

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY

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Abstract

After assuming post of prime-minister of India, Narendra Modi hinted that his foreign policy will actively focus on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours, a policy that has since been termed the neighbourhood first policy. India's Neighbourhood first Policy indicating four things: India will be giving political and diplomatic priorities to her immediate neighbours and Indian Ocean Island states, India to provide all essential requirements of her immediate neighbours as needed by them, to promote greater connectivity and integration in the Indian subcontinent to ensure a free flow of goods and services, people, capital etc., and to establish an India-led regionalism in the neighbourhood. The neighbouring countries had tried to check and restrict India geopolitically and geo-economically through the overt or covert strategic relationships with the extra-regional powers. China's assertive, and often aggressive, behaviour has been viewed as a huge challenge for India because it opens up the likelihood of China dominating India's immediate neighbourhood. The "neighborhood first" policy is the striking feature of Modi government's diplomatic approach. In his government's strategic imagination, India's relations with neighboring countries must receive topmost priority. If India does not resolve its differences with its small neighbors, it will only pave the way for China to exert growing influence in the region.

Introduction

India has been focusing on improving ties with her immediate neighbours which is being termed as neighbourhood policy. Indian PM Narendra Modi gave it more value in the foreign policy of India that is evident in invitation to all the head of state/government in his swearing ceremony. Despite giving more priority to neighbourhood policy in handling the foreign policy of India by Modi Government, India has faced huge problems in it. India has witnessed growing influence of China in her backyard. Neharu had followed this since independence towards the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal and Bhutan (Yasin, 1994:68-117). He unfolded is Nepal policy, 'Much we stand for independence of Nepal, we can't allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed and weakened because that would be a risk of our security(Neharu, 1971:436). After

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Nehru, India's former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has big contribution in shaping first neighbouring policy. He used to say "Friends can change but not neighbours who have to live together". A country's neighborhood must enjoy unquestioned primacy in its foreign-policy making. This is distinctly evident in India's new Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy mantra – "neighborhood (Chaturvedy, 2014:1).

After assuming post of prime minister of India Narendra Modi hinted that his foreign policy will actively focus on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours, a policy that has since been termed the neighbourhood first policy by the media and he started well by inviting all heads of state/heads of government of South Asian countries in his inauguration and on the second day on office he held bilateral talks with all of them individually.

Speaking during the general debate of the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Narendra Modi aptly remarked, "A nation's destiny is linked to its neighborhood. That is why my government has placed the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with its neighbors". Indeed, for India, achieving the objective of becoming one of the key powers in Asia depends entirely on India's ability to manage its immediate neighborhood. India can become a credible power on the global stage only after attaining enduring primacy in its own neighborhood (Chaturvedy, 2014:1)

The Modi Government indicated its priority for building stronger ties with its South Asian neighbors. An account of the Modi government's foreign policy activism in its first few months in office provides ample evidence of this. For example, the India-Nepal Joint Commission which had remained frozen for 23 years got into action and reviewed "the entire gamut of bilateral relations". Similarly, inviting the President of Sri Lanka and having a meaningful engagement with him, despite opposition from some regional Indian political parties, is another case in point (Chaturvedy, 2014:1)

Further, Delhi's priority towards its neighbourhood was manifest in the first presidential address to parliament, which underlined the new Indian Government's "determination to work towards building a peaceful, stable and economically inter-linked neighbourhood which is essential for the collective development and prosperity of the South Asian Region (Chaturvedy, 2014:1)

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etc., and to establish an India-led regionalism in the neighbourhood.

Realizing the geopolitical and geostrategic imperatives, India has invoked all the neighbouring countries to be partners and contribute to the regional growth and prosperity (MEA, Annual Report 2005: 1). But on the other hand, the neighbouring countries have been perceiving India as interfering, non-accommodative, selfish and overbearing. Due to this, bilateral or multilateral relations have been marred on account of recurring tensions (Singh, 2015:61). The neighbouring countries had tried to check and restrict India geopolitically and geo-economically through the overt or covert strategic relationships with the extra-regional powers (ibid).

