

India's Neighbourhood Policy: A Modian Perspective

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Neighbourhood policy always remains significant for all the countries in the world. It is a multidimensional policy based on various foreign policy determinants. After independence from colonial yoke, India has adopted the foreign policy based on the principles of peaceful co-existence, non-alignment, Panchsheel, and friendly relations with the neighbouring countries. India's neighbourhood policy has neither been uni-linear nor uni-dimensional since its inception. Due to regional diversity of both geo-strategic and geo-political nature it has to deal with both its core and peripheral neighbourhood in an indifferent manner.

South Asia is one of the regions in the world which has geographical contiguity and linguistic and cultural homogeneity. South Asia inhabited by more than one-fifth of global population, is afflicted by a number of social, political and economic problems compounded by political mistrust and suspicion. The countries of the region are involved in the inter-state conflicts over boundary. India is peculiarly placed in South Asia. It accounts for 76% of population living in 73.25% of total South Asian land area while the next largest state Pakistan accounts for only 11% of the South Asian population. Its predominant size and capabilities, shared historical, political and cultural linkage have always created a sense of identity crisis among her neighbours thereby giving rise to anti-India feelings. The small states of Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka considered 'India as a Dominating or Hegemonic Power' in the region. The bilateral relations between India and Pakistan and the fear among the smaller states about the interference of the big powers and the policies and attitude of the states led to conflicting conditions in the region. The relation between India and almost all her neighbours have steadily deteriorated. Indian image of "Big Brother" always creates hurdle for good relations among India and small states of the region.

India shares land and maritime boundaries with eight countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It also shares common borders with four South Asian states namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan. Except Maldives and Bhutan it has have troubled relations like border disputes, sharing of river waters cross border terrorism and ethnic conflicts with most of them. The region is also facing the challenges of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, economic backwardness, social injustice and inequality, terrorism and cross-border terrorism, and drug trafficking. Beside this, the big differences between India and other states of South Asia always remain an area of mistrust among the states.

Its access towards neighbours has not only been linked through bilateralism, principle of multi-lateralism was also applied with equal force. Ever since independence the broad strategy of India's foreign policy towards her neighbours has been to maintain peaceful and friendly relations with all, as Nehru maintained in 1949 that, "the neighbouring countries have the first place in our mind". But this approach was disrupted by wars with Pakistan and other boundary and water disputes with other states. In this context, Gujral doctrine was a shift in the foreign policy orientation of India towards its neighbours in South Asia. It was an approach to her neighbours based on magnanimity and non-reciprocity, unilateral initiatives and peaceful solution of disputes. But it was criticized on the ground that it failed to bring any change in the neighbour's perception of India. It was focus on the

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friendly relations with the neighbours. After this again there is a change in the foreign policy of India.

It was the starting of change in the neighbourhood policy of India in South Asia. Though national leadership always affect the foreign policy making process. Modi's vision towards foreign relations was reflected very clearly in the first address of his government. It was mentioned by the president of India in his speech in the Parliament of India. He said that "India's foreign policy, with its civilization roots and heritage, is based on the principles of developing peaceful and friendly relations with all countries. We will pursue our international engagement based on enlightened national interest, combining the strength of our values with pragmatism, leading to a doctrine of mutually beneficial relationships. My government is committed to building a strong, self-reliant and self-confident India; regaining its rightful place in the comity of nations". Earlier, former Prime Minister ManMohan Singh used the phrase enlightened national interests for the first time at a press conference in Vigyan Bhawan New Delhi in February 2006, where he faced tough questions over relations with the U.S. and nuclear deal, he repeated the phrase adding: "we will not buckle and have not buckled any kind of external pressure".

Not much has been written about what "enlightened national interest" actually means. The phrase is of course, derived from Aristotle's concept of "enlightened self interest" it means that more you benefit others the more you are benefited yourself. In Indian traditions the term has its roots in the Mahopanishad, "...Ayam bandhurayam neti ganana laghucetasam udaracharitanam to vasudhaiva kutumbakam" or "Only small men discriminate by saying one is a relative, the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitute but a family".

'Enlightened national interest' is a more contested term than national interest. Often national interest are defined as *raison d'etat*, or reason of state and can be viewed as the selfish pursuit of national ambitions. National interest is arguably the recognition that the narrow pursuit of self interest in an interdependent world can lead to suboptimal policy outcome. The enlightened national interest in broad terms can be analyzed in Indian context as the priority to the neighborhood, tightrope balance between China vs Japan and West vs East, build relations through personal meetings with leaders, economic diplomacy; seek infrastructure investment and offer the world 5ts: tradition, talent, tourism, trade and technology.

