



Alternative Regional Strategy for India: A Charm Offensive to Win the Hearts and Minds

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Given the social inequalities and political instability, India is likely to face a neighbourhood, which is either failing or with substantial ungovernable spaces in its backyard. Though India is not involved in the internal problems in its neighbourhood, the possibility that regimes that emerge out of the instability blaming India, remains high. Even now, anti-Indian sentiments seem to have become an ideology that could unite the different groups within, and even provide some legitimacy to unpopular regimes.

In South Asia, according to the latest annual report on the Failed States Index (2010), published by the Fund for Peace, except for India, Bhutan and Maldives, other countries figure highly on the list of potential failed states. While Pakistan and Afghanistan figure amongst the top ten, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka figure in the top 30 among a list of 177 countries.

Clearly, India is in the midst of a region, with states surrounding it facing state failure. India is, in fact, surrounded by a ring of fire. What can New Delhi do about this? How can India ensure, that instability in its neighbourhood, does not spill into its own borders? How can India protect its own territory from instability, and secure its interests in the region? Recently, the Brookings Institution has undertaken a study, on how the US could manage global insecurity and protect its interests. India should also look into, how it could manage the regional insecurity in South Asia and protect its own interests.

I THE RING OF FIRE

If India's neighbourhood is troubled today, the future is likely to be even more troublesome. Failure of the State and its delivery mechanisms is likely to make the region conflict prone and violent. Political Institutions, like Parliament, legal institutions and the bureaucracy face serious problems of credibility. The recent reports of Transparency International on the performance of these institutions highlight the increasing problems of governance in India's

neighbourhood.

India's neighbourhood has serious ethnic or provincial fault lines, which results in their blaming "foreign hand" (read India) for their internal problems. Violence in Karachi, suicide terrorism in Pakistan, Baloch insurgency and problems in sharing the Indus Waters between its four provinces – always result in India being blamed for mischief. The same is true of Nepal and Sri Lanka; failure of nation building processes, due to faulty policies adopted by successive governments and regimes, are routinely blamed on India. Ironically, both the Maoists and non-Maoist political groups in Nepal blame New Delhi for the domestic instability.

In Sri Lanka, both the Sinhalese and Tamils are apprehensive regarding the role played by New Delhi; while the Sri Lankan Tamils feel, that they have been "backstabbed" in not being supported by New Delhi, the Sinhalese fear that New Delhi is secretly supporting the Tamils. Bangladesh is a classic example of how anti-Indian sentiments have become a national pastime, with Bangladeshi believing that India cannot and will never do anything positive vis-a-vis Dhaka. Worse, even if the regimes take any decisions on merits, they will be suspected of being either pro-Indian or worse, an Indian stooge. This hardening of public sentiment, prevents governments in Dhaka from pursuing any policy that is even remotely perceived as being pro-Indian.

In short, this is the regional problematique which India is facing today and is likely to face in the foreseeable future. Worse, India is likely to face not merely a hostile neighbourhood, but also a with a serious democratic deficit and increasing influence of the radical groups. Besides India is also likely to deal with an increasing governance deficit in its borders.

These two deficits – democratic and governance, along with ethnic fault lines and the failure of political institutions is likely to result in their security forces, especially the armed forces and the intelligence organisations playing an important role. With the polity divided, the armed forces remain

the only monolithic organisation in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Whenever the political parties and institutions fail to deliver, leading to a crisis situation, people automatically look to the security forces for providing an alternative. The ruling elite have also been attempting to gain more power, leading to the democratically elected leadership exhibiting signs of dictatorship. Hence India is likely to face an unstable neighbourhood, with a predominantly anti-Indian attitude.

II

A REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR INDIA: EXPLORING OPTIONS

What are India's options? What can India do about, of the security the region? The geo-strategic reality is, India cannot escape from its neighbourhood. For that matter, no country in this world has the luxury of choosing its neighbours.

Option 1: Look Inwards, Isolate and Quarantine:

India seems to have pursued this strategy; it has built a long fence against Pakistan and Bangladesh. But, the harsh truth is, that these fences cannot prevent the movement of either militants or migrants across borders. In fact, ranging from the Great Wall of China to the technologically monitored US-Mexican border, there is no physical barrier in history that has successfully prevented the movement of people.

Isolating itself through border fencing has neither prevented the illegal movement of people nor the goods. Clearly, an isolationist strategy – trying to insulate India from its neighbourhood will not work. India will have to work with its neighbours to secure the region and protect its own interests. While, there is a serious problem across the border, it is time, to look inwards also to see whether India could improve the situation. Unfortunately, New Delhi (and the rest of India,) has been obsessed with Pakistan, but has overlooked its smaller neighbours; It has spent over a billion dollars in Afghanistan. How much has it spent in its other neighbours?

