

# India in its Neighborhood: Hegemonic Behavior?

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## Abstract

India, being the largest country (by size and population) in South Asia presumes it her natural right to play the role of a dominating power in the region. In order to safeguard its economic, political and security interests and extend its influence outside the region, India strives to influence the internal and external policies of its smaller neighbors as it wants to keep them weak in order to be able to coerce them. With growing international support mainly from the US and the West, Indian policy behavior is likely to continue to pursue its objective of exerting its influence in the South Asian neighborhood and extend it beyond the region. This will complicate the security of smaller states bordering India, cause instability in South Asia, and also discourage cooperation among the regional states.

## Keywords

Regional-power, great-power, intervention, influence, competition, dominance.

## Introduction

Indian relationship with its smaller neighbors<sup>1</sup> is an interesting case study.

It wants to play the role of the dominant power and use its asymmetrical power vis-à-vis its neighbors coerce them to achieve its political, economic, and security objectives. At the same time, it has global inspirations. It also wants to extend its reach and influence outside the region. The balance of power between India and its

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neighbors is critical. The weaker the neighbors the greater the influence India will be able to have over them. Therefore, Indian neighbors and their relative power balance vis-a-vis India have been an important factor in shaping its foreign and security policies.

Historically, strategic and cultural factors have shaped this Indian thinking. First, after independence from Britain in 1947, India considered itself as the successor state to the British colonial regime. Second, India stayed non-aligned in a highly divided world during the Cold War era. The objectives of this policy are discussed later in the article. Third, India's large territory, its population, size of its economy, and increasing military power are the major factors that give India a sense of superiority vis-à-vis its smaller neighbors and in return govern its relationship with its smaller neighbors. In addition to these, India also exercised the influence derived from its centuries-old civilization and culture which is becoming an important pillar of its national pride and power.

India had worked to achieve its policy goals, as noted earlier, right from the time it became an independent state in the mid-twentieth century. Both Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), when in power, assiduously pursued these goals. Though there was a difference in the manner both parties conducted their foreign policies. Congress Party being mindful of presenting a democratic image did not become as aggressive as the BJP in pursuit of these goals. The BJP is more vocal about achieving the status of a big power.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Neighborhood First"<sup>2</sup> policy also vows to give topmost priority to the Indian neighbors. This policy can be linked with the Indian desire to maximize its regional power and deny an external power, especially China, to influence them. In recent years, India and China have competed against each other in some South Asian states, Sri Lanka is the prime example. Similarly, China is extending its influence in Nepal to the detriment of the Indian objectives in the region. PM Modi also announced his vision for the

Indian Ocean, “Security and Growth for All in the Region.” Under this India aims to deepen the economic and security cooperation in the region.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will look at what India thinks of its smaller neighbors to assess its assertive and hegemonic policy stance.

### **Big Power Behavior with a Small Power**

Concept of power is a major factor in the analysis of states’ behavior in the international system. How a state behaves depends on its share of power in terms of economic, political and military domains vis-à-vis other states. By a bigger power or smaller power, we mean bigger or small economically, politically, and militarily. Discipline of International Relations studies the behavior of states with each other. Traditionally, war and peace have been the dominating question while studying the behavior of states. Recently, the issues of the political economy, trade, international institutions, international cooperation, development, and civil society have emerged.

Classical realists term the self-interest and competitive nature as the human condition<sup>4</sup> where the ‘strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,’ according to Thucydides.<sup>5</sup> Neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz argues that the states are the unit faced with the system of anarchy.<sup>6</sup> These states are differentiated by their relative power and the rules of the international system are defined by the most powerful states and as a consequence global and regional hegemonic states emerge.<sup>7</sup>

Kenneth Waltz posits in his Balance of Power theory that in order to secure their survival, states prevent any other state from accumulating sufficient power to be able to threaten them. Stephan Walt further develops the Balance of Power theory into Balance of Threat theory whereby military power or military threat determines the alliance formation of states.<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Stephan Walt along with Kenneth Waltz and other realists adds to the argument that in this situation small states can form two kinds of alliances – balancing and

bandwagoning. Balancing is when states align against the stronger states and bandwagoning occurs when a weaker state aligns with the powerful state.<sup>9</sup> Smaller South Asian states are forming both kinds of alliances to manage big powers' influence over them.

