

A New Regional Doctrine for India

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Introduction

Nepal has been in flux since the overthrow of the monarchy. Since the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Pakistan Army has used Jihad as an instrument of State Policy against India. More recently a Golden opportunity of settling many issues with Bangladesh was available and half grasped, but is in danger of slipping away. The Maldives has been in flux with a dictatorship giving way to democracy and possible reversal/setback. Sri Lanka, after eliminating a terrorist and secessionist threat, seems to be diluting its historically strong democracy and undermining democratic institutions. These developments in the Indian sub-continent and the maritime region around it, challenge us to think about a regional doctrine to replace the abandoned “Indira doctrine”² and “Gujral Doctrine.”³ We can take a cue from the strengths and weakness of these doctrines and apply them to the changing strategic environment. Domestic developments, such as the greater interest and involvement of State Governments or State parties in International policy also argue for a clearer enunciation of a regional doctrine.

National Interest

Why are we interested in the region? What is the National interest of India in the South Asia region. Anybody who has followed India’s international affairs since independence knows that most if not all the threats have originated in this region. Leaving aside conventional territorial threats the most important threat has been from terrorism. This threat has taken many different forms including financing, training, directing, provision of safe havens. It was nurtured and developed long before it became an explicit known public threat. Any regional doctrine must have a strategy for addressing the short, medium and long term aspects of this threat. The second regional threat that we have faced is the acquisition of nuclear weapons either through explicit or tacit support of nuclear weapons powers and the use of nuclear weapons for nuclear blackmail in various forms. It would be naïve to believe that this threat cannot worsen either on the intensive or extensive margin. A regional doctrine must try to ensure the minimization and/or elimination of the threat of nuclear blackmail and blackmail using other weapons of mass destruction. Finally on the positive side it would be in the interests of all countries of the region, including India, would gain from free trade in goods and services and mutual FDI.

Geographical Spread

What should be the Geographical reach of such a regional doctrine? That depends on the degree to which developments in the country/region can either benefit us or harm us. There is general agreement that developments in the Indian sub-continent-South Asia (Afghanistan to Myanmar, Nepal to Sri Lanka) have this potential. Whether Maldives in the Arabian Sea has this potential is less clear. What about other more distant island nations in the Indian Ocean? This depends partly on the amount of resources we are able to commit to the overall task and our strategic reach and partly on the presence of larger, stronger potentially hostile external powers operating in the Indian Ocean (a circumscribed version of ‘Indira doctrine’). By these criteria, Maldives could be included within the region of operation of the doctrine, while other islands may

² The Indira Doctrine: Sub-continent as India’s exclusive sphere of influence. Oppose outside intervention, particularly of powers inimical to India, in domestic affairs of neighbors, who should not ask for outside assistance. Later called the Rajiv doctrine.

³ The Gujral Doctrine: Providing unilateral concessions to S Asian neighbors without expecting reciprocity.

be added over time, as capabilities and potential threats grow. Other Indian Ocean islands of potential interest are Mauritius and Seychelles.

Democracy, Secularism, Peace

Our own culture, secular traditions and democratic principles must form the bedrock of any external doctrine. The basic thrust of the doctrine must be to actively support friendly, peaceful, secular democratic forces, in the region. This would include civil society organizations, political forces and parties and governmental institutions that believe in a peaceful democratic future for their own country and for peaceful, friendly and co-operative relations with neighboring countries (including India). One operational consequence would be for Indian elites, media, and public to clearly and openly back genuinely pro-peace, political parties in these countries. They must, however, be mindful of creating public pressure on the government to adopt a blunt approach that can prove counter-productive. There should also be less inhibition in co-operating with Civil society organizations in other democratic countries that share the same objectives.

Government of India must be much more subtle and nuanced in its approach than civil society organizations, think tanks and media need to be. If and when such friendly parties are in power in the region, the Indian Government should provide asymmetric inter-governmental benefits to assure them and their supporters of the benefits of their positive approach (a selective version of Gujral doctrine). On the other hand **government** per se **should not** “unabashedly back Pro-India political parties (Nitin Pai BS 8/2/13),” in these countries, as in our view, this could be counter-productive in promoting friendly forces.

Dictatorship, Fundamentalism, Terrorism

The second aspect of this doctrine must be a hard headed strategy for opposing dictatorial and militaristic forces that have no compunctions about using violence against their own citizens, supporting terrorists, or engaging in hostile actions against neighbors such as India. This requires us to undermine fundamentalist/extremist elements and organizations, whether religious or ideological, which have a philosophy, ideology or history of violence. We have to rid ourselves of our extreme squeamishness in confronting forces, which have no moral or social compunctions about harboring, sheltering, training and financing militant groups that use violence against innocent civilians (in any country in the region). We must be prepared to use every feasible means to thwart such forces. We must also undermine their supporters - Political parties which provide open or tacit support, countries or organization outside the region that provide funds and safe heavens.

