

# Indian hegemony in south asia



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India has been given a tag as the Regional Hegemon of South Asia. If not formally, then atleast the intentions are tagged as possessing “ hegemonic tendencies”. This paper looks at the concept of Hegemony, Regional, the various reasons responsible for such a view and the various outlooks. I also throw light on the foreign policy of India to stress on the non-hegemonic tendencies of India. India believes in peaceful coexistence. The most important aspect which I wish to bring out is the change in the international scenario that makes India’s “ hegemonic status” tough to survive.

### **SOUTH ASIA – A general outlook and evolution**

South Asia is the southern region of the Asian continent. South Asia typically consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Some definitions may also include Afghanistan, Burma, Tibet, and the British Indian Ocean Territories. Iran is also included in the UN subregion of “ Southern Asia,”[i]although many sources consider Iran as being part of West Asia. South Asia is home to well over one fifth of the world’s population, making it both the most populous and most densely populated geographical region in the world. The region has often seen conflicts and political instability, including wars between the region’s two nuclear-armed states, Pakistan and India. While the South Asia had never been a coherent geopolitical region, it has a distinct geographical identity. The boundaries of South Asia vary based on how[ii]South Asia is defined. South Asia’s north, east, and west boundaries vary based on definitions used. South Asia’s southern border is the Indian Ocean. The UN subregion of Southern Asia’s northern boundary would be the Himalayas, its western boundary would be made up of the Iraq-Iran border, Turkey-Iran border, Armenia-Iran border,

and the Azerbaijan-Iran border. Its eastern boundary would be the India-Burma border and the Bangladesh-Burma border.

Most of this region is a subcontinent resting on the Indian Plate (the northerly portion of the Indo-Australian Plate) separated from the rest of Eurasia. It was once a small continent before colliding with the Eurasian Plate about 50-55 million years ago and giving birth to the Himalayan range and the Tibetan plateau. It is the peninsular region south of the Himalayas and Kuen Lun mountain ranges and east of the Indus River and the Iranian Plateau, extending southward into the Indian Ocean between the Arabian Sea (to the southwest) and the Bay of Bengal (to the southeast). The region is home to an astounding variety of geographical features, such as glaciers, rainforests, valleys, deserts, and grasslands that are typical of much larger continents. It is surrounded by three water bodies - the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

Almost all South Asian countries were under direct or indirect European Colonial subjugation at some point. Much of modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar were gradually occupied by Great Britain - starting from 1757, reaching their zenith in 1857 and ruling till 1947. Nepal and Bhutan were to some extent protectorates of Great Britain until after World War II. In the millennia long history of South Asia, this European occupation period is rather short, but its proximity to the present and its lasting impact on the region makes it prominent.

The network of means of transportation and communication as well as banking and training of requisite workforce, and also the existing rail, post,

telegraph, and education facilities have evolved out of the base established in the colonial era, often called the British Raj. As an aftermath of World War II, most of the region gained independence from Europe by the late 1940s. Tibet at times has governed itself as an independent state and at other times has had various levels of association with China. It came under Chinese control in the 18th century, in spite of British efforts to seize possession of this Chinese protectorate at the beginning of the 20th century. Since 1947, most South Asian countries have achieved tremendous progress in all spheres. Most notable achievements are in the fields of education; industry; health care; information technology and services based on its applications; research in the fields of cutting edge sciences and technologies; defence related self-reliance projects; international/global trade and business enterprises and outsourcing of human resources. Areas of difficulty remain, however, including religious extremism, high levels of corruption, disagreements on political boundaries, and inequitable distribution of wealth. However, a combined effort by the nations has helped the nations in overcoming the various obstacles and settling the disputes peacefully.

India has played a major role in the development of South Asia as a region of resources, technology and even as a power to some extent. However, at several occasions the actions of our nation have been seen as steps taken towards the goal of becoming the “ Regional Hegemon”.

