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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE -03

The Long View

**India's Neighbourhood Policy and
Building South Asian Stability**

In Conversation with

Ambassador (Dr.) T.C.A. Raghavan

Guest host

Prof. Ashok K. Kantha

**Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations
Chanakya University, Bengaluru**

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**In Conversation with
Ambassador (Dr.) T.C.A. Raghavan**

Former High Commissioner to Pakistan and Singapore, and one of India's
most thoughtful strategic voices on South Asia.

**Guest host
Prof. Ashok K. Kantha**

Subhas Chandra Bose Chair Professor of International Relations,
Former Ambassador of India to China

The Long View | Episode-3

India's Neighbourhood Policy and Building South Asian Stability

In Conversation with Chair Professor Ashok K. Kantha and Guest, Ambassador (Dr.) T.C.A. Raghavan

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The Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations is a pioneering initiative that brings a distinctive Indian perspective to bear on the dynamic complexities of twenty-first-century international relations. Anchored in India's strategic culture, the Chair seeks to support the country's rising trajectory in global affairs through innovative thinking, rigorous inquiry, and policy-relevant scholarship.

The Chair promotes interdisciplinary research, develops advanced expertise in international relations, contributes to the articulation of an Indian conceptual vocabulary for global discourse, and fosters partnerships among scholars, practitioners, and institutions committed to advancing knowledge and policy innovation. An initiative of the School of Law, Governance and Public Policy, Chanakya University, the Chair focuses on Asia, with particular emphasis on India's neighbourhood and regional strategic environment.

"The Long View: Conversation. Context. Consequence is a flagship podcast series launched by the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair on International Relations at Chanakya University. Debuting on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary in 2026, the series provides forward-looking, India-centric perspectives on global affairs, strategic autonomy, and Asian geopolitics.

The podcast series can be watched and followed on the website, YouTube page, and Spotify account of Chanakya University."

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Key Takeaways

- South Asia is facing major political and economic instability, while India has remained relatively stable.
- India's bilateral ties with most neighbours have stayed strong despite the region's political turmoil.
- India should revive regional cooperation because SAARC and BIMSTEC have become weaker.
- With Pakistan, India should seek greater stability while keeping security concerns in mind. Economic and cultural strengths can be put to use here.
- With Bangladesh on the other hand, India should show strategic patience and work with all political groups instead of relying on one party or the legacy of 1971.
- Most importantly, stronger regional cooperation and better economic development is needed in South Asia today.

Transcribed and Edited by

Faareha Usmani

Dr. Faareha Usmani is a Non-Resident Fellow (NRF) at the SCB Chair on IR at Chanakya University, Bangalore. She has previously been associated with the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, as a Research Intern.

She holds a PhD in Political Science from JMI, New Delhi and her research focused on India's foreign policy towards the ASEAN nations. Her other research and interest areas include India's Maritime Prospects, Soft Power, South Asia, East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, and has contributed several informative articles and pieces on these themes.

Editorial Note:

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability, clarity and British English. Repetitions, fillers, false starts and obvious speech-recognition errors have been removed or corrected while preserving the substance and conversational character of the discussion. The views expressed by the participants are their own and do not necessarily represent those of Chanakya University or the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations. The opening promotional teaser has not been repeated in the main transcript.

