

The Politics of India's Neighbourhood Policy in South Asia

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Abstract

India's policy orientation towards its immediate neighbouring countries in South Asia has been subjected to analyses mainly through the prism of foreign policy. In this article, neighbourhood is taken as a prism to categorise the phases of India's policy since Independence towards these countries. In this effort, certain trends have been identified in Indian foreign policy that cut across chronology of Indian governments in office. The article critically interrogates the Indian policy package towards India's immediate neighbours through interest based strategies that suit the changing external international political milieu. The Cold War years, the contradictory pulls of economic globalisation and regionalism and the drive towards global multipolarity affected the policy orientations of India towards its neighbours. The article concludes that the political logic of neighbourhood policy of India in South Asia is conditioned by adhocism.

Keywords

India, South Asia, neighbourhood, foreign policy, globalisation, regionalism, adhocism

Neighbourhood policy is an important aspect of a country's foreign policy. The logic of geography is unrelenting and proximity is the most difficult and testing among the diplomatic challenges a country faces. Frontiers with neighbours are where domestic concerns intersect with external relationships. This is where domestic and foreign policies become inextricable and demand sensitive handling. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in defining its vital national and security interests, a country's neighbourhood occupies a place of prime importance. The first area of attention for any foreign policy is the neighbourhood, for unless a country has a peaceful and prosperous periphery it will not be able to focus on its primary tasks of socio-economic development. Any country, therefore, accords the highest priority to closer political, economic and cultural ties with its neighbours and must be committed to building strong and enduring partnership with all its neighbours.

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The intertwining of domestic and external interests has acquired a new intensity in the new millennium because technological changes are bringing about a more globalised world in which nation states and national boundaries can no longer provide the untrammelled autonomy that has for long been associated with national sovereignty. While globalisation has brought many fears of losing one's identity and of being overwhelmed by powerful and technologically advanced societies, globalisation also brings benefits and opportunities for development and for the enrichment of our lives. We are faced with the emergence of sub-nationalism and ethnic exclusivity even while a more interconnected world requires mutual understanding and tolerance.

South Asia is not immune to these global trends. India, in formulating its policies with regard to its neighbours, is facing the challenges of this global phenomenon. South Asia is a compact unit, of subcontinental proportions but occupying an easily identifiable geographical space, enjoying a broad cultural unity and a wide range of intra-regional economic complementarities. There were mighty empires in its history that straddled the subcontinent, and the experience of colonialism more recently reinforced the legacy of interconnectedness and affinity. Then came the trauma of partition, the growth of assertive nationalism, the drift away from democratic freedoms in some countries of the neighbourhood and the impact of global strategic and ideological rivalries, turning the subcontinent into a region of division and conflict, engendering a sense of siege both among states on India's periphery and within India itself. The subcontinent is now home to several independent and sovereign states and this is a compelling political reality. South Asia encompasses eight independent sovereign countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—which dominate the northern half of the Indian Ocean. It is the largest geographical entity of the Indian Ocean community and almost a continental whole.

India is a big country and a major power in South Asia surrounded by small neighbours, barring China. Recognising that small states have a natural fear complex about their big neighbours—historically, this has been one of the facts of international life—and with peaceful coexistence as its guiding policy, India has sought to instil confidence amongst its neighbours. Various Indian governments have repeatedly made policy pronouncements to the effect that although a big country, India does not behave like a big brother; it believes in friendly cooperation, peaceful settlement of disputes and good neighbourliness; it does not interfere in the internal affairs of its neighbours and wishes to live with them on a footing of equality and partnership of mutual benefit, and that it does not aspire to a leadership role, nor has it any hegemonic or expansionist ambitions.

There is an element of geography which is beyond India's control: that India is a large country with over a billion people. This article views the various phases of India's policy towards its neighbouring countries in South Asia since independence in 1947 through the prisms of 'politics' and 'neighbourhood'. In this article politics is seen essentially as an activity to further one's own interest, while neighbourhood is taken as a space that includes all the neighbouring countries in their

totality. The article argues that the phases of India's policy to the neighbouring countries in South Asia can be categorised as (i) Politics of Third Worldism, (ii) Politics of Domination, (iii) Politics of Inclusion, (iv) Politics of Neighbourhood and (v) Politics of Friendship.

