



The Neighbourhood Strategy in the 21st Century: India's Interests in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Eight nations make up the South Asian region: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan. Even though the South Asian nation-states shared a history, civilization, race, religion, language, and culture, they were unable to forge a shared identity. The importance of this region in global politics can be attributed to its geographic location, the rivalry between India and Pakistan, geographical segregation, Chinese involvement, and the emergence of radical groups. India has to continue its strategic collaboration with the South Asian nations since it is a developing economic force and a potential regional superpower. India's foreign policy after independence was significantly shaped by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. He chose the non-aligned policy as the pillar of Indian foreign policy in view of the global environment at the time. He focused on being non-aligned and disregarded the issue of forging deeper ties with India's neighbors, notably those in South Asia. The later efforts made by Indira Gandhi, Narasimha Rao, I.K. Gujral, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Manmohan Singh to deepen India's ties with South Asia may be seen. India's foreign policy has developed greatly since Prime Minister Modi assumed power in 2014 with a sizable mandate, and it has continued to do so since he was re-elected as Prime Minister in 2019 with an even greater mandate.

KEYWORDS : India, South Asia, foreign policy, Neighbourhood, 21st century

INTRODUCTION

Why does India have such a difficult relationship with its neighbours? The short answer is that south Asia suffers from the dreadful repercussions of cultural identity politics that result from a collective unwillingness to realize that the region has a distinct personality and intertwined history that are a result of its clear geographic identity. It is basically blocked off from the rest of the world by the Himalayas to the north, the Indian Ocean to the south, dense forest to the east, and dry areas to the west; as a result, its residents have only occasionally interacted with people from other parts of the world in the past. The lack of any significant internal geographic barriers, aside from the central Indian forest and mountains (which account for the somewhat different history north and south of the Vindhyas), made the geographic, cultural, economic, and ecological interdependence of all areas of this vast expanse of land inevitable. These factors contributed to the development of a distinctive civilization and culture in the south Asian subcontinent, which comprises the majority of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Due to their remoteness and protection from the cultural influences of the mainland during the pre-modern era by the sea and the mountains, the periphery of the subcontinent (Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, Baluchistan, the northwest frontier and tribal regions of Pakistan, and the northeast region of India) had a more autonomous development and consequently more distinctive cultures. But even these areas had important interactions with the heartland and were profoundly affected by it.

OBJECTIVE

studying India's interests in South Asia as part of its Neighbourhood strategy for the twenty-first century. This study's primary goal is to determine how India is implementing policies that are South Asia-focused and what actions are being taken to keep them that way.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using the document review methodology in accordance with the qualitative research strategy. It was done using secondary data from sources like books, research journals, newspaper articles, and various websites. Qualitative analysis was done on the collected data. In this study, the researchers are attempting to understand how India is implementing policies that are focused on South Asia and what efforts are being made to uphold them. Researchers thoroughly investigate the contents of such documents in relation to the Neighbourhood Strategy in the 21st Century: India's Interests in South Asia.

India's Interests in South Asia in the 21st Century:

The relevance of several doctrines and regional organizations in determining the relationship between India and South Asian nation-states has been observed since the 1950s to 21st century.

Indira doctrine

Indira doctrine is focused on minimising foreign countries' influence in south Asia, largely through the growth of India's military forces as a deterrence and an interventionist foreign-policy weapon, to stop tacit or outright anti-Indian intent.



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The Indira doctrine included Sikkim, Bangladesh's liberation, and other issues.

Gujral Doctrine-

Inder Kumar Gujral, the foreign minister under the Deve Gowda administration, established the Gujral doctrine as India's foreign policy in December 1996. Five guiding principles are part of the Gujral Doctrine, which governs relations with India's immediate allies. India does not demand anything in return from its neighbors, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka but instead provides what it can in a spirit of confidence and good faith.

India and SAARC- Following several years of informal and semi-formal diplomacy led by Bangladesh, the "south Asian association for regional cooperation" (SAARC) was officially established at the first-ever summit of the seven south Asian nations -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka -- in Dhaka in December 1985. Afghanistan eventually joined the SAARC in 2007. When all of the SAARC leaders attended the swearing-in event in 2014, the diplomatic connections were highlighted, which provided a clearer image of Modi's approach to the region. But thereafter, the Modi government skipped SAARC summit that was held in Islamabad.

India and BIMSTEC- An international group of seven countries from south and southeast Asia formed the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997 as a result of the Bangkok Declaration.

India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal make up this region.

