



INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBORS

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ABSTRACT

Since gaining independence, India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia has been a pillar of its external relations, demonstrating its dedication to regional cooperation, peace, and security. India's strategy has changed to reflect shifting geopolitical and economic realities, guided by values like peaceful coexistence, respect for one another, and strategic autonomy. Through diplomatic communication, development alliances, security cooperation, and regional connectivity, the Neighborhood First Policy has further improved India's ties with its neighbors. With a focus on regional security, collaboration, and political stability, this essay explores the development and key aspects of India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia. It concludes that while promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in South Asia, India's regional initiatives and constructive diplomacy have strengthened its position as a responsible regional force.



KEY WORDS: India, Foreign Policy, South Asia, Neighborhood First Policy, Regional Security, Political Stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Because of India's strategic location, democratic political system, expanding economic power, and growing worldwide impact, the country's foreign policy is vital to the study of political science and international relations. India has maintained a foreign policy founded on the ideas of peaceful coexistence, sovereign equality, non-alignment, mutual respect, and international collaboration since attaining independence in 1947. Over the years, India's foreign policy has broadened internationally, but its top strategic objective has remained South Asia. South Asia, which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, is intimately associated with India due to common security concerns, economic interdependence, geography, history, and culture. As a result, one of the key goals of India's foreign policy is to preserve amicable and cooperative relations with its neighbors.

From the standpoint of political science, India's neighborhood policy illustrates how national interests, regional cooperation, security concerns, and diplomacy interact. India's economic growth, regional leadership, and national security all depend on South Asia's peace and prosperity. As a result, India has continuously worked to improve political communication, economic integration, connectivity, cultural exchanges, and security cooperation with its neighbors. From the Panchsheel principles and the Gujral Doctrine to more recent initiatives like the "Neighborhood First Policy" and the "Act East Policy,"

which priorities mutual trust, development partnerships, and people-to-people engagement, India's regional policy has evolved.

Strengthening bilateral and regional ties with South Asian nations is India's top objective under its "Neighborhood First Policy," which was implemented in 2014. The policy seeks to advance regional peace, stability, connectivity, trade, infrastructure development, energy cooperation, disaster management, digital collaborations, and capacity building. To strengthen its ties with its neighbors, India has undertaken a number of efforts, such as development assistance, humanitarian aid, cross-border infrastructure projects, educational collaboration, and health diplomacy. Important platforms for regional collaboration have also been offered by organizations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic collaboration (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

India's foreign policy toward South Asia still heavily emphasizes security. Terrorism, cross-border extremism, illegal immigration, maritime security threats, cyber security, climate change, water-sharing disputes, and organized crime are just a few of the transnational issues that the region must deal with. To address these shared issues, India has aggressively collaborated with its neighbors in the areas of intelligence sharing, defence cooperation, maritime security, disaster relief, and border control. In response to the expanding influence of foreign powers, especially China, in the South Asian region, India simultaneously aims to preserve strategic stability. Through trade liberalization, investment, connectivity corridors, energy cooperation, and digital infrastructure, India has economically fostered regional integration. In order to support the development of infrastructure, education, healthcare, renewable energy, and human resources, India has offered loan lines, development assistance, and technical cooperation to a number of its neighbors. These programs have improved South Asia's economic interdependence while fortifying India's position as a regional development partner.

Notwithstanding these successes, India's relations with its neighbors in South Asia still confront a number of difficulties, such as border conflicts, political unpredictability, shifting domestic politics, a lack of trust, refugee problems, disputes over water sharing, and strategic rivalry with foreign countries. While India's interactions with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have seen both periods of cooperation and sporadic diplomatic difficulties, bilateral relations with Pakistan are still impacted by cross-border terrorism and unresolved political issues. India must implement a balanced foreign policy that incorporates regional collaboration, mutual respect, and strategic objectives in light of these developments.

