

Indian Foreign Policy 2018 Reclaiming the Neighbourhood

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Indian PM Narendra Modi in 2018 has wisely switched once again the focus of Indian foreign policy on reclaiming India's neighbourhood which stood lost and was inherited in mid-2014 as a legacy inherited problem.

The notable point that needs to be made at the outset is that in the gigantic task of PM Narendra Modi reclaiming India's neighbourhood in terms of Indian 'Area of Influence' and Indian "Area of National Security Interest" the attitude of the P-5 members is critical. India in 2018 can expect no support from China or Russia in this direction. It is only the United States & West with Japan that can emerge as India's "Natural Allies" in this direction. This chiefly arises from their security interests in the Indian Ocean and also that China's aggressive military rise and brinkmanship needs to be checkmated

PM Modi should not allow any contrary perceptions to prevail in his foreign policy advisers. So in 2018 it would be wrong to term any friendly initiatives towards China and Russia as "Reset Policies". This implies that India is moving away from its existing decades long bipartisan policies of meaningful Strategic Partnerships with United States & West and Asian countries allied to the West. Any recent moves towards China and Russia can best be classified as "Recalibration" of Indian policies towards these two nations. The global geopolitical environment does not permit India the luxury the favourite buzzword of Indian foreign policy /strategic experts that is "Strategic Autonomy". India in any case does not lose its foreign policy independence by entering into Strategic Partnerships with like-minded nations.

PM Modi made a concerted and unprecedented effort to reclaim India's Subcontinental neighbourhood in May 2014 when on his oath-taking ceremony he invited all SAARC Heads of State, enabling both bilateral parleys and establishing personal rapport with these leaders.

Despite PM Narendra Modi's earnest efforts to reclaiming India's neighbourhood as BJP Government's priority focus to facilitate India playing a more prominent role on the global stage as the naturally predominant Power in the Indian Subcontinent with comprehensive national power attributes, India stood stymied in its neighbourhood foreign policy thrusts by a combination of external and domestic political factors.

China and Pakistan, both singly and now in 2018 jointly operating within the parameters of the China-Pakistan Axis have proved the most prominent complicating external factor. China has used Pakistan as the regional spoiler state exploiting the historical visceral anti-Indian hatred that the Pakistan Army mindset is plagued with. China and Pakistan have coincidental geopolitical aims to arrest India's ascendant power trajectory rise despite India's rise being with soft and benign contours.

In 2018 India's neighbourhood presents the spectacle of Pakistan virtually colonised by China, the only erstwhile Hindu Kingdom of Nepal perceptively inclined to be permissive of China's penetration to spite India, one witnesses Bhutan under sustained Chinese diplomatic coercion similar to what China did in Nepal and in Bangladesh attempts being made by China through 'influence operations' to bring about a change of Prime Ministers.

Complicating the above Indian foreign policy challenge is the intrusiveness of India's domestic politics as seen in West Bengal Chief Minister's impeding PM Modi's efforts to arrive at workable solutions to the Teesta River water-sharing with Bangladesh. In Tamilnadu the Tamil affinity with Sri Lankan Tamils clouds India's initiatives to offset China's penetration in Sri Lankan affairs. In Bhutan earlier it was the Indian Nepalese factor issue and in Nepal it is the Madhesis issue that complicate India's efforts.

In terms of India's domestic foreign policy challenges in formulation of Indian foreign policy is the lack of 'bipartisan consensus' where India's political opposition parties are unable to restrain their impulses to politicise India's foreign policy and national security initiatives for petty political gains rather than logical national priorities prevail.

India's and PM Modi's challenge to reclaim India's neighbourhood diplomatically and politically in 2018 lies in finding effective solutions to both the external and Indian domestic political impediments.

China and Pakistan as the external domestic factors bent on impeding India reclaiming its neighbourhood cannot be wished away. Foreign policy processes in China and Pakistan are heavily determined by their respective military hierarchies.

However, India under PM Modi has made significant headway in establishing personal rapport with Major Power leaders which when coupled with India gaining geopolitical ascendancy as an 'Emerging Power' bestows great diplomatic leverage to India. It also endows India with playing the "India Card" against the contextual background of China and Pakistan virtually getting isolated geopolitically.

