

INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

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India's relationship with its immediate neighbours – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Burma – has historically witnessed alternating periods of conflict, clash of interests as well as co-operation. At this juncture of history when all India's neighbours are experiencing turbulence, **it is time for a stocktaking of India's role in its own 'backyard'**.

Barring Nepal, all the countries of the Indian subcontinent were British colonies. The emergence of both Pakistan and Bangladesh was itself fraught with conflict and bloodshed. I will try to point out the shift in India's role on the world stage and its implications for its foreign policy in the subcontinent. I have chosen to focus on Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Nepal because of the recent turmoil experienced by each of these countries. *The way India has responded to these crises marks not just a perceptible shift but an overturning of the Nehruvian principles which formed the basis of India's foreign policy.* This shift has been progressively undertaken in the last six decades, but the recent allegiance to the US has filled India with fresh energy. It is now more than ready to embark on its new journey of serving as a client to its patron, the United States.

Indo-Pak Relations

India shares a symbiotic relationship with Pakistan. The seeds for Pakistan were sown in the alienating policies of the Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi's use of the Hindu religious idiom as well as the ambitions and interests of the Muslim elites, whose political face was the Muslim League headed by Mohd. Ali Jinnah. Independence was marred by the arbitrary division of a shared economy, culture, and history. At the dawn of political freedom there was bloodshed and the worst kind of displacement, the scale of which surpassed all precedents.

This article expresses the author's personal views.

Diplomatic relations were established between both countries immediately after independence, **but the enmity was never forgotten.** There were disputes about the merger of princely states with one or the other nation – Junagadh, Hyderabad and Kashmir being cases in point. In an effort to expand their territories of influence, *India and Pakistan have fought four inconclusive wars* resulting in the loss of thousands of lives on each occasion. There is a lingering danger of breaking into a fresh military offensive at all times.

There are claims and counter-claims of fanning insurgency within the enemy boundary. *The super-power politics of the cold war era played itself even in the India-Pakistan relations.* If Pakistan was a signatory to the US-sponsored South East Asia Treaty Organisation, the Indian ruling establishment was seen as a Soviet ally – despite avowed non-alignment. In spite of making declarations of peace after every war, undertaking confidence-building measures, and establishing hotlines, the two countries' competitive nuclear tests have resulted in a dangerous swelling up of nuclear stockpiles. Defying all common sense which says that enmity with your neighbour can be self-destructive, India and Pakistan continue to blame each other for problems within their own borders. Of late, like little school boys in a quarrel, both nations have been running to the United States who acts as a headmaster chiding and fondling them alternately. There is competition to find favours with the headmaster, and his intervention seems imperative for peace in the subcontinent.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, India flexed its muscles and Pakistan after initial utterances of co-operation, did a U-turn under domestic compulsions. India on its part toned down the anti-Pak rhetoric soon after. A possible military gear up on the borders was averted, not because of some realisation that war is no solution but on the dictates of the United States. Both Pakistan and India have been supporters of George Bush's global war on terror. Pakistan even allowed the US to use its soil for refuelling war planes enroute to bomb Afghanistan and Iraq. Pakistan failed to realise that this war is so sinister that it wouldn't spare even the US own allies, as shown by the air raids on Pakistani territory.

The crisis in Pakistan which surfaced during the Lalmasjid siege in Musharraf's regime, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto during

her election campaign, and the capture of the Swat valley by the Taliban in the present democratic regime, is a fallout of its servitude to the US. The dominant public opinion in India is quick to point out that Pakistan is a 'failed state', that we have been suffering at the hands of Pakistan for the last sixty years, and that the US should now exert pressure on Pakistan. We must however remember that *the proximity to the US and its foreign policy* guided by the military industrial complex *has inevitably led to the destruction of many nations which have been its partners*. India needs to learn lessons from Iraq and Pakistan if it wants to avert possible destruction. Of late, India is basking in its new found glory of being a US ally, the relationship having been cemented through the Indo-US nuclear deal. However, the Indian foreign policy experts should look at the above aspect of international relations.

India and Sri Lanka

The relations between India and Sri Lanka have mythological origins running deep through history. In the colonial times Indian labourers mainly from the neighbouring Madras presidency were transported to Sri Lanka to convert forests into tea plantations. When Ceylon became independent, Indians occupied prominent positions in all walks of the socio-political-economic life of the island nation – be it bureaucracy, trade or industry. With freedom, the conflict however arose over the control of the institutional structures of power. The Tamil minority suddenly found its rights and status as citizens questioned. Sinhalese chauvinism raised its ugly head and government after government systematically dispossessed Tamils in a land where they had already lived for at least a few generations. *This chauvinism and the Tamil retaliation decided the fate of Indo-Sri Lankan relations* in the last six decades and especially since 1980s with the emergence of militant groups like the LTTE.

The Tamils in India have embryonic links with those in Sri Lanka. Hence, the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka has reverberations in Tamil Nadu politics and in turn on Indian policies towards Sri Lanka at large. Thousands of Tamil refugees thus flocked to the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh through the sea route. Insurgency has been a potent weapon in the hands of nation-states, especially in dealing with neighbouring states. Sri Lanka claims that the LTTE was provided

training by the Indian forces, just like India claims that Kashmiri mujahidins were trained by the Pakistan army and work at the behest of the ISI.

