

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY NEEDS A STRONG PUSH

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

The controversy over a purported bid to assassinate President Maithripala Sirisena blew over after the Sri Lankan leader telephoned Prime Minister Narendra Modi and rejected reports about alleged Indian involvement in the plot. Ideally, such a controversy should never have arisen, given the long-standing ties between the two countries. The reports about the alleged plot hint at some sort of lack of communication between the leadership of the two countries, especially at a time when India's relations with some of its key neighbours appear to have been affected by various irritants and developments in the region.

China has already established a considerable foothold in Sri Lanka, having taken over the strategic Hambantota port and 15,000 acres of land around it after the island nation was unable to repay Chinese loans. China now has a presence in territory located just hundreds of kilometres from India and overlooking important commercial and military sea lanes.

In Nepal, despite the scrapping of several big ticket infrastructure projects involving Chinese firms, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has indicated he expects both China and India to play a role in development projects. India is now in a race to match China's efforts to develop infrastructure, including a railway line that will link Tibet with Kathmandu.

In the Maldives, former president Abdulla Yameen was able to defy pressure from India and other countries opposed to his autocratic ways largely because he believed the Chinese had his back. In Bangladesh, there is growing disquiet among the political leadership over threats by Indian politicians to push back people excluded from the National Register of Citizens to the neighbouring country as well as India's perceived silence on the issue of Myanmar taking back hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees now living in Bangladesh.

One cannot help but get the feeling that while India has been able to take the lead on major global issues such as climate change, trade and building a multipolar order and defy pressure from powers such as the US on strategic matters such as the acquisition of the S-400 air defence system from Russia, somehow the country's immediate neighbourhood has slipped from the radar of policy planners and decision makers. This is all the more surprising in view of the government's stated "neighbourhood first" policy. At a time when India's relations with its largest neighbour, Pakistan, are completely in a deep freeze and there has been an uptick in the violence in war-torn Afghanistan, New Delhi can ill afford the fraying of ties with any of the other countries in the region.

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