

India's neighbourhood woes: Friends on the fence?

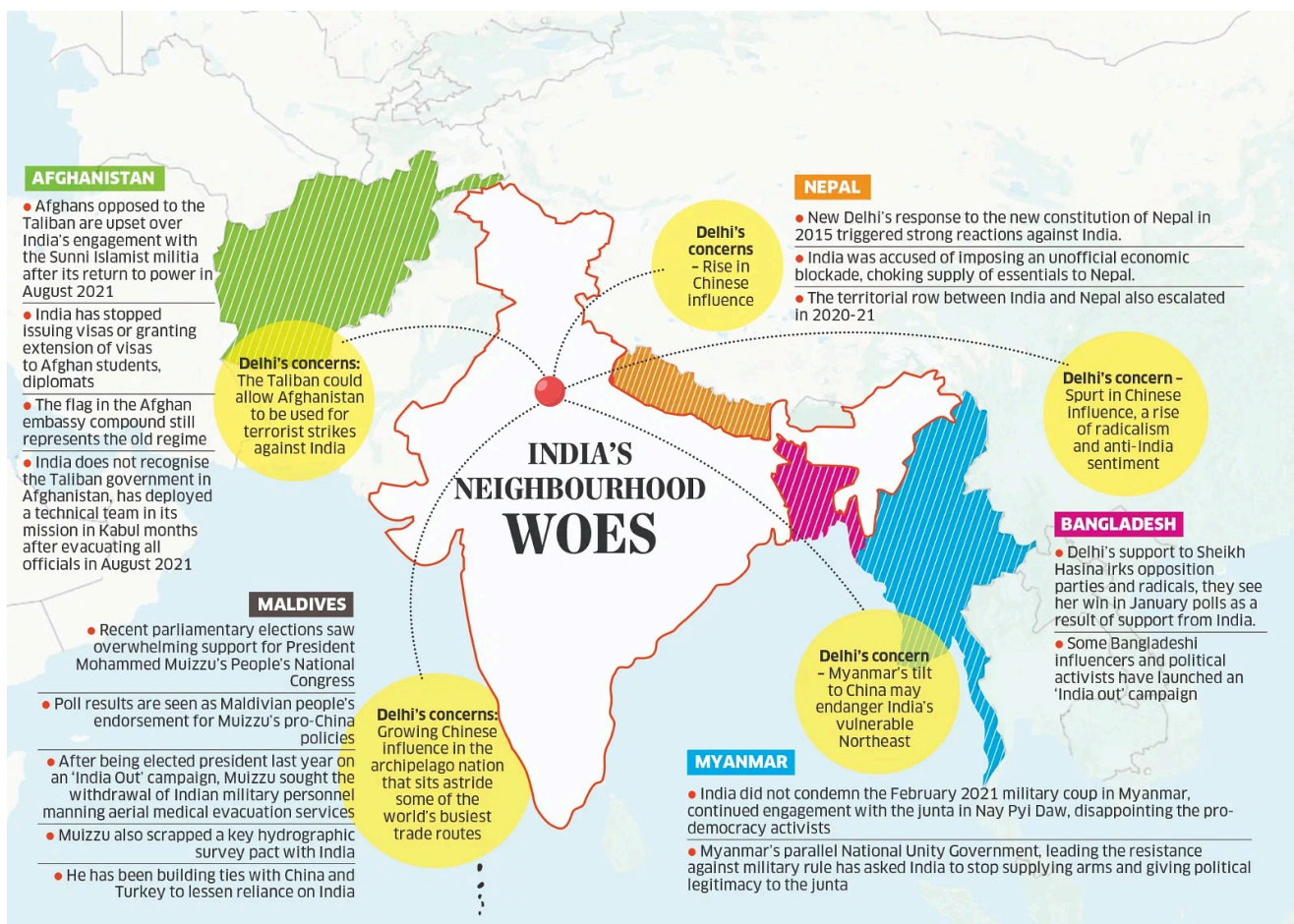
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Last month's elections to the Maldivian parliament – the Majlis – gave President Mohamed Muizzu's People's National Congress a resounding victory with more seats than it needed for a two-thirds majority. Given Muizzu's pro-China stance and that he was elected last year on an "India Out" plank, the poll results could be seen as a setback for India, a measure of anti-India feelings among the Maldivian people.

A look around the subcontinent shows a nascent "India Out" campaign also rearing its head in Bangladesh, impatience or even discontent against India among people in Myanmar over New Delhi's continued ties with the military junta in Nay Pyi Taw, and disappointment among Afghans over New Delhi's recent engagements with the Taliban after years of supporting the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. In Nepal, anti-India feelings are never far from the surface. Memories of a blockade in 2015 that many in Nepal see as imposed by India – though New Delhi denies this – haven't quite faded yet.

This comes against the backdrop of India's strategic rival China increasing its influence in these countries around India's periphery. Some quarters in India also suspect Beijing of fanning anti-India feelings in its neighbourhood. Traditionally, China worked with politicians and the bureaucracy of the South Asian countries, but some in India believe that the communist country is now influencing public sentiment too.



The results of the parliamentary elections in the Maldives could reflect some underlying anti-India feelings. But India's former permanent representative to the UN, T S Tirumurti, who had also dealt with New Delhi's relations with several neighbouring countries, says that the results of the elections also imply discontent with Maldivian coalition politics, which has prompted the vote in favour of Muizzu. In the case of Myanmar, Tirumurti acknowledges disappointment from pro-democracy activists, who ranged against the junta after the coup in February 2021. Given that the situation in Myanmar is in flux, he points to India's nuanced position on Myanmar – not condemning the coup but seeking a restoration of democracy. The reason for this is that India has sought the help of the Myanmar junta to quell insurgencies in India's northeastern states.

In Bangladesh, the "India Out" slogans are more aimed at Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with India seen as one of her international supporters. India has traditionally had stronger links with Hasina's Awami League Party and less than comfortable ties with the Bangladesh National Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami. Former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal dismisses the "India Out" campaign run by Hasina baiters, pointing to the fact that many initiatives like increased connectivity, trade, and transit through Bangladesh to India's landlocked northeast would not have been possible without the support of the Bangladeshi people. Increased demand for visas to travel to India and growing energy trade are other examples Sibal cites of closer people-to-people ties built up over the past decade.

In the case of Afghanistan, people familiar with the matter in New Delhi say that India has not yet recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan and was focused on maintaining its ties with the Afghan people -- supplying 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat and 250 tonnes of medical aid. To alleviate the suffering of women, India has since 2022 supplied 11,000 units of hygiene kits, baby food, blankets, clothing, and medical aid. Refuting charges that India has pushed out diplomats assigned by the Ashraf Ghani government; they say that some Afghan diplomats had left India preferring to seek asylum in Western countries. Those remaining in India had taken over the responsibility of running the embassy and consulates. In Nepal, India is working on its ties with the Nepalese people, focusing on development projects that benefit them.

“Over the years, we have ensured that our assistance is mutually beneficial, timely, sustainable, and impacts the lives of their people. This has considerably dented the negative perception of India among our neighbours. Now we are seen as a solid, dependable friend-in-need, especially when in dire straits,” says Tirumurti.

“However, in our neighbourhood, there are always some latent anti-India sentiments and geopolitical irritants, which get embroiled in their internal politics or which fringe elements are waiting to exploit. We need to be cautious not to overreact but, at the same time, take immediate corrective action where necessary,” he adds.

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