Politics of Third Worldism

The foundations of India's foreign policy were laid during the freedom movement when Indian leaders, even while fighting for India's independence, were engaged with the great causes of the time. The principles of India's foreign policy, that emerged then, have stood the test of time: a belief in friendly relations with all countries of the world, the resolution of conflicts by peaceful means, the sovereign equality of all states, independence of thought and action as manifested in the principles of non-alignment, and equity in the conduct of international relations. Commensurate with national interests and security, the improvement of bilateral relations is an important component of any foreign policy, and India has succeeded in establishing a network of mutually beneficial relations with all countries of the world. India's foreign policy has always regarded the concept of neighbourhood as one of widening concentric circles around a central axis of historical and cultural commonalties. From this point of view, India has always given due priority to the development of relations with Southeast Asia. In 1947, India organised the Asian Relations Conference. It chaired the International Control Commission in 1954 and was a major player in the organisation of the Bandung Conference in 1955. Jawaharlal Nehru had talked of building an Eastern Federation of India and the major Asian countries. In his broader vision of Asian unity and solidarity, Nehru at times inadvertently displayed a tendency to take the smaller neighbours for granted: he seldom thought in terms of assiduously building a community with the immediate neighbours. If at all, he thought that such a community would be encompassed within the broader goal of Asian solidarity. Nehru's foreign policy was based on India's internal needs and conditions, its history, traditions and way of life and its poverty; the aim was to develop India economically and to stabilise India politically. India needed peace and Nehru projected the necessity and importance of a tension free world in his foreign policy.

In this entire Nehruvian period the emphasis was on having a united Third World group of Afro-Asian countries, on the platform of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a neutral entity, engaged in one another's development, and insulated from the power politics of the two blocs led by the Soviet Union and United States. Admittedly, the Nehruvian approach to foreign policy had accorded greater importance to international relations than to regional issues. With the strategy of non-alignment, the Indian leadership visualised a greater role for India in world politics. Particularly in the Cold War atmosphere, non-alignment had a limited role to play in the region. This apart, because of contentious political, economic,

territorial, hydrological and ethnic issues with the neighbouring countries, India overlooked the needs and possibilities of strong regional ties and cooperation. India acted only to the extent that its security interests and regional pre-eminence were not challenged (Harshe and Seethi 2005: 204). As a result, during this phase the neighbouring countries in South Asia only featured in a larger Indian vision of Third Worldism.

Politics of Domination

After Nehru, things began to change. The balance slowly tilted in favour of regionalism. Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi ushered Indian foreign policy into channels of political realism, away from the romantic visions, illusions and idealism which characterised Indian foreign policy during the Nehru era. This shift in orientation was epitomised by Shastri's destruction of the smug predictions upon which Pakistan attacked India in Kashmir in September 1965. Indira Gandhi extended the content and range of this assertive and realistic Indo-centric orientation in Indian foreign policy by building up India's technological defence capacities and giving a clear message to all India's neighbours that while India had no aggressive or hegemonistic intentions towards them, India's response to any threat to its unity and territorial integrity emanating from other countries would require a prompt and decisive response (Dixit 2001: 30).

Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, Prime Minister from 1965–77 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984, tried to control both foreign and domestic policy decisions. The international environment had changed as the USA–USSR Cold War had become stable, and neither Russians nor Americans felt the need for intermediaries. Thus, only the regional area was open for action, which Indira Gandhi took in the lead up to Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Regional politics became the main focus of Indian diplomacy seeking to influence events in Sri Lanka and Nepal, whose tensions could spill over into domestic Indian politics. While the global policy began to gradually lose its lustre, its coherence, its framework and, what is more, its importance, the broad contours of a regional policy began to emerge—a policy that was more coherent, more pragmatic, more national-oriented and more forceful. It was during Indira Gandhi's era that Pakistan was reduced in size, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state in the East, Sikkim was annexed and absorbed in India and a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was formed. Indira Gandhi did not initiate all these events, although she played a crucial role in their development. India's goal was to remain the unchallenged 'regional hegemon' in South Asia, with wider world problems taking rhetorical priority.

