

Major Power Competition and the Internal Politics of Smaller States in Southern Asia

Event Summary

Friday, January 19, 2024

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the 21st edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series on ‘**Major Power Competition and the Internal Politics of Smaller States in Southern Asia**’ with **Paul Staniland**, Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago.
- The speaker discussed his ongoing book project that studies the impact of major power rivalries on the domestic politics of smaller ‘third party’ states in Asia. He used longitudinal case studies of India, Nepal, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, etc. to build his argument.
- **Navnita Chaddha Behera**, Professor of Political Science, Delhi University, joined as discussant. The discussion was moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, CSEP. Participants of the discussion included journalists and scholars from India’s leading universities and think tanks.
- 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.

Major power competition in ‘third party’ states

The speaker explained how great power competitions play out in smaller states that become sites of destabilising proxy wars. External competition plays an uneven, variable role in these smaller states. Governments can either align with one power and use outside support to make themselves stronger or they are relatively autonomous and play their own game. The speaker suggests that there is an interplay between domestic and international circumstances driving the outcomes.

The first variable is the salience of external rivalries in the domestic politics of the smaller states. There could be an overlap between the major power competition and the ethnic, nationalist, and regional divisions within a country, or the international issue might be core “stuff” of domestic politics. The second variable is the concen-

tration of domestic political power in the smaller state. This could range from dominant governments (either authoritarian or democratic) to totally fragmented, divided systems.

Variation over time

The speaker argues that smaller states can be categorised into four different outcomes based on the intensity and interaction of each of these variables. These outcomes are polarisation, contestation, embedded alignment, and autonomy. The speaker complicates this matrix by arguing that states can move from one category to another over time. The causes for such can be dramatic shifts in government power, or intensification of external rivalries, etc.

The book seeks to compare controlled cases to explain divergences and convergences in high level of credible detail. For this purpose, the author uses broad cross-case

comparisons (medium-N), specific paired-comparisons (small-N), and relies on primary and secondary sources like archival material, survey data and historical literature on the Cold War. The speaker uses paired comparisons between India-Indonesia, Nepal-Sri Lanka, and from Southeast Asia as evidence. Based on these case studies, he argues that smaller states cannot be automatically assumed to reproduce external actors' priorities. The influence of external strategies is mediated by domestic preconditions in 'third-party' states.

Turning the 'gaze' to major powers

The discussant commended the ambitiousness of the project because of its vast geography, long time curve and the potential to generate a wealth of data. She further remarked that the large scope of research could further include the role of transnational linkages and non-state actors, as well as considering the influence of smaller state politics on major state competition. She cautioned against treating the smaller states as 'objects of competition,' thereby denying them agency. Finally, the discussant implored the author to explore non-western perspectives, particularly in defining concepts like 'weak state,' and in the language employed to describe and categorise smaller states.

Participants appreciated the valuable combination of theoretical and empirical approaches in the book and the attempt to bridge the fields of International Relations and Comparative Politics. Further, it was suggested that power could be theorised in a relativist sense and the model could account for colonialism and its impact on

smaller states. Some participants also noted the need for greater explanation on selection of cases and time periods. For example, a participant noted that Nepal underwent many political upheavals and changes in political regime between 2006 to 2023.

Theorisation in International Relations

While some participants praised the clear dichotomy between major powers and smaller states, others argued that there was need to better theorise weakness and dominance in International Relations. One participant, for example, contested the labeling of India as a small power or weak state. Another participant called for decolonising narratives in International Relations by 'remapping global and provincialising the metropole.'

Participants also highlighted the nuances in domestic politics of South Asian states like Nepal and Sri Lanka and the necessity to comprehend the deviations from western norms in working of state institutions. A participant noted the absence of variables like state capacity and intent in the framework. There was also discussion over the role of non-state actors for instance, the Taliban in Afghanistan. Participants remarked that the framework presented in the book is useful to understand the emerging rivalries in South Asia and the impact on smaller states like Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, etc. The session concluded with a discussion of the importance of the historical theoretical approach adopted by the author, and future pathways for research.

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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