



# Nationalism, Great Power and Conflict in South Asia

Event Summary

Thursday, March 23, 2023

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the thirteenth edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series with **Prof. Manjari Chatterjee Miller**, Senior Fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and faculty at Boston University on her upcoming book project **to understand the long chain of conflict that shaped modern South Asia**.
- The lead discussants were **Amb. Shivshankar Menon**, former National Security Advisor of India and Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, **Dr Rajesh Rajagopalan**, Professor, Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University and **Dr Jayashree Vivekananda**, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, South Asian University.
- The discussion was moderated by **Dr Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security, CSEP. Participants included former diplomats and military personnel, scholars from leading think tanks and universities from India and abroad. The Tiffin Talk Series features scholars presenting their recent, evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India's foreign and security affairs.

## Developing an outline

Miller discussed how nationalism in South Asia is often associated with and defined as anti-colonial nationalism, as the South Asian elites vied to gain political and economic freedom from the British, seek self-rule and parallelly develop the idea of what it means to be a nation. She discussed how defining a nation and nationalism itself is a daunting task, and it is even more so in the case South Asia given its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The role of external powers often adds another layer to be articulated, dissected and understood. South Asia is no stranger to this complexity. With the withdrawal of the British from the region, other great powers emerged and filled the vacuum. Miller's upcoming book project aims to assess the role of these great powers and the nationalisms that responded to them in the conflicts that have come to dog South Asia. Miller highlighted that

nothing in this world exists in a vacuum, and her book project aims to understand the interconnected nature of conflicts in South Asia along with the larger geopolitical developments, tracing them from the 19th century up to the present. The participants discussed how the historical and present context of South Asia led to the development of nationalism with unique characteristics that are distinct from Western nationalism.

## External powers and the region

Participants agreed on the importance of the role of the great powers in shaping the conflicts of South Asia and they discussed how the legacy of colonialism and the Cold War-era geopolitical dynamics influenced nationalism in the region. A few participants observed how as superpowers, the United States (US) and the Soviet Union (USSR) sought to extend their influence in South Asia,

supporting or opposing nationalist movements based on their strategic interests. A participant exemplified this point by noting that the US supported anti-communist regimes like Pakistan, while the Soviet Union supported socialist and communist movements in countries like India and Nepal. The discussion also included the role of great power competition in South Asia in fuelling conflicts, such as the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir and its contribution to nationalist sentiments and tensions. The role of the USA and the USSR were also highlighted, for instance, in the case of the 1962 India-China war and the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars. A participant also noted that “great power intervention” could be assessed as “great power strategy”, as their support and opposition in the region was a well thought out and curated exercise. Many in the room voiced the importance of the role and thinking of the South Asia political elites, who often used these great powers to further their political agendas in the region. Harking to the idea of South Asian agency, the discussion centred on the sentiment that South Asia’s elites “wanted a reason to fight, and used the great powers as the reason” to do so.

## Stories of conflict mitigation

Springboarding from the idea that the “great powers were one amongst many who were occupying the territory during the time”, the discussion noted various efforts made to mitigate conflicts in South Asia. While conflicts in the region were interconnected, South Asia is not a region defined solely by its conflicts. Throughout the region, even as early as the 1920s there were solidarity movements which “tempered nationalism”. The participants noted how the issue of conflict, nationalism and the role of great powers was not just a South Asian issue, but a larger Asian issue. The discussion focused on juxtaposing nationalism with transnationalism, as it prompted larger forms of solidarity, as the idea of “Asianism” developed. While larger summitry-level developments focused on mitigating conflicts, these were heavily supported by sub-diplomatic encounters. The Afro-Asian solidarity movements of the 20th century stand as good examples of these efforts that

went on to shape the Bandung Conference of 1955. These were important in the face of great power competition and the development of the geopolitical arms race. Another example of this sub-diplomatic cooperation was the People’s Bandung held in New Delhi in 1955, which was a conference that leap-frogged the national level. It cut across Cold War blocs and blurred the official and non-official divides. Participants noted the importance of transnational solidarity and the existence of nationalism from “above and below,” as observed by one participant.

## Defining the region and evolving nationalism

The discussion also touched upon issues of defining “South Asia” as a region. One of the participants noted how the extremely diverse nature of the region results in difficulty in establishing interrelations between conflicts. Discussing how the nature of conflicts in Nepal is vastly different from the ones in Sri Lanka or Myanmar, and very different from those that characterise the “AfPak” region, participants cautioned towards the complexities arising in tracing interconnections in this region. The participants discussed what conflicts should then be considered as part of this book project, as there are multiple nationalisms in the South Asian region. One of the participants noted that “the problem of not being able to define nationalism in South Asia should not be viewed as a problem but as a unique feature”. The definition of South Asia should not stop short of Myanmar in the East, especially if the history of nationalism is traced back to the 19th century, for Burma was especially important then. This also spurred conversation around the issue of minority nationalism in the South Asian context, with examples of the Mizo and Assamese nationalisms, which emerged as a counter to the statist narratives and questioned the hegemony of the elites. Participants discussed how the nature of nationalism in South Asia may not fit traditional theories or definitions, and it may have evolved in response to various historical, social, and political factors. It is, therefore, important to consider the lived experiences of people in South Asia and their perceptions of nationalism.

*All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.*

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