The government under Rajiv Gandhi had severely damaged India's relations with immediate neighbours owing to the government's allegedly high-handed politics and arrogant behaviour. However unintentional it might have been, the

diplomatic style of Rajiv Gandhi's government gave an impression to the neighbours that India was acting like a 'regional bully'. This was particularly true in the wake of the dispatch of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi's foreign policy was said to be a 'muscular policy'. Analysing the hegemonistic tone in India's policy to the neighbouring countries in South Asia during these three regimes, most particularly under Indira Gandhi, a desire for domination over others surfaces. Thus, India's South Asian neighbourhood started to sense a threat of the 'big-brother' and the coordination of the neighbours in turn created a 'gang-up' threat for India. The vicious circle of blame and counter blame started to engulf the region.

Politics of Inclusion

When the Morarji Desai–Atal Bihari Vajpayee team took charge of India's foreign policy in 1977—with the coming to power of the Janata Party government—and set out to define policy towards the neighbours, it first undertook a critical scrutiny of its predecessor's policy on the subject. In this scrutiny, it was found that the previous government's policy suffered from a duality of using 'good neighbourliness' as a cliché on the one hand and the adoption of a superior and imperious tone on the other. The Janata Party Government from the first day of its existence, as emphasised by Vajpayee, set out deliberately to clear the cobwebs of suspicion, remove misunderstanding and banish the fear of interference. The Janata regime took a number of measures to lower India's dominant power profile and to reassure the smaller neighbours that India was willing to accept them as they were rather than measure their credibility and friendship-worthiness on the scale of its own ideological preferences and power calculus.

Like in 1977, the year 1989 witnessed the formation of a second non-Congress government at the centre, under the premiership of Vishwanath Pratap Singh as leader of the National Front. The new regime felt the need to mend fences with the immediate neighbouring countries. To this end, therefore, the new policymakers followed a low-key diplomatic stance *vis-à-vis* the neighbours. To quote Singh 'Our approach to the neighbouring countries will be one of friendliness, no arm-twisting or any bullying tactics. I want to make this clear. Strength lies in mutual understanding' (Singh 2000: 5).

India, like many other developing countries, responded to the post-Cold War developments in the arena of international politics. India realised that in the changed circumstances regional issues had become more important and it was necessary to build strong ties at the regional level. In response to the changing world scenario and the need for a fresh look at India's foreign policy, the Narasimha Rao government was conscious of the need to structure a regional and international order based on harmony, consensus and willingness to strive for peace, stability and development.

In the 1990s, India began to take initiatives to improve relations with its neighbouring countries. With its focus on the Himalayan neighbours, India gave special priority to mending its relations with Bhutan. With Nepal, a process of normalisation of relations started with the signing of the accord in June 1990, restoring the status-quo ante April 1987. The revision of trade and transit treaties, which had become a note of discord between the two countries during 1987–88, further strengthened their relationship. India agreed to provide economic concessions to Nepal in order to encourage trade. India and Nepal also developed an understanding on the issue of mutually beneficial utilisation of the Mahakali River. For Sri Lanka, India's withdrawal of the IPKF in 1990 was a great relief. It indeed paved the way for the improvement of relations between the two countries. In 1991, the two countries agreed to the setting up of a joint commission to provide an institutional framework to their bilateral relations. India's relations with Bangladesh remained unstable during 1975–90. The Khalida Zia government, which came to power in February 1991, could not make much headway except in resolving the Tin Bigha issue. India's relations with Pakistan, however remained as they were in the past, vitiated by an enmity that was basically the legacy of history. India did try to improve trade relations and encourage cultural relations with Pakistan, but issues concerning Kashmir, cross-border terrorist activities, nuclear developments and narcotics and drug trafficking remained unresolved.

The Janata interlude, the V.P. Singh government and the Narasimha Rao government tried to involve the neighbouring countries in South Asia in the creation of a peaceful neighbourhood, which was a prerequisite for India's security. While concern for security was also the driving force of Indira Gandhi's hegemonistic policies, the principal difference during the Janata, V.P. Singh and Narasimha Rao governments was the desire of India to instil a sense among the neighbouring countries that they are equally involved in India's security paradigm, which was to have comprehensive, mutually inclusive security for the countries in South Asia.

