

TMR Session 1: Foreign Correspondents' Club: How India and the World view each other

*Newslaundry and Teamwork Arts come together to present the fourth edition of The Media Rumble. Titled **TMR@Online**, this edition will be entirely digital and its first session was held on the 17th of September, 2020. To inaugurate the annual event, Sanjoy K Roy, Managing Director, Teamwork Arts, addressed the panel on the role of the media.*

The session was presented by *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office*, India, and was titled **Foreign Correspondents' Club: How India and the World view each other**. Peter Rimmele, the Representative of KAS then gave a short address on the session. The key description of his speech was:

Although Indo-German relations date back as early as the 16th century, the relations between the two nations crystalized after the second world war. This was the first time that both the countries were free; India from the British and Germany from the hateful Nazi regime. Realizing that both the rapidly growing economies needed each other's support, leaders of the two nations strove to strengthen their bond. In 1956, Pt. Nehru was welcomed by Konrad Adenauer in West Germany. Unlike many of his counterparts, Adenauer believed that economic relations between the two countries could not be built on racism and colonization but on mutual trust and cooperation. The KAS also played an important role in strengthening cultural ties between the two countries, by partnering with the Statesman to launch a school for training journalists. Today, the countries boast of cooperation on a wide range of issues such as mutual agreements, foreign affairs, research and ecological progress. Earlier, the German loyalties tended to favour China, however the pandemic caused a global distrust of the nation. Germany is now looking to India as its ally in the Indo-pacific region. The media and foreign correspondents can play a huge role in making this relationship possible by generating goodwill and creating a positive perception of India in Europe.

Following this note, the panelists for the session were introduced: *CNN News 18* Executive Editor, Zakka Jacob, was the moderator for the panel. He was joined by Amy Kazmin, South Asia Bureau Chief for *the Financial Times*; Diplomatic Editor of *The Hindu*, Suhashini Haider; *The Economist's* Indian correspondent, Alex Travelli; and *Deutsche Welle's* Indian correspondent Nimisha Jaiswal.

“As a foreign correspondent, it is tough to choose the stories to report about India because of the diversity here”, began Amy. With a growing disparity between what journalists abroad considered important and what Indian news channels aired, she added that it was becoming harder to bridge the gap. “While the pandemic is having devastating effects on India, the news channels are busy running stories on actor Sushant Singh Rajput's demise!” Other panelists agreed that there were many more important issues that needed extensive coverage by the media;

the contraction of the economy due to the pandemic, the ever-increasing cases of Covid-19 in the country and the border tensions with China. Alex also added that “a fourth crisis is the institutional capture by the government.”

Suhasini elaborated this argument by saying that although it seems like we are receiving a lot of information through social media and news outlets, the type of news has actually narrowed down. She said that news stories were becoming much more limited in their scope, circulating the same unimportant reports over and over. She also highlighted the government's role in this, as it skillfully hid important information from the citizens. "The government did not even talk about the Chinese infiltration, until the clash in Galwan valley!" The government has been constantly censoring the media and denying it on-ground permission to cover news, she further added. Parul also agreed with her fellow panelist. "Getting information from the MEA is like walking through a minefield", she laughed. She also commented on how the opaqueness of the government was visible from the fact that the prime minister had not held a single press conference in 6 years. Journalists were also being made to pay to accompany ministers abroad, despite having plenty of room in the plane, the panelists pointed out. "This is being done to reduce transparency", parul emphasised.

Alex commented on the economic situation of the country, saying "India's economy has been worse impacted by Covid-19 than many others. Moreover, it is one of the only countries that has not seen a slump in daily coronavirus cases since the pandemic has started." He also criticised the government for not providing useful data that economists could use to study the pandemic-related damage to the economy. He proposed that the Indian economy was going through a K-shaped progression, where some industries were coping well, while others were being devastated.

Lastly, Nimisha pointed out how challenging it was to report Indian news to a foreign audience. "I shy away from reporting caste-based stories. It's very challenging to explain the concept, in a 300 word article, without over-simplifying it." Both Nimisha and Alex also confessed to having suffered due to the differing vocabularies of India and the west. "I remember mentioning the phrase, "Chief Minister" in an article and then remembering that my audience is American, who wouldn't know what this common phrase means!"

In response to a question, Amy clarified that the growing interest in the affairs of India, by the international media was a consequence of the country's growing prominence in the world. She also said that the media was interested in India since it is the world's largest democracy and the press would like to hold it accountable.

TMR Session 2: Rethinking the European Project

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The session was presented by *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office, India*, and was titled **Rethinking the European Project**. It was held on 19th September 2020. Pankaj Madan, member of KAS, gave the inaugural speech for the session. “The idea of the EU was never meant to replace that of individual nation-states” he said. Europe was too diverse to club into a single union and national identities, like that of ‘Germans’ and Italians, for instance would always come first. The EU was an additional identity, to signify the unity of the continent against the rest of the world. However, he added that the EU had undergone various crises like Brexit and the coronavirus and was in need of revising its foreign policy.

The panelists for the session were then introduced. Deputy Head of *Mission of the Embassy in Estonia* in New Delhi, Juuli Hiio; Policy fellow and head of the *Paris office of the European Council on Foreign Relations*, Tara Verma; Author and journalist, and Associate Professor of Practice at the *Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy*, James Crabtree and Chairman of *Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS)* and Former Ambassador of India to France, Dr Mohan Kumar joined president of *Observer Research Foundation*, Samir Saran on this session of the TMR.

