China in India’s Backyard – The Indian Response

What is the issue?

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- China’s inroads into South Asia since the mid-2000s have eroded India’s traditional primacy in the region.
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- India is reaching out to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal but these smaller countries are keeping options open.
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How has India’s regional strategy evolved off late?

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- As China deploys its formidable financial resources and develops its strategic clout across South Asia, India faces capacity challenges to stem the offensive.
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- India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy, unveiled in 2014, has consequently focused on reaching out to develop partnerships across the region in collaboration with like any minded powers.
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- This strategy marks a departure from India’s earlier efforts to insulate South Asia as its exclusive sphere of influence.
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What are the developments in line with the new approach?

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- With the US, India now conducts close consultations on smaller states such as Nepal, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka.
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- Tokyo and New Delhi developed a joint “Vision 2025” to work in consultation with other partners for better regional integration and improved connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.
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- In 2014, India and Russia signed an agreement to cooperate on developing nuclear power in third countries, with a focus on Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
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- India has also engaged in dialogues about maritime security in the Indian Ocean region with various European countries.
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- Finally, contrasting with its past reluctance to involve multilateral organisations, India has enthusiastically endorsed the “South Asia Sub regional Economic Cooperation” (SASEC).
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How can these partnerships be expanded?

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- **Institutionalisation -** To increase mutual consultation, India and partner countries must invest in creating institutional mechanisms dedicated to sharing assessments on South Asia.
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- Fringe issues that overshadow relationships must give way to specific bilateral dialogues on specifics like political & strategic issues and counter-terrorism & maritime security.
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- Economic issues focused on connectivity, trade & investment initiatives and developmental issues focused on aid projects & other assistance initiatives should also be given priority.
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- **Leveraging Strengths –** Caliberated strategic co-ordination between India & its extra-regional partners according to their respective strengths is primoridial.
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- In Bangladesh, for example, India has focused on political and capacity-building objectives, while Japan is concentrating its financial might in infrastructure projects.
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- Similarly, India and the US have successfully coordinated their political

postures on the Maldives.
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- **Joint Projects –** India should aspire to integrate efforts and implement joint projects across a variety of sectors in the region.
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- This will require expanding bilateral dialogues to include third countries, on the model of the India-US-Afghanistan trilateral.
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What are the Challenges ahead?

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- **Indian Primacy -** The primary challenge is ensuring that the extra-regional partners continue to recognise India as predominant player in the region.
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- **China Card -** The region's small states are playing an increasingly sophisticated balancing game, seeking to play off India and its partners against China.
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- This calls for closer consultation and coordination will be key.
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- **Human Rights -** When it comes to the issues of democracy and human rights, New Delhi and its like minded friends will also face occasional tensions given their different priorities.
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- India's priority will remain the economic and security interests of the neighbourhood.
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- On the contrary, West's liberal impulse will favour a value-based approach that emphasises pressure on authoritarian regimes.
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- **Rohingya Crisis –** As a case in point, the "human rights" issue is currently playing out in Myanmar, with clashing Indian and Western positions being contrary.
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- Under rising international pressure, Naypyidaw is tilting back to China for support, further complicating India's plans.
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- Similar dynamics can also be observed in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives.

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- These further highlight how critical India’s global outreach efforts are for its quest to remain influential in its own region.
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Source: Businessline

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