

India's Relations With Its Neighbours Post-2014

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INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBOURS POST-2014

An objective analysis post-2014, suggests that India's foreign policy has been proactive and pragmatic, especially in its neighbourhood. Many new initiatives have resulted in positive outcomes, relations with several countries have improved and fruitful engagements accelerated. In 2014, leaders of SAARC member states were invited to the swearing in ceremony of the Narendra Modi government. Realising the need for stability on the subcontinent, Modi pitched for a policy aimed at strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. Accordingly, he focused on the Neighbourhood First and Look East policies with the latter being upgraded to the Act East policy. To enhance neighbourhood diplomacy, the leaders of BIMSTEC states were invited to Modi's second oath taking ceremony. India now has an opportunity to further its influence in the region. A focused approach at both the bilateral and multilateral levels could integrate South Asia culturally and in an economic sense.

ABHIJEET

INTRODUCTION

Moving away from India's foreign policy set immediately after independence, the Narendra Modi government after coming to power in 2014 revamped it for contemporary requirements. Under the administration, a new era of India's foreign policy has started, which is not elitist but pragmatic in approach. (Mukesh K Mishra and Abhijeet Pandey,

"New Era in India's Foreign Policy", *The Pioneer*, 26 December 2017, online at <https://www.dailypioneer.com>)

In 2014, leaders of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states were invited to the swearing in ceremony of the Modi government. This was a clear indication of the importance India gives its neighbours. Realising the need for stability on the subcontinent, Modi pitched for a policy aimed at strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. The prime minister focused on the Neighbourhood First and Look East policies with the latter being upgraded by the idea of Act East, an extension of the earlier policy.

An objective analysis of the government's first term in office suggests that India's foreign policy has been proactive and pragmatic. Many new initiatives have resulted in positive outcomes, relations with several countries have improved and fruitful engagements accelerated. One of the major achievements has been the strategy of involving both tangible and intangible aspects of Indian culture ranging from the philosophy of Buddha and *yoga* to engaging with the Indian Diaspora across the globe as tools of engagement in foreign policy. Another significant shift has been the development of country specific policies, marking a departure from the earlier "one size fits all" approach. India now formulates customised policies for bilateral and multilateral engagements. Positive outcomes of this strategy include the

adoption of an international day of *yoga*, when millions of individuals across the globe celebrate this old intangible Indian heritage. This highlights the character of the Modi government's foreign policy of the twenty-first century.

This paper provides an understanding of India's relations with its South Asian neighbours—Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is divided into three parts. The first details the background of India's bilateral engagement with its neighbourhood under

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the Modi government. The second part looks into the role of BIMSTEC in strengthening India's relations with member states. Finally, the paper presents the opportunities and challenges before India in improving relations with its neighbours.

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The principle of diplomacy is convenient in dealing with distant countries. However, in the case of neighbouring states, a pragmatic approach that safeguards and promotes national interests becomes the underlying feature of policy. Here, focusing on the ultimate objective is better than focusing just on principles. Accordingly, there are many new aspects to India's foreign policy of the last six plus years. A major change has been the reenergising of foreign policy through the introduction of greater pragmatism as against mostly ideological leanings. Since day one, foreign relations have remained a high priority for the government. Invitation to SAARC members, who are also India's neighbours, to the newly elected government's swearing in ceremony in 2014 clearly showed the intent of strengthening India's relations with them. This approach continued with numerous successful high-level visits, with even the prime minister visiting these countries and meeting the heads of states multiple times. In the first two years after assuming office, Modi visited almost all neighbours, boosting bilateral relations. In his first address to the nation on the occasion of the country's independence day Modi said, "India's foreign policy has many facets ... but I want to focus on our relations with our neighbours in my speech". (*India, Modi and the Neighbourhood*, Gateway House, 25 August 2014, online at <https://www.gatewayhouse.in>)

India and Pakistan

For long, India and Pakistan have had tense relations and Modi's first term was no different. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was invited and attended the oath taking ceremony of 2014. In 2015, Modi visited Nawaz Sharif's hometown but the efforts soon met a setback when the Indian air force base at Pathankot was attacked by terrorists entering from Pakistan in January 2016. Again in September 2016, the Uri air force base was attacked by Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists. India

retaliated with surgical strikes on terrorist camps in Pakistan occupied Kashmir. Indian national Kulbhusan Jadhav's arrest by Pakistani authorities gave a further jolt to the relationship. Another major blow was a suicide bomber attack on the Indian Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Pulwama, Kashmir in February 2019. India reacted this time with aerial attacks on terrorist camps. All these events have further poisoned relations between New Delhi–Islamabad.

