

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

India's Neighbourhood First Policy has emerged as a central pillar of its foreign policy, emphasizing stronger political, economic, and strategic engagement with neighbouring countries in South Asia. Introduced to enhance regional cooperation and promote mutual development, the policy seeks to strengthen India's relationships with countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. However, its implementation has encountered several geopolitical and strategic challenges, including China's expanding influence in the region, cross-border security concerns, political instability in neighbouring states, and unresolved bilateral disputes. This study examines the objectives, achievements, and challenges of India's Neighbourhood First Policy through a qualitative analysis of secondary data, including government reports, policy documents, scholarly literature, and official statements. The paper analyses India's diplomatic initiatives, economic cooperation, regional connectivity projects, humanitarian assistance, and security partnerships within the broader framework of South Asian regional politics.

The study finds that the policy has strengthened India's regional engagement through development partnerships, infrastructure projects, disaster relief, and people-to-people exchanges. Nevertheless, its effectiveness continues to be constrained by geopolitical competition, domestic political developments in neighbouring countries, and the strategic presence of external powers. The paper concludes that sustained diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and regional connectivity will remain essential for strengthening India's leadership role and promoting peace, stability, and development in South Asia.

Keywords: India, Neighbourhood First Policy, South Asia, Foreign Policy, Regional Cooperation, Diplomacy.

Introduction

India's geographical location places it at the centre of South Asia, sharing land or maritime boundaries with several countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives, and Afghanistan. Owing to this unique strategic position, relations with neighbouring countries have always remained a priority in India's foreign policy. Since independence, successive governments have recognized that regional peace, political stability, and economic cooperation are indispensable for India's national security and sustainable development (Pant, 2019).

In recent years, India's foreign policy has increasingly emphasized regional engagement through the Neighbourhood First Policy, introduced by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. The policy reflects India's commitment to strengthening diplomatic relations, promoting regional connectivity, expanding economic cooperation, and addressing shared security challenges with neighbouring countries. The invitation extended to the heads of government of South Asian countries during the Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony in 2014 symbolized the importance attached to regional diplomacy and marked the beginning of a renewed

focus on India's immediate neighbourhood (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The Neighbourhood First Policy seeks to promote mutually beneficial partnerships based on respect for sovereignty, non-interference, economic development, and shared prosperity. India's engagement under this policy extends beyond traditional diplomacy to include infrastructure development, energy cooperation, digital connectivity, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, educational exchanges, and capacity-building initiatives. Development projects in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives demonstrate India's efforts to enhance regional integration while responding to the developmental aspirations of its neighbours (Mohan, 2015).

Despite these initiatives, the implementation of the policy has encountered several challenges. Political instability in neighbouring countries, unresolved border disputes, cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, water-sharing issues, and the growing strategic presence of China have significantly influenced regional dynamics. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expanding investments in South Asia have intensified strategic competition, compelling India to strengthen its diplomatic and economic engagement with neighbouring states

(Jacob, 2020). Consequently, India's neighbourhood policy operates within an increasingly complex geopolitical environment where regional cooperation intersects with great-power rivalry.

Scholars have offered differing assessments of the policy's effectiveness. Some argue that it has revitalized India's regional diplomacy through proactive political engagement and development partnerships, while others contend that structural constraints, domestic political developments in neighbouring countries, and regional security concerns continue to limit its success. These differing perspectives indicate the need for a balanced assessment of both the achievements and the challenges associated with the policy.

Against this background, the present study examines the objectives, implementation, opportunities, and challenges of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. Using qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the paper evaluates India's diplomatic initiatives, regional cooperation, and strategic engagement in South Asia. The study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on Indian foreign policy by assessing the extent to which the Neighbourhood First Policy has strengthened India's regional influence while addressing the evolving political and security challenges of South Asia.

Literature Review

India's relations with its neighbouring countries have long occupied a central place in the study of Indian foreign policy. With the announcement of the Neighbourhood First Policy in 2014, scholarly interest in India's regional diplomacy has increased considerably. The policy has been widely interpreted as an effort to strengthen political cooperation, economic integration, regional connectivity, and strategic partnerships with South Asian neighbours while reinforcing India's role as a leading regional power.