Option 2: Look Outwards and Engage the Neighbours:

India could pursue an engagement strategy, which could further be divided into either a confrontational strategy to weaken its

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neighbourhood or a positive engagement, by using a charm offensive to win hearts and minds (WHAM).

Will a confrontational strategy serve India's interests? There have been several criticisms within Pakistan, blaming India for their ethnic problems in Balochistan and Sindh. In fact, a section even blames India for supporting the Taliban against Pakistan's interests, in the FATA and Khyber Paktunkwa. There have been reports, including several statements by their Interior Minister that India has instigated the multiple suicide attacks carried out by the Taliban!

A section within India also suggest that India should go ahead and actively assist the Balochi insurgents and Sindh nationalists to break up Pakistan. A similar strategy should be pursued in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and even Nepal, to support groups, with the objective of breaking them up. However, this strategy is unlikely to benefit India over the longer run. India did assist the breaking up of Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh; however, this has not stabilized the situation. In fact, Bangladesh is equally hostile towards India, and many infrastructural projects to link Northeast India and Southeast Asia are being held hostage to Bangladesh's reluctance to provide transit facilities to India.

III

PLAN B:

A CHARM OFFENSIVE TO WIN THE HEARTS AND MINDS IN SOUTH ASIA

There are two sets of strategies that India will have to pursue to establish a stable neighbourhood. First, measures that India should pursue, that would help it to secure its neighbourhood; and second, internal measures, that India should pursue to strengthen domestic actors, decentralising some powers and reworking certain policies.

The following questions need to be addressed, or at least debated, to frame a regional strategy to secure India's interests vis-a-vis its immediate neighbours:

How to create and sustain a pro-Indian constituency in the neighbourhood?

One of the biggest problems that India faces in its neighbourhood is the public hostility vis-a-vis New Delhi. Even, if India wants to make a positive contribution in its neighbourhood, it is perceived with suspicion. In fact, there is a powerful anti-Indian lobby, in almost India's entire neighbourhood, with Bhutan and Maldives being perhaps the exceptions.

Is there a political hostility amongst the leading political parties, leading to creating an anti-Indian opinion amongst the common people, or, is there

an anti-Indian public sentiment in India's neighbourhood, which is reflected and encashed by the political parties and other organisations?

The primary issue before India is, how to create a pro-Indian constituency? More importantly, how to sustain it? A cursory examination will reveal that, besides the political parties, there are other actors, shaping public opinion (for or against India), which includes the media, think tanks/research organisations, and academic institutions. While the political parties try to utilize the prevailing public sentiment, the other three actors shape public opinion. Hence, if India has to address the anti-Indian streak amongst the political parties, it will have to create a positive impact among those other actors who mould the public opinion.

Besides these three actors – media, think tanks/research organisations, and academic institutions – business groups and religious organisations also play a role in creating and sustaining anti-Indian sentiments. While India may not be able to address each and every group/actor, strategies could be evolved towards influencing the first three actors, to win their hearts and minds, and create a constituency favourable to India.

How could India use its Soft Power to influence its neighbourhood?

A cursory look at the Chinese image in India's neighbourhood will reveal the stark differences between Beijing and New Delhi. Unfortunately, except for Bhutan and to an extent the Maldives, India does not have many friends in the other countries of South Asia. On the contrary, China is seen as a saviour and beneficial power. Irrespective of its true relationship – military and economic – China has been hugely successful in projecting its soft power. How has China managed to win hearts and minds? Can New Delhi learn from Beijing?

India's Bollywood is generally seen as a great entertainment industry, immensely popular, and with a huge reach in India's neighbourhood. Besides Indian educational institutions – from the JNUs, to the IITs, including the numerous business schools, are an inspiration in these countries. So are the medical facilities available in India. While, numerous other factors, constitute India's soft power, to WHAM in the region,, these should include Indian democracy, secular culture and so on, but the former three aspects of educational and technical institutions and medical facilities would provide a good beginning.

How to integrate the regional economies into India?

It is extremely unfortunate, to notice that SAARC has become the most ineffective regional organisation. Instead of blaming Pakistan and

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other countries for the problems of SAARC, India needs to pursue alternative strategies to integrate the economies of the region.

A cursory analysis of India's economic strategy vis-a-vis Southeast Asia and India's neighbourhood will reveal the lack of coordination between the Ministries in India in terms of reaching out to the neighbourhood. Ideally, there should be a single window clearance, instead of different Ministries being involved in the decision making process; the latter makes India's foreign relations seem anarchic, from the neighbourhood's perspective.

However, the real problem here seems to lie in convincing the neighbours, that it is in their economic interests to work closely with India. Unfortunately, political perceptions spill over into economic decision making; the best example is the case of Bangladesh and the issue of transit facilities to India. Perhaps, it would be useful to find alternate ways, to convince the neighbours of what serves their own best interests; one such strategy could be to use India's sub-regions as the base.

