

Seminar: China's Influence in Central Europe and the Case of South Asia

December 2020

- On 22nd December, 2020, the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted a private, online seminar titled “China’s Influence in Central Europe and the Case of South Asia” as part of its ‘China in South Asia’ (CISA) Research Project.
- **Mr. Filip Šebok**, Fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague, was the guest speaker for this event. **Ambassador Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and **Prof. Jabin Jacob**, Associate Professor, Shiv Nadar University were the lead discussants.
- The seminar was moderated by **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, CSEP.

This seminar was an exploratory discussion on China’s objectives in South Asia and the non-economic agencies harnessed by China to expand its influence in the region. Following introductory remarks by Amb. Menon, Mr. Šebok, presented on his research work and key findings from his on-going project called MapInfluence, which tracks China’s rising influence in countries of Central Europe. Amb. Menon and Prof. Jacob deliberated upon the comparative aspect of China’s influence in India and South Asia. The key takeaways from the discussion are below:

1. Is the ‘China way’ different from previous rising powers?

Amb. Menon provided preliminary comments for the seminar and posed a question to the participants – “Is China different from other great powers?” A comparison between the US and China was drawn while factoring in smaller nations. Some participants alluded to the fact that an impartial distinction should be made while comparing the two countries. This argument was put forward because different non-economic means like granting scholarships and development aid are among the tools that superpowers use to generate goodwill. In response, Prof. Jacob argued that China’s behaviour

differs from other superpowers but has some similarities with the US. As the US remains the benchmark for rising powers in the global setting, aping American behaviour to some degree is only natural. However, he also pointed out the different methods of Chinese influence, namely the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) emphasis on government-to-government learning and its interactions with political parties of other countries. He provided the example of the CPC’s interaction with SLPP (Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna) in Sri Lanka.

2. Toolkit of China’s diplomacy

Mr. Šebok, in his presentation, described China’s expanding diplomatic toolkit in Central Europe. He explained that the toolkit for China’s influence operations in the region comprised of six types of relationships: government-government, para-diplomacy (sub-national or regional governments participating in the international realm), people to people, government to people, company to people, and company to government. He also spoke about China’s carrot and stick approach. In his findings, the stick (coercion) approach was exercised when the question of Chinese sovereignty was raised. In the carrot approach, China seeks to develop

cordial relations with the elites, especially in Czech Republic and Hungary. However, Mr. Šebok believes this approach is not sustainable in the long run as this makes China solely dependent on the current ruling establishment. Some participants were quick to respond with the fact that economic aspects contributed majorly to the toolkits for Chinese diplomacy in South Asia and therefore the non-economic contributions to the toolkits need to be teased out and segregated from the economic contribution. Prof. Jacob further pointed out that linkages between Indian elites and China don't exist directly and therefore, it might be difficult for China to apply similar strategy or the same toolkit in the South Asian context.

3. The efficacy of China's influence

Amb. Menon questioned the efficacy of the non-economic tools and instruments used by China to gain influence and their success in achieving China's objectives. In response, Prof. Jacob highlighted the importance to distinguish Chinese influence into two categories - outcomes of this influence and tools used to achieve this influence. Amb. Menon further added that the Americans have discovered, and the Chinese are slowly figuring out, that economic influence does not automatically translate into soft power or their desired political outcomes. He further stressed that consideration needs to be given to how receptive the recipient states are to China's influence as they have the voice to shape outcomes of this relationship.

4. Media Control

Media is one of the most influential and cogent tools that can impact public opinion in a country. Mr. Šebok, in his presentation, gave an example where two media outlets in Czech Republic (one television channel and another weekly newspaper) when acquired by a Chinese company, CEFC China Energy, started broadcasting positive content about China. CEFC China Energy even tried to acquire CME (Central European Media Enterprises), which is largest television group in the region. However, the effort was stalled and with help from MapInfluence's advocacy, media was included in the draft of the Czech investment screening regulation, which was later tabled in the Czech Parliament. Amb. Menon highlighted how China has always filtered the content of the Chinese language media for the Chinese community around the world. However, in recent times by controlling the mainstream media of other countries, he argued, China wants to go beyond the Chinese diaspora circle.

Prof. Jacob mentioned that the websites of Chinese embassies based in South Asia are informative portals and important sources of information on Chinese propaganda. He further highlighted how Chinese ambassadors in these countries frequently write for the local media. He also provided the example of the Chinese ambassador to Nepal who writes not only for English language newspapers but her articles also appear on Nepali vernacular media.

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