

Changing Geopolitical Situation in South Asia and Its Impact over India

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Abstract

India's position in South Asia presents both challenges and opportunities. While historical conflicts and security concerns persist, there is also significant potential for economic growth, cooperation, and regional integration. India's foreign policy and diplomacy play a crucial role in navigating these complexities and maximizing the benefits of regional engagement. The changing geopolitical situation in South Asia can have various implications for India, ranging from security concerns to economic opportunities. India's foreign policy will continue to evolve to navigate these challenges and seize opportunities for regional stability and growth. To understand the most up-to-date developments, it is essential to refer to current news sources and expert analyses.

I. Introduction:

South Asian countries have acquired a very important position from geo-strategic and geo-political point of view due to their strategic location and natural resources. Outside Big Powers like China and the US want to engage South Asian countries to increase their economic partnership. Geopolitical is the importance of geography from the point of view of an observer in politics, economics or military or other important fields. For example, while Pakistan may view Afghanistan as geopolitically important in terms of tribalism, the United States may view Afghanistan as geopolitically important in limiting Russian and Chinese influence in South Asia. The winds of geo-political change in South Asia started almost two decades ago. A new geo-political reality and importance of South Asia began with the 1998 India-Pakistan nuclear test. The region is of strategic importance bridging the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean in the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. Moreover, the region has emerged as a vital hub of maritime trade, linking South Asian countries' natural resource producers with consumer states. The end of the Cold War in world politics in 1991 affected the geopolitics of South Asia. But the way it affected other parts of the world, it did not happen in South Asia. Because, even after the end of the Cold War, there were regional and bilateral disputes in South Asia, they have not been resolved. Besides, the issue of regional cooperation in South Asia has not gained much momentum.

Key factors and potential impacts:

- **China's Expanding Influence:** China's increasing presence and influence in South Asia, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and investments in countries like Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, have raised concerns in India. India has been cautious about its relationship with China, and any escalation or competition between the two countries can affect the regional dynamics.
- **Pakistan Relations:** The long-standing tensions between India and Pakistan remain a significant factor in the region's geopolitics. Any flare-up of hostilities or terrorist incidents can escalate tensions and have an impact on regional stability.
- **Afghanistan:** The situation in Afghanistan has the potential to impact India's security and interests in the region. The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan and the uncertain political landscape could affect India's engagement with the country and its strategic interests in the region.
- **United States Involvement:** The United States plays a crucial role in South Asia's geopolitics. Any shifts in U.S. policy, such as changes in its approach to China or its commitment to the region's security, can have implications for India's strategic calculations.
- **Russia's Role:** Russia has maintained strong ties with India, but it has also been expanding its engagements in South Asia, including with Pakistan. India must carefully balance its relations with Russia while considering regional dynamics.
- **Regional Alliances:** India has been actively involved in regional groupings like SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical

and Economic Cooperation). These alliances can shape regional cooperation and influence India's foreign policy.

- **Energy Security:** India's growing energy needs make it dependent on energy resources from the Middle East and Central Asia. Geopolitical developments in these regions, such as conflicts or changes in oil prices, can affect India's energy security and economy.
 - **Border Disputes:** India has ongoing border disputes with China and Pakistan. Any escalation in these disputes can have significant implications for regional stability.
 - **Diplomacy and Soft Power:** India has been leveraging its soft power through cultural diplomacy, economic partnerships, and development assistance to enhance its influence in the region. This can help shape India's regional standing positively.
 - **Economic Integration:** Economic cooperation and trade agreements in the region, such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), can impact India's economic growth and stability.
- However, the economic map of South Asia, the geopolitical map as a whole is undergoing massive changes in the entire region. Economic changes have been initiated especially within the eight countries of South Asia. One of these is the Indian economy. India is the third largest economy among the world's strongest economies. That economic power lies in this region.

India in South Asia: Challenges and opportunities

India, as the largest and one of the most influential countries in South Asia, faces a range of challenges and opportunities in the region. These factors have a significant impact on India's foreign policy, economic prospects, and regional stability. Here, we'll discuss some of the key challenges and opportunities India encounters in South Asia:

Challenges:

1. **Security Concerns:** India faces persistent security challenges in the region, particularly from Pakistan and, to a certain extent, China. Ongoing border disputes and historical conflicts can escalate tensions and threaten regional stability.
2. **Terrorism:** India has been a target of terrorist attacks originating from or supported by groups based in Pakistan. Addressing terrorism remains a significant challenge for India and the broader South Asian region.
3. **Neighborhood Rivalry:** India's rivalry with Pakistan has often spilled over into regional forums and organizations, hindering cooperation in South Asia.
4. **China's Influence:** China's expanding presence and influence in South Asia, including through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), can challenge India's regional leadership and raise concerns about its strategic interests.
5. **Economic Disparities:** South Asia contains a mix of rapidly growing economies (e.g., India, Bangladesh) and countries facing economic challenges (e.g., Nepal, Afghanistan). Bridging these economic disparities can be challenging for regional cooperation.

