

The 'new' South Asia

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to redefine the priorities of the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London this week, India's neighbourhood policy is coming under scrutiny. The visit of Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Oli to India earlier this month has led to suggestions that it could mark a new beginning in India-Nepal ties after the troubles of the past, and Mr. Modi is likely to visit Nepal soon in part to regain some of India's lost strategic clout. This would also be to impart one last dose of dynamism to his 'Neighbourhood First' policy before the 2019 general election.

Soon after coming to power, the Modi government had promised to give priority to the immediate neighbourhood; it did engage with most of the governments here productively for some time. Relations with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh saw a dramatic improvement while Nepal was given due attention. With Afghanistan, ties were galvanised with security cooperation taking centre stage. Except for the Maldives, Mr. Modi visited all of India's neighbours and tried to reassure them of New Delhi's commitment to deliver the goods.

But at the end of four years of the Modi government, the situation is vastly different. There is now the refrain that India has lost the plot in its immediate vicinity. In Sri Lanka, domestic political developments are affecting India, while in the Maldives, India has found its diminishing clout being publicly taken apart. A vocal critic of India has assumed power in Nepal, and with a massive political mandate. In the Seychelles, India is struggling to operationalise a pact to build a military facility. China's clout, meanwhile, is growing markedly around India's periphery, further constraining New Delhi's ability to push its regional agenda.

In many ways, there is nothing new in the lament today about India's declining regional clout. This is a part of the Indian discourse and comes to the fore every few years with singular constancy. Contrary to what many suggest, there was never a golden age of Indian predominance in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Smaller states in the region have always had enough agency to chart their own foreign policy pathways; sometimes they converged with those of India and at other times they varied significantly. There have always been 'extra regional' powers which have come to the aid of India's neighbours, often to New Delhi's discomfiture.

What is true today is that post-Independence, India has never encountered anything like China in its vicinity whose intent and capabilities are posing the kind of challenge to Indian interests which New Delhi is finding hard to manage. China's entry into the South Asian region has opened up new avenues for smaller neighbours which can be leveraged in their dealings with India. As a result, the very idea of what South Asian geography means is undergoing a change. It is not without reason that the idea of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation is gaining currency in Indian policy-making. It can potentially allow India to break through the straitjacket of the traditional confines of South Asia and leverage its Bay of Bengal identity to link up with the wider Southeast Asian region. In that sense, it is about reimagining India's strategic geography altogether.

But the underlying factors that have traditionally framed India's difficulties in getting its neighbourhood policy right remain as potent as ever. India's structural dominance of South Asia makes it a natural target of resentment and suspicion which New Delhi has often found difficult to overcome. India is also part of the domestic politics of most regional states where anti-India sentiment is often used to bolster the nationalist credentials of various political formations. State identity in South Asia often gets linked to oppositional politics *vis-à-vis* India. South Asian states

remain politically fragile and the economic projects in the region have failed to take off as a result. This means that the room available for India to manoeuvre in the region is severely limited despite what many in New Delhi and outside would like to believe.

Successive Indian governments have struggled to get a grip on the neighbourhood. Initially, the struggle with Pakistan engaged a large part of India's diplomatic capital. Today, there seems to be a clear recognition that India's Pakistan policy is merely a subset of India's China policy. And as Beijing's economic and political engagement in India's periphery has grown, New Delhi is coming to terms with the reality of a 'new' South Asia. India will not only have to more creatively reimagine its strategic geography but also evolve new terms of engagement with its neighbours; terms which reflect the reality of our times in which both India and its neighbours can have a stake in each other's success.

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With limited resources and time, it is crucial for States to assess which skills policies will make the biggest impact

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