

DOES INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY NEED REWORKING?

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

Recent visits by [Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla](#) and National Security Adviser [Ajit Doval](#) to countries in the region appear to show new energy in India's neighbourhood policy. Over the past few years, there have been many strains in ties with neighbours — for instance, with Nepal over [its Constitution in 2015](#) and now [over the map](#), and with Bangladesh [over the Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act \(CAA\)](#). Shyam Saran and Constantino Xavier discuss India's neighbourhood policy in a conversation moderated by **Suhasini Haidar**. Edited excerpts:

Shyam Saran: This new energy is welcome. However, it is extremely important that our engagement with our neighbouring countries should not be episodic. It should not be event-oriented; it should be process-oriented. And we should have a plan for continuous engagement at various levels. Also, the present political dispensation's domestic drivers have relegated foreign policy objectives to the background, whether it is with respect to Bangladesh and the CAA or, much more dramatically, with Pakistan. So, I hope that going forward, there will be an awareness that there is a price to be paid if we try to always prioritise domestic factors over foreign policy issues. And this is particularly important in terms of our neighbourhood policy. India should fashion its diplomacy in a manner which does not give rise to feelings [amongst smaller neighbours] of being slighted or marginalised.

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Constantino Xavier: I would say that India's neighbourhood policy has been a constant work in progress. It is almost impossible for India to get all its ducks in a row in the neighbourhood at one time as it's a very complex region. It is one of the largest regions in the world by population. It is one of the least integrated regions with tremendous deficits in terms of infrastructure, connectivity, and interdependence. And it is a region that is now being exposed to various geopolitical competition dynamics, with China making a grand entry and the U.S. developing relations on its own with some of India's neighbours. So, this is a difficult region, I think, as any official who has dealt with the region recognises, and there will never be great solutions or great setbacks. If the main objective of India's neighbourhood policy is to connect and have closer links with immediate neighbours, which has been stated by various Indian Prime Ministers over the last 20 years, then I would risk saying that India is doing more than ever today on connectivity and regional policies. The capacity of China to deliver on its commitments exposed India's deficit, and I would say that China has done India a great favour because it's really pushed India to do much more, to focus on its neighbourhood, which for a long time it took for granted.

Shyam Saran: No, I think diplomacy is not a simple game of being either tough or generous. I think it is a much more nuanced, complex exercise. I think the bottom line should be that if you have determined what your key interests are, then it is better to make it known what the red lines are.

Constantino Xavier: I'd say what is needed from India more than firmness is clarity. It is very easy to accuse any of India's neighbouring countries of being too close to China. But it's very difficult to set out the exact terms of what they should or shouldn't do with China. I'm concerned that sometimes [India uses] the security threat from China as an excuse to limit the capacity [of neighbours] to deepen relations with China or to accept Chinese investment for their own

infrastructure modernisation. Naturally all these countries in India's neighbourhood will try to balance. They will always be anxious about India, which is the de facto giant in this geography. The only way to really solve all this is to focus on creating interdependence in this region that will give India strategic leverage.

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Constantino Xavier: No, we live in a region that has an open competitive market. That means that all these countries in India's neighbourhood that used to depend and rely much more on India in the past are adopting a first come, first served policy. They have an open door policy and they don't care if it is Chinese ventilators or Indian ventilators that are reaching their capitals first. Hence, if you look at the various connectivity initiatives that India has taken over the last few years in the neighbourhood, in terms of energy, interdependence, infrastructural connectivity, grants and loans, the numbers have been going up. And that is not just because India's feeling more generous towards its neighbours; it's because India is facing competition from China.

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Shyam Saran: If we try to match China dollar for dollar, road for road, or project for project, I think we will constantly be trying to catch up. Connectivity is certainly a very important area. Building connections with all our neighbours, whether it is through highways, railways, the revival of riverine transportation or sub-regional energy grids, are things that we can do, because what they do is they bring into play what is one of the greatest assets which we have with respect to all our neighbours, and that is proximity. But this connectivity has to be linked with the 'software of connectivity'. There is no point in having a glass-topped highway connect if trucks have to stop at the border for hours and hours. The procedures for allowing in cargo or people are still archaic compared to, for example, what we find in Southeast Asia or Europe. Also, we often speak about the importance of transit, for example, through Bangladesh to our Northeast or through Pakistan to Central Asia, but what many people do not realise is that as far as most of our neighbours are concerned, we are the most important transit country. Why can't we, for example, give 'national treatment' to our neighbours with respect to the use of our transportation network or ports, and exports and imports? We should aim to be the best possible alternative in terms of the economic development of our neighbours. If we can do that, I think the picture will dramatically change.

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Constantino Xavier: As far as I see, the [government's] approach for coordination and cooperation with other extraregional powers except China has been welcome. If you look at Nepal [in the past], the British had their development cooperation programme, the Japanese had theirs, the Americans had theirs, and India had its own. And often these countries were working in parallel without coordinating, which only benefited China because it plays a divide and rule approach and has been able to make the most of it. In the past few years, India has been much more open to coordinating and aligning policies in South Asia. That has an advantage because it increases synergies with the Japanese in Sri Lanka for infrastructure financing and with the U.S. and India on political issues, for example. I'd say the bottom line is of working closer together with like-minded partners that are fellow democracies, that think alike about developmental priorities and also about economic connectivity with the rest of the world.

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Shyam Saran: I have a slightly different view. Since we are not in a position to really match the

kind of resources that China is able to deploy in the neighbourhood, it does make sense for us to join other partners which are currently benign partners, like the U.S. or Japan. But to give you the example of the time that I was Ambassador in Nepal, we coordinated with other countries under the clear understanding that India would be in the lead. So, in the current phase, my sense is that perhaps that element is getting weakened. Perhaps the U.S. or Japan or others may be pursuing projects or activities that are not necessarily aligned to India. This could be a problem in the future. I hope that India's objectives and interests remain the primary elements in any initiative by other countries in the region.

Constantino Xavier: The format of SAARC is outdated and does not serve the complex, fluid regional cooperation agenda any longer. I think India has taken a pragmatic policy. It is unfortunate of course, but Pakistan has taken a very different approach to regional connectivity, where it sees itself mostly as a hub between China and the Gulf or Central Asian regions, so towards the west and the north, and India therefore had to respond and seek to gravitate more towards the south, to the Indian Ocean region, and the east, across the Bay of Bengal with Southeast Asia. Effectively, what we've been witnessing over the last four years is another chapter in the split of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan that has manifested in the stagnation of SAARC.

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India has revived BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and worked in the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) quadrilateral for a framework on motor vehicle and water governance, which don't hold India's cooperation agenda hostage to a consensus at SAARC, which will always depend on a Pakistani veto.

Shyam Saran: BBIN and BIMSTEC should be pursued for their own merits, but I do not see them replacing SAARC. If we consider regional integration to cover the whole of South Asia, even if we are having difficulties currently with Pakistan, even if Pakistan's orientation is today more towards China or towards its western flank, I think the overall objective and the idea of a fully integrated South Asia is something we should always keep in front of us. Our other neighbours, with perhaps the exception of Bhutan, are interested in SAARC. They see SAARC as a worthwhile platform for regional cooperation. Now, if India is going to turn its back on SAARC, if India walks out, for example, there could even be a possibility of China being welcomed into SAARC. If that were to happen, our challenges would become even worse. So, I think that even though SAARC at this point of time is not functioning as the best instrument for promoting regional cooperation, there are various other reasons, particularly with respect to how the political dynamics in this region are working out, to keep that vision alive. I would not be in a hurry to abandon SAARC.

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