

Make the neighbourhood first again

Almost four years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his term with a “Neighbourhood First” moment, by inviting leaders of all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to his swearing-in ceremony, India’s neighbourhood policy is clearly adrift. New Delhi’s connect with its South Asian neighbours is weaker than it has been for a very long time.

A perfect storm?

The first problem is that for various reasons other governments in the SAARC region are either not on ideal terms with New Delhi, or facing political headwinds. In the Maldives, President Yameen Abdul Gayoom has gone out of his way to challenge the Modi government, whether it is on his crackdown on the opposition, invitations to China, or even breaking with New Delhi’s effort to isolate Pakistan at SAARC. In Nepal, the K.P. Sharma Oli government is certainly not India’s first choice, and Kathmandu’s invitation to the Pakistani Prime Minister this week confirms the chill. And no matter which party is in power in Pakistan, it is difficult to see Delhi pushing for official dialogue, especially with the military on the ascendant once again. In other parts of the neighbourhood, where relations have been comparatively better for the past few years, upcoming elections could turn the tables on India. In Sri Lanka, the recent local election results that have gone the way of the Mahinda Rajapaksa-backed party could be a portent of his future re-election. In Afghanistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh, elections this year and the next could pose challenges for India.

The next problem is the impact of China’s unprecedented forays into each of these countries. Instead of telling the Nepal government to sort out issues with India, for example, as it had in the past, China opened up an array of alternative trade and connectivity options after the 2015 India-Nepal border blockade: from the highway to Lhasa, cross-border railway lines to the development of dry ports. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan, China holds strategic real estate, which could also be fortified militarily in the future. At present, it means China has a stake in the internal politics of those countries. While China’s growing presence in infrastructure and connectivity projects has been well-documented, its new interest in political mediation must be watched more carefully as a result. When China stepped in to negotiate a Rohingya refugee return agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh, or host a meeting of Afghanistan and Pakistan’s foreign ministers to help calm tensions and bring both on board with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) connection between them, or offer to mediate between the Maldivian government and the opposition, it wasn’t just breaking with its past policy of ignoring political dynamics in countries it invests in. Beijing is now taking on a role New Delhi should have been in a better position to play, and by refusing to play it Delhi is being shown up as unfeeling, partisan or, worse, ineffective in the bargain.

The third issue is that the Modi government’s decision to use hard power tactics in the neighbourhood has had a boomerang effect. Theoretically, given its central location in South Asia and being the largest geographically and economically, India should be expected to hold greater sway over each of its neighbours. However, the “surgical strikes” on Pakistan of 2016 have been followed by a greater number of ceasefire violations and cross-border infiltration on the Line of Control. The 2015 Nepal blockade and a subsequent cut in Indian aid channelled through the government did not force the Nepali government to amend its constitution as intended, and the subsequent merger of Mr. Oli’s Communist Party of Nepal (UML) with Prachanda’s CPN(Maoist) is seen as a reversal of India’s influence there.

Mr. Modi’s decision to abruptly cancel his visit to Male in 2015 did not yield the required changes in the government’s treatment of the opposition, and New Delhi’s dire warnings about Mr.

Yameen's emergency in the past month have led to the Maldives cancelling its participation in the Indian Navy's "Milan" exercises. Even in Bangladesh, the Indian Army chief, General Bipin Rawat's tough talking last week about immigration has drawn ire there, with Bangladesh's Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan describing the remarks as untrue, unfounded and not helpful.

While many of these factors are hard to reverse, the fundamental facts of geography and shared cultures in South Asia are also undeniable, and India must focus its efforts to return to a more comfortable peace, and to "Making the Neighbourhood First Again".

Time for reversal

To begin with, despite conventional wisdom on the benefits of hard power and realpolitik, India's most potent tool is its soft power. Its successes in Bhutan and Afghanistan, for example, have much more to do with its development assistance than its defence assistance. It's heartening, therefore, that after sharp drops in 2016 (of 36%) and 2017 (of 19%) year on year, the budget allocations for South Asia have seen an increase (of 6%) in 2018. After the Doklam crisis was defused in 2017, India also moved swiftly to resolve differences with Bhutan on hydropower pricing, and this February it announced a tariff hike for energy from Bhutan's Chhukha project, the first in several years.

Next, instead of opposing every project by China in the region, the government must attempt a three-pronged approach. First, where possible, India should collaborate with China in the manner it has over the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic corridor. Second, when it feels a project is a threat to its interests, India should make a counter-offer to the project, if necessary in collaboration with its Quadrilateral partners, Japan, the U.S. and Australia. Third, India should coexist with projects that do not necessitate intervention, while formulating a set of South Asian principles for sustainable development assistance that can be used across the region.

This will all only be possible if India and China reset bilateral ties, which have seen a marked slide over the past few years. It is noteworthy that the government appears to have started this process with Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale's recent visit to Beijing.

Learning from ASEAN

It will also be impossible to renew the compact with the neighbours without reviving the SAARC process. In their book *The ASEAN Miracle*, Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng describe in detail the need for SAARC to learn from the success of ASEAN. Mr. Mahbubani suggests that leaders of SAARC countries meet more often informally, that they interfere less in the internal workings of each other's governments, and that there be more interaction at every level of government. They also say that just as Indonesia, the biggest economy in the ASEAN, allowed smaller countries such as Singapore to take the lead, India too must take a back seat in decision-making, enabling others to build a more harmonious SAARC process.

"It is much safer to be feared than to be loved," wrote Niccolo Machiavelli, "when one of the two must be wanting." The government's challenge is to steer India towards a course where it is both feared and loved in appropriate measure, and away from a situation in which it is neither feared nor loved.

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