

India's neighbourhood strategy

What is the issue?

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India needs to have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood to work towards South Asian integration.

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What are the prevailing concerns?

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- India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers with the absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy.

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- India was accused of interfering with the Constitution-making process in Nepal in 2015 and also trying to influence recent electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka.

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- On the Rohingya refugees, India's approach goes against its traditional practice and it also suffer from lack of a refugee policy.

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- Also, the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless.

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- India also has a long record of not following up on its promises to its neighbours.

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- India, thus, needs to have a coherent and consistent strategy to deal in its neighbourhood.

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What should be done?

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- South Asia is the least integrated region in the world because of the weak economic linkages among the countries of the region.

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- **Regional Trade** - India needs to frame better regional trading arrangements.

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- The long 'sensitive lists' maintained by South Asian countries are a major impediment in the implementation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

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- Each member country has a 'sensitive list' on goods that are exempt from tariff concessions (not eligible for lower import tariffs).

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- These sensitive lists remain long and hence India should persuade its neighbours to reduce the number of items on such lists.

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- **Soft power** - In the case of regional infrastructure projects, China is at a clear advantage than India.

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- Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and in soft power promotion.

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- India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU), including by providing a proper campus and ensuring that its students get research visas to India without much hassle.

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- If properly utilised, the SAU can become a point for regional integration.

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- **Focussing on Border states** - Several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighbouring countries.

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- This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.

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- **Multilateral engagements** - India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums.

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- However, there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the SAARC.

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- India should also look at other possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development in the multilateral fora.

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- This would help India to have a coherent and long-term vision for its neighbourhood.

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Source: The Hindu

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