

Indian and Challenging Neighborhood

Dr Shahnawaz Mantoo

Assistant Professor, Centre for International Relations, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Awantipora (India)

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*Corresponding Author

Email: shahnawazmantoo[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The world has been in flux for nearly two decades. The end of cold war and the rise of US brought the paradigm shifts in the global political settings. A new world order was proclaimed. Indian foreign policy has equally undergone several shifts from independence to Non-alignment to alignment and again has taken a new turn to aspire for global power and global reach. India has with the help of its dynamic foreign policy achieved a credible status not only within its own neighborhood but it equally has influenced the global political scenario. Political stability and peaceful political transitions at the domestic level have immensely contributed and brought dynamism in its foreign policy. Despite all this the past of Indian foreign policy has experienced many ups and downs and the present too is seriously facing many upheavals and the future of foreign policy is also fraught with many serious security and non-security challenges most importantly within its backyard. The present paper will analyze India's neighborhood policy and the challenges emerging from its neighbors. India can't afford to have disturbed neighborhood and therefore resolution of bilateral issues is important to aspire for global power. The paper will examine the India's neighborhood policy as its stable neighborhood is imperative and prerequisite for its stability progress and perpetual peace.

1. Introduction

India's foreign policy can be divided into four distinct phases. The first is the Nehruvian era (1947-1964) and is considered the initial benchmark for India's foreign policy approach. It is very difficult to fit Jawaharlal Nehru into any ideological framework. He was a product of evolution, of the stresses and strains as much as hope and aspirations which characterized the prolonged nationalist struggle. This period is considered as one of high idealism. The key characteristic of this period was Nehru's emphasis on 'Nuclear Disarmament' in order to transform the Global Order. This was followed by Nehru's binding interest in 'Multilateral Institutions' in promoting Global Peace and delegitimizing colonial enterprise through his policy of Non-Alignment. Nehru played a critical role in ideationally challenging the notion of colonialism and the very norm of imperialism. Nehru's emphasis on low military expenditure during this period was partly because of Bonapartism at home and partly because of his interest in promoting economic development. However there were certain internal and external challenges because of which his approach did not work within this highly uncertain political atmosphere. The 1962 war was a devastating for Nehru's approach as he himself accepted that "I had never thought that China will attack India". This phase was particularly characterized by Sino-India conflict, India-Pakistan war, death of Nehru and weak leadership and also US sanctions (Rajiv Sikri, 2009).

The second phase started with India's disastrous defeat in the 1962 Sino-India border war. This phase overlaps with the tenure of Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indra Gandhi. This period saw a gradual shift away from the early idealism that had characterized the country's foreign policy and the adoption of an increasingly "self-help" approach to foreign policy. In his final days Nehru oversaw a drastic re-appraisal of India's

security policies and practices. Immediate concrete steps were taken to modernize military and a serious commitment was shown to the creation of strong army and new mountain divisions. This phase is generally reefered to as a strategic dependence on the USSR particularly after 1971 India-Pakistan war. This war bifurcated Pakistan and India became a regional power in South Asia. This phase is particularly characterized by India-Soviet treat, India-Pakistan war, nuclear test, erosion of non-alignment and consolidation of socialist policies (Sumit Ganguly & Manjeet S. Pardesi: 2009)

Following the end of cold war structural shifts could be observed and in this direction attempts were made to improve relations with the US and much of the industrial world. This third which roughly started after the end of cold war and with the collapse of USSR India lost trust worthy friend and US emerged as a lone super power. During this phase Indian economy particularly the socialist model and the mercantilist approach had collapsed. Along with the economic collapse million internal mutinies had emerged and challenged the Indian sovereignty and integrity. During this phase at the global India was a friendless state. To counter both the challenges structural steps were adopted particularly new LPG model and concrete steps were also taken to reach out to United States.

The post 2014 phase of India's foreign policy is characterized by an idea of enlightened national interest, an interlinked neighborhood and an integrated South Asia, greater emphasis on soft power, multi-alignment with great powers, willingness to engage in dialogue with neighbors particularly Pakistan. However the neighborhood policy of this present dispensation is fraught with serious lacunas.