As various regional initiatives under SAARC stalled, primarily as a result of Pakistan's lack of cooperation, India has been working to make BIMSTEC a vibrant forum. In 2019, heads of BIMSTEC countries attended the second oath-taking ceremony, where they were able to observe Modi's foreign policy approach towards the wider neighbourhood. Under Modi's direction, strategies for the neighbourhood and the expanded community were developed in response to China's intervention in the area.

BBIN- BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, INDIA, and NEPAL Initiative

The South Asian Growth Quadrangle was established in 1996 by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal to promote trade, investment, transportation, and tourism. The BBIN's transport ministers signed the historic vehicle accord in 2015.

Neighbourhood First Policy- Since the BIMSTEC bloc benefits from the power of integrating South and South-East Asia, it is a natural choice to advance important foreign policy initiatives like 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East.'

Objectives: committed to fostering cordial and good relationships with all of its Neighbors. Dedicated to working with Pakistan to reach a bilateral and amicable agreement to resolve any outstanding concerns in line with the Simla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration. focuses on creating human-centered, mutually beneficial regional frameworks for development and stability that are free from terrorism, hatred, and violence. approach to SAARC members that is cooperative, non-reciprocal, and goal-oriented. provide more security, better infrastructure, and deeper development cooperation in numerous industries. increasing India's soft power, as well as the shared civilization and culture, in the area establishing relationships between people. Fighting back against Chinese meddling in the South Asian region.

In the 21st century how India is dealing with the nation-states of south Asia is concisely discussed:-

India-Nepal

The Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which was signed in 1950, marked the beginning of the contemporary relationship between India and Nepal, despite the fact that the two nations' links date back to very ancient times. When King Gyanendra assumed power at the start of the twenty-first century, relations between Nepal and India deteriorated; however, after the introduction of democracy in Nepal in 2008, those relations started to improve.

Both nations enjoy close, cordial ties that are characterised by shared history, culture, open borders, and enduring human connections. When Sher Bahadur Deuba took office in July 2021, the friendly ties between India and China were reinforced from the previous administration, which was led by PM K P Sharma Oli and had a tendency to favor China. As part of his 'Neighbourhood First Policy,' Prime Minister Modi has travelled to Nepal four times since taking office.'

The Government of India (GoI) provides Nepal with substantial financial and technical assistance to carry out large-scale development projects in critical fields like agriculture, health, irrigation, and rural and livelihood development. In order to complete 13 road packages and hand them over to the government of Nepal, the government of India contributed RS 400 cores. During the COVID outbreak, the GoI supplied 23 tonnes of medicines and medical equipment, in addition to more than 9.5 million vaccines to Nepal.

India-Bhutan

Bhutan first recognized India's independence in 1947 and since then India has maintained close ties with Bhutan. A bilateral treaty of peace and friendship was signed between Bhutan and India on 4th August 1947. In 2007, the 1949 India-Bhutan Friendship was slightly revised, allowing Bhutan full freedom to determine its foreign policy. Narendra Modi first officially visit to Bhutan after becoming Prime Minister in 2014.

Four significant bilateral projects were launched, including the 720 MW Mangdechhu hydroelectric project, the extending of linkage between the national knowledge networks of India and Bhutan, the ISRO ground earth station for use with South Asian satellites, and the RuPay card. Both countries share exemplary and one-of-a-kind bilateral relations. Bhutan's top trading partner is India. The "Neighbourhood First Policy" of the Indian government has opened up new business opportunities, and 5.5 lakh doses of the made-in-India Covishield vaccine were also given to Bhutan. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, was awarded the highest civilian medal, the 'Ngaday Pel gi Khorlo,' on Bhutan's National Day. The prime minister of Bhutan tweeted via a company account

India-Bangladesh

Independent Bangladesh was born on December 16, 1971. In the cause of independence, the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, helped the 'Mukti Bahini'. In 2001, a coalition government led by Bangladesh National Party came to power, after this coalition government the relation between these two countries started to degrade. When the Awami League came to power in 2004 under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, India-Bangladesh relations started to improve again.

India was crucial to East Pakistan's freedom and entrance into Bangladesh. Since 2014, there has been a friendly relationship between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. As part of this relationship, Modi broke security rules to personally greet Sheikh Hasina as she arrived in Delhi for a state visit. The Bangladeshi people who were trapped in the war-torn Ukraine were recently evacuated by India. Exports have tripled and trade between India and Bangladesh has steadily grown over the past ten years. India imported \$1.26 billion and exported \$8.2 billion to Bangladesh in the 2019–2020 Fiscal Year.

In addition to supplying India with a 3-line credit worth \$8 billion over the past eight years for infrastructure, shipping, and port development, Bangladesh is currently purchasing 1160 MW of power from them. Since 2019, 1800 civil servants from Bangladesh have received training from the GoI at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG) in Mussoorie. At a number of top training facilities in India, police are also trained. At the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal, 1500 judicial officials from Bangladesh receive training. These are some of the areas where India is assisting Bangladesh in constructing its nation.

