

India And Its Troubled Neighbourhood

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

Group Discussions are now essential to many selection processes, job interviews, and academic evaluations. During a Group Discussion (GD), the participants are encouraged to exchange their opinions and ideas. At the same time, while doing so, they also vividly display their communication, interpersonal, leadership and other soft skills. To ace the Group Discussion round, candidates must follow some essential tips. Here are some common tips to clear a competitive Group Discussion round. Firstly, a candidate must be well-prepared and knowledgeable about some common topics. For this, there is a need to remain adequately informed about current affairs, both national and international. Secondly, one needs to acquire good communication skills. This can be done by listening and regularly speaking with a group of friends on current topics. Thirdly, one should be confident and assertive but certainly not dominating. Fourthly, the candidate should learn to listen actively and attentively. Fifthly, one should maintain eye contact with group members while expressing his ideas and also remain calm and composed during the entire discussion. Then, there is a need to respect others' opinions and avoid interrupting others abruptly. Finally, as the time is limited and all the group members are required to participate in the GD, one must speak clearly and concisely. These are some essential tips for participating in a competitive Group Discussion.

The above topic was picked up by a group of 11 candidates who were called to take part in a Group Discussion during the process of screening candidates for admission to an MBA course in a prestigious Management Institute. On arrival, candidates were allotted identification numbers and asked to address each other by these numbers only. Three assessors, who were deputed to conduct the Group Discussion, briefed the candidates about the conduct of this GD and told them to conclude the discussion within 25-30 minutes.



Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and as Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted many interviews and group discussions during the last two decades and has authored four books, including two on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of Air Staff.

The Group Discussion then commenced in the following manner:

Candidate No. 11: Good morning, friends. We have selected a currently much-discussed topic for our Group Discussion. This topic is now extremely significant for our country in many ways. Former Prime Minister of India, A.B. Vajpayee, once remarked that you could change friends, not neighbours. Unfortunately, there has been considerable disquiet in India's neighbourhood. So, for the past some time, maintaining ties with our neighbours has been the chief thrust of India's foreign policy. Friends, when we talk of our neighbours, we should mainly refer to our immediate neighbours: Pakistan, Nepal, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Internal issues in most of these countries also directly or indirectly impact our country. Further, India is surrounded by nations in which China enjoys considerable leverage. We know China has emerged as a big world power, both economically and militarily. Since India has a troubled relationship with China, this situation triggers several security

issues for India. To my mind, we need to talk about our relationship with these neighbouring countries in detail and then suggest how India should be dealing with the present difficult geopolitical situation without compromising its national interest. Being encircled by troubled neighbours, we need to highlight why India should worry.

You all may express your views on this topic now. Thanks.

Candidate No. 7: Friends, the topic chosen by us is fairly vast in its coverage, and we need to plan a strategy to discuss it in such a way that all aspects of this issue are adequately covered. I would suggest we talk about all the countries mentioned above one by one by pointing out the present crisis in each country and how that crisis worries India. That, I think, should be the right approach. Do you all agree with me?

Candidate No. 2: Yes, I agree with you. In this way, we can do justice to this broad topic in a systematic way.

Candidate No. 8: OK. I want to talk first about the crisis in Pakistan. The crisis in Pakistan has been the main cause of worry for India for a long time. In the recent past, the crisis started after present Pakistan military rulers decided to support the move to remove Mr. Imran Khan as Prime Minister of Pakistan through a no-confidence motion in Parliament in 2022. Mr. Khan was then arrested on various charges, which led to protests and a crackdown on a range of leaders. Subsequently, in the elections, though Mr. Khan and his party were disqualified from fighting elections, Mr. Khan-backed independents won the largest number of seats. Mr. Khan joined a coalition, which has emerged as the single largest party and poses a threat to both the army and the present ruling dispensation. As a backlash of these events, the Pakistan army is back to using proxies to launch terror attacks in India, which has been a serious problem for India for quite some time now.

Candidate No. 5: I think Number 8 has covered the existing situation in

Pakistan quite adequately. I would like to point out that the present worry for India remains a series of terror attacks in Jammu by Pakistan-backed militants. With Pakistan depending so much on China, China will use it as a pawn to needle Indian security forces. In addition, the economic crisis due to the external debt burden and high inflation in Pakistan threatened the country's stability. Therefore, the present fluid situation in Pakistan remains a matter of serious concern for India.

Candidate No. 9: I agree with you. The unstable conditions due to military rule and other political issues in Pakistan have been a cause of worry for India for a long time now.

