Tensions of Expertise and Capital: Perspectives from India on International Developmentalism

Event Summary | Thursday, 21 March, 2024

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the 23rd edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series on '**Tensions of Expertise and Capital: Perspectives from India on International Developmentalism**' with **Pariroo Ratan**, PhD student at Harvard University and Visiting Research Associate, CSEP.
- The conversation focused on replicating the success of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) to other Global South countries utilising capital from the Global North, exploring the tensions and synergies between national boundaries, global capital and technical expertise.
- The discussants included **Shivshankar Menon**, former National Security Advisor of India and Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and **Rudra Chaudhuri**, Director, Carnegie India. **Pooja Ramamurthi**, Associate Fellow, CSEP moderated the discussion. Participants included scholars from leading think tanks and universities in India as well as members of the diplomatic community.
- 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.

Drawing on insights from discussions during India's G-20 presidency, the speaker addressed the transfer and financing of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) originating in India to other countries across the Global South. DPI refers to a digital network essential for connecting people to a range of goods and services. The initial remarks aimed to explore the following overarching inquiries: What strategies has India employed to cultivate trust among countries in the global dissemination of DPI? and what idea of the Global South is conjured through this process? The speaker used a comparative framework to examine the differences in India's and China's foreign policy concerning the export of technological capabilities.

To illuminate how India is fostering the trust of other countries in a mistrusting and fragmented geopolitical context, three key points were underscored. First, technology development and transfer are driven by private organisations rather than through state-centric initiatives. Second, funding for DPI primarily originates from "global capital," sourced from private philanthropies in the Global North. Third, India seeks to achieve global recognition for its efforts in digital diplomacy with other countries.

The speaker defined the Global South beyond mere geographical confines, portraying it as a transnational political entity rooted in shared experiences of subjugation. As states attempt to establish themselves as leading voices in the Global South, the speaker discussed varying rhetorics of leadership. To illustrate this, comparisons were made between India and China. India's approach was noted for its focus on horizontal or fraternal relationships with other Global South countries. Within this rhetoric, DPI emerges as a software tool facilitating knowledge transfer and offering solutions for issues of governance and public service delivery, common between India and other states in the developing world. In contrast,

China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) was highlighted as a form of digital trade primarily focused on hardware, establishing a more vertical relationship with states to challenge Western-centric development paradigms.

The introduction and evolution of DPI in the global landscape prompted various areas of consideration and questions from the participants:

Digital Public Infrastructure: What is it?

Discussants proposed revisiting the conceptual understanding of DPI before assessing its geopolitical relevance. They emphasised examining aspects such as software code – open-source or proprietary – and the potential benefits of DPI. Participants noted the absence of successful examples of DPI export to other countries to date. Discussants asked the author to consider whether DPI was viewed as a means of making citizens legible and addressed its inclusion and efficiency benefits. Further inquiry was recommended to discern how DPI differs from other forms of developmental partnerships or avenues of triangular cooperation. Additionally, the value of substantiating India's rhetoric around DPI with empirical evidence from the ground was recognised.

Global South Leadership

The comments from participants challenged the notion of leadership, suggesting that the Global South may not necessarily require leaders or actively seek them out. Additionally, India's aspiration to become a leading voice in the Global South is seen as complex due to its positioning between the West and China, while still relying on Western funds to export its DPI. Questions arose about how India navigates the idea of leadership while maintaining its democratic principles. India presents itself as "one-of-many" within the Global South, in contrast to China's perception of itself as distinct. For instance, the G77 summit was referred to as G77 + China, highlighting China's separate identity within the Global South framework.

The distinction between India's DPI and China's DSR approach was further illuminated, with participants stating the significant differences in structure and governance between the two. It was noted that DPI is not intended as a geopolitical tool to challenge China, nor is China's tech transfer an attempt to compete with India, suggesting that the comparison between the two may be overstated. The speaker also mentioned that more work would be done to study how DPI functions as a tool within domestic politics beyond its international implications.

State vs. Private Sector

There were questions raised regarding the claim that India's DPI export is solely driven by private entities. Participants pointed out the involvement of state-associated organisations in developing crucial aspects of this technology. They also shed light on the evolving dynamics of DPI, trust, and global capital, noting the blurring between private and public domains. This development poses challenges in studying the access, control, and neutrality of DPI. An alternative approach suggested focusing on the political economy of these institutional structures and disaggregating the various actors involved.

National Boundaries

In discussions regarding DPI, the concept of sovereignty is deemed critical, prompting concerns about national boundaries and security. Some argued that the erasure of national boundaries is foundational to the formation of a global tech economy, given the direction of capital flow. Others countered, suggesting that DPI leads to a hardening rather than softening of national boundaries due to the growing priority of sovereignty. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that DPI's global expansion offers broad advantages in addressing its imminent challenges and mitigating risks related to data security, transportability, transparency, and accountability.

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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