



India's Neighbourhood First Policy

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Abstract: After becoming Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi launched significant efforts to strengthen India's position in South Asia and expand its influence in the Indian Ocean region. Central to this strategy is the "Neighbourhood First Policy", which serves as a cornerstone of India's foreign relations framework. This paper aims to analyze the implementation of the "Neighbourhood First Policy" by examining bilateral relations between India and its neighboring countries, utilizing both historical and logical research methods within the field of international relations. While the policy has aimed to foster stronger ties, it encounters challenges, particularly from China's growing influence and ongoing border disputes that contribute to regional security concerns, including recurrent terrorist incidents. Despite these obstacles, the "Neighbourhood First Policy" has facilitated improved connections between India and its South Asian neighbors, reflecting Modi's commitment to enhancing bilateral relationships and regional connectivity. Looking ahead, the trajectory of the "Neighbourhood First Policy" is expected to evolve, with the potential for greater success in future phases as India navigates the complexities of its regional dynamics.

Index Terms - Neighbourhood, Narendra Modi, International Relations, Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

India's neighbourhood policy emphasizes national security and economic development to enhance its status as a regional and global power. The country's geopolitical and geostrategic positioning has led New Delhi to forge specific relationships with its neighbours. Key turning points in India's post-Cold War relations include the nuclear tests of 1998, the Kargil War in 1999, and the US-led global war on terror, which significantly impacted South Asia.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the neighbourhood first policy, inspired by Gujarat's development model and the Gujral doctrine, aimed for a pragmatic and proactive approach. While initial results were promising, Modi's administration now faces the need for a refreshed perspective and practical strategies to strengthen ties with neighbouring countries. This is particularly crucial as India navigates strategic competition with China and aims to solidify its role as a significant economic and political power in the region and beyond.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Vinay Kaura and Meena Rani(2020) in their article stated that after Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister of India in 2014, New Delhi has worked diligently to elevate India's status as a great power by solidifying its influence in South Asia and expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean. While there have been notable successes in foreign policy, five years later, the initial enthusiasm surrounding Modi's neighbourhood policy has waned, leading to a renewed focus on BIMSTEC. This article examines India's bilateral relations with its neighbours and highlights key challenges: inadequate perception management, limited regional connectivity, gaps in project implementation, and the external pressures stemming from China's growing influence in the region. To enhance outcomes, policy planners and decision-makers must undertake thorough strategic assessments and address these critical issues.

Smruti Pattanaik.(2022) in her article stated that India's foreign policy has long been shaped by its immediate neighbourhood, intricately linked to the security and stability of the region. The partition of 1947 severed many socio-cultural ties among diverse ethnic groups, creating a legacy of mistrust and suspicion that has complicated regional cooperation. The post-colonial focus on a majoritarian national identity often overlooked shared cultural connections, deepening divisions and hindering economic collaboration. India's historical emphasis on security concerns has made it particularly vigilant regarding the domestic politics and foreign policies of its South Asian neighbours. This has sometimes been perceived as an infringement on their sovereignty, leading to resentment and a lack of trust in India's intentions. However, India's neighbourhood policy has gradually evolved. It is shifting from a predominantly security-centric approach towards fostering development partnerships. By focusing on collaborative growth and shared prosperity, India aims to rebuild relationships with its neighbours, promoting stability and enhancing mutual security in the region. This transformation reflects recognition that cooperation can optimize the economic potential of South Asia while addressing longstanding tensions.

Saroj Kumar Aryal and Simant Shankar Bharti(2023) in their article revealed that The 'Neighbourhood First Policy' has been a cornerstone of India's foreign relations since independence in 1947. Over the years, this policy has evolved, faced challenges, and been redefined under different prime ministers. This article explores how the Neighbourhood First Policy has been shaped by the perspectives and priorities of four key leaders: Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Inder Kumar Gujral, and Narendra Modi. It examines the motivations behind each prime minister's approach to the policy and provides an empirical analysis of its implementation during their respective tenures.

Shweta Singh (2023) in her article stated that India's Neighbourhood First Policy is grounded in a profound sense of care and moral responsibility towards its neighbours. This guiding principle emphasizes India's commitment to uplift its regional partners, fostering a collaborative environment that promotes stability and prosperity. The Ministry of External Affairs, through its Economic Diplomacy Division, articulates that this policy aims to establish a rules-based order, strengthen multilateralism, and enhance peace and security in the Indian Ocean. Notably, the Neighbourhood First Policy transcends mere geographical boundaries. While it initially focuses on South Asia, it strategically extends to encompass initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) framework, as well as even reaching into Central Asia. This broader normative and strategic approach underscores India's commitment to regional integration and cooperation, reflecting a vision of shared progress and collective security in the region.

