

Editor's Note

India's Precarious Periphery

India's sprawling Southern Asian periphery surrounding its continental and maritime boundaries has seldom been a stable and peaceful zone. The string of small and medium states surrounding the continental-sized central state — Bharat or India — have struggled to build stable political systems that can ensure sustained economic growth over a significant period. Sri Lanka in the early years and Bangladesh in the pre-COVID decade did record impressive growth as a result of a period of political stability and continuity in policies. Over the past seven decades, however, each of these states — Pakistan, Bangladesh (pre-1971 East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Myanmar — has gone through brutal and sometimes long civil wars and most of them have also experienced mass upheavals that have brought down governments. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar have witnessed multiple civilian governments fall, rigged elections, military coups and long periods of military rule. The human, political and economic costs have been extremely high. Only a stable and friendly Bhutan has been an exception.

A longer view of the political trajectory of these states underlines a common pattern — acute political rivalry, power grab, and absence of a shared national vision that would unify the nation to overcome challenges and spur it forward to a higher destiny. Consider this: a war ravaged Afghanistan has remained unstable since April 1978 when President Mohammad Daoud Khan's progressive government was overthrown in a coup d'état by the military and the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Today the country has turned a full circle with political power seized by the antediluvian and repressive Taliban that does not respect democracy, modernity, rule of law, individual freedoms, and women's emancipation. In neighbouring Pakistan, a power struggle and street battles between rival political groups have been underway for months with the military fully involved. Conflict has been rife in provinces such as Balochistan that deeply resent the central government's misrule, abuse of power, discriminatory and repressive policies. The rebel Tehrik-i-Pakistan (TTP) is challenging the government and the military in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The economy faces an acute debt crisis and the hapless people suffer. In India's north, Nepal has not been stable since the Maoist uprising against the monarchy and the ten year long civil war began in the mid-1990s. The monarchy has been pulled down, and a Constitution adopted but consensus eludes the conflicted political

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elites and the ruling communist party factions. A series of governments have struggled to survive and collapsed.

In the South, Sri Lanka went through 30 years of bloody civil war because the Sinhala nationalists and the Tamil minorities could not agree on the national language policy. Even after the internal war ended and recovery could be completed, economic mismanagement, rising debt and high inflation led to a mass uprising that pulled down the government. Tiny Maldives too has experienced authoritarian trends, attempted coup, volatile politics, and debt crisis. In Myanmar, the military has repeatedly cut short civilian rule in a country that began as a parliamentary democracy post-independence. In 2010, Myanmar began a new journey towards democracy after decades of military rule. But the 2021 coup ended that journey and returned the country to military rule. Since then, the country has been in the grip of a civil war, and thousands of refugees have illegally moved into Northeast India fanning local conflicts. Similarly, Bangladesh that promised to build a secular democracy after a bloody battle for freedom from Pakistan in 1971, has experienced constant internal conflicts, the killing of the founding father Mujibur Rahman and his family, the seizure of power by the military, assassination of the military ruler Zia-ur Rahman, and acute rivalry between the two leading parties — the nationalist Awami League and the pro-Islamist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). While Sheikh Hasina provided a period of much needed stability and high economic growth, charges of rigged elections and authoritarianism have marred her rule. A period of political battles and uncertainty stares it in the face.

In the past five years, the situation has turned particularly grim owing to the effects of COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukraine war on these weak and vulnerable states. Economic conditions worsened, growth fell, global supplies and export markets were severely disrupted, commodity prices rocketed, and tourism — vital to the economy of several countries — suffered. Politics, meanwhile, has become volatile and destabilising. The conditions, instead of improving with time and experience, remain precarious for most of the states.

The Price of Instability

All these states aspired and began as formal democracies but have failed to build the basic national consensus on political norms, language and religion, functioning of independent institutions, secure provincial rights, and ways to control endemic corruption. Political parties often have failed to garner popular support necessary to keep the military or extremist forces at bay. Weak states and fragile governments cannot sustain democracy or provide the stability needed for economic growth and development, and the rule of law

vital for ensuring order. Nor can they protect people's rights or minority rights. Most of them, as a result, have become failed or struggling democracies.