Transcript

Prof. Ashok Kantha: Hello, and welcome back to the Longview. It is our space to step back from the noise and think of the world with a little more depth to understand how history, strategy, and regional dynamics shape the choices India faces today. The podcast, The Longview, is part of the work we are doing at the Subhash Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations at Chanakya University, where we try to bring 'India-centred', 'Asia-aware' thinking into global conversations. And today, special for two reasons. One, the subject of today's podcast, is India's neighbourhood policy, and how we are developing our relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh, which is also at the heart of the work we are doing at the Chair. Second, because we have a very special guest, Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan, who has devoted a lot of his time as a diplomat, as a historian, to understanding this part of the world. So welcome to the Long View, Dr. Raghavan.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: Thank you for inviting me.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: Our audience is aware that Dr. Raghavan is not only a very distinguished diplomat. He has served as High Commissioner to Pakistan and to Singapore. He was Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs. But he also has a second avatar. And the second avatar is a very serious historian. He has written a number of deeply researched and well received books. So, we have with us someone who can look at foreign policy in a larger and historical context, which fits in very well with the ethos we are trying to develop for our podcast. So, let me begin with a few things we talked about yesterday. Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan delivered the inaugural Subhash Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture in Bengaluru yesterday, and he talked about apart from the legacy of Netaji, also a place of South Asia in Asia. So, I will ask you a very direct question. How do you look at India's neighbourhood at this point of time? How do you look at India's neighbourhood policy? It is a big question, I know, but let's start a bit and we will go to more specific issues.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: First of all, thank you again for inviting me, and I enjoyed preparing for and delivering the lecture yesterday, and Congratulations on all that you are doing, and all that Chanakya University is doing. It was my first opportunity to visit this campus, and it is quite astonishing as to how quickly it has come up and is still coming up. And perhaps in three or four years, the entire place will be totally transformed. So, it's a great opportunity to be here. To my mind, South Asia over the past four or five years is very evidently in a state of great fragility and crisis. And if one looks at different country situations, that comes across directly. We have had a coup in Myanmar, which upset 10 years of a certain democratic process, and that coup has been followed by a civil war, and that has led to a certain reduction or shrinking of central authority in Myanmar, and that obviously has enormous implications for us. We had a transformative change of architecture in Afghanistan in August 2021, where again, a 20-year process was suddenly interrupted, and the Taliban came back to power. We had Pakistan going through enormous domestic and external convulsions over that same period from 2020, 2021 till about 2024 which people term, I think, with some amount of merit as a polycrisis. That was a polycrisis phase of Pakistan. You had an insurrectory kind of situation in Sri Lanka, which again, swept away one government. A similar insurrectory

type of situation in Bangladesh, then in Nepal. So, one can see that while India has remained stable and on its chosen trajectory, each of our neighbours has gone through major, and is still going through major domestic trauma. In this time also, I think the idea of South Asia as a region has also eroded because regional platforms are evidently weaker today than they were 10 years ago. And both SAARC and BIMSTEC, for different reasons, are examples of that. So, I would say our immediate neighbourhood is not in a good situation. It does not mean that all of this directly can be remedied by Indian policy options. No, because much of this is also impacted by domestic change or domestic factors in each of these countries. But nevertheless, put together, when you look around your immediate neighbourhood, it is not a very good situation.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: If we follow the question, if we were to assess India's neighbourhood policy, and if I were to ask you, to identify three key achievements of our neighbourhood policy over the last decade, and three areas where you think we should have handled doing things differently or we need to make a course correction looking ahead.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: Well, I would say one very positive achievement is that notwithstanding this enormous churn in the region as a whole and in individual countries. Most of your bilateral relationships have remained quite strong and robust. So, whether you look at Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Afghanistan particularly is a good case where in 2021, it appears that there is going to be no bilateral relationship at all. But that it was steadied and now you have a significant one. The natural relationships have remained strong, and notwithstanding the churn which many of these countries have...

Prof. Ashok Kantha: Maldives is another example.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: Maldives is another example. So these are good, positive achievements. I think on the negative side we have, the regional envelope has weakened. First because of SAARC and now because of BIMSTEC. Now, one could argue that what really matters is the strength of your bilateral relationships, and to some extent that is so. But to my mind, the regional envelope enables you to strengthen further your bilateral relationships and the regional envelope or a regional cover helps in bringing temperatures down and adding to the sense of stability in the region as a whole. And that certainly has not happened. And to some extent, it has risen because of the absence of a strong policy framework on India's side. And that clearly is the case with regard to SAARC.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: You are absolutely right. The last SAARC summit was way back in 2014. For more than 10 years, there was no summit. BIMSTEC is not quite emerging as a substitute for SAARC. What do you think we need to do to revive the whole process of regionalism? Because regionalism is going to play a significant role, in fact, it is playing a significant role in different parts of the world. We seem to be outlier to some extent.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think we have to understand more than anything else that while strong bilateral relationships are essential and most of what you will do with your neighbours will remain strictly bilateral. Nevertheless, when you put it in a regional envelope, it acts as a further sweetener and it enables you to reduce temperatures in the subcontinent and as I said, add to stability. So, I think some kind of regional thinking will be quite helpful. The other