2. Challenges

The political, economic and social landscape in India's immediate neighborhood has changed significantly since the

end of the Cold War. A power transition is under way in the global order. The bipolar world has given way to a non-polar world in which several new powers have emerged. The centre of gravity of power is shifting towards the Asia Pacific. The simultaneous rise of India and China is a development of great significance. The traditional concept of national security is being broadened gradually to include human security concerns. Non-military issues like climate change, energy security, competition for scarce resources, food and water security, pandemics, migrations, etc., are getting securitized. Globalization, driven by technology, has created an unprecedented situation where borders are losing their relevance. People are able to connect with each other more easily and more quickly. At the same time, globalization has also fostered the assertion of ethnic and linguistic identities. These massive changes, which are likely to further accelerate in the next 20 years, have also affected India and its neighborhood (Rumel Dahiya Ashok K Behuria: 2012).

Even a cursory glance at the developments of the last few years will show how significant the changes have been in India's neighborhood. Who would have thought even a few years ago that the monarchy would disappear in Nepal; the LTTE would be militarily defeated; General Musharraf would be ousted and compelled to live in exile in London; a democratic government would be elected in Maldives; Sheikh Hasina would come back with a more than three-fourths majority; NATO would be fighting in South Asia; the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir would become a 'soft border'; insurgency in Kashmir would decline; insurgencies in the Northeast would be tamed; and China will become India's number one trading partner?.

But new challenges are again emerging within India's periphery which is serious impediment to India's peaceful development. India Pakistan relations are back to square one, India-China recent flare up have given rise to new security challenges, Nepal is again showing signs of political disorder and India is worried, Sri Lanka government has failed to evolve federal mechanism to resolve Tamil issue and now emergency has been imposed due to communal riot, Pakistan is in political disorder as enmity is growing between civilian establishment and supreme court and LOC is changed into hard border and deep sense of alienation is visible in Kashmir and also insurgency has immensely increased, Bangladesh is in deep political confrontation, emergency is declared in Maldives and India is deeply concerned about the developments. These new developments in the neighborhood can have serious repercussions on India's internal political stability.

There are in fact number of internal and external security and non-security challenges. The neighborhood policy can define and redefine the country's political and economic fate at the global level. If India wants to become global power then peaceful neighborhood is important.

3. Challenging Neighborhood: Major Security Concerns

Pakistan

It is cliché that a nation can choose its friends but cannot choose its neighbors. India and Pakistan are neighbors with complex problems with each other; that cannot be simply washed away or be forcefully settled down. Ideology, history and geo-politics remained permanent markers in the relations between India and Pakistan (Narendra Singh: 2007).

It is said when the going gets tough, the tough get going. However, when the going gets dangerous, the tough should 'rethink his options'. Since partition India and Pakistan relations have seen many downs and less ups.

India and Pakistan were birthed out of a bloody partition that encouraged each to define itself in opposition to the other. Six decades after the tragedy and trauma of partition, a host of issues continue to bedevil India Pakistan relations and cast long shadows on bilateral ties. Years of mutual mistrust, misperception and hatred has led to psychological barrier between India and Pakistan. Since achieving independence in 1947, the relations between India and Pakistan have been such that the talks of trade, cooperation and peace have often taken place parallel to the threats of war. The Indo-Pakistan relationship is a complex mix of national prejudices, inflated psyche, injured ego and plain rivalry (Narendra Singh: 2007).

Both countries share multiplicity of connections bet it culture, geography, language, history, trade etc. But both have many bilateral issues which have substantially minimized the potential of cultural historical and geographical connections. Kashmir issue and terrorism are two main bilateral concerns which have largely marred the relations between the two states. Both are nuclear powers and can't afford war, therefore both need to realize the importance of irreversible and irrevocable dialogue. The escalation of tensions have soared along the volatile frontier and since

4. Major Issues

1. Kashmir is both internal and external security concern for India. Since partition Kashmir is a bone of contention for both states. Both states fought three major wars on Kashmir and since 1989 rigged elections gave emergence to militant separatists who are fighting against India. The old age militancy was militarily defeated and thereafter composite dialogue was started which ended with achieving no substantial results. After the failure of composite dialogue and since 2008 many uprising happened and also gave rise to new age militancy and in 2016 a militant poster boy was killed which resulted into mass uprising and more than hundred people were killed and brought the India Pakistan relations to an all time low. Since 2016 uprising the political developments in Kashmir have been worrying and situation is totally out of control. To deescalate the situation, government of India needs to engage mainstream parties as well as the other off-stream, civil society etc. Government of India has failed to engage mainstream parties and it was in 1953 when Sheikh Abdullah was arrested as Prime Minister of J&K and this was the first blow to the mainstream politics and politicians as well. Therefore the need is to engage mainstream and fulfill their political demands.
2. As terrorism emerges as one of the greatest threats to India's internal security, the government, policy makers and strategic community continue their efforts to find an anti-dote to counter the menace of terrorism. One of the nation most affected by it has been India owing to its neighbor, Pakistan, having adopted terrorism as an extension of state policy to destabilize India. Not only in J&K but in other Indian

