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Policy Perspectives Foundation (PPF) is a non-profit, apolitical think tank on matters of national interest. PPF's activities focus on complex and inter-connected challenges to peace, stability and development in India in cognizance of the external dimension. PPF is committed to spreading awareness, building capacity and promoting resilience.

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Prospects of Peace in the Arch of Crisis: Ukraine To Iran

Gautam Sen

Introduction:

The contemporary global scenario, sadly, presents an increasing number of violent engagements between states (Russia and Ukraine) or even between a state and a non-state entity (Israel and Hamas). It is imperative in the interest of future of humanity to study and analyses the reasons that lead to devastation that follow in its wake." In this exposition, the continuous efforts in the post-Cold War era, the attempt is being made to understand the conceptualization of war and peace with the focus on events from Ukraine to Iran. This requires a behavioural approach. Hidden in this idea is the requirement to take note mentally of the occurrence of the events leading to the balkanization of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Today there is a major breakage of the possibility of establishing peace and tranquillity due to the occurrences related to the events from Ukraine to Iran.

It is by studying the dynamics of changing interstate relations between big powers that we will be able to define the emergence of a particular world order, and the unique dynamics of power within the present international system.

The Problematic:

It has thus become necessary to understand the Power Transition that is occurring to fathom out when and why big power conflicts at strategic international security levels erupt into regional wars and conflicts between lesser powers. Quincy Wright in his approach to study of war and peace observed "War to be abolished must be understood. To be understood it must be studied" This last aspect has not been paid attention to. Coupled with it is the requirement to understand three variables to measure the major powers - ideational power, material power; size of population, mobilising capacity and geo techno-economic productive capabilities in its competition to other major powers. These factors converge to produce a hierarchy of power to form the basic structure of international order. In the pyramid of power structure, the US still remains the top hegemon even today. Below is the re-emerging Russia, China, Japan, Germany, the European Union and perhaps in the tail end is India to offer a challenge to the US. Lower down below are France, Italy and Brazil and well below them most other states of the international system – all considered smaller powers. Whether the Middle East situation today will lead to global war will depend on if the US will be faced by a rival (most probably with an alliance of rival states) could precipitate a war but may still decide not to challenge the US.

In the case of Power Transition in the Middle East today, war will be most likely to occur if the rival in this case Russia were to rapidly overtake the dominant power US. Under the circumstances, it is unlikely that China would like to be a partner with a rogue state like North Korea to assist Russia. Hence it is most unlikely for a major war to take place with the involvement of the US and her allies on one side and Russia, China and N Korea as the rival power. India just does not figure in any of the happenings in the arch of crisis. India is clear and does not have the inclination to utilise her military capability nor compromise her ideological reasons to become part of the US conglomerate or Russia. India's strategic ambiguity should not necessarily be considered as indecisiveness to make a policy statement but a realistic approach as can be seen even hours after Iranian attack on Israel. India's dependence on Iran for energy resources and Russia for strategic defence platforms and geopolitical resources are well understandable notwithstanding the long-standing Indo-Israel relationship.

However, we should be clear about the understanding of war and peace in the era of Power Transition taking shape in the Middle East in the past two and a half years. Peace will have to be defined too. It is best defined by Kolodziej who articulated, "Peace would be defined not by force or threats but by mutual consent to laws and norms binding human communities and states together in conformity". He further suggests that what Wright supposed will be "the social scientist's discovery of order in nature - inanimate, animate and human." To define war with which every researcher struggles in the present times is not unusual. Again, Wright becomes relevant who states "war as a state of law and a form of conflict involving high degree of legal equality, of hostility and of violence in the relations of organised human groups". This fits into the issues

confronting the Middle East today.

The Arch of Crisis:

It is essential to undertake a stock taking of the happenings in the regional wars since Feb 22 first involving Ukraine and Russia – a war which is still continuing for nearly two and a half years, followed by Israel – Hamas regional war in Gaza with a number of proxy powers aiding each party in the past six months and ultimately followed by ongoing Iran-Israel confrontation started on 1 April 24 when earlier Israel bombed the Iranian Consulate in Damascus. resulting in Iran launching a full-scale drone attack along with unleashing of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles on Israel on 17 April 24 with an assortment of some 300 drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles".