Among the tools through which a stronger power can influence, pressurize or deny a weaker power the liberty of action, are economic, political, and military. Economic sanctions, debts, trade barriers, tariffs, and loans can be important levers to a state to influence and pressurize a smaller country into changing its policy behavior. In the military domain, the huge conventional and nuclear arms build-up, aggressive posturing, threats of taking an action, and actual actions are major tools. Politically, interference in internal policies of another state, supporting armed and separatist groups, coercive diplomacy, use of the internet, and cyberspace for opinion shaping are available options.

The balance of power theory is helpful in understanding the Indian policy behavior in the region. With more power differential with its neighbors, India potentially has the necessary tools to influence them into taking or avoiding actions not favorable to its national interests. Countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan are more manageable for India than Pakistan with which its military power differential is not as much as with other states. Therefore, militarily a weaker Pakistan may be in India's interests for achieving its political and security objectives in the region.

India has employed the above-discussed tools of influence and coercion in order to achieve its policy objectives in its neighborhood. Indian actions in this regard are discussed later in the article after giving the contextual information of the region first.

### **India and its Neighborhood: The Geographical Context**

Geographically, India is the largest country in South Asia and the seventh-largest in the world by size. It is situated in the center of the South Asian region. It is linked with all the countries in the region

either by land or sea. This gives India a direct physical connection with all the regional countries. Strategically, Indian location also impedes a direct bilateral connection between any of its neighbors. All of its neighbors do not share direct borders with each other as well. Thus, they are dependent on India's goodwill for their bilateral trade and communication.

Geography makes Nepal and Bhutan almost entirely dependent on India; not only to connect with other countries but also to support their survival. Nepal and Bhutan are strategically important for India because both states share borders with China too and India competes with Chinese influence in both countries. India is also located in the North center of the Indian Ocean. All major sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean from the Middle East to East Asia pass through India.

To sum up, due to geographic limitations, all regional countries rely on India for their physical communication and trade. Hence, often bilateral relations of smaller countries in the region also depend on the nature of their relationship with India. Thus, geography is a major leverage India enjoys in the South Asian region.

### **Economy, Politics, and Military**

Economic, political, and military are considered concrete and the most important elements of a country's power. All other regional countries in South Asia are smaller than India in terms of economy and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). India accounts for 1/4<sup>th</sup> of total GDP in South Asia in nominal terms with \$2.8 trillion GDP in 2018.<sup>10</sup> With the GDP growth rate of 6-7%, it is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. India opened up its economy for the world with its liberal economic policies in 1991 and made its economy more market and service-oriented by expanding the role of the private sector and thus attracting foreign investment.<sup>11</sup>

Today, India is engaged in expanding its economy and is part of various multilateral regional and global economic groups like

BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

India is further strengthening its strategic relations with the United States, Russia, Israel, Japan, Australia, France, and other important countries. Besides, it has also signed strategic partnership agreements with more than thirty countries stretching from East Asia to Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

India is one of the largest importers of arms globally.<sup>13</sup> It has the fifth largest military budget of \$63.9 billion<sup>14</sup> and the world's second-largest military force. Russia, the United States, Israel, and France are the major suppliers of arms to India.

These trends indicate that India's position as the biggest country in the South Asian region would be further consolidated. These trends have a great influence on Indian strategic behavior and foreign policy. The growing economic, political, and military clout of India, therefore, is both the cause and the outcome of Indian policy behavior.