Politics of Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood is a space lodged in between the safe inside of friends and the threatening outside of enemies. Friends and enemies are opposite positions in the same system, whereas strangers, because they cannot adequately be known and identified as either friends or enemies, introduce ambivalence in the system. But even if both 'neighbours' and 'strangers' as such escape the friend/enemy binary, they are clearly not of the same nature. The lack of knowledge that constitutes the stranger, the inability to locate and identify the stranger does not fit well with the manifest nearby presence of the neighbour. Musing on the proverb that 'good fences make good neighbours', Ruben Zaotti points to the inherent ambiguity of 'neighbours': their position outside the fence distances them from the 'friends'

inside, which runs counter to the conventional idea that good neighbours can be helpful in warding off threats or enemies. Being a stranger to one's neighbour would be considered an abnormality, but neither is 'neighbour' directly opposed to stranger, because we are not expected to know our neighbours in the intimate detail that regards family. The neighbour turns out to be a denomination whose meaning—except for the claim to proximity—changes in different circumstances. The neighbours can be a comforting buffer when we are under threat from our enemies. But they seem distant acquaintances when in the company of our friends. They are reassuringly recognisable in a world of strangers, but clearly outsiders when compared to the intimacy of the family. In modern border logic, the (national) border simply separates the friends inside from the enemies outside. The very goal of forging a 'ring of friends' can be interpreted as indicating a simple strategy of moving the 'modern border' to the other side of the neighbours, thus installing them as a buffer zone or a series of satellite states, protecting against a threat geographically located beyond them (Ifversen and Kølvråa 2007).

India appeared to follow a policy of good neighbourly relations on a long-term basis with the installation of the United Front government at the centre in 1996. The government took concrete steps towards resolving contentious bilateral issues with neighbouring countries. India witnessed the emergence of a new doctrine in foreign policy by Inder Kumar Gujral as the External Affairs Minister of the United Front government under H.D. Deve Gowda's premiership. Gujral marked a new beginning in India's relations with South Asian countries. India during the United Front regime launched an initiative of peace through the 'Gujral Doctrine'. Gujral became the Indian Prime Minister after Deve Gowda and continued to pursue the doctrine. The Gujral Doctrine essentially promoted the accommodation of interests of the neighbouring states, without expectations of reciprocity. In the post-Cold War era, Gujral understood the need to adopt a liberal attitude towards the problems of the neighbouring countries and stressed that India on its own should take initiatives in resolving long-standing problems without expecting reciprocity.

The new trend after the Cold War that witnessed conflict resolution and conflict management led some in the Indian foreign policy establishment to believe that peace with neighbouring states could be established without the proactive role of the superpower. If peace could reign in Southeast Asia, Cambodia and between formerly deadly enemies such as Egypt and Israel and Jordan, and Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), there was no reason for South Asia to be left far behind. The second most important rationale behind the Gujral Doctrine was the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. This had a far reaching effect on world politics in general and India's area of 'special relationship' outside South Asia in particular. In the changed world, the most significant achievement of the Gujral Doctrine was a conscious decision to make India's foreign office less Pakistan-centric. Its objective was to promote all-round economic and social development with justice and equity. The accelerated development of

every nation in the subcontinent was a principal goal of the Gujral Doctrine. Conflict resolution in South Asia is also a long drawn process requiring multi track efforts. It is a process that requires years of discussion and learning, educating the public, broadening the agenda, re-perceiving the enemy and organising workshops. The Gujral Doctrine appeared to be the beginning of incrementalism in Indian foreign policy (John 2005: 270).

The policy perception of India in the Gujral era was based on the realisation that India cannot become a great power unless it takes along its neighbours. India's self-interest requires a fresh thinking in its neighbourhood policy. It was believed in South Block that India cannot hope to remain prosperous if its neighbours continue to languish, as growing economic opportunities in India will inevitably generate cross-border illegal flows of migrants. In word and deed, India has in its relations with its South Asian neighbours, since the time of Gujral, shown restraint and accommodation. It has sought to normalise its relations with small neighbours on a basis of give and take, as in the case of Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, though finding sensible solutions wherever possible, often on its own initiative, without aggravating matters over intractable issues, as in the case of China and Pakistan. India has not sought to make the interests of its ethnic population settled in other lands an issue in bilateral relations; on the contrary, these concerns were subordinated to its overriding concern for better relations with those countries. As the major power in South Asia, India has been a force for the stability of the region, striving to make the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean area a zone of peaceful commerce and good neighbourly cooperation. The concessions and accommodation that India has shown in resolving disputes and removing irritants have their critics at home, who contend that it is a weak policy for a big country to follow since India is being pushed around and taken for granted. But a country's promises had to be with its professions. That imposes certain responsibilities and limitations.