states too, Pakistan has been zealously pursuing its anti-India, though myopic policies, of fomenting terror and unrest. As universally accepted after the 9/11 terror attacks in the US homeland, Pakistan has been blamed as the fountainhead of terror activities all over the world. The recent attacks in Uri, Pathankot are an eye opener to India which was allegedly perpetuated by Pakistan. Terrorism in India has increased rapidly after the independence and now has become one of the major problems faced by India. The existence of terrorism in India can be seen repeatedly in areas such as Jammu and Kashmir, east-central and south-central India (Naxalism). According to former National Security Advisor M K Narayanan, there are as many as 800 terrorist cells operating in the country. India government needs to be very careful about the Terrorism and should take serious concrete policies to end this menace.

3. In international system, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan are the most vital states in the South Asian region, from multiple perspectives such as in terms of economic contexts, military aspects, geopolitical connotations, geo-strategically, in socio-cultural matters as well as in religious area. Some of the major concerns of India in Afghanistan are to keep Afghanistan away from being used as a base for Pakistan to train and coordinate terror attacks against Indian cities, weaken and limit Pakistani and Taliban/Pashtun influence over Afghan politics, establish a network to access oil-rich regions of Central Asia via Afghanistan for pipeline projects and assure energy security, maintain a certain level of political influence in Afghan politics and deliver financial aid in order to maintain some sort of economic influence over the Afghan economy. In contemporary south Asian security environment, Afghanistan provides a challenging opportunity for the Indo-Pakistan relations as a make or break avenue for peace and stability both at the bilateral and regional level (Nazeer Hussain: 2014). In view of the Afghanistan ethnic, political military economic and religious fault lines, the India-Pakistan competition fuelled by mutual rivalry and chequered history has led to the re-emergence of proxy warfare inside Afghanistan. Pakistan's security dilemma and India's great power status pursuit further interact with the regional cross-purpose of other states as well. The competing Indo-Pak interests inside Afghanistan range from their respective sphere of influences in Kabul, transit trade routes to central Asia and combating talbinaziation endangering the future of regional peace and stability. It also involves other players with Iran from west Asia and China from south East Asia in particular. The US role in Afghanistan as a global power has circumstantial influence and impact over the dynamics of Afghan political spheres of India and Pakistan and vice-versa. India because of the recent political developments in Afghanistan can have serious security implications which can prove disastrous and harmful for its interests in Afghanistan.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh was part of Undivided Pakistan and after 1971 war became independent state in South Asia. India provided military and diplomatic help to Bangladesh and relations started on a healthy note but after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, anti-India establishment came to power and introduced many new changes into the constitution and most importantly word secularism was deleted and it was replaced by "Kalima". With the passage of time General Ershad declared Islam as the state religion. The military establishment which took over immediately after Mujib's assassination ruled the country for 15 years and Democracy was restored in 1990 (Ali Riaz: 2016).

The political history of Bangladesh from secularism to Islamization is also characterized by deep political confrontation between two national parties which have given rise to fundamentalist forces and also have led to the downfall of democratic institutions (Rounaq Johan: 2014). Political confrontation and downfall of democratic institutions, rise of fundamental forces, increasing footprints of China are worrying developments for Indian security. Bangladesh is critical for India's security, the development of the Northeast and the success of its 'Look East Policy'.

With the changed South Asian geo-strategic scenario, Bangladesh's importance increased due to three factors. First, Bangladesh began to be referred to as the third largest Muslim country in the world and second in the region. The second factor is Bangladesh's location within the 'geo-strategic frontier' of India, South Asia's most powerful country. And the third is Bangladesh being in close proximity with China, Asia's largest power, considered a strategic rival of both the US and India (Shahnawaz Mantoo: 2013).

