



## India's South Asia Policy: Time to Reinvigorate

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Does India has a regional policy or it is just an extension of its domestic policies? This is the moot question which has been debated and discussed, but no concrete conclusion has been drawn out from those exercises. Flipping through the past records, it is apparent that policy makers while formulating a regional policy have been mainly influenced by global/regional-structures, and have taken into account domestic considerations. Besides these two factors, more than often, the political leadership has also influenced the shaping of India's regional policy.

### **Defining 'Region'**

Region is a geo-political construct whose definition keeps on changing according to the needs, capabilities and interests of an actor. After lord Curzon's expansion policy during the colonial period, 'region' for India was extended up to Central and West Asian borders in north, and almost up to African shores of Arabian Sea in west; this changed after independence in 1947. But since 1991, due to economic and political reasons, India has been engaged in re-defining its region. It is in this context that the idea of 'extended neighbourhood' has emerged. David Scott writes that the geo-political construct of an 'extended neighbourhood' is different from the earlier globalist rhetoric of Jawaharlal Nehru, and from the subsequent South Asian focus of Indira Gandhi. This concept was pushed with some vigour under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) led

National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government of 1998-2004, which quickly announced 'our concerns and interactions go well beyond South Asia. They include other neighbours and countries immediately adjoining this region-our extended neighbourhood'. Since then, this construction has been substantiated; and an attempt to forge an identity based on it is in process.

### **India's Regional Policy**

According to Raymond Dacey and Lisa Carlson, Foreign policy decision making often entails a two stage process in which the first stage involves the elimination of certain alternatives from the choice set, and the second stage consists of an analytic process of choosing an alternative that minimizes risk and guarantees rewards. The first phase in the decision process typically involves a non-holistic (non-exhaustive) search, to select a subset of alternative using a simplifying process. The second phase typically involves a maximization or lexicographic decision rule for selecting an alternative from the subset of surviving alternatives. This is one of the major reasons why India does not have a concrete regional policy. The policy makers have scanned various available options, and on their basis, in most of the cases have even preferred to maintain status quo instead.

Broadly, India's regional policy can be categorized into three: From the prism of an internationalist, giving preference to its domestic constituency over other determinants, and accommodative to the demands of neighbours. In the initial decades after the independence of India in 1947, the Indian leadership under Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru faced the Cold War related political dilemmas, so actively participated in building up an effective alternative to the eastern and western blocks. The Non Aligned Movement (NAM), which provided an effective platform to the then newly de-colonized countries, was the result of the effort. It does not mean that the Indian leadership entirely ignored the region: India's foreign policy was undoubtedly shaped by sub-continental considerations. Srinath Raghvan maintains that the disputes with Pakistan over Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the treaties with Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim, and the problems over Tibet and the boundary with China all consumed India's attention and circumscribed its strategic vision to subcontinent. During that period India engaged in wars with Pakistan

(1948 and 1965) and China in 1962, and also signed some of the important treaties with Pakistan (Indus Water Treaty in 1960) and Nepal (India-Nepal Friendship Treaty in 1950).

After Nehruvian heydays, Ms Indira Gandhi formulated her own doctrine to deal with the region. Guided by Indira doctrine, Indian military played an active role in south Asia. The first one was in East Pakistan in 1971, though it was for humanitarian reasons. Then in 1983, operation 'Lal Dora' was carried out by the Indian troops in Mauritius. This operation expanded the political idea of region for India. Indira doctrine was followed by her successors. During Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, India sent Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987. During this phase the small but strategic important neighbours moved to invite 'external powers' to secure their self-interests in the region.

In early 1990s the Cold War abruptly ended with the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, and a new World Order emerged. It had an influence on the India's regional policy as well, but it was mainly the individual leadership which called on for a paradigmatic shift in India's regional policy. In 1997 then Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral came out with his doctrine towards the region. The Gujral doctrine was based on five basic principles : (a) With the neighbours like Nepal ,Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka ,India does not ask for reciprocity but gives all that it can in good faith and trust.(b)No South Asian country will be used against the interest of another country of the region.(c)None will interfere in the internal affairs of another.(d)All South Asian countries must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.(e)They will settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations.Post- I.K.Gujral, the Indian Prime Ministers have tried to mix-up all three doctrines to deal with the neighbours.

Another significant development, as a result of India's skewed regional policy, is the presence of a weak regional organization- South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Initially, India was reluctant to be its member, but it has failed to be, what neo-realists call- a 'responsible hegemon'. Instead, of revitalizing SAARC, India became a member of other regional groups, and also initiated some groupings to give space to its

'accommodative' neighbours. The prime reason for SAARC's weakness is that the member states do not share cordial relationship with India. Unlike other regional organizations like European Union (EU) or Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) this organization is structurally weak and does not have mechanisms to resolve the bilateral disputes among the member states.

The new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi had, unprecedentedly, invited the head of states from the neighbouring countries at its swearing-in-ceremony. The move had been welcomed and seen as a beginning of a new era in the India's regional policy. The Prime Minister, later on, also made a proposal for setting up a SAARC Bank, and SAARC satellite. The new government's policy of 'region first' has generated good will; but there is no need to flow with tides of expectations. In past also almost all Prime Ministers had something or other for the region: Most of their proposals could not yield a result because of India's bilateral tensions with its neighbours. As the Modi government has just taken over, it is too early to make any prediction about the fate of its south Asia policy.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Firstly, there is a need to have a substantive regional policy to deal with the neighbouring countries. The consistency in policy should be maintained despite intermittently occurring bilateral political tensions, challenges, and problems with the countries. For example, if the bilateral dialogue has been pre-decided there is no need to terminate it even if some serious crisis has occurred because solution lies in a dialogue, not in de-railing the process. Secondly, as a big country India has to take forward steps to accommodate and address the concerns of its small, but strategic important neighbours. One of the major reasons for existing disputes is: Indian policy makers do not try to make compromises even on a 'secondary' issue, which is a first step any state, willing to resolve its conflicts with neighbours, takes. There is a need to look into the regional issues objectively instead of engaging into a zero-sum-game. The hint for this is there in Gujral doctrine.

Lastly, SAARC's charter must be amended to make it a strong, viable, and an effective organization. There is indeed a need for a Dispute Settlement Body within SAARC, so that bilateral problems among the member states can be, at least, discussed on a neutral platform. Almost all regional organizations have this sort of body to discuss and find out a solution to the bilateral problems among their member states.

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