India's South Asia policy since the Gujral government shows a shift from an exclusive hard power strategy of military and diplomatic interventions to a soft power approach that emphasises intergovernmental cooperation, negotiated settlements and economic collaboration. The changes can also be seen as attempt to change India's image from that of a regional bully to a benign hegemon (Mohan 2003: 242). This shift was not caused because of altruistic reasons but can be traced back to various factors. First, India's hard power approach of the 1970s and 1980s was not very successful. Second, economic liberalisation after 1991 added a new element into Indian foreign policy at the regional as well as on the international level. Finally, India's aspirations for major power status gave the region a new strategic value. Concepts of hard and soft power can be regarded as two poles on a continuum of power. They also imply different ideas, interactions and institutions for foreign policy when looking at the fields of politics, security and economy (Wagner 2005).

The approach of the Indian government under the Gujral Doctrine emphasises the importance of all the South Asian neighbouring countries and tries to create a

linkage between the development of India and the development of the region. The text of the Gujral Doctrine itself reflects the neighbourhood as a vital element in the foreign policy design (Gujral 1997). Such a regional design in the policy approach marks a departure from the earlier phases of domination and 'beneficial bilateralism'.

Politics of Friendship

Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* is a work that applies his use of 'difference' to the concept of friendship. Derrida does not have to problematise the concept of friendship because it is already problematised by its very own history. In its essence, friendship is marked by difference. In this case, Derrida uses the adverb 'perhaps' to underscore its undecidability, its indeterminacy, its changefulness. Who is the friend? Who is the enemy? How are these to be named and counted? Who am I? Friend? Enemy? Both? These and similar questions Derrida poses against the backdrop of two central aporias.

The first aporia is a quotation attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius and picked up again by Michel de Montaigne: 'O my friends, there is no friend'. Derrida calls this statement a 'performative contradiction', as it would be difficult to address friends and tell them that there is none (Derrida 1997: 12). Friendship in this sense depends upon the act of loving unconditionally. Love, for Derrida, needs no real object. The loving constitutive of friendship is the differential ground and possibility that constitutes subject and object. 'One can love being loved, but loving will, always be more, better and something other than being loved.' The second aporia is one in which the movement of chance (the perhaps) again effects a sort of madness. In 'Human All Too Human', Nietzsche reverses Aristotle's reputed address as, 'O my enemies, there is no enemy'. The contradiction is again obvious enough, but who is the enemy? What is the truth of the friend/enemy distinction?¹ The political justice that arises out of friendship/enmity is respect and responsibility. Respect is generated out of the relation of friend to friend and enemy to enemy.² Thus, the crux of Derrida's argument is that enemies and friends as concepts are not watertight compartments and have an element of simultaneity in them.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments that came to power in India after the Gujral era continued to pursue a policy approach towards the neighbouring countries in South Asia that tries to create a network of interdependence at the government and civil society levels, but at the same time, triggered by the political realism of the global order, India went on to link itself economically and politically with various regional organisations and other important countries. Thus both the NDA and UPA were extremely pragmatic in their respective neighbourhood policies towards South Asia that was reflected in carving a benevolent face of India in the region. The activities of the NDA government in relation to the countries in the South Asian

neighbourhood reflect that the neighbourhood has been a very clear political priority. The NDA government established close interaction with all the South Asian counterparts. India's initiatives to reopen road, rail and ferry links with Pakistan, the Open Skies arrangement *vis-à-vis* Sri Lanka, the optical fibre backbone across the Nepalese Terai as well as the Rail Agreement with Nepal, the hydro-electric projects in Bhutan and Nepal, the Dhaka-Agartala bus service and proposals for ferry services between Colombo and Kochi and Mumbai and Karachi, are all initiatives specifically designed to promote people-to-people contacts, trade and commercial interaction within the region. The NDA government injected significant economic content into the Gujral doctrine. In signalling a new direction to India's neighbourhood policy, the NDA government also emphasised two important political messages. One, India's size and centrality to the region are realities that will not disappear by some of its neighbours bemoaning them. Two, in a clear message to Pakistan and Bangladesh, India emphasised that respect for the security concerns of each other is the key to the success of trade and prosperity in the region. It is quite clear that if those security concerns become overpowering, then many other areas of cooperation are lost sight of for the time or in the long run. Sensitivity to each other's security concerns was an important issue for the NDA government in the implementation of its neighbourhood policy. This reflects that the NDA government followed a 'carrot and stick' approach towards its South Asian neighbours with friendly diplomatic acts.