This article is mainly aimed to examine India's first neighbourhood policy and its implication in current period. The whole study has been focused on how far India has been successful in occupying central position in her neighbouring countries in the changed geopolitical context? Here researcher attempt to explore the loopholes witnessed in the execution of neighbourhood policy of India particularly dealing to Nepal.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature, which will incorporate the description, assessment, examine and comparative methods. It has attempt to describe the problems in the execution of neighbourhood first policy of India in changed geopolitical context. The study has been based on secondary sources of data. In this information has been collected from books, journals, official reports, newspapers, magazines, articles, monographs, unpublished thesis and dissertations on research subject. The researcher has also widely used internet variable materials.

Review of literature

Dahiya, R., Behuria, A.K. (2012) argues that the geopolitical situation in the neighborhood is likely to change significantly due to uncertainties in the global economy, chronic instability in the Af-Pak region, increasing salience of external factors in regional politics, continuing anti-India sentiments in some of the countries, demographic pressures, growth in illegal migration, and adverse consequences of climate change. However, there are also signs of greater desire for economic integration, strengthening of democratic institutions in some countries, and emphasis on regional cooperation. While India may face increasing security challenges due to instability in certain countries, there will be an opportunity for it to better integrate its economy with the region.

Singh (2015) focuses on the fault-line of Indian Neighbourhood Policy particularly in the context

of its handling of Nepal's Constitutional Crisis Post-2015. He draws the statement of former Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee that friends can change but not neighbors who have to live together, ' and argues that the neighbourhood policy is holding a very significant place in Indian foreign policy. Since independence, India has been pursuing ' Neighborhood Policy. He also mentions that the incumbent government has also conceived 'Neighborhood First ' policy under the visionary and dynamic leadership of PM Modi, but the irony is that notwithstanding this policy, India has recently lost its geopolitical space in Nepal despite such policy. On the contrary, China has made its geopolitical space. He also mentions that India has legitimate security concern in addition to its geopolitical interests. Due to sharing an open border with Nepal, Indian security concerns have been emanating from the international criminal organizations operating within Nepal, insecure Indian investment, Maoist movements, and Islamist terrorism along with fake currency etc.

Rengama (2017) argues that "charm offensive" of China's foreign policy have an impact on the world in terms of how China pursues its national goals and global objectives. According to him this "charm" of China is its "soft power," The term was first coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr., who argued that the future of international politics would rest on the attractiveness of a country and not necessarily its economic or military power. China has understood that harnessing soft power through attractive features of "brand China" may play a consequential role in China's ascendance in the hierarchy of global power

Lai, H., & Lu, Y.(2012)In this book, each of the ten chapters focuses on a unique aspect of China's soft power and a rising China, and provides an in-depth analysis of that aspect. Of the ten chapters, the first seven are devoted to analyses of China's soft power. These aspects include the views of the elites on soft power and resources and initiatives to enhance soft power; China's diplomatic strategy, such as multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and the good-neighbor policy; the evolution of China's public discourse regarding a desirable world order; the origin and change in use of the peaceful rise concept in public discourse; cultural diplomacy; international communications; and challenges for China's soft power endeavors to promote a harmonious world. Of the remaining three chapters, one discusses the rationale of China's foreign aid, which could significantly help to project China's soft power; another analyzes the international perception of arising China, which may be regarded as a rough measure of China's soft power; and another examines China's strategy for managing its rise on the world stage.

(Britannica)Good Neighbor Policy, popular name for the Latin American policy pursued by the administration of the U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt. Suggested by the president's commitment "to the policy of the good neighbor" (first inaugural address, March 4, 1933), the approach marked

a departure from traditional American interventionism. Through the diplomacy of Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the United States repudiated privileges abhorrent to Latin Americans. The United States renounced its right to unilaterally intervene in the internal affairs of other nations at the Montevideo Conference (December 1933); the Platt Amendment, which sanctioned U.S. intervention in Cuba, was abrogated (1934); and the U.S. Marines were withdrawn from Haiti.

