

(Re)Emerging India?

Article by Gazi Hassan



Image courtesy AP

With the forces of globalisation blurring the lines between sovereignty and interdependence, the world is at a point where bilateralism and multilateralism have become the need of the hour. In the international system, there exists a dynamic relationship between the nations, where traditional enemies can become allies and allies can turn hostile to each other. The region of South Asia is emerging as a pivot for changing international politics in a significant manner. India being the largest country both in terms of area and population in the region has to sustain its dominance by exerting soft power to wean away the rising popularity of China. The Chinese influence has been on the rise and in order to cope with it, India has to carefully frame its policy to protect its national interests in the South Asian region. The political developments in various countries of the region highlighted below and India's response to them will make grounds for robustness in policy making.

Sri Lanka

After several months of political drama, normalcy has returned to Sri Lanka. Political crisis broke out in the country in October 2018, when the sitting President Maithripala Sirisena dissolved the Parliament and dismissed his Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on account of allegedly plotting to assassinate him and undermining national interests. Sirisena replaced him with Mahinda Rajapaksa, former President and current member of the opposition. Wickremesinghe refused to step down and decided not to leave the official residence. The Sri Lankan Parliament was engulfed in chaos and even witnessed violence as legislators punched, kicked and hurled chairs at each other. In an attempt to arrest anarchy, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court on December 14 ruled the dissolution of the Parliament as illegal and ordered President Sirisena to reappoint Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister.

In the meantime, the changing political dynamics in Sri Lanka brought India and China into the relief of the competition. India sees Ranil Wickremesinghe as catering to India's interests best, while China has a long-standing relationship with Mahinda Rajapaksa. So, when the decision to dismiss Wickremesinghe and install Rajapaksa was taken, the Indian government issued a statement, "Hope that democratic values and constitutional process will be respected," whereas the Chinese ambassador in Colombo hailed Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister. This is not surprising at all as Rajapaksa, during his tenure as the President of Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2015, had made several trips to Beijing and had signed various economic and security agreements with China. Even during his brief tenure in the follow-up to the recent events, he signed two infrastructural project deals with Beijing.

India was relieved with the reinstatement of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister and lauded the resilience of the Sri Lankan democracy, while China greeted with obvious silence. As far as India is concerned, the reluctance for diplomatic manoeuvring advocates that India no longer remains a traditional heavyweight of the region, whereas China has become an undisputed master in the ring.

China has been flexing its muscles whether on economic terms or in the security domain in South Asia, hitherto a region dominated by India since the 19th century. China that until very recently had hardly any formal relations with the countries in the region is now

a predominant power capable of providing economic assistance and making crucial investments in the region. India, on the other hand, has lost its status of being a 'big brother' fulfilling the economic and security interests of its smaller neighbours.

Bangladesh

India is closely following the developments in neighbouring Bangladesh and hopes that incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina retains power, despite her being seen as drifting towards totalitarianism. New Delhi maintains good relations with Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party. However, since 2014, Hasina has been undermining the state institutions allegedly interfering with the courts, suppressing student protests and curtailing freedom of expression. This has raised eyebrows in the western world, while India chose to overlook and signed various bilateral agreements with the Government of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, headed by Khaleda Zia, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, is considered as the main political opponent of Awami League. But India considers Zia's party as anti-India, having ties with Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and much leaning towards China. India also alleges Jamaat of financing and arming terrorists in the Northeast. It is highly unlikely that New Delhi will raise objections over the erosion of democracy in Bangladesh, as long as Hasina is in power, safeguarding India's security and economic interests.

Maldives

Before the transition of power, Maldives was a gone case for India. Its former President Abdulla Yameen was drawing his country closer to China. In March 2018, the island nation witnessed a political crisis when Yameen imposed a state of emergency in the country and defied a Supreme Court order to release 12 legislators and nine political opponents. However, after winning a contentious election in September 2018, the current President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, has turned new pages in the country's relations with India. He has vowed to affirm his government's India First Policy, clearly giving India the much-needed impetus for strengthening bilateral relations on a merit basis. Now, the onus is on India to harness this potential of the newly tilted balance in its favour in Maldives.

Nepal

India has not shied away from interfering in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, particularly Nepal. In 1989, when the King of Nepal reached out to China for military assistance and recently when Nepal began to draft its constitution, India interfered with a free hand in order to influence the developments. India had even imposed on Nepal a crippling economic blockade, forcing the country to include ethnic minority rights in its newly drafted constitution, a move that backfired immediately, paving the way for the formation of a communist coalition government that moved closer to China. There is growing concern regarding India's interference in Nepal, which the Nepalese see as an imposition of India based rule system.

India's inefficiency in the timely completion of the promised projects has further led Nepal closer to China, which has been supporting the country through economic and infrastructural development aids. In this sense, China has been quicker to recognise the importance of economic ties in the region. India is yet to discard using labels such as 'anti-India' and 'pro-India' in order to deal with similar situations effectively, if it wants to emerge as a powerful and reliable force in the region.

Iran

India and Iran had arrived at a commercial contract, wherein India will help with infrastructural development and regional connectivity. The contract includes the development of a port in Chabahar in the Gulf of Oman. This agreement is part of a much broader trilateral agreement signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan. The port development will facilitate India's access to the oil-rich Central Asian countries and provide an alternate access route to Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan. As the US is also preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan, the onus is on India to fill the void before Pakistan and China can make any inroads into Afghanistan. India is seen as a potential player to assist Afghanistan in its journey towards institutionalisation and democratisation.

Bhutan

The Doklam crisis of mid-2017 has reaffirmed the special relations between Bhutan and India. India's response to the crisis earned it much praise from the Bhutanese, who have always cherished its age-old relationship with India. When newly elected Bhutanese Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering visited India on his maiden foreign trip, it spoke volumes on Bhutan's leaning towards India. Wide ranging talks between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Dr. Lotay reflected the spirit of trust, cooperation and understanding between them. Modi also announced Rs. 4500-crore financial assistance to Bhutan for its 12th five-year plan in continuance of India's long-held policy of providing financial assistance to the country. China is pulling all stops to woo Bhutan by providing necessary infrastructure to harness its hydroelectric potential. Hence, India should be cautious of China and must stand firm in its commitment to Bhutan.

Finding India's Lost Glory

The rising assertiveness of China in South Asia has galvanised India's policy makers. India can no longer take China's dominance in the region for granted. It has to deliver more, better and faster economic as well as military assistance to its smaller neighbours, keeping with its 'Neighbourhood First' policy. India should take advantage of its pivotal location in the Indo-Pacific to reaffirm its position in the Indian Ocean region. The hegemonic dream of India in the region is long gone now. India can no longer dictate terms by using hard power. The best India can do is use soft power and good offices to placate its neighbours. To regain the predominance that India enjoyed in the past, it has to adapt to the competing environment in the region. India has to reckon whether it is an emerging or a re-emerging force that can help it regain its lost position in the region.

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