

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Eastward Tilt Remaps India's Neighbourhood

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Summary

New Delhi's decision to invite the leaders of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation forum to the inauguration ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the end of May 2019 marks the continuing tilt in India's foreign policy towards the eastern subcontinent. The unwillingness to invite Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to the inauguration, however, does not mean Modi will turn his back on Pakistan. What it does show is the new understanding in New Delhi that Pakistan and the North Western subcontinent is a problem that must be managed, while the eastern subcontinent that extends into Southeast Asia is an opportunity that must be nurtured.

Among the many changes that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has imparted to India's world view is the way it thinks about its neighbourhood. Modi, like his predecessors, has persisted with the idea of putting the 'neighbourhood first' in the conduct of India's foreign policy. Where Modi has broke new ground is in changing the geographic nature of it. Before Modi, the idea of neighbourhood corresponded largely with the idea of South Asia.

The geography of South Asia itself was widely seen represented by the eight member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) [Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka]. Like all regions, South Asia too was an invented one. When he came to power in the summer of 2014, Modi chose to invite all leaders of SAARC, including then-Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif, for his inauguration as part of signalling his commitment to the principle of neighbourhood first. However, perhaps instinctively, Modi added Mauritius – an island state in the Western Indian Ocean – to the list of countries invited. The fact that the majority of its population was of Indian origin and Modi's special interest in strengthening ties with the diaspora probably led to that decision.

Five years later, Modi has chosen to invite a different group of leaders for his inauguration for the second term. These were the leaders from the forum called BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), along with Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan, the current chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which will host the next summit of the organisation in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in the middle of June 2019.

That Pakistan was excluded from this list has been widely interpreted as a "snub" to Khan who has been eager to resume dialogue with India. However, the talk of a deliberate diplomatic put-down of Pakistan misses the story of the larger regional dynamic that has emerged over the last few years. When he travelled to the SAARC Summit in Kathmandu at the end of 2014, Modi quickly figured out that the future of this South Asian forum was quite bleak. At the Summit, Sharif pulled out of regional connectivity agreements that were ready for signature. Officials from Islamabad were very much part of the prolonged and

painful negotiations to finalise the agreements on road and rail connectivity. New Delhi had concluded that the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi had pulled the plug on these agreements at the very last minute.

The fiasco in Kathmandu led Modi to shift the focus to two alternative pathways to regional integration. One was India's sub-regional cooperation within South Asia with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal under a new forum that went by the acronym, BBIN. Modi's saw that Pakistan is not ready for regional integration with India. Any number of summits is not going to get Pakistan to open to greater commerce and connectivity with India. Pakistan makes no secret that its priority is to get talk and resolve the question of Jammu and Kashmir. In Kathmandu, Modi was convinced that, rather than holding up the rest of the region hostage, it is better to move forward in other directions. If BBIN is about sub-regional cooperation, Modi also turned to a trans-regional forum – BIMSTEC that brings together five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand). Set up in 1997, the organisation had been moribund until Modi chose to revive it. The new interest in BIMSTEC was reflected in Modi's invitation to the BIMSTEC leaders to join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Summit that he hosted in Goa in 2016. Since then, New Delhi has invested its hopes for regionalism in BIMSTEC.

That it was not invited to Modi's oath-taking ceremony does not mean Pakistan will disappear from India's foreign policy agenda. It certainly has not escaped Modi's attention in the first term. In the last few years, Modi demonstrated his political will for either peace or war with Pakistan. If he travelled to Lahore on short notice at the end of 2015, Modi was ready to attack a terror camp at Balakot in February 2018. Modi will have an opportunity to engage Khan at the summit in Bishkek next month. Any productive meeting with Pakistani leadership needs significant preparation. Media reports say back channel conversations are on between Modi and Khan on how to kick-start the peace process.

For Modi, Pakistan to the west is a big challenge that needs to be carefully managed. The east, in contrast, appears full of opportunities – marked by the economic resurgence of Bangladesh and Myanmar that form a bridge the dynamic region of East Asia. Modi has talked the talk on BIMSTEC in his first term. He must now walk the walk by committing substantive resources to strengthen BIMSTEC and remove the multiple obstacles within India for the rapid economic integration of the Bay of Bengal littoral. Otherwise, there is the danger that BIMSTEC too could become as dysfunctional as SAARC.

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