



## Is India deviating from its neighborhood first policy?

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### Abstract

Prime Minister Modi despite having an excellent start of his tenure by focusing on Neighbour first policy seems to be clearly drifting from it in recent times. India is moving towards that position where it is seen with fear rather than loved by its neighbours. With an increasing China's influence in the region, India needs to build more strong relation with its neighbours.

**Keywords:** neighbour hood first policy, diplomacy, china's influence, bilateral relations

### Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Oath taking ceremony proved to be a "major diplomatic event" [1]. The spectacular event saw SAARC regional leaders amongst the invitees. Modi's first high symbolic message to the world was his firm "Neighbourhood first" policy. Inviting SAARC leaders was the 'right decision at right time', said Modi [2]. Even the very Election Manifesto of the party clearly stated, 'BJP believes that political stability, progress and peace in the region are essential for South Asia's growth and development. In our neighbourhood we will pursue friendly relations. However, where required we will not hesitate from taking strong stand and steps. We will work towards strengthening Regional forums like SAARC' [3]. 'The Congress-led UPA [United Progressive Alliance] has failed to establish enduring friendly and cooperative relations with India's neighbours. India's relations with traditional allies have turned cold. India and its neighbours have drifted apart. The absence of statecraft has never been felt so acutely as today', further added in the manifesto [4].

Analysts saw inviting SAARC leaders as a bold step to launch a positive policy of regional engagement. "India's foreign policy should begin in its immediate neighbourhood and so it is a good thing that Modi has invited leaders of the SAARC countries," said Srinath Raghavan, Senior Fellow at Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. "In the next five years Modi-led NDA government should try to get out of the mould that SAARC is in right now, and produce some kind of result which is significant," said P Sahadevan, Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The Bhartiya Janta party -led National Democratic Alliance did surprisingly good start with Prime Minister personally choosing to make Bhutan the destination of his maiden foreign trip. This showed that his immediate focus was on contiguous neighbours.

Despite making such a groundbreaking start, Modi government is now battling with the varied kind of regional resentments. The relationship between bordering countries have strained considerably due to various factors stating that

the Government has failed to deliver desired results concerning the regional diplomacy. While the not so good relation between India and Pakistan is not surprising, but the cordial relations between the other South Asian nations has also soured. Troubles are mounting in these regions and India cannot succeed until and unless it looks for some hard options [5].

### India's Weakening "Nepal diplomacy"

India has been playing a crucial role in political changes happening in Nepal. This is one of the main reasons of its growing unpopularity. The Constitution passed by the constitution Assembly in September last year resulted in discontentment among the people of Terai, especially the Madhesis and Tharus, living close to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, regarding their identity crisis and substantial political participation. India was criticized heavily for having sided with the "discredited" Madhesi leaders, and for ignoring the problems it created for common Nepalis. Several diplomats have criticized India for promoting an ethnic divide and taking sides, with potentially dangerous consequences.

For India, another casualty in its "Nepal's diplomacy" came when India was accused of its attempts to topple the K.P. Oli regime in Kathmandu. The new government formed in 2017 in Nepal comprised of the Left Alliance of the CPN-UML led by Oli and the CPN-Maoist Centre led by Prachanda proved to be ditching India's attempt to meddle in its domestic affairs. They had sweeping victory in the local government elections. Everything in Nepal seems to be going for the UML: the people, media, anti-India nationalism and China's deep pockets [6]. In both the events China took advantage to deepen its ties with Nepal & put India on the strategically disadvantageous position.

Nepal acts as a buffer state between India and China. The China friendly government in Nepal has been alarming for India. China is spreading its tentacles across Nepal politically, culturally and economically by enlarging its strategic space. China is Nepal's largest foreign investor, and in the past financial year alone has invested 8.36 billion Nepalese rupees (US\$81.89 million) in the country, an increase of almost 35

per cent from the year before according to Nepal's Department of Industry<sup>[7]</sup>. making it the largest investor in the region, surpassing India. Most of the Nepali population is unemployed, illiterate, China serves as a potential supplier of goods and assistance that it badly needs in order to recover its economy. Other important factor to increase the interest of Nepal's towards China card is to gain the mileage in negotiations & counter India's Big Brother approach.

### **Diplomacy in Sri Lanka**

India being Sri Lanka's closest maritime neighbour has deep historical and cultural ties with the island nation. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2015, while visiting India, had claimed that, "Sri Lanka is neither pro-India nor pro-China." But, government in Colombo has been vigorously shaping its foreign policies inclined towards Beijing for economic and infrastructural assistance, something it knows that India cannot sufficiently provide.

