
India 's Neighbourhood Policy: An Overview

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Introduction

The spectacular victory of the BJP under the leadership of Mr. Narendra Modi had a matching euphoric swearing-in ceremony. The occasion had all the glitter and glamour with the presence of the leaders of the SAARC countries. Invitation to these neighbouring countries has been variously viewed. It is perceived as a diplomatic master stroke, a desire on the part of Mr Modi to bring peace and prosperity in an otherwise conflictual region with one-fourth of the world population. And of course; it has been billed as an occasion to showcase Indian democracy and its strength.

However, it would amount to indulge in self-deception to expect anything extraordinary out of this. For the reason that even in cordial relations a summit meeting requires serious prior preparations for better

results. In this case this speed diplomacy cannot herald a new era for obvious reasons. First and foremost, there is a deep distrust amongst India's neighbours and the vice versa. Given the power asymmetry in the region, the misgiving against India among smaller neighbours, were heightened particularly after the liberation of Bangladesh, merger of Sikkim and nuclearisation. They often objected to India's self-identification as the "dominant", "paramount", "pre-eminent", "hegemonic" or just plain major power in South Asia and the rights and privileges that accompany such a status.¹ Due to the existing power structure and nature of relationships, the countries in the region are characterized in terms of hegemon, bargainer and peripheral states.² Hegemon (India) possesses a strong self-conception as a regional leader and bargainer Pakistan always attempts to retract material, military and motivating power

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projected from the hegemon. Smaller states are less powerful and are left to pursue self-conceptions such as regional collaborators. In such a situation, while the so called hegemon India has a tendency to seek its acceptability from the region, bargainer Pakistan shows a perpetual quest to catch up with India which explains its urge for equality. At the same time smaller states fluctuate their relations between India, Pakistan and extra-regional powers. Conflict is embedded in this scenario also because "if the hegemon and a neighbour went to war in the past, armed confrontation in the future by policy planners will be perceived as more likely than if relations had always been peaceful."³ This explains why South Asian countries have often shunned cooperation and there is mutual distrust and suspicion.

Secondly, individuals play an important role in shaping the diplomatic behavior of a country which is often guided by their socio-political and philosophical foundations. Leading historical personalities have guided the course and destiny of mankind and hence they are extraordinary. Individuals do matter in history, not in the sense of changing the course of history, for history is not epitomized in an individual, it is not a mere game of personalities but the

interplay of social forces, economic relations and new or hegemonic ideas. In this context Mr. Modi carries some negative baggage. Walter Anderson, the celebrated author of *The Brotherhood of Saffron* finds him individualist and charismatic. He is being compared with Reagan, Nixon, Thatcher and Indira Gandhi. The simple commonality between all of them is that they all sought absolute personal power having little patience for liberalism.⁴ Dominant and aggressive foreign policy is an extension of their personal moorings. Unfortunately, the election campaign had little to discuss on foreign policy issues but some remarks were made about our neighbours by Mr. Modi himself. Moreover, the section on national security and foreign policy in the BJP manifesto upholds the slogan—*Nation First* having a covert reference to political realism championing its fundamentals, such as national interest based on power-politics. It cautions that, "India has a sensitive neighbourhood. There have been intrusions inside the LAC (Line of Actual Control)...increase in Pakistan backed terror groups in India, illegal migration across the eastern border...in our neighbourhood we will pursue friendly relations. However, where required *we will not hesitate from taking strong stands and steps.*"⁵ Thus, the BJP manifesto and election speeches reek of a

strong neighbourhood policy. This becomes more obvious when Mr. Modi stood castigated for years due to the blemishes of the Gujrat riots. Not only that, of 282 BJP MPs, there is none from the Muslim community and the lone Muslim face in the cabinet is Ms. Najma Heptullah. Shiv Sena, the second largest constituent of the BJP- led NDA has relentlessly opposed any relations with Pakistan. To get rid of this situation there is an urgent need to reach out to the minority community to allay their fears and to bring them prominently in the national mainstream which is imperative for the reason that there is an intimate and organic link between our domestic situation and the neighbourhood environment. Mr Modi and his government is bound to be scrutinized on this account and the success of neighbourhood policy hinges heavily on this as in the South Asian region religious majorities and sectarian politics continue to dominate the power structure influencing their external behavior.

