



India Needs a ‘Sphere of Influence’ Policy in South Asia

By: Prof. Rajat Ganguly | Jan 31st, 2024



Figure 1: Indian Sub-Continent Map, Image Courtesy mapsfindia.com

In South Asia, India finds itself surrounded by small and weak states that have become fertile ‘sovereign spaces’ for anti-India activities. Political instability, corruption, and mal governance are often rife in weak states. The crisis in governance may create space for anti-India factions or regimes to gain power. This, in turn, may create difficulties for

India by allowing hostile foreign forces to conduct anti-India activities from a proximate region. Additionally, in weak states, political violence in the form of armed insurgency and terrorism often becomes endemic. These insurgent and terrorist forces may have strong kinship ties with ethnic brethren in India, which may embolden India's own ethnic insurgencies particularly along the border areas to threaten India's border security and territorial integrity. Moreover, economic collapse and meltdown are never far away in weak states. Such crises often creep up and erupt suddenly, causing social unrest, street riots, and violent agitations. This, in turn, may lead to a population exodus and confront India with a refugee burden. Dealing with such crises may require emergency economic aid and even military intervention by the Indian armed forces to stabilize the situation. Finally, weak states lack a keen sense of national identity and national consensus, which may cause such societies to fragment along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines, further exacerbating the problems of governance and allowing anti-India forces to capture power and use the sovereign space to undertake anti-India activities.

From the point of view of India's national security, controlling and managing these sovereign spaces in South Asia will be a big challenge going forward. It will require a more robust neighbourhood policy and a firm commitment to the concept of a 'sphere of influence'. The history of international relations over the past three centuries has shown us that all Great Powers consider their immediate neighbourhood to be within their sphere of influence. In that space, no Great Power can tolerate activities that are inimical to its national interests and national security. India should be

no exception to this rule of great power politics, particularly in the rapidly growing multipolar international system in the twenty-first century. In a multipolar international system, the sphere of influence concept will be crucial, particularly for Great Powers. This is because no one Great Power will be able to dominate the entire international system as the United States has done for three decades after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s. China today is stretching out its sphere of influence in East and Southeast Asia, which has increased the friction between Beijing and Tokyo, Seoul, Hanoi, Manila, Jakarta, and other neighbours. Russia's military actions in Ukraine (and previously in Georgia) seem to clearly suggest that Moscow considers Ukraine (and Georgia) to be within a Russian sphere of influence where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) are not welcome. Through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan, Moscow is demarcating a sphere of influence in the Eurasian region. In January 2022 for instance, three thousand Russian troops were deployed in Kazakhstan as 'peacekeepers' after the Kazakh President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, requested military assistance from the CSTO to put down political unrest in the resource rich country.

As an emerging Great Power, India would be justified in claiming the South Asian region as its legitimate sphere of influence. India today is the fifth largest economy in the world, and soon to become the third largest after the United States and China. It is also a nuclear weapons state and the fourth largest military power after the United States, China, and Russia.

Politically, India is the world's largest democracy with a 1.4 billion strong population and is fast emerging as the leader of the Global South as demonstrated clearly during the New Delhi G20 Summit last year. Since a state's, and particularly a Great Power's, national security is most affected by what happens in its immediate neighbourhood, whether India likes it or not it is in a fiercely competitive game with other 'hostile' Great Powers for influence and dominance in South Asia. India must therefore robustly defend its core security interests in the region and prevent the sovereign spaces provided by the smaller neighbours from being used for anti-India activities. To do this effectively, New Delhi must clearly enunciate the core objectives of its sphere of influence policy in South Asia.

India's sphere of influence policy in South Asia should incorporate three core objectives. First, New Delhi ought to make it clear to everyone that it considers South Asia to be a region that is solely under India's sphere of influence. In this space, any development, which the Indian government considers to be anti-India or harmful to India's interests, will not be tolerated and India would be justified in taking any actions it deems fit to rectify the situation. Second, India should make it clear to the smaller neighbours that it is willing to work with all political parties and factions in these states without prejudice provided they understand and accept that South Asia is under India's sphere of influence. Hence, they must not indulge in any activity or promote policies that are against India. If these smaller neighbours require economic, financial, political, military, and other assistance, they must seek that assistance from India. Finally, New Delhi must make it clear to the neighbours that within these states the anti-India

campaigns and rhetoric that some forces are actively promoting and encouraging must come to an immediate end. This will not be tolerated by India at any cost!

If New Delhi were to bluntly lay out these core objectives of its sphere of influence policy in South Asia, it would send a strong signal to all the South Asian states that they must not indulge in any activities that would be against India's national security and national interests. If they did, there would be significant 'costs' including, if required, strong coercive measures using India's hard power. Neighbouring states and critics alike may see this as India's 'hegemonic behaviour' towards smaller neighbours. But all Great Powers are hegemonic to some extent, especially in their sphere of influence. Then why should India be an exception? My view also is that the time for playing a hedging game is over. India must unequivocally say to neighbouring states that nothing in this region will happen without India's approval and involvement.

But does New Delhi have the political resolve to play this sphere of influence game? Can India's political leadership send this strong message to the region? Historically, India's political leadership has demonstrated time and again that it lacks strategic wisdom and resolve, which led to a series of strategic blunders in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Indira Gandhi tried to change this narrative in the 1970s and 1980s but also made major strategic mistakes. Indira Gandhi's successors often sent out conflicting signals to India's neighbours. Has India turned the tide under Narendra Modi? I am sceptical that the Modi government's 'good neighbour' and 'neighbourhood first' policies have delivered the kind of outcomes that a great power like

India would consider positive vis-a-vis its national security. India has not only sat back and watched the massive jihadi radicalization that has taken place in Bangladesh, the Maldives, Pakistan, and parts of Sri Lanka, but has done very little to even stop its spread inside India. The Maldives contributed the highest number per capita from South Asia to the ISIS war in Syria-Iraq. Many volunteers also went from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and of course Afghanistan-Pakistan. Indian security agencies, though aware of the problem, seemed powerless to stop or reverse it. In several cases (such as the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka in 2019), India's warning to neighbouring governments fell on deaf ears. Another problem that the Modi government seems oblivious to is the phenomenal rise in anti-India sentiments within South Asia's smaller states. This was demonstrated vividly in Bangladesh in the aftermath of India's defeat to Australia in the final of the 2023 Cricket World Cup. Scenes of jubilation and celebration in Dhaka and other towns and the open voicing of anti-India sentiments testified to many Indians the failure of the 'good neighbour' and 'neighbourhood first' policies of the Modi government. Given India's tepid response to recent events in the Maldives (and to some extent in Nepal and in Bhutan), one wonders whether the Modi government has the courage and resolve to robustly implement an Indian 'sphere of influence' policy in South Asia. Could things change after the May 2024 national elections, particularly if Modi wins a third term? I am not sure if this would be the case, and that India's political leadership would demonstrate that it is finally thinking strategically like a Great Power.

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