How to make India's sub-regions as the engines of regional growth?

India could learn from China on how to utilize its peripheries as centers of sub-regional growth along our borders. In China, cities like Kashgar, Kunming and Chengdu – the capitals of Xinjiang, Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, are world class cities. More than the growth in urban centers of these provinces, what is amazing, is the policy space – domestic and foreign, that these regions enjoy vis-à-vis Beijing.

Three primary reasons could be identified for this transformation. First, a deliberate policy by Beijing, with a long term vision, backed by adequate investment at the ground level. Beijing has over the years made huge investments in its provincial cities, with the object of making them, the engines of provincial growth. Second, Beijing has also allowed these provinces to develop as centres of regional growth. In terms of economic investment and foreign policy, the provinces have been given the space to pursue what is in their best interests, as long as they do not affect the overall policy of Beijing. Thereby, the provinces,

could attract foreign direct investment and even pursue independent strategies vis-à-vis their neighbouring regions outside China.

For example, both Sichuan and Yunnan were given a greater degree of freedom to work with the countries of Southeast Asia. Today, the Chinese foreign policy vis-à-vis Myanmar and the Mekong region, are being pursued by these two provinces. Third, and more importantly, the provinces grabbed the opportunity both vis-à-vis Beijing and the neighbouring regions. Both Yunnan and Sichuan have been extremely successful in improving their infrastructure, attracting foreign direct investment, and more importantly, working with Myanmar and the Mekong region. The Kunming initiative, for example, was the brainchild of Yunnan province, and Sichuan wants to improve its relations with Myanmar, Bangladesh and India's Northeast. Not only in terms of infrastructure and foreign policy, but also in terms of intellectual investment, these provinces have gone far ahead. Their Universities have specialized centers to study South and South East Asia, economic interactions, and the Silk Route. The Sichuan University, also has a programme on Pakistan, which none of the Indian Universities have!

J&K, India's Northeast and South India should become the engines of regional growth vis-a-vis Xinjiang and Tibet, Bangladesh and Southeast Asia, and Sri Lanka and Maldives respectively. Unfortunately, the intellectual investments in these regions has been minimal, resulting in low returns in terms of contribution to India's foreign policy.

How to make use of Media, Think Tanks and Research institutions as Un-official Ambassadors to promote India's External Relations in the Neighbourhood?

India has a strong media and well established think tanks and research institutions. Unfortunately, their inputs into the Indian foreign policy making or becoming un-official ambassadors of India's foreign policy are minimal, because the establishment is reluctant to use their potential.

If the media in India's neighbourhood is avowedly anti-Indian, the media in India, especially the electronic media, is unnecessarily jingoistic. Remember the case of Verinder Sehwag, missing a century by one run, in a one day match held in Dambulla, Sri Lanka in August 2010? True, the Sri Lankan player bowled a no ball that resulted in Sehwag missing the century but the Indian media went berserk in accusing Sri Lanka of complicity. The Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi was asked to explain the situation by one of the leading TV channels, on what was essentially a sporting event, played in an un-sportsmanlike manner by a single player. While the initial reaction in the Sri Lankan media was critical of its own conduct, the subsequent India media campaign turned public sentiment within Sri

Lanka to become defensive and anti-Indian.

Besides the Indian media, think tanks and research institutions could also play a major role in building the relationship, thereby creating a positive environment. Unfortunately, there is not enough funding support to these organisations to build a network, and thereby create a community of South Asian scholarship that would think beyond national boundaries. Worse, the visa procedures of India are restrictive; hence, the academic community in India's neighbourhood finds it a nightmare to get a visa to enter India. The Indian High Commissions in the neighbourhood are seen as highly bureaucratic, inefficient and rude.

In most cases, the opinion makers in the media – both print and electronic, in India's neighbourhood, are the real image destroyers of India, through their columns in news papers and magazines, and interviews in TV channels. In most cases, the hard reality is that their interaction and understanding of India is through their experience in the Indian embassies. This is where, by better interactions and increased communications; Indian think tanks could build a network among the academic community.

How to use the NDMA to alleviate the pain of disasters in our neighbourhood?

Culturally and psychologically, the neighbourhood is similar in terms of perceiving those who help them, when help is most needed. Especially, in a disaster situation, when there is little possibility of local governments or the international community providing timely assistance.

Physically and geographically, India's neighbourhood faces natural disasters periodically; from tsunami, floods, earthquakes and cyclones. Unfortunately, the disaster management authorities in our neighbourhood are either dysfunctional or absent. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in India is the largest and best prepared compared to similar organisations in the region. While the NDMA has the mandate to address "national" disasters, it could become an excellent foreign policy tool, at the regional level to WHAM in our neighbourhood.

These questions need to be debated, in re-working and re-framing New Delhi's regional strategy to achieve its larger national interests and secure its objectives in the neighbourhood.



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