

**A proposal for two-day Seminar on
“India’s Neighbourhood First Policy: Emerging New Trends”
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1. When we mention Indian foreign policy as highlighting, its preferred attention to its neighbourhood, it is necessary to know what makes it to take such a position. A simplistic, yet very important factor is: Neighbourhood is a geographic fact; a nation can choose its friends but it is destined to live forever with ‘neighbours’ bestowed by the geopolitical developments. In that sense when we are speaking about India’s ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’ it refers to policy towards members of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
2. For India, of all other seven, members of the SAARC—Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh have geographical contiguity with India; while Afghanistan, a member had geographical boundaries with British ruled India. But creation of Pakistan and Pakistan ceding one-third of territory of Jammu & Kashmir (J & K) which came to occupy it in 1947-48 war, now known as Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) has made it a SAARC member without geographical connectivity with India. Two others, Sri Lanka and Maldives are members of the SAARC, though do not have geographical connectivity with members of the SAARC, are yet close to Indian territorial waters. All seven are India’s neighbours.
3. But in a significant manner there is an important qualitative difference: Whenever we speak of the SAARC, our primary focus is on either a member-nation’s policies toward the SAARC, or common policies of the group on issues of common interest. On the other hand, when we speak about India’s neighbourhood, it directly refers to India’s external policies towards an individual nation; and their policies towards India. Collectively, it refers to India’s foreign policy thrust toward neighbours, with certain emphasis on relations being oriented with special connotations.
4. We need also to consider legitimately, Myanmar, another nation as a neighbour; that deserved to be within the South Asian region as well. Though it is already a member of the ASEAN. Obviously in the eastern part of India Myanmar has 1643 km long boundary with four Indian states-Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur of seven sisters. Since we are not considering SAARC as a region as our focus-area but India’s neighbourhood, we are within our competence to treat it as a nation for our consideration.
5. Since we speak here of India’s neighbourhood we need to reckon with all these eight nations. But all nations cannot be considered on par in our relations with them as these eight nations have numerous differences within themselves, among themselves and with India as well. These problems create conflicts among them as well as with India and generate scope for cooperation and conflict among themselves and with India as well.

External Actors impinging on Indian Neighbourhood Policy:

6. These issues of cooperation and conflicts are aggravated by two external powers—the United States (US) and China. Thus, the US and China are two major nations who are very much present by their bilateral relations with India as well as their relations with other members of the Neighbourhood.
7. The US long reigning Super Power is external to the South Asian region and to Asia. But as a colonial power—only colony it had was the Philippines—it had interests on many counts in

Asia. World War II and its aftermath saw equally significant US presence as it fought against Japan. During the Cold War as well as in the post-Cold War period those interests have become stronger. Its interests are global and as a promoter, *albeit* selectively of democracy, it continues to affect policies of India's Neighbours and India's policies towards them.

8. Of the two, China is an aggressive player in the region, enjoys the status as an Asian Regional Power; is working already to change existing pattern of relations in its favour. While the US, is a democratic *status quo* power, farther away physically from the region, enjoys status as a Super Power, economically and militarily. While acting to promote its existing pre-eminence, has also acquired a limited interest in promoting Indian interests, in the region if not in a positive sense, at least to prevent those others in the region doing any harm to Indian policies, since those also impinge interests of the US.
9. But China while is a regional power, is also aiming to replace the US as the Super power; constantly aiming to prevent any emergence of India as a regional power. It is immensely successful in its mission as already it is the second largest economy. It does everything to undermine emergence of India as an independent actor in the region as well as globally. It has been literally pouring money in the smaller nations in the Indian neighbourhood. Nations like, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives are completely in stranglehold of China, and Pakistan is on the way to emerge as its colony though PM, Imran Khan has promised a review of China's model of economic cooperation with Pakistan called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
10. These two external players in the region have also Chief Executives who are unique in different ways. US President Trump came to office with an aspiration of presiding over an Imperial Presidency, promoting national interest is facing terrible time at home. But Chinese Li Jinping has already got himself named as President for Life, with his intentions to recreate ancient Middle Kingdom in the 21st century. For India Trump has gone several steps further in comparison to his predecessors to name Pakistan as the promoter of terrorism against India and ask it to desist from it; and has cancelled its military aid. Further, he has strengthened strategic partnership with India, first initiated by Bill Clinton, built upon by George W. Bush and strengthened by Barrack Obama. On the other hand, India weighing whether 'good' Trump can do to promote her interests against 'damages' that China can cause to her vital interests, is trying to mend perception that India has put all her eggs in American basket!

