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India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy

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This article is based on “There is no happy end-state in India’s relations with its neighbours” which was published in Indian Express on 29/09/2020. It talks about challenges and way forwards in India’s relations with its neighbours.

There has been a debate amongst the Indian foreign policy intelligentsia that India in the recent years has been losing clout in its neighbourhood. This can be seen from the prism of strategic challenges posed by China & Pakistan, tussle with Nepal, Bangladesh & Srilanka and uncertainty in Afghanistan.

However, a deeper look at India’s regional diplomacy suggests the significant geopolitical changes in the region have hampered a stable neighbourhood policy.

Therefore, in pursuit of establishing a peaceful regional order, India should timely respond to emerging regional problems, preventing small issues from becoming big, and aligning its regional economic policy with natural geographic advantages.

Historical Perspective of India’s Regional Policy

- **Before Independence:** India under British had an extended period of India’s regional primacy. As the regional expression of the then sole superpower, British Raj exercised a hegemony not only over the littoral neighbourhood but across the Indian ocean region.
 - On the continental side, the British Raj surrounded itself with a series of buffer states and protectorates and often projected military power beyond them.
 - Also, the Indian Ocean was dominated by the Royal Navy and the Indian Army. This allowed the British to develop new port cities (from Aden to Hong Kong) and construct trans-regional connectivity through roads and railways.

- **After Independence:** The notion of regional primacy certainly persisted in the Nehruvian era —seen in the three security treaties that the first prime minister signed with Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal during 1949-50.

However, as India got involved in border conflicts with Pakistan & China and also due to persisting poor economic policies, its influence in the neighbourhood got marginalised.

- **Resurgence of Regional Influence:** After the 1991 economic reforms, Indian economy boomed and its relations with superpowers like the US and Europe improved.

This allowed India to reestablish its assertion in its neighbourhood.

Challenges To Regional Diplomacy

- **Divided Subcontinent on the Religious Lines:** The problems generated by the partition of India divided the subcontinent on religious lines. This continues to affect regional integration even today.

Further, challenges of settling boundaries, sharing river-waters, protecting the rights of minorities, and easing the flow of goods and people, affects regional diplomacy.

- **Emergence of China:** China annexed Tibet 1950-51, this marked the arrival of China at the Indo-Tibetan frontier. This profoundly transformed the geopolitical condition of India.

Beyond the bilateral territorial dispute between India and China, the emergence of a powerful state on India's frontiers affected India's relationship with its neighbouring countries.

- **Closed Economic Model:** Independent India's conscious choice was in favour of protectionism, which led to a steady deterioration of commercial connectivity with the neighbours.

- **Influence of Domestic Politics:** India's domestic politics always had an impact on our regional policy. The same is true of our neighbours, whose domestic politics impact their engagement with India. For example:

- Issue of Tamils has been a dominant factor in India's Sri Lanka policy.
- West-Bengal's Chief Minister pulled out of the Teesta Waters agreement between India And Bangladesh.

Way Forward

Policy of the Government of India towards neighbors is encapsulated in the phrase, '**Neighborhood First**'. However, in order to fully realise this vision, India and other countries in neighbourhood must realise that anything that happens in one country will affect the other countries in the neighborhood. In this context:

- **Policy Non-interference:** The size of India is an important factor in the way our neighbors view India and its policies. India accounts for a major chunk of the land area, population, economic activity, resources, of South Asia.
 - Therefore, India needs to be conscious of its neighbors discomfort of having to deal with a big neighbor and must follow the policy of non-interference in domestic affairs.
 - Similarly, neighbouring countries must ensure their relations with other countries must not undermine strategic interest of India.
- **Establishing a Border Commission:** Demarcation of India external boundaries is yet to be completed. Resolution of border disputes will pave way for stable regional integration.

Thus, India must strive for resolution of border by establishing a border commission.
- **Broader Lens of Foreign Policy Goals:** Integrating India's regional economic and foreign policy remains a major challenge. Therefore, India should resist compromising bilateral relationships with neighbours for short economic interests.

Further, the countries in India's neighbourhood should strive for economic integration that has helped countries to overcome their political differences by creating economic interdependencies.
- **Improving Regional Connectivity:** India's economic reorientation since 1991 and the rediscovery of regionalism did open possibilities for reconnecting with its neighbours.

Thus, connectivity must be pursued with greater vigour while security concerns are addressed through cost-effective, efficient and reliable technological measures which are in use in other parts of the world.
- **Implementing Gujral's Doctrine:** India's neighbourhood policy should be based on the principles of Gujral Doctrine. This would ensure India's stature and strength cannot be isolated from the quality of its relations with its neighbours and there can be regional growth as well.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the challenges which India must deal with in its neighbourhood will become more complex and even threatening compared to two decades ago. But neighbourhood first policy must be anchored in the sustained engagement at all levels of the political and people to people levels, building upon the deep cultural affinities which are unique to India's relations with its neighbours.

Drishti Mains Question

“A deeper look at India’s regional diplomacy suggests the significant geopolitical changes in the region have hampered a stable neighbourhood policy”. Discuss