European Commission, (2003): The European Neighbourhood Policy was launched in the year 2004. Its aim is “....to avoid drawing new dividing lines in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the Union” The policy provides an alternative to the membership to the EU and creates a framework to maintain relations with the neighbouring states of the EU

Zagorski (2012) argues Russia, like China, wants to conduct a ‘values-free’ foreign policy with the United States and Europe in the manner of eighteenth or nineteenth century cabinet diplomacy where states could do as they please domestically. For most of its post-Soviet history Moscow has been seeking to project, both domestically and internationally, the image of a resurgent Russia reassuming the mantle and responsibilities of a great regional power. This vision is based on the assumption that Russia can only prevail in a globalised world if it succeeds in preventing further erosion of the ‘post-Soviet space’. This status-quo thinking is deeply rooted in the mindsets of Russian political elites, resulting in a rigid zero-sum game approach shaping their attitude towards the neighbourhood. Understanding the neighbouring policy of the regional powers, it’s not doubtful to trace the relevance of it. While the whole world is under the impending paradigm shift, the regional powers are seen in perusing proactive neighbourhood policy.

Is India losing her neighbour?

Despite making an impressive start with its neighbourhood-first policy, the Modi government is increasingly battling resentment in the region. The message is clear: muscular tactics cannot replace mature diplomacy (Jacob, 2016, May 18). Coming to these India has been losing her geopolitical space in her neighbour due change in power dynamics. India’s rise is taking place in the shadow of China’s even more dramatic rise. China’s assertive, and often aggressive, behavior has been viewed as a huge challenge for India because it opens up the likelihood of China dominating India’s immediate neighbourhood. The “neighborhood first” policy is the striking feature of Modi government’s diplomatic approach. In his government’s strategic imagination, India’s relations with neighboring countries must receive topmost priority. If India does not resolve its differences with its small neighbors, it will only pave the way for China to exert growing influence in the region (Jacob, 2016, May 18).

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 Mahinda 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.

India's ties with Maldives have been impacted by China's growing footprint on the island. China opened an embassy in Male, the Maldivian capital, only in 2011. Many countries have non-resident embassies either in New Delhi or Colombo; the Chinese embassy in Colombo took care of Maldivian affairs until 2011 (Jacob, 2016, May 18).

The Modi government's policy of diplomatically isolating Pakistan does not seem to be succeeding as Islamabad has stepped up its diplomatic efforts to engage Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran. Escalation of hostilities also inadvertently helps in reinforcing Pakistan's narrative that India-Pakistan relations are facing a deadlock, which can only be removed if big powers intervene. New Delhi has always resisted international intervention in the bilateral dispute (Jacob, 2016, May 18).

There are many reasons behind China's ability to move much faster than India, including an authoritarian one-party governing structure that gives President Xi Jinping decision-making power far beyond what Modi is able to command. Besides the fact that Indian economy is only a fifth of China's in size, India suffers key institutional constraints, including a notoriously slow and cumbersome bureaucracy. Hence, it is no surprise that India has been struggling to compete with China across different regions, where many nations are now economically dependent on China (Jacob, 2016, May 18).

India's Nepal Policy and its repercussions on Nepal India relations

India and Nepal had been sharing civilizational ties since the time immemorial connected by the geography, history, geo-culture, and religion etc. These multifaceted ties had formalized by signing the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950. However, the last several decades, these bilateral ties had been witnessed many ups and notwithstanding Nepal being figuring prominently in India's neighbourhood policy (Singh, 2015:59).

Modi's initial outreach to Nepal in 2014 managed to strike the right chord, and captured the imagination of people and policymakers in Nepal. After the devastating earthquake caused great havoc in Nepal in 2015, India carried out extensive rescue operations and extended much-needed financial assistance for post-earthquake reconstruction projects.