### **Stated Contours of Indian Foreign Policy**

From its beginning in 1947, India states that its foreign policy is derived from the principles of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence. The sentiments against colonization being very high at the time of its independence from the British Raj.<sup>15</sup> The themes of anti-imperialism and anti-colonization were used heavily in the statements of Indian leadership.<sup>16</sup> India supported decolonization in several parts of the world. Its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru advocated the policy of Panchsheel which consists of the following five principles.

1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
2. Non-aggression against each other.
3. Non-interference in each

other's internal affairs. 4. Equality and mutual benefit. 5. Peaceful co-existence.

These major themes were projected aggressively by India during the Cold War period. India was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement along with Egypt and other countries.

With regards to its neighbors, Prime Minister Modi also announced during his election campaign in both terms that his government will focus on its relations with its South Asian neighbors in what was termed as Neighborhood First policy.<sup>17</sup> The proactive policy is to reinvigorate Indian relations with its neighbors. As mentioned earlier, if India doesn't strengthen its relations with its neighbors, it can't extend its reach and influence into these states which may provide an opportunity for China to fill this vacuum.

On his oath-taking ceremony during the first term as Prime Minister, PM Modi invited all the South Asian heads of states to attend the ceremony. Next, he made official visits to all the South Asian countries starting from Bhutan, then Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka over a period of one year and made a stopover in Lahore, Pakistan on his way back to New Delhi from Kabul in December 2015. This was not an official visit, but he had an opportunity to discuss matters of mutual interest with the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif.

However, he failed to make a breakthrough with Pakistan. India does not look ready to accept Pakistan's role in the region. PM Modi is avoiding Pakistan as much as he wants to cooperate with other states in the region in his second tenure as the prime minister. A possible reason behind his reluctance to warm up to Pakistan could be the anti-Pakistan sentiments generated by the Hindutva ideology of the ruling BJP party.

### **Indian Foreign Policy in Practice**

Former Indian Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran in his book '*How India Sees the World*' writes that "the idea of making the subcontinent whole

again is a powerful driver of India's foreign policy behavior."<sup>18</sup> Indian strategic thought seems to have been heavily influenced by its history and geography. It still has the imprints of a whole of South Asia as one unit with the central power in the heart of India.

The earlier reference on its singular identity date back to the Maurya period when major areas of present-day India and adjoining countries were under the control of King Ashoka. The Maurya empire saw the world in terms of 11 circles, India being central to them. The core state, India, is a powerful one. Its immediate neighbors are natural enemies and the neighbors of the neighbors are considered allies. The tools of foreign policy vis-à-vis other states were the same (alliance), dana (gifts), danda (use of force), and bheda (dissension). A higher value was attached to mantra shakti (wise counsel) over the army. India follows these themes in its strategic vision today. It has played diplomacy effectively and used military when required. It has also supported dissension in neighboring countries to achieve policy objectives.

The Maurya empire lasted only for about a hundred years. India was subsequently again divided into several kingdoms. Five centuries later Chandragupta brought major parts of India under his command. Except for these two periods, India was never a unified political entity. Even during these periods, there were several autonomous states which retained their sovereignty by offering tribute to the emperor, subordinating their foreign policy and by offering their allegiance to him. When an emperor was weak these autonomous states asserted their independence.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, the claims of modern India as a single political entity are not based on merit. India may have been a single geographical unit but not a political one. Yet, these thoughts continue to influence Indian strategic behavior and policies regarding smaller South Asian states.

So, where do the policies of non-alignment and anti-imperialism fit in? These policies were not moored in idealist grounds, they were



carefully crafted keeping in view the external environment to achieve its policy goals. The policy of non-alignment was a clear manifestation of the Indian thought of having a distinct and powerful identity. With the non-aligned policy, India could deal with both the blocks of Cold War rivalries without being subordinate to either. Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland argue that “[non-alignment] appears less as a moral appeal—as is often argued—but rather as a pragmatic concern: India should develop internal balancing capabilities rather than subordinate its freedom to maneuver to either of the superpower blocs in order to truly retain its hard-fought independence.”<sup>20</sup>

Indian support of anti-imperialism was also based on realistic grounds rather than hinged on moral moorings. India might have supported anti-colonization in other parts of the world but during the course of its independence, India made several independent states as part of India using force, for example, Goa and Sikkim were integrated with the Indian territory in 1961 and 1975 respectively. These actions were on the pretext of consolidating power and denying any third state’s influence in its neighborhood. The annexation of Goa and Sikkim were pure realpolitik and achieved without much resistance in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It may be difficult to repeat these actions today. Nevertheless, the Indian idea remains unchanged: to manage the region according to its own national interests.

