



India's Challenges in South Asia

This editorial is based on [“India’s growing neighbourhood dilemmas”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 08/12/2023. The article discusses the challenges and opportunities that India faces in its neighbourhood, especially in the context of the changing regional and global dynamics.

For Prelims: [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), South Asia Region

For Mains: Dilemmas before India in Current Geopolitics, China’s advantage over India, Reasons behind the emergence of these dilemmas, and Way forward

Indian foreign policy faces a major challenge in its own neighborhood. While India aims to play a significant role globally, especially in leading the global South and becoming a key player in world politics, its efforts are hindered by difficulties in its immediate surroundings. **The South Asian region, where India is situated, is not enthusiastic about aligning with India's ambitions. In fact, it seems to be holding India back, partly due to the emergence of a powerful neighbor in the region,** presenting a unique and challenging situation for India, unlike anything it has experienced before.

John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism: John Mearsheimer is a prominent international relations theorist known for his theory of offensive realism.

- Offensive realism posits that the international system is inherently anarchic and that states should prioritize their own security and survival by seeking to maximize their power relative to other states.
- Mearsheimer argues that **states are driven by the pursuit of dominance and that this pursuit leads to competition, insecurity,** and ultimately conflict.

What are the Dilemmas before India in Current Geopolitics?

- India faces several dilemmas in its neighborhood, each presenting unique challenges. These dilemmas can be categorized into three main types:
 - **Political Dilemma:**
 - **Anti-India Regimes:** One of the key dilemmas is the rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia. For instance, in the Maldives, the new government has taken an anti-India stance, explicitly asking Indian troops to leave.
 - **Potential Ideological Shifts:** The upcoming elections in Bangladesh, with the possibility of a Khaleda Zia-led government, add another layer to India's political dilemma.

- The fear is that such a government could be ideologically anti-India, complicating diplomatic relations and regional stability.
- **Structural Dilemma:**
 - **Chinese Influence:** India faces a structural dilemma due to the increasing influence of China in South Asia. China's growing presence poses a challenge to India's regional dominance and influence. **As China becomes a significant economic and political player in the region, it attracts nations seeking material benefits.**
 - The structural shift makes it difficult for India to compete effectively in meeting the material needs of its neighbors, leading them to tilt towards China.
- **Normative Dilemma:**
 - **Changing Regional Dynamics:** Historically, India has approached the region with a normative and political stance. However, **China's emergence as a non-normative alternative challenges India's traditional calculus.**
 - China's **approach of being a 'norms-free-zone' disrupts the dynamics of South Asian diplomacy**, as states in the region may find it attractive to align with a power that doesn't impose normative conditions.
 - **Limited Choices:** The absence of viable alternatives for South Asian states creates a dilemma. With China offering a non-normative alternative, **India faces the challenge of adapting its approach to accommodate the changing dynamics in the region.** This shift challenges India's historical dominance in setting norms and political expectations in its neighborhood.

How does China stand out from India?

- **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Economic Influence:** China's active engagement in the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#) and other projects has resulted in a growing entanglement of smaller states in the region.
 - The BRI is a massive infrastructure and economic development project that involves investments in various countries, enhancing connectivity and trade.
 - China's **financial capabilities and commitment** to these initiatives **give it a significant advantage over India.**
 - While India also engages in regional economic projects, China's deeper pockets enable a more substantial impact and influence in the region.
- **Outreach to South Asian States:** China has demonstrated a **proactive approach in reaching out to South Asian states**, even when other international players might avoid or abandon them for normative or other reasons.
 - Notable instances include **China's engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar, and [crisis-hit Sri Lanka](#).**
 - India also engages in diplomatic outreach, but the scale and financial backing of China's efforts contribute to a more significant overall impact in the region.
- **Border Dispute Resolution Strategy:** China's approach to **settling border disputes with its neighbors, excluding India, is a distinct strategy aimed at winning over the region.** By resolving issues, such as the case of Bhutan, China seeks to establish itself as a reliable and cooperative partner.
 - India, too, has engaged in efforts to resolve border disputes, but the specific focus and strategy employed by China contribute to its unique standing in the region.

Why does India face these Dilemmas?

- **Diminishing Presence of the United States:** The first cause is the changing regional geopolitical architecture, marked by the diminishing presence of the United States in South Asia.
 - Historically, the U.S. was a geopolitical constant in the region. Although **its presence was not always advantageous for India, its departure is considered disadvantageous.**
 - The absence of the United States has created a power vacuum, allowing other players, notably China, to fill the void.
- **Rise of China as a Geopolitical Buffer:** The second cause is the aggressive and substantial rise of China. **China's emergence as a major geopolitical player in the region has served as a**

"geopolitical buffer" for smaller states.

- These states have increasingly **utilized the "China card" in their foreign policy**, aligning themselves strategically with China.
- This shift is seen as a response to the power vacuum left by the United States and reflects a dynamic where neighboring states are more inclined to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis India but show a different inclination when it comes to China.
- **Neighbours' Strategic Autonomy and China's Appeal:** The third cause relates to the strategic choices made by neighboring states. While **these states may desire strategic autonomy in their relationships, there is limited enthusiasm** for asserting this autonomy in dealings with China.
 - The rise of China as a powerful player in the region **has made smaller states more adept at leveraging their relationships with both India and China** to pursue their interests.
 - This dynamic poses a challenge for India's efforts to engage with its neighbors and maintain influence in the region.

What could be the Result of this Geopolitical Shift?

The net result, or one that could potentially develop overtime, is somewhat alarming. If India does not take innovative measures, there is a good chance that it will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia.

What should India do?

- **Engage Friendly External Actors:** India should continue to **strengthen its bilateral and multilateral ties with its neighbours**, based on mutual respect, trust, and cooperation.
 - India should **emphasize its historical, cultural, and economic links with the region**, and offer its assistance and partnership in areas such as trade, connectivity, development, security, and disaster management.
 - India should aim to **be a reliable and constructive partner for its neighbours**, and not a domineering or hegemonic power.
- **Flexible Diplomacy:** Indian diplomacy should be **adaptable to involve various stakeholders in neighboring countries**. The essence of diplomacy lies in reducing the hostility of anti-India elements, rather than harboring hatred towards them.
 - It is wise to **engage with the current leaders, but limiting engagement solely to those in power is unwise**.
- **Expand Diplomatic Personnel:** India should invest more resources and personnel in its diplomatic pursuits, as suggested by the information you provided. India should increase the number and quality of its diplomats, who can effectively represent and advance India's interests and values in the region and beyond.
 - India should also **enhance its public diplomacy and cultural outreach, by showcasing its achievements, diversity, and soft power**, and by facilitating people-to-people exchanges and interactions.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy in South Asia faces crucial challenges amid China's rise and shifting dynamics. To navigate this, India should prioritize economic connectivity, boost regional security cooperation, and use soft power for positive relationships. Strategic communication, active participation in regional platforms, and a patient, long-term vision are vital for India to be a stabilizing force in the evolving South Asian landscape.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the geopolitical challenges faced by India in its immediate neighborhood. How can India navigate these challenges to strengthen its influence in South Asia, considering the rise of China and the changing dynamics of the region?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains:

Q. 'China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia'. In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbour. **(2017)**

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