C. Raja Mohan (2015) argues that India's foreign policy under the Neighbourhood First approach represents a shift towards greater regional engagement, with an emphasis on development partnerships, connectivity, and diplomatic outreach. He contends that India's influence in South Asia depends not only on its economic and military capabilities but also on its ability to build trust and mutually beneficial relationships with neighbouring states. Similarly, Harsh V. Pant (2019) maintains that peace and stability in South Asia are indispensable for India's national security and economic development. According to Pant, India's regional diplomacy has increasingly focused on balancing security concerns with developmental cooperation.

Several scholars have highlighted the opportunities created by the Neighbourhood First Policy. David M. Malone (2011) observes that India's expanding economic strength has enabled it to play a more active developmental role in South Asia through infrastructure projects, trade, and technical cooperation. Likewise, S. D. Muni (2015) argues that India's assistance in connectivity, energy cooperation, disaster relief, and capacity building has strengthened bilateral relations with countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. These initiatives have contributed to enhancing regional cooperation while promoting India's image as a responsible regional partner.

The strategic dimensions of India's neighbourhood policy have also received considerable academic attention. Sumit Ganguly (2010) argues that India's regional policy has traditionally been influenced by security concerns, including border management, terrorism, and political instability in neighbouring countries. Similarly, Shivshankar Menon (2021) emphasises that India's diplomacy must simultaneously address traditional security threats and emerging geopolitical challenges while maintaining strategic autonomy in an increasingly competitive international environment.

Despite these positive assessments, scholars have identified several challenges that continue to affect the implementation of the policy. Happymon Jacob (2020) argues that unresolved border disputes, cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, and domestic political instability in neighbouring countries continue to complicate India's regional engagement. In addition, the growing strategic presence of China in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure investments, and expanding economic partnerships has intensified regional geopolitical competition and posed new challenges for India's foreign policy (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into India's neighbourhood policy, much of it concentrates either on India's bilateral relations with individual neighbouring countries or on the strategic competition between India and China in South Asia. Comparatively fewer studies examine the Neighbourhood First Policy as a comprehensive regional strategy by simultaneously analysing its objectives, achievements, opportunities, and challenges. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a balanced assessment of India's Neighbourhood First Policy and evaluating its significance for regional cooperation and India's evolving role in South Asia.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to analyse India's Neighbourhood First Policy in the context of contemporary South Asian politics. The specific objectives are:

- To examine the objectives and evolution of India's Neighbourhood First Policy.
- To analyse the major initiatives undertaken by India to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries.
- To evaluate the opportunities created by the policy in promoting regional cooperation and development.
- To examine the political, economic, and strategic challenges affecting the implementation of the policy.
- To assess the significance of the Neighbourhood First Policy in strengthening India's regional influence in South Asia.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology based entirely on secondary sources of data. Information has been collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official publications of the Ministry of External Affairs, reports of regional organisations, and other credible academic sources relating to India's foreign policy and South Asian regional politics. The collected data have been analysed using the descriptive and analytical methods of qualitative research. Particular attention has been given to official policy documents, diplomatic initiatives, regional connectivity projects, development partnerships, and scholarly interpretations of India's engagement with neighbouring countries. The study does not rely on primary field data; instead, it critically synthesises existing literature to examine both the achievements and the limitations of the Neighbourhood First Policy.

The research is exploratory in nature and seeks to provide a balanced understanding of India's regional diplomacy by evaluating political, economic, and strategic developments in South Asia. The findings are based on the interpretation of authentic secondary sources and aim to contribute to the growing discourse on India's foreign policy and regional cooperation.

Evolution and Objectives of India's Neighbourhood First Policy

India's relations with its neighbouring countries have traditionally constituted the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Since independence, successive governments have recognised that political stability, economic prosperity, and regional security in South Asia are closely linked to India's own national

interests. While earlier governments pursued policies based on regional cooperation through bilateral and multilateral engagements, the emphasis on strengthening immediate neighbourhood relations gained renewed momentum after the formation of the Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.