The Sri Lankan government chose to further marginalise the ethnic Tamil minority by unleashing violence against them. State-supported ethnic cleansing thus took place in different regions of the Sri Lankan federation, ultimately swelling the ranks of the LTTE's suicide-bombers. Rajiv Gandhi tried to directly intervene in the ethnic conflict by air-dropping food parcels in the Tamil region of Jaffna. Instead of acting as a mediator, India entered into a peace accord with Sri Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi then sent the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) to the Tamil regions to ensure that the militant groups would lay down arms and accept the activities of regional councils which now had a small degree of autonomy. In spite of the fact that this peace accord was not negotiated by the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil militants, most groups agreed to it. However, this accord was not accepted by the LTTE and the IPKF found itself at war with the LTTE. In order to force the LTTE to give up arms and to control the LTTE areas, the IPKF launched the 'Operation Pawan'. Later on, the VP Singh government withdrew the IPKF from Sri Lanka.

During an election rally in Sri Perumbudur in Tamil Nadu, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the LTTE because of his role in the Sri Lankan crisis. India has played the big brother's arm-twisting tactics with its neighbours, including Sri Lanka. It has also engaged in doublespeak on the Sri Lankan-Tamil issue. On one hand, it supplied arms and ammunitions to the Sri Lankan Government and on the other, it tried to fan insurgency in Sri Lanka. On the pretext of intervening on behalf of Tamils, India has continuously tried to meddle into Sri Lankan politics.

The Sri Lankan Government's war on the Sri Lankan Tamil people has culminated into the extermination of the top LTTE leadership, including Prabhakaran himself. The political formations in Tamil Nadu have displayed shameful opportunism in making unprincipled political capital on the Tamil issue. And the Indian Government did precious little in ensuring the safety and well-being of thousands of Tamils caught in the crossfire between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE. However, it needs to be remembered that *the Tamil resistance against*

discrimination and the struggle for self-determination in Sri Lanka cannot be washed away in a military bloodbath; it demands a political solution.

India-Burma Relations

The Indo-Burmese relations are another pointer to the shift in India's foreign policy – a shift from an idealist policy guided by principles to one where our narrowly ill-conceived national interest is the only guiding factor. India and Burma are linked to each other in myriad ways since the fifth century. Both countries came to be occupied by Britain. Until 1937 Burma was a part of British India. The British brought quite a few Indians to Burma. This association led both countries to support each other's freedom struggle. India also helped Burma to frame its Constitution. Dr Rajendra Prasad, the then President of the Constituent Assembly of India, declared at a meeting of Rangoon citizens on 5th January 1948: "Free Burma can always count on India's assistance and services whenever it needs them." Prime Minister Nehru and U Nu shared a personal friendship which resulted in frequent consultation between the two countries and the avoidance of any confrontation. India was the largest importer of rice from Burma. Nehru's government also provided arms to the Burmese Government in its counter-insurgency measures. This was part of Nehru's efforts to help newly independent smaller nations.

*Under Nehru, India enjoyed the moral leadership of the Non-Aligned Nations in Asia and Africa. India supported the democratic movements the world over. Nehru's five principles or Panchsheel provided the basis for India's relationship with its neighbours. **These were times when principles governed India's foreign policy, of course with quite a few aberrations.** Some friendship treaties weren't well balanced. For instance, a treaty between China and Burma raised alarm bells in the Indian Parliament. China's proximity to Burma threatened to upset power relations in the sub-continent. In the 1970s and 80s, the Indo-Burmese relations witnessed ups and downs on account of the Chinese factor.*

India supported the 1988 pro-democracy upsurge in Burma. Refugees were welcome into our country. India moreover criticised the military government for not respecting the people's mandate and not allowing the National League of Democracy leader Aung San

Suu Kyi to form the Government. India was of course concerned by the military junta's closeness to China. In any case, India did support the democratic movement. In the 1990s however, India assumed that democracy was a lost cause in Burma and cemented its economic and military relations with the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for almost two decades but India has no qualms about signing defence deals with the junta. *India has sacrificed its principled foreign policy at the altar of self-interest.*

India-Nepal Relations

India has often played the big brother's role with Nepal. It has often interfered in the internal politics of Nepal, pitting one power centre against another, in its own interest. In the garb of helping a small and poor neighbour, it has tried to strengthen its own hegemony. If one for example examines Nepal's recent transition from monarchy to republic, the point becomes crystal clear. In spite of its proclaimed democratic principles, India supported the Nepalese king Birendra Bikram Saha in trying to crush the democratic aspirations of the Nepalese people. It gave military support to the king in his endeavours to crush the people's resistance to the emergency. It was the people's resolute determination which forced the parties across the political spectrum to side the masses in their struggle to dislodge the feudal monarchy.

It is against India's wishes and efforts that the Maoist CPN got a thumping majority and formed the government with their leader Prachanda becoming the Prime Minister. The Maoists in Nepal tried to join the political mainstream and accommodate all their erstwhile enemies (other than the king). The recent political crisis, which resulted in Prachanda's resignation due to the opposition of the military, once again exposed India's role. Supported by the Indian Government, all the other parties in the Parliament stood against the Maoists who had got an unprecedented political mandate. It seems that a Maoist-led Government close to China was not in tune with the Indian interests. One of the most important principles of a democratic republic, namely civilian control over the armed forces, was therefore sacrificed. *India however needs to remember that sacrificing principles for strategic interests is not the best foreign policy in the long run.*

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Conclusion

*The above case studies were chosen to discuss various aspects of India's foreign policy towards its neighbours. With Pakistan it is war-mongering, hatred, that governs India's policies. The Indian government must resume its dialogue with Pakistan and take a firm stand against the US influence in the region. In the Sri Lankan case, it is the issue of finding ways and means to ensure Tamil rights through political dialogue. **Burma and Nepal**, which are smaller nations struggling to reinstate and preserve democracy, **must find principled support from a big power like India.***