Technically and on ground, the Iranian attack/retaliation was a highly unsuccessful military operation conducted by Iran. Israeli retaliation took place two days later which overall has so far been an indication of a calibrated counter offensive to indicate Israel's military superiority over Iran first by neutralising 99% of Iranian drone attacks and secondly Israel's precision attack capability of penetrating Iranian air space to hit targets close to Iranian nuclear facilities and also attack an air force base with least amount of force proving its graduated deterrence capabilities. However, it is interesting to observe that none of the actors namely Ukraine, Israel, Hamas or Iran have the independent military capability to participate in the regional wars without the active support of outside powers providing material and financial support but without involving 'boots on ground".

Assessment and Observations:

Decoding the arch of the crisis physically ranging from Ukraine to Iran, gives a repeat of what happened during the cold war period when Khrushchev coined the phrase "sane balance of interest". This meant that each of the superpowers USA and Russia (then the former Soviet Union) demarcated the protection of their protectorate states without confronting each other militarily. The US fortified Israel and Russia (then the Soviet Union) fortified Egypt. However, Egypt lost the Six Day War to Israel. Despite that no transition of power took place and no loss of superpower status took place between the US and the then Soviet Union. The US and the Western Europe could not impose sanctions over the former Soviet Union nor on her protectorate states.

Today the interdependency in the international political economy is enormous. If the US and the European Union imposed sanctions over Russia at the beginning of the Russia Ukraine war, then Russian sanction on oil exports, energy exports world-wide including to West European countries has had a crippling effect on maintaining peace and tranquility world-wide. Thus, many countries including the emerging as well as major powers in Asia had to feel the pinch and resort to exhibiting double standards of behaviour in international morality by justifying their national interest to be seen as prudent and overriding.

Technology and Warfare:

In the past two and a half years the on-going regional wars have been heavily subsidised by the US and Russia and the NATO countries which comprises of the European Union States, in terms of money, materials and high-end technologies to their client states or as in the case of Russia her

ambition to consolidate, integrate and amalgamate lost territories. All are failing to find a solution to a lasting peace.

The world is appearing to become more polarised, more illiberal, more authoritarian, less tolerant and more adventurous to brinkmanship. While the concept and the guiding principles of strategic analysis was ensconced in the principle of being user neutral and aid in enhancing the vitality of nation states and securitise the non-military dimensions comprising of ecology, environment, pollution, energy, economy and the rights of the unborn, the global strategic community has become obsessed with the preparation of the inevitability to wage war.

The regional wars in the "arch of crisis" in a short period of two and a half years has already consumed nearly half a trillion dollars, more than hundred thousand killed, produced more than three million refugees and untold miseries to innocent people, children and women. Despite all this and the tremendous amount of displacement and destruction of property, more capital in terms of nearly $200 billion are already on the way to be distributed to keep the war going. It appears that Plato has emerged from the grave to remind us that "Only the dead have seen the end of all wars".

Conclusion:

If one sees normatively, the role of India on international issues, role of international law, concern about human security, global inequality, protecting the environment and ecology, education, awareness of human values, norms and ethics are all well defined in one-word i.e. "Vasudeva Kodambakkam" means that the world is one family which translates

further into the idea of universal brotherhood. Howsoever unacceptable it may be to many a rationalists of different philosophical schools, the emerging world order of the 21st Century has no other options but to follow the dictum of Kohen and Nye that interdependence and independence will be the guiding principle of the new international political economy not lead by market forces of capitalism nor by state capitalism controlled by "Oligarchs" nor by constitutionally elected leaders for life. The canvas of new international order is wide open for accepting a major transformation and India with its rich legacy of cultural heritage and other civilizational state like China have to come to terms to ensure that artificial arcs of crises like the one which is under review is not permitted to overtake the functional modalities in the 21st century in which science and technology is bound to play a pivotal role to usher peace and prosperity in the geo techno-economic productive capabilities.