The unique geographic location of Bangladesh which cuts the troubled North East region of India off from mainland constitutes a significant security weak point for India for the fact that the region shares border with China and that various insurgent groups are active within the region that are fighting against the Indian state. In light of their experience in Indo-China war in 1962, the Indian defense planners consider the strategic chicken neck to be inadequate and see Bangladesh to be the safest and the shortest route to transport military logistics to North East region in case of a military conflict between India and China in the future. A strategic corridor through Bangladesh is also seen as important to conduct sustained military campaign against the insurgent groups in North East. The corridor through Bangladesh has economic significance as well because it is the most cost effective route to connect North East with the rest of India for the transshipment of industrial goods to and from North Eastern states, which is vital to improve the economic condition of this land locked region (Nurul Kabir: 2009).

Bangladesh, which is being regarded as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN, also has enormous geographic advantages for its proximity to Myanmar and other South East Asian nations to promote interregional economic, political and security cooperation. Once connected via Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway, the South and South East Asian nations will be using Bangladesh as the main transit point to increase economic interactions amongst themselves. Bangladesh with appropriate policies and infrastructures in place will be playing

pivotal role in defining the direction of economic relations between the two emerging regional groups.

Bangladesh is considered the gateway to Bay of Bengal with its 45000 sq. miles of sea territory in which lies valuable marine resources such as hydrocarbon, fisheries etc. Its well developed sea ports offer both economic and military opportunities because India can use the port facilities to increase trade with its land locked North East region while other South and South East Asian countries and China can use the same facilities to increase interregional economic interactions. With the ambition to protect the oil transshipment and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, the Chinese navy is making rapid progress in developing relations with the coastal nations such as Myanmar and Bangladesh to gain access to their port facilities so as to conduct sustained naval operations in the sea. Because of her burgeoning population, high economic growth, and rapid industrialization, India has become the sixth largest energy consumer in the world, but she has to import oil to meet 70% of her domestic demand which cost 40% of her total export earnings. Bangladesh also is the most cost effective route for India to import gas from Myanmar; therefore, Bangladesh may emerge as a significant player in regional strategic energy game.

India and Bangladesh have many issues to resolve including that of transit and connectivity, illegal smuggling, water sharing, trade, etc., but, migration will remain the major issue on the agenda. Illegal migrants from Bangladesh have posed serious security and non-security concerns to the integrity of India. The next 20 years in Indo-Bangladesh relations will most likely be taken up with the issues of human security. The role of India's eastern states in Indo-Bangladesh relations will grow significantly. Bangladesh granting transit facilities to India, completion of the Asian highway and trans-Asian railways could be the game changing events in the region.

India keeping in consideration the geo-political significance of Bangladesh cannot afford to have political instability in its neighborhood. India needs to use smart political and economic diplomacy to avert security concerns.

Sri Lanka

The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is more than 2,500 years old and both sides have built upon a legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction. In recent years, the relationship has been marked by close contacts at the highest political level, growing trade and investment, cooperation in the fields of development, education, culture and defense, as well as a broad understanding on major issues of international interest.

The nearly three-decade long armed conflict between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE came to an end in May 2009. During the course of the conflict, India supported the right of the Government of Sri Lanka to act against terrorist forces. At the same time, it conveyed at the highest levels, its deep concern at the plight of the mostly Tamil civilian population, emphasizing that their rights and welfare should not get enmeshed in hostilities against the LTTE.

Sri Lanka has long been in India's geopolitical orbit, but its relationship with China has strengthened in recent years. As Western countries accused former President Mahindra Rajapaksa of gross human rights violations during the final

stages of the civil war with LTTE, China extended billions of dollars of loans to the Sri Lankan government for new infrastructure projects, though these loans turned out to be economically unviable for the island nation (Harsh V Pant, *The Diplomat*, 2015).

In February 2015, Sri Lanka's newly elected President Maithripala Sirisena undertook his first official visit to India, and Narendra Modi paid a return visit to Colombo in March 2015. He was the first Indian prime minister to do a stand-alone visit to Sri Lanka in 28 years. While there, Modi not only addressed the Sri Lankan parliament but also made a trip to the northern province of Jaffna. Modi visited Sri Lanka again in May 2017, where he inaugurated a specialty hospital built with Indian assistance and visited the Indian-origin Tamil community there (Jivanta Schoettli, *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 2017).