Shyam Saran adds that the resolution of its security concerns is a challenge for India in a divided subcontinent. For this, he says there are only two ways. First, India should be powerful enough to impose its perspective on others and secondly by framing a political, economic, cultural and security policies so on to create a web of interdependencies. India being the largest in all the material terms (economic and military) could have an advantage over its neighbors by such measures and a step towards expanding its influence beyond the region.<sup>21</sup>

To reach beyond its territorial limits, India first has to influence the internal policies of its neighbors which is not easily achievable in respect of every South Asian country. India sees Pakistan as a hurdle in its outreach towards Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> India managed to weaken Pakistan in 1971 by helping in the creation of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, India is aware that its ability to deal with the United States and Beijing can be augmented if it has a greater influence in South Asian states.<sup>23</sup> Thus, South Asia is the take-off point for India's dominance in the region and beyond.

Another reason behind Indian efforts to become a dominant power is to deny China any grounds in the South Asian region. India often blames China of interfering in its neighboring states to influence them against India. Chinese investments in South Asia are seen in India as a threat to its security. For example, the Chinese investments in the development of infrastructure in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. It doesn't want China to have a role in its neighborhood.

After the signing of the India-US Nuclear deal in 2005, India found new confidence in its actions. India started branding Pakistan as the sponsor of terrorism inside its territory and presented itself as a victim of terrorism. This policy helped it in attaining the sympathy of the world's major powers and align itself with the emerging external environment. Its actions have become bolder and more strident on the pretext of countering terrorism. This was demonstrated during the 2001-2 military Standoff and later events between India and Pakistan during the Uri and Pulwama crisis. India is following the policy of unilateralism in achieving its national interests. It is also taking unilateral actions in Kashmir which is a UN-recognized bilateral issue between India and Pakistan; as manifested in ending the special status of Indian held Kashmir. The regional multilateral forums like the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are dead. The primary reason behind SAARC's could be the Indian equation with Pakistan. Instead, it is promoting the BIMSTEC where it dominates the decision-making.

Nevertheless, India was keen to present an image of a law-abiding and peaceful nation to the international community, yet it had been forceful and assertive in its stances. Its Ministry of External Affairs and diplomatic missions abroad have helped mitigate the negative consequences of its several actions by tactfully hiding its realpolitik ambitions. From forcefully integrating states to testing weapons like Intercontinental Ballistic Missile and anti-satellite missile tests, India has met little to no global resistance on its contestable policies. When India is not able to exercise the use of force it uses its influence and diplomatic clout to achieve its objectives. For example, after the Mumbai attacks in 2008, India lobbied to show Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism which the world community should boycott and punish. Pakistan's weak global standing and accusations of providing safe havens to the Afghan Taliban from the United States.

However, under the BJP government, the policy of using only diplomatic tools to counter Pakistan came under scrutiny. Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, in one of his important speeches laid down the contours of the BJP government's foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> He emphasized greater realism in foreign policy to take into account the realities of hard security, focus on economic development, nurturing Indian independence, high risk-taking foreign policy for greater results, and a more accurate understanding of the global environment to make the right decisions.<sup>25</sup>

Among other noteworthy points raised the speech was his emphasis on the bold and risk-taking approach. He termed Indian response to the 2008 Mumbai attack under the Congress government as "lack of response" and appreciated the use of military force in the Uri and Balakot crisis under the BJP's government.<sup>26</sup> Events like Uri, Balakot, abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A removing the special status of Kashmir, the controversial Citizen Act Amendment and the rise of ultra-right into the Indian political mainstream are the manifestation of BJP's policies. These also show that India is confident of its power to undertake such measures without fear of global repercussions.

