**WHY INDIA HAS BETTER FOREIGN RELATIONS WITH COUNTRIES THAT ARE NOT ITS NEIGHBORS**

India and foreign relations:

India is labelled to be many things: a regional power, a nuclear power, a nascent global power, and a potential superpower, among others. With a growing international influence, India is starting to exhibit a prominent voice when it comes to matters and affairs on global levels. The growing influence of the nation can be seen on various levels – an equal partner in the BRICS, a co-founding member of various international organizations, including the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, New Development BRICS Bank, and the G-20. It is also well-known for founding the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of 120 states that do not align themselves with any major power bloc.

By playing influential roles in various global matters, India has always held its head high when it comes to maintaining peaceful bilateral relationships with various countries, excepting its neighbouring countries in the subcontinent. Given the current scenario of the country’s relationships, it can be conjectured that the farther away a country is, the more likely it is to have a strong relationship with India.

So, why does such an influential nation keep its friends close, but its enemies closer?

The trail of disputes with India’s neighbours:

There are several borders that India happens to share with other countries – its land borders with China, Bhutan, Nepal, and Pakistan along the north and north-west sides, and with Bangladesh and Myanmar to the eastern side. Its water borders are shared by Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia, aligned along the southern parts of the nation.

Despite being close geographically, India’s various peaceful relationships with its neighbours seem to end there; with looming threats that range from border disputes to terrorism, the nation is having a lot of trouble being handled all at once from different sides simultaneously.

The biggest and longest threat since India’s independence has been Pakistan. Ever since the creation of the nation leading to the independence of both countries, Pakistan’s governmental influence led to various issues that ended up being a sore needle between the two countries. From land disputes over Kashmir and the Line Of Control, to blatant terrorist attacks that continue to this day, the India-Pakistan relationship has been complex and largely hostile due to recurring political and humanitarian disputes. While most people tend to chalk this up to the historical and violent partitioning of the country in 1947, Pakistan’s increasingly troubling attacks on India show no signs of slowing down.

Apart from the various borderline disputes between the two nations, the India-Pakistan relationship now lies in tatters, due to various terrorist attacks on India, and India’s violent responses. While a nuclear war almost ensued in 2001 between the nations, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks were the final nail in the coffin for both countries, leading to high-tension situations that the relationship can never recover from. This was further deepened by the 2016 allegedly-jihadist attack on Pathankot, an Indian military base. The deaths of nineteen soldiers of the Indian Army led to an ongoing confrontation that has resulted in continued terrorist attacks, and the collapse of the bilateral relations between the countries.

The India-Pakistan relationship is not the only strained relationship within the subcontinent. Relations between India and Sri Lanka have also been on thin ice for a long time. Alleged incidents of Sri Lankan Navy personnel firing on India fishermen fishing in the Palk Strait, where India and Sri Lanka are separated by approximately twenty two kilometres. Utilization of mechanized trawlers by Indian fishermen led to Sri Lankan fishermen being deprived of their catch and getting their boats damaged. While no concrete agreement has been reached due to opposing stances on the usage of mechanized trawlers, a Joint Working Group has been constituted to deal with the issues related to Indian fishermen straying in Sri Lankan territorial waters, and to work out modalities for prevention of use of force against them.

Alleged attacks on Indian fishermen on January 12, 2011, led to India protesting against the Sri Lankan Navy for its involvement in the shoot-out, shortly after which another fisherman was found killed on the 22nd of the same month. Around 730 fisherman have been found killed in the last thirty years, with the apathetic attitude of the central government and national media being highly condemned.

Relations between India and China have not shown any optimistic results either. While the countries have a bilateral relationship built between them, their revolting acts go back to the Opium Wars during the 19th century. Border disputes have led to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and the Sino-Indian skirmish of 1987. Despite China becoming India’s largest trading partner in 2008, citizens of the nation are protesting against their products since May 2020, leading to a nationwide boycott of Chinese products led by various Indian trade associations.

Repeated incursions of the Chinese military into Indian territory have been reported by various media outlets for a long time. With China’s statement in 2012 holding up Sino-Indian partnership as the “most important bilateral relationship of the century” leading to their trades hitting USD 89.6 billion in 2017-18, the increasing trade deficit leaning in China’s favour is also a major role in why India trade associations are up in arms against Chinese products being sold in the nation.

In recent times, relations between India and Nepal have broken down as well. Despite sharing borders not just geographically but linguistically and religiously as well, late 2015 political issues and border disputes have led to strained relations between the nations, with anti-Indian sentiment growing amongst the government and the people of Nepal. Due to border disputes between the countries, a boundary agreement has not been ratified yet by either nation.

The major territorial dispute between India and Nepal seems to be the Kalapani tri-junction area that lies in-between China, India, and Nepal. With Nepal claiming that the area is theirs in attribution to the main Kali river lying alongside and India claiming that the reference used must be the ridges of Om Parvat lying to the east of the river. This disputed area has come up in recent news in response to the Indian government inaugurating a link road via Lipulekh Himalayan Pass, a part of the disputed region. The Nepalese have ever since protested India’s unilateral decision to open such an area, and survey teams have been created as part of the Joint Technical Level Nepal-India Boundary Committee since the issue.

Closing the wounds:

It is in the best interest of any two countries to maintain a bilateral relationship, be it in terms of trade or war. When it comes to maintenance of peace, building a trustworthy relationship is the first step. While India has been successful at doing that with countries far away, such as the US and the UK, it has not healed the wounds that exist in the relationships with its neighbouring countries.

The Ministry of External Affairs has been observed to justify its budget request year after year. While their spending might have gone down by a minimal margin for the session of 2019-2020, their overall budgetary spending on foreign help and governmental relationship building has strongly increased on average. And while they are doing a great job with building relationships with countries away from the nation, we can only hope that they change course to try and close the wounds in the relationships that exist already.

With the growing influential power of India and its neighbours, every tear in their bilateral relationships will impact not just the nations, but other developing countries of the world as well. It is in good hope to make sure that all nations, including India, maintain peaceful relations with all countries of the world, neighbours or not.