Opportunities:

1. **Economic Growth:** India's robust economy provides opportunities for trade, investment, and economic cooperation with its South Asian neighbors, contributing to the region's economic growth and integration.
2. **Regional Connectivity:** Initiatives like the BIMSTEC and SAARC can enhance regional connectivity, trade, and people-to-people exchanges, promoting stability and development.
3. **Soft Power:** India's rich cultural heritage and Bollywood industry can be harnessed as tools of soft power to build goodwill and enhance its image in South Asia.
4. **Energy Cooperation:** Cooperation in energy resources and projects can enhance energy security and promote economic development in the region.
5. **Diplomacy:** India can play a vital role in promoting peace, stability, and conflict resolution in the region through diplomacy and dialogue.
6. **Human Capital:** India has a large, educated workforce that can support the development and modernization of neighboring countries, providing opportunities for collaboration in education and skills development.
7. **Counterterrorism Cooperation:** India can work with its neighbors to strengthen counterterrorism efforts and intelligence sharing to address shared security challenges.
8. **Environmental Initiatives:** South Asia faces environmental challenges, including climate change and water scarcity. India can lead efforts to address these challenges through regional initiatives.

What is the geo-political scenario in South-Asia:

The Russia-Ukraine war is showing signs of a new polarization in global power. It is also affecting the geopolitics of South Asia. Meanwhile, South Asian politics are showing signs of fragmentation.

Diplomatic sources say that the leaders of the region are holding several meetings to ensure the security of South Asia in the ongoing tension. South Asia is focused on ensuring security in the face of current tensions, leaving aside past hostility for the time being. The small states of the world are worried about the Russia-Ukraine war. This concern is also felt in South Asian countries. For this reason, there are signs of strong unity among the countries of the region on the issue of strengthening security. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka of South Asia refrained from voting in the United Nations to take action against Russia on the Ukraine issue. Besides, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives voted against Russia on this issue. In the overall situation, the diplomats say, there are signs of a change in the geopolitics of the region even if it is temporary in the ongoing tension.

The Russia-Ukraine war has stirred international politics, and we are slowly but surely entering a new world order that will be multi-faceted in which India's role is crucial. The recent visit of foreign dignitaries to New Delhi, including the foreign ministers of China, Russia and the UK, underscores the importance these powers attach to India. Each of these visits was discussed with keen interest, but somewhere we missed the fact that similar geopolitical changes are underway in South Asia, which deserves our attention.

Recently, in several countries of South Asia, there has been a significant shift in politics and this will have both long and short term implications for the entire region. Since India is a major power in the region, its response is important and New Delhi is deeply involved in South Asia as in the past. Let us take a closer look by evaluating some of these regional diplomatic initiatives of India. We can start with the Indian Foreign Minister's official visit to Maldives (March 26-27) and Sri Lanka (March 28-30). Maldives and Sri Lanka are important countries in the Indian Ocean region, maritime neighbors of India and occupy a significant place in India's maritime strategy. The Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) is India's maritime doctrine to promote cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Both these countries have interesting relations with India. During the Sri Lankan civil war, India sent troops to maintain peace. The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was stationed in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. Similarly, in 1988, Indian armed forces suppressed a coup attempt against the then Maldivian government. In Sri Lanka, the IPKF struggled, but in the Maldives, the Indian Army's operation codenamed 'Operation Cactus' succeeded. Despite the history of strategic cooperation, in the last few decades, we have seen the rise of India's political relations with its two maritime neighbors. Anti-Indian politics in some South Asian countries, rivalry with Pakistan and uncertainty in Afghanistan have made the region a challenge for India's foreign policy. Additionally, China's active intervention in the region has put India in a precarious situation. This is why several Indian experts take a pessimistic view of South Asia.