The challenges

The major challenges of our foreign policy and diplomacy have their origins in Kashmir-Pakistan-China nexus. All our global concerns derive from these neighbourhood realities. Chinese leaders might view Mr Modi a business friendly leader and may hope for better bilateral

economic ties, but there is more to it than trade and finance. Certainly, deep rooted distrust failed Dr Manmohan Singh's initiative to make *border irrelevant* by promoting commerce, communication, contacts and development of Kashmiris on both sides. This calls for careful monitoring of our neighbours and cultivating the positive elements there. For we face a troubled neighbourhood with varying degrees and dimensions based on the ideology of nationalism. We need to move beyond this limited vision which has marred India's quest for achieving its rightful place in the comity of nations. This may require some sacrifice in the short-run to bring a paradigm shift in the politics in this region— to approach every relation from the perspective of cooperation instead of conflict.

The neighbourhood policy

India's neighbourhood policy in classical terms can be traced back to Kautilya's *Mandala* theory; wherein the immediate neighbour is perceived as an enemy. Therefore, for a glorious ruler, it is prescribed to be cautious of neighbours and either to use force to control or to win over them. This has reference to the age of monarchy and a self-sufficient society having little need to interact with the outside world. The British India also had similar perception and

pursued the policy of expanding its influence in the neighbourhood. However, the freedom movement in India was a moral act by peaceful means to create a new society based on democratic principles to transform the lives of the lowest. Social cohesion and cooperation was emphasized for the benefit of all the suffering people in India and the world over. Since colonialism was a global menace; the remedy was not to remain confined in narrow boundaries of India. This was the reason that the Indian national leaders forged solidarity with Afro-Asian countries with an aim to build a better global society in future. In this direction the first major step was to win over the trust of neighbours. This was imperative for freedom and to realize India's vast potential. All India Congress Committee in its historic Delhi Declaration (4-5 Nov. 1921) affirmed its commitment to goodwill and friendliness towards neighbours; and urged them to reciprocate the same.⁶ The architect of India's foreign policy, Nehru broadened the idea of neighbourhood amongst all like-minded countries with emphasis on Asia. In his opinion, "our neighbours now are all the countries of the world...we have to think practically every country and take into consideration all the possible areas of conflict, trade, economic interest, etc...if there is a

conflict on a big scale anywhere, it is apt to spread all over the world. Nevertheless, the nearby countries always have a special interest in one another and India must, inevitably, think in terms of her relations with countries bordering her by land and sea...If our neighbouring countries have in a sense the first place in our minds, then the second place goes to the other countries of Asia with whom we are fairly intimately connected."⁷ This Nehruvian vision had its first organized manifestation at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi (23 March-2 April 1947) when he exhorted the people of Asia in these words: "Asia has suddenly become important again in world affairs. Ours is the great design of promoting peace and progress all over the world. We propose to stand on our own legs and to cooperate with all others who are prepared to cooperate with us."⁸ He was well aware of weaknesses of newly independent countries and therefore believed that they could have no significance if they acted separately. The idea was being toyed as Asianism, or Nasser's pan-Arabism, or Nkrumah's pan-Africanism, or Afro-Asianism for promoting goodwill and cooperation. Their collective endeavour gave birth to novel ideas of *Panchsheel and non-alignment*. Deriving from *Panchsheel* the principle of peaceful co-existence

became popular in diplomatic parlance while dealing with neighbours.

The leadership issue

Unfortunately, bickering began at the very Asian Relations Conference. The Arab League protested the presence of the Jews. There was a shadow-boxing with China over Tibet. Burma and Malaysia were apprehensive that the two giants—India and China, might dwarf their autonomy. Indonesia pleaded that India should withdraw its troops deployed by colonial rulers. The Chinese were conscious that India might implicitly acquire leadership in Asia. The flashpoint was the location of the secretariat for the proposed Asian Relations Organisation. India assumed it to be in India. China objected to it. Finally, it was decided to rotate every six months between Delhi and Beijing, starting with India. When it was moved to China, it met a premature death.⁹ Perhaps these skirmishes were a premonition of future shape of things to come.

The regional rivalries

Rise of Asian communism (China), Pakistan's close military collaboration with the USA, formation of military blocs (SEATO, CENTO) further aggravated mutual suspicion and created divergent perceptions and

interests. The clash of personality added fuel to the fire. Nehru's international activism earned him the sobriquet of Light of Asia (Churchill, 1955), the greatest figure in Asia (Walter Lippman 1949). In January 1949 *Life* wrote a long article on him, and his was, in the same week, the cover portrait of *Time*.¹⁰ Bandung (1955) was its unpleasant manifestation despite tall proclamations of Afro-Asian solidarity. Nehru roused considerable hostility among the other delegations by what was suspected to be a calculated effort at personal leadership.¹¹ He was the main target of attack. Chou Enlai outshone Nehru. The only elements to fade out of the conference were the Nehru-type neutralists.¹² Nehru was so disappointed that he resisted to hold other conferences till the beginning of 1961 when India had to attend the non-aligned preparatory meeting at Cairo. Foreign Secretary R.K. Nehru on his return from Cairo said that India was not committed to attend the Belgrade conference and would take a decision whether to attend it or not. However, a reluctant Nehru attended the first non-aligned summit in September 1961.¹³

