

Analysis of India's 'Neighbourhood First' Policy: Perspectives from Nepal and Maldives

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Abstract

For any state that has the potential and aspirations to be a considerable power force in the international framework of states, its neighbourhood and region is of utmost importance. If the states in the immediate and extended neighbourhood enjoy more or less cordial relations with the state, are strongly interconnected on multiple levels, and are influenced by the state's actions in domains of geopolitical importance, the state can be considered a regional power, increasing its leverage on the international stage. After the end of Cold War, the world has gradually shifted towards a seemingly multipolar but definitely more volatile world order, and regional powers have been gaining more traction since then. India, through its natural geospatial positionality and other crucial factors of population size, geographic size, principles, ideologies, economy, military capacity etc., aspires, and succeeds to an extent, to be the regional power. However, India's actions and relations [bilateral and multilateral] with its neighbours, their response and mutual perceptions shape this aspiration to a great extent, and also makes it more dynamic and uncertain. Other vital facets such as historical relations, changes in leadership and ideology of nations and presence of extra-regional powers further influence these equations. Since its independence, India has been fairly consistent in its outlook towards the neighbourhood, reflected in its foreign policy. Changes at the leadership level have changed the ways in which issues are addressed, but the broader outlook has remained consistent. The past decade specifically, has seen the gradual moulding of a more assertive, aggressive, 'new normal' foreign policy, which reflects in India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy as well. India realises, acknowledges and accepts its roles and responsibilities in the region, and has undertaken actions accordingly. However, India's relations with some of its neighbours have undergone volatile changes over the past several years, complicating ties. Whether it is a country like Pakistan with traditional turbulent ties and fragile peace, or whether it is nations like Nepal and Maldives with whom India enjoys historical bonhomie, recent years have experienced unfavourable changes which are detrimental to Indian interests as well as its image

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on the regional and international level. Constantly changing geopolitical calibrations through the presence of countries like China, the US and Russia further complicates responses. This paper seeks to trace India's Neighbourhood First Policy over the years, responses by other states to India's actions according to changing dynamics and leadership and changing relations due to presence of extra-regional powers with a focus on the case studies of Nepal and Maldives.

Keywords: Neighbourhood First, India-Nepal ties, India-Maldives relations, regional power, South Asia, foreign policy, extra-regional power

Introduction

India's immediate neighbourhood consists of Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Afghanistan, out of which it shares territorial borders with seven nations. Since India assumes a role of leadership in the region by virtue of its physical and spatial factors, it is perceived as a 'big brother' or a 'big friendly giant' by its neighbours. It is a precarious position to be in, as its actions in the region can be shaped in either positive or negative narratives, and the leadership role can be easily repackaged as one of aspiring regional hegemony. Advice and guidance given in goodwill can be perceived as interference and domination, and assistance can be looked upon as a tool for increasing leverage and dependency. Due to India's position and perception, the neighbours hold a touch of apprehension towards its actions. Therefore, India needs to clearly and diplomatically express its ideology, opinions and concerns regarding its neighbours to allay their fears and apprehension.

The nature of interactions with neighbours depend largely on the actual power the state possesses and its usage and the perception of that power and the actions in accordance by other states. The power of a state can be measured in terms of quantifiable (population, economy, military capability, technological abilities) and intangible elements (leadership, ideology) (Bhasin, 2008, p. 73). Since India has had a distinct tradition and strong measure of both elements, it creates a power differential with other nations in the region, shaping their perception and response towards India and ascertaining India's roles and responsibilities as a regional power. In case of such a singular power force in the region, there is quite a thin line in its behaviour leaning towards leadership or hegemony. A nation which assumes a leadership

role undertakes actions that are characterised by a will for positive development of the region as a whole, taking steps to boost the socio-economic and political institutions of the region, projecting and representing the region's common interests on a global scale and providing a fillip to strengthened bilateral and multilateral relations (Bhasin, 2008, p. 76). Whereas, a hegemonic state furthers its individual interests to the detriment of others, exhibits military aggression and dominates and dictates the collective's rules and arrangements to a certain extent (Bhasin, 2008, p.76). Hence, India needs to tread carefully with its foreign policy in the neighbourhood to shape its perception as a leader and not a hegemon in the region in specific and globally in general.

