

For a better South Asian Neighbourhood

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Ukraine conflict, developments in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan underline need to reframe regional ties, work with the logic of geography in Subcontinent.

Recent developments — in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan — underline the geographic imperative that binds India to its neighbours in the Subcontinent. Together, they should remind the region's leaders that working with the logic of geography has become an unavoidable necessity amidst the deepening regional and global crises accentuated by Russia's war in Ukraine.

As higher oil and food prices trigger inflation and popular unrest across the region, more intensive regional cooperation is one of the tools for managing the new dangers. The last few weeks have seen some positive trends in that direction as well as enduring negative policies that defy the logic of geography.

Last week, the Indian High Commission in Colombo was quick to scotch wild speculation that the former strongman prime minister of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapaksa was fleeing to India. We don't know if Mahinda Rajapaksa, a target of the people's outrage for the terrible mismanagement of the economy, was actually planning to take a short flight out of Lanka. If he did, India would be the natural first destination given the geographic proximity.

Now put on the exit control list in Colombo, Mahinda might not be travelling any time soon to India and pay his regular obeisance to his favourite deity, Lord Venkateswara in the Tirumala hills. But India has had a long tradition of hosting political exiles from the region. Whether it was the Dalai Lama from Tibet or Prachanda from Nepal, Delhi has welcomed leaders from the neighbourhood taking shelter in India.

There is a dangerous flip side to this positive tradition in the Subcontinent. India has paid a high price for the decision in the early 1980s to train and arm Sri Lankan Tamil rebels. That, hopefully, is an exception rather than the rule in India's emerging neighbourhood policy.

While India's muscular meddling in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka did not succeed in realising the Tamil demands, it unfortunately contributed to the deep distrust between Delhi and the Sinhala nationalists. As a consequence, the geographic imperative became a casualty in Colombo.

But the current crisis in Sri Lanka raised hopes for transcending the internal ethnic divide in the island nation and rebuilding political confidence between Colombo and Delhi. To be sure, positive sentiments driven by crises do not always last. But Delhi's unstinting support — both material and financial — for Colombo during this unprecedented economic and political crisis has generated much goodwill in Sri Lanka. This offers a major opportunity to reframe Delhi's ties with Colombo.

If India's relations with Sri Lanka underline the importance of continuous tending of political geography, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit this week to Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha in Nepal, highlights the immense possibilities of cultural geography in reshaping the Subcontinent's regional relations.

The idea of a "Buddhist circuit" connecting the various pilgrimage sites across the India-Nepal border has been around for a long time. Given the massive size of the global Buddhist population — estimated to be more than 500 million — and the wider international interest in the historic sites, it is surprising how long it has taken Delhi and Kathmandu to come together in developing the Buddhist circuit.

That China has built a new airport near Lumbini and Modi is avoiding it points to the turbulent triangular dynamic between Delhi, Kathmandu, and Beijing. Even more consequential has been the deep discomfort of a large section of Nepal's political class — especially the communists that have dominated Kathmandu in the last two decades — with the India relationship.

The return of the Nepal Congress to the helm and its readiness to deepen ties with India has also opened the door for a recalibration of Delhi's ties with Kathmandu. Revitalising the shared cultural geography inevitably involves better management of economic geography. The last few years have seen the Modi government step up on infrastructure development on the Indian side and accelerate transborder transport and energy connectivity in the eastern subcontinent.

Religion and culture are deeply interconnected in South Asia. Developing all religious pilgrimage sites across the region, and improving the transborder access to them could not only improve tourist revenues of all the South Asian nations, but could also have a calming effect on the troubled political relations between nations.

Despite their frozen bilateral political relationship, Delhi and Islamabad had agreed to open the Kartarpur corridor at the end of 2019 across their militarised Punjab border. The corridor makes it easier for Sikh pilgrims to visit the shrine in Kartarpur in Pakistan, where Guru Nanak founded the Sikh faith. There is much more to be done on reconnecting the Subcontinent's sacred geographies — including the Ramayana trail and Sufi shrines.

While parts of the region are aligning their policies with the geographic imperative, Pakistan would seem to be an exception. Some would say, Islamabad's policies are deliberately anti-geographic. Consider, for example, the recent controversy in Pakistan over the routine appointment of a "trade officer" in its high commission in Delhi.

Facing a barrage of media criticism, the new government led by Shehbaz Sharif had to clarify that it was not planning to improve trade ties with India. Given the depth of its macro economic crisis and massive inflation, one might have thought Pakistan would want to expand trade ties with India in its own economic interest. But Pakistan's politics are hard-wired against the logic of geography. An attempt at limited trade liberalisation with India after the two countries signed a ceasefire agreement in February last year was overruled at the last moment by Prime Minister Imran Khan. The Muslim League's Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan People's Party's Asif Ali Zardari — who back the present government in Islamabad — have, in the past, supported normal trade relations with India, but could not get the army's consent.

While General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the current Chief of Army Staff, had called for a reset of relations with India, Imran Khan pulled the plug on trade liberalisation. His argument was that Pakistan can't trade with India unless Delhi reversed its 2019 constitutional changes in Kashmir.

Now Imran is on the streets campaigning against the "imported government" (from the US which, according to the former PM, conspired to oust him from power). He could chew the government up if it opens up to trade with India. The army, long viewed as a decisive arbiter in Pakistan's political and policy disputes, seems divided on how best to manage the current crisis.

This leaves Shehbaz little room for creative policy making that can ease some of Pakistan's current economic problems. Meanwhile, the young Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who has taken charge of Pakistan's Foreign Office, is tied down by his bureaucracy's staple of Kashmir cliches.

Delhi had little reason to believe that Pakistan's new government can alter its self-defeating policy towards India. But it must continue to bet that the geographic imperative will eventually prevail over Islamabad's policies. Pessimists in Delhi will say the word "eventually" means nothing for policy-making today. But optimists would say India must continue to find ways to work with Pakistan.

Realists might want to argue that current trends in the Subcontinent point to India's growing agency in shaping its neighbourhood and that Pakistan will not forever remain an exception. For Delhi, the policy question is whether India can do something to hasten the inevitable change in Pakistan.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

What is?

- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an economic and political organization of eight countries in South Asia.
- The headquarters and secretariat of this organization are located in Kathmandu, Nepal.
- If we look at the population of the member countries of the organization (about 1.5 billion), it is more influential than any regional organization.

Member

- SAARC consists of eight member countries:- Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka.
- At present there are 9 observer member countries of SAARC- (i) Australia (ii) China (iii) European Union (iv) Iran (v) Japan (vi) Republic of Korea (vii) Mauritius (viii) Myanmar and (ix) United States of America.

Objective of SAARC

- To improve the welfare and standard of living of the people of South Asia region.
- To accelerate the economic, social and cultural development of the region and to provide opportunities to all persons to live with dignity and to realize their full potential.
- To increase the social self-reliance of the countries of South Asia.
- To develop a sense of mutual trust and understanding and sympathy towards each other's problems.
- To increase active cooperation and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
- To promote cooperation with other developing countries.
- To express themselves in international forums on matters of common interest.
- To do with international and regional organizations with similar objectives.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements:-

1. The Indus Water Treaty was implemented between India and Pakistan in the year 1960.
 2. Nepal shares a border of over 1,800 km with five Indian states – Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.
 3. India and Sri Lanka organize joint military exercise Mitra Shakti and naval exercise SLINEX.
- Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 2
- (d) all of the above

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. What are the main challenges India is facing in its neighbourhood? Also discuss what efforts India needs to make to ensure peace and development in the South Asian region?

(250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.