

For India, it should be neighbourhood first

As India's salience in global matters grows — amply demonstrated recently by the presence of 10 leaders from the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#) at India's Republic Day celebrations, the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest forays to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Palestine — its leaders also need to contemplate and reflect deeply on what is happening in India's immediate neighbourhood.

Far more than East, South-east Asia, or West Asia, it is India's immediate neighbourhood that directly impacts it geopolitically, geo-strategically and geoeconomically. Whatever be the ambit of India's reach elsewhere, India's principal focus, hence, will need to be on this neighbourhood.

India can afford to live with demands such as the one made at the recently concluded ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, where it was urged to play a pro-active role in the Asia-Pacific region, without needing to take hard decisions. It possibly also does not have to answer questions as to whether ASEAN nations fully back India's membership of the Quadrilateral (Australia, Japan, the United States and India), even as most of them back China's Belt and Road Initiative. India can even afford to skirt the issue as to whether ASEAN-India relations are all embracing in nature or limited only to specific aspects.

The balancing act, in India-ASEAN ties

In West Asia, India still possesses enough leeway to engage in skilful manoeuvre around contentious issues without having to take a stand. India could, thus, successfully handle an Israeli Prime Minister's visit to India just prior to Mr. Modi's visit to Palestine, and yet avoid a negative fallout. It could also separate the technological "blush" of Mr. Netanyahu's visit without having to take a clear stand on the issue of Jerusalem. Likewise, Mr. Modi, during his Palestine visit could conclude as many as six agreements and express the hope that Palestine would soon emerge as a sovereign independent country in a peaceful manner without having to specifically refer to a "united" and "viable" Palestine.

With the UAE and Oman, things have been easier. With the former, trade and economic ties as also counter-terror aspects have been on a growth curve. With the latter, an established friend, the option of closer naval co-operation and of reaching an agreement to give the Indian Navy access to Duqm port did not prove difficult.

It is in South Asia where troubles are mounting, where India cannot succeed without looking at some hard options. For instance, how to deal with a new government in Nepal (comprising the Left Alliance of the CPN-UML led by Oli and the CPN-Maoist Centre led by Prachanda) with few pretensions as to where its sympathies lie. India also needs to now contemplate the prospect of prolonged unrest and possibly violence, both communal and terror-related, in neighbouring Bangladesh, prior to scheduled elections in 2019. This follows the conviction by a special court in Dhaka of Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader and three-time [Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges](#). Dealing with both Nepal and Bangladesh will need more than fine gestures; they will need far more closer monitoring.

Another and a more imminent challenge for India is to sort out the imbroglio in the Maldives which is threatening to spill out of control. No amount of dissimulation will help. India cannot afford not to be directly engaged in finding a proper solution.

Relations between India and the Maldives have undergone significant changes since the days of

former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. After the Maldivian Democratic Party, headed by former President Mohamed Nasheed, came to power, for the first time anti-Indian forces within the Maldives (including radical Islamist groups sponsored by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) could muster some support. It was also Mr. Nasheed's initial overtures to China that set the stage for Maldivian-China relations. Under the [current President, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom](#), anti-Indian tendencies have steadily increased and there has been a pronounced tilt in favour of China. The free trade agreement that the Maldives signed recently with China has been the proverbial thin end of the wedge, providing China with an excellent opportunity to enhance its influence and retain de facto possession of the Southern Atolls in the Maldivian archipelago.

Straddling a strategic part of the Western Indian Ocean, the Maldives today occupies a crucial position along the main shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. The Southern Maldives has long remained an object of interest to the major powers. With the U.S. taking a step back, China has begun to display a great deal of interest in the area; this coincides with its current outreach into the Indian Ocean Region as also its ongoing plans to take control of Gwadar port (Pakistan) and establish a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

India cannot, hence, afford to remain idle and must come up with an answer soon enough that is consistent with its strategic interests. A muscular reaction would be ill-advised, despite the entreaties of Mr. Nasheed, as the international community is likely to react adversely to any military adventure. China is, meanwhile, playing its cards carefully, calling for "home-grown solutions" and "warning against any military intervention". The critical need is to find a solution early — one that takes into account India's geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the region. Else, it would have far-reaching consequences as far as India's quest for regional power status is concerned.

Two other issues, viz., Pakistan and Afghanistan, similarly demand our focussed attention, and that India acts with a sense of responsibility expected of a regional superpower.

The virtual collapse of a Pakistan policy seems to affect Pakistan less and India more. The latter is facing a daily haemorrhaging of human lives due to cross border firing and terrorist violence from Pakistan. In spite of its internal political crisis, and U.S. President Donald Trump's fusillade threatening Pakistan with dire consequences if it failed to amend its ways, Pakistan shows no sign of altering its anti-India trajectory. Democratic India can hardly afford to remain as blasé and let things slide, without effectively trying to find ways and means to change a situation which is certainly not to our advantage.

Equally vital for India is to try and find a way out of the Afghan morass. The daily massacre of innocents, men, women and children, civilian officials and military personnel, experts from several countries and diplomats, marks the start of the complete collapse of a system of governance.

Despite periodic optimistic forecasts of the Taliban being in retreat, terrorists under check, and that the Afghan government is still in charge, Afghanistan's position today is the worst ever since the 1970s. This January, the capital city of Kabul witnessed one of the worst ever incidents of violence anywhere, in which over 100 civilians were killed following a series of terror strikes. This happened despite the presence of foreign troops, elements of the Afghan military and also of the Afghan police. Notwithstanding the omnipresent Pakistan hand in the violence in Afghanistan, this kind of "engineered chaos" over a prolonged period of time effectively demonstrates that the Afghan state has virtually disintegrated.

The collapse of the Afghan state does have severe consequences for India and nations in the vicinity. As a regional power, India has significant stakes in Afghanistan. Apart from the human cost and the fact that New Delhi has spent over \$2 billion in providing humanitarian assistance to

Afghanistan, India's true stake lies in sustaining the future of the Afghan state. Its "shrivelling" or "demise" and any premature end to the attempt to restore peace in Afghanistan will only revive memories of the worst days of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and 1990s, and India has every reason to feel concerned about the fallout. Of no less consequence is the fact that if Afghanistan were to cease to exist, its civilisational links with India would also evaporate. For a variety of reasons, therefore, India cannot allow Afghanistan to collapse or cease to exist as a state in the modern sense. This is something that demands India's critical attention, and specially for a display of its leadership skills.

For all these reasons, and apart from those currently at the helm of affairs in India, the leaderships of parties and States across the spectrum must try and achieve a unanimity of purpose in regard to our foreign policy priorities. Today, the focus needs to be on our immediate neighbourhood. The outcome of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the turmoil in the East and South China Seas, or other big-ticket issues across the world are important, but it is South Asia and the neighbourhood that demands our concentrated attention. If India is not seen to be actively involved in ensuring that the region is at peace and functions in conformity with its world view, any claims to leadership would amount to little more than treading water.

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