Just ahead of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) summit in May 2017, Colombo refused to allow a Chinese submarine to dock. Under the previous dispensation, Sri Lanka had allowed a Chinese submarine to dock at the Colombo port, drawing protests from India. But Sri Lanka also sent its Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to the Belt and Road summit, and was offered an estimated \$24 billion in additional loans (*The Wire*, May 13, 2017).

In early December, Sri Lanka handed over the strategic port of Hambantota on a 99 year lease, which is expected to play a key role in China's BRI initiative. The opposition parties and trade unions in Sri Lanka have already dubbed the port deal as a sellout of their country's national assets to China. It must be noted that Sri Lanka is struggling to pay back its existing \$8 billion debt to China. Many critics feel that the lease could set a precedent for other small South Asian countries that owe money to China to accept deals that involve surrendering a part of their territory. In order to allay Indian concerns that the Hambantota port will not be used for military purposes, the Sri Lankan government has sought to limit China's role to running commercial operations at the port while it retains oversight of security operations.

Beset by China's offensive in its strategic backyard, the Modi government is determined to improve its ties with Colombo. Modi's second visit to Sri Lanka in May this year was primarily aimed at reinforcing traditional ties at a time when China has been aggressively seeking to make inroads in the Indian Ocean region. Similarly, Wickremesinghe visited India in September 2015, his first overseas visit after being appointed as Sri Lankan prime minister. India is also likely to invest in Mattala airport in Hambantota district. It is hoped that India's presence at the airport, which is just 30 kilometers away from the Chinese-operated port of Hambantota, will help New Delhi to monitor Beijing's growing presence in Sri Lanka.

Three major concerns to India

1. Peace and security in Sri Lanka is imperative for Indian internal security
2. Maritime security in the Indian Ocean and between India and Sri Lanka
3. Influence of China and Pakistan in Sri Lanka is also worrisome for India's security interests.

Political stability in Sri Lanka is important for the security of India as north states share sensitive cultural relations. The onset of Civil war in Sri Lanka and the defeat and annihilation of LTTE ushered in an era of peace and stability but is largely depended on the political solution of the Tamil issue. Indian

Tamils in Tamil Nadu state and Sri Lankan Tamils share very close cultural proximity, therefore it is pertinent to watch closely the political developments and strive towards the resolution of unresolved issues between the Tamils and Sri Lankan government. Therefore Sri Lankan government should resolve the issues confronting Tamils as there is a palpable alienation and brewing anger among the Tamils population as almost ten years have passed since the Tamil defeat. India's major strategic concern shifted to Sri Lanka's instability because of the effect it was having on India's own stability. Ethnic violence in Sri Lanka has carried on from the 1990s into the present day with only brief periods of respite afforded by unsuccessful peace talks. Negative externalities of the conflict have irked India, and consequently also affected India-Sri Lanka relations. Sri Lanka's ethnic violence has spilled over into India primarily in the form of security concerns in the thin water way separating India from Sri Lanka, refugee inflows to southern India, and insurgency supply chains- all of which threaten security and political stability in the southeastern Indian state, Tamil Nadu (Brian Orland: 2008)

Maritime security concern is another immediate issue which has the potential to destabilize India's as well as the regional security. Instability in Sri Lanka also undermines security in the Indian Ocean, which India has a great economic stake in protecting. Sri Lanka occupies a critical location in the Indian Ocean's strategic environment, as international shipping lanes flow right by Sri Lanka's southern coast. The port of Colombo is used as an entry and exit point for regional goods, bound for or incoming from the East and the West. The Indian Ocean accommodates half the world's containerized freight, one-third of its bulk cargo, and two-thirds of its oil shipments. Thus, its security is an essential consideration for all economies with significant sea-based trade and energy demands. In the post-Cold War period, and especially since India passed trade-oriented economic reforms in 1991, India's dependence on the Indian Ocean as a maritime trading zone and transit-way for oil trade has meant that securing the Indian Ocean is crucial to its continued engagement with the international marketplace; and the waters adjacent to Sri Lanka assume special significance in these security arrangements (Sudha Ramachandran: 2006)