While the fate of this set of states has been largely shaped by their political elites, their interests, visions and choices, two other factors, both external, are important: one, the British colonial legacy that had left behind states struggling with ethnic and religious conflicts, mass poverty and illiteracy, weak economies and absence of resources necessary for industrialisation. Two, the role of great powers in actively shaping the choices, the domestic politics and the foreign policies of these countries. Pakistan went into an alliance with the US and Britain in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958. The alliance was aimed at boosting the military power of Pakistan to contain the communist threat, but Pakistan used it to wage wars against India and later Afghanistan recklessly. The costs were high; economically, it distorted allocation priorities, strengthened the military's role, and turned India into an enemy. Its insecurities multiplied many fold and deprived the country of the gains from peace, trade and security cooperation with its largest neighbour. Pakistan compounded its problems thereafter by allying also with China and becoming a pliant partner in Beijing's strategic calculus against India from the mid-1960s. The role of the US and China in shaping Pakistan into a perpetually unstable Islamist terror hub, and an economically weak and debt-ridden failed state has been immense.

Afghanistan was similarly drawn into a vortex of global power politics and conflict following Soviet armed intervention in 1979 to protect a shaky regime and the US aggressive response to it. The US trained and armed radical Islamist groups based in Pakistan in its strategy to defeat the Soviet Union that not only forced the Soviet forces to withdraw, but also finally engulfed both Afghanistan and the US in two decades of devastating war. It ruined the country and deeply wounded America. The Taliban's rise and domination of Afghan politics is the direct outcome of this tragic American policy. America's backing for regime change in Pakistan, and its pressures and sanctions on Myanmar and Bangladesh have not helped stabilise these countries. China, meanwhile, has enhanced its interference in the domestic politics of all these countries. It is today a key actor influencing politics, military and economics in these countries through its 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative, trade policies, and arms supplies. Its predatory policies are also the major reason for the huge debt burdens of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and increasingly Nepal. Both the US and China have not only aggravated the difficulties these countries face but have also heightened the region's conflicts and the challenges of building stable state systems and promoting economic growth.

India's Predicament

A peaceful, secure, cooperative and prosperous neighbourhood is a boon to states and regions; a disturbed, turbulent and conflicted periphery a bane — a source of insecurity, migrants and refugees, cross-border drug and arms flow, terrorism and extremism, conflict and war. India has suffered all these costs over the decades. It recognised early in its journey that cooperative and friendly ties would help build peace, security and stability in these countries and in turn bring peace and security gains to itself/and the region. This has not always been possible given the nature of politics and the suspicions about their large neighbour that has prevailed in these countries. Pakistan has always been hostile and actively forged alliances with the US and China. Most of the other states forged strong ties with China as a balancer, even when their interdependence with India was critical for survival, well-being and development. Such a strategy has often hurt these countries and have raised security, economic and political costs for India at a time when it needed a peaceful environment for nation-building and rapid development.

India's policy of helping build a peaceful and stable neighbourhood has been well established and has not been changed by successive governments. The strategic vision is articulated in its 'Neighbourhood First' Policy. The imperative of being the first responder in every crisis in countries that have needed India's help has taken deep roots in policy. It was reflected in restoring democracy in the Maldives as the regime was sought to be overthrown in 1988; helping the warring sides reach a peace settlement to end the civil war in Nepal in 2006; rushing critical large financial aid to Sri Lanka and the Maldives to overcome their acute debt crisis; supplying COVID vaccines to the neighbourhood; and rushing its navy and supplies to help with aid and rescue assistance to a Nepal facing devastating earthquake and a Sri Lanka facing Tsunami. Its USD 8 billion in line of credit to Bangladesh has helped build ports, roads, rail links, irrigation and other infrastructure projects. It provides multiple training programmes in all the countries it partners, and has zero to minimal tariffs for imports of numerous goods from the regional Least Developed Countries.

The periphery faces multiple challenges today. The impact of these challenges has the potential to overflow on to India in multiple ways. India needs to keep its vigil, enhance engagement and regional cooperation, and sustain developmental assistance so that such effects can be minimised. Closer monitoring of politico-economic developments in the region and better policy coordination with regional governments are increasingly necessary. Intelligence and security cooperation need a fillip. It also needs to make greater efforts to energise the regional organisation BIMSTEC to deal with collective issues. India's active role and deeper engagement could help the region minimise the negative impact of the policies pursued by some of the leading powers.

A peaceful, stable and prosperous neighborhood is in India's paramount interest as it seeks to achieve the goal of '*Vikasit Bharat*' — a developed and secure nation.