Vaishali Jain and Somvir Gill (2024) in their article stated that India wields significant influence over South Asia due to its strategic location, robust economy, and formidable military capabilities. Since gaining independence, India's foreign policy towards its smaller neighbours has evolved considerably. Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, this approach has shifted, emphasizing the "Neighbourhood First Policy, which prioritizes relations with countries in the South Asian region. This paper aims to examine the development of India's Neighbourhood First Policy over the past decade, analyzing the current state of diplomatic ties with its neighbouring nations. It also explores the challenges posed by growing Chinese influence in the region and its implications for India's strategy. In the concluding section, the paper offers recommendations on how India can enhance its contributions to neighbouring countries, thereby strengthening its Neighbourhood First Policy and fostering a more cooperative and stable South Asia.

METHODOLOGY

To present data descriptions and explore patterns within particular spatial and temporal contexts, this paper uses a variety of research methods, including historical and logical methods to examine various historical periods and chronological aspects simultaneously, as well as specific social science methods like analysis, statistics, synthesis, and comparison. Additionally, this study explains the international viewpoints of India and its neighbours using popular political science techniques, particularly for analysis of recent eras, like content analysis, comparative analysis, and event analysis.

MODI'S NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY

After assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced a transformative approach to India's foreign policy, encapsulated in the "Modi doctrine" and the "Panchamrit" framework. This framework outlines five core pillars: dignity, dialogue, shared prosperity, regional and global security, and cultural linkages, all aimed at reinforcing India's emerging role as a global power.

To effectively navigate a multipolar world, Modi's administration seeks to align domestic priorities with foreign policy objectives. A key aspect of this strategy is robust regional diplomacy, focusing on fostering relationships with neighbouring countries and enhancing political connectivity through dialogue.

In response to China's expanding influence in Asia, particularly in South Asia, India is striving to assert its prestige and counterbalance external pressures. Modi articulated this commitment during the 69th session of the UN General Assembly in 2014, emphasizing that "the destiny of a country is linked to its neighbourhood" and prioritizing friendship and cooperation with neighbouring states.

India's approach aims to create a peaceful and stable regional environment conducive to economic integration. This strategy is critical for reinforcing India's standing in South Asia and counteracting China's influence, while also expanding India's reach beyond the Indian Ocean. South Asia and the Indian Ocean have emerged as pivotal arenas in the rivalry between India and China.

Historically, India has been a dominant force in South Asia, boasting significant geographical, demographic, and military advantages. However, China's deepening ties with smaller South Asian nations pose a challenge to India's supremacy. In light of these dynamics, Modi's government has recalibrated its foreign policy towards its neighbours, encapsulated in the "neighbourhood first" policy, which is characterized by four main elements:

1. **Political and Diplomatic Prioritization:** New Delhi emphasizes its diplomatic relations with neighboring countries and island nations in the Indian Ocean.
2. **Support in Development:** India commits to assisting neighbors with resources, training, and equipment when necessary.
3. **Connectivity and Integration:** A crucial focus is on enhancing connectivity to facilitate the free flow of goods, people, energy, capital, and information.
4. **Regional Leadership:** India aims to promote a model of regionalism that is inclusive and led by itself.

Following the initial implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy (2014-2018), India has seen positive developments in its relationships with South Asian neighbours. However, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents significant challenges, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which threatens Indian territorial integrity and strategic interests. Modi's government recognizes that disconnection with neighbouring countries undermines both economic and security goals. Consequently, enhancing connectivity remains a top priority during Modi's second term.

At the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Modi highlighted the importance of connectivity for regional unity and prosperity, asserting, "We must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust". The "neighbourhood first policy" emphasizes the interconnectedness of commerce and relationships, reaffirming that South Asia are central to India's foreign policy.

India's approach has also shifted towards realism, particularly in the context of strategic competition between the US and China. By engaging with its neighbours while allowing the US to exert pressure on China, India is strategically positioning itself to enhance its interests within the evolving Indo-Pacific framework.

