

Changing contours of India's foreign policy towards South Asia

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Abstract

India's foreign policy towards South Asia always remain important for the scholars, policy makers and statesmen. South Asia is one of the important regions in the world. It consists of newly independent states. Due to its geographical location, economic status and democratic polity. India is playing crucial and significant role in the region. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was established in 1985 for the economic cooperation and development. Like other countries, India's foreign policy always remains a subject of change due to change in the strategic, economic, political and other dimensions. In the post cold war-era, specially during Modi era, important changes took place in the foreign policy of the country. It was the starting of a realistic approach to the issues and problems. For the understanding of India's relations with South Asia, it is important to study the changing contours of India's foreign policy towards South Asia.

KEYWORDS: Strategic, geo-political, bilateralism, regionalism.

Foreign policy of any country is the product of a complex interplay of history, geography, political, socio-economic conditions, present requirements, perceptions of the ruling people at the contemporary time. External and internal determinants play significant role in the formation of basic principles of a foreign policy. Due to its complex nature, India's foreign policy towards South Asia always remain an issue of debate, discussion and criticism among the statesmen, policy makers and academicians. South Asia also known as Southern Asia, is the southern region of the Asian continent, which comprises the sub Himalayan countries. According to the United Nations geographical region classification, Southern Asia comprises the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Afghanistan, Iran, and Sri Lanka.¹ India accounts for 76% of the population living in 73.25% of total South Asian land area. India shares land and maritime boundaries with 8 countries. It has had troubled relations like border disputes, sharing of river water, cross border terrorism and ethnic conflicts with most of them. Beside this the factors like past legacies, geo-political settings, socio-economic conditions, ethnic issues, societal composition, nature of borders, political processes, political stability in south Asian region has influenced the Indian foreign policy in South Asia. In this context, it is important to study the changing contours of India's foreign policy towards South Asia.

The history of India's foreign policy can be traced from pre-independence era. During colonial age Indian National Congress, showed interest in matters relating to foreign policy right from its birth in 1885. Which gradually became wider with the passage of

time and incidents. Thus, by the time India achieved independence in 1947, there had developed a distinct, Indian outlook on world affairs, and this became the foundation of India's foreign policy.ⁱⁱ

India's foreign relations in South Asia can be analysed in the context of core state and periphery states. Though China is not a South Asian state, but it has lot of influence in the region. Pakistan is one of the core states for India. Pakistan is a nuclear state and pose direct threat to security of India. India has bitter experience of fighting wars, proxy wars, border disputes and problem of terrorism with Pakistan.

Strategically, Pakistan along with China is playing significant role in the region. As far as small states are concerned India can not ignore them while formulating their foreign policy due to connectivity and other strategic and economic importance. The changing contours of India's foreign policy can be discussed as following.

1. India adopted peace, peaceful-co-existence, security, economic development, independence of opinion and independence of action as fundamental objectives of its foreign affairs. Initially Nehru developed the concept of peace and peaceful co-existence to solve the problems of the region. Non-alignment was initiated to resolve all the problems by creating a global milieu of peace and tranquility. This approach on one hand, was aimed to these states from the brunt of cold war politics and on the other hand creating a goodwill among these states to churn out their processes of economic development. India adopted Panchsheel in 1954 as an ideal code of conduct for bilateral relations. The five principles of peaceful co-existence were mutual respect for each other, territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal matters, equality and mutual benefits and peaceful co-existence.ⁱⁱⁱ India made these principles as the base of their foreign policy in South Asia and other states in the world.
2. After Nehru's death global idealism was replaced with regionalism or bilateralism. India focused on its security concerns and Pokhran-1 and Integrated Guided Missile Programme were launched to increase military power. India's role in liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 and integration of Sikkim in India affected its image in the region. India was perceived by the smaller states as hegemonic power in South Asia. After Indira regime new trend of adhocism took place in India's foreign policy. But with the disintegration of USSR, end of cold war and other drastic changes in the world, influenced the foreign policy of all the countries including India. A new initiative was taken under Gujral doctrine to understand the new economic realities and translate them in a positive manner. Due to coalition government and drastic economic changes India focused on foreign investment, foreign aid for economic development. As the result of change, in post-cold war era, India also adopted globalization, liberalization and privatization in economic sphere. There was a major change in India's orientation towards South Asian states.
3. In the changed scenario, the whole of South Asia was given attention, but attracting small states was the objective of the policy. India's liberal attitude

towards them was to translate in terms of extending concession to them in such a manner that they would fall in time. Signing of new treaties with Bangladesh on Ganga water sharing and with Nepal on Mahakali agreement are witness to operationalization of such initiatives. Through the resolution of bilateral conflicts in a democratic and peaceful manner and providing liberal economic assistance to small neighbours, India wanted to develop cooperative regionalism, under Gujral doctrine.^{iv}

