South Asia's new satellite: Signaling public engagement for sustainable regional diplomacy?

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*The recent launch of the South Asia satellite funded by India demonstrates a new form of regional diplomacy. However, **Preeti Raghunath** writes that a communication and meteorology satellite will only go so far in building regional ties. She writes that the answer to sustained diplomatic engagement lies in promoting public diplomacy between the region's peoples.*

India's most recent foray in exerting its diplomatic weight in the South Asian region comes in the form of the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) GSLV-F09 South Asia communication satellite. Interestingly, this is the only satellite in the region that is funded indigenously, with the other countries in the region looking to external aid. As part of its neighbourhood first policy outlined in 2014, the Government of India has called the satellite 'an invaluable gift' to South Asia and Modi described the benefits as 'going a long way in meeting the developmental needs' of participating countries, boosting connectivity and providing improved infrastructure for tele-medicine, weather forecasting and disaster management.

However, the communication and meteorology satellite only covers seven of the eight countries of SAARC, the regional organisation whose slow death has been lamented for years now. Pakistan, which had initially shown enthusiasm in the project, backed out when India refused to accommodate the country's insistence on financial and technical contribution. This is also India's effort in ramping up its regional security apparatus, in terms of negotiating the larger South and Southeast Asian regional security complex. This may be seen in light of China's unquestionable expansive power and the world's growing focus on the larger Asia-Pacific region, as it has played out in its balance of power dynamics in the negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Expanding the ambit of diplomacy

While the launch of the satellite amply showcases India's diplomatic overtures in the region, the act in itself would not serve the country's raison d'être of continuing to wield influence and safeguard its strategic interests in its immediate neighbourhood, nor would it cater to being the sole system by which to track disaster warnings and climactic triggers. The answer to sustained diplomatic engagement, and a more pragmatic approach to the building of early warning systems and disaster mitigation apparatus, lies in focused and engaged public diplomacy. As the People's SAARC, "a network of organisations from regional 'civil societies'", created in the mid-1990s, comprising peoples' movements on various issues of the region, declared:

> *We, the people of South Asia, not only share a contiguous geographical space but also a social and cultural history that shapes our lifestyles, belief systems, cultural particularities, material practices and social relationships. Our natural environments are related, interdependent, and form elements of a common eco-system. There is a similarity in our life practices. Our belief systems and cultural practices influence/complement each other, thus exhibiting distinct similarities. On the other hand, the unique diversity of our region in all aspects has enriched the common heritage, and we celebrate a sustained history of mutual respect for one another.*

Even as commentators point to the withering away of the SAARC, the sentiments of the region's peoples like those expressed above only gain more currency in a world marked by naysayers of climate change realities, growing right-

wing populism, and deterministic appeals of civilization and nation. Public diplomacy, as people-to-people contact, and networked interaction that goes beyond national borders is the recognition of difference, even in the upholding of norms and values of common concern and benefit.

This is evident across communication and media policymaking fora in the region, upholding principles of multistakeholderism for a more open, secure, collaborative and just Internet, as seen in the recent and upcoming efforts towards the Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF) to be held in July. From engaging the youth in the region to deliberating varied models of multistakeholderism, the internet governance space has, in a WSIS+10 world that is at the cusp of what is being hailed as the fourth industrial revolution, seen public engagement as a key principle. Similarly, the regional and national networks and associations of advocates for community media in South Asia who have made sustained efforts in creating a third tier of broadcasting in some countries of the region make a similar case for approaching peoples' regional engagement. For instance, Sri Lanka and Nepal have been the first countries in the region to initiate community-based and community radio broadcasting, respectively. India and Bangladesh are the two countries in the region to have dedicated policies that recognise community radio as a third tier of broadcasting. Interesting initiatives focused on community video, newspapers and other multi-platform, hybrid media exist in the region. Collectives of film and art in the digital and offline spheres, and in the advocacy for plural media landscapes that allow for public engagement within and across countries in the region, are all initiatives that need to be brought under the purview of sustained efforts towards public diplomacy between the region's peoples.

Recognising human security for sustainable regional diplomacy

Any efforts in tackling anthropocenic changes, the challenges of digitising governance processes themselves, as also incisively building the country's security apparatus cannot overlook the potential in the ideas of public deliberation in sustaining these efforts and upholding human security. Governmental recognition of the complexities of the everyday engagement of its diverse populations, in the form of negotiating citizenship rights and civil liberties, freedom of expression and privacy concerns, community-based knowledge systems and their intellectual property, would go a long way towards this end. Collaboration with the region's peoples in policy processes governing these areas would qualify for and contribute to sustainable diplomacy in the region. This could happen in the form of addressing the more fluid mobility of people cutting across borders, their ways of redefining their own spaces, embracing peoples' dialogues on ground – all of which would only supplement and accentuate India's latest foray into redefining regional spatiality in South Asia, and promote progressive deliberative democracy in the region.

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