BRINGING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY INTO PRACTICE

At the outset of his first term, Narendra Modi prioritized political and diplomatic engagement with neighbouring countries, highlighted by his invitation to South Asian leaders for his swearing-in ceremony on May 26, 2014. This gesture was not only his inaugural diplomatic act but also a clear indication of the significance he placed on neighbouring nations in India's foreign policy, marking the launch of the "Neighbourhood First Policy". Modi's commitment to this approach was further demonstrated by his frequent visits to various South Asian countries following his inauguration. Notably, in 2014, he became the first Indian prime minister in nearly two decades to visit Nepal, and in 2015, he made a historic bilateral state visit to Sri Lanka, the first in nearly 40 years (excluding Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's brief visit in 1987).

These diplomatic efforts underscored the importance of the "Neighborhood First" policy and reinforced India's leadership role in South Asia, while also aiming to reshape regional international relations. Bhutan, in particular, has a unique and special relationship with India, characterized by an absence of disputes. Given its strategic location on the Siliguri Corridor (often referred to as the Chicken's Neck), India has a vested interest in Bhutan's stability and security. As a testament to this relationship, Modi chose

Bhutan as his first destination in a series of visits after taking office. India has consistently supported Bhutan through various cooperation initiatives and preferential policies, reaffirming its commitment to a strong partnership.

The Modi government has taken numerous steps to strengthen and improve the chilly ties with Sri Lanka, one of India's key strategic partners, under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Modi's visits to Sri Lanka in 2015 and 2017 during his first term signaled a new turning point in bilateral relations and helped to bring India, Sri Lanka, and China into balance. After two decades without an Indian prime minister's visit, Indian Prime Minister Modi's two-day visit to Nepal on August 3–4, 2014, demonstrated India's efforts to reclaim its influence in the country given China's growing influence there.

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has improved dramatically in the last ten years, and it could serve as a model for India's South Asia policy. These neighbours are now more similar in terms of their development objectives and rates of growth. Both nations have expressed a desire to maintain this progress and use the advantages to improve the welfare of their citizens. By pursuing reciprocal policies that develop into a legitimate development partnership, India's neighbouring neighbours may be able to take advantage of similar opportunities for mutual growth. Trade, investment, and connectivity—all indicators of a successful economic partnership are becoming more and more prevalent in their interactions. During its first term from 2014 to 2019, the Modi government, working with his counterpart Sheikh Hasina, was able to use constructive diplomacy to address long-standing, urgent concerns in India-Bangladesh ties.

India-Pakistan relations have undergone a significant transformation since the Pulwama crisis. The terrorist attack and subsequent airstrike escalated tensions, bringing both nations to a critical juncture. For the past two decades, terrorism has been a central issue, posing a serious threat to regional stability. Efforts under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to address these concerns have seen limited success, with both India and Pakistan being key members.

In the aftermath of Pulwama, India implemented a major policy shift by revoking the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and re-designating it as a Union Territory, effective August 5, 2019. This move aimed to alter Pakistan's stance on Kashmir and reduce its rhetoric regarding the region. India has since asserted that the only disputed territory is Pakistan-administered Kashmir, strengthening its position on the global stage.

India's foreign policy goals focus on reclaiming its historical prominence and enhancing self-reliance through technological advancements. While smaller neighbouring countries do not pose a direct threat, India must remain vigilant as some align more closely with China, complicating regional dynamics. Economic integration through SAARC has stalled, allowing China to expand its influence in countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Pakistan continues to seek China's support on Kashmir, managing to bring the issue to the UN Security Council without a resolution being passed.

India's relations with Maldives have improved following the exit of the Abdul Gayoom administration, and the government has made notable outreach efforts to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, alongside deepening ties with Israel.

Historically, India-Pakistan relations have been marred by broken promises and ongoing border conflicts. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has adopted a firmer stance on bilateral dialogues, clearly stating that talks and terrorism cannot coexist. This was exemplified by India's decision to skip the SAARC summit in Islamabad in November 2018, sending a strong message that without addressing cross-border terrorism, Pakistan risks isolation both regionally and internationally.

In addition to fostering relationships with neighboring South Asian countries, India's government has implemented financial measures to enhance regional connectivity. To support Indian companies in securing strategic infrastructure projects in these countries, Delhi introduced the Concessional Finance Scheme (CFS) in 2015, which was extended in 2018. This initiative facilitates India's entry into neighbouring markets and strengthens economic and trade ties. Furthermore, India has established the Border Area Development Programme (BAPD) and the National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL), aimed at allocating funds for critical infrastructure development in border regions and promoting cross-border economic collaboration.