Pakistan

11. By any reckoning yardsticks, Pakistan deserves our utmost attention. Pakistan is a spoiler in the SAARC; because, religion was the basis for its creation, with Indian huge Muslim population, is ever-ready to lay its claim for one or the other part of Indian Territory, has not been comfortable with Regionalism. India, almost five-times its size, is constantly challenged by Pakistan; by now universally acknowledged by several members of the UN by promoting cross-border, cross-sea terrorism; by pumping fake currency; narcotics; yet enjoying full Chinese backing, deserves highest attention. It is a nuclear weapons state as India is; it has more nuclear weapons than India. Despite that it states its threshold of tolerance on the use of nuclear weapons is extremely limited. Hence, even if India drops its hat, Pakistan assumes India is planning to use its nuclear weapons against it. Since it believes in First Use (FU) of nuclear weapons, threatens India on its readiness to use them against India, which has globally committed on No First Use (NFU).

12. Despite, internationally well-documented evidence on its promotion of cross-border and cross-sea terrorism against Indians and Indian assets, it continues in the denial-mode while giving promises to check its veracity! It enjoys Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status conferred by India in business and trade but has denied reciprocal grant of MFN status to India! Despite Pakistan's hostility towards India, and dozens of anti-India acts, on its part, Indian Prime Minister (PM) Modi extended olive branch to its PM Nawaz Sharif by meeting him more than thrice, despite knowing full-well that its foreign policy towards India is controlled by its all-powerful Army.
13. Though, it may be too early to comment what may be the approach of Imran Khan towards India, certain indicators are available for an assessment: Imran Khan has been a protégé of the Army; there are at least five or more ministers related to Army Generals or have worked under former Military General and dictator, Musharraf; appointed an experienced Mehmood Qureshi, as Foreign Minister (FM) who was very much involved by thinking out of box in finding a solution to issues under previous assignments; and in very first interaction with the Indian High Commissioner, Imran Khan is reported to have raised Kashmir. Despite well-established anti-India stances of ARMY-PM Combine, PM Modi offered to hold Foreign Minister-level talks on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly. However, these were called off by the Indian government because of confirmed information that Army controlled ISI had ordered terror group to kill three police officers initially kidnapped! That led obviously External Affairs Minister (EAM), Sushama Swaraj to cancel agreed talks and reiterate well-articulated position of the government: Talks and Terror cannot go together!

Bangladesh

14. India-Bangladesh relations on the other hand have moved to improved understanding of the problems faced by each other as two sovereign nations. However, this improvement has not been a steady upward movement; rather, there have been ups and downs; these ups and downs are directly related to two women-politicians who dominate electoral politics—Hasina Sheikh and Khalida Zia. With Hasina, India-Bangladesh bilateral relations have been far friendlier than under Zia, who has always tried to make use of the 'Pakistan card'—of moving Bangladesh closer to Pakistan in the bilateral relations.
15. Indian bilateral interactions with Bangladesh can be assessed by focussing on important issues like, Land Border, Water Sharing, Economic cooperation, and terrorism. Now, in contrast to Pakistan, India has been able to maintain excellent relations with Bangladesh and its PM Hasina Sheikh. India has active role in helping it in a variety of fields. India has resolved long pending Land Border Issue; there is the water-sharing issue yet to be resolved, but recently Bangladesh FM said no longer it is a major issue between the two nations. There is active cooperation between the two nations in fighting the scourge of international terrorism.
16. All nations, divided with artificially drawn boundaries, as in the case of East-Pakistan that became Bangladesh, human problems are bound to be left to be decided by later generations. Bangladesh shares with India 4096 Km land boundary covering West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Hence, there were Indian enclaves left surrounded by Bangladesh territories and Bangladesh enclaves by Indian territories. People living in these territories were citizens of their respective nations, yet were unable get services from the State! It was a life of great miseries to the affected citizens.