In Asia, as Mr. Modi has clearly admires Japan has used the term enlightened national interest to define many of its policies, including those steering its overseas development assistance. Through supporting other nations via giving and via attractive development funding and loans Japan has greatly increased its regional influence. The concept opens up the possibilities of creating cooperative outcomes for many issues, even those traditionally seen as difficult, zero-sum conflicts by realists in the establishment.

It was used in the first official speech of the head of the state after a change in New Delhi. In his speech the President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee further mentioned about the neighbourhood policy or foreign policy of India in South Asia. He stated that, "My government sent a unique and bold signal to the South Asian region and the world, by inviting for the first time in independent India, leaders of all South Asian neighbours to the swearing-in ceremony of the new Council of Ministers on May 26. We are grateful to them for accepting the invitation at such a short notice. ... This shows my government's commitment and determination to work towards building a peaceful, stable and economically inter-linked neighbourhood which is essential for the collective development and prosperity of the South Asian Region. We will further work together with South Asian leaders to revitalize SAARC as an effective instrument for regional cooperation and as a

united voice on global issues. Speaking to a gathering of party cadre Modi also mentioned the importance of his decision of inviting all head of states of SAARC countries, “we have never thought beyond the country's frontier. We are big country, we are an old country, and we are a big power. We should make the world realize it. Once we do it, the world will not shy away from giving us the due respect and status. It can be considered as a clear message to the South Asian states about India's approach towards them.

Policy of multi-alignment is another dimension of Modi's foreign policy. India adopted the policy of non-alignment in its relations at international level. Nehru with Naseer and Tito advocated the policy of non-alignment, which later on moved towards non-aligned movement of newly independent states of Asia, Africa and Latin America after the end of second world war. It was adopted as a policy of independent foreign policy choice during the cold war era. After the end of cold war non-alignment still continue as a form of foreign policy, but with the disintegration of Soviet Union and dismantling of bloc, it has no more relevant in the changed world. It is simply being argued when there is no bloc than non-alignment to whom? But the incipient Modi doctrine moves beyond the former delineation between “non-alignment” “non-alignment 2.0” and alignment to suggest that India could follow a policy of what Mr. Shashi Tharoor may describe as “multi-alignment” with all the great powers.

Beside these new trends in the foreign policy, talking tough has emerged as the new trend in the foreign policy of India. When speaking to Nawaz Sarif, Mr. Modi reportedly made it clear he would have to take “strong action” if there was a major attack traced back to Pakistan. US Under-Secretary of State Nisha Biswal was given only basic courtesy when she visited to engage with the new government. And the External Affairs Ministry's reported line to visiting Chinese's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, with whom Sushma Sawarj conversed in Hindi, not in English was to respect “one India” while expecting India to adhere to its “One China” policy.

Personalization of foreign policy is another dimension in India's foreign policy. Modi gave personal touch to relations with Pakistan by sending a shawl for the Pakistan Prime Minister's mother. Modi's Nepal visit has improved the bilateral relations between both the countries. He was the only foreign dignitary to address Nepal's Constitutional Assembly cum Parliament and the only Indian Prime Minister who performed a special prayer (“Basuki Puja” and “Rudra Abhishekam Puja”) at Kathmandu's holy shrine of Pashupatinath Temple. His visit to a Nepali family is another informal effort towards personal relations.

To develop cordial relations with South Asian countries is a challenge for India's new government. Pakistan will remain a challenge in this context. The civil-military divide continues to be a significant factor in shaping Islamabad foreign policy and particular its approach towards India. The unrest on border and line of control is the output of the resentment against Nawaz Sarif government in Pakistan. The decision to grant MFN (Most Favoured Nation) status remains stuck while the rhetoric on Kashmir has become shrill in recent time. Modi visit to Pakistan was a positive signal in the bilateral relations of both the countries. But Pathankot terrorist attack and Pakistan response to the problem again high jacked the relations.

Sri Lanka remains another challenge for Modi government in the changed scenario. Colombo matters because the Indian Ocean matters. The great game of this century will be played on waters of Indian Ocean. Though India's location gives it great operational advantages in the Indian Ocean, it is by no means certain that New Delhi is in a position to hold on its geographic advantages. China is rapidly catching up and its ties with Sri Lanka are aimed at expanding its profile in this crucial part of the

world. Indian policymakers need to shape up soon or else they are in the danger of losing this game for good. These days Afghanistan stands at a crucial juncture in its political transition, though new government had taken over the charge and it is also making its expectations known to India? The debate on what sort of security footprint India should have in Afghanistan has been going on for years in New Delhi and there has been no urgency in coming up with a coherent response. The bitter truth is that all the developmental investment that India has made will come to naught once the western forces leave Afghanistan if India does not make it unequivocally clear that it intends to strongly protect and enhance its security interests even in the absence of the Western presence. In fact Modi government will have an opportunity to reshape the contours of India's Afghan policy at a time when Afghanistan is also undergoing political transition, providing new opportunities to both states.