factor that we have to be conscious of, is that if you do not stress on the regional factor and give importance to regional processes, then a kind of narrative will emerge in South Asia. And as you said, South Asia is an outlier in terms of regional cooperation. And in geo-politics, like everywhere else, vacuums are always filled up by other forces. So, I don't think we should create a new situation where outside parties are....

and especially China, because of the strong relationships it has with all South Asian countries. I don't think we should be part of a process which ends up creating a situation where you have regional cooperation developing, but somehow you are not in the room.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: True. Let me now turn to a country Dr. Raghavan has dealt with extensively, both as a diplomat and as an author. I am referring to Pakistan, which is a very difficult relationship and yet most consequential for India. Dr. Raghavan has served as a Deputy High Commissioner in Islamabad, High Commissioner in Islamabad later and Joint Security dealing with that part of the world. So it is an extensive experience. My question to you, Raghavan, is this relationship condemned to be in that zone of negativity with no light at the end of the tunnel? Or do you see possibilities?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: Well, I see a possibility, but I think to be absolutely realistic, we should be very clear that India-Pakistan will always be a neighbourhood relationship. And neighbourhood relationships are never stable, and they are never static. And it will always therefore be a relationship, especially because of its own particular history, which is prone to difficulties, which will constantly run into problems and headwinds and roadblocks, and lead to frictions and even conflicts. So those characteristics of the relationship are not going to change. But at the same time, you can certainly think of a relationship which has greater elements of stability. Because I think if one looks at it purely from the point of view of our national interest, some stabilization of the relationship with Pakistan is something that we should strive for. Because we don't want to have a situation where you have conflicts and the chances of conflicts which are escalatory in nature and just being left out there to be handled in an improvised kind of fashion.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: I would like to bring a conversation back to something you discussed yesterday in your lecture and a few minutes ago when we were interacting with our Chalakya fellows, that is the role of domestic politics in our external relations, especially when it comes to dealing with the neighbourhood. To what extent does this instinct to look at the foreign policy issues through the prism of our domestic politics at times partisan domestic politics become a constraint in policy making?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think it is very often a constraint. But since we live in the real world, we also have to accept that constraint. It is there, not just in India, but in most other countries that domestic politics and foreign policy, in many cases, merge together. It is very difficult to separate the two, although where it comes to our vital neighbourhood relationships, I think the the principal responsibility of the foreign office has to be to try to separate the two and have a certain clinical approach to friction within relationships so that it does not go into a spiral where it is going to be, even more difficult to then restore some kind of stability. So with Pakistan, to a great extent, the domestic factor in the foreign policy approach is there.