## **Indian Foreign Policy Application vis-à-vis its Neighbors**

This section briefly studies major events in India's dealings with its neighbors.

**Pakistan:** Pakistan is the biggest challenge to India regionally. India has behaved like a big power that is unwilling to share power with other regional countries. Pakistan was carved out of South Asia as a new country during the partition of the region when Britain decided to withdraw from the Indian sub-continent in 1947. India did not accept its creation and saw Pakistan as unnatural and hoped that the division would have a short span of time. In order to achieve this objective, India managed to make the survival of the new state difficult by every possible mean. India delayed giving the latter's share of military and financial assets as per terms of partition. The partition also left several other territorial and water issues unresolved. Issues including Kashmir and unjust distribution of resources sowed the seeds of the distrust between both the newly independent states.

Both countries went to war in 1948, 1965, 1971, and Kargil in 1999. They also faced multiple other crises since their independence. India managed to dismember Pakistan in 1971 by first instigating and supporting the insurgency in its eastern wing called East Pakistan and later attacking Pakistani territory with a large military force. Lately, India has also supported insurgents in Pakistan mainly the Tahreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch separatists. Pakistan also arrested several people in Gilgit-Baltistan for having ties with Indian Intelligence R&AW which points towards the Indian interest in the area due to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>27</sup> However, Kashmir remains the paramount unresolved issue between India and Pakistan. PM Modi's policies of integrating Kashmir with India and abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A, which gave special status to Kashmir, have further strained India-Pakistan relations.<sup>28</sup>

**Nepal:** India and Nepal are close neighbors sharing culture, religion, and history. They have also close people-to-people contacts. Both

countries signed the Treaty of Friendship and the Treaty of Trade and Commerce in 1950. However, since Indian independence in 1947, the relations between both countries have seen many upheavals. Nepal has been suspicious of Indian policy of supporting opposition forces in the country and sees it as an interference in Nepalese internal matters.<sup>29</sup> The persistence of this policy has led to the rise of anti-Indian sentiments in the country.

During the 1950s, India intervened in Nepal's internal affairs and pressurized the Rana regime to liberalize the political system by allowing the Indian backed Nepali Congress into the political system. Indian backed forces called for an armed revolution against the Rana regime. The first People's government was established by the opposition forces. Five transitional governments were formed before the elections in 1959 in which Congress emerged as the majority party. However, the government ended in 1960 and a party-less Panchayat system under the king continued until 1990. During the Sino-India War in 1962, Nepal got some breathing space and extracted some concessions from India. India on its part decreased its support to opposition forces in Nepal.

India also sees Nepal with Chinese influence in Nepal in its mind. India fears close Chinese-Nepal relations would decrease its influence in the country. Nepal and China signed an agreement of friendly relations with China in 1956. China built a strategic road between Kathmandu and Kodari on the China-Nepal border. Meanwhile, Nepal signed a trade agreement with Pakistan in 1962.

India blocked transits for Nepal in 1989 due to issues of transit agreements. Nepal experienced a shortage of life essential items and fuel. According to an archived New York Times article of April 11, 1989, the blockade was also due to Nepal's growing relations with China and arms purchase from the latter.<sup>30</sup> India termed these Nepalese actions violations of the Treaty of Friendship of 1950.<sup>31</sup>

Nepal experienced political turmoil and instability throughout the 1990s. After the agitation by pro-democracy forces in 1990, the Monarch agreed to hold new elections which the Congress won. Meanwhile, Maoists started a revolt to end the monarchy. The monarchy ended in 2007 as part of a peace deal with Maoists.<sup>32</sup>