In recent years, Beijing has invested heavily in Sri Lanka's infrastructure as part of its "string of pearls" policy aimed at establishing a naval presence across South Asia by building ports and other facilities in friendly countries – including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The expansion is part of its "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project, a new trade route linking China with the West<sup>[9]</sup>. The unrelentless effort of Chinese to woo President Maithripala Sirisena, after its trusted supporter Mahinda Rajapaksha lost elections, is now yielding its true colors, with numerous investments in Lankan infrastructure lying ahead.

There is no doubt that India is the leading trading partner of Sri Lanka and has provided developmental assistance worth \$2.5 billion. For India, Trincomalee and other planned investments – which include power plants, railway line upgrades, and the creation of special economic zones – have a strong strategic value<sup>[9]</sup>. But recent Chinese presence in terms of investments made at Hambantota port, though made out of debt<sup>[8]</sup> has unnerved India. It is channelling its energies towards countering it, and focusing on strategic investments together with ensuring its strong hold in Indian Ocean Region.

### **Muddling with Maldivian diplomacy**

Neighbourhood first policy of Prime Minister Modi has got serious shocks in recent times most clearly visible in growing camaraderie between Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen and China. The recent political crisis being faced by Maldives has started debates among Indian foreign policy analysts regarding India's loggerhead approach. Abdullah Yameen declaring state of emergency despite international pressure and the repudiation of the Supreme Court's order to release some lawmakers, and the arrest of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and the country's chief justice has created serious problems in the region which India cannot. For India stakes are higher than any other country. This inclination towards China started with former President Mohamed Nasheed resignation in 2012, which Nasheed termed a coup orchestrated by the security forces<sup>[10]</sup>. The relationship between Male and Beijing, under current president Yameen is at its peak now. Recent developments saw massive upsurge of Chinese tourist in Maldives, signing of Free Trade Agreements and there's also a rumor about China planning to

build a naval base at Marao Island. There is pronounced anti-Indian approach in policies and a distinct tilt towards China. It's high time that India let go its muted response and act tougher. The geographical proximity between India and Male definitely makes the stakes high. Till now, India has been joining the chorus with the Western countries asking President Yameen to abide by the Supreme Court orders. Ministry of External Affairs in its advisory note, "The prevailing political developments in Maldives and the resultant law and order situation is a matter of concern for the Government of India. Indian nationals are, therefore, advised to defer all non-essential travels to Male and other atolls until further notice. Indian expatriates in Maldives are also alerted to the need for heightened security awareness, and urged to exercise due caution in public and avoid public gatherings<sup>[11]</sup>." New Delhi must plan to intervene cautiously and don't hesitate to use coercive diplomacy when needed. Working collectively with regional leaders as well as extra regional players will be much needed first step.

### **Indo-Bangladesh Relations**

China has been steadily spreading its tentacles over all of India's close neighbours; it's now the right time for India to prioritize its neighbourhood first policy. A recent report by Centre for Policy Research's Indian Development Cooperation Research on India's aid for Bangladesh noted that heightened Chinese interest should mean that kinks in the implementation of Indian development aid be ironed out fast. Moreover, such an active Chinese interest necessitates India to push forward its own model of development cooperation, express its weight as Bangladesh's support structure at global level and importantly, to filter out some of the problems with respect to disbursement of Indian financed projects in Bangladesh<sup>[12]</sup>."

Like, in the case of defence purchases Bangladesh relies heavily on China for 80% of its military equipment and technical training to use Chinese defence platforms. Security experts in Dhaka say Delhi must prioritize its relations with Bangladesh – the only country that has so far resisted giving in to Chinese pressure. In fact, it is widely held that Bangladesh tends to lean towards India on most issues because of the two countries' proximity in geography and mindset, but is disappointed at not being treated the same way by Delhi. India needs to increase its defence assistance to chip away this dependence on China and also ensure the Bangladesh military do not see India as its potential threat. For India, Bangladesh is crucial for India's security strategy in North East. Even Bangladesh is not devoid of the threats hovering on it of transnational terror groups, with both al-Qaeda and ISIS having trying to create a presence.

The upcoming elections in 2019 will also be crucial for Indo Bangladesh relations. India by now needs to contemplate the prospect of unrest and possibly violence, both communal and terror related prior to elections. The principal opposition party in Bangladesh have been criticising the Hasina government for signing the defence agreements with India and failing to get any resolution on Teesta water-sharing and bridging the trade deficit. This is followed by the conviction by a special court in Dhaka of Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader and three-time Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges.