The formal articulation of the Neighbourhood First Policy marked a significant development in India's regional diplomacy. The invitation extended to the Heads of State and Government of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member countries to the Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony in May 2014 symbolised India's intention to accord the highest priority to its neighbouring countries. This diplomatic gesture reflected India's commitment to strengthening mutual trust, promoting regional cooperation, and addressing common developmental and security challenges (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The policy seeks to promote peaceful and cooperative relations with India's neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. It is founded on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence, and shared economic development. Unlike earlier approaches that were often dominated by security considerations, the Neighbourhood First Policy integrates diplomacy with economic cooperation, infrastructure development, digital connectivity, energy security, and people-to-people exchanges (Jaishankar, 2020). Another important objective of the policy is to strengthen regional connectivity. India has prioritised the development of cross-border road networks, railway links, inland waterways, energy grids, and digital infrastructure to facilitate trade and improve regional integration. Connectivity initiatives such as the India-Bangladesh railway projects, the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement, and cross-border electricity trade illustrate India's efforts to create a more interconnected South Asian region (Saran, 2017).

Security cooperation also remains a central objective of the policy. India has expanded collaboration with neighbouring countries in areas such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, intelligence sharing, border management, and disaster response. The growing challenges posed by terrorism, organised crime, illegal migration, cyber threats, and maritime security in the Indian Ocean have reinforced the importance of closer security partnerships within the region (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The policy further reflects India's aspiration to act as a "net security provider" and a reliable development partner in South Asia. Through development assistance, concessional lines of credit, humanitarian relief, vaccine diplomacy, and capacity-building programmes, India has sought to strengthen goodwill and promote sustainable development among its neighbours. Initiatives undertaken during natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated India's commitment to regional solidarity and humanitarian cooperation (Jaishankar, 2020).

Overall, the evolution of the Neighbourhood First Policy represents a shift from a predominantly security-oriented approach towards a comprehensive framework that combines diplomacy, development, connectivity, and strategic cooperation. It reflects India's recognition that regional peace and prosperity are fundamental to its long-term national interests and its aspiration to emerge as a leading power in South Asia.

Major Initiatives under the Neighbourhood First Policy

Since the introduction of the Neighbourhood First Policy, India has undertaken several diplomatic, economic, and strategic initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries. These initiatives have focused on enhancing regional connectivity, promoting economic development, expanding security cooperation, and deepening people-to-people interactions.

One of the most significant achievements of the policy has been the strengthening of bilateral relations with Bangladesh. Cooperation between the two countries has expanded in areas such as border management, trade, energy, inland waterways, and connectivity. The implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement and the development of cross-border railway and road networks have significantly improved bilateral relations. Bangladesh has also emerged as one of India's largest trading partners in South Asia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

India's partnership with Bhutan continues to represent one of the strongest examples of regional cooperation. Hydropower development remains the foundation of bilateral relations, with India providing financial and technical assistance for major hydroelectric projects. Cooperation has also expanded to include education, digital technology, healthcare, and environmental conservation, reflecting the comprehensive nature of the bilateral partnership (Pant, 2016).

In Nepal, India has focused on infrastructure development, post-earthquake reconstruction,

cross-border petroleum pipelines, railway connectivity, and integrated check posts. Although bilateral relations have occasionally experienced political and boundary-related tensions, both countries continue to cooperate in trade, cultural exchanges, and development projects. Their long-standing civilisational and people-to-people ties remain a significant strength of the relationship (Muni, 2016).

Relations with Sri Lanka have increasingly centred on maritime security, fisheries management, infrastructure development, and economic assistance. India has provided substantial financial support during Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis through credit lines, humanitarian assistance, and currency support, reinforcing its role as a dependable regional partner (Jaishankar, 2020).

The Maldives occupies an important position in India's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. Through initiatives such as the "Greater Male Connectivity Project," defence cooperation, coastal surveillance, and capacity-building programmes, India has strengthened bilateral engagement while promoting maritime security and sustainable development in the island nation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

Beyond bilateral engagement, India has promoted sub-regional cooperation through initiatives such as the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) Initiative, the BIMSTEC framework, cross-border electricity trade, digital connectivity, and regional disaster management mechanisms. These initiatives aim to enhance economic integration, facilitate trade and transport, and reduce barriers to regional cooperation, particularly in areas where traditional regional institutions such as SAARC have experienced limited progress (Saran, 2017).