In this Issue

To better understand the emerging politico-security dynamics, the current issue of *National Security* focuses on developments in some of the states that are a part of India's immediate and extended neighbourhood — Iran, Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Iran is a crucial partner in the extended neighbourhood and how its policies and politics evolve have major implications. Scholar Kingshuk Chatterjee analyses the current predicament of Iran. While it is a country that sustains a unique political system that is presently in turmoil, it also asserts itself as a regional adversary to Israel and attempts to pose an existential challenge to Israel through its proxies. He explains how on the sidelines of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza, Iran has attempted to neutralise Israel's improved relationships with some of the Arab countries. Yet neither Iran nor Israel have so far desired a direct war that could drag the region into a wider conflict. Though it does not share borders with India, Iran is crucial to maintaining stability in Afghanistan and still nurtures a pro-India constituency. From this vantage point, he argues that India must engage with Iran while simultaneously balancing its relationship with Israel.

Scholar Gulbin Sultana looks at democratisation in the Maldives and its evolution as a multi-party democracy. She analyses the contest between the democratic reforms of Mohamed Nasheed and the remnants of the erstwhile autocratic system of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and their successors since 2008. She explains how in the process of democratisation and development, a distinct partisan approach to various foreign policy issues has also emerged. In a country that zealously guarded its sovereignty, increased engagement with India was seen as a sign of compromise. The moves towards and away from India happened largely independently of India's posture towards Male; essentially shaped by the political constituencies within the Maldives. It is they who also decide to engage with China in the manner they deem fit. She argues, therefore, that India must stay engaged with Maldives in a positive way without compromising on its security interests.

In his study of the situation in Pakistan, scholar Ashish Shukla notes the continuous political turmoil that grapples it. He explains the current state of play between the political parties, the army and the Islamic groups in Pakistan. Providing details of the political dynamics witnessed in the recently concluded general elections at the provincial levels, he brings us up to date with the formation of the coalition government at the Federal level. He argues that the current alignments in Pakistan do not show any signs of a change

in policy towards India, so for now, India should do what it has been doing for long— be alert, wait and watch.

VIF Director and former Deputy National Security Advisor, Arvind Gupta reviews a book on Nepal. The book is co-authored by K.V. Rajan, India's longest serving diplomat in Nepal, and Atul K. Thakur, a policy and management professional with specialisation in the interface of economics and politics, with a focus on South Asia. Gupta contends that despite historical, cultural, social and familial ties, the relationship between the two countries remains enigmatic. The authors, he points out, have highlighted that anti-Indianism often rears its head and has acquired a more pernicious form lately. In addition to vested domestic constituencies over a period of time, both Pakistan and China have been able to vitiate India's relations with Nepal. Gupta underscores the authors' point espousing for an understanding and magnanimous approach by India to allay the fears of its land-locked neighbour.

A second book review is by scholar Anchita Borthakur on Bangladesh, India's eastern neighbour. Authored by a former ambassador to Bangladesh, Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, the book begins its narrative with developments in pre-colonial times and provides several interesting historical inputs regarding the political dynamics on the eve of Independence in the then East Pakistan. It also reveals unknown facets of the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. Borthakur states that an important aspect of the book is the light it sheds on the relationship between the anti-India forces in Bangladesh and Pakistan. She highlights the assertion made by the author that India's policy towards Bangladesh has been consistently positive despite change in governments in the two countries and the imperative for India to contribute to Bangladesh's development and stability.

Finally, scholar Cchavi Vasisht reviews a recent study on Myanmar, a country that borders India's northeastern states and has been historically India's overland gateway to Southeast Asia. Myanmar is also an important conduit in the drug and small arms smuggling circuit between Southeast Asia and India. The author of the book, Kolkata based scholar Tuhina Sarkar, argues that Myanmar has been traditionally viewed as a gateway to Southeast Asia. However, the instability and violence in Myanmar since February 2021 have cast doubts on its potential as a gateway. The military coup shattered the foundation on which India's vision of a "Myanmar gateway" rested. The ongoing conflict in Myanmar has also triggered a refugee influx into India. Tens of thousands of refugees from Myanmar have crossed the border to enter India, thus straining security in the border areas and States. Additionally, political and armed clashes since October 2023 in Myanmar have driven many Myanmar soldiers and civilians to seek refuge in India. Vasisht highlights

the author's concern regarding China's increasing influence in Myanmar and India's continuing vulnerabilities across a porous border with the country.

The issue points to the many challenges India faces in its neighbourhood and contains suggestions for transforming bilateral relationships. It has several pointers on ways to strengthen and reinvigorate the 'Neighbourhood First' policy of India.

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