India needs more than fine gestures; it needs closer monitoring of the political and economic situation in Bangladesh. It needs to enhance its branding and also assistance in Bangladesh.

### **Across the border- Afghanistan and Pakistan**

These two region demands India's focused attention and that India must act with a sense of responsibility as expected of a regional super power.

The worsening ties with Pakistan have affected India more than Pakistan. The virtual collapse of dialogue is daily hemorrhaging the human lives near borders due continued violence on the Line of Control and terrorist violence. In recent attempt to counter terrorism, US President Donald Trump appeared to be ratcheting up the pressure on Pakistan, suggesting he would be in favor of cutting all aid to Islamabad over the government's refusal to take more decisive action against terrorism. But, this step hasn't led Pakistan to alter its anti-Indian trajectory. India cannot afford to remain casual and let things slip aside, without even trying to find ways to change situations which is certainly not to our advantage.

The relationship with Afghanistan can be seen a success story of Modi government's Neighbourhood first policy. The move towards improving ties started with Ashraf Ghani coming to power in 2014. Modi's first Afghan visit came in December 2015, during which he inaugurated the Afghan Parliament building that was constructed with Indian assistance. In his another trip Modi made to Afghanistan, he inaugurated Salma Dam in Heart. India's assistance for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan stands at \$2 billion, making New Delhi the biggest donor among regional countries. New Delhi and Kabul plan to improve their transport connectivity through Iran's strategically located Chabahar port, which is likely to boost trade between India, Afghanistan, and Iran, despite Islamabad denying New Delhi transit access for trade between the two countries.

With increasing strategic importance of Afghanistan, India cannot keep itself aloof of the ongoing internal turmoil in the country. The daily massacre of innocents, men, women and children, civilian officials and military personnel, experts from several countries and diplomats have often hinted the start of the complete collapse of a system of governance. The city of Kabul has witnessed several violent terror attacks that have left hundreds of civilian dead. There can be no denying fact that there's been hidden hand of Pakistan over creating chaos in Afghan state. As a regional power India has significant stakes to play in Afghanistan. India has all reasons to be concerned if there's any fallout in the current regime in Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion**

These are some of the affairs that India needs to consider seriously while formulation its foreign policy and standing by its neighbourhood first policy mandate. The focus needs to be on our immediate neighbourhood. Today, concentrated attention should be on the ongoing political crisis in regions like Bangladesh, Maldives, and Nepal giving complete regard to India's national interest in the long run. India needs to enhance its loans and external aids to the neighbouring states. According to a Parliamentary Standing Committee report on External Affairs noted that there has been sizeable decrease in the aid and loans to countries in our immediate neighbourhood

such as Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The Committee also noted that the quantum of aid to a country under this head is viewed as a reflection of India's diplomatic engagements with its immediate and extended neighbourhood.

It's high time that India checks Chinas moves towards establishing neocolonialism in South Asia. China has embarked on a series of infrastructural investment development projects, mostly part of Belt Road Initiative, which many experts believe may leave India isolated regionally and encircled by Chinese allies like Pakistan, Nepal and now in Maldives <sup>[15]</sup>. Seeking an explanation from the government on the situation in the Maldives, a senior member of Parliament Consultative Committee on External Affairs which met on December 21 supposedly asked, "Why is India unable to address concerns of an island nation whose size is equal to that of [the Delhi neighbourhood of] Maharani Bagh? <sup>[17]</sup>" India's ties with Maldives has turned cold since the first week of December when Male signed a Free Trade Agreement with China after rushing it through parliament. India has serious worries on over growing relations between China and Pakistan that is a big challenge to its national security. China is also making relentless efforts to establish its strategic relation with Bhutan after Doklam standoff.

Despite this, Modi's achievements in South Asia have been significant, if not exceptional. Some of his initiatives have admittedly fallen short, but they do not taint his larger record<sup>15</sup>. The "neighbourhood first" policy has seen some intense engagements with neighbours beginning with official trips, signing of MOUs, trade deals, investment projects and developmental aids, that are a high point of Indian foreign policy in recent decades. Yet these relationships need constant nurturing. As China has deeply entrenched in its economic and strategic expansionist policies in South Asia, the New Delhi government has a long road ahead that demands India's critical attention and specially for a display of its regional leadership skills <sup>[16]</sup>

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