The performance of the UPA government both in its policies and activities reflects India's objective of a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood. India continues to attach the highest priority to close and good neighbourly political, economic and cultural relations. India is committed to developing political relations with its South Asian neighbours on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect. This is exemplified most recently by the upgrading of the 1949 friendship treaty with Bhutan. Politically, the neighbourhood policy of the UPA government is based on the recognition that what can best secure India's interests in the region is the building of a web of 'dense interdependencies' with her neighbours. The UPA Government believes that it is important to have frequent and regular contacts and wide-ranging discussions with the neighbouring countries at all levels to take forward and to maximise opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation.

During the first UPA government, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran was ready to recognise India's responsibility in changing the appalling nature of the subcontinent's international relations: 'The challenge for our diplomacy lies in convincing our neighbours that India is an opportunity not a threat, that far from being besieged by India, they have a vast, productive hinterland that would give their economies far greater opportunities for growth than if they were to rely on their domestic markets alone' (Saran 2005). This marks a calibrated departure from the Gujral Doctrine's stress on appeasing the neighbours for peace in the region, and heralds an intelligent and well-considered neighbourhood policy that befits a country of India's stature. In Saran's words, India's neighbours would have to

'demonstrate sensitivity to India's vital concerns. These concerns relate to allowing the use of their territories for cross-border terrorism and hostile activity against India, for example, by insurgent and secessionist groups' (Saran 2005).

Saran's successor, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, signalled a departure from India's past attitude towards its neighbours that was rigidly focused on strict reciprocity. In building a peaceful periphery, Menon identified three key goals for India's foreign policy: 'Firstly, ensuring a peaceful periphery; secondly, relations with the major powers; and, thirdly, issues of the future, namely food security, water, energy and environment' (Menon 2007). Menon described the neighbourhood in the same terms as Saran had: 'expanding circles of engagement, starting with the immediate neighbourhood, West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region' (Menon 2007). In South Asia, India has increasingly engaged in peacemaking both with its neighbours (Pakistan) and between warring factions within its neighbours (Nepal and Sri Lanka).

The neighbourhood can be loosely defined as a place in geographical proximity, development within which can have serious implications for Indian security considerations. This notion has been very prominent in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's articulation of the extended neighbourhood, of India's strategic frontiers. The ideology of *Hindutva* determined that India's neighbourhood was wherever Hindu influence had spread to. Viewed in this perspective, India's neighbourhood extends to Central Asia in the north, East Asia including Southeast Asia in the east and the Persian Gulf region in the west. India did not remain trapped in goodwill gestures to its immediate neighbours only, but developed and reflected goodwill with its extended neighbours under the NDA government. The NDA government actively pursued infrastructure projects and policies aimed at expanding India's connectivity with the extended neighbourhood. The India–Myanmar–Thailand trilateral road project, the Open Skies policy announced for Southwest Asia and the agreement to use Chabahar Port of Iran for transit to Central Asia and Russia through Afghanistan all stand out in this context. The NDA government was also proactive in the building of other regional groupings, such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), which expand India's reach beyond the subcontinent.

India's 'Look East Policy' was given a new dimension by the UPA Government. India is now looking towards a partnership with the ASEAN countries. The India–ASEAN Summit dialogue reflects links to economic and security interests, particularly for India's East and Northeast region. The Indo-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement has been operationalised from 2009. Moreover, India shares a Comprehensive Economic Engagement Programme with countries like Singapore and Thailand separately.

