

ENGAGING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Nepal

By S Shaji

India's foreign policy engagements with its neighbourhood is an active topic of debate now, especially in the context of "territorial disputes" with China and Nepal. This is happening when India, a regional preponderant power, is undergoing a serious status transformation — in recent discourses it is labelled an "emerging power". The recent developments will have long-term implications for its neighbourhood policy.

The South Asian region, which is home to eight countries, and the Indian Ocean region (maritime Indian Ocean region; mostly Western Indian Ocean) comes under the broad geographic expanse of India's neighbourhood.

However, nation-states such as China and Myanmar, though not part of South Asia in formal institutional regionalisation plans yet share a border with South Asia, also form a part of India's neighbourhood. Moreover, there are ideas such as "extended neighbourhood" (linking India with other regions which do not necessarily share borders but share cultural, civilisational or economic linkages) that have come up in policy parlance in recent times.

In general, in the immediate neighbourhood, there is an India-centric system with India dominating its geography, economic, social and cultural systems. Given its centrality and capabilities, since Independence, traditionally India had preponderance in the region, especially in South Asia and to a large extent, in the Western Indian Ocean. In a way, India, while maintaining zig-zag relations with Pakistan and China, have had relatively long phases of cooperation with smaller countries, though there were rare occasions of strain or conflict. Most of the South Asian smaller neighbours have had friendly ties with India in their post independent period.

India's neighbourhood policy has been through several phases. The phase under colonial times centred on ideas and slogans around anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, (for instance, major agendas of Asian Relation Conference of 1948) which cemented India's relations with its neighbours and in a way, supported their respective de-colonisation movements (for instance, in Myanmar, which was under British colonial system, and Sri Lanka). The post-colonial phase, which broadly began in the late 1940s, again, has had a complementariness which helped India and its neighbours to propel ideas such as non-alignment (reverberated in the first Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955) in the international arena, which was inspired by a macro-level "third worldism", "South-South cooperation" and so on.

Though multilateralism prevailed in India's foreign policy at the international level, there has been a tremendous focus on bilateralism in India's approach to its immediate neighbourhood. This was due to a variety of factors since Cold War related dynamics at play in the region. In that context, to a large extent, India's foreign policy approach towards its neighbours were shaped by the "principle of balancing". For instance, the policies that the major adversarial States (such as Pakistan and China) followed with super powers defined India's relations with the latter. Such balancing and counterbalancing has had an effect on India's neighbourhood. It does not imply that domestic level factors never played a role in the shaping of neighbourhood policy; indeed, some of the conflicts in the neighbourhood had domestic dimensions — for example, the India-Sri Lanka conflicts in the eighties and water sharing issues with Bangladesh. Parallel to this, the

role of super powers and their Cold War proclivities significantly contributed to India's neighbourhood policies. In general, there is a dominant perception that India's neighbourhood policy was mostly dominated by issues involving Pakistan and China in the land territorial sphere and was overtly overlooking maritime issues.

In the post-Cold War period, which began in the 1990s, India set out to refashion its foreign policy premises on non-alignment, its relations with Western bloc countries, regionalism and so on, which in turn had a huge impact on India's neighbourhood/regional policies. The factors that contributed to such changes broadly fell under two categories — systemic and domestic. The systemic (international) level factors included the collapse of the Cold War binaries, spread of globalisation, increased degree of regionalism while the domestic level factors included introduction of economic reforms, emergence of coalition politics, nuclearisation and so on. In a way, India's newly defined foreign policy premises began to provide an unprecedented attention to the neighbourhood. As a result, there were several initiatives to build better ties with its neighbours as evident from the increased trade, confidence building measures (CBMs), border agreements/treaties and so on. India even undertook non-reciprocal initiatives to its South Asian neighbours to build ties and instil a high degree of confidence. One of those initiatives was the "Gujral Doctrine" of 1996.

However, intermittent conflicts with neighbouring States like Pakistan continued, which to a large extent, affected the forward march of the South Asia specific regional organisation, the SAARC. In general, India through new neighbourhood policy at that point in time was striving to address both traditional and non-traditional issues. Traditional included military and economy while non traditional included water, sharing, migration, climate and disasters and so on (India's initiative of Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure of 2019 is a case in point).

Since the 1990s, many treaties have been signed with neighbouring States to address such issues — for instance, the India-Bangladesh Ganges Treaty, Mahakali Treaty with Nepal and so on. On the other end, security related issues have dominated India's relations with Pakistan, and of late with China, though India-China trade increased exponentially in the period of post-Cold War era.

In the "current [pandemic](#) phase", in the times of contracting economies, several fissures have emerged between India and its neighbours resulting in violent conflicts like the one witnessed involving China on June 15, 2020, which subsequently expanded into the economic and business arena. The pandemic to a large extent has accentuated the issues as new economic and political realities are transforming the world at a fast pace. In fact, the non-traditional security threats such as the [COVID-19](#) pandemic are increasingly leading to traditional security conflicts.

China's aggressive actions and action of smaller countries are some of the indicators of a new geo-political situation emerging in the region. Apart from this, there is an ongoing trade conflict between the US and China, an offshoot of the emerging new Cold War at the global arena, which is most likely to impact India's neighbourhood and its neighbourhood policies. In other words, the China factor, the changing global power architecture, and the existing conflicts with neighbours will play a significant role in India's foreign policy, of which its neighbourhood policy is a crucial one.

Therefore, a new neighbourhood policy needs to be imaginatively crafted in tune with the emerging realities in order to maintain its regional power status and to realise status transformation to the next level in the near future. It calls for promotion of a multi-vector foreign policy by diversifying its foreign policy attention on multiple powers (not only the US; but also Russia, the European Union, Africa and so on) in the global arena while developing a stronger

matrix of multilateralism (may be a revival of non-alignment?) and employing stronger diplomatic communications strategies. Such re-strategising can enable India to strengthen its position in the region/neighbourhood. India's neighbourhood policy can go a long way, if these initiatives are properly backed up by sufficient innovative hard power resources (defence and economy) and the use of soft power strategies. The latter can be operationalised only by way of creatively propelling India's democratic values and ideas, which can further improve its civilisational ties with regional states. This in turn can lead to a recalibration of India's neighbourhood policy.

The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

The Indian Express is now on Telegram. Click [here to join our channel \(@indianexpress\)](#) and stay updated with the latest headlines

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com