

INDIA'S GROWING NEIGHBOURHOOD DILEMMAS

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The proverbial Achilles heel of Indian foreign policy continues to be its neighbourhood. Contemporary Indian foreign policy has an ambitious vision — from being the leader of the global South, to being an arbiter in global geopolitical contestations, to making a serious claim to be a pole in world politics. But South Asia is not only not keen to jump on the bandwagon of the India story, but it is also seemingly holding India back, albeit indirectly. Neighbourhoods are difficult for any major power, but contemporary India is faced with an exceptionally hard one, complicated by a rising superpower in its neighbourhood, for the first time in its history.

In general, there are three types of dilemmas that India faces in the neighbourhood. One, the rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia such as the one in the Maldives where the new government is effectively asking Indians to pack up and leave. While the Maldives is anti-India in an instrumental sense, a Khaleda Zia-led government in Dhaka, which goes to the elections early next year, could turn out to be ideologically anti-India. The second type of dilemma India faces in the neighbourhood is structural, resulting from Beijing's growing influence in South Asia.

Three things stand out. The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other Chinese projects. Beijing's assiduous outreach to South Asian states when the rest of the international community abandons or avoids them for normative or other reasons — as was the case with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar and crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India does too, but the overall impact of China's outreach is far higher than that of India primarily as a function of deeper pockets. Finally, China's desire to settle border disputes with its neighbours (minus India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.

The net result, or one that could potentially develop overtime, is somewhat alarming. If we do not take innovative measures, there is a good chance that we will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia. This may well be a case of overstating the point, but is to lay emphasis on a potential future scenario.

There are three broad sets of causes behind the dilemmas India faces in the neighbourhood. The first is the regional geopolitical architecture characterised by five overlapping elements. Contemporary South Asia is characterised by a diminishing presence of the United States, which, for a long time, was a geopolitical constant in the region. For New Delhi, Washington's

presence in South Asia was not always advantageous, but its departure is definitely disadvantageous, in particular given how China has filled the power vacuum created by Washington's departure. The aggressive and stupendous rise of China has come as a 'geopolitical buffer', at least for now, for the smaller states in the region which have become adept at using the 'China card' in their foreign policy assertions. While our neighbours are keen to practise strategic autonomy with us, there is little appetite to do so vis-à-vis China.

Third, in one of the least interconnected regions in the world, and poor, it is natural that the inhabitants of the region will tilt towards a power with the ability to cater to their material needs. With India's ability to meet those needs being limited, China is that power. Fourth, India, for the most part, has had a normative and political approach towards the region, with the states in the region acquiescing, rebelling, and falling in line given the absence of choices. Beijing has changed that India-centric calculus by offering itself as the no-frills non-normative alternative. For the first time in modern South Asian history, the region is a 'norms-free-zone'.

Finally, for much of its independent existence, New Delhi enjoyed unrivalled primacy in the region. Today, the downside of being the resident power in South Asia — with all its attendant cultural, ethnic, refugee and other spillovers — is felt more sharply than being the primary power. China, on the other hand, is the region's non-resident power which benefits from the absence of complications — ethnic, linguistic, religious — arising out of being a resident power.

The second cause behind India's regional dilemma is related to its policy stance which exhibits a deep-seated status quo bias when it comes to dealing with the region's domestic politics and the multiplicity of actors/power centres therein. Dealing only with, for the most part, those in power in the regional capitals, elected or otherwise, is perhaps the right thing to do as well as less risky. However, such a one-track policy generates path-dependencies often alienating other centres of power or opposition leaders. Bangladesh is perhaps one such example.

Furthermore, India's dilemmas are also caused by two mistaken assumptions that we have long held. For one, there has, for some time, been a strong belief in India that South Asia minus Pakistan would be amenable to Indian geopolitical reasoning which prompted an attempt to deal proactively with South Asia without Pakistan. However, in retrospect, one has to admit that this policy has not exactly panned out that way India imagined. The second (mistaken) assumption that New Delhi approached the neighbourhood with was that India's special relationship with the region rooted in culture, soft power, history and ethnicity would help the country deal with the neighbourhood better than those without intimate knowledge of the region, namely China. Has India's culture-connect with its neighbours indeed become a liability in the conduct of foreign policy towards them?

To begin with, it is time India made a mental switch and acknowledged that South Asia and its balance of power have changed fundamentally. Old South Asia where India enjoyed primacy no longer exists. 'Southern Asia' which has pretty much replaced South Asia is a space where China has emerged as a serious contender for regional primacy. India's neighbours and periphery are China's too, even if we do not like it. Such a realistic and pragmatic framing would help India deal with the reality as it is rather than working with the mental frame of Indian primacy which is long gone.

Second, New Delhi must proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region. That is the only way to deal with the impending possibility of the region becoming Sino-centric.

Third, Indian diplomacy must be flexible enough to engage multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries. The art of diplomacy is not about hating the anti-India elements in the

neighbourhood, but, instead, lessening their anti-India attitude. In a similar vein, dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power is bad policy.

Finally, here is the highlighting of an issue that has been spoken of ad nauseum — India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits. The glaring shortage of sufficient diplomats to implement the foreign policy of a country of 1.4 billion people will prove to be India's single most crucial challenge going forward. The more India's role in world affairs grows, the more the shortage of personnel will be felt by us and others. If the current state of affairs continues, there will be no one to show up with the Indian flag when opportunities beckon or crises emerge.

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