Hypothesis

With the dynamics of the region fluctuating constantly, India's foreign policy in the neighbourhood requires restructuring on bilateral and multilateral levels to improve its relations with its neighbours and consolidate its position as a regional power.

Research Methodology

The author has focused on qualitative and descriptive research with an engagement with secondary research sources.

Research Problems

During analysis, the author encountered the following research problems:

- A comprehensive take on India's foreign policy evolution on bilateral and multilateral levels with case studies to substantiate the fluctuations in its image of a regional power is lacking.
- Case studies which take into account India's territorial neighbour (Nepal) as well as maritime neighbour (Maldives), both joined by the similarity of sharing historical ties with India.

Narration on Core topic

India emerged as an independent country in a turbulent neighbourhood with relatively lower levels of development. As the situation stabilised and India ascended the structural hierarchy of the South Asian region, the onus came on its head to smoothen bilateral relations and multilateral institutions of the region. This responsibility is a double-edged sword as the

neighbouring nations expect India to assume leadership in developing strong multilateral economic and political frameworks and greater cohesion in the region, but still harbour fear and apprehend India's actions as hegemonic aspirations. India, conscious of its positionality and the importance of having a favourable neighbourhood for individual and collective development, has had the neighbourhood on priority in its foreign policy since its inception. While having 'neighbourhood first' policy on priority, a historical dilemma persists in the choice of bilateral or multilateral approach. India prefers consolidating bilateral relations with neighbours as it fears other states would exert unreasonable collective leverage on it in multilateral forums; whereas, the smaller states in the region push for multilateral dialogue as they fear India would exploit their weaker bargaining capacities in bilateral communication channels (Bhasin, 2008, p. 79). Only a combination of both approaches would ensure a successful 'neighbourhood first' policy as well as India's strengthened position as a regional power exhibited through its earnestness for regional development by reinforcing collective institutions.

India's Neighbourhood First policy

India's neighbourhood policy has been closely dictated by its own history of strategic warfare in the ancient times as well as taking into consideration the deeply interlinked economic, socio-cultural, political and strategic ties that it enjoys with its neighbours in the immediate vicinity. These facets enhance interdependence across the region, and foreign policy action by any individual nation causes reverberations in all other countries, more so when the actor is India. India's neighbourhood policy continues to be influenced by historic principles such as wisdom from *Kautilya's Artha Shastra*, Indira Doctrine and Gujral Doctrine of the initial decades, but has undergone modifications according to changes at the leadership level along the decades and, requires restructuring to suit the current regional and global upheavals. While India maintains its focus on resolving bilateral issues, it has also been foundational to the genesis of regional frameworks like SAARC, BIMSTEC and BBIN. Regional structures become redundant if bilateral relations between any two countries which are part of the structure take a hit, as experienced by standstills in the aforementioned forums. Hence, India's focus on improving bilateral relations remains justified. However, equal importance should be accorded to bilateral and multilateral spheres, and India should take an initiative in rebuilding robust regional substructures.

