

In South Asia, be the Un-China

As the [stand-off between the Indian and Chinese militaries](#) enters its third month at Doklam, it is not just Bhutan that is keenly anticipating the potential fallout. The entire neighbourhood is watching. There is obvious interest in how the situation plays out and the consequent change in the balance of power between India and China in South Asia. India's other neighbours are likely to take away their own lessons about dealing with their respective "tri-junctions" both real and imagined, on land and in the sea. A Chinese defence official was hoping to press that nerve with India's neighbours when he told a visiting delegation of Indian journalists this week that China could well "enter Kalapani" — an area near Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand that lies along an undefined India-Nepal boundary and a tri-junction with China — or "even Kashmir" with a notional India-China-Pakistan trijunction.

Perhaps, it is for this reason that governments in the region have refused to show their hand in the Doklam conflict. "Nepal will not get dragged into this or that side in the border dispute," Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister Krishna Bahadur Mahara said ahead of a meeting with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, who had travelled to Kathmandu for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) regional summit. Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang will be in Kathmandu next week, and Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in Delhi the week after. Making a similar point while speaking at a conference on public relations this week, a Sri Lankan Minister in Colombo contended that India and China are "both important" to Sri Lanka. Bhutan's Foreign Ministry has stuck to its line, blaming China for violating agreements at Doklam, but not mentioning India. Columnists in the country too are increasingly advocating that Bhutan distance itself from both Indian and Chinese positions.

Is India a good neighbour?

A policy of 'equidistance' for our closest neighbours is a far cry from India's past primacy in the region and something South Block can hardly be sanguine about. Yet, it is a slow path each of the neighbours (minus Bhutan) has taken in the past few years. When the Maldives first turfed private infrastructure group GMR out of its contract to develop Male airport in 2012, few could have imagined the situation today with Chinese companies having bagged contracts to most infrastructure projects. This includes development of a key new island and its link to the capital Male and a 50-year lease to another island for a tourism project.

Similarly, when the then Prime Minister of Nepal K.P. Sharma Oli signed a transit trade treaty and agreement on infrastructure linkages with China in late 2015-2016, Ministry of External Affairs mandarins had brushed it off as a "bluff". Today, China is building a railway to Nepal, opening up Lhasa-Kathmandu road links, and has approved a soft loan of over \$200 million to construct an airport at Pokhara. According to the Investment Board Nepal, at a two-day investment summit in March this year, Chinese investors contributed \$8.2 billion, more than 60% of the foreign direct investment commitments made by the seven countries present.

Sri Lanka's Hambantota port construction project went to the Chinese in 2007 only after India rejected it. Today, China doesn't just own 80% of the port; it has also won practically every infrastructure contract from Hambantota to Colombo. Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh last October was another such overture, with \$24 billion committed in infrastructure and energy projects. Earlier this year, the largely state-owned Chinese consortium, Himalaya Energy, won a bid for three gas fields in Bangladesh's north-east shoulder from the American company Chevron, which together account for more than half of the country's total gas output.

Even if Pakistan is not counted in this list, it is not hard to see which way India's immediate

neighbours, which are each a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are headed in the next few years. More pointedly, once the investment flows in, it will be that much harder for them to stave off a more strategic presence which China is now more unabashed about.

The crossroads at the Doklam plateau

If one of the aims of the action in Doklam is to save Bhutan from the same fate, then what else must India do to ensure that China doesn't succeed in creating similar space for itself in a country that stood by India in its objections to BRI, and bring its other neighbours back?

To begin with, India must regain its role as a prime mover of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the organisation it abandoned a year ago over its problems with Pakistan. Despite sneers all around, SAARC has survived three decades in spite of its biggest challenge, India-Pakistan tensions. That New Delhi would cancel its attendance at the summit to be held in Pakistan in the wake of the Uri attack, winning support from other countries similarly affected by terrorism such as Bangladesh and Afghanistan, is understandable. But a year later, the fact that there have been no steps taken to restore the SAARC process is unfortunate. This will hurt the South Asian construct and further loosen the bonds that tie all the countries together, thereby making it easier for China to make inroads. It should be remembered that despite China's repeated requests, SAARC was one club it never gained admittance to. For all the Narendra Modi government's promotion of alternate groupings such as South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), BIMSTEC, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), none will come close to SAARC's comprehensive cogency.

Second, India must recognise that picking sides in the politics of its neighbours makes little difference to China's success there. In Sri Lanka, the Sirisena government hasn't changed course when it comes to China, and despite its protestations that it was saddled with debt by the Rajapaksa regime, it has made no moves to clear that debt while signing up for more. The United Progressive Alliance government made a similar mistake when President Mohamed Nasheed was ousted in the Maldives, only to find that subsequent governments did little to veer away from Chinese influence.

India made its concerns about the then Prime Minister Oli very clear, and was even accused of helping Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' to replace him in 2016, yet Nepal's eager embrace of Chinese infrastructure and trade to develop its difficult terrain has not eased. In Bangladesh too, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has overseen the closest ties with New Delhi over the past decade, has also forged ahead on ties with China. Should her Awami League lose next year's election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party will most certainly strengthen the shift towards China. In Bhutan's election, also next year, it is necessary that India picks no side, for nothing could be worse than if the Doklam stand-off becomes an India-versus-China election issue.

Above all, India must recognise that doing better with its neighbours is not about investing more or undue favours. It is about following a policy of mutual interests and of respect, which India is more culturally attuned to than its large rival is. Each of India's neighbours shares more than a geographical context with India. They share history, language, tradition and even cuisine. With the exception of Pakistan, none of them sees itself as a rival to India, or India as inimical to its sovereignty. As an Indian diplomat put it, when dealing with Beijing bilaterally, New Delhi must match China's aggression, and counter its moves with its own. When dealing with China in South Asia, however, India must do exactly the opposite, and not allow itself to be outpaced. In short, India must "be the Un-China".

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