

Why China is winning in India's neighbourhood

Even before Narendra Modi took over as India's prime minister, he decided to invite the leaders of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries and Mauritius to attend his swearing-in ceremony. In a way, "neighbourhood first" was the first policy decision of the Modi government. His first foreign visit after assuming office was to Bhutan. Shortly, he became the first Indian prime minister to visit Nepal in 17 years. By now, he has visited all the countries in the neighbourhood except the Maldives. Yet, the neighbourhood remains a headache for the Modi government.

At the moment, the biggest problem is the Maldives where President Abdulla Yameen has gone against India's repeated warnings and imposed a state of emergency. It is not difficult to figure out that China's backing is giving Yameen the confidence to snub India. In Nepal, K.P. Oli, another pro-China leader, is now back as the prime minister. Beijing helped him get elected by brokering an alliance of the left parties to take on the pro-India Nepalese Congress. While Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are currently being ruled by ostensibly pro-India regimes, New Delhi has enough reasons to worry even in those two countries. The pro-China Mahinda Rajapaksa's party won big in the recently concluded local body elections in Sri Lanka. And Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina government is not happy with the Indian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Most of the analyses of India's neighbourhood woes revolve around whether a pro-India or a pro-China regime is in power in these countries. However, there are important structural factors involved which, interlocked with each other, have created conditions that have made the going difficult for India in the neighbourhood.

First, and this is the most well-known one, the geopolitical rivalry between India and China has been skewed in favour of the latter because of its economic and military advantage. China's gross domestic product (GDP) is five times that of India and its defence budget is more than three times that of India. This power disparity means that China has more resources to wean South Asian countries away from India. But why does South Asia matter so much?

The answer to this brings us to the second structural factor. For India, the importance of South Asia was wonderfully captured by Shyam Saran in his *How India Sees The World: Kautilya To The 21st Century*. India's security interests, Saran explained, span the entire subcontinent but its political control lasts only till the edge of its own borders. Beijing, on the other hand, sees some of these South Asian countries lying within China's traditional sphere of influence. A 1954 map in Chinese textbooks (reproduced in John W. Garver's *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry In The Twentieth Century*) shows Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, India's north-eastern states, Bengal, Hunza and Gilgit in northern Kashmir, and Myanmar lying within China's traditional sphere of influence. As China becomes stronger, it wants to gain back its influence in these regions to the extent possible.

Third, the formation of modern Indian and Chinese nation-states was accompanied by significant "territorial churn". In India's case, independence from colonial rule came together with separation of West and East Pakistan. The colonial regime had several formal and informal arrangements with neighbouring countries in order to stall the advance of Tsarist Russia. Even though India entered into treaty agreements with Nepal and Bhutan, New Delhi did not exercise the same kind of control as earlier because: a) Independent India did not have the resources to carry forward earlier arrangements in toto, b) there was no more the threat of Tsarist Russia, c) a belief that colonial practices were unfair and should anyway be discarded, and d) the confidence that the logic of geography will keep India's status as the pre-eminent regional power intact.

While India underwent partition and dilution of its extra-territorial influence, Communist China undertook a massive territorial unification. The incorporation of Tibet into China was a particularly huge event and was recognized as such in India. India's deputy prime minister Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 alerting him to the implications of "the disappearance of Tibet" and "the expansion of China up to our gates". But the logic of territorial unification was not lost on the Chinese too. Wang Hongwei of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for example, asserted that India's desire for "power and hegemony" was a direct follow-up of New Delhi "annexing more than 560 principalities" and embarking on "expansionism" in Kashmir. The integration of princely states in India was actually being closely observed in China.

Fourth, India's relative size by itself, regardless of policies, makes it a threatening actor in the subcontinent. Sometimes, policies add to the problem. It is no surprise that small neighbours would want an extra-regional balancer to temper Indian influence and even to secure better terms from the bureaucrats in New Delhi. China is the most obvious option to balance India. Besides geopolitical balancing, there is genuine need for capital for infrastructure projects in these countries. If India cannot service those needs, then China's bottomless pocket comes in handy. There is also the angle of Chinese money greasing the political economy of these countries. It is no coincidence that Hambantota—the political base of Rajapaksa—was chosen for big Chinese infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. Bertil Lintner in his *China's India War: Collision Course On The Roof Of The World* documents a number of NGOs run by leaders, and their relatives, of leftist political parties in Nepal receiving assistance from China.

India's neighbouring countries may continue to see pro-India and pro-China governments but these structural factors will be dictating medium-term trends. Barring the first, all of these structural factors have been present for a long time. It was the logic of geography that helped India maintain its sway. China's economic rise and military strength is gradually eroding India's geographical advantage. Ergo, the long-term solution is pretty clear: India needs to focus on accelerating its economic growth and building military capabilities. In the short- and medium-term, India needs partnerships and the appetite to take calculated risks.

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