The Decades till the 2000s

India's independence came at a critical period of the world order polarised by the Cold War. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, steered and established the two clearest facets of India's foreign policy that hold relevance even in the current times – the principle of nonalignment and *Panchsheel* principles (Sahoo, 2016, p. 70). These policies elucidated India's stance and outlook on the regional and international level. Through nonalignment, India spoke for all developing, least developed and newly decolonised nations of Asia and Africa to have their independent space in the world order without succumbing to the pressures of the European powers. Through *Panchasheel*, India consolidated the basic tenets of its bilateral relations with any country, namely, respect, non-interference, non-aggression, equality and cooperation and peaceful coexistence. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi furthered these principled policies, but the 'Indira Doctrine' in the neighbourhood policy was looked upon as India's attempts to establish hegemonic authority in the region, and exhibited India's paternalistic, 'big brother' attitude, significantly damaging India's image regionally as well as internationally. India's actions in the liberation movement of Bangladesh (1971), the Sri Lankan crisis (1987) and the attempted coup in Maldives (1988) were the string of events coming under Indira Doctrine that are perceived as undermining India's perception in the neighbours, raising hackles (Roy, 2015, p. 1026). In the late 90s emerged the 'Gujral Doctrine' under the leadership of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral. It targeted economic development of the smaller nations, resolving collective regional issues and giving a fillip to domains of technology, intelligence sharing, mobility of ideas and people (Sahoo, 2016, p. 72). This Doctrine was inherently based on the ideology that India would always harbour the tendency to 'give', and not expect any reciprocity from the other countries in the neighbourhood. However, this policy had a negative projection, as the other nations perceived it as a means to increase the power differential and the domineering attitude of India. During Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure, neighbourhood policy was dominated by trying to normalise ties with Pakistan through 'bus diplomacy' (using transport infrastructure to facilitate diplomacy). In this period, India also undertook nuclear tests, which played a critical role in shaping the region's outlook towards it. Acquiring nuclear weapons was largely perceived as attempts to gain regional hegemony.

Due to volatile regional politics, India's efforts to reconstruct peaceful and mutually beneficial bilateral relations in this era remained largely focused on singular countries at a certain time

period, to the neglect of others. Instances like the three wars with Pakistan and China, political instability in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh are testimony to this.

The Modi era

After Narendra Modi assumed Prime Ministership of the nation, there has been a furtherance of the principles that have influence India's neighbourhood policy historically, but a distinct change in strategies and shaping the outlook. The focus still remains on bilateral ties, but multilateral institutions have also been provided a fillip. The Modi government has made many statements through its actions, the initial ones being inviting SAARC (immediate neighbourhood) and BIMSTEC (extended neighbourhood) leaders to the first and second oath taking ceremonies respectively and making maiden foreign visits to the nations in the neighbourhood (Abhijeet, 2020, p. 86). These actions portray India's commitment to its neighbourhood and restructure communication channels that have halted or become redundant over the years. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach or a consolidated policy, the government is trying to build a customised needs-based model, based on the unique issues between India and each neighbouring state and for multilateral engagements as well. Accordingly, Pakistan and China, Bhutan and Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka, receive differential treatment. While trying to resurrect forums like SAARC, Indian leadership has aimed to amplify economic development and the resolution of common regional issues such as territorial borders, ethnic terrorism, water sharing, trade and security. Despite these successes, consistent inroads by extra-regional powers and increase in the number of irritants in bilateral relations due to changes at the leadership level are the challenges Indian foreign policy has to tackle on its way forward. China's increasing engagement in the region shapes the Indian response to the greatest degree. Since independence, India has been clear in its abhorrence of the presence of any foreign power in its sphere of influence as detrimental to its strategic and national interests (Saho, 2016, p. 71). China's multifarious policies ranging from the 'String of Pearls' strategy, maritime Silk Road, debt policies, to the Belt and Road Initiative aim at political, strategic, infrastructural and soft power expansion in the region, spurring India into building similar models to cater to the needs of the neighbouring states. Similarly, increasing Russian and American engagement with Pakistan, for long-term access and pathway for power hold in Central Asia and the Middle East remains a cause of concern for India.

Guests in the Neighbourhood

India's neighbourhood is rife with vulnerable and politically unstable nations, opening up a playground for countries from the region and beyond that have vested interests in the region to increase their scope and intensity of actions to fulfill those interests. The US, focused on containing China, keeping a friendly but also wary eye on India, and maintaining a measured relation with Pakistan to secure a pathway to Iran, engages bilaterally more than with South Asia as a region. Closer home, Russia and China have their own reasons for engagement. Russia, although wrapped in its own war in Europe (Russia-Ukraine War, 2022), has a sustained weapons relationship and historical bonhomie with India, but has an increasing interest in Pakistan as well, thus having the potential to recalibrate regional perceptions. China, ever interested in deepening its regional footprint and curtailing India's supposed regional leadership, undertakes consistent multi-dimensional efforts towards increasing the dependence and goodwill of India's neighbours on itself. Considering these external ramifications, and India's own foreign policy outlook and responses in recent years, a recalibrated Neighbourhood Policy pivot is highly essential.

