

India's dangerous



India

By C Raja Mohan

At a time when the world is looking at New Delhi to take charge of the region, India does not seem to have its regional security act together

THAT India lives in a rough and turbulent neighbourhood is not news. Even as we celebrate the triumph of people power in Nepal we are shocked by the latest manifestation of terrorism in Sri Lanka.

It is not that India could have stopped Tuesday's daring bomb attack in Colombo on the Sri Lankan army chief right in the heart of the army headquarters. Nor is the argument here about India's bumbling response to the political crisis in Nepal.

It is about the disturbing reality that India does not seem to have its regional security act together. At a time when the world is looking at

New Delhi to take charge of the region, India is dropping the ball.

After nearly two years in office, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has had no time to visit Sri Lanka or Nepal. He managed to get just once to Bangladesh. Conservatives in his office want to delay his long overdue visit to Pakistan as much as possible. The neighbourhood record of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was at helm for nearly six years, was no better.

If there is no sustained high-level engagement with our neighbours, the situation is much worse when it comes to developing a strategy towards the neighbourhood. Collectively we are so obsessed with the US and so intensely focused on grand principles and slogans of international relations that there is no real effort to understand our own region and our responsibilities towards it.

As India looks at the troubled neighbourhood, at least five antinomies stand out. The first is about whether India should lead or step back from handling the regional crises. Whether India likes it or not, and whether the elites in the neighbourhood approve or not, India is a rising power and its impact on its neighbours can only grow.

Without a conscious and strong Indian policy that aims to lead the region towards peace and prosperity, South Asia would begin to unravel. Avoiding leadership is no longer an

option, given the gravity of the problems posed by endemic poverty, political instability and the growth of extremist and terrorist forces in our neighbourhood.

Part of the responsibility for the collapsing peace process in Sri Lanka must be laid at India's door. New Delhi's unwillingness to lead

Today the world is looking for a lead on resolving regional conflicts. On the one hand, while the political elites in the region criticise India for its interventions, they also demand India act on their behalf. On the other hand, however, for India lies in the past. Its interventions are for the cold war era, not merely for its own nation's

the peace process has emboldened the LTTE to violate the ceasefire agreement with impunity. For the LTTE now fears nothing from India.

The second antinomy juxtaposes the principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention. This stems from conflating our own traditional fears of external involvement in our internal affairs with the great power

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ous neighbourhood

posed imperative to manage regional security. India's own policy on the neighbours has been littered with interventions ever since Independence — from restoring the monarchy in Nepal in 1951, to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, to the military intervention in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s. The latest attempt to

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TE to revive the political process in Nepal is just one punity. more in that tradition. Pretending that it is not dia. intervention would fool no one. Even India's e prin- refusal to act in the current crisis in Nepal would have been seen by the democratic forces r own as a conscious intervention on behalf of a ent in power hungry monarchy.

Even as the political elites in the region

criticise India for its interventions, they also demand India act on their behalf. In Nepal, the king was hoping he would get a pass on constituent assembly from India, while the Maoists were hoping India would act to facilitate the birth of a republic. In Sri Lanka, both the LTTE and Colombo want us to protect their interests. The question, then, is not whether India should intervene. It is about when and how to intervene. The challenge for India lies in ensuring that its interventions are for the collective good and not merely for its own narrow interests.

The third antinomy is between bilateralism and multilateralism. India has traditionally sought to prevent other powers from intervening in the region. While not always successful, it has been a mantra for the Indian establishment.

But today the world is looking for India to take the lead on resolving regional conflicts. The US and the international community share India's goals to promote democracy in Nepal, end the civil war in Sri Lanka, and counter extremism and terrorism in Bangladesh.

If seeking to intervene for the right purposes, India today can confidently expect international support. And it might be in India's interest to mobilise the rest of the world in encouraging positive change in its neighbourhood at the lowest possible political cost.

The fourth tension is between sectional

goals and national interests. In Nepal, India came dangerously close to abandoning the national goals in favour of the interests of the feudals, Hindutva crowd and the parochial interests of the army.

It has been much worse in the case of Sri Lanka. For years both the Congress and the BJP have elevated their desperation to maintain political alliances with Tamil parties above the collective national interest in Sri Lanka.

The fifth antinomy is about the tension between the principles of status quo and transformation. The idea of preserving order, which always animates a great power, has over the years been interpreted as a "do-nothing" policy.

The overbearing bias in India's neighbourhood policy is towards "masterly inactivity", an old British Indian phrase that Natwar Singh, the former foreign minister, has put back into the discourse this week.

At any given time, whatever might be the situation, there are enough powerful voices in the Indian establishment to prevent change in the approach towards any neighbour.

India's policy towards the region now demands a strong commitment to transformation. With change now inevitable, the old order in South Asia can no longer be sustained. Instead of resisting change, India must nudge the subcontinent towards a radical transformation. COURTESY THE INDIAN EXPRESS