During the period of the second UPA regime, India has also categorically tried to improve its ties with extra regional groupings and countries. The India–Africa Project Partnership in March 2008, followed by the first ever India–Africa Forum Summit in New Delhi on 8–9 April 2008, brought together top functionaries and

heads of governments of fourteen African countries with their Indian counterparts to raise an old friendship to a new level. India's ties with the European Union (EU) got intensified with the Ninth India–EU Summit in Marseille, France in September 2008. In addition, India is trying to have a tripartite power equation with China and Russia to present an alternative power centre from Asia in the nascent multipolar post-US world order. The regular meetings of forums such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), RIC (Russia, India and China) and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) bring to the fore the interest India places on its connections with these countries.

In this phase, betterment of institutionalised relationship with the neighbouring countries, by using the SAARC forum, did take place at a rapid pace, the most obvious instance of which is the operationalisation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) Agreement. However, in this phase the NDA and UPA governments channelled their energies into finding a place for India in the global political and economic order. As a consequence, the positive efforts in Indian policy formulation towards the South Asian countries were halted before a general neighbourhood policy could emerge. Under the NDA and UPA, India has played and is playing a 'politics of friendship' with its South Asian neighbours, in order to have a benevolent image at the global level which is very important for India to maintain a balanced position in today's world politics.

Conclusion

The first five decades of policy framing in India remained confined to the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi. This Nehruvian legacy was pivotal in defining India's relationship with its neighbours in the region, in some cases even reshaping the political boundaries of the subcontinent. Nehru's policy was based on three assumptions: (i) India had to shoulder the role and responsibilities of the region; (ii) India would be the leader of anti-colonial struggles and would help to create a buffer of 'Third World' states; (iii) India would collaborate with China to keep Asia free of superpower rivalry. By the time Indira Gandhi assumed power in India, the world and the region had completely changed. Although India's policy towards its neighbouring countries was based on beneficial bilateralism and reciprocity, the contours had begun to change soon after the creation of Bangladesh. By the 1980s, in the wake of ethnic conflicts and political crises in Sri Lanka, the transformation was complete. The press dubbed it as the 'Indira Doctrine', but it was, in essence, merely a modified version of the Nehru Creed, claiming India's pre-eminent right to intervene in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries if disorder threatened to extend beyond national boundaries.

India has attempted to uphold a regional security order on the premise that the subcontinent must be an exclusive sphere of influence for itself and that it

must prevent other powers from intervening in the region. The notion of an Indian Monroe Doctrine, similar to the one that the US had proclaimed for the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century, was expounded by none other than Nehru. Although the idea of keeping the great powers out of Asia was beyond India's reach, it was at the heart of New Delhi's policy towards the sub-continent. During the Indira Gandhi years, this Doctrine was buttressed by the principle of bilateralism.

On the whole, from Independence right till the end of the Narasimha Rao government (1947–96), India's South Asia policy lacked a clear and broad perspective. Instead, it followed a piecemeal approach. Yet India's initiatives were significant in many respects. India realised the need for stronger economic ties with its neighbouring countries and was prepared to take the necessary steps to achieve this. India's initiatives towards improving relations with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal were important. However, India's problems with Pakistan remained as they had been before. All efforts towards building bridges and the confidence building measures proved to be mere rhetoric and were confined to strengthening public relations, insofar as India–Pakistan relations were concerned.

Unlike Nehru, his successors in the 1990s had little time or inclination to articulate the ideas behind the new foreign policy in the making. If Nehru both enthused and educated the political elite with his frequent speeches and writings on foreign policy, the Indian leaders of the 1990s neither had the conceptual flourish nor a burning desire to communicate their foreign policy objectives to their constituents. Although I.K. Gujral, who shepherded India's foreign policy from 1996 to 1998, tried to keep up with the Nehruvian tradition of vocalising ideas, both P.V. Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee chose to be reticent about the foreign policy tradition. Manmohan Singh has tried to vocalise ideas of Pan-Asianism much in the Nehruvian way, and like Nehru, exclusive attention to South Asian countries remained absent in the Congress-led UPA government's tenure as well.

