

India's growing neighbourhood dilemmas

The proverbial Achilles heel of Indian foreign policy continues to be its neighbourhood. Contemporary Indian foreign policy has an ambitious vision – from being the leader of the global South, to be an arbiter in global geopolitical contestations, to making a serious claim to be a pole in world politics. But South Asia is not only not keen to jump on the bandwagon of the India story, but it is also seemingly holding India back, albeit indirectly. Neighbourhoods are difficult for any major power, but contemporary India is faced with an exceptionally hard one, complicated by a rising superpower in its neighbourhood, for the first time in its history.

New Delhi's dilemmas, the causes

In general, there are three types of dilemmas that India faces in the neighbourhood. One, the rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia such as the one in the Maldives where the new government is effectively asking Indians to pack up and leave. While the Maldives is anti-India in an instrumental sense, a Khaleda Zia-led government in Dhaka, which goes to the elections early next year, could turn out to be ideologically anti-India. The second type of dilemma India faces in the neighbourhood is structural, resulting from Beijing's growing influence in South Asia.

Three things stand out. The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other Chinese projects. Beijing's assiduous outreach to South Asian states when the rest of the international community abandons or avoids them for normative or other reasons – as was the case with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar and crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India does too, but the overall impact of China's outreach is far higher than that of India primarily as a function of deeper pockets. Finally, China's desire to settle border disputes with its neighbours (minus India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.

The net result, or one that could potentially develop overtime, is somewhat alarming. If we do not take innovative measures, there is a good chance that we will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia. This may well be a case of overstating the point, but is to lay emphasis on a potential future scenario.

There are three broad sets of causes behind the dilemmas India faces in the neighbourhood. The first is the regional geopolitical architecture characterised by five overlapping elements.



Happyymon Jacob

teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and is the founder of the Council for Strategic and Defense Research

Contemporary South Asia is characterised by a diminishing presence of the United States, which, for a long time, was a geopolitical constant in the region. For New Delhi, Washington's presence in South Asia was not always advantageous, but its departure is definitely disadvantageous, in particular given how China has filled the power vacuum created by Washington's departure. The aggressive and stupendous rise of China has come as a 'geopolitical buffer', at least for now, for the smaller states in the region which have become adept at using the 'China card' in their foreign policy assertions. While our neighbours are keen to practise strategic autonomy with us, there is little appetite to do so vis-à-vis China.

Third, in one of the least interconnected regions in the world, and poor, it is natural that the inhabitants of the region will tilt towards a power with the ability to cater to their material needs. With India's ability to meet those needs being limited, China is that power. Fourth, India, for the most part, has had a normative and political approach towards the region, with the states in the region acquiescing, rebelling, and falling in line given the absence of choices. Beijing has changed that India-centric calculus by offering itself as the no-frills non-normative alternative. For the first time in modern South Asian history, the region is a 'norms-free-zone'.

Finally, for much of its independent existence, New Delhi enjoyed unrivalled primacy in the region. Today, the downside of being the resident power in South Asia – with all its attendant cultural, ethnic, refugee and other spillovers – is felt more sharply than being the primary power. China, on the other hand, is the region's non-resident power which benefits from the absence of complications – ethnic, linguistic, religious – arising out of being a resident power.

The second cause behind India's regional dilemma is related to its policy stance which exhibits a deep-seated status quo bias when it comes to dealing with the region's domestic politics and the multiplicity of actors/power centres therein. Dealing only with, for the most part, those in power in the regional capitals, elected or otherwise, is perhaps the right thing to do as well as less risky. However, such a one-track policy generates path-dependencies often alienating other centres of power or opposition leaders. Bangladesh is perhaps one such example.

Furthermore, India's dilemmas are also caused by two mistaken assumptions that we have long held. For one, there has, for some time, been a strong belief in India that South Asia minus

Pakistan would be amenable to Indian geopolitical reasoning which prompted an attempt to deal proactively with South Asia without Pakistan. However, in retrospect, one has to admit that this policy has not exactly panned out that way India imagined. The second (mistaken) assumption that New Delhi approached the neighbourhood with was that India's special relationship with the region rooted in culture, soft power, history and ethnicity would help the country deal with the neighbourhood better than those without intimate knowledge of the region, namely China. Has India's culture-connect with its neighbours indeed become a liability in the conduct of foreign policy towards them?

What can be done

To begin with, it is time India made a mental switch and acknowledged that South Asia and its balance of power have changed fundamentally. Old South Asia where India enjoyed primacy no longer exists. 'Southern Asia' which has pretty much replaced South Asia is a space where China has emerged as a serious contender for regional primacy. India's neighbours and periphery are China's too, even if we do not like it. Such a realistic and pragmatic framing would help India deal with the reality as it is rather than working with the mental frame of Indian primacy which is long gone.

Second, New Delhi must proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region. That is the only way to deal with the impending possibility of the region becoming Sino-centric.

Third, Indian diplomacy must be flexible enough to engage multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries. The art of diplomacy is not about hating the anti-India elements in the neighbourhood, but, instead, lessening their anti-India attitude. In a similar vein, dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power is bad policy.