However, things began to take an ugly turn when Nepal announced a new constitution, which, according to critics, disadvantaged ethnic groups such as the Madhesi people in the country's Terai region. Consequently, Madhesi protesters' blockade stopped all essential supplies from India from reaching Nepal and created a humanitarian crisis. Kathmandu blamed New Delhi for being complicit in an unofficial economic blockade and began to play the "China card" to balance India's immense power over Nepal.

India conveyed Nepal to add seven amendments in the constitution to make it more inclusive. India through its state apparatus asked Nepal to include seven amendment to the constitution. These include article 63(3)- electoral constituencies proportional to population; article 21- 'proportional inclusion'; article 283- qualification (being citizens of descent) to hold high-ranking government posts be expanded; article 86-representation should be based on the population of each state: Article 154- timeframe for delineation of constituencies be 10 years instead of 20-year; article 11(6)- acquisition of naturalised citizenship be automatic on application. Apart from these seven recommendations, disputed Kanchanpur, Kailali, Sunsari, Jhapa and Morang districts, home to a large population of Madhesis, included in the Madhes provinces(singh, 2015:68)

This caused huge resentment against India in Nepal. Nepal sought alternative of India and became closure to china giving big shock to India's first neighbourhood policy. Member of the Rajya Shabha of India Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar mentions on July 21, 2017:

Springing to the defence of 'Madhesi' demands, despite an overwhelming majority of Madhesi members of the Constituent Assembly having voted for the Constitution as framed after years of intensive negotiation, Modi sent his Foreign Secretary as a "special envoy" to Kathmandu to dissuade the Nepalese from proclaiming a constitution they had successfully passed with well over the required constitutional majority. Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar's behaviour was described as akin to "Lord Curzon's". The comparison was apt as what would we have made of Lord Mountbatten returning to India on 24 January, 1950 to order us to not promulgate our constitution two days.

In May 2016, the Nepali government went to the extent of cancelling the visit of the country's President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to India and recalling its ambassador in New Delhi. This radical step was symbolic of the frosty relationship between the two countries.

But little did Nepalis know that an even bigger calamity was around the corner. When the Constituent Assembly elected to write a new constitution for Nepal produced a charter on September 20, 2015,

There were spontaneous protests against the new document in the southern parts of the country. The political parties representing these regions felt that the constitution discriminated against the natives of the southern plains. As a part of their protest, they set-up temporary camps on Nepal's key border points with India, from which the country imports nearly all its fuel and other daily essentials.

The protestors wouldn't allow any vehicles to enter Nepal from India, effectively closing the landlocked country's lifeline. But the border-centric protests of small parties would most certainly have failed if they didn't have the support of India.

India, the preeminent power in South Asia, was also unhappy with the new constitution, which it felt ignored India's major concerns even as it went out of its way to accommodate the concerns of the West and particularly the Chinese, India's geostrategic rival in Nepal.

The "blockade" lasted for four and a half months. It did great damage to the already-battered Nepali economy; the blockade, According to Nepal's finance minister, the blockade inflicted greater economic damage than the earthquakes. It also led to a humanitarian crisis. "The declining stocks of gas, food and medicines, together with the closure of schools... and shortages of fuel throughout the country, are not only inflicting damage to the lives of the children now—they threaten the future of the country itself.

Although India all along denied it had any role in the disruption of supply of essential goods into Nepal, few in Nepal were inclined to believe it.

Following the blockade, Nepal has warmed up to China, the only other country besides India with which Nepal shares a border. There is a feeling that if Nepal does not diversify its trade away from India—with which it now does 70 percent of its business—it could again be made a victim of India's high-handedness in the future. This explains Nepal's recent overtures toward China to balance India's influence.

China is more than willing to fill this vacuum. Kathmandu has already signed on to the BRI plan, which is likely to cement China's communication links with Nepal. It may be reasonable to argue that Nepal would prefer China's model of economic engagement without political dictation to Modi's "neighbourhood first" policy (Jacob, 2016, May 18).