Since China is not a geographic part of South Asia, but needs to further its vested interests in the region, it uses economic and strategic tools more than direct use of hard power to assert its influence in the region (with the exception of land skirmishes with India at the LAC). China's foreign policy outlook towards South Asia, thus, becomes more of economic, infrastructural and soft power advances rather than territorial or hard power efforts. Geoeconomics and soft power diplomacy (loans and grants for infrastructure mega-projects, trade relations, military agreements (weaponry supply and aid), aid packages) as a tool for strategic engagement and enhancing regional influence. Although extensively commercial and financial in the form of project finance and technological and logistical support, China's engagement in South Asia is also expanding to political, educational, military and civil society domains, with an attempt to create narratives of China's importance in the region and the global order, signalling a multi-dimensional effort.

Another concerning element of China's meddling in India's neighbourhood is its increasing military collusion with Pakistan. The recent deadly Pahalgam Terrorist Attack 2025 in India laid bare the deepening military and diplomatic ties between China and Pakistan. Not only did China diplomatically stay firm with Pakistan and mirror its narratives on a larger level during the entire saga, but advanced Chinese-origin systems were visibly employed by Pakistan in the

military skirmishes that followed after the terror attack. Pakistan deployed Chinese J-10C fighters armed with PL-15 missiles and HQ-9 air defence systems, taking up an emboldened military approach against India (Kantha, 2025). This battlefield collusion between China and Pakistan undermines India's credibility in the region, and stands as a double reinforced security challenge for India.

Keeping in mind China's multifaceted forays in South Asian nations, it'll bode well for India to consider the fact that although its smaller neighbours sometimes may not have a choice but to cooperate with their bigger counterparts, they sometimes may consciously opt to leverage their geostrategic and regional importance to keep the bigger powers in check. They are not always passive receivers, and to pursue our Neighbourhood First Policy further would require holistic, ground-level assessments of India's perceptions and acceptance of India's cooperation/developmental initiatives in their civil society and polity.

Additionally, how the US engages with Pakistan poses significant quagmires for India as a strategic ally of the US. The US's response to the recent Pahalgam Terror Attack 2025 in India exposed how its actions reflect its larger, long-term strategic interests in the region rather than standing firm with India against terrorism. Despite official denials by India, the US's insistence of a mediation between the two nuclear states undermines India's autonomy and agency in shaping narratives in a larger setting, as well as dilutes its 'new normal' military stance against state-funded terrorism. Weeks after the attack, Pakistan's Army Chief 'Field Marshall' Asim Munir enjoyed a private lunch at the White House, clearly reflecting the US's engagement with Pakistan for keeping an eye on Iran. America's involvement in the recent Iran-Israel conflict cemented its role in military action against Iran. America's (along with its staunch ally, Israel's) ambitions for curtailing Iran project its nuclear anxieties in the Middle East. Conflict spillovers of South Asia, Central Asia or Middle East all carry threats of a nuclear Third World War, spurring the US sustain its presence in all three regions.

Similarly, ever-growing Russia-China nexus as a potential counter to the US and its allies is also reflected in new geopolitical alliances. Pakistan's geostrategic position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East reaps for it the interest of all major powers like China, the US, and now, increasingly, Russia - a historical friend of India, as well. Pakistan-Russia Trade and Investment Forum hosted its inaugural event in 2024, establishing a new channel in Pakistan-Russia relations in the domains of trade, agriculture and information technology (Aatif, 2025). Energy cooperation also forms a large part of this synergy.

It is to be understood that countries with vested interests in the region and Pakistan, with its key geographic position, will work constructively to hinder India's regional aspirations.