These puzzles are real, so is the fact that India is a powerhouse in South Asia, and it cannot ignore the region. Comparatively, India is South Asia's largest country and economy and the most superior military power. India shares borders (land or sea) with almost every South Asian country and has a global ambition. Thus, India's size, power and ambitions raise concerns for smaller South Asian countries. Over the years, some of them have decided to play the China card against India. It is a balancing act between two giant powers in Asia, aiming to take advantage of both. For example, Nepal's dominant foreign policy discourse is – Nepal is a bridge between India and China. Such concern and reaction of small states towards a great power is quite noticeable in any part of the world. What is needed is a good, continuous and sensitive Indian response and a proper regional approach. The 'Neighbourhood First' policy provides a framework for India's engagement in South Asia, although we have been hesitant in the past.

India's geopolitical strategy in the South Asian region:

Today, not only the world, but South Asia is standing at a crossroads. In South Asia, serious financial crisis in Sri Lanka, humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and political and economic uncertainty in Pakistan are now common topics of discussion. A careful analysis of each of these crises shows that it opens a window for India to diplomatically re-engage with the region.

High inflation has made life miserable for ordinary citizens of Sri Lanka. The Rajapaksa government has been criticized for mismanaging the economy and not taking the necessary measures earlier to avoid the country's financial collapse. Notably, Sri Lanka had \$2 billion of foreign reserves remaining in February 2022, but the government delayed seeking support from international organizations such as the IMF. The Rajapaksa government was known for its closeness with China. Nevertheless, when the Rajapaksa regime approached India, New Delhi responded strongly and agreed to supply \$500 million worth of diesel through a soft loan and also signed a \$1 billion credit line under which Sri Lanka could import essential goods.

Despite serious concerns over the return of the Taliban, India finally decided to reach out to help the Afghans. India has pledged 50,000 tonnes of quality wheat and three tonnes of essential life-saving medicines to Afghanistan. A portion of Indian wheat and medicine has already reached Afghanistan, and Taliban leaders have publicly expressed their gratitude to India for the timely assistance. This is a significant shift in the Indian position after some initial policy paralysis on engagement with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Similarly, India has shaped its relationship with the Maldives over the past few years. Notably, after starting his second term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose Maldives as the first destination of his international visit. Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih has cautiously invested in India despite facing political attacks for his policies. New Delhi returned the gesture, and today, India-Maldives relations are at their best with cooperation in various fields, including military. For example, in 2019, the National Center for Good Governance signed a memorandum with the Maldives Civil Service Commission to build the capacity of 1,000 Maldivian civil servants over the next five years. On his just-concluded visit, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar highlighted the salient features of Indian development assistance to the Maldives, calling it "a transparent partnership driven by Maldivian needs and priorities – over \$2.6 billion today".

Finally, amid political uncertainty in Pakistan, Pakistan Army Chief General Bajwa made some interesting comments. Last year, General Bajwa's comments on regionalism in South Asia also intrigued many. He emphasized the relevance of geo-economics over geo-strategy and his critique of stable Indo-Pak relations for the region. In fact, since then, General Bajwa has not deviated from his stand on India. Recently, he admitted that there was no violation of LOC ceasefire. The Pakistani Army has also masterfully handled the mistaken firing of a Brahmos missile from India, which landed in Pakistan.

The visit of the Prime Minister of Nepal to India, which also included the inauguration of a 35-km long cross-border rail link from Jayanagar in Bihar to Kurtha in Nepal. Indo-Nepal relations have been visibly strained, mainly over border issues, but Sher Bahadur Deuba's visit is a new ray of hope as it has created some goodwill between the two sides.

II. Conclusion:

A realistic understanding of the challenges facing India suggests that Delhi's emphasis should be on caring for the region, making relentless efforts to resolve long-standing differences, opening its markets to its neighbors and creating prospects for common prosperity. Although reactions from neighbors will vary, making incremental progress wherever possible is the only way forward. Simply claiming a sphere of influence would set Delhi up for inevitable failure. Delhi must instead focus on accelerating its own economic growth, making a serious stake in India's success for its neighbors, and managing the unique complexities that shape its relations with all its neighbors. Above all, India should focus on building a more open region rather than an exclusively India-led region. Creating trans-regional frameworks, building larger alliances of like-minded powers, engagement with India as a neighbor and deepening interdependence with it.

To conclude, China is on the back foot or political changes that are very favorable to India in the region do not make sense. South Asia is changing, and this is where India needs to re-engage with new energy and vision. South Asian countries are looking to India due to unforeseen changes in the global system like the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Nevertheless, this is a historic opportunity for New Delhi to act positively to meet the expectations of its neighbors and strengthen its position in the region.

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