17. This issue has been discussed and an agreement was reached between Indira Gandhi and Mujibur Rehman way back in 1974. But Indian parliament failed, since then, to ratify the agreement with a necessary legislation as it involved ceding of Indian territories to Bangladesh. Former PM, Manmohan Singh in 2011 signed again the agreement; but was unable to get it approved by the Parliament!
18. But the Congress-made long-lingering problem was resolved only during Modi's tenure as the PM. Constitution Amendment Bill, 2013 was passed by Parliament on 7 May 2015. There was a transfer of 111 enclaves to Bangladesh and 51 enclaves to India from Bangladesh. There was a net loss of territory to India. PM Modi visited Dacca in 2015 to mark a sense of achievement. Has the new legislation enacted by the Indian Parliament solved all problems of human beings settled in the affected territories? A report from a village from Meghalaya close to Bangladesh border says that lack of a vehicular road forces residents to trade in Bangladesh currencies and trek across the borders for medical emergencies!
19. Yet Land Boundary Legislation brings out how important is the issue of cooperative federalism for success of foreign policies. Federal Government in our Constitution is endowed with enormous powers. But to exercise those powers, it was necessary that Chief Minister (CM) of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, agree for such a land exchange deal with Bangladesh. That she did only after the federal government agreed to finance rehabilitation of those who opted to live in India, who had to be settled in West Bengal. It was known that a majority of even those who earlier lived in Bangladesh owned enclaves, preferred to live in India.
20. During the latest visit of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh to New Delhi, she and PM, Modi signed 22 agreements which covered a wide range of issues. After the disputes over land borders were resolved, water sharing issue was taken up. Greatest attention was given to Teesta river water sharing. Since India has moved away from the period of one-party-dominance; West Bengal has today a party in power different from that at the federal level.
21. The relations between two seem to be even beyond cooperative federalism. Teesta water sharing has been vehemently opposed by CM, Mamata Banerjee. This was expressed tactically by PM Modi when he said: "I am very happy that the CM of West Bengal is my honoured guest today. I know that her feelings for Bangladesh as warm as my own."
22. Economic cooperation has been however increasing between the two. When Hasina visited Delhi in 2010, India had offered a billion dollar line of credit to Bangladesh. This was the largest that India had ever offered and Bangladesh ever had got from any foreign country till then. A part of that was converted into a grant to construct Padma Bridge. But PM Modi, during his first visit to Dacca, in June 2015 offered another \$3 billion soft loan. A third loan of \$4.5 billion was extended in October 2016. This was done largely in response to Chinese efforts to engage Bangladesh in its efforts to encircle India, what Americans call as "string of pearls." Loans have helped in increasing Indian cooperation visible to ordinary people as it has been utilised largely in development of roads and creation of transport systems.
23. India and Bangladesh have been common victims of Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Modi had said in 2017 meeting with Hasina that promoters of cross border violence consider, "terrorism as higher than humanism, destruction greater than development." Since terrorism has been an area of special interest of the CIS, I will avoid temptation to narrate many instances of terror suffered by Bangladesh with exception of July 2016 attack on Holey Artisan Bakery in Dacca. Five Bangladeshi terrorists had chosen the crowded weekend night in which more

than 28 were killed around 20 were taken hostage, of whom some were killed as well. It was truly an international terrorist attack not only because many foreigners—Italians, Japanese, Indians were the innocent victims, but amongst terrorists, there was foreign influence as well; at least one terrorist had confessed that he was influenced by Indian evangelical speaker, Zakir Naik! Bangladesh Home Minister attributed the heinous crime to *Jamaeytul Mujahedeen* Bangladesh (JMB). However, “Zero tolerance” towards terrorism practiced by PM, Hasina has been publicly praised by PM Modi.