## **HEGEMONY**

Hegemony is a term defined as the leadership(formal) especially of a state within a group of states. This is how any standard dictionary would define hegemony[iii]. In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, political theorists Ernesto

Laclau and Chantal Mouffe define hegemony as a type or form of political relation in which a given collectivity performs some kind of social task which is not “ natural” to them[iv]. However, the term hegemon is generally used in a negative sense to signify dominance, coercion or influence in the various fields. India has often been accused of possessing hegemonic tendencies in its foreign affairs and policies by various writers and nations altogether. A country’s foreign policy, in general, aims to achieve three basic objectives- security, stability, and status (George Liska ). George Modelski in his book ‘ A theory of Foreign Policy’ defined foreign policy as the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and adjusting their own activities to the international environment[v]. In this sense any country big or small, which endeavours to further its policies to achieve its desired world order is hegemonistic. The word hegemony is pejoratively used when the great powers practice policies in seeking predominance over others. Literally hegemon means a leader who seeks predominance over others. This requires the existence of some subordinate states too, whose politics and policies hegemon would try to influence.

In the Ancient World, Sparta was the hegemon (leader) city-state of the Peloponnesian League, in the 6th century BC, and King Philip II of Macedon was the hegemon of the League of Corinth, in 337 BC, (a kingship he willed to his son, Alexander the Great); in Eastern Asia, it occurred in China, during the Spring and Autumn Period ( 770-480 BC), when the weakened rule of the Zhou Dynasty led to the relative autonomy of the Five Hegemons who were appointed, by feudal lord conferences, and were nominally obliged to uphold the Zhou dynastic imperium over the subordinate states. In late sixteenth-

and early seventeenth-century-Japan, hegemon applies to its “ Three Unifiers” - Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu - who exercised hegemony over most of the country. In the modern world hegemony has contours in imperialism. Imperialistic powers all over their empire had hegemony. After Second World War the beginning of cold war led to a grouping up of countries in two major camps. The groups had strong NATO countries as well as weak countries like Pakistan. Weak countries, which entered into such alliances to secure themselves from the hegemony of other countries, were subjected to veiled hegemony, and military bases of the stronger countries were often accommodated there. This has been an accusation for India too for several years. India has been accused of being influential in policies of different nations by making them dependent on it in terms of economy, military strength, resources and even in the political aspect.

## **REGION AND REGIONAL**

What precisely is meant by the “ region” which is specified in the term Regional Hegemony. We talk of South Asia as a region. Amitava Acharya in his Regional Worlds in a Post-hegemonic Era says Regional world subsumes regional order and regional institutions, as well as economic regionalization. Regional Worlds “ are not just material constructs.[vi]They offer sites for ideational and normative contestations, resistance and compromises, involving both states and civil societies which transcend regional boundaries and overlap into other regional and global spaces. Regional worlds are not autonomous entities, nor purely subsets of global dynamics. They create, absorb and repatriate ideational and material forces that make world politics

and order.” This definition brings out the important aspect of the term “ regional” which are economic, ideational and so on. It is true that regional worlds are not autonomous entities since nations within a region are not only dependent on each other but are also affected by as small factors as the water problem which a any day take a bigger form. The policies of one nation affect the other in some way. Winston Churchill and Walter Lippmann were of the view that world order could best be attained by regional spheres of influence. Robert W. Cox in his ” Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An essay in method”, talks of the different phases in the world hegemony where he mentions the period of U. S hegemony from 1945-1965 and then mentions the phase which starts from 1965 which was characterized by the fall of the U. S hegemony with the rise of the third world and the fragmentation of the world economy[vii].