India has also emerged as a leading humanitarian partner in South Asia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vaccine Maitri initiative supplied vaccines and medical assistance to several neighbouring countries. Similarly, India has provided humanitarian relief and disaster assistance during earthquakes, floods, cyclones, and other emergencies, reinforcing its image as a responsible regional power committed to the welfare of its neighbours (Jaishankar, 2020).

Despite these achievements, the implementation of these initiatives has not been without challenges. Political instability in neighbouring countries, delays in infrastructure projects, financial constraints, and increasing strategic competition from China have affected the pace of implementation. Nevertheless, the Neighbourhood First Policy has significantly expanded India's diplomatic engagement and development

partnerships, making regional cooperation a central pillar of its contemporary foreign policy.

Opportunities Created by the Neighbourhood First Policy

The Neighbourhood First Policy has created significant opportunities for India to strengthen its political, economic, and strategic engagement with South Asian countries. By placing neighbouring states at the centre of its foreign policy, India has sought to foster regional stability, enhance economic integration, and promote cooperative responses to shared challenges. The policy has also enabled India to project itself as a responsible regional power committed to mutual development and peaceful coexistence.

One of the major opportunities generated by the policy is the expansion of regional economic cooperation. India has promoted trade liberalisation, cross-border investment, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development with neighbouring countries. Projects involving road and rail connectivity, integrated check posts, inland waterways, petroleum pipelines, and electricity transmission have contributed to improving regional trade and facilitating the movement of goods and people. These initiatives have strengthened economic interdependence and created new avenues for regional growth (World Bank, 2022).

Another important achievement has been the enhancement of regional connectivity. Improved transport corridors, digital infrastructure, and cross-border communication networks have strengthened commercial relations and encouraged greater people-to-people interaction. Initiatives under the BBIN framework and BIMSTEC have complemented India's efforts to improve physical and institutional connectivity, thereby promoting regional integration beyond the traditional framework of SAARC (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

The policy has also strengthened India's role as a development partner in South Asia. Through concessional Lines of Credit, grants, technical assistance, educational scholarships, and capacity-building programmes, India has supported infrastructure development and institutional strengthening in neighbouring countries. Development partnerships in sectors such as health, education, renewable energy, agriculture, and digital governance have enhanced India's soft power and reinforced its image as a reliable regional partner (RIS, 2020).

Humanitarian diplomacy has emerged as another significant opportunity under the Neighbourhood First Policy. India's rapid response during natural

disasters, including earthquakes, floods, and cyclones, as well as its medical assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic through the Vaccine Maitri initiative, strengthened regional goodwill and demonstrated India's commitment to humanitarian cooperation. Such initiatives have contributed to building confidence and expanding India's diplomatic influence among neighbouring countries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The policy has further provided opportunities for strengthening regional security cooperation. India has expanded collaboration with neighbouring countries in maritime security, counter-terrorism, border management, intelligence sharing, and disaster preparedness. Growing cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region has enhanced collective efforts to address common security threats such as piracy, trafficking, illegal migration, and transnational crime. These initiatives contribute not only to India's national security but also to regional peace and stability.

Overall, the Neighbourhood First Policy has enabled India to deepen regional engagement through diplomacy, development cooperation, economic integration, humanitarian assistance, and strategic partnerships. Although several challenges remain, the policy has created a strong foundation for promoting long-term cooperation and sustainable development in South Asia.

Challenges in the Implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy

Despite its significant achievements, the implementation of India's Neighbourhood First Policy has encountered several political, economic, and strategic challenges. The complex geopolitical environment of South Asia, coupled with domestic political developments in neighbouring countries and the growing influence of external powers, has limited the full realization of the policy's objectives. One of the foremost challenges is the increasing strategic competition between India and China. Over the past decade, China's expanding economic investments and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have considerably enhanced its presence in South Asia. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Maldives have received substantial Chinese investments in ports, highways, energy projects, and other infrastructure. This growing Chinese engagement has intensified geopolitical competition and constrained India's traditional influence in the region (Tellis, 2020).