The beginning of the decade proved ominous for India. At the Belgrade conference India relinquished much of what remained of its leadership in the non-aligned bloc. Chinese aggression

revealed its military weaknesses and exposed the futility of *Panchsheel*. There was hardly any condemnation of China by this bloc. India became disenchanted with such gatherings. Nehru died as a sad man of Asia in 1964; and Shastri had to attend the second non-aligned summit at Cairo. Here again, he failed to get support for his proposed non-aligned mission to China to persuade it to desist from developing nuclear weapons. Only President Makarios of Cyprus gave him public support. China exploded its first nuclear weapon within a week of the summit.¹⁴ In less than a year Shastri faced unprovoked aggression by Pakistan armed with American weapons. Yet, he opted for a negotiated settlement of all outstanding problems at Tashkent in January 1966.

The New Approach

Rise of Indira Gandhi to power marked a major shift in India's foreign policy. She imparted an element of pragmatism of power politics besides carrying the baggage of Nehru's idealism and moralism. Indo-Soviet Treaty, liberation of Bangladesh, Pokharan I, annexation of Sikkim and engagement with China were major steps in this direction. Simla Agreement with Pakistan emphasized bilateralism and thus disapproval of extra-

regional powers' interference in the region. This was variously described as India's Monroe Doctrine or Indira Doctrine.¹⁵ Thus, India practised aggressive *unilateral bilateralism* at times which amounted to arms twisting and setting alarm bells in the neighbourhood.

The Janata(1977-79) interregnum brought desired relief in the sub-continent with its declared policy to instil confidence among India's estranged neighbours. Foreign Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee echoed this sentiment in these words: "In seeking and offering cooperation to our neighbours, we have never imposed ourselves. We have gently tried to explain the mutuality of advantage in bilateralism."¹⁶ Attempts were made to resolve major irritants. Ganga water agreement with Bangladesh, Salal dam with Pakistan, River water projects, trade and transit etc. with Nepal were important achievements heralding an age of beneficial bilateralism.¹⁷ Mr. Vajpayee also visited China to initiate a new beginning, though it proved to be a fiasco as China chose the same time to attack a friendly Vietnam. This new found confidence in the neighbourhood tempted South Asian leaders to think in terms of regional cooperation. Thus began the SAARC process in 1985. The SAARC might not have achieved its declared

goal of instilling among the member countries a sense of collective concern either in economy or security but it has been remarkably successful in bringing warring neighbours (particularly India and Pakistan) to meet at different levels which otherwise would not have been possible. On several occasions serious bilateral issues have been negotiated and also resolved. SAARC may have many limitations given the geo-political nature of the region and conflictual relations among its members; but it has a huge potential for peace and prosperity if nurtured carefully.

This calls for India to shoulder a major responsibility. The smaller neighbours should use India's strength to their benefit and India should offer all possible help to them as it was proposed by Gujral Doctrine for smaller countries. India under the foreign policy leadership of I.K.Gujral rightly decided to take unilateral steps without expecting similar response from its neighbours. As a token of goodwill gesture India decided to relax rules and regulations relating to visas, travels, communications, exchange of goods and services, radio/ television programmes, newspapers, books, other printed materials etc. The basic purpose was to reinforce Indian sincerity and determination towards a friendly neighbourhood; even if

some sacrifice was needed to begin with. In this direction Gujral Doctrine enunciated following five core principles as neighbourhood policy:

- (a) In our dealing with neighbours (Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka) we do not insist on reciprocity on any concessions made;
- (b) We will not allow our territory to be used against the interest of any country in the area;
- (c) We will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and would expect others to observe this principle as well;
- (d) We respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all the states in the region;
- (e) We are determined to settle all our disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations.¹⁸

India ought to extend a robust Gujral Doctrine to all its neighbours based on the policy of non-reciprocity. Some extra care and caution must be taken while dealing with the leaders of Pakistan due to overarching nature of power equations there which is largely influenced by the mullah-military combine. In this regard it is instructive to mention the *bus diplomacy* of Atal Behari Vajpayee

(19-21 Feb.1999) generating high hopes on both sides of the border. Both the leaders— Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif signed the famous *Lahore declaration* and committed themselves to the principle of peaceful co-existence and reiterated that an environment of peace and security is in the interest of both the sides and that the resolution of all outstanding issues, including Jammu & Kashmir is essential for this purpose.¹⁹

