India’s Regional Security Strategy under the Modi Government

Balaji Chandramohan
FDI Visiting Fellow

Key Points

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s efforts to reach out to India’s neighbours are aimed at both increasing New Delhi’s present influence in South Asia and at countering any further ambitions of Beijing in the region. It could be thought of as India’s Monroe Doctrine.

- In the future, the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation, the only regional multilateral forum in South Asia, may evolve into an informal security partnership under Indian leadership. While the security aspect may not appeal to Pakistan, Islamabad would be an active participant in trade-related matters.

- Smaller countries in the region, such as Afghanistan, the Maldives and Mauritius will be happy to have an increased Indian military presence in their countries.

- India’s expanding reach in the continental and maritime domains will be welcomed by its immediate neighbours, as well as Australia, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam, all of which are wary of increased Chinese military expansion in the Indo-Pacific.

Summary

As the decision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to invite the Heads of State of all the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) member countries to his swearing-in ceremony illustrates, the new government is serious about engaging with its regional partners (including Burma, even though that country’s leaders were not at Modi’s
inauguration) and in trying to solve outstanding issues, such as the relationship with Pakistan, and, in so doing, outlining a policy and a political framework for its expanding global profile.

India’s foreign policy posture is now very much rooted in realism. There is a perception that the primary security threat for India is from its larger neighbour, China, and that New Delhi needs to reach out to its smaller neighbouring countries – including Pakistan – in an effort to build a greater regional consensus before it can claim its status as a global great power. India thus recognises that it first needs to solve its problems with its neighbours.

Analysis

The decision to invite the Heads of State of the SAARC member countries to his swearing-in ceremony on 26 May was an unprecedented diplomatic initiative. It sought to bring the SAARC countries under one strategic umbrella and highlight that some of the smaller countries in the region do not need to look to external powers for their security. The SAARC countries responded warmly by sending their respective Heads of State with, perhaps, a sense that it might be better to side with India in its ascendancy rather than looking towards external powers (which often does not go down well with their respective domestic constituencies, either).

India’s new policy of developing friendly relations with its neighbours has, therefore, found consensus both within its own ruling élite and among its neighbours. This approach is deeply rooted in an awareness that India’s neighbourhood, especially the SAARC countries, are attracted to China’s “Yuan Diplomacy” and that, therefore, New Delhi is obliged to change its regional security strategy to a more flexible and accommodating stance.

The above posture is very much intended to contrast with China’s activities in its neighbourhood, where it confronts countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea, as well as the United States. China’s recent moves have pushed those countries even closer to the US and made them even more inclined to check what they see as Chinese expansionism.

On the other hand, China is more comfortable with India being primarily a regional power in South Asia, either by design or default. That is precisely Beijing’s strategy to aid Pakistan in following an aggressive posture in its diplomatic relations with India. With India distracted by Pakistan, and with the US distracted in Afghanistan and Iraq, China was more easily able to expand its strategic presence.

In this sense, China benefits from its authoritarian and monolithic decision-making processes and culture – as compared with the more reactive, and sometimes contested, processes of democracies like India and the United States.

Despite perceptions of increased Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi, under the earlier United Progressive government, was largely passive. That response owed a great deal to internal dynamics, such as the pressures of being a coalition government and
its adherence to the concept of non-alignment. Indeed, in contrast to the realism that has been at the centre of China’s conduct in world affairs since 1949, Indian foreign policy under the left-centre Congress governments has favoured a stance of moralism-cum-idealism.

Now that the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party is in power, India is taking a more realistic stance in its foreign policy. The new government would like to see a unitary economic and trade bloc of South Asian countries and proximal Indian Ocean island-states, but the security concerns that would underpin any such arrangement will need special attention.

In terms of the military and diplomatic dimensions, the above stance could be seen as “India’s Monroe Doctrine” that seeks to establish New Delhi’s hegemony or sway over its neighbouring countries through both economic incentives and the provision of an overall security umbrella for the South Asian region. One continuation of the policy could be the export of India’s “South Asia model” of reaching out to other strategic countries in the Indo-Pacific region to help it establish its credentials as a major power.

In terms of geopolitics, this initiative could lead to a scenario wherein India solves its core continental security threat from Pakistan and expands along its periphery in both in the continental and maritime domains, establishing itself as a major power holding sway from the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca Strait and beyond to the South-West Pacific. In terms of a continental perspective, it becomes a credible power player in Central Asia with the aid and support of Afghanistan.

**Continental Strategy**

Outgoing Afghan President Hamid Karzai has emphasised the need for India to stay engaged with his successor. This is a tricky bit of policy space to negotiate with Pakistan’s military establishment, which remains distinctly uneasy about India’s presence across its western border.

Indian investment in the extraction of minerals, especially in the coal-rich Hajigak region and elsewhere in Afghanistan, and in other industries, will only grow. So, too, will the importance of Afghanistan in India’s geostategic ambition of assured access to – and connectivity with – Central Asia through the Iranian port of Chabahar and the north-south rail and road corridors, parts of which are already functional, such as the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, that was built by India.

