

South Asian uplift

The satellite is to be seen as a first step in a new journey. Even when its own capacity to deliver material assistance was limited, India was careful to support, and in some cases to underwrite, the developmental effort of its immediate South Asian neighbours. The troubled relationship with Pakistan has led that country to exclude itself from the Indian effort to share its development experience. All the others have drawn closer to India, finding advantage in better cooperation



India's success in launching a satellite designed specifically for South Asia has inaugurated a new era for the region. This part of the world has long been dependent on advanced countries for the hi-tech services and products it requires, and it is only in recent years that matters have changed as India's ability to develop sophisticated devices has grown and its mastery of advanced technologies has become more apparent. India has already made striking advances in space technology where it has found its way into what was a small and exclusive club, and has established itself as not just a user but also a significant provider of advanced space technology. There have been many important milestones along the way. At one stage, India's proficiency in satellite construction drew particular attention as a showcase for its skills in intricate and innovative design, to be followed in course by increasing ability to make large launch vehicles for space satellites. By now India has a recognized capacity to provide the whole package, and the satellite launched for the benefit of the SAARC region as a whole is an impressive testament to the country's advanced capacity.

The South Asian satellite launched by India has been lauded for the services it will provide for the region as a whole. With this, telecommunications and broadcasting between South Asian countries can be upgraded, along with services for the delivery of educational and medical programmes. To dramatize the achievement and the possibilities it now provides, Mr. Modi joined the Heads of the other participating countries in a multilateral link where they were able to converse with each other, in a concerted exchange that served to reinforce the sense of South Asian togetherness. This was labelled a form of 'space diplo-

macy', and it certainly showed how relatively easy communication between South Asian capitals had become a reality. The satellite was also expected to provide timely information about regional weather conditions, which can be of great practical value in places that are periodically struck by typhoons and may need to confront other adverse weather phenomena. Such services are of special significance at a time of rising international concern about the impact of global warming and its associated dangers.

While the rest of South Asia has come together in this endeavour, Pakistan has kept conspicuously aloof, for reasons that have not become clear. Relations between India and Pakistan are in a deep trough and that may be the main reason why Pakistan decided to keep out of a project that owes everything to India, but in this Pak decision there are echoes of past disagreements about how the affairs of SAARC should be conducted. The SAARC Charter permits smaller groups within the larger body to act collectively in promoting shared sub-regional interests which may not be of concern to every member. On at least one occasion, SAARC sub-groups have been convened under this charter provision and have been active, as for instance to bring interested parties together for discussions on the sharing of the Ganga and other Eastern waters. That particular initiative, which took place more than two decades ago, achieved little but it did show that SAARC could be flexible enough to give its imprimatur to initiatives that may not extend to all the member states. So even if Pakistan has

not gone along with the Indian-led satellite project, the enthusiastic support of the others promises it a flourishing future.

Another important development in Asia of the last few days is China's success in developing a passenger jet. This aircraft is seen as the harbinger of a fleet of aircraft for civilian use that in the long run could challenge the dominance of Boeing and Airbus, and thus create issues for the current world leaders in civil aviation. China has been eyeing the civil aviation market for many years and has steadily enhanced its capacity in that field. According to one account, it had developed the capacity to build an aircraft some years ago but still

lacked a suitable aero engine to complete the project. While China was advancing India did not lag behind, and had comparable achievements and ambitions. Both these large and fast developing Asian countries had vast internal markets for their ambitious plans in civil aviation, which in turn attracted the atten-

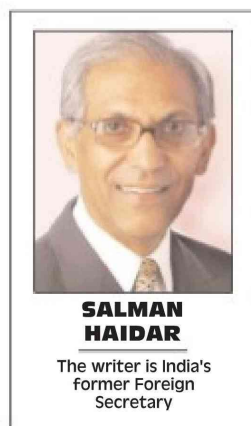
tion of the established manufacturers, so that aviation mega deals in Asia have become almost a routine affair. An intriguing possibility envisaged by some imaginative entrepreneurs was to try to promote some pooling of effort between the different parties in Asia and the West. What both the Asian giants lacked, it was said, was the ability to build aero engines of the requisite sophistication, which led to speculation about the viability of a pooled arrangement between the different parties; each has something to offer the others and they could benefit substantially if they could share their effort. However, there is little immediate possibility of any such development ~

the current discourse about India and China lays stress on the rivalry between them and not on matters where they may have common interests. Yet these common interests do exist, not least in their parallel dealings with advanced economic and technological partners in hi-tech industries.

Seen in a wider perspective, what is important about the satellite launch is the tangible evidence it provides of the priority India attaches to its immediate neighbourhood. The satellite, and all its attached facilities, represents a substantial investment by India, which could not have been undertaken when the country's resources were more limited. Today, our neighbours in South Asia have other alternatives for space-related technologies beside the Indian-designed project. But India has shown friendly intent and a readiness to share with its close associates, which can make a difference and permit the region to develop and hold its own in a competitive world.

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The troubled relationship with Pakistan has led that country to exclude itself from the Indian effort to share its development experience. All the others have drawn closer to India, finding advantage in better cooperation. There are strategic spinoffs in closer ties that could be of advantage to all sides but the main purpose of the more active Indian engagement in neighbourhood affairs must be to support development and prosperity from which all the parties benefit. It is in that spirit that the successful satellite launch was conceived and should be viewed.



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