Amitava Acharya puts up a question asking whether the end of US hegemony might open the door to the rise of regional hegemonies such as East Asia under Chinese, South Asia under Indian, the Caucasus and Baltics under Russian, and southern Africa under South African, west Africa under Nigerian and south America under Brazilian, dominance. Would the end of American hegemony be replaced by such distinct or over-lapping regional hegemonies? Such questions have often come up and have forced the nations to think of any single nation progressing at a higher speed as a potential hegemon. In his Tragedy of Great Power Politics, John Mearshimer argues that great powers, including rising or aspiring great powers seek to achieve regional hegemony, a goal more necessary and attainable than global hegemony[viii]. It is true that in today’s bigger than before world,

global hegemony is a distant goal though some still vouch for the U. S hegemony. The point of concern comes to the fear of regional hegemony due to Hegemony often being understood as a first step towards imperialism. Regional imperialism of a kind in limited sense can not be avoided. If a country is bigger or stronger its foreign policy stakes would be higher and its objectives are to be set accordingly which may or may not be compatible with the interests of other regional states. South Asia as such did not have any real issues, however a psychological scare of big brother often posed smaller states in this region in defensive posture more as an over reaction. India is one such example of a state caught in a dilemma.

### **INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY- non hegemonic**

When India got liberation from the imperialistic rule of British Empire in 1947, it was to adopt a policy, which should fulfill its aspirations of a changed world order and thereby confer a status, provide the country an economic stability and security to its borders. The ideological cover of non-alignment and panch sheel was best suited for this. One of the basic tenets of Panch sheel is peaceful co-existence, which implies non-interference in the internal matters of neighbors. In an effort to achieve its objective of world order where new nation states could progress together was to be the objective of India's Foreign policy. Thus the hegemony over the neighboring states or in South Asia couldnot have been a part of India's Foreign Policy. On the contrary it was against the policy of peaceful co-existence and Panch sheel. India's efforts to allay the fears of its neighbors was one of the highlights in all these fora, be it NAM conferences or other international symposiums. India's foreign policy of non-alignment and its assumed role of third world



leader however is one of its strength. But in a natural corollary to this surrounding countries felt weak and insecure due to natural fear lest India start acting as big brother in the region. Though India's foreign policy of non alignment was more aimed at providing a new world order where the new states could survive without participating in the cold war between the super powers of post world war era, a big brother scare among the smaller countries is logical and could not have been avoided. There are various reasons that have led to these fears.

## **WHY THE TAG?**

Countries that surround India, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bagladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma are nowhere at par with India, be it in their size, population, economic development or skilled human resources. The natural resources available in theses countries also do not make these countries competitive.

India dominates the whole area geographically. She is the only country that shares a large coast line with all the other six states while none of them have common borders with each other. China after the occupation on Tibet in 1950, reached the borders of the Asian subcontinent but faces problems of accessibility due to the difficulties of the northern terrain. K. M. Pannikar said " Geography constitutes the permanent basis of every nation's history." It is true since it is because of the rich geographical features that India possesses, landlocked nations like Nepal and Bhutan can hardly survive economically without India's cooperation. Pakistan and Bangladesh too are dependent on India for water supply. Giantism as called by John. P. Lewis has its far reaching regional ramifications.

The enmity with Pakistan continues since the partition days and is yet much behind India in all aspects other than nuclear status and that too is unclear. Three wars with Pakistan have almost established military supremacy of India in South Asia. In 1971 war India could successfully achieve its objective of dismembering Pakistan from various issues in spite of opposition of United States of America. In spite of the various attempts of "friendship" including the recent cultural cross border efforts through "Aman Ki Asha", Indo-Pak meetings always end up as what Nawaz Sharif had once described as "zero meeting". Pakistan still does not grant India the status of MFN (most favoured nation) though SAFTA has been in force for some time now. Although India's self-perception might be that it has acted with considerable restraint in prior crises with Pakistan, for example, in the 2002 standoff after the attacks on the Indian parliament, in the 1999 Kargil crisis and even in the 1971 war, from the Pakistani perspective the trauma of disintegration suffered in 1971-when India significantly assisted in the creation of Bangladesh-overshadows all Indian actions.

