

# India and South Asia: The Elusive Sphere of Influence

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## Summary

*‘Spheres of Influence’ is a notion that has not disappeared from international relations despite the significant democratisation of international relations. Independent India did inherit an expansive sphere of influence from the British Raj, but Partition, alienation from the West and inward economic orientation made it hard to sustain that legacy. While its ability to regain regional influence has grown along with economic rise, Delhi faces formidable new challenges in reconstituting a South Asian sphere of influence. India’s focus must instead be in tending the region carefully rather than setting ambitious and unrealisable goals.*

## Introduction

It was widely presumed that the spheres of influence as a concept in international relations had come to an end with the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact had collapsed. However, the idea has come back to the centre-stage amidst the dissolution of the unipolar moment and the renewed quest for political accommodation among the great powers.<sup>1</sup> In the South Asian subcontinent, the idea endures. It is possible to argue that the inter-state relations of South Asia are an expression of the tension between the idea of Indian primacy and the resistance to it from the region.

The idea that India must ‘lead’ the neighbourhood is a very appealing one for the country’s elite. As a commentator on Indian diplomacy put it, India must be the “arbiter of its own destiny, and the region’s.”<sup>2</sup> This is not an exceptional view but prevalent across the Indian political spectrum. From the conservative to the liberal, the notion that the subcontinent is India’s to keep is strongly held. The implicit idea of an Indian sphere of influence in South Asia is shared by the ideologues of *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India) as well as the traditional foreign policy community which believes the subcontinent is a single entity and that Delhi is entitled to lead.

While these notions are enduring and attractive, they set the stage of perennial political frustration and policy disappointment that is often directed at the failures of the government of the day in Delhi. India’s task in the neighbourhood is more prosaic – that of managing the messy regional reality and striving for steady improvement in the regional dynamic. That task, however, is complicated with the presence of other big and small sovereign actors in the subcontinent as well as great powers who have interests of their

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive recent discussion, see Susanna Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and for a discussion of the current relevance see, Graham Allison, “The New Spheres of Influence: Sharing the Globe with Other Great Powers”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

own in the region. The idea that India can just will its regional leadership, through political proclamations or use of force, is a political fantasy.

Earning the regional leadership, in turn, depends on overcoming contradictions of history and geography. This is a process full of twists and turns, and the 'successes and failures' of the regional policy of any government cannot be measured in simplistic terms. Taking a longer term view though, there is no denying the continuous improvement in India's relative position in the subcontinent in recent decades. India's rapid economic growth and greater priority for regional affairs have certainly helped its South Asian strategic options. However, the challenges too have increased in the region, most notably the rise of Chinese power and its growing regional influence.

## **Structural Challenges**

A number of factors suggest that India's claims for a regional sphere of influence have a reasonable basis. That the subcontinent shares a common civilisational inheritance is not in doubt. Pakistan, however, denies this inheritance and seeks to develop an identity that is different from India.<sup>2</sup> The lineage of the current thinking on India's regional primacy can be traced to the extraordinary power of the British Raj, which brought the entire subcontinent under its sway and exercised dominance over the neighbouring states and shaped the regional order across the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> Economic liberals reinforce this claim by pointing to the great possibilities of integrating regional markets in the age of globalisation around the commercial weight of India. But political ideology compels Pakistan to dissociate itself from any such efforts.

The Partition of the subcontinent along religious lines has left a deep wound that is yet to heal. This continues to make it hard to implement policies whose value seems so-self evident. The growing strength of religious forces has only made matters worse for India's relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh. India's inward economic orientation in the decades after independence reinforced the political division of the subcontinent into multiple sovereign entities. The lack of interest in trade has reduced the value of connectivity with neighbours and undermined the historic linkages inherited from the Raj within and beyond the subcontinent. Meanwhile, the rise of nationalism and self-identity in the smaller nations of the subcontinent have put the neighbouring elites often at odds with India. If the smaller kingdoms of the subcontinent looked up to Calcutta for their security during the Raj era, today they are tempted to mobilise other great powers to balance New Delhi in the region. Pakistan, for example, looked to the United States (US) and China to limit India's regional dominance. Today, all countries of the region play, to different degrees, the so-called "China card" against India.<sup>4</sup>

All great powers struggle continuously in sustaining their regional primacy, managing the contradictions with the neighbours and fending off other powers from within the

