

# IMAGINING SOLUTIONS: RESPONDING TO KEY CHALLENGES IN OUR REGION

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## SYNOPSIS

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 overshadowed many changes that were already taking place in the polity and society of countries in the Gulf States, the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, North and East Africa and the Levant. That said, the re-alignment of world attention to countries in the region is a reversal of years of careless abandonment. America's interest in the region has been rekindled and with it, the changing geo-politics have once again thrust countries in the region to the cynosure of world attention.

From bad governance to terrorism, from rampant poverty to the inequitable distribution of wealth, from of globalisation to the effects of Information Communications Technology (ICT), the problems and challenges the region faces are inter-connected, multi-faceted and complex. It is a unique moment in history to examine these challenges and explore how best countries in the region can meet them.

The paper argues that countries in the region must both not fall back on crude anti-Americanism and should cultivate have greater self-belief and greater self-respect. This self-respect should entail responsibility for one's own actions. Failures in development are not to be blamed on colonial powers. Lip-service to world summits on sustainable development and environmental issues must not be allowed to pass without real, tangible changes in polity and society. A firm and sustained commitment to root out corruption is of vital importance. Using Information Communications Technology (ICT) along with more traditional developmental mechanisms is another priority. Perhaps more than anything else, engaging and using innovative ideas in the formulation of policy should help our region overcome its problems and illuminate the path towards prosperity, democracy and social justice.

## IMAGINING SOLUTIONS: RESPONDING TO KEY CHALLENGES IN OUR REGION

It is not easy to collectively examine the key challenges facing the Gulf States, the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia, North and East Africa and the Levant. To find solutions to many of the grave problems facing the region is to realise that countries and peoples in the region both share problems and face unique challenges of their own. Problems arise when an attempt is made to bridge generalised socio-economic and cultural characteristics to socio-economic outcomes without taking into account all the intervening variables and situational contexts. And yet, an exploration of alternatives to years of under-development, bad governance and poverty requires that one is able to link the varied problems and find strands of commonality – strands that bind, define and highlight the socio-political realities that for too long have escaped the attention of the world.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 overshadowed many changes that were already taking place in the polity and society of countries. That said, the re-alignment of world attention to countries in this region is a reversal of years of careless abandon. Since the American financed mujahideen contained and reversed what many feared was a Russian drive to the Persian Gulf in the 1980's, countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan were cast adrift and forgotten, the pariahs of a post-Cold War order. Thrust deep in these countries are the festering ills of neglect and hopelessness – a region beset with Islamic fundamentalism, poor governance and inequitable distribution of wealth cannot be expected to be the harbinger of social development. And yet there is hope. America's interest in the region has been rekindled and with it, the changing geo-politics have once again thrust countries in the region to the cynosure of world attention. It is thus a unique moment in history to examine challenges that face the region and examine how best countries in the region can meet them.

### Globalisation and its discontents

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From Sri Lanka to Syria, globalisation is a reality. One cannot escape it, or pretend it did not exist. Definitions of the term, however, are problematic. Globalisation as a single system (a global civil society, connected through capital and commodity markets, inter-connected through information flow) or globalisation as a 'global age' that we have already entered do not capture the essence of the idea or the concept of the word.

What we are witnessing is the impact of globalisation on a series of existing interdependent global systems, such as the global market and global politics. The sum of these systems does not yet constitute a system itself. Instead, we should see globalisation as a process which transforms without eradicating the institutions and features of the political landscape in which it is at work. It does not entail the end of territorial geography or ethnicity, much less so religion: these still co-exist in complex inter-relationships. It may be changing the nature of social structures such as the state and the nation but neither the state nor the nation have been replaced. Indeed, it may be that for countries like India, globalisation and open markets have only served to heighten identity and ethnicity, and successfully export it abroad – 'rice and curry' modified to suit a Western palette, is now a staple of the United Kingdom.

Far more importantly, as countries in the region amply demonstrate, not everyone is living through the global age. The impact of globalisation has been unequal: greater in the North than the South; in the younger generation than the older; in the professional class than manual workers. At present the gap between the globalised and the un-globalised is the greatest of all cultural divisions. It is much profound than any 'fault lines' between civilisations for it cuts across age, class and gender. Neither side understands the other. To the globalised the other often seems marginal; to the marginal, the globalised appear uncaring and exploitative. This difference is likely to be a growing source of tension in the future, and could even account for societal discontent, political instability and rise of religious fundamentalism in the region.

Countries that are unable to participate in the expansion of world trade or attract significant amounts of foreign capital risk becoming marginalized from the global economy and falling farther and farther behind the rest of the world in terms of growth and human development. This marginalization, in turn, poses the very real threat of economic stagnation and increasing poverty – the underpinnings of discontent and seeds of terrorism.

The failure of governance, the accumulation of socio-economic problems and the invasion of the new values of globalisation have aggravated an identity crisis among the new generation in the region. Countries must address this crisis, and the demarche for more accountability, transparency, and the need for a more active civil society working to enlarge the public space and defend basic freedoms - for it is only through engagement, and not through resistance, that countries in the region will be able to address the challenges of globalisation.

## Terrorism

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'We are all Americans' claimed Le Monde, shortly after 9-11. But judging the historical impact of any event is difficult and made more so when we live so close to events. Whatever the long term implications of the World Trade Centre attack, societies in the region are changing as they respond to new threats or old threats in new forms, or as they are forced to re-conceptualise security policy and even the defence of civil liberties at home.