Afghanistan

24. Historically, even prior to Indian independence, India had very cordial relations with people of Afghanistan. Since independence, the cordiality has remained unbroken despite wrong approach of India during the Soviet military intervention in 1979. Since then, particularly after George W. Bush removed, the then ruling Taliban government from power and a democratically elected Hamid Karzai and later Ashraf Ghani governments have had friendly relations with India.
25. India has done extremely well in extending aid and soft-loans for economic and infra-structural reconstruction. India has been fifth largest donor to Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s Parliament building stands as a living testimony for Indian role in promoting democracy in that country. There have been regular exchanges of visits by Indian and Afghan Heads; President Ghani was in New Delhi recently, where two governments discussed the issues of safety of Indians in Afghanistan and President Ghani’s plans to hold “direct talks with the Taliban without any preconditions.” India by seeking to develop Chabahar Port in Iran has already been able to reach economic aid directly to Afghanistan bypassing Pakistani land route.

Sri Lanka

26. Assumption of power by current President in Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena happened in August 2015 soon after Narendra Modi became the PM. Sirisena came to power as the then strong man, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was defeated which he then blamed on Indian RAW and American CIA as Rajapaksa had moved Sri Lanka too close to China for a comfort. Sri Lanka, had almost similar to Pakistan leasing Gwadar Port, leased Hambantota port to China. Similarly as Pakistan was in perpetual debt to China, Sri Lanka was also on a debt trap laid by China. But the new government of Sirisena with subsequent election of Wickremesinghe as the PM aimed to liberate at least partially Sri Lanka from Chinese stranglehold. India welcomed the move, has signed several MOUs for economic cooperation for Indian participation.

India is interested in developing an LNG terminal in Kerewalapitiya outside Colombo, Mattala and Palely airport in Jaffna and oil tank farms—all with an eye to balance China. But Indian delays in executing agreed projects and uncertainties created by Sirisena government, have put neighbourhood first policy in a limbo. As I was completing the proposal, developments like President Sirisena appointing Rajapaksa as the PM, after dismissing Wickremesinghe, and China publicly lauding developments will certainly provide a blow to India trying to secure her neighbourhood.