According to theories of international relations, India's foreign policy embodies constructivism, liberalism, and realism. India's emphasis on national security, strategic autonomy, and regional influence is explained by realism; its dedication to multilateral institutions, economic cooperation, and regional integration is highlighted by liberalism; and the influence of shared cultural values, historical ties, and diplomatic norms on regional relations is emphasised by constructivism. As a result, India's foreign policy toward its neighbours in South Asia is a dynamic blend of regional leadership, diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and strategic objectives. India's positive interactions with its neighbours will be crucial to maintaining regional peace, stability, prosperity, and inclusive development as South Asia continues to face new geopolitical and socioeconomic challenges.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. J. N. Dixit (2003) studied how India's foreign policy toward South Asia changed following independence. He maintained that the goals of preserving regional stability, protecting national security, and fostering amicable ties with neighboring nations have served as the foundation for India's regional diplomacy. The report emphasizes India's attempts to handle regional political issues while striking a balance between strategic goals and bilateral cooperation.

2. C. Raja Mohan (2003) examined how India's foreign policy changed after the end of the Cold War. In response to shifting geopolitical conditions, he contended, India's neighborhood policy increasingly prioritized regional connectivity, economic integration, and strategic alliances. India's expanding regional and international ambitions are highlighted in the paper.

3. David M. Malone (2011) looked at India's foreign policy from both a historical and modern standpoint. He emphasized how India interacts with its neighbors in South Asia through regional organizations, diplomacy, development aid, and security cooperation. According to the study's findings, India's foreign policy strikes a balance between its obligations to the region and its own interests.

4. Under the Neighborhood First Policy, S. D. Muni (2016) examined the advantages and disadvantages of India's connections with its neighbors. He talked about topics like terrorism, connectivity, border management, regional security, and China's expanding influence in South Asia. According to the report, maintaining regional stability requires ongoing political engagement and economic collaboration.

5. With a focus on South Asia, Harsh V. Pant (2019) investigated India's evolving foreign policy priorities in the twenty-first century. He maintained that India's regional strategy increasingly incorporates multilateral collaboration, economic diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and strategic security. The study came to the conclusion that India's rise to prominence as a major regional and international force depends on its ability to engage in successful neighborhood diplomacy.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the development and key aspects of India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia, with a focus on regional security and collaboration.
2. To examine how India's Neighborhood First Policy advances political stability and regional peace in South Asia.

4. INTERPRETATION OF THE OBJECTIVES

4.1 Aspects of India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia, with a focus on regional security and collaboration

1. Development of India's Foreign Policy toward South Asia: Since gaining independence in 1947, India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia has changed in response to shifting regional and international political circumstances. At first, non-alignment, peaceful cohabitation, anti-colonialism, and the Panchsheel principles served as the foundation for India's strategy. India moved toward more regional involvement in the post-Cold War era by placing a strong emphasis on multilateral cooperation, strategic alliances, and economic liberalization. The Neighborhood First Policy, which reflects India's dedication to bolstering bilateral ties, advancing regional stability, and encouraging mutual growth, has emerged as the cornerstone of the country's regional diplomacy in recent years.

2. Strategic Stability and Regional Security: India's foreign policy in South Asia has always placed a strong emphasis on regional security. Cross-border terrorism, border disputes, maritime security, cyber threats, illegal migration, and transnational organized crime are just a few of the classic and non-traditional security issues that India has attempted to solve. India has attempted to uphold strategic stability and guarantee peace in the area through defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, joint military drills, and coordinated border management with neighboring nations. India's goal of establishing a safe neighborhood that supports growth and regional collaboration is reflected in these initiatives.

3. Promotion of Multilateralism and Regional Cooperation: Through multilateral organizations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India has continuously promoted regional cooperation. Trade, connectivity, energy security, disaster management, climate change, education, public health, and technology are just a few of the sectors where it has promoted cooperation. India has worked to promote deeper political and economic integration among South Asian nations and strengthen collective responses to shared challenges by promoting regional discourse and institutional collaboration.