It is essential that the Indian elite, media and public adopt a clear and open stand against extremist forces, organization, elements in supposedly moderate political parties and organs of the government (e.g. Army). They must have an equally clear stand against terrorist killing of innocent civilians. Though government’s stand should be equally unabashed with respect to hostile non-govt. organizations, its public posture towards extremist forces within the government (of these countries) would have to be more nuanced. It is more important for the government to act quietly and forcefully against such institutions than to talk a lot about it. It can however, take a much more active diplomatic stance in private dealings with other countries who profess the same values and approach with respect to terrorist forces threatening them. At the same time the Indian elite,

media and civil society must understand and support the nuanced public stance of the Indian government

Ethnic Cleansing

Government could, **however**, take a more active role in international forums in exposing **genocide** and **ethnic cleansing** by an anti-India governing party or organ of government, perhaps through an announced policy. For instance India should have supported international efforts to expose the genocide in E. Pakistan/Bangladesh and to punish the guilty, including elements of General Tikka Khan's army (a la Justice Hamood-Ur-Rahman Commission) and its agents and collaborators in the Jamat-e-Islami (Razakars). The main argument against this proposition is that, it will open us to foreign interference and questions from other governments about how we have handled the insurgencies in J&K, the North West and in Maoist areas. There are two approaches to this: If the questioning is from Western 'do gooders', we must confidently question their own record of supporting dictators and murderers to further their national objectives. If the questioning is from oligarchic and dictatorships we must quietly but firmly tell them how their own record can and will be questioned. This requires a little hard work, including building a dossier on these countries historical record, and an awareness among our analysts, commentators and diplomats about this record.

In this context the most important question confronting the sub-continent is the ethnic-religious cleansing going on in Pakistan. Though it started long ago with prosecution of Hindus it has now been extended not only to Christians but to all non-Sunni Islamic sects and groups such as the Adamidis and Shia's. Recent reports suggest that it is beginning to be applied to other sects such as the Aga-Khanis, Sufis and even liberal Sunnis who deviate from fundamentalist tenets of Al Hadith. The global terror unleashed by fundamentalist Islamic groups (many originating in Pakistan) is now giving a rise to an ugly counter-reaction by Buddhists in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Civil Society Idealism

The main modality for supporting positive forces and opposing negative ones in the region, should be Civil Society organizations funded or supported by the government. These would need to have a clear program for study and analysis of neighboring countries to identify the positive and negative forces, the socio-political dynamics and the organization that need to be supported or ostracized. Based on this analysis they would have to work out country strategies to support the positive forces and oppose and undermine the negative forces in each country. They may need to hire development experts, former diplomats and intelligence experts with knowledge and expertise in these countries to formulate and implement these strategies. This knowledge and expertise would also be invaluable in government decision making in emergencies. One of their most important regional objectives should be to support other civil society organizations across the region, particularly those headed by Women, which believe in and work on, the socio-cultural objectives that constitute the high culture and the best traditions of the sub-continent.

It may also be worth creating and funding regional language TV, web papers and web sites that are run by regional language speaking non-Indian journalists and media persons. For instance Civil society groups could fund an *Urdu language* website that is run by journalists of Pakistan origin (/nationality) interested in preserving liberal non-sectarian values, promoting liberal democracy and civilian control of Armed forces and preaching peace, countering ethnic and religious hatred and

promoting rational discourse on critical Pakistani national issues like terrorism, Balochistan, cleansing of Shia-Hazras, TTP takeover of NW Pakistan and the origins and consequences of “The Deep State.”

Government Pragmatism

Though this doctrine will help in the medium-long term, in the short run, National Interest should play a dominant role in deciding how to deal with Army led Pakistan (Musharraf after his coup), a Military led Myanmar (with sole friend China), or democratic countries veering towards oligarchy. We must ignore the self-interested advice of Western human rights activists who have never been able to stop their own countries from coddling dictators who made life hell for neighboring countries.

Conclusion

Independent think tanks, Government supported organization and perhaps the National Security Advisory Board should try to formulate a full-fledged Regional Doctrine along these lines. It should then be discussed by the media and political parties. Once there is a broad agreement we should also invite think tanks in friendly countries such as the US to comment on it, before reaching a final understanding among ourselves. For any policy doctrine to succeed there must be a tacit understanding among all elements of society on its broad contours and the role of different institutions in propagating and promoting it. In my limited experience, successful foreign policy and diplomacy (the US, Pakistan till 5 years ago) always has this tacit co-ordination behind it.

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