

Chapter 5

Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?

Public Attitudes, Opinions and Level of Concern in Asia

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ABSTRACT

In a continent as vast and as densely populated as Asia, regional cooperation and friendship is rooted in the people. People-to-people ties determine the extent of economic and social progress in the region. The chapter focuses on attitudes, opinions and expectations of Asian community so as to monitor the state of mutual understanding and trust among countries in Asia. It is an attempt to acquire realistic understanding of the nature and determinants of public attitudes and opinions in the Asian region. Besides studying the impressions/views of Asians about each other, the chapter also intends to investigate the reasons behind these impressions and provide recommendations based on the observations.

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INTRODUCTION

Asia is a continent of enormous diversity and contrast, a panorama of different landscapes, cultures and civilizations that have a long, contentious past strewn with conflicts and territorial disputes. In a continent that is home to almost 60 percent of world's current population (World Population Data Sheet, 2015), neighborly friendship is rooted in the people. People-to-people ties determine the extent of economic and social progress in the region. They play a crucial role in establishment of meaningful and sustainable relationship and in development of mutual trust and confidence. Citizen exchanges form an important element of public diplomacy and complement traditional diplomacy as well. Integration at the grassroots has also assumed great relevance in the era of multi-track diplomacy – a concept that originated due to the ineffectiveness of Track 1 diplomacy (purely government driven) in securing international peace and cooperation.

Many countries in Asia have a shared history and are tied by religion, proximity, linguistic and cultural heritage dating back centuries, but they still cannot get along. The rising economic power of India and territorial ambitions of China generate anxieties among their neighbors. Therefore, the main objective of this chapter is to foster a realistic understanding of the nature and determinants of public opinion in the Asian region. It focuses on attitudes and expectations of Asian community so as to monitor the state of mutual understanding and trust among countries in Asia. This chapter is an attempt to ascertain public opinion and gauge public sentiments by addressing questions such as the following: What feelings Asians harbor about each other? How do they rate the favorability of their neighbors? Who is their most trusted partner/greatest threat and why? What is the level of confidence they have in their leaders regarding handling of world affairs? The chapter draws on the worldwide public opinion survey data collected by BBC World Service Poll, Pew Research Centre, Lowy Institute for International Policy and other international organizations. In addition to studying the impressions/views of each other, the chapter also intends to investigate the reasons behind these impressions and provide recommendations based on the observations for consumption of public intellectuals, social scientists and policymakers.

As former Foreign Secretary to Government of India, Kanwal Sibal puts it “the commandment ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’ elicits no obedience from the chancelleries of the world.” In spite of great degree of commonality among states, regional cooperation has failed to gain momentum mainly due to widespread negative perceptions at the political level. Such perceptions may differ from public percep-

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