Is any further evidence required on the above than the Chinese President inviting PM Modi for the informal Wuhan Summit last month and the Pakistan Army Chief's assertions that Pakistan must normalise relation with India. Ultimately, the weight of contextual geopolitical factors will hold China's and Pakistan's disruptive hands.

PM Modi should capitalise on the unfavourable geopolitical situation that both China and Pakistan face in 2018 to extract substantial quid pro quos. PM Modi also needs to hammer-in in the consciousness of the global community that China and Pakistan pose to regional and global security with their disruptive strategies.

The Indian Prime Minister should order his Foreign Office to desist from using the term "Reset of Foreign Policy" from its vocabulary. What PM Modi is effecting is a "Recalibration" of India's foreign policy in relation to China and Pakistan. The underlying aim should be to limit China's and Pakistan's intrusiveness in India's neighbourhood, both directly and indirectly.

Overcoming India's domestic political compulsions of Opposition parties shying away from bipartisan consensus and impeding national priorities like the Teesta Waters Agreement with Bangladesh may require Constitutional changes where federal provisions should not be allowed to subsume India's national priorities in the fields of foreign policy, national security and coping with external and internal security threats.

India has had a long historical and spiritual connect with countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. India's Buddhist and Hindu 'connects' with these countries should be at the forefront of Indian foreign policy thrusts towards these countries. PM Modi has made a good recent start along these lines during his visit to Nepal last week.

Bangladesh and India enjoy rich cultural and language commonalities and this needs to be the main thread in our foreign policy. Pakistan ISI's Islam-centric strategies to divide Bangladesh and India can also be offset effectively. Bangladesh's recent advocacy that India should be given membership in the Organisation of Islamic Countries is a pointer in this direction.

The most significant foreign policy asset that India has as a leverage tool is its economic resurgence and sustained growth of Indian economy. India's neighbourhood countries stand to gain economically by plugging into the growing Indian economy. Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka should recognise the reality that China as distant entity cannot offer the same economic advantages as India can offer by its geographical proximity and the economic interdependence that flows from this factor. This outstrips China's allures of sizeable

financial resources

India's neighbourhood necessarily also includes Afghanistan, Myanmar and Maldives.. Myanmar has geographical contiguity both by land borders and maritime expanse of the Bay of Bengal, besides cultural and spiritual affinities. Afghanistan has long historical and civilisational ties with India and enjoys strategic convergences with India. Maldives in recent times has adopted adversarial stances towards India under Chinese and Pakistani influence.

India has legitimate security interests in the above three named countries. Fortunately, in these three countries India does not have to contend with domestic political compulsions of Indian Opposition parties. India's challenge is to contend with China's and/or Pakistan's strategies like in the case of the Maldives.

In the case of Afghanistan and Myanmar India's existing foreign policy approaches serve India's security interests but need to be injected with more dynamism in implementation and imaginative implementation as force multipliers of Indian diplomacy.

In the case of Maldives, India in its foreign policy approaches cannot afford to adopt a 'hands-off approach'. It should not be allowed to be coerced by the 'China Factor'. India here should resort to adopt the muscular approach to protect its national security interests, if need be. China is geopolitically cornered and India can expect support of all Major Powers that do not favour China establishing a major naval presence in the Maldives, should it wish to tame Maldives. India is notably silent on pointing out to the global community the dangers flowing from China's naval presence in Maldives endangering security of Indian Ocean maritime expanse, especially for the United States, Japan and Australia.

Concluding, it needs to be stressed that 2018 is the opportune time for PM Modi to initiate vigorous diplomatic thrusts to reclaim India's neighbourhood. The geopolitical environment is in India's favour and that provides much leverage to add weight to India's moves to reclaiming the neighbourhood and limit China's and Pakistan's disruptive intrusiveness in India's neighbourhood. Further, Indian domestic political environment in 2018 precludes sizeable political opposition to PM Modi's drive to reclaim India's neighbourhood.

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[Indian Foreign Policy](#) ^[2]

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[Papers](#) ^[3]

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