

Heritage & Silent Diplomacy as Soft Power: The SAARC & IORAC

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I wish to focus on an integral geographical scape represented by the SAARC & IORAC. Located between two World Systems, this region carries some of the earliest civilizations on the one hand and Colonial domination for over four centuries on the other. The essential ingredients that shaped the identity of the SAARC-IORAC region is the commonality of its heritage and also the shared memory of Colonialism.

The region itself is located in the strategic junction between two World Systems to its east and the west and also represents one of the fastest growing economic engines. It is also not an accident that most of the countries in this region are also members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The region itself presents a platform for understanding each other and the value of our shared heritage. This provides us with a strong bond to resolve historical contradictions as a shared problem within the region and by reaching out to each other in a mutually beneficial manner.

We need to adhere to a strategy beyond conflict zones, both, physically and as a cognitive value. The resolve to opt for Track 3 diplomacy is one such alternative and People-to-people diplomacy undertaken by individuals and private group is a positive option. Cultural and other initiatives (prayers, pilgrimages, performance arts, academic exchange and seminars etc.) brings people together for a greater understanding beyond the officialdom and bureaucracies. Heritage, plurality, diversity, inclusivity nurtured by silent diplomacy may be listed among a gentle path that could embrace individuals, non-state organizations and even an amalgam between the state policy and such outreach programs.

Perhaps one of the most effective and sensitive connectivity is **inter-cultural and inter- religious initiatives** between and among countries high lighting **people to people** connectivity as a win-win strategy. Twining heritage sites; inter regional food, music/theatre/film, craft carnivals etc. present a long list of activism centered projects. Heritage for conflict resolution and outreach programs on peace education (e.g. Sri Lanka - South India heritage programs done by Seneviratne is a case in point). Outreach programs need to be carried out with the participatory role of UN/UNESCO, Ministries of foreign affairs-and Line Ministries.

The region itself does not require third party peace merchants from outside the region or their subalterns in the region to educate us on our shared legacy and the value of mutual respect for each other. Mutual understanding and respect for each other and the ability to work together will one day be the strongest deterrent preventing the Balkanization of South Asia and IORAC. In a conflict and competition ridden globe, heritage and silent diplomacy will eventually be appreciated as a value-added bench-mark of soft power.