Nepal: A kingdom in the Himalayan lap

Long before being separated by political boundaries, India and Nepal were a continuous society sharing deep historical, cultural, ethnic and strategic relations. Therefore, even if there exist two separate countries now, the actions of each deeply affect the other. The geospatial importance of the Himalayan range makes Nepal a crucial factor in India's security, and consequently, India harbours a deep interest in ensuring political stability in Nepal and keeping the physical barrier impenetrable. In accordance, India furthered peace and trade treaties with Nepal in 1950 and 1960 (Saroja, 2021, p. 127). Since strategic and economic interests are deeply intertwined, India has invested heavily in Nepal. On the political level, India has been a witness to the phased political transition from monarchy to democracy, and a supporter and assistance provider in all scenarios. Even though democracy was the preferred model of political ruling for India, it did not impose its ideology on Nepal, and helped in maintaining the monarchic reign in the initial decades to ensure political stability (Saroja, 2021, p. 130). The change in leadership (from King Mahindra to King Birendra) brought about some irritants, as the Indian government and the Nepali monarchy and some sections of the Nepalese population did not see eye to eye for that time period, leading to two important developments: India's increasing support for democracy in Nepal, and Nepal's growing closeness to China (Saroja, 2021, p. 130). Eventually, tensions were resolved, but Nepal's strategy of inviting the presence of an extra-regional power in the neighbour as a counter to Indian influence persisted from then on in differential degrees. Water sharing and water security is also a geospatially sensitive issue. In Indo-Nepal ties that shapes India's perception in Nepal, as most rivers flowing through India originate in Nepal, making it a vital national interest. Minor inconsistencies in relations persisted, but ties remained cordial till 2015, wherein internal political developments in Nepal, Indian responses and China's increasing role in the situation resulted in considerable setbacks in Indo-Nepal ties.

In 2015, India imposed a blockade on supplies transported to Nepal in response to the structure of the new Nepali constitution, which seemingly did not take into consideration the interests of an ethnic minority in Nepal, the Madhesis (Khobragade, 2016, p. 150). The Madhesis have ethnic proximity to the Indian population residing in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, states bordering Nepal; and also enjoy marriage relations. India criticised Nepal's revised constitution, and sent

a list of seven provisions for amendment. The criticism and the subsequent blockade which provided a stimulus to Madhesi agitations leading to instability in Nepal is perceived a diplomatic miscalculation on India's part. This move neither satisfied India's intentions nor improved the situation in Nepal, but adversely gave rise to detrimental consequences such as rise of anti-India sentiments in the Nepali governance and population and an opportunity for Chinese expansion in the Himalayan state. Numerous scholars have assessed these developments through different vantage points. A narrative suggests that Nepal's political authority makes India a convenient scapegoat to divert the population's attention from internal political and developmental issues (Khobragade, 2016, p. 150). Another narrative points out to the fact that such a move from India is perceived as increased interference, causing Nepal to deviate naturally to the next power magnate (China) as a counter to India (Shah, 2023). Regardless of the narratives, the end outcome remains constant: India's image and perception in the region being harmed, and smaller neighbours using China as a leverage against India in the South Asian region. Following the abrogation of Article 370, the inclusion of disputed territories between India and Nepal in India's official map furthered the grievances and mistrust harboured by Nepal (Saroha, 2021, p. 133). Governance under the leadership of Prime Ministers Pushpa Kamal Dahal and K.P. Sharma Oli has exhibited an inclination to take more strategic risks and increase Nepal's bargaining power with regard to India and China.

The Dragon Breathing Down on Nepal's Neck

China's biggest tool of wielding influence in South Asian nations has been infrastructure diplomacy - loan financing for infrastructure rail, road and port mega-projects - so far. For eg., China's loans to the Maldives are believed to be between a staggering \$1.1 billion and \$1.4 billion. Through economic overtures, China seeks pathways to create civil society goodwill and political and security influence as well (Pal, 2021). Nepal's geostrategic significance is enhanced as it borders the Tibetan Autonomous Region. To reduce its logistical and trade dependence on India, Nepal has been consistently increasing its use of Chinese facilities.

