



# Being a good neighbour

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## **Being a good neighbour-India must shed its zero-sum style foreign policy-making, and work towards South Asian integration**

- If South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers.
- While there indeed are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is New Delhi's ideational disinclination towards its neighbourhood.
- Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity.
- Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation.
- Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result, restricted our space for manoeuvre in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.

### **At a critical juncture**

- Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence.
- India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.

### **Lessons from the past**

- For one, India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic subtlety and finesse.
- The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbour to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to

backfire.

- Second, it must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbour countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another.
- Third, New Delhi must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours which it has a terrible track record in this regard.
- Fourth, there is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage vis-à-vis India.

### **Looking for convergence**

- Finally, while reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka.
- There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development.

### **Resurrect SAARC**

- India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums.
- However, there is only so much that can be gained from bilateral arrangements, and there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- India must have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood devoid of empty rhetoric and spectacular visits without follow up.

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