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From Bias to Balance: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in India

-Manika Malhotra

India's economic growth has overlooked a crucial demographic: women. Despite improvements in social indicators, the growth experienced by India hasn't translated into the promised levels of inclusion and development for women.

Instead, women's participation in the labour force has stagnated and is projected to decline further due to technological advancements. Unemployment poses a disproportionate challenge for women, particularly as routine jobs susceptible to automation are increasingly replaced by technology, leaving women more vulnerable to job loss.

Reports by Bain & Company and the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) highlight the grim reality: women are significantly more likely to be unemployed compared to men, with women graduates facing even higher unemployment rates. While overall unemployment in India stands at 7%, it spikes to 18% among women.

Given this dire situation, promoting entrepreneurship among women is a vital pathway alongside traditional employment opportunities. Entrepreneurship is critical for women for several reasons:

Employment Creation:

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are acknowledged for their role in creating long-term employment opportunities. When provided with equal access to resources, women-owned enterprises yield strong economic outcomes. Women entrepreneurs are also more likely to hire other women, thus challenging gender stereotypes and improving employment prospects for women.

Innovation:

Women entrepreneurs are at the forefront of innovation, pioneering new markets and addressing previously neglected customer needs. Businesses focusing on areas like beauty products, eco-friendly sanitary pads, and women-centric education are examples of such innovation.

Social Outcomes:

Investing in women entrepreneurship yields social benefits for future generations. Women's economic empowerment leads to improved education and health outcomes for their families, contributing to overall social prosperity.

Personal Empowerment:

Entrepreneurship offers women greater financial independence, autonomy, and control, leading to increased retention of women in the workforce and reduced dependency on partners or family.

Despite these compelling benefits, the question remains: why aren't there more women entrepreneurs? The journey of entrepreneurship is challenging for anyone, but it's particularly arduous for women due to various societal and structural barriers. Overcoming these barriers requires concerted efforts to provide women with the necessary support, resources, and opportunities to thrive as entrepreneurs.

Women face several significant challenges when it comes to starting their own ventures and realising their entrepreneurial dreams.

Lack of Role Models:

A notable obstacle for women entrepreneurs is the scarcity of female role models in the business world. Without visible examples of successful women, it's challenging for aspiring female entrepreneurs to envision their own paths to success. Additionally, finding female mentors and coaches who understand their unique struggles and can provide relevant guidance and feedback is often difficult.

Limited Mobility:

Building a network, securing suitable vendors and investors, and nurturing a business often requires extensive travel. However, various factors, including safety concerns, restrict the mobility of female business owners. Women may face challenges travelling alone or staying in hotels for business purposes due to safety considerations. Furthermore, primary caregiving responsibilities can further constrain women's mobility.

Pressure to Conform to Gender Roles:

Women entrepreneurs often encounter societal pressure to prioritise familial responsibilities over their professional ambitions. This pressure, historically labelled as the "women's place," can influence women's decisions, opportunities, and perceived capabilities.

Poor Funding Opportunities:

Female founders encounter significant barriers in accessing funding for their ventures. There is a glaring disparity in the funding raised by female-led startups compared to those led by men. In 2021, female-only founding teams received a mere fraction of total venture capital investments globally. In India, startups founded by women received an even smaller portion of total venture capital funding. Even when female entrepreneurs secure funding, they often receive it for ventures perceived as traditionally "feminine," such as fashion or children's products, despite demonstrating comparable or superior performance to male-led ventures.

The underrepresentation of women in venture capital firms exacerbates funding challenges for female entrepreneurs. Biases within male-dominated investment panels often lead to preferential treatment of male-led startups.

Female founders encounter discriminatory practices, such as being ignored or facing inappropriate inquiries about personal matters. Additionally, women often lack collateral, hindering their access to bank loans or private financing. The scarcity of women in investment roles further widens the funding gap.

Women's limited financial freedom and confidence contribute to their risk aversion, perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation. This absence of female representation results in fewer investments in women-led startups. Increasing the presence of women in investment roles could foster greater support for female entrepreneurs and startups.