The Belt and Road Initiative was initiated in Nepal in 2017. A framework agreement in December 2024 has heralded 10 multiple BRI projects in Nepal after facing significant delays initially. These projects comprise roads, bridges, university and museum buildings and rail tracks. However, BRI is yet to materialise successfully in Nepal, with no project completed as of now. This does, however, mark China's concerted effort in infrastructure diplomacy in Nepal. Additionally, Nepal-China relationship has also been bolstered by environmental

cooperation and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, institutional partnerships, media cooperation, public outreach and language courses, a 'Health Silk Road' vision since the Covid-19 pandemic, etc (Pal, 2021).

The Approach Ahead

India's special relations with Nepal require foreign policy structuring unique to the Himalayan state. Diplomatic miscalculations on India's part eventually make space for China to make inroads in the region, undermining India's position as a regional power. India's apprehension and hostility towards China should not influence its foreign policy responses to an extent wherein it perceives every external action by a neighbouring state as a cause or outcome of the India-China power tussle in South Asia. Bilateral relations failures portray a damaging image of India in the region as well as on the international level. Similarly, excessive focus on bilateral at the cost of regional multilateralism is not feasible for India. India's position as a regional power can be consolidated only when it promotes vibrant multilateral regional institutions and collective growth in various developmental facets. For Nepal, India's policy efforts should focus on maintaining the delicate balance of juggling between the political and civil society perceptions of the country and India's energy and infrastructure projects furthering economic diplomacy along with enhanced and unhindered border mobility, people-to-people ties and cultural symposiums.

Maldives of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

India's assertion as a regional power in the neighbourhood can hold strength only when its security interests are protected on land as well as water. The Indian Ocean Region is an important strategic sphere essential to maintain regional stability and power play. Hence, Maldives, an archipelagic nation in the IOR, is vital to India's security interests and constitutes an important facet of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Any significant development in Maldives has reverberations for India as well. India has been a witness to the evolution of different political systems in Maldives, and provided support in different aspects whenever required. India-Maldives ties have been multipronged, including trade and tourism, defence technologies cooperation, maritime surveillance, strategic infrastructure and tackling common regional issues like radicalisation and cross-border terrorism. India's perception by Maldives and the cordiality in relations keeps fluctuating with a change in the Maldivian leadership. Issues like using anti-India rhetoric to garner vote banks in the population and presence of extra-regional powers in the country remain irritants in building strong bilateral relations.

Throughout the decades, the foreign policy of the Maldives and engagement with power magnates like India and China has differed according to Prime Ministerial level changes. The island nation has a clear understanding of its geostrategic positioning (strategic location on the Sea Lanes of Communication), and uses one regional power against the other to suit its internal and external interests. Internal interests include shaping domestic politics to the government's favour, whereas external interests lie in increasing importance and say in the Indian Ocean Region. Since its independence in 1965, the Maldives reached out to neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. It enjoyed cordial and friendly relations with India with historical, cultural and strategic links. In the 1980s, under president Gayoom, relations with India seemed stable at the outset, but the Maldives slowly tilted towards China. Inroads were made with visits from Gayoom, Chinese infrastructure projects and disaster assistance to the Maldives in the 2004 tsunami (Kumar, 2016, p. 156). With President Nasheed came multiparty democracy in the Maldives, and consequently an improvement in Indo-Maldives ties. The government under President Nasheed claimed to follow 'India First' policy, with measures such as conduction of defence exercises only with India and not provide a base for extra-regional powers to create infrastructure networks (Kumar, 2016, p. 157). Under the successive tenures of Presidents Waheed and Abdulla Yameen, the Maldives saw a return to authoritarian practices and erosion of democracy in domestic politics and serious deterioration of ties with India. This provided an opportunity for China to make deeper incursions in the island nation in terms of military aid agreements, trade and tourism and infrastructural projects (Kumar, 2016, p. 159). Interestingly, under Yameen, the Maldives also sought relations and help from other powers in the region such as Japan and Saudi Arabia, thereby reflecting the country's intentions to leverage its position in the neighbourhood.