The recent victory of the left coalition in Nepal's parliamentary elections is expected to pose several challenges for the Modi government. Due to inconsistent policies and conflicting priorities from New Delhi as well as the emergence of a new crop of politicians and opinion

makers in Nepal, India's leverage in Nepal's internal politics has shrunk to its lowest level.

New Delhi and Beijing have shown deeper concerns this time because the new government will probably sustain for the next five years, something that has not happened in Nepal since its first elections. Both India and China have complained that the lack of stable government in Kathmandu is affecting their development projects and assistance; both believe that the new government, if friendly, could be instrumental to advancing their influence and interests in Nepal. That is why both countries are closely watching the overall election results, with final tallies expected within the second week of December (Bhattarai, 2017, December01).

As there is little progress to date on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Nepal, Beijing hopes that a left alliance government in Kathmandu will speed up related projects. Beijing is already putting pressure on Kathmandu to act swiftly on BRI projects.

Oli government has signed several agreements with China, including trade and transit deals that aim to end India's monopoly over the Nepali market. During the election campaign, Oli has frequently mentioned constructing a railway line linking the two countries, something agreed to during his brief stint as prime minister. China believes that an Oli-led government could be favourable to advance its interests in Nepal; Beijing is expecting the same spirit and pace after the elections. India, on the other hand, fears losing its influence in Nepal if the left alliance is in power (Bhattarai, 2017, December01).

Recent Chinese engagement in Nepal

When Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang met Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Krishna Bahadur Mahara on September 7, 2017 in Beijing, the Chinese premier underlined China's three priorities in Nepal, i.e. connectivity, trade and investment. According to Xinhua news agency, the Chinese Premier also expressed his desire to cooperate in energy, infrastructure, and post-disaster reconstruction and tourism. China wants to work in these areas under Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), a flagship Chinese project announced by President Xi Jinping. DPM Mahara requested the Chinese side invest in connectivity and infrastructure projects. Li's statement clearly shows China's key concerns in the Himalayan nation which is sandwiched between two Asian powers India and China. A week after Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba paid an official visit; Deputy Prime Minister Mahara held high-level meetings in Beijing. During Mahara's visit to Beijing, two countries agreed to work together to 'speed up the feasibility study of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and development of cross-border economic zones.'

Interestingly, growing Chinese influence in Nepal was also one of the major issues discussed during PM Deuba's India visit. As China continues to increase its influence in Nepal challenging India's sole dominance in Nepal, a sense of uneasiness is clearly seen in New Delhi. Not only at the government level, there is growing concern in Delhi about growing Chinese influence in Nepal. This clearly indicates that China has emerged as a major factor in India-Nepal relation. During the meeting with Deuba, India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh clearly inquired Deuba about Nepal's relation with China and growing Chinese influence (Bhattarai, 2017 September 30).

In the recent years, China has stepped up high-level visits to Nepal in the recent days. Chinese vice Prime Minister Wang Yang concluded three day (15-17 August 2017) to Nepal signing three agreements related to bilateral economic and infrastructure cooperation. Chinese leaders, government officials and military officials are visiting Nepal almost on monthly basis. In December last year Liu Qibao, a senior leader of Chinese Communist Party and head of party's propaganda department visited Nepal and discussed on connectivity agenda. In March this year, Chinese Defense Minister and State Councilor General Wanqan paid a three-day official visit to Nepal. The Defense Minister pledged to provide assistance to Nepal Army and Nepal Police. There are other various visits from China. The frequent visits from India and China clearly demonstrate the competition between two giant neighbors to increase their influence in Nepal (Bhattarai, 2017 September 30).

India seems worried about its decreasing influence in Nepal. China, on the other hand, is working to increase its influence in Nepal through its economic strength. It is easier for China to increase its influence in Nepal due to at least four reasons. First, there is no opposition or even criticisms from political parties and media if Nepal government signs deal and understanding with China. Second, the border blockade in 2015 contributed to anti-Indian feeling in Nepal which provided room to substantially increase its influence in Nepal. After the blockade China made significant inroad in Nepal not only in trade, investment and security sector but also in the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Third, opinion makers, media and intellectuals are supportive of any initiatives taken by China in Nepal. Fourth, China prefers to work closely with any government in Nepal irrespective which party or leader leads the government; it is not selective like India (Bhattarai, 2017 September 30).