Empowering women in India requires recognizing their invaluable contributions to the economy and addressing systemic barriers that hinder their entrepreneurial endeavours. Beyond the systemic challenges and barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, it's crucial to recognize the immense potential and value they bring to the economy and society. Empowering women entrepreneurs isn't just about addressing disparities; it's about harnessing untapped talent and driving inclusive growth.

Investing in women entrepreneurs yields multifaceted benefits. Women-led businesses often prioritise social and environmental impact, driving positive change in their communities.

Additionally, diverse perspectives foster innovation and resilience, leading to more robust and sustainable business models.

Supporting women entrepreneurs isn't just a moral imperative; it's a strategic investment in the future. By providing women with equal opportunities, access to resources, and supportive ecosystems, we can unlock them full potential as drivers of economic prosperity and social progress.

Furthermore, fostering a culture of inclusivity and diversity within the entrepreneurial ecosystem benefits everyone. By breaking down barriers and promoting equal opportunities, we create a more vibrant and dynamic entrepreneurial landscape where all individuals, regardless of gender, can thrive and succeed.

The author is a researcher with PPF.

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Inequality and the Quest for a Sustainable Future: A Case of Kosi River Floods

-Rahul Kumar Yaduka

Introduction:

That the river Kosi is the "sorrow of Bihar" is not hidden from anyone. True to its image, the river has been flooding annually during the monsoon and affects life in general in the districts of North Bihar. The river floods significantly and migrates because of the biophysical backdrop of the region. The river transcends Tibet (China), Nepal and India, collects water and sediment from seven tributaries and descends in the plains without any middle course. Hence, it lacks adequate capacity to drain its water. Gole and Chitale (1966) map the migration of the river westwards. Literature in Hindi (Parti Parikatha, Maati Ke Log, Sone ki Naiya), Bengali (Kusi Prangnera Chitthi) and Maithili (Jal Prantar) is replete with the destruction brought by this river.

Flood Management in the Kosi River:

The long history of floods and associated miseries prompted the British to consider taming the river in the 1870s. Through a long journey till 1953, the Kosi Project came with plans to construct a barrage at the Indo-Nepal Border, a pair of embankments on the then main channel of the river Kosi and a pair of canals.

The idea was to manage floods, produce electricity and facilitate irrigation (Mishra, 1997). However, the aftermath of the Kosi Project underlines how the project was an ill conception. There has been a rise in the intensity of PPF floods and land erosion within the embankments; waterlogging has increased in the countryside, and there have been at least eight significant breaches. Canals remain silted and dysfunctional, and hydroelectricity has never been produced.

This essay intends to highlight instances of inequality embedded in the design and implementation of flood management in the Kosi River, which is the cause of the present predicament. It also argues how these inequalities manifest into an unsustainable flood management approach.

Inequality and Kosi Flood Management:

The first instance of inequality has been between the knowledge systems that imagine the river, its floods and coping mechanisms. Kosi Project, premised upon a colonial outlook towards nature, has been put into place by displacing the traditional approach of 'living with the floods' where the community didn't wish off the floods but made productive use of its water and

sediment for agriculture. This already existing knowledge (AEK) was not given epistemic equality while envisaging the flood management policy.

Today, academicians and activists claim that the Kosi Project and the approach undergirding it have made the floods more dangerous.

The second aspect of inequality is between the technical experts and the people. Right from its inception till the present day, ordinary citizens don't have any mechanism to register their voice in the policy-making and execution regarding the Kosi flood management. People's knowledge, experience and concerns don't count in the existing scheme. The power is concentrated with a few institutions like the Water Resource Department of the Bihar Government.

The third facet of inequality is between the people living within the embankments, i.e., the riverside and those outside, i.e., the countryside. The logic of flood management is to trap and tame the river within the walls of the embankment, ignoring the million-plus population living there. The concerned authorities, like the Water Resource Department, categorically declare that their agenda is to protect the embankment, which means no concern for the people within the embankments. This official position (articulated in the Standard Operating Procedure) suggests that not all citizens are equal to the government. This is also apparent in the fact that multiple structures, like bridges, spurs, and security bunds, have come up on the river, worsening the flood conditions and erosion within the embankments.