At the outset of his second term, the Modi administration accelerated efforts to enhance connectivity with South Asian neighbours and expanded its focus to inter-regional connections within the Indo-Pacific framework. The government emphasized deeper engagement with countries in the Indian Ocean and prioritized the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This initiative serves as a vital link between South and Southeast Asian economies, reflecting a shift in India's neighbouring policy toward strengthening cooperation and addressing regional security challenges, particularly in light of rising global terrorism.

Following his re-election in May 2019, Modi reinforced his neighbourhood first policy with strategies aimed at diminishing neighbouring countries' reliance on China while bolstering India's regional influence. By inviting BIMSTEC leaders to his inaugural events, he highlighted a renewed focus on maritime partnerships, driven by the growing Chinese presence in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure investments.

The Maldives and Sri Lanka, India's neighbours, play a crucial geopolitical role along key trade routes in the Indian Ocean. These regions are significant arenas for strategic competition between New Delhi and Beijing, especially within the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Maldives has openly endorsed China's "Maritime Silk Road" as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, aligning its economic and diplomatic focus more closely with China, thereby becoming an essential component of China's Indian Ocean ambitions. Similarly, Sri Lanka is deepening its ties with China's strategic framework.

In response to this shifting landscape, Indian Prime Minister Modi chose the Maldives and Sri Lanka as the first stops on his overseas trip after being re-elected. During the India-Maldives Joint Statement, both nations agreed to enhance maritime security coordination in the Indian Ocean through air patrols, surveillance, information sharing, and capacity building at sea. This trip also signifies India's commitment to strengthening relations with Sri Lanka, particularly following the terrorist attacks in April. Additionally, the trilateral agreement among Sri Lanka, India, and Japan to develop a deep-water port in Colombo aims to counterbalance the Chinese-controlled Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka. Overall, Modi's visit underscores India's strategic efforts to solidify its influence, extend military reach, and mitigate the growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region.

In contrast, Bhutan remains the only neighbour, alongside India, to have rejected China's Belt and Road Initiative. During Modi's visit to Bhutan in August 2019, he inaugurated the \$624 million Mangdechhu power plant, funded by New Delhi, with plans to purchase any surplus electricity generated. India is actively investing in infrastructure projects in Bhutan to prevent its participation in China's ambitious plans and to keep the country aligned with Indian interests.

The construction and inauguration of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj pipeline on September 10, 2019, marked a significant step in India's efforts to strengthen its influence in Nepal, especially in light of China's growing presence in the region. This pipeline is notable as the first cross-border oil pipeline in South Asia, symbolizing India's commitment to enhancing regional connectivity and cooperation.

Similarly, India's relationship with Bangladesh has seen positive developments. During Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in October 2019, both nations signed seven treaties and initiated three projects aimed at bolstering bilateral ties. India continues to support Bangladesh across various sectors, aiming to assist the country in improving its economic status and moving off the list of least developed countries.

In an effort to enhance regional connectivity, India has invested in infrastructure projects with its neighbours. This includes the construction and expansion of Integrated Testing Stations (ITPs) to facilitate trade with Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Notably, rail connections between India and Bangladesh increased from one to four between 2008 and 2020, with plans for additional routes in the future (India-Bangladesh, 2019). A new shipping agreement allows for direct exchange of goods between the two countries, streamlining trade.

India has also improved customs procedures for Nepalese goods and supported infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, such as upgrading the Jaffna International Airport, which re-established direct air connections with Southern India after decades. Furthermore, the establishment of an Indo-Pacific division by India's Ministry of External Affairs in 2019 highlights the country's strategic focus on enhancing regional connectivity.

Since India is the only country with interests in South Asia, the Modi administration abandoned the region's traditional local stance during its second term. In order to counteract the expanding influence in the region, India also adopted a new strategic approach that centred on coordinating and fostering collaboration with nations outside the region, including the US, Japan, and even Russia. A tripartite infrastructure funding group has been established by India, Japan, and the US to aid in the development of infrastructure in South Asian nations. In order to promote external expansion and regional connections, India and Japan quickly worked together to construct a new harbour in Colombo, Sri Lanka. As part of the South Asia Sub region Economic Cooperation (SASEC) and in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), India is carrying on one of the most important multimodal connectivity projects in Asia along the East Coast. Russia and India are collaborating to build nuclear power stations in Bangladesh. Given their comparable foreign policies Russia's presence in South Asia benefits India by fostering regional connectivity and fortifying their strategic partnership.