India-Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, an island nation in South Asia located in the Indian Ocean, is one of India's closest neighbors. In December 1994, India and Sri Lanka signed the "India Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement", which greatly increased financial transactions between the two countries

The two nations' relationship dates back more than 2500 years, and they have a rich history of intellectual, cultural, religious, and linguistic exchange. Sri Lanka and China had very strong ties, which was unfortunate for India. Despite China's lack of intervention, Sri Lanka is currently going through the worst economic catastrophe. This is due to the debt trap that China has placed it in, as well as its bankrupt economy and lack of food, fuel, and basic necessities. The Indian government provided assistance of about \$2.5 billion in the form of credit facilities for food and petrol.

India-Maldives

In the "Neighbourhood First Policy" and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) visions of the Indian government, the Maldives retain a special place. Following President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's inauguration on November 17, 2018, diplomatic relations were resumed with fresh vigour following a brief break from 2011 to 2018. Prime Minister Modi was the only head of state to attend the president's inaugural ceremony. Modi's first trip abroad after being elected to a second term was to the Maldives.

India offered a financial support package worth \$1.4 billion in two equal installments during the first state visit of the president of the Maldives to India in December 2018. India has made significant investments in the Maldives over a number of years, including military assistance and "capacity building" initiatives. The previous administration, led by Abdulla Yameen, had a tilt towards China and its debt trap, which had upset India. However, the regime change in the Maldives, which is anti-China, made India a natural friend of the region.

India-Pakistan

India and Pakistan are two neighboring countries in the Asian continent but since independence in 1947, Pakistan has become India's farthest neighbor geographically and even in terms of relations between 2001 and 2005. From 2004 to 2005, the trade volume between the two countries was only 521 million US dollars, in just three years i.e. from 2007 to 2008, the volume stood at 2 billion US dollars. Even though the Mumbai terrorist attack in November 2008 dealt a major blow to the relationship between the two countries, but the trade transactions continued as before.

India wants cordial neighbourly relations with Pakistan in accordance with its "Neighbourhood First Policy." Even though Pakistan and India declared their independence from the British Raj at the same time, their respective systems of government are significantly dissimilar. In the eight years since PM Modi took office, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has had three different prime ministers. When Nawaz Sharif was the prime minister of Pakistan in 2014, when Modi assumed office, India established diplomatic ties that persisted till the reign of terror began. Imran Khan became prime minister when the Nawaz Sharif-led government was overthrown and negotiations with other countries began. However, the government of Pakistan continued to support cross-border terrorism against India.

The hostile relationship between India and Pakistan was exacerbated by significant terror strikes like Uri in 2016 and Pulwama in 2019. India has made the decision to take the "talks and terror can't go together" stance with Pakistan at the UN. The new Prime Minister Shehbaz wants to improve relations with other governments, but only time will tell if he is successful. However, the Kartapur corridor has continued to advance, making it easier for Indian pilgrims to get to Gurudwara Kartapur Sahib all year round. India does not benefit from Pakistan's closeness to China.

India-Afghanistan

Since the evacuation of Indian residents from Afghanistan under "Operation Devi Shakti," even after the Taliban seized power, India and Afghanistan have maintained a diplomatic relationship. When all nations refused to maintain diplomatic ties with the new government in Afghanistan, India provided 2 tonnes of medicine out of humanitarian considerations. With the use of vaccine diplomacy, India supplied approximately five lakh doses of COVAXIN from its citizens to Afghans. After that, India sent roughly 2500 metric tonnes of wheat in February to Afghanistan during a severe food shortage. Even though PM Modi asserted that "the Afghan government [the Taliban] is not inclusive," the Indian government established Afghanistan's parliament in 2007 as a sign of friendship and cooperation to help rebuild the war-torn country, just before the regime change, when Indo-Afghan relations were at an all-time high. India and Afghanistan improved their ties through cricket by working together to build the national squad. The value of bilateral commerce for the fiscal year 2016–2017 was projected at USD 800 million. A new era in Indo-Afghan commercial connections had begun with the opening of the Wagah-Attari corridor, but the Taliban regime has clouded things on the other side.

Conclusion

As former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee famously said, "you can change friends but not neighbours," the South Asian area is crucial to India strategically. In order to stabilise the region, India must promote harmonious relations with its close neighbours. Political turmoil in Afghanistan, economic hardship in Sri Lanka, racial unrest in Myanmar, the rise of international terrorism, and China and Pakistan's cooperation could all substantially hinder Modi's foreign policy towards the South Asian region.

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