Kargil War

Beneath this euphoria of cordiality, there prevailed a simmering discontent amongst Islamic fundamentalists and the military establishment. These two elements in Pakistan have always joined hands to queer the pitch of good relations with India. *Jamaat-i-Islami* called for Lahore bandh against Vajpayee's visit. Service Chiefs of Pakistan had serious difference with Nawaz Sharif over peace overtures to India. They refused to welcome Vajpayee at Wagah border on the ground that *it would be difficult for them to salute Mr Vajpayee who is the leader of an enemy country and moreover a Hindu bigot.*²⁰ During the same period Kargil plans were being executed by these very forces, leading to Kargil war in the summer of 1999. Domestic turmoil caused by

Kargil misadventure culminated in a bloodless *coup* in Pakistan on 12 October 1999 General Pervez Musharraf captured power by arresting the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. India announced not to have any business with the hawkish military ruler who often relished to rattle the nuclear swords of Pakistan. However, the Vajpayee government faced several serious domestic challenges and realized the need to engage Pakistan. Thus, Musharraf was invited to India which again created enormous hope only to be dashed into yet another aborted summit in Agra during 14-16 July 2001.

Peace Initiative

It is instructive to note that Musharraf was invited without proper preparations and planning that was necessary if the goal was to resolve the conundrum called Kashmir. Hence, it was destined to be doomed by any count. This was followed by increase in terrorism in India reaching its peak in an attack on the Parliament on 13 December 2001. This paved the way for hard-hitting rhetoric and war mongering between the two countries derailing the SAARC process and the proposed 11th summit in Kathmandu in December 1999 was postponed indefinitely. In the following years

attempts were made for normalization but things failed to improve due to rising tide of India-specific terrorism in Pakistan. In this context also fundamentalists (Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar) warned Nawaz Sharif against visiting India on the invitation of Mr. Modi. Nawaz Sharif's brother took the army chief Raheel Sharif into "confidence" and "informed" him about the visit. It was said to be a "difficult decision" by Mr Sharif to visit India.²¹ Not only that, an attempt was made on 28 May 2014 to propose a resolution by the opposition against Mr. Modi over his allegations of terrorism against Pakistan in the Assembly of Punjab province ruled by Nawaz Sharif's PML-N. The situation was saved as the Speaker did not allow it.²² These things speak volumes of vulnerability of peace initiatives in Pakistan; and India must empathise with the democratic elements there. The Indian state and society, both must take caution while dealing with crisis situations and resolve to continue dialogue for whatever be the provocation. After all, every problem can only be solved by negotiation between two nuclearised neighbours. No doubt, it is easier said than done, due to domestic compulsions and demands of realpolitik. Given these realities India and its two important neighbours are involved in competitive arms race. China's military budget is

more than three times India's (\$30 billion) at \$100 billion plus. It is a matter of serious concern for the strategic community that India is being encircled by China. This provides for a strong support to increase military expenditures to catch up with China despite the fact that India is the second largest arms buyer after Pakistan.²³

Conclusion

The foregoing appraisal earnestly demands to contemplate on these issues of conflicts, weapons, wars and now the menace of terrorism. Has any country benefited from such a conundrum? In this scenario India must pursue a policy of engagement in all possible areas, with every eager element to increase the peace constituency around its borders. It is expected from India, an emerging major power, to take bold initiatives. Its first manifestation would be to shed the alarmist attitude in relations with China and arrogance towards others including Pakistan. We must desist from hurting their sentiments by creating unnecessary controversies arising out of otherwise pleasant game of cricket. A terrorist attack should not prompt us to suspend talks. Don't we realize that a civilian government in Pakistan is a hostage to the powerful mullah-military combine as our own politics,

at times, also gets helpless in the face of rising tide of communalism which becomes more sharpened during elections. References to Pakistan and Bangladesh are made without any consideration for their impact on our relations with them. No doubt, similar anti-Indian rhetoric is played in full swing in our neighbourhood by certain political parties for petty political gains. Thus, political maturity must be maintained in the long-term interest of India while referring to our neighbours. Moreover, we cannot change the internal dynamics in the neighbouring countries at our will. It is a difficult task

to be undertaken whether we like it or not. Neighbours form the first circle in India's interest and influence. So long as India remains deeply involved in the mire of the neighbourhood conflicts; its dream to become a global player would remain unfulfilled. This situation can be changed by a prudent policy with probity and nuanced diplomacy. It is expected that Mr. Modi would remember the former Prime Minister Vajpayee's famous formulation, "*one can choose ones friends, not neighbours*"; and act accordingly in the interest of South Asia in general and India in particular. ■

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