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<sup>2</sup> Aparna Pande, *Explaining Foreign Policy: Escaping India*, (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Wainwright, *Regional Security and Paramount Powers: British Raj and Independent India* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> T V Paul, "When balance of power meets globalization: China, India and small states of South Asia", *Politics*, Vol 39, no. 1, 2019, pp. 50-63.

neighbourhood. Consider, for example, the problems of American hegemony in Latin America – it cannot tame either Cuba or Venezuela despite repeated efforts – or prevent the larger countries in the region like Brazil seeking greater autonomy from the US. Look also at Moscow’s difficulties in influencing Ukraine that has been a historical part of Russia but is a sovereign entity today. Do also note Russia’s problems managing the larger role of the US, Europe and North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the former Soviet Republics. Or the growing number of Beijing’s neighbours turning to the US for their security despite huge economic interdependence with China. These trends are inbuilt into the politics of international relations. There is no way India can wish them away. And the Partition adds an additional layer of difficulty for India’s South Asia policy.

## Problems Unending

A review of the region’s relations with India underlines these enduring structural constraints. Let us start with the Maldives in the south-eastern waters of the subcontinent. Few years ago, it looked like India was dealt out of the Maldives by the government of Abdullah Yameen (2013-18) which moved very close to China. The current government, led by Ibrahim Solih, talks of an ‘India First’ policy and his relationship with Delhi is closer than ever before. It would be a mistake to believe this will be a permanent state of affairs. Opponents of the government are running a campaign on getting India out of the Maldives.<sup>5</sup> Speculation is that the campaign is being funded by China. But the more enduring fact is that India is an inevitable part of the internal power struggles within the Maldives. And so is China. India can only transcend this by creating conditions where all political factions in Malé, develop enough stakes in a positive relationship with Delhi.

Sri Lanka offers lessons in the special problems with India’s intermeshed domestic politics of its neighbours. Delhi’s enduring concerns about the rights of the Tamil minority in Lanka stands in contrast to the Chinese claim of ‘non-intervention’ in the internal affairs of Lanka. That the claim is not true is besides the point; the undeniable fact is that Sinhalese nationalism is today directed against India and that severely complicates Delhi’s engagement with Colombo. If India is seen as the source of the problem on the Tamil question, China and even Pakistan are seen as part of the answers in Colombo. This idea translates into Sri Lanka’s approach to projects by India and China. If Beijing seems to get away with projects that are patently unfair to Colombo, Delhi struggles to get any project through. This built-in problem of politicisation of economic projects in Sri Lanka is unlikely to be corrected any time soon. If the United Progressive Alliance government was paralysed by the Congress party’s interests in Tamil Nadu in dealing with Sri Lanka, the National Democratic Alliance government is less of a hostage to Chennai and expanded the engagement with Colombo. But progress is bound to take time.<sup>6</sup>

Delhi’s ties with Dhaka point to the persistent problems posed by the Partition. On the positive side of the ledger is the resolution of the disputes over boundaries created by

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<sup>5</sup> Meera Srinivasan, “India Out campaign in Maldives intensifies with Yameen’s backing”, *The Hindu*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-out-campaign-in-maldives-intensifies-with-yameens-backing/article37996175.ece>.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion, see “India-Sri Lanka Relations: New Issues and Perspectives”, *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-57.

Partition. Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi get credit for this – the former negotiated the agreement and the latter implemented it. But the Partition continues to assert itself on the issue of religious minorities across the border and the movement of people across it. There are no easy near term solutions for these issues that threaten bilateral ties. Fortunately, trade and economic and political ties have significantly improved providing a balance against the negative trends.<sup>7</sup>

In Nepal and Bhutan, China looms larger than before and has inevitably undermined the primacy of India in the traditional relationship between the mountain states and India. Delhi, which had a free run in the past, did not pay enough attention to long-term challenges arising from China. Beijing now offers a stiff contest and there is a way of stopping either Kathmandu or Thimpu from leveraging this dynamic. With the disputed Sino-Indian border becoming a live zone of conflict, India's position in Nepal and Bhutan will be severely tested by Beijing, whose economic and military resources are far superior to those of Delhi.<sup>8</sup>

