pave the way for India to showcase a developmental model based on space technology that would further Indian interests through regional integration. The successful execution of such a vision could help India make progress toward its great power aspirations, the unstated but perennial driver of Indian foreign policy. India arguably is adopting a diplomatically nimble, smart-power approach to South Asia through its space diplomacy, and New Delhi would be well-advised to continue this practice.

CONCLUSION

In essence, India is embarking on an ambitious endeavor to deliver public goods to its neighbors and foster regional connectivity and integration. This, in turn, could potentially open further avenues to engagement with other South Asian states and lead to a more cooperative and positive-sum regional environment rather than one driven by conflict and zero-sum calculations. The onetime Austrian chancellor and statesman Klemens von Metternich, who strove for peace among fractious states and competing interests almost two centuries back, once observed that it is the process of meaningful

interactions that makes the tongue loose and the heart open, and such an approach can eventually outweigh cold, hard calculations even among suspicious actors. Through the South Asia Satellite and other initiatives, India is quietly asserting its role as an emerging power and a global leader. New Delhi would do well to remember Metternich's profound insight as the contemporary global order undergoes periodic instability driven by the shift of the international system's economic and political axis from the West to the East.

Nevertheless, several challenges could derail this innovative enterprise. Other South Asian states' indigenous space programs could reduce the number of countries that benefit from the South Asia Satellite. Similarly, there is a risk that the satellite initiative could remain just another episodic mega-project without regular and sustained follow-up on the part of India. Most importantly, while technology may complement diplomacy, it can rarely substitute for it. Deepening integration and cooperation in a region marked by historical animosities and political prejudices is not for the faint-hearted.

A leading state must bear the cost of certain public goods to sustain its preeminence and garner legitimacy in the international order—a principle India cannot and should not underestimate when it comes to its neighborhood. The road to global leadership starts with regional diplomacy and, for India, outer space has emerged as a promising venue for projecting its influence. As such, the launch of the South Asia Satellite is noteworthy and is bound to have significant implications for India, the region, and beyond in the years to come.

NOTES

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