And it is even more difficult here to separate. And this is largely because Pakistan has a well-established role in fermenting terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir and also in other states. That amounts to a kind of interference in your domestic processes. So separating the domestic from the external is not so simple. But I would say that we should always strive to do so. Because in the end, if you do not follow that approach of trying to stabilize the relationship, regardless of the provocations you are facing, you will end up in a kind of track where you find that the only way forward is further securitization. And excessive securitization is something which is neither in your national interest and also does not mean that you are playing all your strengths. I think if we are talking specifically about Pakistan, but also in the general proposition across South Asia, it is a fallacy to think that your strongest trump is securitization or your military strength. It is not. Your real strengths are the strength of your economy, the strength of your cultural projection, the strength of your own pluralistic system. And in any relationship, you should try to bring those factors into play, because that will, first of all, broad-base the relationship and stabilize it. And also you will be playing to your strengths. It is not to say that it will become a totally desecuritized relationship. That will never happen, especially with Pakistan in a certain role for the military options or the kinetic options always will have to be there. But it will be embedded in a larger framework that you are playing to all your strengths.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: So let me take our conversation to a country Eastward, Bangladesh, where what are you referring to, you know the strengths were deployed quite successfully when Sheikh Hasina was in office, and it was projected as a success story, India–Bangladesh relationship. Then we suffered a major setback in August 2024 with the ouster of Hasina’s involvement. Now, yesterday we had elections in Bangladesh, moved by Varsadalehul, and the media at present BNP seems to be well poised to form the next government, though Jamat has done reasonably well, actually, looking at the historical trends. Their performance has been much better in the past, partly because Awami League was kept out. How do you see this movement? Do you think there is a possibility of taking the relationship back to an Indian heel once again after a period of turbulence? How do you think the government should deal with the present and emerging situation?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think the fact that the election has taken place as has been assured by the transitional architecture is a good development. And regardless of all the limitations of this electoral process, and in particular, the fact that the Awami League was not allowed to participate, it is still a good step forward. But we should not forget that Bangladesh has gone through a major internal trauma. When the government’s architecture is swept away by an insecratory process, it means a major change. And to think that this election means that that process of change is now in the past and more stable phases are beginning, I think, would be a fallacy. I think we have to begin with the premise that Bangladesh has gone through a major trauma, and it will take time for it to restore its own internal sense of stability in the first place. Therefore, for India, I would say the most important thing is to exercise a certain amount of strategic empathy and strategic patience, and not try to rush things in terms of trying to achieve the older targets which have been set when the Awami League was in power or trying to compare the news set up with the kind of relationship we had with the Awami League. Because nothing in any country remains static. And I think we should understand the

changes which have taken place and deal with them with as much patience as possible.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: A few days ago, you had a very insightful op-ed on Bangladesh, where you have rightly anticipated that the strength of Jamat has grown significantly, and that assessment seems to be going out by trends that are available. How do you think we need to deal with the rise of Jamat in Bangladesh and the fact that they are likely to be the principal opposition party now?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think we have to be absolutely realistic about the region we are living in. There are many things which happen over here which may not be, not just to your liking, but which may be against your whole way of thinking, but you still come to terms with it. One example of that is the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Until a few years ago, our approach was that there is no difference between good Taliban and bad Taliban. But then things changed. And the Taliban came back to power after being an insurgent group or a terrorist group for 20 years. And you no longer have the luxury of standing aside and saying that I will only deal with those things which I like. You have to play whatever hand you get. And you cannot deal with the world as you would like it to be. You have to deal with the world as it is. And that means very often dealing with entities you are not comfortable with. Which requires one to be realistic and clinical. And I think the Jamaat is an example of that situation. It has a certain force or presence in Bangladesh politics, and we should understand it and not exclude it from our dealings when we deal with Bangladesh. It doesn't mean that you agree with it. It doesn't mean that you give up all your reservations about the Jamat. But you address and you try to see whether you can come to some minimum working relationships with all the parties in your neighbourhood and not make normative choices unless it is absolutely essential. And I think the kind of situation you are in Bangladesh, I don't think it's the situation that you need to make normative choices again, because you may then end up in the same kind of situation situation for which you are now being to decide that you dealt with only a certain set of players and that you ignored the rest of the political spectrum. So I think our concerns about the Jamat are valid. But at the same time, politics of all parties change, organizations change, and we should be prepared to recognize the possibility of change and deal with everyone.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: You often argued that we need to move beyond the prism of 1971. Would you like to just elaborate that for our audience?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think 1971 occupies a certain position in our narrative for very good reason, it was a diplomatic and military achievement. But we should also remember that it happened half a century ago. And viewing current day developments in Bangladesh through a half a century old prism will only lead to errors of judgment. Two new generations have come up in Bangladesh since then. And while they have a certain empathy and they have a certain inherited memory of 1971, their day-to-day affairs, their domestic politics has not been ordered on the basis of that principle or that factor alone. And we should be prepared to accept that. And because of that, I say that we should not view Bangladesh today through the prism of 1971. It also means understanding that countries can be internally divided, and there is no monochromatic view in any society or any country. So there have always been two views in Bangladesh itself. 1971 was certainly an external genocide which was inflicted on the people of Bangladesh. But there were also elements of a deep colonization within Bangladesh