Finally, here is the highlighting of an issue that has been spoken of *ad nauseum* – India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits. The glaring shortage of sufficient diplomats to implement the foreign policy of a country of 1.4 billion people will prove to be India's single most crucial challenge going forward. The more India's role in world affairs grows, the more the shortage of personnel will be felt by us and others. If the current state of affairs continues, there will be no one to show up with the Indian flag when opportunities beckon or crises emerge.

Most South Asian states are sceptical of India's primacy in their own ways

EVA STALIN

ivato
Go to Set

Problematizing periodisation in history

The all-too-familiar triad of historical periodisation – ancient, medieval, modern – now universal, has rather specific provincial and temporal origins. All societies evolved their own modes of dividing their history into periods: dynastic and regnal was the one prevalent in India, Iran, the Turko-Mongol regions, besides Europe. The creation of eras, such as Vikrami, Shaka, and Ilahi or the era of piety in Islam coinciding with the Prophet and the first four caliphs and the steady decline afterwards were among many other modes.

A European triad

The triad took birth in Europe around the 16th-17th centuries, first in the history of theology and steadily in society's history, finding its largely evolved form in 1688 at the hands of Cellarius, a German. This was the era when over the past few centuries, Europe had been creating its new self-image of rationality, science and progress, in short, modernity; to reinforce it, the inverse image of its immediate past, the medieval, was also created as one of irrationality, regression, and superstition which were constituted as the synonym of religion/religiosity – in short, the "Dark Age" from which Europe was progressing into Enlightenment.

With the expansion of Europe to the rest of the world during the 18th-20th centuries, besides its trade, arms and politics, its intellectual concepts also found entry into what were becoming its colonies. The indigenous notions of historical time and space were replaced by the European triad through what Jack Goody calls "The Theft of History" in an unequal power relationship. Thus, the Dark Age of Europe was transferred to the rest of the world from which Europe must rescue it by bringing to it Enlightenment through colonialism. A very "rational" legitimization of colonialism. The triad first came to India with a further distortion; whereas in Europe, its premise was the retreat of backwardness in the face of progress, James Mill introduced it as the Hindu,



Harbans Mukhia
taught history at
Jawaharlal Nehru
University

The transience of the notion of periodisation is likely to become more manifest as history goes on to explore other areas of research

the Muslim and the British periods underlining the legitimization of modern British rule which would rescue India from the dark age of medieval Muslim rule.

Periodisation is riven with problems. Being a human construct, rather than a ground reality, it is, by its nature, transient. Some signs of its transience have already appeared with several qualifications getting attached to it: Late Antiquity, Early Medieval, Late Medieval, and Early Modern. What shape the transience is going to take in the near or distant future is hard to predict. One wonders if our modern period will still be considered modern in the 22nd or the 23rd century. For sure, there is great regional variance in the application of the triad in the regions around the world with China taking its "medieval" into several centuries BCE and some such as India drawing the 18th century CE into it. Indeed, some powerful voices such as Jacques Le Goff's have questioned the very notion of dividing history into tranches.

On the other hand, the notion of periodisation is premised on the very tranches, once characterised as stages of development, each self-contained and autonomous in a sequence of succession, indicating irreversible change or progress from the preceding stage. Change and continuity are envisaged here as dichotomous. Are they really? Historians have got round to witnessing much continuity in what is seen as change and change in continuity. The idea of stages of development has quietly disappeared from their horizon.

The notion of modernity

At the heart of periodisation lies the notion of modernity, for the triad originated from the "modern" and travelled back to the medieval and the ancient; it thus created the image of history of a travel back from the present to the past instead of the other way round. It vested modernity with the attributes of what it saw as developments in Europe from the 17th-18th centuries onward, ones we have recounted above and much else besides,

from where the rest of the world was obliged to emulate them mostly by force. The modern world that we inhabit was thus essentially the West's creation. This perception has held unquestioned sway for over a couple of centuries everywhere. It is only in the past three or four decades that the view has come under sharp scrutiny in the West as elsewhere. Today, it has become hard to speak of modernity in the singular; "modernities" has far greater space in the academic discourse. Modernity that had for long been accepted as an objective reality "out there" in Chris Bayly's words has become subjective in each variant context.

Implied in this transformation is the premise that the modern world that we inhabit and its "modernity" are not the gift of any one region of the globe and any single segment of humanity nor confined to a given time bracket but rather the cumulative outcome of contributions of all societies and civilisations throughout the period of history known to us. Whether in terms of material objects such as crops, metals or technologies or ideas and concepts such as philosophies, sciences, religions, the fine arts, literature, economic systems, and state systems, all civilisations have at different times added to humanity's multi-faceted capital to give us the world we live in.

This calls for the treatment of history as a universal entity of which regions form constituents – a call made several times by historians in the past. It also implies history to be a continual process rather than an aggregate of disparate tranches.

The transience of the notion of periodisation is likely to become increasingly manifest as history embarks on exploring areas of research such as climate, and planetary history, and even what is increasingly being questioned as pre-history and to an extent archaeology. These are far less susceptible to getting tied up in temporal boxes than the history that is still the predominant norm. The question also is this: how long will this remain the predominant norm?

EVA STALIN