That brings us to the Af-Pak region. In Afghanistan, the British Raj was the dominant external power. Partition ensured that Delhi will not have the luxury or trouble of exercising hegemony over Afghanistan. That burden has gone to Pakistan, which inherited the border between the British Raj and Afghanistan. The notion that India can shape the outcomes in Afghanistan which has seen massive military interventions by the world's superpowers – Soviet Union and the US – as well as the leading Islamic powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran is an illusion. India's good run in Afghanistan during the last two decades was a function of the stability and security provided by US military forces during 2001-21. In the post-American phase, India's challenges in Afghanistan will only mount; but new opportunities might also present themselves as the Taliban asserts its autonomy from Pakistan. Although India can never be the dominant power in Afghanistan, it will always have a measure of influence in Kabul. While Pakistan remains in the driver's seat in Afghanistan, sections of the Afghan elite who resent Islamabad's policies have always turned to India. That trend is unlikely to disappear.<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan was never willing to accept India's claims to primacy in South Asia, let alone the nature of the territorial settlement under Partition. Pakistan turned to Britain and the US and later to China to balance Delhi as well as internationalise its disputes with India. Every prime minister of India, irrespective of the nature of the ruling party, has sought reconciliation with Pakistan. But there is no agreement within Pakistan on the terms of mutual engagement let alone on reconciliation.

Lamenting the absence of dialogue with Pakistan does not mask the reality that it is not prepared to take the smallest steps on cooperation with India; not even when it is in

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<sup>7</sup> For an assessment of the current state of Delhi's ties with Dhaka, see the collection of essays, *India-Bangladesh Relations @50* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2021), <https://www.orfonline.org/series/india-bangladesh-relations-50-commemorating-bilateral-ties/>. Accessed on 2 January 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Wagner, "The India-China competition in the Himalayas: Nepal and Bhutan", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 15 November 15, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/india-china-competition-himalayas-nepal-and-bhutan-28258>. Accessed on 2 January 2021.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of India's geopolitics in Afghanistan, see Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from Soviet Invasion to US Withdrawal* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2017).

Pakistan's own interest. Meanwhile, India's relative power in relation to Pakistan has steadily grown in recent decades. The Indian economy, at US\$2.9 trillion (S\$3.93 trillion) today, is 10 times larger than that of Pakistan's US\$270 billion (S\$366.09 billion). But the power differential might not be big enough for Delhi to either decisively defeat Islamabad or induce a satisfactory settlement. Delhi then has no option but to wait for a different approach to come out of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the bilateral, there is much concern that South Asian regionalism is going nowhere. The main regional forum, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has not had its annual summit since 2014. (The leaders did meet to discuss the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020; but Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan did not join.) In any event, the pandemic did not produce any major regional agreements among the South Asian leaders to collectively manage it. More meetings would not, however, have made much difference to SAARC. As at the bilateral level, so also at the regional level, Pakistan has made a strategic judgement that it will not trade or promote connectivity with India until the Kashmir question is resolved to its satisfaction. Pakistan's preference instead has been to integrate with the Chinese economy.<sup>11</sup> It is easy to question the merits of these judgements, but Pakistan has the sovereign right to choose its economic partners. Significant internal and external developments could someday change that calculus, but it is not something India can force upon Pakistan.

## Conclusion

A realistic appreciation of the challenges facing India suggests that Delhi's emphasis should be on tending the region, undertaking sustained efforts to resolve long-standing differences, open its market to the neighbours and generate possibilities for common prosperity. While the responses from the neighbours would vary, making incremental progress wherever possible is the only way forward. Merely claiming a sphere of influence would only set Delhi up for inevitable failure. Delhi must instead focus on accelerating its own economic growth, give a serious stake for its neighbours in India's success and manage the unique complexities that shape its relations with all the neighbours. Above all, India should focus on building a more open region rather than an exclusive India-led one. Building trans-regional frameworks, developing wider coalitions of like-minded powers, would make it easier for the neighbours to engage India and deepen interdependence with it.

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<sup>10</sup> Ashley Tellis, "Are India-Pakistan Talks Worth a Damn?", Carnegie Endowment, Washington DC, 2017; and see John Vater and Yogesh Joshi, "Narendra Modi and the Transformation of India's Pakistan Policy", *South Asia Scan No.9*, Institute of South Asian Studies, August 2020, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/South-Asia-Scan-Vol-9-Full-Amended.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Haroon Sharif, "Pakistan's Regional Economic Integration: Challenges and Opportunities", Brief No. 877, Institute of South Asian Studies, 5 November 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/pakistans-regional-economic-integration-challenges-and-opportunities/>.