

How India's tilted Foreign Policy paved China's road to South Asia

This post by Tarushi Aswani examines India's relationship with fellow South Asian countries, and how recent foreign policy initiatives may have rendered the largest democracy in the world 'friendless' in its South Asian neighbourhood, paving the way further for China to make inroads into South Asia.

While Covid-19 might have rekindled SAARC members' relationships positively, it has certainly not stood the test of time when India needed her neighbours to stand for it against China. Late in the evening and night of 15 June 2020, tensions along the Indo-China border spiked to its highest since 1962, with over 20 troops being killed in a face-off in the [Galwan Valley](#) that saw a six-week long stand-off between India and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).

As both countries and their Foreign Ministries kept assuring its citizens and the global media that the situation was stable, there was hardly any strong-worded intervention from neighbouring countries with whom India shares amicable relations. While [Afghanistan expressed hope](#) that the two countries would resolve their differences through dialogue, it clearly did not support India which has been playing an active role in the Afghanistan peace process which was then underway — now, of course, toppled by the Taliban takeover (in August 2021). And even as India has committed [assistance worth Rs 45 billion](#) for implementation of development projects, and Rs 4 billion for transitional Trade Support Facility, in Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan (2018–2023), Bhutan itself has become a pressure point for India in this dispute as it (Bhutan) also faces a [cartographic conflict with China](#).

Nepal, oblivious to years of friendly relations, assistance and support from India, came out with an utterly neutral statement saying that India and China should resolve their 'mutual differences through peaceful means in favour of bilateral, regional & world peace and stability'. In addition, [Nepal's recent actions of redrawing](#) its map by incorporating three disputed areas with India has initiated a cultural claim that the Hindu god Ram was born in Nepal, and was thus Nepali. This followed tensions between India and Nepal which were rekindled after India inaugurated a road connecting India to China via [Lipulek](#), as part of India's Kailash–Mansarovar pilgrimage route, without consulting Nepal.

Bangladesh has also remained tight-lipped, even as [India donated 30,000 Covid-19 test kits](#) to her as part of its emergency medical assistance. Soon after [India banned imports from China](#), [China offered 97% tariff waivers](#) on 5,161 items which it trades with Bangladesh, which benefited Bangladesh greatly and was accepted by her, despite Bangladesh's historic ties with India going back to its Liberation War in 1971. While India considered import bans and bans on Apps as a possible economic blow to China, it in fact resulted in China furthering its businesses with Bangladesh, and signalled China's wide network of trade ties across South Asia, far beyond India. In early August 2020, China also agreed to fund a [US\\$ 1 billion project for the management of the Teesta river](#), which remains a contentious border issue between India and Bangladesh, once again demonstrating China's strategic stance against India in favour of another country.

This neutral and/or cold attitude displayed by India's neighbouring countries is alarming, perhaps arising from its recent haphazard demeanour in its immediate neighborhood. With Nepal, India imposed a [blockade](#) on the landlocked nation, leading to massive humanitarian and economic crises, and also expressed unhappiness with Nepal's newly-drafted [Constitution](#); in Sri Lanka, India was [asked to recall their intelligence \(RAW\) officials due to allegations](#) that they were working to ensure the victory of the anti-Rajapaksa (the current President, then preparing to fight the elections) coalition.

The President of The Maldives condoled the [death of 20 Indian soldiers](#) in Galwan Valley but remained conspicuously silent on the increased Chinese military activity in the region. While India's influence in the Arabian Sea archipelago may have grown, China holds extensive clout there as well. The economy of the Maldives is massively dependent on tourism, and China is their main source for tourists; their fishing industry too is heavily dependent on the Chinese market. Clearly, the power of China's economic heft has purchased the silence of India's allies at the cost of their ailing trade deficit.

Immediately after assuming office in May 2014, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi repackaged its earlier '[Look East Policy](#)' (of the 1990s) to the '[Act East Policy](#)', claiming that this would facilitate greater Indian reach in the Asia-Pacific region. It was portrayed as India's strategy to strengthen cooperation with Southeast Asian countries — since 2015 (and in 2016 and 2018 in particular), India and the ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) have executed joint maritime law enforcement patrols, military exercises and maritime military exercises with 16 countries. Infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are still underway (though India is yet to complete its share of the infrastructure). But all this seems to have lent India no advantage all in deeper integration with ASEAN where China is known to have been dominant for a long time.

Even at the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) meet in November 2019 in Bangkok, India's '[Act East Policy](#)' fell flat when it [withdrew from the regional trade deal after 7 years of negotiation](#). And it was interesting to note that although India holds bilateral trade agreements with Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and South Korea (alongside a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN), no Eastern nation tried to bring India back on board when she claimed that the trading terms were unsuitable to her interests. Pulling out of RCEP and lack of strategic trade links (laced with diplomatic alliances) has lost India another chance of integrating further into the political landscape of the East.

At the same time, India's foreign policy in its own neighbourhood has invited China further into South Asia. By constantly turning national attention towards rebuttal of Pakistan, the current Indian government has created grounds for China to increasingly step in as a regional supporter. Even after supporting the liberation of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) in 1971, India has failed to walk with Bangladesh and diplomatically appease it (noticed once again in China's current engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan). During both the Galwan and [Doklam standoff](#), no regional response challenged China's expansionist behaviour. Rather than amassing validation for its position against Pakistan or China from its neighbours whom India claims to support economically and politically, India's seeking diplomatic support from USA has cost it dearly as it is increasingly surrounded by crises.

Prime Minister Modi's refusal to attend the SAARC meet in Islamabad in 2016 as a sign of protest against [Pakistan's attack on Uri](#) earlier in the year (followed by Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan's withdrawal from the meet) meant that the Summit had to be called off. But in this instance too, while a potential confrontation at the regional level was avoided, there were no sanctions or trade embargoes against Pakistan, either by India or by its meekly supportive neighbours. And now that Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban, Pakistan yet again becomes a focal point in its future foreign policy with Afghanistan as [Indian envoys meet Taliban representatives in Qatar](#). As the world watches Afghanistan being draped in the Taliban flag, India is haunted by the effects of extremism that Kashmir might witness, putting Pakistan back in the South Asian game.

In instances where India has approached the US for support against Pakistan or China, it feels as though India undervalues its neighbours; simultaneously, when she seeks US help, no other superpower comes forth even if they diplomatically harbour Indian interests. This has made China an active stakeholder not only in South Asian regional trade but even in its geopolitics. By 'Acting West' (i.e., looking to the US for support) India has gradually but surely lost its dominance in South Asia to China through the goodwill of China's economic and trade power, letting China become an active stakeholder not only in the economy but also in influencing geopolitics in the region.

What India needs are diplomatic tactics that tie South Asian countries economically, politically and regionally to the extent that she is able to regain her regional dominance, and the friendly neighbouring countries seeking support of India and her strategic assistance, which in turn would lead them to support India unconditionally. India needs to effectively counterbalance Chinese incursion into the regional oceanic space and territories. Over the years, India has aided Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar and Nepal with sizeable financial packages; such support ought to redeem themselves when India needs their support. It is time for India to believe that a regionally strong stand against China is the only way to make a mark on the dragon's looming shadow in South Asia.

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