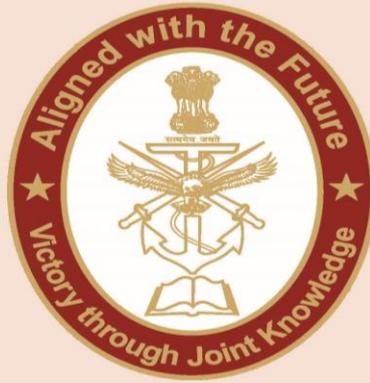


# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### INDIA NEEDS TO CONCENTRATE ON ITS BACKYARD

BY

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SAARC has been a failure mainly because it was dominated by Indo-Pak rivalry. Anything which one nation proposed, the other had reservations. It was an organization which never proceeded beyond being a coffee shop. While India claimed that its reasons for rejecting attending the SAARC conference in Islamabad since 2016 was Pak's continued support to terrorist groups operating from its soil, another reason apparently was that SAARC had outlived its utility and could be ignored as a body.

India had, in the meanwhile, moved beyond Pak and established its own understanding with its immediate neighbours, contributing to their growth and development. India seeking to enhance ties with its neighbours, thus keeping Chinese influence away, while simultaneously ignoring Pak, revived BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral and Economic Cooperation) which though created in 1997 remained in cold storage till 2016.

BIMSTEC is a grouping of nations dependent on the Bay of Bengal. The nations forming its membership include Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India. BIMSTEC accounts for 22% of the global population and has a combined GDP of USD 2.8 Trillion. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India are also members of SAARC. India invited the leaders of BIMSTEC when it hosted the BRICS summit in Goa in 2016, ignoring SAARC as it desired to keep Pak at bay.

The latest BIMSTEC summit was hosted by Nepal last month. It was on the opening day of this summit that PM Modi announced a BIMSTEC military exercise this month, followed by a conclave of all army chiefs. This was to be the first joint military exercise involving the nations of this grouping. It was also possibly the first serious attempt of the Indian government towards approving military diplomacy, especially for the neighbourhood.

The countries forming part of BIMSTEC have the army playing a dominant role in national politics, hence military to military contacts could prove beneficial in the long term. A conclave of the army chiefs would enable establishment of a rapport, projection of Indian military and national soft power as also a discussion on topics of common interest. It could also be a precursor to enhanced contacts in the future.

Though not officially stated, it is quite possible that impact of loss of strategic assets due to accepting commercial loans from China for unviable projects, by governments seeking re-election, may be raised in some form. Military concerns are best expressed and understood by those in uniform.

Post the summit, Nepal backed out of the exercise. It also subsequently stated that its army chief would not be present for the conclave. It was only Nepal which had stated during the summit that BIMSTEC could complement SAARC, which was ignored by the others. This comment was possibly based on request from Pak and China. Unlike Thailand, which announced that a senior General would represent the army chief, Nepal would not be represented. India has expressed its disappointment to Nepal on the same.

Almost simultaneously, Nepal announced the participation of its army in a joint exercise with China. It is likely that Nepal backed down as it feared that the BIMSTEC military cooperation was aimed at projecting a unified front at countering increased Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean, which it was keen to avoid. This perception may be realistically incorrect as India does not seek such a forum. It is already a member of the QUAD. In India's perception this exercise was more aimed at mitigating disasters.

India downplayed the incident, with the defence minister stating that three observers from Nepal would participate as also since their chief has only recently been appointed, there are some formalities which need to be completed before he can engage internationally. In her opinion it was not a 'snub'. Reports from within Nepal suggest that PM KP Oli faced opposition on Nepal's participation from various Nepali political quarters and hence ordered his army not to participate.

The reality remains that despite all its attempts, India has failed to secure its own backyard from strong Chinese influence. Indian assistance in developing our backyard thus reducing dependence on China has been lacklustre over the years. In Nepal itself a slew of projects financed by India have been languishing over the years. These include major hydro-power projects like Arun III, Upper Karnali and Pancheshwar. Nepal, like most other South Asian nations is being wooed by China, including being offered port facilities, which may not ultimately be cost effective, being 3000 Kms away.

The MoS External Affairs, General VK Singh, stated in parliament recently that Indian financial assistance to South Asian nations dropped from Rs 5298 Crores in 2013-14 to Rs 3,483 Crores in 2017-18. This figure does not include the line of credit given to select countries. In case India as the big brother does not come to support their development by enmeshing their economy with ours, they are bound to look outwards and the easiest support available comes from China.

The recent 2+2 dialogue also spoke of a joint strategy involving India and the US to tackle the growing Chinese influence in South and South East Asia. While the US alongside other nations, including Japan and Australia, may lead in SE Asia, it is India which must move forward to support nations in its immediate neighbourhood. India is aware of the impact on its security when nations in its neighbourhood fall into the Chinese debt trap yet has done little to prevent the same. Sri Lanka is a known example.

Nations in the vicinity have begun acting on their own against curtailing Chinese loans. Malaysia and Thailand are two. Malaysia has cancelled two projects, while Thailand is seeking Japanese assistance for developing the Mekong region. India may not be able to independently fund the infra development of these nations but could support bysecuring loans from multiple international agencies including the Japanese Overseas Development Assistance and its Asian Development Bank, apart from international monetary funds.

India must now switch focus to its immediate proximity, before other nations commence following the Nepal model and ignoring India for China. It may be ideal for India to expand its footprint beyond its shores and project itself as a rising power, however before it seeks to do so, it must secure its own backyard. It should realize that China's statement on multiple occasions that 'since it has never meddled with India's growing relations in SE Asia, its backyard, India should also reciprocate in South Asia', is loaded and needs to be seriously considered.

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