Third, China and Pakistan factor in Sri Lankan political developments and strategic importance. With the designs of major powers for gaining economic and military footholds in the island, Sri Lanka finds itself vulnerable to major power penetration. In the 1980s, the US wriggled its way into the island, causing worry and at the same time irking Indian policymakers. Since then, China and Pakistan's strategically-oriented influence on Sri Lanka's defense and economic activity have also worried Indian policymakers. While the threat of foreign power penetration in Sri Lanka, inimical to Indian interests, is real and it should not be overemphasized to the point of paranoia. It is unreasonable for India to expect Sri Lanka not to take advantage of lucrative Chinese contracts in the energy sector, or resist buying ammunition from Pakistan, when India is reluctant to meet all of Sri Lanka's demands for arms and munitions. In the recent political developments Sri Lankan government has handed over Hambantota port to China on Lease for 99 years thus makes the Indian security position very precarious and adds further worries to Indian strategists (Depanker Banerjee: 2007).

Nepal

Nepal is a landlocked country, bordering with India in the east, south, and west, and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the north. It shares an open border of 1,751 km with India running through 20 districts of five north East Indian states and 1,415 km long border with China. India and Nepal are inseparable parts of a single geographical region. Both share the same civilization and have deep age-old socio-cultural and religious links. Both are well connected due to close geographical proximity and plain borders making communication smooth and possible. Under the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, India and Nepal have an open border system that allows free movement of people without any restriction or the need for a passport or a visa. Nepali citizens enjoy several rights in India, similar to Indians, and unhindered business with rights of trade, border transit and movement of goods (H B Jha: 2010). Both countries have 22 agreed routes for mutual trade and for land traffic. Nepal's economy is largely dependent on India, as Nepal receives a large portion of their remittances from migrant Nepalese workers in India. On the contrary, Nepal and China have a closed border. It runs mainly through high altitude snowy mountains and glaciers, not connected well due to geographical distance and natural barriers, making people-to-people connectivity and trade difficult. Unlike India, China cannot serve as a natural transit country to Nepal due to the presence of tall and snowy Himalayas separating the two territories and also the distance between Nepal and the Chinese mainland and seaports makes it too difficult and costly. The India-Nepal open border system has not only influenced each other's culture and tradition but also had an impact on political, economic and strategic relations between the two neighbors. While India has an edge over China due to the geographical contiguity, historical and civilizational links with Nepal, China has been successful in projecting itself as a benign economic power rapidly penetrating in every sector of Nepal through aid and heavy investment.

India is facing many challenges from Nepal and the new political developments from last couple of years have further complicated the bilateral atmosphere. Three important concerns which India is facing are- China's growing influence in Nepal, second-Madheshi issue and the economic blockade and the third one anti-India sentiments run deep in the country and the formation of government by Maoists who are very close to China is substantially loaded with security concerns.

The Maoist insurgency followed by mainstreaming and now the main power holders presents an entirely new set of challenges, which India need to take note as well as initiate measures to counter effectively. These recent political developments in Nepal have brought both India and China to the brink of diplomatic war. China's presence is the main security concern to India as the government formed by Maoists is relatively closer to China than India.

The victory of the Left Alliance is seen as bad news in New Delhi; however the fact is that India has unwittingly contributed to the rise of both the Left Alliance and the new Nepali nationalism with anti-India undertones. Recall some of the recent developments in India-Nepal relations – Delhi's brazen diplomatic intervention in Nepal's constitutional process through the sending of its foreign secretary to halt that process in September 2015; its coercive economic diplomacy

to punish K P Oli for not responding to its constitutional preferences regarding accommodation of Madhesi demands; its [blessings for unseating Oli](#) once by supporting Sushil Koirala against him in 2015 and then by encouraging Prachanda to defect and align with the NC in 2016 (S D Muni, *The Wire*, 2017). All this not only alienated Oli, who had remained a friend of India for several decades, but also infuriated the Nepali people – who bore the brunt of this coercive economic diplomacy. This created conditions for Oli to cleverly exploit Nepali sentiments against India and the Madheshis to crystallize an anti-India nationalism and consolidate his power base on it. By opening up the Chinese option in the 'wake of coercion from India' he successfully projected his image of being a strong leader who could brave Indian pressures. The election results are a reward for his deft political moves in this respect.