Candidate No. 3: I can talk about the situation in Nepal. Nepal has seen frequent changes in prime ministership for some time now. The present Prime Minister, Mr. K.P. Sharma Oli, is known to be pro-China and, during his previous tenure, had declared three disputed areas, namely Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani, which cover about 372-sq.km area at the India-Nepal-China trijunction in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district, as belonging to Nepal. Later, he also formalised it by ramming through a Constitutional amendment. This matter remains unresolved. He has been working for better relations with China and has entered into several agreements with China to build infrastructure projects.

Candidate No. 11: I would like to add that the Chinese and Americans are known to be quite active in Nepal. Earlier, Nepal had also accused India of interfering in its domestic affairs. I think that, in the case of Nepal, India must engage with all parties to earn people's confidence. Nepal seeks India's cooperation in building power projects to build its hydraulic potential, but India's response has not been very encouraging. Indian armed forces' Agnipath scheme for recruitment has stopped the recruitment of Nepalis into the Indian Army, breaking a 200-year tradition and annoying a lot of Nepalis. This has also become an issue between the two countries. All these issues have adversely impacted the relations between India and Nepal in the recent past.

Candidate No. 10: Looking at all this, I feel that focusing on China as the root cause of all troubles in our neighbouring countries may not be appropriate. We need to examine if we have been also at fault.

Candidate No. 6: Yes, I agree with Number 10. We should also introspect.

Candidate No. 8: Friends, after talking about Pakistan and Nepal, can I talk about India's troubled relationship with another neighbouring country, Myanmar?

Candidate Number 4: Yes, Number 8, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 8: You would recall that the military junta overthrew the democratically-elected government of Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021, and a bloody civil war has continued in Myanmar since then. The generals currently control less than 50% of the land, while rebels have control of the other half of Myanmar's territory. Myanmar shares a long border with India, and India continues to back the State administration, which a military general leads. The military junta is extremely unpopular with the civilian population. The Indian Government continues to support the military by supplying arms and ammunition, which the Myanmar army is using to suppress the rebellion. Some political experts feel, while some disagree, that India is making the same mistake in Myanmar as in Bangladesh by supporting an unpopular government. So, the situation is quite unpredictable in Myanmar also.

Candidate No. 5: Yes, you are right. I want to add that the youth of Myanmar are leading the agitation against the country's poor economic situation. Currently, Myanmar has a negative GDP growth that is quite worrisome. Unfortunately, at present, the majority of people in Myanmar perceive India negatively and feel that India should support a democratic system similar to its own.

Candidate No. 7: That is quite understandable. So far, we have covered India's three neighbours in our discussion and have seen that all are facing serious issues.

Candidate No. 5: If you agree, we could now switch to another much-troubled neighbour, Bangladesh.

Candidate No. 10: Yes, Number 5, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 5: We know India shares an over 4,000 km land border with Bangladesh, the longest we have with any other neighbour, which has strategic significance for India. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, its founder, in 1975, the governments of Bangladesh were hostile to India. However, when Ms. Sheikh Hasina assumed prime ministership from June 1996 to July 2001 and again from January 2009 to August 2024,

things substantially improved. The land dispute was amicably resolved, and major infrastructure projects were initiated. Ms. Hasina's contributions to economic growth and infrastructure development were quite impressive, but they did not benefit the people at large, and corruption continued. However, she became somewhat authoritarian and dealt with the opposition with a firm hand.

Candidate No. 3: Yes, Ms. Hasina faced the anger of students, and the opposition boycotted the elections, which she won comfortably. Later, a minor student protest transformed into a huge people's movement against her authoritarian rule, and she was forced to resign and flee the country. An interim government has since been installed in Bangladesh, but the situation continues to be fluid. Since the Indian Government had continued to fully support the Hasina government despite her allegedly undemocratic ways, a section of people in Bangladesh has turned against India as well.

Candidate No. 8: I think numbers 5 and 3 have described the prevailing situation in Bangladesh quite comprehensively. I would only like to add that due to the above-mentioned developments, India's apprehension is that hardline Islamic groups may again pose a threat and anti-India activities, including those by militant groups in the northeast, may again rise. Ms. Hasina had kept these activities well under control. Secondly, progress on bilateral cooperation, such as infrastructure projects, may be adversely impacted, allowing China to increase its activities in Bangladesh, which would not be good news for India. Thus, experts feel that the situation in Bangladesh is considered a huge diplomatic and strategic setback for India.

Candidate No. 1: Friends, we have discussed how Bangladesh has become a troubled neighbour for India. Let us now talk about Sri Lanka or Maldives. Can some friends talk about these countries?

Candidate No. 3: Yes, I can tell you about the troubled situation in Sri Lanka.