or within Bengal, East Bengal society at that time. And people have written about this and said that it is not as if the spirit of 1947 completely vanished from Bangladesh because of 1971. No, those two contradictory, contrarian views have always existed. And because we are now a foreign country dealing with the neighbour, we have to be clinical about these different forces existing and try to deal with all of them in as even handed a manner as possible.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: My last question is sort of a broad question based on a theme you have explored in the past, that is the idea of South Asia, given all the complexities, flux, the role of external forces here, and the tendency of some countries to go beyond the Indian subcontinent. How do you look at South Asia as an entity, as an idea, especially if you look at the larger context of the idea of Asia, which you explored yesterday in your lecture.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think South Asia or an older term, it still has the identity, which is the Indian subcontinent, has had a certain identity which has persisted, notwithstanding other larger identities. And I think in that context, the South Asian identity still has meaning, if for no other reason, that it is a region which is defined by each of the countries in it having a major border with India. So from that limited point of view, also there is a separate identity which exists. And because it exists, we have to address it. To my mind, one major problem South Asia as a whole faces is that within Asia, it is now standing out with a bit of a laggard. Because if you move to the West, across the Arabian Sea, because of hydroclimate, you find that whole region has uplifted itself in various ways in terms of political outreach, in terms of the way their economies have developed, in ways in which their infrastructure has come up and in ways in which they themselves are projecting soft power. It sounds, I mean, 25-30 years ago, it would have been anachronistic to talk about the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Gulf states being major projectors of soft power. But that is the reality which exists today. It is a major transformation which has taken place because of changes in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, etc. If one goes East and looks at Southeast Asia, similarly over there, you find that that region has transformed to a very great extent. And that includes how it has managed to suppress or moderate its own internal conflicts. It is not to say conflicts have disappeared. The Thai-Cambodia situation is very much a live situation today, but nevertheless, they have managed to suppress internal conflicts and concentrate on economic change, because of which the character of Southeast Asia has transformed. South Asia in that context has not changed in the same way. First of all, the political issue which dominates the subcontinent remains the same. Regional integration is still very limited as compared to other regions around us. And most of all, while a great deal of economic development has taken place, and that the leader has been India. But in a comparative sense, if one sees the performance of our social indicators or even the economic indicators, the extent to which your infrastructure has come up, you have not performed as well as the surrounding regions. And I think this factor is also something which now adds to the South Asian identity in a perverse way that outsiders see you as a kind of laggard. I think this is a painful fact that we in South Asia, I have to view and introspect about with a somewhat more clinical, introspective, and objective approach.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: Just a follow-up question, if South Asia is laggard, which appears to be the case, can the rise of India really transcend that phenomenon?

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: I think it can certainly help. I think if we have stronger bilateral

relationships, even with Pakistan. I mean, Pakistan, we should not ignore the fact that there is a point of however weak and however much of a minority it may be, that Pakistan is the ultimate loser in the India–Pakistan contestation, the way it has developed over the last 10 years. And this is not in Pakistan’s interest, because it is losing out on so much in terms of economic options and trade and commercial options. I think stronger bilateral relationships and a stronger focus on a cooperative, regional approach can certainly help to a great extent.