The two countries remain significantly divided on various international issues stemming from the conflicts between India and China. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India was particularly hard-hit, yet the Modi government has remained dedicated to its neighbourhood first policy, aiming to extend support to its neighbouring nations. From 2019 to 2020, India launched the “Aid to Nepal” program, which included over 150 development projects, contributing to 30% of Nepal's foreign direct investment. In 2020, India also allocated \$15 million to Sri Lanka to enhance bilateral relations through projects centered on promoting Buddhist values. By early 2021, India had invested \$3 billion in approximately 400 development projects in Afghanistan. Furthermore, India responded positively to Pakistan's request for Indian-made Covid-19 vaccines, bolstering its vaccine diplomacy efforts, which were well-received by the governments involved. However, by early 2021, India was also grappling with various challenges from neighbouring countries, including Myanmar, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. Despite these difficulties, India continues to strive for collaboration with its neighbours to mitigate potential crises.

CHALLENGES

Entering its second term, Prime Minister Modi's administration maintains the neighbourhood first policy as a cornerstone of India's foreign relations. This strategy emphasizes comprehensive cooperation with South Asian countries and envisions inter-regional collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. By enhancing connectivity through regional integration, India aims to strengthen ties along vital land and maritime routes connecting South Asia to East Asia and the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

To this end, the Modi government has shifted its focus from traditional South Asian cooperation frameworks to include BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) countries.

Overall, while the Neighbourhood First Policy has yielded positive outcomes, strengthening connections with South Asian neighbours, PM Modi's administration now confronts a range of external and internal challenges in this evolving international landscape.

China's increasing influence in South Asia, particularly through its aid initiatives and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), poses significant challenges to Prime Minister Modi's Neighbourhood First Policy. As China deepens its economic and political ties with countries in India's sphere of influence, India's reluctance to engage with the BRI may push these nations to lean more toward Beijing, further complicating India's regional ambitions.

To counter this trend, India must prioritize proactive diplomatic engagement and development initiatives with its neighbours, especially Pakistan, which remains reliant on China and the US for economic and military support. A stable and prosperous South Asia is contingent on India's ability to foster better relations and reduce regional tensions.

Modi's administration faces multiple hurdles in implementing the Neighbourhood First strategy and in establishing inter-regional connectivity. To enhance its competitive edge against China, India should focus on targeted investments in key areas, particularly in infrastructure connectivity. By bolstering capacity-building initiatives and investing in cross-border infrastructure such as ports, roads, railways, and airports—India can create long-term interdependence and cooperation with its neighbours.

However, the success of India's connectivity strategy hinges on economic openness and the removal of trade barriers that currently hinder cooperation. A more comprehensive approach that goes beyond security concerns is necessary to foster robust regional integration. India should engage with its neighbours in ways that respect their political, economic, and cultural sensitivities, avoiding an overemphasis on cultural unity, which may not resonate with all countries in the region.

Furthermore, it's crucial for India to maintain stability in its relationships with neighbouring countries. Small-scale conflicts could undermine the Neighbourhood First policy and provide opportunities for China and Pakistan to strengthen their influence. In light of ongoing tensions with these countries, India risks losing its opportunity to assert itself as a key regional player.

In inference, while the aspirations of Modi's administration to enhance regional connectivity and assert India's role in South Asia are commendable, they must be matched by practical strategies that address the nuanced dynamics of the region and mitigate the growing influence of China.

CONCLUSION

India is aggressively pursuing a neighbourhood first policy under Prime Minister Modi's direction in an effort to promote deeper and more meaningful interactions with its neighbours. The goal of this initiative is to restore India's reputation, influence, and status in the area. But achieving these goals and preserving India's ties with its neighbours will require overcoming obstacles brought on by both internal and external forces.

To foster confidence and improve relations with its neighbours, India should use its soft power, look into other regional agreements, and pursue new economic development opportunities. The success of the Neighbourhood First Policy will depend on giving priority to bilateral relations and promoting their growth through diplomatic measures, such as high-level visits aimed at fostering trust.

Additionally, developing shared interests among the nations in the region should be a key component of regional connectivity projects like infrastructure cooperation and fostering economic ties. This strategy will support the region's general growth and prosperity. By prioritising bilateral relations, promoting diplomatic activity, and highlighting regional connections, especially in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific area, Prime Minister Modi's administration can create a more robust and mutually beneficial neighbourly policy that benefits the entire region.

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