Both Kabul and the Modi Government will strive to deepen their existing defence and security co-operation to increase the operational capabilities and mobility of the Afghanistan National Security and Defence Forces (ANSDF). As India had earlier given military equipment as well as sought greater co-operation in building a battle-capable ANSDF, it will now carefully weigh the implications of greater defence co-operation.

The Modi Government will use Afghanistan as a base for its “Look West” and “Look North” policies. The “Look West” policy has not been nearly as co-ordinated or successful as the

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1 Chaulia, S., ‘BJP, India’s Foreign Policy and the “Realist” Alternative to the Nehruvian Legacy’, *International Politics Journal*, Boston, June 2002.
“Look East” policy because New Delhi is restrained from pursuing relations across Central Asia and the Middle East by Pakistan. Similarly, its relations with the United States, though positive, have not developed significantly because Washington has not necessarily welcomed India playing a major role in the Middle East and Central Asia. Washington needed Islamabad as a base for its operations in Afghanistan, but with the winding up of its military support to the Afghan Government, the US will be more comfortable with New Delhi expanding its reach to possibly serve as a counterweight to any Chinese ambitions in Central Asia and the Middle East, just as it has done in South-East Asia.

Further, as part of its expanding continental orientation, India should reconsider deploying a squadron of Su-30MKIs at the Farkhor base in Ainee, Tajikistan, to counter increased Chinese military assertiveness in its western borders. From India’s point of view, the region north of Afghanistan will soon prove to be pivotal to the energy security of continental Asian powers.

To allay potential apprehensions in Pakistan over these actions, the Modi Government will be required to reconfigure its policy approach towards that country, including demonstrating that its military focus is China-centric. This might include, but would not be limited to, reducing as much as realistically possible its western defences and then re-configuring India’s capabilities so as to obtain a single mechanised armoured corps and several independent armoured brigades from the present three strike corps in its eastern regions. The excess personnel and assets would be transferred to form two offensive mountain corps, in addition to the one being raised now, to give a total of three such corps positioned for an offensive land operation against China. This would be a strategic shift from the existing defensive continental posture.

Such a shift may win Pakistan’s confidence enough to facilitate a genuine normalisation of relations, while building up potent Indian offensive forces for operations on the Tibetan plateau as a deterrent to the Chinese forces stationed along the disputed mountain border. Strategically, it could help to establish India as an actor in Central Asia with Pakistan potentially even providing elements of support.

**Maritime Strategy**

In the maritime domain, under the Modi Government, India will likely heed the request made by Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen Gayoom for help in constructing a naval base off the main island of Malé.

A similar approach is expected in Mauritius, also, as the Modi Government will be very likely to consider the Mauritian proposal to grant India a long-term lease to use the North and South Agaléga Islands as naval and air bases.

Such agreements would allow India to increase its forward maritime presence in the Indian Ocean and might encourage similar arrangements with other Indian Ocean states, such as the Seychelles and Mozambique. It would draw the western and southern reaches of the Indian Ocean into an Indian security grid at the same time that India is also expanding its Western Fleet and building a base in Karwar. It would also help to keep India proportionate to the Chinese South Sea Fleet’s expanding presence in the Indian Ocean.
As a part of its expanding maritime strategy, India will also seek to consolidate its existing maritime co-operation with Sri Lanka. India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives presently have a trilateral maritime security co-operation agreement that might, in the future, expand into an informal strategic partnership, if not an alliance, aimed at curtailing Chinese maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean. Delegations from Mauritius and the Seychelles attended the most recent National Security Advisor-level meeting held in New Delhi in March 2014, indicating their interest in the trilateral. Arrangements such as the trilateral help India to expand its role and presence in the Indian Ocean by adding subtle diplomacy and capacity-building to the forward naval presence described earlier.

Boosting that forward naval presence by expanding its links in the Indian Ocean will, therefore, be a priority for the Modi Government. In addition to contributing to a more effective maritime strategy, it could also complement the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), as both India and Sri Lanka are members. So, too, are Mauritius and the Seychelles and the initiative may encourage the Maldives to join IORA.

Conclusion

Under the new government of Narendra Modi, India will pursue a more effective strategic orientation by both consolidating its links with the existing partners in its region and, also, with other countries such as Australia and Japan. The first step in realising its Great Power ambitions, however, is to have an effective regional security strategy, which has the necessary internal support within India and also among its neighbours – particularly Pakistan – which are, of course, often wary of India’s ambitions.

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About the Author: Balaji Chandramohan is Editor of the ‘Asia for World Security Network’ and a correspondent for the Auckland-based newspaper, Indian Newslink. He is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the New Zealand Labour Party.

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2 ‘NSA level meeting on trilateral Maritime Security Co-operation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives’, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 6 March 2014.
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