

Press Release

"India's transformation to be difficult if the country turns inwards": Ambassador Shivshankar Menon at CSEP's Flagship Seminar on his new book

28 April 2021, New Delhi: Speaking at the launch of his new book, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*, Shivshankar Menon, Former National Security Advisor and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), highlighted that the India-Asia story has been relatively neglected and will become increasingly important over the coming years.

Moderated by Constantino Xavier, Fellow at CSEP, the seminar featured Shivshankar Menon; Stephen Smith, Professor of Public International Law at the University of Western Australia (UWA); Bilahari Kausikan, Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2013, and Rakesh Mohan, President and Distinguished Fellow, CSEP.

Menon started the proceedings by raising a very critical issue in India's recent policy direction: that the country has been turning inwards in the last few years - whether it is in raising tariffs or walking out of the RCEP. He added, "If we ignore that and turn in on ourselves, we are making it harder for India to transform into the country we would like it to be". That is the book's key message: that we need to be more engaged; that we need to go out and work with the world. He cautioned, "We are entering a dangerous decade".

Referring to Southeast Asia's contradictory perceptions of India as a relevant stakeholder in Asia that could shape the balance of power, Bilahari Kausikan noted that "India by its sheer existence has geopolitical significance, regardless of whether there are proactive or passive foreign policies." But he also questioned whether it would be "sufficient today for India to continue to lie back at ease on the couch of its existential geopolitical relevance? India's position in Asian geopolitics is consistently important but also consistently disappointing."

Bringing in the perspective from Australia, Stephen Smith highlighted that "the India-Australia economic relationship must catch up with the strategic and security relationship. This is a large piece of unfinished work... and is an essential part of completing our relationship."

Quad, China and the Indo-Pacific

"India's relevance today is underscored by the new concept of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Unlike in the 1990s, today, no ASEAN member would object to Indian participation in any new forum or closer engagement," said Bilahari Kausikan. He added that, "India's geopolitical importance will be enhanced from Asia's natural multipolarity as a check on China's ambitions."

Additionally Stephen Smith observed that, "the reason we have seen a productive reincarnation of the Quad is that China has changed, and India, Japan and Australia's attitude towards China has changed. The Quad is useful but will not solve all our problems. If it was a quintuplet and included Indonesia, it may be more reflective of our region and better placed to manage or balance China's activities."

Myanmar, India and Asean

Talking about the crisis in Myanmar, Shivshankar Menon said, "Democracy in Myanmar is India's goal, but in the process of seeking democracy, there are more immediate issues that we need to solve today, and we don't want to see the collapse of Myanmar." Noting the convergent views between India and ASEAN, he emphasised that ASEAN "is best placed" to seek a way out of the Myanmar crisis.

Economic research agenda

Concluding the timely discussion, Rakesh Mohan said, "there is a dense set of East and Southeast Asian economic structures and financial institutions developed over the last 25 years, and unfortunately, India has kept out of most of them, whether RCEP or the Chiang Mai Initiative. India cannot afford to lie back but must work hard to join Asia's new economic arrangements."

Building on the key themes of Shivshankar Menon's book, Mohan emphasised that CSEP will be focusing its research agenda on identifying opportunities to accelerate India's geo-economic re-engagement with Asia.

For media enquiries, please contact:

Zehra Kazmi

Email: zkazmi@csep.org