The entire South Asian region has been impacted by the conflict between India and Pakistan. Their growing differences have made it difficult for SAARC to function, leading to a decline in its influence. India boycotted the Islamabad summit in 2016 after the Uri terror attack and since then no summit has taken place, leaving the organisation in a coma if not dead. India has made it clear to Pakistan that it will not tolerate crossborder terrorism. Through befitting replies to the incidents at Pathankot and Pulwama, the Modi government sent out a clear message that things are different now. In addition Pakistan through its own actions and negative international image has ensured that it is not a crucial component of New Delhi's quest for a greater global role. As needs demand, India has been moving in various directions to diversify engagements with neighbours and retain its position as a major player in regional affairs. An invitation to other neighbours apart from Pakistan for the second swearing in ceremony clearly showed that New Delhi would not unnecessarily engage with Islamabad.

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India and Sri Lanka

Realising the strategic importance of Sri Lanka, the Modi government soon after coming to power took several initiatives to improve relations. Many high-level visits have taken place in the last almost seven years. In February 2015,

President Maithripala Sirisena visited India and in March 2015 Modi paid a return visit to Sri Lanka, making him the first prime minister to undertake a standalone visit to the country in almost three decades. During the visit, Modi addressed the Sri Lankan parliament and visited the northern province of Jaffna. In May 2017, he again visited Sri Lanka, when he inaugurated a hospital built with Indian assistance. With a focus on cultural diplomacy, India is developing a Ramayan train in Sri Lanka and a Buddhist circuit in India. Modi also highlighted the common cultural legacy on the occasion of International Vesak Day in May 2017. (Snehil Kacker, "India and its Neighbours: From Big Brother to Colonial Cousins", *World Focus*, no458, February 2018, pp78–82) A memorandum of understanding was signed in 2017, promoting economic ties between the two countries. After the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as President of Sri Lanka, India promptly reached out to him. Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was the first foreign dignitary to call him. He conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory message and invited the president to visit India.

One of the reasons for India's promptness is the alleged pro-China bias of the Rajapaksa brothers. Former president Sirisena had tried to balance Colombo's policy between India and China. Nonetheless, during his term in 2017 China in a debt swap acquired the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota. In the last over six years, the Chinese presence in the island nation has increased with Sri Lanka even receiving a warship from China. Beijing has invested over eleven billion dollars in the country of which eight billion has been in the form of loans. It has made massive investments in infrastructure projects including oil refineries, a highway connecting Colombo and Kandy, a port next to Colombo port and the Colombo International Financial Centre. As a result of these investments there is a genuine fear of another "debt-trap", especially after Sri Lanka was forced to cede control of Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease. One of Gotabaya's election campaign promises was to renegotiate the leasing terms of the port. Thus it is essential for India to strengthen its ties with Sri Lanka.

India and Bangladesh

During Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, a Land Border Agreement was reached towards resolving a 41-year long dispute between the two countries.

For enhancing connectivity, the India–Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline Project connecting Siliguri (India) and Parbatipur (Bangladesh), new railway lines and bus routes were also inaugurated during the visit. Later, a standard operating procedure for the use of eight waterways was finalised in November 2015. In April 2017, during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India, 22 agreements were signed on cyber security, defence and nuclear energy, among others. New Delhi extended lines of credit to Dhaka of three and four and a half billion dollars in 2015 and 2017 respectively for 17 developmental projects. In 2017, India also provided Bangladesh a line of credit of \$500 million for the purchase of defence equipment. (*India's Foreign Policy: Analysing Relations with Neighbouring Countries*, Swaniti Initiative, August 2017, online at <http://www.swaniti.com>)

A joint statement issued during the Bangladeshi prime minister's visit to India in October 2019 highlighted mutual efforts on border security and management, ease of the crossborder movement of people at the checkpoints at Akhaura (Tripura) and Ghojadanga (West Bengal), cooperation in working against extremist and radical groups, discussions on integrated check posts, the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, cooperation in the areas of disaster management and the increase in the numbers of border *haats*, among many other positive developments. An important achievement was the signing and implementation of the Framework of Interim Agreement for Teesta River water sharing. Under the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement both countries have taken steps to boost connectivity. Efforts are also being made to enhance defence and energy cooperation and in developmental projects. India has also agreed to train Bangladeshi bureaucrats and Dhaka has started the process for establishing a deputy high commission in Chennai. India may also be invited to construct a liquefied natural gas pipeline in Bangladesh. However the atmosphere soured when India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, designed to facilitate the expulsion of illegal immigrants from the country.