Since the ascension of Ibrahim Solih to Presidentship in 2018, bilateral relations began to return to normalcy, marked by delegation and ministerial level visits and agreements in various domains such as visa arrangements, cultural and economic cooperation and communication technology (Mishra, 2018, p. 216). Solih consolidated the Maldives' position of 'India First' and acknowledged that cooperation between the two countries is essential for a peaceful and secure IOR. However, Indo-Maldives ties again suffered setbacks when Mohamed Muizzu became the president in 2023. An anti-India and pro-China stance was the major driving force of his political campaign rhetoric. Additionally, Muizzu amped up relations with China and Turkey, signalling a diplomatic shift in the Maldivian foreign policy. Currently, Muizzu's anti-

India stance has softened marginally, with him acknowledging the importance of cooperation with India as essential in the IOR.

Way forward

India should accept the fact that the Maldives, owing to its unique geopolitical positioning, will use its leverage in the favour of one big nation or the other in regional proximity to maximise its gains. Foreign policies would remain in a constant state of fluctuation with a shift in ideologies and domestic political demands. India should maintain a calm and composed stature suitable to a regional power, and on the other hand, send clear, reciprocal responses whenever required to display non-tolerance towards aggressive tactics. Additionally, India should continue to uphold its responsibility and ensure assistance to the Maldives in economic, military, strategic and other domains.

The Future?

With regard to bilateral relations, it is no surprise that South Asia's smaller neighbours will always leverage the greater regional powers of India and China to their benefit and try to make the best of both opportunities, economically and strategically. India's best bet lies in strengthening regional security and economic systems and following it up with soft power and historical heritage ties.

In-depth analyses of the military capabilities, weaknesses and gaps of self and neighbours, enhanced bilateral ministerial-level meetings for discussions on shared strategic, economic and cultural goals, articulating India's position on terrorism, trade, soft power exchanges, and the keenness on building shared infrastructures of anti-terrorism, economic and military agreements, collaboration in the domains of education, health, tourism, cybersecurity, energy and natural resources among others should be the focus of strengthening bilateral relations. India's emphasis on dialogue, prosperity and mutual benefit should be reflected through tangible cooperation and gaining the trust of smaller neighbours through action.

Reviving regional outfits should be India's responsibility. Organisations like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN are struggling to find relevance and tangible outcomes today. BRICS has now become an expanded collective of nations with so divergent interests that cooperative action to the mutual benefit of all is a Herculean task to achieve, although dialogue on multiple levels remains consistent. India should be a defining voice of action, shaping the future of these organisations through first initiative. India should also allay any fears of assertion or aggression

towards the neighbours, and warn them of practices like economic dependence and succumbing to being political pawns to other greater powers with vested interests in the region. Consensus and collaborative action in currently defunct regional organisations can be accelerated through strong bilateral relations. Similarly, India, along with other regional outfits such as QUAD, should display consistent efforts for cooperation in development domains and needs-based projects, assuring smaller South Asian nations of engagement with nations that are geographically far but nearer in strategic thought. This will also propel South Asia on a pathway to international fora where the collective regional voice can be asserted better.

As part of a recalibrated Neighbourhood First Policy, India should strive to offer cooperation to alleviate the multiple vulnerabilities of fragile state institutions, political instability, weak law enforcement, bureaucracy and administrative systems in the smaller neighbours, along with economic, strategic, people-to-people and military ties.

Conclusion

India's aspirations to establish itself as an undisputed regional power is largely dependent on its intertwined fate with the smaller neighbours. India should realise China as a considerable counter-force in the region cannot be ignored and sidelined, but solutions have to be found to circumvent the hurdle and enhance relations with the neighbouring countries. Other great powers with their meddlements need to be acknowledged and addressed through India's policy make-up as well. Smaller nations would attempt to leverage their position by strategic realignments, and India's foreign policy should be equipped enough to accommodate the frequent changes. In the current geopolitical order, strategic and national interests surpass traditional-historical ties and hence, India cannot rely completely on its traditional advantages to sustain friendly bilateral relations. An accommodative yet sturdy foreign policy structure is the path towards an established regional power status.

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