China, though not a part of South Asia plays an important role in the affairs of the region. China remains what Andrew Hurrell calls the best example of "pragmatic accommodation"[ix] and in spite of being a true friend and permanent member in the United Nations Security Council has often participated in discouraging India's development in military, or as the permanent member of the United Nations Security Council or in the India-Pak wars or even the increasing friendly ties of India and U. S. India is a growing power and is a major market for Chinese goods as well as a major service

provider at the global level. Hence, China has often displayed its displeasure at India's "hegemonic tendencies".

Nepal is more or less dependent on India for its economic development. Nepal's overtures with China in order to have an independence from the shadow of India could be an example of this over defensive posturing. India and Nepal have had a friendship treaty since the days of King Tribhuvan. The treaty facilitated both countries to have trade across their borders without much of custom formalities. Nepal's economic dependence on India's economy and its geographical landlocked position impelled Nepal to have this treaty. Nepal however never stopped searching for alternatives such as route to the sea through India and Bangladesh to increase its international trade. Invitation to China to build roads in Nepal was one such step to send a clear message that their country has other options too and as efforts to avoid "dominance" by one nation.

Bangladesh came into being almost with the single handed initiative of India. Even their Mukti Bahini was trained by Indian Army. Soon after liberation from Pakistan, Bangladesh started pursuing a policy to exert independence in its foreign policy. The fanatic elements in Bangladesh however were not satisfied with this subtle and gradual posturing and assassinated their first President Sheikh Mujiburrahman for his being pro-Indian. Governments successively after his assassination had to pursue Controlled Anti Indian Stance in their Foreign policy in order to satisfy their domestic compulsion in expressing opposition to Indian hegemony.

Sri Lanka's foreign policy has been more independent in the region. However its domestic compulsion and gradual increase in the power of fanatic Buddhist elements in its politics and their pro-majority policies have complicated the domestic politics. This led to rise of Tamil resistant groups in Sri Lanka and then their establishment of a limited control over the Tamil majority areas in Northern and North eastern Sri Lanka. India's limited role of sending IPKF to restore Sri Lankan control over these areas was also be seen as an effort to prove its hegemony in South Asia.

Mohammed Ayoob wrote in "India matters", that given its advantages in terms of both technically skilled manpower and command over the English language by a substantial section of the working population, India has the capacity to play an increasingly important role in the sphere of service industries. He also brought in another aspect which could have been responsible for the fear of India's role as a regional hegemon[x]. It could be the strengthening ties between India and U. S. Ayoob brings in an interesting reason for the close bonds between India and U. S. He says "Indian and U. S. concerns do not coincide merely on the issue of maintaining a stable and secure order in Asia in general and in South Asia in particular. A major threat to both regional and global stability and security comes from a particular variety of terrorism that has targeted both India and the United States." This is true that post the twin tower attacks in U. S, terrorism gained importance all over the world which owes it highlight to U. S because the 11 September attacks proved that terrorism could shake the super powers too. Hence, started the Indo-US friendship which continues and the signing of the nuclear deal was another step towards the friendship. That was another reason

which made the neighbours uneasy about India's increasing power. The question was whether India was trying its hand at friendship with "the hegemon" to follow it.[xi]

Absence or weak democratic institutions in these countries, and India's established democracy has further weakened the ties countries surrounding India. Nepal has had Monarchy for most of the part in last sixty years. The intervals of democratic governments there have so far not been able to establish a workable democracy. Pakistan's army still calls the shots even if democratic governments come into power. Bangla Desh has had its own problems with democracy where the successive governments after being elected have tried to wipe out opposition, more of an inheritance from Pakistan. Sri Lanka has had democratic traditions which have weakened, off late, due to the rise of the fanatic elements in politics and government as well. Perhaps, Kant's "Perpetual Peace" works here too in increasing the suspicions of other nation's regarding India.