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India and Nepal

After independence, India had shared close bonds with Nepal, but for a long no Indian prime minister had visited the hill state. In August 2014, Narendra Modi became the first to do so in the last 17 years. In 2015, when Nepal was struck by a massive earthquake, India was quick to reach out and provided over \$67 million in relief assistance for recovery and rebuilding efforts. However, there was a setback in relations during the Madhesi protest of 2016. Nonetheless, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli visited India and in April 2018, Modi made a return visit to Kathmandu. During this visit he inaugurated the Ramayan circuit and a bus service was started between Janakpur (Nepal) and Ayodhya (India). In his visit Modi focused on the cultural and religious bonds between the two countries. Nepal however is forming close economic ties with China whose influence is growing.

India and Bhutan

Bhutan was the first country that Modi visited as prime minister. He inaugurated the Supreme Court building and also laid the foundation of the joint venture 600 megawatt Kholongchu hydroelectric project with an estimated cost of `400 million. When in June 2017 China entered Bhutanese territory to construct a road in the Doklam plateau, Thimpu raised objections and requested India to intervene leading to a standoff between India and China. (Kriti M Shah, "South Asia" in Harsh V Pant and Kabir Taneja (Eds), *Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Foreign Policy in Transition under Modi*, Observer Research Foundation, 24 July 2019, pp42–8, online at <https://www.orfonline.org>)

India and Maldives

Maldives was the only neighbouring country Modi could not visit in his first term. A trip planned for March 2015 had to be cancelled due to the worsening political situation there. (Vinay Kaura, "A New Chapter in India–Maldives Relations", "Grading India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy", *The Diplomat*, 22 December 2018 and 1 January 2018 respectively, online at <https://thediplomat.com>) Under the leadership of Abdulla Yameen, Maldives moved closer to China and for five years bilateral relations between India and Maldives suffered.

Nonetheless, during the president's visit to India in April 2016, agreements were signed in diverse areas such as the conservation of mosques, defence, space research, taxation and tourism. (*ibid*) Mutual attitudes changed after Ibrahim Mohamed Solih came to power. During his visit to India in December 2018, the president emphasised Maldives' close traditional ties with India and reaffirmed his government's India First policy. New Delhi announced an assistance of \$1.4 billion through a line of credit and budgetary support. Geographical proximity and traditional connections should help India strengthen bilateral ties with Maldives.

India and Myanmar

India and Myanmar share a long land border of over 1600 kilometres and a maritime border in the Bay of Bengal. Myanmar is a land bridge between India and Southeast and East Asia and as such is vital for India's eastern foreign policy endeavours. During the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Nay Pyi Taw in 2014, Modi unveiled his government's Act East policy. In July 2015, the India–Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission established an umbrella structure for strengthening and expanding relations. Modi again travelled to Myanmar in 2017 and visited Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Bagan. In 2018, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind visited Myanmar. In the last almost seven years, Myanmar's President U Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi have also visited India. The bilateral visits have helped strengthen relations and several institutional mechanisms have been established. The Joint Consultative Commission is co-chaired by the foreign ministers of both countries. To discuss

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security cooperation, drug trafficking, etc a National Level Meeting at the home secretary/deputy home minister level has been set up. It is supplemented by a joint secretary-level Sectoral Level Meeting. Representatives from the armed forces discuss issues of counterinsurgency and border disputes in the regional Border Committee Meeting. In addition, joint trade committees and joint working groups discuss matters of trade, connectivity and other economic cooperation.

India and Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in October 2011. After assuming office, Modi placed India's relations with the landlocked country on a new pedestal. He visited Afghanistan in December 2015, when he inaugurated the parliament building constructed by India. He again visited Afghanistan in June 2016 when he inaugurated the Afghan–India Friendship or Salma Dam. India has made large contributions towards Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. In December 2016, to enhance trade both sides decided to establish an air cargo route. The air freight corridor programme has increased significantly and there are weekly cargo flights between Kabul and the Indian cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Amritsar. (Neelapu Shanti, "India–Afghanistan Relations: Gaining Strategic Bonding", *The Economic Times*, 6 February 2019, online at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>) In 2016, India provided Afghanistan with Mi-25 and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Cheetah helicopters. In 2017, the New Development Partnership between Afghanistan and India was signed, through which India assists in developmental work in Afghanistan. In education, India provides scholarship to Afghan students.