Prof. Ashok Kantha: Well, thank you very much, Dr. Raghavan, for this rich and wide-ranging conversation. We have really benefited from the ability to connect history with contemporary diplomacy and to read South Asia with the sense of both empathy and realism, because often the empathy is lacking. I believe this gives us exactly the kind of long view we hope to bring to this podcast. Thank you very much for joining us.

Amb. T.C.A. Raghavan: Thank you for inviting me. Thank you very much.



Summary

In this episode of The Long View, Chair Professor, Prof. Ashok Kantha in conversation with Amb. (Dr.) T. C. A. Raghavan, discuss India's neighbourhood policy and the shifting regional landscape: India's evolving relationship with Pakistan, engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, and how New Delhi positions itself within an increasingly fragile South Asian order. Drawing from decades of diplomatic experience, Dr. Raghavan examines India's foreign policy through a regional lens, asking not just how India deals with its neighbours, but how India fits within South Asia as a political and strategic space.

The episode reflects on a region marked by turbulence, from the coup and civil war in Myanmar to deep internal crises across multiple states. Institutions such as SAARC and BIMSTEC are arguably weaker today than a decade ago, leading to a thinning of the regional envelope that once enabled stronger bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Dr Raghavan outlines three key achievements of India's neighbourhood engagement, foremost among them the resilience and robustness of most bilateral ties and identifies three areas where course correction may be necessary.

The podcast conversation is a timely, candid and a strategic assessment of South Asia at a time of flux.

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Episode 03

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About the Guest

Dr. T.C.A Raghavan retired from the Indian Foreign Service in December 2015 and is one of India's most thoughtful strategic voices on South Asia. Dr. Raghavan has served as Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan (2013–15) and had earlier served as Deputy High Commissioner in Pakistan (2003–2007) and High Commissioner to Singapore from 2009 to 2013. During his last posting in New Delhi (2007–09) in the Ministry of External Affairs Dr. Raghavan was Joint Secretary dealing with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. He has also served in Kuwait, the United Kingdom, and Bhutan. Posts earlier held in the Ministry of External Affairs include Director of the Office of the External Affairs Minister (2000–2003).

Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan has also served as Director General of ICWA and President of the Association of Indian Diplomats. An award-winning historian, he has authored acclaimed biographical works, including *Circles of Freedom* (2024), and frequently writes on Indian history and diplomacy. He was awarded a PhD by the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1992 for his dissertation relating to the economic history of India. He is the author of (i) 'Attendant Lords, Bairam Khan and Abdur Rahim– Courtiers and Poets in Mughal India', awarded the Mohammad Habib Memorial Prize by the Indian History Congress in December 2017. (ii) 'The People Next Door– The Curious History of India's relations with Pakistan'. (Harper Collins, 2017).

About the Host

Prof. Ashok Kantha is the Chair Professor of the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations at Chanakya University. A career diplomat with over 38 years of experience, he served as India's Ambassador to China (2014–16), Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, and High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Malaysia. He is a former Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, and has held several senior positions dealing with China and India's neighbourhood. A specialist on China and South Asia, he was also the lead Indian negotiator for key agreements with China on the boundary question and military confidence-building measures.



About the Chair

The Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations is a pioneering initiative that brings a distinctive Indian perspective to bear on the dynamic complexities of 21st-century international relations. Anchored in the country's strategic culture, its mandate is to support India's rising trajectory in global affairs through innovative thinking and rigorous inquiry. The Chair seeks to foster interdisciplinary scholarship, equip advanced learners and researchers with expertise across key domains of international relations, develop an Indian conceptual vocabulary for IR discourse, and build partnerships and a collaborative community dedicated to advancing knowledge and policy innovation. An initiative of the School of Law, Governance and Public Policy, Chanakya University, the Chair focuses on Asia, with special priority given to India's neighbourhood.

Transcription Note: Audio transcribed using HappyScribe and edited by Dr. Faareha Usmani, Non-Resident Fellow at Subhash Chandra Bose Chair on International Relations, Chanakya University, Bengaluru.





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