Candidate No. 6: Number 3, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 3: The powerful Rajapaksa brothers, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa, who ruled Sri Lanka as President and Prime Minister, fled to safety in 2022, which was a result of people's revolt over high inflation and low incomes. They played China's card

against India. Mr. Gotabaya's successor, Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe, stabilised the economy, but the next elections were held in a divisive manner. The newly elected President, Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, comes from Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This Marxist political party has been against the India-Sri Lanka accord of 1987 and devolving power to Tamils. Even though India bailed out Sri Lanka with \$4.5 billion in aid during the economic crisis, there are fears that the new government may hinder India's plans to expand strategic cooperation with Sri Lanka. China's influence is also substantial in that country.

Candidate No. 11: Yes, China attracted Sri Lanka with investments worth over \$13 billion, including major infrastructure projects. However, many of these proved to be very costly, and Sri Lanka's debt-to-GDP ratio crossed 110%, which could not be continued. The economy was on the verge of collapse, the tourism industry crashed, and food, fertiliser and petrol prices hiked. To help Sri Lanka, India and its private sector invested huge amounts in the country and due to this, public sentiments favoured India, which is a good indication of better ties between the two countries. Therefore, the economic and political situation is quite fluid in Sri Lanka, which is a cause of worry for India.

Candidate No. 8: Friends, let me talk about the situation in Maldives, which has been much in the news in recent times.

Candidate No. 9: Yes, Number 8, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 8: Recently, when the government changed in Maldives, we saw the relations between India and Maldives deteriorate substantially. Earlier, when the then President, Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, ruled the country from 2018 to 2023, economic cooperation and security arrangements between the two countries had remarkably improved, and we were able to reverse some policies that the previous pro-China government had implemented. But, Mr. Solih lost the election to pro-China Mr. Mohamed Muizzu, who had won the election on an "India Out" plank. Subsequently, relations between India and Maldives witnessed a new low as the new President Mr. Muizzu asked all Indian military personnel to leave the country and cancelled some defence arrangements.

Candidate No. 5: Yes, I want to add that after some derogatory remarks were passed by a Minister of the Maldives' government against the Indian Prime Minister, India gave a call to boycott the Maldives as a tourist destination. This gave a big jolt to Maldives as it witnessed a drop of 42% in the number of Indian tourists. However, soon thereafter, Mr. Muizzu visited Beijing and signed 20 agreements with China to cut down the Maldives' dependence on India for trade, food imports and health facilities. China is now planning to establish a naval base in Maldives, which would pose a big threat to Indian security directly. This would also adversely impact India's strategic initiatives in the Indian Ocean.

Candidate No. 7: I think the above situation in Maldives and Bangladesh indicates that India is loosening its hold on the neighbourhood. India needs to have a new look at its much-discussed 'Neighbourhood First Policy'.

Candidate No. 2: Yes, I agree with you.

Candidate No. 3: Friends, we have talked about our troubled neighbours, except China, the most significant one. Most people consider China to be the root of all the troubles in India's neighbouring nations. In May 2020, China made intrusions over the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Galwan Valley in Ladakh, where 20 Indian Army personnel lost their lives. It then amassed troops in several sectors of Ladakh and the Northeast. Thus, the border stand-off saw India's relations with China reach a new low. Subsequently, after several rounds of military talks, China did not vacate some areas which it had encroached upon in May 2020. China insists that the border dispute should not come in the way of trade relations between the two countries, as trade relations have been showing an upward trend.

Candidate No. 1: You are right. Moreover, China has been attracting India's neighbours through its Belt and Road Initiative, liberally offering funding for infrastructure projects and increasing their trade with it. Knowing India's relations with China, neighbouring nations have been playing one against the other. I think India needs to review its relations with neighbouring countries, considering the Chinese activities in these countries. Yet another worry for India is China-Russia's close friendship, which may adversely impact India's security interests.

Candidate No. 5: Very recently, in October 2024, consequent to constant dialogues, India and China have reached an agreement on patrolling arrangements along the LAC, leading to disengagement and resolution of issues that had emerged after the stand-off in 2020. However, it is assumed that due to a massive trust deficit between the militaries of India and China, the actual ground disengagement process and further talks may be lengthy and time-consuming. However, the latest India-China agreement is described as a move in the right direction.

Candidate No. 10: Yes, looking at the above facts, it seems that dealing with China is currently the most difficult predicament for Indian foreign policymakers.

Candidate No. 11: As we have seen above, all of India's neighbours have been posing problems for it, and this scenario needs urgent attention. It appears that while India's stature in terms of broader global issues is on the rise, its record in the neighbourhood has been sketchy. India's commitment to providing aid to its neighbours has been irregular, and, therefore, China has taken the lead in influencing them.