INDIA AND BIMSTEC

There are many advantages for India in making the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) a more active organisation. Comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the organisation could help check Chinese influence in the region. The importance of BIMSTEC in India's policies was

highlighted by the NITI Aayog's *Strategy for New India @75*. (online at <https://niti.gov.in>) Placed in the public domain in November 2018, the strategy mentions the need to engage with this region. The first chapter of the policy document advocates a need for "closer economic integration within South Asia and the emerging economies of Southeast Asia particularly Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, while utilising the potential of existing regional associations like BBIN and BIMSTEC". (*ibid*) The latter is an important group for maritime security and connectivity with considerable potential for the development of India's northeast states. It is a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and through it India could further digital, economic, people-to-people, trade and transport connectivity.

BIMSTEC offers India an opportunity to strengthen its footprints in the neighbourhood. The organisation has significant regional influence as it is connected to other regional groupings. Among its seven members, five are also members of SAARC, two are part of ASEAN and six are part of the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation. Apart from its cross-regional structure, BIMSTEC has vast economic potential due to the region's dynamism, large market and rich natural resources. It represents a more than three trillion dollar economy with a trade potential of about \$760 billion against the current intra-regional trade of around \$40 billion. This potential can only be tapped by cooperation between member countries.

BEGINNING AGAIN AFTER RE-ELECTION IN 2019

After securing a second term in 2019, Modi again used his swearing in ceremony as a major platform for his foreign policy initiatives. This time the list of invitees included leaders of BIMSTEC countries, the Prime Minister of Mauritius, who was also the chief guest at the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas and the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the most active and influential organisation in Central Asia. Good relations with the Central Asian Republics are vital for India's energy security interests and could provide a counter to China. In the first month of his second term, Modi undertook a number of engagements and visits. The prime minister visited Sri Lanka after Maldives. Visits to these two countries show

that the neighbourhood continues to play a major role in India's foreign policy. Modi also attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit where he addressed the plenary session and presented his views on regional cooperation and development. During his visit to Osaka, Japan to take part in the G-20 summit, he held a number of bilateral meetings with leaders of other member states.

THE CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBOURS

An important factor in India's relations with its neighbourhood is China, which is also a neighbour. New Delhi's relationship with Beijing has not been cordial with an additional strain caused by the baggage of the 1962 war. In recent times, China's expansionist policies across the globe in general and in South Asia in particular have become a source of concern for India. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China has been aggressively spreading out. Announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the initiative aims to strengthen China's connectivity with the world, especially in Asia, Europe and Africa. A combination of old and new projects covering a large geographic area, the initiative presently includes 65 countries with a combined gross domestic product of \$23 trillion and a population of about 4.4 billion people. (*China Belt and Road Initiative*, China Power Team, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 8 May 2017, online at <https://chinapower.csis.org>)

China has focussed cooperation initiatives on Pakistan and Myanmar. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor will join China's Kashgar city to Pakistan's Gwadar port, covering a distance of around 3000 kilometres. It will include highways, pipelines and railways that will connect the land Silk Road to the maritime Silk Road of the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company has leased Gwadar port until 2059 from the Pakistani government. China is involved in all of India's neighbouring countries. As stated earlier it has taken control of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. It has also undertaken numerous projects in Nepal. New Delhi must engage with its neighbours to prevent China's hegemony in India's periphery. Cultural and historical connections should be used to improve bilateral ties, apart from diplomatic channels and people-to-people contacts.

CONCLUSION

Narendra Modi laid the foundation for a robust and pragmatic foreign policy in his first term in office through proactive engagement. In his current term, he needs to build on these structures to advance India's position in the global order. His last term gave a good start and the pace needs to be maintained in future initiatives. The policies and actions of his government are well informed of the present international situations and bilateral ties demonstrate reciprocity in the steps taken by the other sides. China's aggressive actions and large investments have affected India's relations with its neighbours, but the negative effects could be averted by New Delhi's proactive engagement with the region. 