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South Asian satellite: A giant lift-off for regional integration

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The launch of the GSAT-9 satellite on May 5. Prime Minister Modi's space diplomacy has raised India's credibility in the eyes of the region and the world at large. Photo: AP

The launch of the South Asian satellite (GSAT-9) from India's Sriharikota rocket centre earlier this month is an extraordinary milestone in the history of a subcontinent fragmented by decades of petty politics and rivalries.

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The presence of heads of government of all seven nations at the inauguration of the satellite via videoconferencing, and their appreciative remarks about the project reify Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's broad vision of "sabka saath, sabka vikaas" (together with all, development for all).

Truth be told, not all of South Asia was present to raise a toast. Rather, it was a golden "Saarc minus one" moment. The one and only glaring absence was Pakistan, which chose to "opt out" of this mega connectivity initiative for fear of falling into India's sphere of influence. Pakistan's own rudimentary space programme relies heavily on its all-weather-ally China. Pakistan's elites believe that collaborating with an Indian-dominated venture such as GSAT-9 would compromise its national security.

While there is no doubt that satellites have civilian, military and intelligence applications, none of the other Saarc members — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives and Lanka — had any phobia of India spying or compromising their security through GSAT-9. The problem is Pakistan's ideological self-definition as the "non-India" or the "anti-India" party in South Asia. Islamabad would rather spite India than hold hands with the rest of the Saarc members for economic development and prosperity through a satellite that carries enormous benefits for disaster prevention, broadcasting, telemedicine, long-distance education, weather prediction, banking and Internet services.

Pakistan's attitude is to refuse to cave in to alleged Indian scientific, economic and cultural expansion while seeking favours from China for nuclear power, infrastructure investments and space technology.

The fact that none of the smaller Saarc countries is willing to buy its logic of boycotting every India-led attempt to integrate South Asia will make GSAT-9's success hard for Pakistan to digest. The consensus among Saarc countries to scrap their last summit meeting, scheduled to be held in Islamabad, and a growing recognition that jihadi extremism is the common enemy of the whole region, have marginalised Pakistan.

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throw spanners in the works, Mr Modi's proactive diplomacy has won hearts and minds and fostered unprecedented faith in India among its neighbours. Pakistan has been reduced from a chief obstructor of regional harmony to a mere objector that is being ignored and left behind.

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan said at the GSAT-9 launch that "the gap between talk and action is now bridged". He could have been alluding to India before Mr Modi, where big talk on proposed regional connectivity usually did not make it to implementation.

Mr Modi mooted the Saarc satellite in 2014 and delivered a high-tech product with transponders that can be customised to meet specific needs of each country in 2017. Fulfilling grand promises in good time and with high quality is the mark of a genuine regional leader.

Mr Modi's space diplomacy has raised India's credibility in the eyes of South Asia and the world at large. His clarion call at the GSAT-9 launch for "cooperation, not conflict; development, not destruction; and prosperity, no poverty" is not an empty shibboleth.

India under Mr Modi is finally walking the talk, putting its money (the South Asia satellite cost 4.5 billion Indian rupees, or S\$98.2 million) where its mouth is, and showing the way to progress.

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Space is a key emerging domain for global competition. Despite lacking the wealth and legacy investments of the United States, China and Russia, India is making up for lost time.

Already, India's frugal innovation in space has won worldwide acceptance and buy-in via commercial launching capabilities. In February this year, the Indian Space Research Organisation launched a record 104 satellites, 101 of which belonged to foreign countries, in rapid succession within 18 minutes. India's ultra-low-cost Mars orbiter mission— Mangalyaan — is another feather in its cap.

Saarc nations, barring the one misguided country, have realised that they have a dynamo in India's space advancements for lifting their respective populations out of deprivation.

Yet, India remains challenged by the fact that many Saarc nations besides Pakistan have chosen to join China's One Belt, One Road mega connectivity initiative.

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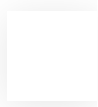
India lacks the financial heft that China brings to the table in developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Hence, Indian strategy has to perforce focus on low-cost, high-impact space diplomacy, Internet-based solutions such as the Pan African e-Network, and export of human resources from India to improve healthcare and education in poor countries.

Given these constraints on India’s foreign aid, Mr Modi’s positioning of his country as a player that transcends narrow self-interests and magnanimously generates public goods for neighbours and the wider international community is a monumental change.

GSAT-9 is a manifestation of a new India that, notwithstanding myriad problems of its own as a developing country and its limitations vis-a-vis China, is ready to take its place as a leading power. All of India has a reason to celebrate.

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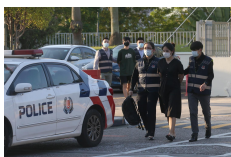


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