India always distinguishes the parties\ media\ political leaders as favorable and unfavorable to it and deals accordingly. There is a growing perception in Nepal that deal with India would be unfair and disadvantageous to Nepal. In the last two years, there has not been any big deal between India and Nepal. Prime Ministers who frequently visit to India refuse to sign a deal with a fear of criticisms by opposition parties. But, there have been several deals between Nepal and China in

the last two years and China is making inroad to Nepal. Two years ago, CPN-UML Chairman KP Oli-led government signed Trade and Transit agreement with China ending India's monopoly. Chinese side is pressing Nepal to implement the agreements reached between two countries during Oli's tenure. The erstwhile government led by CPN (Maoist Centre) Pushpa Kamal Dahal signed an accord on the framework Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Connectivity is one of the major areas where two countries are closely competing in Nepal. China plans to extend its railway to Lumbini. Military is another area where China is challenging India's influence.

Armies of Nepal and India enjoy a special relationship which has been established since the long period. India is still the largest supplier of military hardware to Nepal. Hundreds of Nepal Army officials get training and scholarship opportunities in India on annual basis. China is extending more hardware and budgetary support to Nepal Army. Similarly, Nepal Army is keen to purchase its military requirement from China (Bhattarai, 2017 September 30).

Trade and Transit is another area when two Asian giant are competing each other. For the long time, Nepal used only Kolkata port the export and import with third countries. Now, both countries are offer new transit routes. As both countries are pressing for specific development, hydro and other connectivity projects, it has been difficult to Nepal government to make decision. Dealing with India and China is increasingly becoming a major foreign policy challenge for Nepal though they are major development partners. As India-China relation continues to sour, it will be more difficult to make a balance relation between two countries.

Conclusions

India to its neighbours, instead of mourning China's rising profile in the Subcontinent, Delhi should reflect on its past failures to respect the logic of geography in the neighbourhood and find ways to correct them.

Proximity at once generates intimacy and hostility between a hegemon and its neighbours. India's problem is not about competing with China in South Asia, but managing its messy interdependence with the neighbours with some strategic vision and a lot of tactical finesse.

Delhi's foreign policy discourse must stop seeing the competition with China in the Subcontinent as a limited overs cricket game with one winning and the other losing at the end of play. Even if Delhi "loses" most of the presumed "encounters" with Beijing in the near term, there is no way China can eliminate, let alone neutralise, India's weight in the Subcontinent.

India must be more comfortable with the idea of Nepal dealing more with the rest of the world, including with China.

India also needs to recalibrate its perception of country borders. It is essential to understand that there has been a paradigm shift in the understanding of borders, which has evolved from boundaries separating regions to areas, facilitates the movement of people and goods across borders. In today's global climate, cooperation and connectivity with neighbours is a must if one is to maintain decorum. Therefore, India must change its views and adopt a more open stance when it comes to borders.

India and its relationship with its neighbours have always been marred by minor disputes, which harm bilateral ties. To counter this, short-term sacrifices need to be taken on the Indian front in order to achieve long-term goals; focusing on the provision of mutual, unilateral and preferential benefits to its neighbours in order to build their trust, and thereby tying them to India in the long run. In regard to crises and problems in neighbouring countries, India needs to first self-introspect before blaming neighbours for their 'internal problems'; as the root of crises in neighbouring countries can often be traced back to the other side of the border, as is also the case for domestic and regional policies.

While the influence of China in South Asia steadily rising over the past decade, India should neither overlook nor overreact to the growing influence. While China has been growing from strength to strength in conducting development projects in third world countries, India has been unable to complete a majority of its endeavours in third world countries. Focus therefore needs to be placed on actions such as project delivery instead of political manoeuvring to address the threat of China's increasing influence.

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