The innovations in India's foreign policy strategy since the early 1990s have resulted in the happy situation of simultaneous expansion of relations with all major powers, growing weight in Asia and Indian Ocean regions and the prospect of improved relations with important neighbours. Despite being marginalised, the imperatives of idealism and morality have not completely disappeared from India's foreign policy. Since 1991, India has moved from its traditional emphasis on the 'power of argument' to 'argument of power' (Wagner 2005). Given its noisy democracy, India cannot build domestic political support to foreign policy initiatives purely on the argument of power. It would continue to need a set of values and norms to justify its actions on the world stage. As a consequence the tension between power and principle remained an enduring one in India's foreign policy strategy.

The BJP-led NDA government that followed the United Front government did not explicitly reject the Gujral Doctrine, but declared that it would go beyond

words and produce more substantive results on the ground. However, the BJP-led government was unable to sustain a serious diplomatic focus on the subcontinent. Its preoccupations with managing relations with Pakistan meant that there was little energy left to deal with other neighbours in the subcontinent. Only major crises in relations with Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh would force the NDA government to pay attention to these countries. The UPA government genuinely tried to increase connectivity in the subcontinent through a non-reciprocal approach and by establishing new cultural linkages. However, the UPA government also became concerned about earning a place for India in the global political arena and thereby increasingly got attached to extra-regional organs like the EU, BRICs, Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO). Major areas of disputes with India's immediate neighbours in South Asia that lasted for nearly sixty years remained as they were before.

India since the Gujral era has done everything right in order to have a long-term, peaceful and strong bond with its South Asian neighbours within an institutional framework, with a long-term aim of a political union and common currency for the region that got reflected in the various policy pronouncements over the past one decade. During the NDA government under Vajpayee, there were also a declared set of rules guiding the relations with the neighbouring countries. During the UPA government under Manmohan Singh, there were attempts to get linked with the neighbouring countries. However, both the NDA and UPA governments also extended their friendship to distant countries, seeking to bring them into the fold of an extended neighbourhood. India's inclination towards the countries in the extended neighbourhood, coupled with the absence of the nomenclature 'neighbourhood policy' in any of the foreign policy reports and policy pronouncements, raises critical questions about the commitment of these governments to 'mending fences' with the South Asian neighbours. The NDA and UPA governments have played a subtle politics of preserving self interest with a benevolent mask—an empirical reflection of Jacques Derrida's expression 'politics of friendship'—which is also a strategically realist position in international politics.

Once there is a neighbourhood policy, it will be extremely difficult for the Indian government to withdraw from that declared commitment. There seems only one logical reason for the absence of such a framework: the uniqueness of the South Asian region based on 'reflexive nationalism' and the evidences of concrete anti-Indian activities favoured and sponsored by some of the neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan. In response to such reasoning, it can be said that it would be in India's interest to have a set of general rules guiding its relations with the South Asian neighbours under the rubric 'neighbourhood policy', not only to restrict the spread of the anti-Indian virus among other countries of the region but also across to other regions, especially in Southeast Asia. Given the present diplomatic terms with Pakistan in the post 26/11 period, the

UPA government in India may do well to have a South Asian neighbourhood policy without extending it to Pakistan immediately, but having a concrete commitment to extend it through various phases of composite dialogues at all levels. With Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's much criticised statement at Sharm-el-Sheikh, delinking terrorism from the dialogue process with Pakistan, and the resumption of dialogue at the foreign secretary levels between India and Pakistan in February 2010 that reached its climax in the cricket diplomacy of 2011 (with failure of the Foreign Minister level talks at Islamabad in the latter half of 2010), India seems to be striding down that pathway. In the final analysis, it can be said that the periodisation of India's policy towards its South Asian neighbours, notwithstanding overlapping of approaches, rests on one axiom: 'diplomacy of the moment'.

Notes

1. Derrida's answer to the question is: 'the truth of friendship is a madness of truth, a truth that has nothing to do with the wisdom which, throughout the history of philosophy qua the history of reason, will have set the tone of this truth—by attempting to have us believe that amorous passion was madness, no doubt, but that friendship was the way of wisdom and of knowledge, no less than of political justice' (Derrida 1997: 72).
2. See Derrida's comment: 'The enemy is then my best friend. He hates me in the name of friendship, of an unconscious or sublime friendship. Friendship, a "superior" friendship, returns with the enemy.... The two concepts (friend/enemy) consequently intersect and ceaselessly change places. They intertwine, as though they loved each other all along a spiralled hyperbole' (Derrida 1997: 52).

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