The political, territorial, trade and transit issues between Nepal and India continue to affect their relationship to date. In 2015, Nepal accused India of trade blockade for its adoption of a new constitution in Nepal.<sup>33</sup> India objected to it by stating that it doesn't represent the Madheshis, the Janajatis, and the Tharus people.<sup>34</sup> India stated that these tensions could spill out into the Indian state of Bihar.<sup>35</sup>

Nepal is, however, trying to move away from Indian influence and hedge against interference in its internal affairs by signing agreements with its only other neighbor China. After the unofficial blockade by India, the Nepali Prime Minister went to China and signed trade and transit agreements.<sup>36</sup>

Nepal has been the classical case of Indian policies of coercion against a smaller neighbor from the very beginning. India used several tools to influence the Nepalese governments when they showed an inclination to follow an independent course in their foreign affairs and internal policies. India wants to have a bigger say in Nepalis affairs for primarily three reasons. First, India sees itself as the biggest power in South Asia it thinks it is natural to influence the policies of its smaller neighbors. Second, for security reasons, India thinks that it must have a bigger role in Nepal's relations with other countries especially China and Pakistan. India believes both the countries can influence and use Nepal against it. Lastly, Nepal has huge water resources and India receives water into its rivers from Nepal. Nepal also has the huge potential for hydro-power which India hopes to use for its own needs. Other than water resources, Nepal has also minerals that can be beneficial to India.

**Bangladesh:** The Indian interference and role in the creation of Bangladesh set the stage for an assertive Indian role in the affairs of newly independent Bangladesh. India has interfered in the internal politics of Bangladesh from the time of the latter's creation as a separate state from Pakistan. The instrument of surrender was signed between the Indian and Pakistani general. On this plea, the Indian army took away all the major weaponry with it from Bangladesh. These weapons were never returned to Bangladesh. The Bengali freedom fighters who were earlier supported by India were, thereafter, forced to surrender their weapons to India.<sup>37</sup>

Bangladesh has two mainstream parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party. India has historically supported the Awami League. The Awami League is seen as a pro-Indian and the BNP is considered to be anti-Indian in outlook. The nature of India-Bangladesh relations is also determined by the party in power in Bangladesh.

Another major issue that still haunts Bangladesh is the water issue. India built the Farakka barrage in the 1970s to divert water from the Ganges River into West Bengal. After the independence of Bangladesh, it signed an agreement with India to limit the operation of the barrage and its trial run from 21 April to 31 May 1975. However, India violated the agreement and continued the diversion of water to the detriment of Bangladesh's economy until 1996. A water-sharing arrangement was subsequently signed in 1996 between the prime ministers of India and Bangladesh. This agreement would be operational for the next thirty years. The unilateral diversion of water is seen in Bangladesh as a case of a bigger power disregarding the rights and needs of its smaller neighbor.<sup>38</sup>

Bangladesh has frequently objected to the Indian trade and tariff policies against it. The bilateral trade balance is largely in India's favor and growing every year. According to the Bangladesh Bank's data, its imports from India were about \$6.036 billion against total exports of

\$456.6 million only in 2017.<sup>39</sup> To discourage imports from Bangladesh, India has put several non-tariff barriers including lab tests of each consignment of food and other products. However, Bangladesh continues to seek favorable access to the Indian market.

India and Bangladesh have had land and maritime border disputes. Both have independent enclaves in each other's territory. The land border agreement was signed during PM Modi's visit to Bangladesh in 2015. The maritime boundary dispute, however, remains unresolved till date.

**Sri Lanka:** The Tamils led insurgency has been the dominating issue in India and Sri Lanka. Tamils are a small ethnic group (11.2%) in Sri Lanka who started an armed insurgency against the Sri Lankan government in the 1980s which continued for the next three decades. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and several other groups were active during this period. Tamils are in majority in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Government of India and people and the regional government of Tamil Nadu showed great interest in the affairs of Tamils living in Sri Lanka and used the opportunity to destabilize Sri Lanka. Indian intelligence, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) provided the initial arms, training, and monetary support from 1983 onward.<sup>40</sup> One important reason for the support of Tamils was the growing Sri Lankan relations with countries other than India, like China, Pakistan and western countries.<sup>41</sup> Thus, there was a need to have leverage over Colombo.