The establishment of SAARC meant to have closer regional cooperation could not allay the fears of smaller states around India. It is more used as a forum for venting the feelings against India in a veiled manner. Before each SAARC meeting the diplomatic channels would have been working overtime to manage this in place of finding new avenues of regional cooperation. However the platform is often used to malign the Indian image by doing an all year roun survery of Indian intrevention in the affairs of other nations and that highlights the 'hegemonic tendencies" of India.

India's role of being party to good offices and mediation in managing international crises could be another reason for the rising suspicions. Initially, owing to the non-aligned status, India was accepted as a mediator by several belligerent states like in the Korean War, South African apartheid and so on. But the Bangladesh crisis was seen as an unnecessary intervention by Pakistan and even the Sri Lankan crisis which later led to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Many such interventions were seen as a display of unwanted disciplinary acts by India just like U. S played the role of a police man in the world scenario post world war.

India's new nuclear status has been seen as a disapproving move by Pakistan, China and several other nations of the world. The world today is basically divided on the basis of nuclear haves and have-nots. India joined the club with its first peaceful nuclear tests in 1974. India refused to sign the discriminatory treaties like NPT and CTBT and went ahead and signed the much criticised nuclear agreement with USA. USA came forward to accept India as a major global player and made an attempt to delink Indo-US relationship from its relationship with Pakistan. It was held that Indo-US civil nuclear deal was designed to serve Indian security needs and provide a basis for the development of bi-lateral relations with the USA. Though India declared its intention to sign similar nuclear cooperation treaties with other countries too and that her decision was not against any other nation, India's nuclear status was not taken in good spirits by the neighbours and even beyond the neighbourhood.

India's role in Afghanistan has often been seen as a hegemonic tendency. In the GIGA working papers, Melanie Hanif discussed the Indian involvement in <https://assignbuster.com/indian-hegemony-in-south-asia/>

Afganistan and said that” India as a rising regional power is the only country in the region that might possess the capabilities, the willingness, and the legitimacy for a long-term engagement in Afghan security.”[xii]India provides scholarships for Afghan students and fosters its commercial ties with the country, something which has, however, been hindered by Pakistan’s denial of direct access. India has also offered training to the Afghan National Security Forces, but this has not been realized due to Pakistani opposition. India is committed to development and infrastructure projects in various sectors in Afghanistan, especially the reconstruction of overland roads. In terms of soft power, India’s asset is the high popularity of Indian music, movies and television shows in Afghanistan. With a view to military capabilities, India has enhanced its presence in Central Asia through the establishment of its first airbase outside India, in Farkhor/Aini, Tajikistan. All this points to India’s willingness and preparedness to become more involved in the attempt to reconstruct and stabilize Afghanistan. Although most of the external parties are likely to accept a prominent role of India in Afghanistan, two important veto players remain, one within and one outside South Asia: Pakistan and China.

## **IS INDIA A REGIONAL HEGEMON?**

All these reasons together see India as a regional hegemon. The tag has resulted in both seeing India as a leader as well as a threat. More than a threat, it is the suspicion and anxiety of other nations, which has given India the tag. Power is seen as a zero sum quality. The power gained by one nation is the loss of the other. India with all the resources and power is hence seen as an expansionist maybe not in the earlier imperialist ways but

by means of soft power and mediation. However, it is highly doubtful to call India as the hegemon because hegemony would mean supremacy in decision making and policy making for all the other nations of the region. Pakistan is a major example of India's faulty hegemony.

