

TENDING TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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

The idea that India is losing clout in the neighbourhood has recently become a special cause for anxiety among Delhi's commentariat. Is this concern really new? A longer look at India's regional diplomacy suggests that Delhi has been losing some and winning some at any time in the region.

The current chatter on India's regional diplomatic failures takes me back to the early 1980s, when I began to track India's neighbourhood diplomacy at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. I was drafted as a rapporteur for a major conference on "India and its neighbours", organised by India International Centre. The conference brought together the leading lights of India's foreign policy establishment — including current and former officials, newspaper editors and academics. The luminaries argued with each other on the sources of the problem and the remedies for it.

The divisions in the foreign policy elite only mirrored the fracture already evident in the political class. During the campaign for the 1977 general elections, the opposition Janata Party criticised Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) for her costly pursuit of regional hegemony in South Asia and promised to build good neighbourly relations. Prime Minister Morarji Desai and his foreign minister [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#) did bring about some important correctives. But it did not take long for them to face the same criticism as Indira Gandhi. No government since then has escaped the charge of mishandling the neighbours.

Was there a "golden age" in India's neighbourhood policy? Yes and no. If there ever was an extended period of India's regional primacy, it was before Independence. As the regional expression of the then sole superpower, Britain, the Raj exercised much sway not just over the neighbourhood but across the Indo-Pacific, if you will, during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Indian Ocean littoral was dominated by the Royal Navy and the Indian Army. Indian capital and labour moved across the Indo-Pacific. On the continental side, the Raj surrounded itself with a series of buffer states and protectorates and often projected military power beyond them. The Raj contributed to British efforts in developing new port cities (from Aden to Hong Kong) and constructing trans-regional connectivity through roads and railways. (You might call it the British Belt and Road Initiative!)

Even for the Raj, one of the mightiest powers in history, it was an unceasing struggle to sustain its primacy. It had to constantly fend off its European rivals from encroaching into the periphery of the Raj. The Great Game was about keeping the Dutch, French, Germans, Russians and Japanese at arm's length. Then there were the pesky local rulers who had to be continually disciplined, deposed or bought. Rebellions across the littoral — whether the Boers of Southern Africa or the Faqir of Ipi in Waziristan — had to be crushed. Keeping the Subcontinent safe resulted in frequent military and political disasters — from Afghanistan to Burma and Xinjiang to Singapore.

The notion of regional primacy certainly persisted in the Nehru era — recall the three security treaties that the first prime minister signed with Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal during 1949-50. The newly-formed Ministry of External Affairs, the legatee of the Foreign and Political Department of the Raj, certainly retained some of the viceregal style of political agents in the neighbourhood. But beyond the region, Nehru had put India on a different diplomatic track that emphasised sovereign equality among nations.

Forget for a moment the schizophrenia this duality generated among the Indian diplomats; primacy was hard to sustain after Independence even within the immediate neighbourhood. Five reasons stand out.

One is the Partition of the Subcontinent. The problems generated by the great division of the Subcontinent on religious lines continue to animate the region. No amount of virtue-signalling in the name of good neighbourly policy can help fix the challenges of settling boundaries, sharing river-waters, protecting the rights of minorities, and easing the flow of goods and people. The burden of the Subcontinent's history is not easily discarded.

Second, the arrival of China at the Indo-Tibetan frontier during 1950-51. The unification of China amidst the Partition of India had profoundly transformed the geopolitical condition of India. Beyond the bilateral territorial dispute in the Himalayas, the emergence of a large and purposeful state on India's frontiers was going to be a problem given the ease with which it could constrain Delhi within the Subcontinent. If it was the Raj that advanced northwards across the Himalayas before 1950, it would be China's turn now for a relentless southward ingress into the Subcontinent.

Third was independent India's conscious choice in favour of de-globalisation, which led to a steady dissipation of commercial connectivity with the neighbours. For Delhi's new quest for autarky was not just from the global economy but also the regional one. India's economic reorientation since the 1990s and the rediscovery of regionalism did open possibilities for reconnecting with its neighbours. Delhi today is acutely aware of the need to revive regional connectivity.

There is much progress in recent years — note, for example, the recent launch of a ferry service to the Maldives or the reopening of inland waterways with Bangladesh. But India has a long way to go.

Consider the recent fiasco of onion exports to Bangladesh. The Foreign Office might see the neighbourhood as an integrated geopolitical space. But for the commerce ministry, there is no difference between Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Brunei. Integrating India's regional economic and foreign policy remains a major challenge.

Fourth is the persistent fallacy in Delhi that the neighbourhood is India's to will. It ignores the rise of political agency among neighbourhood elites and mass politics that they need to manage. Their imperatives don't always coincide with those of Delhi. On top of this, divisions within an elite easily intersect with their engagement with major powers, including India, China and the US. It is unlikely that Delhi can completely insure itself against the intra-elite conflicts in the neighbourhood.

That insurance is tied to a fifth factor — the role of domestic politics in India's regional policy. Here is an important question that Delhi's foreign policy debate avoids. Can India persistently champion Tamil minority rights in Sri Lanka without incurring any costs with the Sinhala majority? But asking that question takes us to India's own domestic politics. Can Delhi ignore sentiments in India's Tamil Nadu in making its Sri Lanka policy? [Manmohan Singh](#), for example, did not attend the Colombo Commonwealth Summit in 2013 because Congress leaders from Tamil Nadu opposed the visit by citing the impending elections. [Mamata Banerjee](#) pulled the plug at the very last minute on the Teesta Waters agreement that PM Singh was to sign in Dhaka in 2011.

There are no easy answers to the regional difficulties that trouble all governments in Delhi. The source of the problem lies in the deeply interconnected nature of South Asian societies

administered by multiple sovereigns. Contrary to the prevailing belief, India's domestic politics always had an impact on our regional policy. The same is true of our neighbours, whose domestic politics impact their engagement with India.

There is no happy end-state in India's relations with its neighbours. It will always be about carefully managing the inevitable difficulties that arise. Timely responses to emerging problems, preventing small issues from becoming big, and aligning Delhi's regional economic policy with India's natural geographic advantages are some important elements of any successful management of India's perennial neighbourhood challenges.

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