India claims that its involvement in the civil war was necessary due to the threat it posed to Indian national unity and territorial integrity.<sup>42</sup> India feared that it could spill into its Tamil areas for the demand of a greater independent Tamil state. At a time when Sri Lanka claimed a near victory against the separatists, India provided aid to Tamil areas through air-dropped food and other items.

India pressurized Sri Lanka to sign an agreement for a constitutional amendment giving rights to Tamils. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the Sri



Lankan constitution for the devolution of power to the Tamils was passed in 1987. India also sent the Indian Peacekeeping Force to oversee the implementation of the agreement. While other groups agreed to put down their arms, the LTTE refused. The central government in India may have stopped active support to LTTE but the state government in Tamil Nadu continued the support. IPKF and LTTE fought for three more years until the IPKF was accused of human rights violations and withdrawn in 1990.

Their bilateral relationship further deteriorated when India supported the UN Human Rights Council resolution urging Sri Lanka to conduct a probe into alleged war crimes in the civil war with Tamil Tiger separatists in 2009, 2012 and 2013. Prime Minister Modi visited Tamil areas during his visit to Sri Lanka to demonstrate Indian connection with them.<sup>43</sup> Modi handed over 50,000 homes to Tamil people and supported the Tamil cause.

Apart from its role in managing and controlling Tamil issues in Sri Lanka, India sees itself engaged in a competition with China for strategic influence in Sri Lanka. Lately, China has invested heavily in the infrastructure development of Sri Lanka which India considers would decrease Indian influence in the country, pushing Sri Lanka further into Chinese arms. Pakistan's role in ending the militant conflict in Sri Lanka is also an important factor. Sri Lankan military enjoys warm ties with its Pakistan counterpart. Sri Lankan military officers are regularly trained in Pakistan's military institutions among other things.

**Myanmar:** Indian special forces entered the Myanmar territory on June 10, 2015, after the National Socialist Council of Nagaland killed 18 Indian Army men in the Indian state of Manipur on June 04, 2015. India claimed to have destroyed a militant's camp and killed as many as 38 militants in a short operation.<sup>44</sup> The Government of Myanmar categorically and unambiguously stated that the operation had not been carried out within its international borders.<sup>45</sup> Following the

cross-border raid, Junior Minister for Information and Broadcasting Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore said that "we [India] will carry out surgical strikes at the place and time of our own choosing" based on intelligence.<sup>46</sup> He said it was only the beginning and the message should go everywhere that India was strong. Some observers noted that the operation was nothing new as India had conducted such operations in Myanmar in the past too. However, the media had played it big this time.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, after the operation, India projected its image of an assertive power in the region.

Multiple factors drive India's dealing with Myanmar. It has to balance growing Chinese influence; counter non-traditional threats as discussed above and gain from the captivating economic interests.<sup>48</sup> India has supported the democratic forces during the 1962 military coup.<sup>49</sup> Due to this support to pro-democracy forces and the rule of the military in Myanmar for the next decades, their bilateral relations remained fraught and started to improve only in the 1990s.

**Maldives:** The Indian policy of intervention dates back to the failed 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives. India sent its military on the request of Maldives president to help squash the attempt by the pro-Eelam group. Although the intervention was on the request of the Maldivian President, Abdul Gayoom, nevertheless it demonstrated Indian unwillingness to have a role in the internal affairs of its neighboring countries. Indian also hurried to intervene due to the fear of other big powers entering India's neighborhood.<sup>50</sup> The US had also supported India in its action.