This is the time for India to have an economic role in Afghanistan by using imaginative diplomacy involving Iran, Afghanistan Central Asian neighbours, China and Russia. At the same time, the US, its NATO allies and Japan have to be approached to keep funds flowing for Afghanistan, national security and economic development.

As far as Nepal is concerned, she is continued to make its tentative journey towards democratic stability. With political and economic instability causing more uncertainty in recent years, India is viewed as part of the problem too involved in the domestic politics of the country. The political uncertainty in Nepal has flamed anti India feelings and allowed China to enlarge its presence. The Himalyan kingdom is going through a crisis and India is being blamed for pulling strings from behind the scenes. It is in this insecurity that Beijing has been able to exploit in Nepal to serve its own interests. Modi's recent visit to Nepal is a sign of hope for both the sides as various agreements have been signed and most important is the revival of the treaty of friendship between both the countries. But the presence of China in Nepal will remain crucial for India's foreign policy and interests.

Recently, Sheikh Hasina has taken great political risk to put momentum back in bilateral ties. But there has been no serious attempt on Indian part to settle outstanding issues. Bureaucratic inertia and lack of political will have prevented many of the deals in getting followed through. Dhaka is seeking an expeditious Indian response to its demand for the removal of the tariff and non-tariff barriers on Bangladeshi products. There also has been little movement on the boundary issue and transit rights. Constructive Indo-Bangladesh ties can be a major stabilizing factor for the South Asian region as a whole.

Basically in South Asia in the changed context, the trend of multi-polarity and palpable quest for an independent and dignified role in the international order and its institutions will shape and constrain the policy preferences that Modi's government pursue. Moreover, regionally India's interests should be re-defined to focus on economic growth perhaps not very different from Deng Xiaoping's strategy for China, which can be summarized as leave geo-politics aside and focus on the economy. Though there has been no official articulation of what India's regional interest and role is other than to attract its neighbours to participate in India's economy. Astute observers have highlighted that since the 1990's, India's regional policy has been largely devoid of both norms and a sense of power. A multi-polar environment makes such an ambivalent regional role potentially costly because it leaves the door open for external powers and India's smaller neighbours to pursue their interests without much concern for India's regional position or for regional stability. Thus the Modi regime will face the challenge of constructing a balanced regional role with focusing on both economic and geo-political issues.

In the changed world order, the new cold war between US and Russia is taking place in the world. It is the revival of new cold war between old cold warriors. In these conditions, while Mr. Modi's task will be to focus on bailing India out of its current economic crisis, It would be a mistake to ignore the massive shifts the world has undergone while India was caught up in election fever-to begin with the situation in Ukraine, a lightning rod for what is now called "Cold War 2.0" between the U S and Russia. While the unrest in the country may ease up after the presidential elections, and the impending withdrawal of Russian troops from the Ukraine border, there are even more far reaching consequences for the new Indian administration to study. Russia's annexation of Crimea has not only changed the map in the most dramatic way possible, but has also changed power structure in the world, with Russian President Vladimir Putin gaining the upper hand. In their comp gain against Russia at the U.N., U.S. and European Union have warned that Mr. Putin's actions hold a dangerous precedent for India too, especially when it comes to possible designs by China on parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Conversely the action of western diplomats and U.S. non-governmental organizations in Ukraine, who openly supported anti Russian protesters to oust their government while attempting to pull Ukraine into the EU, is also a dangerous precedent for the world.

There are various factors which seriously undermine the ability to maintain a sustained effort in relations with neighbouring countries in South Asia. The first is the excessive importance and attention give to Pakistan which as other neighbours believes is at their expense. Now the time has come to realize as Indira Gandhi realistically did that relations with Pakistan are not going to materially change in a hurry and that on issue like trade and economic cooperation we should stop giving the impression that we are yearning to get trade and economic concessions from western neighbours. A policy of "benign neglect" on economic issues and realistic and low key political and diplomatic engagement is the only realistic way to deal with Pakistan.

The new government has to face these realities of the new world in framing India's foreign policy. There is a need to maintain balance between national interests and the requirements of the international order. There is a need to follow the policy of accommodation and adjustment in the foreign affairs especially in South Asia.

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