

Acceptance in the Contemporary World Order: India's Neighbourhood First Policy

Debasish Roy

MA in Political Science

Former Student, Rabindra Bharati University

Emerald Bower Campus, 56A, B.T. Rd, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Email: roydebasishdeopul@gmail.com

Abstract: India's foreign policy has evolved in various ways in the post-independence era. The main architect of independent India's foreign policy was Jawaharlal Nehru. He was essentially an idealistic leader. Therefore, he envisioned a peaceful world and the main principles adopted in India's foreign policy during his time are equally relevant even after 75 years of independence. There is no doubt that India has wanted to maintain good relations with its neighbouring countries from the very beginning. From Nehru to Modi; Despite various strategic changes in India's foreign policy during this long journey of India's foreign policy, India's foreign policy towards neighbouring countries has remained almost unchanged. After the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, came to power, the government's foreign policy priority list has been prepared with the principle of 'neighbours first'. The main objective of adopting this policy was to establish good relations with the neighbouring countries of the country and to give priority to the neighbouring countries first. Because, one of the many challenges of the foreign policy of the state in India is to establish good relations with neighbouring countries. We know about Pakistan's hostility towards India, its fierce rivalry with China; the ups and downs in relations with Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives and its friendship with Bhutan. Moreover, the countries Afghanistan and Myanmar, located on both ends of the Indian subcontinent, have largely controlled the mainstream of India's politics, social structure and economy. In this situation, the Indian state has wanted to establish good relations with its neighbouring countries and present itself to the world as a strong and modern state along with the neighbouring countries. Therefore, it goes without saying that this policy of India, 'Neighbours First', is an extremely important and acceptable policy in the contemporary world order. Based on this policy, the Indian state is trying to establish good relations with its neighbouring countries by providing them with financial, military and diplomatic assistance.

Keywords: Neighbourhood First Policy, South Asia, Foreign Policy, Connectivity, Geopolitics.

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 position has led New Delhi to develop specific relationships with its neighbours. Important turning points in India's post-Cold War relations include the 1998 nuclear tests, the Kargil War in 1999, and the US-led global war on terror, which significantly affected South Asia.

During the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the 'Neighbours First' policy was adopted which was largely influenced by the Gujarat De-

velopment Model and Gujral Theory. As a result, it was very important for the administrative department of the Modi government to develop good relations with the neighboring countries. Through this, India also competed with the Chinese state and in this case, India's main goal was to emerge as a strong state by highlighting its power in the South Asian region economically and politically.

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 success in foreign policy, five years later, the initial enthusiasm surrounding Modi's neighbourhood policy has waned, leading to a renewed focus on BIMESTEC. This article examines India's bilateral relations with its neighbours and highlights new challenges.

Saroj Kumar 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. This article explores how the Neighborhood 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 of its implementation during their respective tenures.

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. 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.

Methodology: To present data descriptions and explore patterns within particular spatial and temporal contexts, this paper uses a variety of research 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 era, 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.

To effectively navigate a multipolar world, Modi's administration seeks to align domestic priorities with foreign policy objectives. Modi circulated this commitment during the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, emphasizing that "the destiny of a country is linked to its

neighbourhood and prioritizing friendship and cooperation with neighbouring states.”

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 do not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust.”

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.”

After taking oath as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has visited various neighbouring countries in South Asia to give more importance to the neighbouring countries. For this, he first went to Nepal in 2014, where no Indian Prime Minister has visited in the last two decades. Then in 2015, he went to Sri Lanka, where Rajiv Gandhi was the only Indian Prime Minister to visit before. These diplomatic efforts underscored the importance of the “Neighbourhood First Policy” and reinforced India's leadership role in South Asia, while also aiming to reshape regional international relations.

The Modi government has taken numerous steps to strengthen and improve ties with Sri Lanka, one of India's key strategic partners, under former president Mahinda Rajapaksa. Modi visits to Sri Lanka in 2015 and 2017. 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 here.

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 Asian 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. 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 Co-operation (SAARC) to address these concerns have been 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. 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.

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.

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 neighbour-

hood 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.

Conclusion: 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.

Though 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.

India's Neighbourhood First Policy seeks to strengthen political, economic, and cultural ties with its neighbouring countries through cooperation, connectivity, and shared prosperity. In the contemporary multipolar world order, the policy holds significant relevance and acceptance potential if implemented with sensitivity and inclusiveness. Global politics today is marked by growing competition among major powers, especially between India and China in South Asia. Many neighbouring countries prefer balanced relations, avoiding dominance by any single power. Therefore, In-

dia's approach must focus on mutual respect, non-interference, and equitable benefits. Recent developments—such as cooperation with Bangladesh and Bhutan on energy and digital connectivity—show that India's engagement can be welcomed when it brings tangible benefits. Thus, India's Neighbourhood First Policy can be accepted in the contemporary world order if it adapts to multipolar realities and prioritizes mutual trust, cooperation, and development.

References

- Aryal, S. K., & Nair, A. 2021. SAARC's dysfunctionality and China's foot at South Asia's Door. South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF).
- Behuria, A. K., Pattanaik, S. S., & Gupta, A. 2012. Does India have a neighbourhood policy? *Strategic Analysis*, 36(2), 229-246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2012.646440>.
- Chattopadhyay, P. 2011. The Politics of India's Neighbourhood Policy in South Asia. *South Asian Survey*, 18(1): 93–108.
- Vinay Kaura and Meena Rani.2020. India's Neighbourhood Policy During 2014– 2019: Political Context and Policy Outcomes, *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Volume 66 Issue 1:1-9.
- Saroj Kumar Aryal and Simant Shankar Bharti.2023. Evolution of 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' Since Independence. *Society*,60:224–232.
- Vaishali Jain and Somvir Gill .2024. Evaluating India's neighbourhood first policy: Decoding the China factor in south Asia. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 6(1): 27-33.
- Gayen,Subir. Bharot O Pratibeshi Rashtra: Dipakkhik Somproker Rosayon, Avenel Press.