4. Development Partnership and Economic Cooperation: India's focus on development partnerships with its neighbors has been a significant aspect of its foreign policy. Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and other nations have received financial support, credit lines, infrastructure

development projects, humanitarian help, educational scholarships, and capacity-building initiatives from India. These programs have boosted regional connectivity, increased economic interdependence, and bolstered India's position as a responsible development partner dedicated to shared prosperity and inclusive progress in South Asia.

5. Current Challenges and Future Prospects: Despite significant advancements, political instability, border disputes, water-sharing issues, terrorism, refugee movements, and growing geopolitical competition particularly with China's growing influence in the region—remain obstacles to India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia. From the standpoint of political science, India's future foreign policy will necessitate a well-rounded strategy that incorporates people-to-people interaction, economic cooperation, successful diplomacy, and strategic autonomy. For South Asia to achieve long-term peace, stability, and sustainable development, fostering inclusive regional government, upholding state sovereignty, and fostering mutual trust will continue to be crucial.

4.2 India's Neighborhood First Policy advances political stability and regional peace in South Asia.

1. Building Political Trust and Bilateral Relations: India's Neighborhood First Policy, which was introduced in 2014, centers its foreign policy on South Asian nations. With neighboring nations including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, the policy aims to improve bilateral ties through frequent diplomatic engagement, high-level visits, and political discourse. India has attempted to lessen political misconceptions and create enduring alliances that support regional peace and stability by encouraging mutual trust, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful cohabitation.

2. Strengthening Regional Security Cooperation: One of the main goals of the Neighborhood First Policy is to strengthen regional security by working together to combat shared dangers. In areas including counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, border control, maritime security, cyber security, and disaster response, India has increased its collaboration with its neighbors. By addressing transnational security issues and bolstering regional resilience, these programs contribute to the establishment of a secure security environment that is necessary for South Asia's political stability and sustainable development.

3. Encouraging Development Partnerships and Humanitarian Aid: India has strengthened development cooperation through the Neighborhood First Policy by giving neighboring nations financial help, infrastructure support, capacity-building initiatives, and humanitarian aid. India's position as a responsible regional partner has been strengthened by initiatives in areas including healthcare, education, digital connection, energy, and disaster assistance. By tackling socioeconomic issues that frequently affect political stability and regional collaboration, these development-oriented initiatives promote peace.

4. Promoting Regional Cooperation through Multilateral Platforms: Through groups like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India has actively promoted regional cooperation. India promotes communication and cooperation in the areas of public health, disaster management, trade, connectivity, and climate change through these forums. Such multilateral cooperation fosters trust between neighboring nations and offers institutional frameworks for amicably resolving shared regional problems.

5. Handling Geopolitical Issues and Maintaining Regional Stability: By addressing new geopolitical issues in South Asia, India's Neighborhood First Policy also aims to preserve political stability. The policy addresses challenges like border disputes, political instability, and competition between external powers while emphasizing strategic engagement, democratic ideals, respect for state sovereignty, and peaceful conflict resolution. India hopes to maintain regional peace, build strategic alliances, and advance an inclusive and stable political order in South Asia by taking a cooperative and balanced diplomatic stance.

5. CONCLUSION

Under the Neighborhood First Policy, India's foreign policy toward its neighbors in South Asia has changed from being based on the ideas of non-alignment and peaceful cohabitation to being more proactive and engagement-oriented. India has improved bilateral and regional ties while promoting peace, stability, and confidence-building in South Asia by placing a strong emphasis on diplomacy, regional security, development cooperation, and mutual respect. Its dedication to creating a safe and cooperative neighborhood is demonstrated by its active participation in regional forums and development projects.

Notwithstanding these successes, regional connections are nevertheless impacted by issues including border conflicts, cross-border terrorism, political unrest, and geopolitical rivalry. Thus, discussion, strategic cooperation, economic partnership, and respect for the sovereignty of neighboring countries should remain top priorities in India's future foreign policy. India can strengthen its position as a responsible regional leader and support long-term peace, political stability, and sustainable development in South Asia by taking a fair and inclusive stance.

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