

Article Title: "Gentrify the neighbourhood: For India, double-digit growth can be the best foreign policy option of all"

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Even its worst critics admit, if only in private, that the one area where the Modi government has undoubtedly shone is in foreign policy. And those who take political potshots at the PM's travels abroad, ironically also claim credit, with some justification, for the origin of many of his diplomatic initiatives. In any event, it is difficult to ignore that the world sees India far more favourably than it did a year ago.

The last time there was such a turnaround in India's global image, at the turn of the century, it had happened against the backdrop of sanctions after the 1998 nuclear test. Then, as now, the world overcame its reservations not just because of our stellar record against nuclear proliferation, but clearly also because of India's growing economic clout.

One aspect of that earlier turnaround that holds lessons for this one is the hubris that took hold of our policy making. Hubris about our economy — that we were somehow destined to be the next economic superpower, irrespective of whether we nurtured or damaged that prospect — was years in the making. But hubris about breaking free from the constraints of dealing with our South Asian neighbours was there all along.

For decades, India had been held back not only by our own blinkered economic policies, but also by frictions in the subcontinent that ranged from the petty to the existential. That yearning to be done with recalcitrant neighbours, have-nots like us but who seemed unwilling or unable to leave the past behind, and join the 21st century global mainstream, was understandable. But it wasn't practical. Unlike aspirational and upwardly mobile families who can simply up and leave for a better neighbourhood, nations have geographical limitations.

This time around, India has clearly recognised that to achieve our overall potential, we need to do more to gentrify the neighbourhood. This has been evident from the first days of this government, beginning with the precedent setting invitation to South Asian heads of government to attend the swearing in.

Symbolism is important, and the PM has done more than his fair share of sending out the right signals. But resetting decades of hardened positions requires more than symbolism, and it is heartening to see that realpolitik is finally taking hold.

Take, for instance, the principle of "non reciprocity", which acknowledges India's huge size relative to other South Asian nations and concludes that it needs to do more than just seek quid pro quo from them. Some form of this has existed for long, most notably in the so-called Gujral doctrine of the late nineties. But while that had included elements of unilateral drawing down of strategic assets, the Modi doctrine is closer to Teddy Roosevelt's "speak softly, and carry a big stick".

India, whose economy is a startling 82% of the entire Saarc region, is now loosening its purse strings for neighbours, even as it begins a much overdue beefing up of defence capabilities. A flurry of India-assisted projects has been announced recently in many South Asian countries, including railways, hydropower, transmission lines and the like. Many others, as well as policy changes to help integrate their economies with India's, are on the anvil. Underpinning all this is the growing realisation that double-digit economic growth is likely the best foreign policy of all.

Admittedly, some of this had been initiated prior to the Modi government, by UPA or even earlier. Though there are some new proposals as well, the most important feature now is the refreshing urgency that pervades India's foreign policy establishment. In no small measure, this is enhanced by the quiet efficiency of the foreign minister, as well as an accomplished foreign secretary who is to the manner born.

Just as important as any of this, of course, is the cooperation of opposition parties. Though foreign policy has never been a major source of discord in India, it is nevertheless a fact that lack of consensus in the recent past had led to delays on crucial initiatives, such as the now concluded Bangladesh land accord.

In recent years, our relationship with Bangladesh has epitomised the turnaround in South Asia that India has been seeking. Its crackdown on radicalism at home, as well as action against terrorist groups using its territory as safe havens to target India, has brought a welcome transformation on our eastern front. Thus, while PM Modi's visits to other South Asian countries have also been hugely successful, it is fitting that the first truly epoch making breakthrough is with Bangladesh.

In this new orchestra of feel good South Asian music, the only discordant note relates to Pakistan. Despite the same initial outreach as with other neighbours, India's hope for rapprochement with its western neighbour remains mired in Pakistan's atavistic fears and instincts. The same old script of border provocations, shelter to "non-state actors", and intransigence on trade, both bilateral and regional, keeps playing out over and over again.

For the first time, however, the rest of South Asia is no longer content to wait until the weakest link in the chain is strengthened. India has thus settled on a two-speed policy. That is, full speed ahead with all neighbours, including Pakistan, preferably, but without if necessary.