



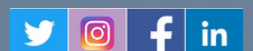
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**THE FUTURE OF SOUTH ASIA IN
INDIA'S GRAND STRATEGY
BY
DR HAPPYMON JACOB**

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THE FUTURE OF SOUTH ASIA IN INDIA'S GRAND STRATEGY
BY DR HAPPYMON JACOB
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Dr. Happymon Jacob initiated his lecture with the argument that the concept of 'South-Asia' no longer works for India's grand strategy – and that, it is time that we must start thinking beyond the artificial construct of 'South-Asia' and re-imagine our grand strategy. Dr. Jacob laid out his arguments as to why the concept of South-Asia constrains India's grand strategy.

The first way, it limits India's grand strategy is because 'South-Asia' as a construct limits India's region into India and its small neighbours, boxed in a fight with Pakistan, balanced by small states and increasingly dominated by China. The geographical smallness of South Asia creates a psychological constraint on our strategic elite – our politicians, thinkers, bureaucrats. Once we readily accept this mental barrier of only considering South-Asia as our immediate neighbourhood we are limiting ourselves in terms of our strategic vision.

The second way, it limits India's grand strategy in that India looks at the regions beyond South-Asia as its extended neighbourhood. Is West Asia our extended neighbourhood or neighbourhood? Is Indian Ocean Region our extended neighbourhood or neighbourhood? This framing of the region needs to be re-imagined and re-framed.

In the present context, 'South-Asia' is no longer India-centric due to the arrival of China. Now, in the present attempts of India trying to win South-Asia back from China, Dr. Jacob argues that India is playing a losing game in an already shrunken strategic theatre.

Dr. Jacob traces the genesis of the phrase 'South-Asia' which is relatively a new term. The post-colonial legacy of the British Raj was the emergence of the term 'Indian-Subcontinent' in the 1950s and 1960s. The phrase 'South-Asia' came into the strategic discourse once the American State Department started articulating it in their policy documents in the 1960s and 1970s. This term 'South-Asia' quickly gathered pace in various University Departments across the world, various International Organisations including the United Nations. This phrase was also readily accepted by India's neighbours as it gave a neutral connotation to the region, divorcing India's central positioning from the naming and framing of the region. India's strategic elite at the time did not bother to contest this framing as it did not face any significant challenge to its centrality in the subcontinent. But, in light of today's geopolitical context with the gains made by China, this framing of South-Asia stands as a major hinderance to its strategic objectives in the region.

Dr. Jacob stated that China is a non-resident power in South Asia – it has no cultural, political, religious, linguistic connect with South-Asia. While, India has all of these with her South-Asian neighbours which further complicates its relations with her neighbours. As a non-resident power in South-Asia, China has undercut several long-held assumptions by India of the region. One of them being, that the small South-Asian countries have no option but to strategically depend on India. This assumption has been dismantled as they now seek to regularly balance their options between China

and India on key strategic issues. The second assumption that India's long-standing cultural linkages with each of its South-Asian neighbours is an advantage for building its bilateral relations has actually adversely affected by the baggage of partition and historical factors. This is why China being a non-resident power has the free-hand in transacting with the smaller states while carrying no baggage from the past.

Therefore, the framing of 'South-Asia' as our primary region is actually undercutting our strategic priorities and our larger grand-strategy objectives. 'South-Asia' is a geopolitically diminishing concept – it is imploding internally and expanding externally. Dr. Jacob argues as the intellectual concept of South-Asia is gradually on a decline and is disappearing, so why should India any longer stick with it if it doesn't serve its regional interests? He suggests that India must now think beyond South-Asia as to re-define its concept of neighbourhood. It is time for our strategic elite that with the changing dynamics of the region it should match with the changing times and no longer hold on to the artificial construct of 'South-Asia' which no longer is amicable to serving India's grand strategic interests.