In recent years, India has engaged in a competition with China for expanding its sphere of influence into the Maldives due to the geostrategic importance of the country. Maldives' location is an important point on sea routes in the Indian Ocean. China has invested heavily in the country's infrastructure and development. It has supported the Maldivian presidents Muhammad Nasheed and later Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the past. Both presidents are considered

pro-India. While China supported the Abdulla Yameen during his tenure. India-Maldives relations deteriorated during the Abdulla Yameen regime. India openly opposed him as PM Modi omitted the Maldives tour from his South Asian tour. During the Yameen crackdown on opposition in 2018, the opposition leaders including Muhammad Nasheed called for Indian help, however, India was reportedly deterred from intervening this time due to the Chinese support to President Yameen.<sup>51</sup> China had opposed unilateral intervention in the affairs of the country. After the Maldives elections later in 2018 pro-India Mohamed Solih won and declared India as the closest ally.<sup>52</sup> India-Maldives relations enjoy ups and downs with the relevant leadership in power.

**Bhutan:** Bhutan is another case where India has tried to influence the conduct of another state's foreign policy. The foundation was laid in a treaty when India agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of the country while retaining the right to influence the foreign relations in 1949. Bhutan considers itself as a sandwich between two big powers. Indian military thinks it is virtually responsible for the protection of Bhutan from any external threat. This led to 72 days long standoff between India and China in 2017 when China wanted to construct a road in the Dokhlam area which is claimed by Bhutan. India entered the area and opposed the road construction on behalf of the Bhutanese government.<sup>53</sup> China views it as the border is between Bhutan and itself, therefore, considering India has no right to intervene. It also stated that the Indian action had not only violated China's territorial sovereignty but also challenged Bhutan's sovereignty and independence.<sup>54</sup> Bhutan, meanwhile, followed the policy of caution to avoid offending either of its big neighbors.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, China and India agreed to scale down tensions and withdrew from the area on August 28, 2017.<sup>56</sup>

## **Analysis**

The brief analysis of bilateral relationships between India and its smaller neighbors shows that India supported a certain political

section against others in all its neighbors especially in Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka; or it has preferred to foster a relationship, not with the state but a political actor in the same country. Secondly, it has used its overwhelming military power against Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and unsuccessfully against Pakistan. The objective of the use of force in each instance was, nevertheless, the projection of India's role as the regional supreme power and policeman.

These Indian actions of creating and maintaining dominance over its neighbors are causing instability in the region. The countries are already less connected with each other economically and politically. In addition, policies like control and domination remain a constant source of division. For example, political disputes have hindered trade between India and Pakistan, the two major South Asian powers. Due to Indian military actions like in Myanmar and against Pakistan in 2019, smaller neighbors remain suspicious of Indian motives. This adds to their insecurity vis-à-vis India.

## **Conclusion**

India's big size, lack of contiguity among its smaller neighbors, and its big power ambitions have had a huge impact on the security, economic and political landscape of South Asia. In order to maintain its natural advantage of size against its neighbors, it first had to establish itself and be recognized by the international community, as the dominant power in South Asia. It has, therefore, made conscious efforts to discourage its neighbors from strengthening trade and political relations among themselves. It has used economic incentives, diplomatic pressure, and trade blockade as instruments to constrict space for these states in the conduct of their security and foreign policies.

India's blockade of supply routes to Nepal in 2015 and earlier 1989 caused serious shortages of coal, oil, medicines and other essential goods in the Himalayan state. India was unhappy with Nepal for

exploring new foreign policy avenues and opening communication lines with China. Despite growing China-Nepal relations in the last decade, India has used its political influence to pressurize Nepal. Similarly, using political pressure and deployment of military force India was able to integrate Sikkim, an independent state, into India in 1975.

Besides the natural advantage that geography had bestowed on India, complexities have been added to the security environment in South Asia by India's ambitions to play a role of big power and have an assertive role at the global stage; where it has refused to be treated in the manner in which India has treated its other smaller South Asian neighbors. Consequently, tensions between India and Pakistan have prevailed for the last seven decades. Both being nuclear powers, neither one can take the risk to initiate a major war. Uneasy peace and tensions between them are likely to persist in the near future. Furthermore, the role of global powers like the US enhancing India's military power have added to the security problems of smaller states of South Asia.

## Endnotes

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