

Topic: Space Diplomacy

**Introduction:**

India, on **05 May 2017**, opened a new frontier of 'space diplomacy' by literally gifting the **SAARC nations with a South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9)**. The idea of a satellite to serve the needs of SAARC member nations was mooted by PM Narendra Modi during the **18th SAARC summit held in Nepal in 2014**. The satellite, aimed at helping **regional countries to boost their telecommunication and broadcasting services**, has been built at a cost of around **Rs 235 crore**, which has been entirely funded by India. GSAT-9 is a space-based platform that would cost the participating nations to the tune of **\$1,500m for developing ground infrastructure** and ancillaries services. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have already endorsed for utilizing the services of the SAARC satellite. Afghanistan is yet to pledge its commitment, while Pakistan had opted out of the program.

**Details Regarding the Satellite:**

The South Asia Satellite weighs **2,230 kilograms** and is carrying **12 top-of-the-line communication transponders in the Ku band**, which India's neighbours can use to improve their communications services. Each country will get access to at least **one transponder**, but they will have to **develop their own ground infrastructure**. PM Modi, at the time of launch of the satellite, called for a video conference with the heads of the South Asian nations of **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka**. The participating nations anticipate an **Rs 10,000-crore benefit** from the **satellite's 12-year lifespan**. Finally, amidst much fanfare, the GSLV-F09, carrying the South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9), was launched from the Second Launch Pad (SLP) at Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota on 5th May 2017 at 04:57 PM IST.

**Benefits from the Satellite:**

The launch of GSAT-9 is being seen as a major stride by India in the emerging domain of space diplomacy. As PM Modi put it, the satellite represents a "**new form of regional cooperation**." One of the most significant benefits to India will be in terms of **offsetting China's growing influence in the region** accruing out of '**infrastructure diplomacy**' that it has systematically indulged in to dominate and intimidate India. The satellite has the capability to provide **secure hotlines** among the participating nations. Such foolproof, crucial communication link between the nations, especially in the times of **natural disasters or other unforeseen national crises** will ensure prompt response from the neighbours. South Asia is the world's most populous region and is prone to **tropical cyclones, heat waves, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides and floods**. GSAT-9 will help these nations to accurately predict weather and be forewarned of natural disasters. The satellite will also help countries in **mapping terrain and natural resources**. Besides the above, the satellite will provide important services to India's neighbours in telecommunication and broadcasting areas such as television, direct-to-home (DTH) services, education, telemedicine and disaster management support to mitigate losses.

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### **Pakistan's Concerns:**

Pakistan had opted out of the program raising concerns of **security and mission scope** of the satellite. Pakistan feared that the satellite could allow India to have a ready access and secure key data on Pakistan's sensitive information database infrastructure. Pakistan has its own space programme under its **Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO)**. In June 2015, SUPARCO proposed a joint monetary and technical venture with the development of the satellite. ISRO chairman **A. S. Kiran Kumar** announced that India and Pakistan will collaborate on developing the SAARC satellite with SUPARCO performing technical engineering under ISRO's guidance.

However, after a deliberate debate on 20 September 2015, the officials from India and Pakistan could not arrive at a consensus over the ownership and control of the satellite and hence on 02 October 2015, India announced that it has decided to go ahead with building the satellite, without Pakistan's consent. Consequently, on 23 March 2016, it was official that Pakistan had decided to opt-out of the satellite project.

### **Read further:**

[http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/ISRO\\_Successfully\\_Launches\\_GSAT\\_9\\_SAARC\\_South\\_Asian\\_Communication\\_Satellite\\_999.html](http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/ISRO_Successfully_Launches_GSAT_9_SAARC_South_Asian_Communication_Satellite_999.html)

<http://www.india.com/business/isro-saarc-satellite-first-south-asian-telecommunication-satellite-to-become-operational-this-week-2109357/>

<http://www.firstpost.com/india/gslv-is-a-grand-success-but-indias-saarc-satellite-is-a-bad-dream-because-of-pakistan-2997014.html>

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/countdown-to-india-s-saarc-satellite-take-off-on-track-5-things-to-know-about-isro-s-latest-launch/story-A61IS4oaL1RSMT9mDgjj9J.html>