Although for many countries in the region terrorism is not a new phenomenon, what the region must now realise is that countries that sponsor terrorism, or harbour them, are in a Faustian pact. Hoping to use terrorism against a world order they despise, terrorists and states that employ terrorism inadvertently get entwined in a vortex of violence from which they are increasingly unable to escape from. This is not only moral dilemma, but fact.

Overcoming this vicious cycle that is another key challenge in our region. However, there is a less obvious flip side to terrorism. Given our increased sense of vulnerability we have to ensure an adequate balance between improving security which may require necessary restrictions on some civil liberties, and ensuring that civil liberties themselves are not compromised. While countries in the region are favourably disposed to an alignment with America against the axis of evil, they nevertheless employ draconian legislation to repress everything from sub-state nationalism to dissident voices.

The hypocrisy has to stop.

#### Governance – The Good, The Bad

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Kishore Mahbubani, in a provocatively titled book 'Can Asians Think?' asks whether Asians are capable of managing their own affairs competently and effectively. Judging by the poor governance of many of the countries in the region, it is a fair question. From countries rich in petro-dollars to the world's poorest, social disparity is never more evident than in the region under consideration.

The four pillars of governance are accountability, transparency, stability, and participation. A political culture which eschews these principles in favour of draconian and authoritarian systems of governance only perpetuates societal grievances. Throughout the region, governments and leaders have to recognise that addressing key challenges requires a decentralisation of power, streamlining public service delivery, creating transparent tender and contract procedures, enabling marginalised groups to participate in development, empowering women and enshrining human rights within a development regime are inescapable facets of real development.

A key challenge facing the region is to reconstitute government and governance to empower the masses. Though much hyped, the promise of e-governance and e-government are still far off. While realising the promise of technology – technology that empowers and liberates, it is also important to realise that technology is in itself not a panacea to the problems besetting the region. Predatory and incompetent governments will doubtless continue to hold some poor countries back, but countries in the region have one great advantage that Western countries cannot match – the abundance of skilled labour and human resources, especially knowledge-workers. To best harness these advantages is a key challenge for the region.

#### Poverty

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Poverty reduction remains the central challenge in the region. Robust, sustainable economic growth is essential for significant gains in poverty reduction, for addressing the diverse problems of underdevelopment, and more generally for improvements in the quality of life. The countries of the region need to address these challenges of growth and sustainability in a systematic manner. Building and upgrading physical and social infrastructure throughout the region is a primary condition for robust, sustained growth, with large investments required in social services such as education, health, water supply, sanitation, and shelter, especially in the poorer countries. Ensuring the environmental sustainability of growth in the region's resource-based economies is essential for development and poverty reduction.

The fight against poverty and the huge developmental challenges facing the region will require the mobilisation of considerable financial resources over the coming years. To an important extent, these resources will have to come first from the people and the governments of the countries themselves. Robust, sustainable growth will be necessary, hence policies to accelerate economic growth need to be reinforced and the management and prioritization of public investment and expenditure must be widely improved.

The development experience of the West has shown that the private sector can contribute significantly to the generation of resources for development. To mobilize such efforts in our region, reforms to remove market distortions, strengthen public institutions and governance, and develop efficient and transparent financial and capital markets must be pursued further at various levels throughout the countries of the region.

The socio-economic empowerment of the marginalised is also of vital importance. Decentralised government must encourage local communities to partake in the development of the region. The disadvantaged must be empowered to think beyond the structures of patronage that tie them to politicians who promise everything and deliver nothing. Communications infrastructure, coupled with roads and waterways must link rural communities to the economic hubs of countries. Furthermore, rural areas must be encouraged to develop and sustain coherent, inclusive political organisations, and engage pro-actively in politics.

### Imagining the future

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Our region is often challenged to question its often half-hearted commitment to its own cultural values and norms (the fact, to take one example, that suicide is condemned in the Quran and yet not a single Islamic government has condemned the suicide bombers on the West Bank). It is challenged to do more for itself by admitting its own responsibility for many of the social inequalities that breed terrorism. Islamic countries need to address the issues capitalised on by the radicals such as the lack of schools which has driven children to be educated at Islamic maddrasahs and the existence of corrupt judiciaries and bureaucracies which have fuelled the anger of the zealots.

Oil unfortunately does not automatically bring with it social development. Neither, as Pakistan and India have found out, nuclear arms struggles. While Colonial histories and legacies have long been blamed for the present state of affairs in the region, it is difficult to posit the squalor of refugee camps in Sri Lanka, the insufferable living conditions of slums in Calcutta, the starvation of peoples in Ethiopia, or the illiteracy that ravages the entire region on colonial policies alone.

Above all, countries in the region must both not fall back on crude anti-Americanism and have greater self-belief, as well as greater self-respect. This self-respect should entail responsibility for one's own actions. Failures in development are not to be blamed on colonial powers. Lip-service to world summits on sustainable development and environmental issues must not be allowed to pass without real, tangible changes in polity and society. A firm and sustained commitment to root out corruption is of vital importance. Using Information Communications Technology (ICT) along with more traditional developmental mechanisms is another priority. Perhaps more than anything else, engaging and using innovative ideas in the formulation of policy should help our region overcome its problems and illuminate the path towards prosperity, democracy and social justice.