4. In the post- cold-war era, introduction of globalization, liberalization and privatization in the economic spheres provided another opportunity for regional cooperation. In the post-cold war era, South Asia remains the fastest growing region in the world. South Asia's economic growth story and rising interdependence have increasingly put the onus on India to deliver more, better and faster connectivity. Due to economic growth and the disproportionate size and centrality of its market in the region India always remain significant in the region. Beside this, due to market based economic reforms in 1991, India has become one of the fastest growing major economies, and is considered a newly industrialized country. All this has provided India an opportunity to deepen economic relations with the Neighboring states in the South Asia.
5. Within South Asia, Modi government framed a Neighborhood First policy to signal India's commitment to regional connectivity. From a policy of strategic insulation and neglect during much of the Cold War, and a reluctant embrace of regionalism thereafter, India's regional policy has now shifted irreversibly towards strengthening cross-border relations. Invitation to all Heads of the states at the occasion of Oath Taking Ceremony of the Prime Minister was a signal towards strengthening regional integration and regionalism in South Asia. It was the introduction of Modi doctrine. The doctrine has various elements, first and most important is the idea that a strong self -reliant and self -confident India will pursue a foreign policy of enlightened national interest. In international diplomacy, enlightened national interest is arguably the recognition that the narrow pursuit of self-interest in an interdependent world can lead to suboptimal policy outcomes. In Asia, Japan-a nation Mr. Modi clearly admires has used the term enlightened national interest to define many of its policies including those steering its overseas development assistance. Second is the idea that India will help to build and strengthen a democratic, peaceful and economically interlinked neighbourhood. Third is Modi's emphasis on soft power explained though yet another Modi alliteration of 5Ts: trade, tourism, talent, technology and traditions. Finally, the willingness to raise issues of concern at a bilateral level (read Pakistan) and the uncontroversial claim that stability can be built in the region only if there is an end to the export of terrorism.^v
6. Another change is due to geostrategic response to China and its unprecedented linkages across the subcontinent. China is the second biggest economy in general and has massively expanded its diplomatic, economic, and political footprint across South Asia, especially in the area of infrastructure finance and development. Except of Bhutan, all of the South Asian countries have joined the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is not interested in building blocs or empire; she is interested to expand its economy through the small states in South Asia. All this has raised the issue of security for India and its dominating role in small states of South Asia.

7. Initiatives taken under Modi doctrine for friendly relations with neighboring countries is also one of the new dimensions in India's relations with South Asian countries. Historically India is a civilizational power, centrally located in the region. Traditionally, India has cultural relations with all the countries of the region. In his visits to Nepal, for example, Prime Minister Modi repeatedly emphasized cultural links and the shared history and Hindu heritage between both countries.

Challenges

Though various changes are taking place in geo-strategic, economic, cultural and other spheres in the region. India is also facing various challenges in the implementations of the foreign policy objectives. India's image of policeman in South Asia is one of the problems in the region. South Asian countries considers India as a big power not a big brother in the region. They consider India as a threat to their national security and integrity. It may be one of the reasons that smaller states are attracting towards China. They are looking towards China as an alternative of India's hegemonic approach. It will be a challenge for India to manage the image of hegemonic state in the region. In changed context India will have to focus on specific areas and projects that enhance its comparative advantage with China. There is a need to invest on the soft dimensions of connectivity, including capacity building in the region.

Management of bilateral relations with China and Pakistan is another big challenge for India. The terrorist attacks on Indian forces, surgical strike in Pakistan and abolition of Article 370 (related to Jammu & Kashmir) have affected the bilateral relations of both the countries. China's interference in Doklam and other areas of Ladakh in India have provided more inputs for China-Pakistan strategic and diplomatic relations.

Moreover, after the end of cold war world order is in a flux without any particular order and system. India's success in South Asia likely to be dependent upon how this world order will take place and what will be the space for India. India's relations with other emerging powers also affect its role and status in South Asia.

The role and interactions of regional and intra-regional organizations also determine the status of India in South Asia. South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation is one of the important regional organization for fostering economic cooperation in the region.

Conclusion

After independence, India adopted an independent foreign policy at international level. South Asia always remains significant for India. In the contemporary scenario, it is significant for India to change its strategy and approach to accommodate its national interests in the complex situation in the region. India's connectivity strategy in South Asia must be enhanced by new research, knowledge, and data on neighboring countries and specific sectors of major concern. India will also require economic openness, beyond all the investment in cross-border infrastructure. An Indian connectivity strategy will have to deliver rather than deny. India will have to stay focused, and be prepared to commit more, better and faster on connectivity initiatives that are sustainable. The strategy will have to be implemented in coordination with new stakeholders, including sectoral ministries, state governments, and political parties, private sector interests, civil society representatives, and also multilateral organizations related to the formation of foreign policy. Beside this, India will have to consider the political, economic and cultural sensitivities of all countries specially the small states, in the region for better regional cooperation. Being the big power of the region, it is the duty of India to behave with all its neighbors with a sense of respect and responsibility as it was done by providing help during Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia.

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^{iv} R S Yadav, *Ibid.*, p.337.

^v For details see, Amitabh Mattoo, "A doctrine of economic levers, soft power," *The Hindu*, June 12, 2014.