Smaller Nations, Greater Geopolitical clout

27. Smaller a nation, greater its geopolitical clout. Two smaller nations like Nepal and Maldives (until recently) have been playing truants with India, largely on the assured support from China. Under the Chinese megalomania, it has launched One Belt One Road (OBOR) programme to invest in small and weak nations in various projects with its own surplus funds and manpower. Chinese goodwill is prompted by its perceived non-economic benefits of creating “all-weather” client states similar to Pakistan.
28. Nepal has been playing hide and seek with India; often agreeing to increase cooperation, but often policy is damaged because of frequent political changes in that country. After K. P Oli government took office, it has obviously put all its eggs in Chinese baskets. He has taken several steps to indicate his being a pro-China PM. He has not sent Nepalese ambassador to India since October 2017. Reversing earlier PM, Sher Bahadur Deub’s decision to develop Budi Kanda Ki hydro power project being the country’s largest at \$2.5 billion with internal resources, PM Oli has assigned it to China.
29. The case of Maldives has been worse example of a small nation’s behaviour capable of upsetting the India’s Neighbourhood policy. China has invested its surplus money and labour under the OBOR in Maldives in a big way. Often it seems correct to say, after first-ever democratically elected government of Nasheed was overthrown under a military promoted coup, government appeared to display an attitude of ‘we don’t care’ towards India’s sensitivities within the region. However, it had democratic elections of September 2018 that threw a surprise by electing a combined opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih who defeated President Abdulla Yameen. A period of over two months for new President to be sworn seems to be a fault-line in protecting Maldives constitutional system as a democracy.
30. **Bhutan, Though like Afghanistan and Nepal, has been a** land-locked neighbour of India, has close economic, political and security relations with India. Until 1971 India also represented Bhutan in the UN. But it has no diplomatic relations with China. Since 1971 it is a member of the UN. Since then China has been putting pressure on Bhutan to open its Embassy in Beijing. Doklam crisis of recent times was an evidence of it.
31. In conclusion we may say that India’s neighbourhood has been a highly volatile region, where every nation is instead of maintaining a status quo seems to be moving to unforeseen and unpredictable policies posing a challenge to policy-makers to keep their pursuit of policy of ‘neighbourhood first’ with the exceptions of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar; if we accept that India may not be able to bring about a change in the policies of Pakistan from hostility to even a degree of cooperation, it will not be an exaggeration. But behaviour of three nations Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka seem to be in a constant flux.
32. This is further confirmed by the uncertainties plaguing the foreign policies of the US and China. India under NDA II began by moving closer to the US under Barack Obama in 2014-2016. In 2016. I could see a policy-coordination between India and the US. It was visible in India that the US was moving closer to Vietnam, as well as Iran. There was a possibility of US accepting India’s extending its geopolitical cooperation with Iran in developing Chabahar port as an India-US equivalent of Chinese Gwadar port in Pakistan. But US policy under Trump with twin goals of undoing everything done by Obama and pursuit of ‘America First’; with his unpredictable temperament and uncertain turns around on policies towards India, despite proclaiming PM Modi as his best friend, have made India to ensure perception of equidistance in approaches towards US and China. This is testified by PM Modi initiating India-China military exercises called hand in hand; this is happening when India US, Japan

military exercises have seen 17 editions so far and more are expected to join from quadrilateral countries.

33. Since canvas we intend to cover is very vast during the two days with sudden changes here and there we intend to attend them at two levels: First eminent scholars, retired diplomats and public figures will be invited to address to 13 broad areas listed here below; each considered as a keynote address. Another group of twenty plus Ph.D. and P.G. students, post-doctoral fellows and newly recruited young assistant professors will be invited to take micro problems and present their views as far as possible under the 13 topics here below. We intend to address more specifically the following questions:

- a) What are the salient features of Indian Neighbourhood policy? How does it differ from the SAARC?
- b) A critical analysis of Indian policies directed towards establishing normal relations with Pakistan; its unabated support and use of terrorism against India as well as Afghanistan; Role of Pakistan's Army and ISI in India policy making.
- c) Will there be any change in Pakistan's India policy and foreign policy under new Prime Minister, Imran Khan?
- d) What are the efforts made by the US and India in promoting democracy globally and regionally. How sincere are the efforts?
- e) How well has India promoted its policies towards Bangladesh in resolving outstanding issues? How did PM Modi succeed to find mutually acceptable solutions to issues in India-Bangladesh Relations?
- f) A case study of domestic roots in India's Bangladesh policies; analysis of West Bengal's interest in Bangladesh issues; terrorism as a factor in India-Bangladesh relations.
- g) Terrorism and Rohingya Issues; UN's efforts to find a trilateral solution by involving India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- h) Doklam crisis, its background and roots. Can we today make a critical analysis of Chinese behaviour?
- i) Small states in India's neighbourhood: cases of Maldives and Nepal.
- j) India-Bhutan relations, China's efforts to delink Bhutan from India
- k) Sri Lanka-China and India Trilateral relations; The US-India advantages vis-à-vis China's OBOR funding.⁴
- l) Is Nepal turning a sore point in India's Neighbourhood policy?
- m) Maldives and its changing policies; will newly elected President provide a rebalancing tilt in favour of China?

It might be added that many more micro-ideas hidden in the generalised statements can be taken up for a critical analysis: for instance, China's use of UN-proclaimed terrorists like Azad Masood to pressurise India to change its policies.