Prioritising South Asia in Our Foreign Policy

What is the issue?

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- India’s stature in the international arena has been steadily growing over the years due to various structural and economic aspects.
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- While other geopolitical issues are important, New Delhi must give its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia its fullest attention.
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What are India’s recent initiatives in the extended neighbourhood?

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- **Palestine -** India has been very skilful in manoeuvring contentious issues in this region with considerable success like in the case of Israel and Palestine.
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- India could, thus, successfully handle an Israeli PM’s visit to India just prior to Mr. Modi’s visit to Palestine, and yet avoid negative fallouts.
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- It could also separate the technological outreach of the Israeli PM Mr. Netanyahu’s visit without having to take a clear stand on Jerusalem’s status.
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- Likewise, the bilateral with Palestine saw the conclusion of as many as six agreements and the expression of hope for full independence to Palestine.
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- **UAE -** Trade, economic ties and counter-terror aspects have been on a growth curve, with massive investments too flowing India’s way.
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- **Oman -** There exists an established long standing friendship with Oman.
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- Hence, option of closer naval co-operation and of reaching an agreement to give the Indian Navy access to “Duqm port” did not prove difficult.
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- **ASEAN Outreach -** The 2018 republic day celebrations saw all 10 ASEAN

countries being represented at the highest level, which was a grand success.
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- But the recently concluded ASEAN-India Summit urged India to play a pro-active role in the Asia-Pacific region, without needing to take hard decisions.
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- This is possibly a dampened support for the Quad Initiative (India, Japan, Australia and USA), for which ASEAN hasn't come out openly in support.
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- Significantly, this is in striking contrast to the overwhelming support that these countries have extended to the "Belt and Road Initiative" of China.
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- Despite such inconsistencies with ASEAN, it is still very manageable and what requires attention is the immediate neighbourhood (south Asia).
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How does the scenario look in India's immediate neighbourhood?

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- Trouble is mounting in almost all neighbouring countries, and India cannot succeed without looking at some hard options.
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- **Nepal -** A leftist government has taken over in Nepal, whose leaders in the past have clearly taken a pro-China attitude vis-a-vis India.
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- The responsibility of aiding the aspirations of the Terai population through ensuring a balanced constitutional setup weighs heavily on India.
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- The challenge is that this has to be done without antagonising the Nepali state.
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- **Bangladesh -** A special court in Dhaka recently convicted opposition BNP leader and three-time PM Khaleda Zia on corruption charges.
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- As this debars her for contesting polls (elections are slated for 2019), the possibility of a prolonged unrest in Bangladesh is very much alive.
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- Dealing with both Nepal and Bangladesh will need more than fine gestures; they will need far more closer monitoring.
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- **Maldieves -** Recently, political tensions have been mounting in Maldives due to the repressive regime, which is threatening to spill out of control.
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- India has tacitly been backing the opposition and is vouching for a decocratic solution form within Maldives and has largely been mincing words.
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- Considering the increasingly pro-China tilt of the present dispensation and the gravity of the situation, although risky, India can't afford to be passive for long.
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- Notably, a free trade agreement had been signed between Maldives and China recently, along with allocating for multiple infrastructure projects.
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- Notably, anti-India activities and Saudi & Pakistan backed Islamic radicalists have been growing in strength in the island for a while now.
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- **Pakistan -** Increasingly, Pakistan is resembling a failed state in the face of what seems like a virtual collapse of its public policy.
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- As intuitive attitudes of the military and a free run of terrorists has come to prevail, this seems to be affecting India more than it is affecting Pakistan.
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- Despite US warnig Pakistan of dire consequences, there seems to be no course correction and anti-India propaganda and radicalism has been escalating.
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- **Afghanistan -** The daily massacre of people even within urban districts have become common over the years in Afghanistan.
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- Even the combined strengths of local police, Afghan military and the foreign forces aren't able to weed out the menace, partly due to Pakistan's hand.
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- Despite periodic optimistic forecasts of the Taliban being in retreat, Afghan government is still reeling under intense pressure to even sustain itself.
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- The collapse of the Afghan state does have severe consequences for India and other nations in the vicinity, which calls for decisive action.
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- Apart from the human cost, New Delhi has spent over $2 billion in providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.
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What needs to be done?

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- A concensus across parties needs to emerge on pressing foreign policy concerns across domains for deriving the best possible outcomes.
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- While West Aisa, Asia Pacific and South East Asia are important domains, India’s primary focus should remain in the south Asian neighbourhood.
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- If India seems uninterested in ensuring peace and stablitly in the region, there would be an undsireable spike in the influence of extra-regional players.
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Source: The Hindu

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