Whereas the above three aspects of inequality deal with the design of the flood management approach, there are other kinds of inequality in implementation. A survey conducted by a people's movement, Koshi Navnirman Manch, pointed out that a large percentage of the population within the embankments belongs to lower castes. There are very few villages or households of upper castes. In the existing social context, this reduces their bargaining power. Academics, present-day social activists, and local MLAs also emphasise that the Kosi Project was shaped by local caste and land equations where upper caste and big landlords prevailed in the decision-making.

The condition of women is particularly precarious. In a society with massive out-migration of working-age men, women are the first respondents of the disaster. They take care of the agriculture and the cattle in ordinary times and shift homes, belongings and children in times of floods. Given the low level of female literacy, there is very little power to access the entitlements as the victims of floods. Women suffer particularly during pregnancy and menstruation in an ecological backdrop with no hospitals and toilets. It is difficult to guard the shame during peak flood periods.

How equality is critical for a sustainable future.

The preceding section underlines the significant inequality axes intertwined with the Kosi flood management. We have also discussed how these inequalities have culminated in a situation in the Kosi River basin, which is not sustainable for long. The flood management approach based on structural interventions has changed the entire ecological backdrop and, in turn, the society. The embankments and other structures constraining the river have reduced the river's drainage capacity; silt

deposition has made the river shallow and embankments prone to breach.

There has been a marked decline in the production of paddy crops. Overall, land suitability for agriculture has decreased as lands have been under water or silt for years. The tamed river has also lost much of its biodiversity, like fish, Ghongha Sitwa, etc. Many varieties of rice are not seen. This decline in agriculture and biodiversity has triggered massive outmigration from the region. The dual burden on women due to male outmigration has been discussed in the preceding sections.

Hence, there is a case for bringing equality along many axes in the entire rubric of Kosi flood management. First, the gross neglect or substandard treatment of the people within the embankments must stop, and a citizen-like treatment needs to be given to them. Kosi Peedit Vikas Pradhikaran provides the best articulation for this, constituted in 1987 for the welfare of the people who sacrificed for the greater common good.

Second, institutional mechanisms should be implemented to allow people to influence the decisions of structural interventions. It needs to be accepted that people have experience and knowledge of the river, which is equal to the technical knowledge of the engineers. The epistemic superiority enjoyed by the technical experts needs to be shed.

Third, special attention has to be paid to the vulnerability of the weaker sections of society, like Dalits and Women, who have a lesser capacity to cope with the floods.

Those who have land outside the embankments can shift in the peak flood period. People from the Musahar community, who are primarily landless, are forced to settle on the roads, embankments and in low-lying areas. Similarly, the administration needs to be extra sensitive to the unique needs of women in general and during floods in particular.

Conclusion

A sustainable future can be envisaged only with the democratic and equal participation of all stakeholders. This participation should not be cosmetic but sincere.

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Truth or Trickery? - Elections in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

-Vaishali Basu Sharma

2024 is the year of elections. As at least 64 countries hold national elections, nearly half of the world's population is eligible to vote. What's different this year though is the widespread availability of artificial intelligence generated deep fake- media that has been digitally manipulated. General elections are underway in India, and the real menace in the process has been the extensive dissemination of both disinformation and misinformation through Artificial Intelligence (AI) and sophisticated deepfake technology. False narratives, fabricated statements manipulated through deepfakes, influence public opinion and mislead voters.

Days before the elections commenced, PM Narendra Modi in conversation with Bill Gates addressed the pitfalls and challenges of deepfake technology. Emphasising caution, Modi warned against relying on AI as a shortcut or magical solution, highlighting the importance of ethical considerations and human effort.

Social media bombards us with information most of the time it's harmless but sometimes it can take the form of lies, disinformation or even outright manipulation; couple that with political elections and you've got all the ingredients needed for a potential threat to democracy. Deepfake videos and computer-generated photos are proof that the camera now sometimes does lie.