Andrew Hurrell talks of the potential great powers in the world and calls them BRICs, i. e. Brazil, Russia, India and China.[xiii]He says that countries like Brazil, India and China are acquiring " enough power to change the face of global politics and economics." However, he also brings out another aspect. He says that though these nations have the capacity to become great powers, these nations share certain uncertainties especially regarding the behaviour of " the leader", United States. A second characteristic that these nations share is a sense of vulnerability. It is true for India too. Though the size may increase options and like every other nation, India too may have a belief in its ' natural right' to an influential international role yet it is aware of its vulnerability. When Hurrell talks of India as a great power, he questions what would happen if the " developing country" identity of India comes into conflict with the " aspiring great power identity". This argument brings the aspect of India's aspirations for being a great power, which would be the aspirations of any nation. Any nation has the goal of being counted among the influential ones. That does not necessarily imply hegemonic tendencies.

The most important aspect is the recognition. For India to be a regional hegemon, it is a precondition that other nations acknowledge the position desired. To be a hegemon, India would need the support and recognition by the entire region. This is highly unattainable in today's times of globalization



and freedom. All the nations are “sovereign” and are free to take their decisions on the basis of their national interests. There is interdependence but not domination. There is the whole process of settlement of disputes by mediation but the mediator remains only that and nothing more. The world today is anarchic where there is no overarching authority. There are sections that advocate for some authority but there is no such authority present. Even United States, which could be called once the leader or “the hegemon”, is met with opposition now by developing nations like India. The Gulf War met with a massive opposition and international pressure. India is nowhere near USA in any developmental field.

In his book “The Production of Space”, Henri Lefebvre posits that geographic space is not a passive locus of social relations, but that it is trialectical – constituted by mental space, social space, and physical space – hence, hegemony is a spatial process influenced by geopolitics.[xiv] This is true because in spite of being a huge nation India is still behind Japan in the technology aspect. If we look at Asia, we have China as a competitor. Infact, though China is not a part of South Asia, it is very much a part of the decision making process. Whether we talk of the Indo-Pak relations or the Kashmir issue which had affected almost all the nations of South Asia in some way, China has always had a say. It is quite powerful and enjoys a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. It could always be called as “the hegemon” of Asia if we consider development and relations with U. S to be a criterion for the tag. China has for years maintained a balance in its relation with the west in spite of it being a communist nation. In

spite of being a communist nation, it enjoys a special place in the world. That is power. The benchmark for every Indian step is the Chinese strength.

## **SOUTH ASIA: INDIA'S RESPONSIBILITY?**

K. P. S. Gill in the article "Freedom From Fear — Regional Security - India can redeem South Asia", called South Asia "the most volatile area of the world, as the epicenter, the 'new locus' of terrorism, as the venue of a resource-sapping and futile arms race and of a possible and devastating nuclear confrontation[xv]. Gill says India is the regional giant of South Asia and accepts that it has been thought of as an ambitious regional hegemon. "India is the home to a resurgent economy, led by sections of the hi-tech manufacturing and information technologies sector, has attracted significant and growing international investments and multinational participation. Much of this 'globalization', though, is still within the category of speculation and predatory capitalism, rather than a deep structural reorientation or long-term commitment by international partners. India is also home to the largest pool of technical and skilled manpower in the world, though its quality may be somewhat uneven. Despite these drawbacks, the country's potential to seize the opportunities of the new technological revolution is unquestionable."

Gill says that India being on the way to the developed status has to take the responsibility of bringing up the entire region. "To do this, it must accept the notion of its own centrality, not as hegemon or 'big brother', but in processes of genuine friendship and shared concerns with its neighbours."

But, before doing that India would have to deal with the suspicions regarding India's interventions and initiatives. This true because even the slightest initiatives taken by any nation for the progress of another nation, are looked

at as “ expansionist and hegemonic tendencies”. In the absence of direct imperialism and old forms of power, a new term has come up and that is “ Soft Power” which has been discussed by Joseph Nye is what operates today. In today’s times, power has changed its face. It is no more confined o traditional instruments like military and economic assistance, because they are rarely sufficient to deal with the new dilemmas of the world politics. Today multinationals are the new sources of the co-optive power. India has gained a lot from these multinationals. As India liberalized her economy, these multinational corporations entered t