Candidate No. 1: Friends, I think we have adequately discussed India's troubled neighbourhood, and before we conclude, let us suggest some ways for India to deal with the present geopolitical situation.

Candidate No. 8: I feel there is certainly a need for India to have a fresh look at its 'Neighbourhood First Policy'. India should pursue a more active trade policy to substantially increase regional integration with neighbours and push economic amalgamation. India should not always look for reciprocity from its neighbours and provide financial help to them when needed. This may help India to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has already impacted our neighbours and made them economically dependent on China. India did well in this respect when it provided financial assistance to Sri Lanka when the latter was facing an economic crisis.

Candidate No. 5: As reported, recently, the Maldives President visited India, while Indian officials have also visited Maldives and Sri Lanka to improve relations. These are welcome moves, which indicate that there are efforts to improve relations. Friends, the time allotted to wind up this discussion is over, and we must conclude it.

Candidate No. 3: If you agree, I can conclude.

Candidate No. 11: Yes, Number 3, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 3: Friends, you would agree we had an interesting and informative discussion on this much-discussed topic. Since the topic is so vast, it was decided to discuss the issues of India's seven neighbours separately. To start, we spoke about Pakistan. The political and economic crises there continue to pose security problems for India. While talking about Nepal, we highlighted the border dispute between the two nations, its proximity to China and India's new military recruitment scheme, which has annoyed Nepalese. In Myanmar, we talked of the military administration, which was imposed after throwing out the civilian government. However, the Indian Government continues to support the military administration, due to which the youth of the country are not favouring India anymore. The situation remains uncertain in Myanmar and poses a security problem for India. Then, we discussed the situation in Bangladesh, where Ms. Hasina's government was thrown out after a mass movement. Since India provided support to an authoritarian Hasina administration, some people in that country are now against India. Bangladesh continues to pose a problematic situation for India. We discussed Sri Lanka, where the new President has not been favouring India. Though India provided financial help to Sri Lanka, China also invested there. The political and economic situation there is fluid. In Maldives, there is anti-India sentiment among people, and due to its recent agreements with China, it poses a huge security problem for India. Lastly, we discussed China and highlighted the border stand-off. China remains a big problem for India, as it also hampers India's relations with other neighbours. Finally, we suggested some measures to deal with these issues. That's all. Thanks, friends. Have a nice day.

Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance :

Good: 3, 5, 8 and 11

These candidates came well-prepared to discuss this important topic. They presented relevant information and data to support their arguments. While they spoke, they did not obstruct other candidates' presentations of their points of view. Due to their good knowledge of the topic, they displayed a fair amount of self-confidence while speaking. While Number 11 took the initiative to introduce the topic, Number 3 willingly came forward to conclude the Group Discussion. He concluded the GD by aptly summarising all the details of the proceedings. Owing to all these considerations, their performance has been assessed as 'Good'.

Average: 1, 7 and 10

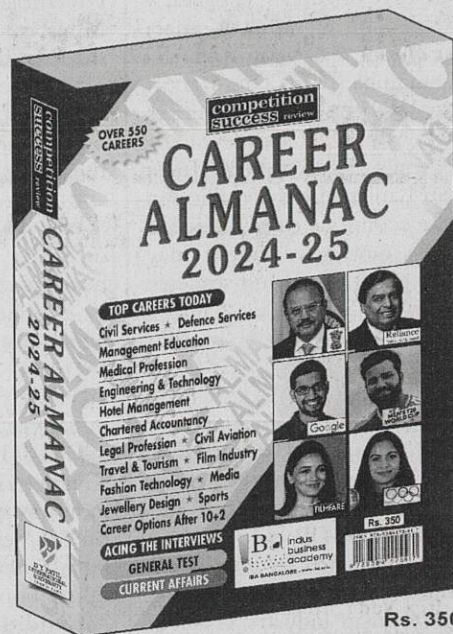
These candidates also participated in the discussion and possessed some knowledge of the topic, but their contributions remained somewhat limited. They also took the initiative to guide this discussion to proceed in the desired direction so that all aspects of this vast subject were well-covered. It became conspicuous that they lacked sufficient preparation. Candidates are well advised to get familiar with current affairs to put up a winning performance in competitive Group Discussions. Due to these obvious reasons, their performance has been adjudged as 'Average'.

Below Average: 2, 4, 6 and 9

The contributions of these candidates were barely noticeable to the assessors. They spoke only once in a while, that too to agree or appreciate other candidates who were active in the discussion. Apparently, this was due to their lack of effort to become familiar with current affairs. Since they did not possess adequate knowledge of the subject, they lacked the needed self-confidence to speak in the group. Owing to these factors, their effort has been assessed as 'Below Average'.

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