Hate speech, propaganda and outright lies are nothing new in the online world but as generative AI becomes hugely accessible the volume and sophistication of disinformation has intensified. There is not only a fundamental shift in the accessibility of the tools for creating deepfakes and AI generated contents but also a massive jump in the realism of the outputs that can be generated; whether that's voice audio, video content or of course AI generated images.

In two recent, now viral, videos actor Aamir Khan can be seen promoting a particular political party. Khan has issued a FIR allegeding that the videos are fake and that he has never endorsed any political party throughout his career.

In the run up to the elections umpteen deepfake media is floating around for malicious or meme content. From its official Instagram handle the Congress party shared a deepfake in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's face is superimposed onto that of Justh, the singer of a popular song titled 'Chor' (thief).

On its X account, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) has shared a fake video of late party leader Jayalalitha urging people to vote for their party.

Shared extensively on Instagram, in a deepfake Congress leader Rahul Gandhi seemingly says the words, "I don't do anything" that depicted him as derisory. Earlier this year, an AI-generated image of Modi, styled as Mahabharata's Bhishma Pitamah was being circulated clearly intended to further boost the PM's image. An instagram account @hokagemodisama that routinely shares generative pictures of political leaders, promoting itself as a Hindu AI artist has thousands of followers.

Manipulated or fabricated visual and auditory content, are being used to either enhance a leader's character or for nefarious purposes to erode reputation, negatively affecting public discourse to sway the vote. It is worrying that we are starting to see them being used extensively in a political sphere. Identifying AI-generated content or synthetic video/audio remains the biggest challenge. Today even an otherwise discerning eye finds it difficult to separate the truth from the trickery. By the time the 'fake' gets noticed, the damage is already done because it gains popularity and views on social media. Rapidly progressing to a point at which detection will be very difficult or impossible, the threat is real and begs the question - can traditional methods of regulation keep up with AI's advancements?

How can the spread of AI generated disinformation be stopped? Solutions to address the issue of deepfakes remain unclear and continue to elude policymakers. While the government plans

to include regulations for deepfakes in the Information Technology Rules (2021), for now India's election model code of conduct (MCC) does not stipulate any rules concerning the use of AI deepfake technology for election campaigning.

But deepfakes are only as good as the ecosystems in which they thrive. Social media platforms are the primary mechanism by which the majority of dangerous information that is created via generative AI systems is spread. Last year the Ministry of Electronics and Information technology (MeitY) had sent an advisory to social media intermediaries in December last year mandating the identification and removal of misinformation and deepfakes within 36 hours.

In February, 20 major technology tech companies including the likes of Amazon, Microsoft, TikTok and X signed a voluntary pledge to prevent deceptive AI content from disrupting voting. But under that accord they didn't agree to ban users or to remove material - they only agreed to detect disinformation and to label it.

Another deepfake spinoff is the 'Liar's Dividend' in which individuals could successfully deny the authenticity of genuine content, by claiming that the content is a deepfake. It seems like it's only a matter of time before photographic and video evidence of criminal activities will be useless to a prosecution team, once video can be faked on a level that is indiscernible from real video.

Field experts believe there are several mitigation strategies to combat fakes, from 'liveness' solutions like light reflections on the face, or asking questions in real-time in an agent-led journey, to the use of watermarks for AI-generated. Others say that image watermarks are easily removed, and feel that detection tools will struggle to surpass new generative AI technologies.

Technology companies feel that regulation could undue burden on social media platforms, restricting expression. Fact is they may be reluctant to act on deepfakes as these are popular and garner heaps of 'views.' The question then becomes should there be a universal approach on regulation of these generative AI contents?

While there is much to be cynical about in politics, the advent of artificial intelligence as a major player in India's 2024 general elections adds yet another layer of incredulity to the exercise. Indeed, truth or trickery, it is getting harder to tell. Combating the problem will foremost require educating the public about deepfakes. There is an urgent need for cooperation among government regulators, companies creating AI technologies, and social media networks where disinformation is spread.

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