Samir opened the discussion with the topic, “what was the role of EU in the current two-power world dominated by USA and China? Further, what was its impact on India?” “The EU has been distracted due to its own problems lately and has not been playing the role in the world that it needs to”, said James. However, he also noted that relations of the EU and China have soured. The EU finally has an anti-China stance, after a long time. “However, the EU's policies remain defensive’ trying to protect its interests from the nation. There is a need for the union to play an ‘offensive’ role and actively engage with the Indo-Pacific region.” It was an opportune time for the EU to re-enforce ties with India, and this would be possible with increased European presence in this region. He said that countries with a strong naval base, such as the UK and France, needed to increase their military presence in the continent. Moreover, the EU needed to invest money for infrastructural developments in nations like India.

Mohan urged the EU to increase its dialogue with India, especially on matters such as climate change, 5G and technical expertise, where both sides would benefit from each other. He also admitted that countries like the UK, France and Germany were more enthusiastic about developing ties with India, than the rest of the world. “France has taken a pioneering step in this direction”, he added.

Tara spoke of her experience in the foreign affairs of France. She claimed that it was one of the EU countries to have the harshest anti-China stance. EU’s relations with China had deteriorated post the pandemic, as the country had spread misinformation and lies regarding the virus. China was officially seen as a ‘rival’ by the EU, that had to be competed against rather than cooperated with. President Macron supported this strategy, by ensuring his visit to

China included other leaders from the EU, choosing to discuss key issues rather than focusing on strengthening ties with the country. Speaking of Indo-French ties, she said that France was ahead of the other countries of EU as it already had military relations with India.

Sameer then steered the discussion towards whether ‘fake news’ played a role in Europe, to ill-liberalise views and interfere with elections.

Juulie and James agreed that the media in the EU was largely free from government pressure to spread misinformation. “The EU has a deep regard for freedom, including the ‘Freedom of Speech’”. Juulie said. James was of the opinion that while the mainstream media was free from bias, social media was the new platform for spreading lies and hatred. “Social media works on an echo chamber ‘phenomenon’, where you only see views of people that you follow, which for most people, are those who hold views like their own.” Tara added. She warned that this could shape one’s definition of truth and indoctrinate one in a set ideology, which could in turn, interfere with elections.

On the topic of the EU's ties with Russia, Mohan argued that the EU needed to strengthen its ties with the nation, to avoid a greater Sino-Russian partnership. However, Tara pointed out that the EU could not ignore the spread of fake news and the human rights violations being carried out by Russia.

TMR Session 3: Balancing Powers or Norm Shapers? Defining India and EU's proposition for Asia

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The session was presented by *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office*, India, and was titled **Balancing Powers or Norm Shapers? Defining India and the EU's proposition for Asia**. It was presented on 19th September 2020. Marizio Paciello, Representative-in-Training, at the KAS, gave the inaugural comments for the session. “The spread of expansionist views in various nations coupled with a disregard for human rights have almost left the world in a Cold War” he stated. He emphasised the need of the hour being increased cooperation between EU and Asia, putting aside historical relations and regional aspirations.

Following this note, the panelists were introduced. Dr Garima Mohan, Fellow in the Asia program at the *German Marshall Fund* of the United States; Darshana Baruah, Non-resident scholar with the South Asia Program at the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*; Jeff Smith, Research fellow in *Heritage's Asian Studies Center*; Theresa Fallon, Founder and director of the *Centre for Russia Europe Asia Studies (CREAS)* in Brussels joined moderator, Dhruva Jaishankar, Director of the U.S. Initiative at the *Observer Research Foundation* for the session.

Speaking about the EU's stance on China, Theresa stressed that the 27 member union would be unable to speak with one voice on any issue. Germany, 40% of whose exports were with China, had always been a staunch supporter of the country. It had kept Chinese interests in mind when making policy decisions in the EU. Italy, had also grown favourable to the country, after enlisting its help during the pandemic. In fact, Italy had considered China to be a bigger support during the coronavirus crisis than the EU. However relations changed as the pandemic progressed. China was accused by the EU of supplying defective medical kits and spreading misinformation about the virus. As a result, most EU nations distanced themselves from the country and began to look for partnerships elsewhere.

Garima agreed with this assessment and pointed out that the EU currently held an unstable relationship with both the USA and China, the two leading powers in today's world. This has pushed them to strengthen ties with other nations. It would be beneficial for both India and the EU to collaborate on matters like 5G and technical expertise in such a global climate, she emphasised.

Highlighting that the systematic shift away from China had improved global opportunities for India, Darshana, praised the trilateral military partnership between India-Japan and Australia.

Commenting on India's relationship with the USA, Jeff said that it had improved post the advent of Covid-19. India had earlier been apprehensive about participating in cooperative assessments held by the superpower in Asia, however its position had changed post the chinese infiltrations. India has begun to show a keen interest in developing ties with the

USA. Jeff also praised Shizo Abe's attempts, in 2006, to unite the democracies of India, Japan and the west, calling it a 'futuristic move'. He claimed that this policy was to the need of the hour, to control China's growth in the Indo-Pacific region.

Dismissing a claim that the American stance towards China may change with the change in leadership, Jeff, assured the panel that both the republicans and democrats were unfavourable to China.

The panelists also agreed that the weakening of ties between the EU and USA was a temporary phenomenon. Theresa even stated that the Trump administration had been putting in much needed efforts to mend this relationship.

Lastly, Darshana, advised India to stick with its policy of non-alignment, in a fast polarising world. She highlighted that India would benefit from relationships with both the USA and Russia, especially since its military is dependent on Russia and the USA is a growing superpower. She suggested India sign treaties with both nations, depending on its interests.