India must now cope with the victory of the Left Alliance and the rise of new Nepali nationalism. There are strategic planners in the Prime Minister's Office, the external affairs ministry and other parts of the establishment to whom the option of breaking the Left Alliance would come easily. Any such shortsighted move will be a disaster for India's Nepal policy. If the alliance has to break, it will do so on its own as many of its internal tensions are visible. There are also political heavyweights within the ruling BJP who want to turn Nepal into a Hindu state and revive its constitutional monarchy for resisting the rise of the communists and China in Nepal. They need to learn from the electoral outcome that the Nepali people have smashed the forces of feudalism and Hindutva.

India, instead of adopting the path disastrous diplomatic adventures, must help the alliance stabilize and give good governance to the Nepali people. India has to take initiatives to firmly demonstrate, not through words but actions, that it is a true friend of the Nepali people and sincerely wants to cooperate in their developmental efforts. It must complete long pending projects in Nepal and initiate new ones that create confidence and goodwill among ordinary Nepalese (*The Wire*, December 16, 2017).

This is not the first time that India has had to deal with a communist regime in Kathmandu. As Nepalis, particularly the communist parties are keen on revising some of the old agreements and treaties, like the one of 1950 on Peace and Friendship, India must respond with sincerity and ensure that while protecting its core interests, Nepal's sentiments are also respected. Though the Chinese challenge is becoming formidable for India in its immediate neighborhood, Indian policymakers must accept that the neighbouring countries' affection for China is shaped considerably by their alienation from India. Part of the challenge of China in the neighborhood can be met by India revisiting and recasting some of its own critical policy options towards smaller neighbors.

The India concerns in Nepal are manifold, first China's growing footprints poses a serious security concern to Nepal where need a careful diplomatic endeavor to tackle this sensitive issue. That painful blockade taught its people that total dependence on India has a cost. Consequently, it has forced Nepal's leaders to look north for a reliable partner. Last May, Nepal joined China's Belt and Road Initiative. Along with this, China's investment in the country has increased manifold while India has reduced its aid budget to SAARC countries by almost 30-50% under Modi (*The Wire*, August 25, 2017).

Madheshi issue is another concern which has recently emerged because of the constitution making process in Nepal. Nepal announced its new constitution on September 20 2015 which invited criticism at domestic and international level. The constitutions proposed federal divisions proved to be controversial. Concern has been expressed over the disturbed situation in the Terai region that borders India. In Nepal's southern district madhesis and Tharu ethnic groups represent over 40 percent of the population in its Terai region. India has raised its objections to the new constitution on the basis of the argument that the new constitution has failed to 'support a federal democratic republican and inclusive' Nepal (*International Crisis Group*, April 2016).

After this issue border trade slowed down between the two states and India's unofficial blockade was an attempt to force the Nepali government to concede to New Delhi's demands. However unwarranted intervention backfired and thus gave rise to anti-India narrative in Nepal. This anti-India narrative united the Maoists who took the advantage and sold it during the general elections. It also provided a golden opportunity to China to intervene and support Nepal which made things worse for New Delhi.

Maldives

Strategically significant and geopolitically sensitive, Maldives, a chain of 1192 islands 199 of which are inhabited and home to 3,15,000 people, has recently been brutalized by violence and coup, shattering the very nascent and fragile edifice of parliamentary democracy, which had just begun to take roots since 2008 after 30 years (1978-2008) rule of Abdul Gayoom (*The Centre for Land and Welfare Studies*, 2012).

Maldives is located south of India's Lakshadweep Islands in the Indian Ocean. Both nations established diplomatic relations after the independence of Maldives from British rule in 1966. India was one of the first nations to recognize Maldives' independence. Since then, India and Maldives have developed close strategic, military, economic and cultural relations. India has supported Maldives' policy of keeping regional issues and struggles away from itself, and the latter has seen friendship with India as a source of aid as well as a counterbalance to Sri Lanka, which is in proximity to the island nation and its largest trading partner.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the Maldives "a valued partner in the Indian Ocean neighborhood" and said that India-Maldives "ties are built on a very strong foundation," the contours of which "are defined by shared strategic, security, economic and developmental goals" (N Manoharan, *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, June 28, 2017). However, the bilateral ties are not without irritants, which can be seen in two broad areas: political and strategic.

