

## BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOUR

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

If South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers. While there indeed are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is New Delhi's ideational disinclination towards its neighbourhood. Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity. Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation. Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result, restricted our space for manoeuvre in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.

Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence. India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.

### Pieces of the Asian dream

The Narendra Modi government's neighbourhood policy began exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments. But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka. While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives. Despite their characteristic bravado and grandstanding, the BJP government's foreign policy mandarins looked out of their depth.

While it is true that 2018 seems to have brought some good news from the regional capitals, it has less to do with our diplomatic finesse than the natural course of events there. The arrival of an India-friendly Ibrahim Mohamed Solih regime in Male has brought much cheer, and the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Sri Lankan Prime Minister is to India's advantage too. Nepal has reached out to India to put an end to the acrimony that persisted through 2015 to 2017. Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are also positively disposed towards India, though the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless. What this then means is that New Delhi has a real opportunity today to recalibrate its neighbourhood relations.

First, let's briefly examine what should not be done in dealing with a sensitive neighbourhood. For one, India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic subtlety and finesse. The manner in which it weighed down on Nepal in 2015 during the Constitution-making process is an example of how not to influence outcomes. The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbour to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to backfire.

Second, it must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbour countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another. Preferring one faction or regime over another is unwise in the longer term. Take the example of incumbent Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. There was a great deal of cheer in New Delhi when he took office in January 2015 (with some saying India helped him cobble together a winnable

coalition) after defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, considered less well disposed toward India. However, Mr. Sirisena's political transformation was quick, as were India's fortunes in Colombo, at least temporarily.

Third, New Delhi must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours. It has a terrible track record in this regard.

Is India's foreign policy adrift?

Fourth, there is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage *vis-à-vis* India. This is especially true of regional infrastructure projects. India simply does not have the political, material or financial wherewithal to outdo China in building infrastructure. Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and the use of soft power. However, even in those areas China seems to be forging ahead. India must therefore invest a great deal more in soft power promotion (and not the Hindutva kind of outreach). To begin with, India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU), including by providing a proper campus (instead of allowing it to function out of a hotel building) and ensuring that its students get research visas to India without much hassle. If properly utilised, the SAU can become a point for regional integration.

Finally, while reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka. There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development. China and India's engagement of the South Asian region needn't be based on zero-sum calculations. For example, any non-military infrastructure constructed by China in the region can also be beneficial to India while it trades with those countries. A road or a rail line built by China in Bangladesh or Nepal can be used by India in trading with those countries.

Going forward, New Delhi must invest in three major policy areas. There needs to be better regional trading arrangements. The reason why South Asia is the least integrated region in the world is because the economic linkages are shockingly weak among the countries of the region. The lead to correct this must be taken by India even if this means offering better terms of trade for the smaller neighbours. While it is true that long 'sensitive lists' maintained by South Asian countries are a major impediment in the implementation of SAFTA, or the South Asian Free Trade Area, India could do a lot more to persuade them to reduce the items on such lists. Second, several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighbouring countries. This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.

Second, India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums. However, there is only so much that can be gained from bilateral arrangements, and there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Third, India must have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood devoid of empty rhetoric and spectacular visits without follow up. We must ask ourselves, as the biggest country in the South Asian neighbourhood, what kind of a region do we want to be situated in, and work towards enabling that.

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