Three immediate concerns to India which are emanating from Maldives are

1. Political instability
2. Emergence of fundamentalism
3. Chinese involvement

New Delhi's major concern has been the impact of political instability in the neighborhood on its security and development. The February 2015 arrest of opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed on terrorism charges and the consequent political crisis have posed a real diplomatic test for Modi's neighborhood policy. In the past decade or so, the number of

Maldivians drawn towards terrorist groups like the Islamic State (IS) and Pakistan-based Madrassas and jihadist groups has been increasing. Protestors' bearing IS flags are not uncommon on the island. Approximately 200 Maldivian nationals have reportedly been fighting along with the IS. In terms of proportion to population, this number is quite high compared to other South Asian countries, irrespective of whether they are Muslim-majority countries. Political instability and socio-economic uncertainty are the main drivers fuelling the rise of Islamist radicalism in the island nation (*Independent*, Sep. 13, 2014).

Pakistan-based jihadists groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have used these fault lines to their advantage. The Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), through its front organization, Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, has established a foothold especially in the southern parts of the Maldives in the garb of the post-2004 tsunami relief operations. Events in West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan have also influenced Maldivian radicalization. The youth, who return from their religious studies in certain Pakistani madaris controlled by various jihadist groups and from Saudi Arabian madaris, come back not only with radical ideas, but also with jihadi networks. The Madrasa-educated youth are brainwashed to wage jihad in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya. The returnees help in the recruitment of Maldivian youth to Islamist militant groups.

India has two worries in this regard: one, the exfiltration of members of Indian terror groups like the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and the Indian Mujahedeen (IM) to the Maldives after their crackdown in India and two, the possibility of LeT using remote Maldivian islands as a launch pad for terror attacks against India and Indian interests. Overall, India's concern is regarding how radical Islamist forces have been gaining political influence in the neighborhood.

In the recent past, China's strategic footprint in India's neighborhood has increased. The Maldives has emerged as an important 'pearl' in China's "String of Pearls" construct in South Asia. Given the Maldives's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Beijing has been vying for a maritime base in the atoll with the primary motive of ensuring the security of its sea lanes, especially the unhindered flow of critically-needed energy supplies from Africa and West Asia through the Indian Ocean. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in 2014, the Maldives agreed to become a partner in China's Maritime Silk Route. China has provided grant and loan assistance to the Maldives to build a bridge between the capital and the airport (called the China-Maldives friendship bridge). Chinese companies are involved in airport development and have now been handed islands for resort development. India views the growing Chinese footprint in the Maldives with concern. India's

concern stems from the increasing Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean region. Though the Maldivian government under Yameen has reassured India that the Chinese presence is purely economic, the concern of 'places turning into bases' is genuine. (N Manoharan, IPCS, 2017)

Being a small country, the Maldives may tend to use the China card. However, it is well aware of India's importance in every sphere of its state-of-affairs. This has been proved time and again including in the recent water crisis. For its part, the main challenge to India's diplomacy is balancing out all these contradictions into harmonious relations.

The unfolding political emergency in the Maldives has prompted calls for India to intervene and resolve the deteriorating situation. The crisis poses both a diplomatic and ideological challenge for New Delhi.

5. Conclusion

India can't afford to live with disturbed and politically volatile backyard. The China factor is increasingly becoming important concern because it is fraught and loaded with serious security implications. The China's policy of 'String of Pearls' and the recent 'One Belt one Road' policies can't be over-estimated or under-estimated because India has raised serious concerns regarding the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' as it passes through questionable Pakistan occupied territory and has legal implications as well. India can confront China only by using smart political and economic diplomacy. Regional Economic diplomacy is the most vibrant means to confront China growing presence in its neighborhood.

The second important means to confront China is to strengthen Regional cooperation. Regional organization SAARC's disintegration or failure is not in India's interests. India has to confront China at multiple levels and the strong and vibrant SAARC can be the way to engage Pakistan and also politically to disengage confront and stop China's footprints in South Asia. There is not an iota of doubt in this hypothesis that weak SAARC is beneficial to Pakistan and China more than India.

The third factor is that India should engage and strengthen the roots of liberal elements in other south Asian countries. The extremists' elements are emerging and are increasingly taking over in whole of South Asia and it poses a serious challenge to Indian democracy. The need is to engage liberal elements and disengage illiberal elements. This is the only practical way to defeat extremism and fundamentalism as it is a common challenge to all south Asian States.

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