Cross-border terrorism and security concerns continue to present another major obstacle. Persistent tensions with Pakistan, cross-border infiltration, terrorism, and unresolved border

disputes have adversely affected regional cooperation and limited the effectiveness of institutions such as SAARC. Security challenges along India's western and northern borders have compelled India to devote considerable diplomatic and military resources to regional stability (Ganguly, 2010).

Political instability in neighbouring countries has also influenced the implementation of the policy. Frequent changes in government, constitutional crises, civil unrest, and shifting foreign policy priorities in countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Maldives have sometimes delayed bilateral projects and complicated diplomatic engagement. Domestic political developments within neighbouring states often affect the continuity of long-term development partnerships and regional initiatives (Muni, 2016).

Economic constraints and implementation delays constitute another challenge. Although India has announced several connectivity and infrastructure projects, procedural delays, financial limitations, bureaucratic hurdles, and land acquisition issues have affected the timely completion of some initiatives. Delays in project execution may reduce the confidence of partner countries and create opportunities for competing external actors to expand their influence.

Water-sharing disputes and border management issues continue to affect bilateral relations with certain neighbouring countries. Disagreements relating to transboundary rivers, migration, and border demarcation periodically generate political tensions despite broader cooperation in other sectors. These issues require sustained diplomatic engagement, mutual trust, and effective institutional mechanisms for peaceful resolution.

Another significant challenge lies in balancing India's regional leadership aspirations with the sovereign interests of neighbouring states. While India seeks to promote regional cooperation and development, smaller neighbouring countries often pursue diversified foreign policies involving multiple external partners. Consequently, India's regional diplomacy must continuously balance strategic interests with respect for the sovereignty, equality, and developmental priorities of its neighbours.

In conclusion, the Neighbourhood First Policy operates within a highly dynamic geopolitical environment where regional cooperation coexists with strategic competition, domestic political uncertainty, and evolving security challenges. Addressing these constraints will require sustained diplomatic engagement, timely implementation of development projects, enhanced regional connectivity, and continued confidence-building

measures. The long-term success of the policy will depend on India's ability to combine strategic vision with inclusive and mutually beneficial regional partnerships.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of India's Neighbourhood First Policy demonstrates that it has emerged as a significant pillar of India's contemporary foreign policy. By placing neighbouring countries at the centre of diplomatic engagement, the policy reflects India's recognition that regional peace, stability, and economic prosperity are essential for achieving its broader strategic and developmental objectives. Unlike earlier approaches that primarily focused on security concerns, the Neighbourhood First Policy has adopted a more comprehensive framework encompassing political dialogue, economic cooperation, regional connectivity, development partnerships, humanitarian assistance, and people-to-people exchanges.

The study indicates that the policy has generated several positive outcomes. Enhanced bilateral cooperation with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives has strengthened India's regional presence through infrastructure development, trade facilitation, energy cooperation, and capacity-building initiatives. India's humanitarian assistance during natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic further reinforced its image as a responsible regional partner committed to the welfare of neighbouring countries. These initiatives have contributed to strengthening mutual trust and expanding India's diplomatic influence across South Asia.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the implementation of the policy continues to face significant challenges. Strategic competition arising from China's expanding presence in South Asia, unresolved border disputes, cross-border terrorism, domestic political instability in neighbouring countries, and delays in infrastructure projects have constrained the effectiveness of several initiatives. These challenges illustrate that regional diplomacy is shaped not only by national priorities but also by changing geopolitical realities and the foreign policy choices of neighbouring states. Consequently, India's regional engagement requires sustained diplomatic dialogue, timely implementation of development projects, and greater institutional cooperation to ensure long-term success.

The study also demonstrates that the Neighbourhood First Policy cannot be viewed solely through the lens of traditional security. Contemporary regional diplomacy increasingly depends on economic interdependence,

connectivity, technological cooperation, climate resilience, disaster management, public health, and human development. India's ability to address these emerging dimensions will significantly influence its credibility as a regional leader and its capacity to build enduring partnerships in South Asia. A balanced approach that combines strategic interests with respect for the sovereignty and developmental aspirations of neighbouring countries will remain essential for strengthening regional cooperation.

In conclusion, the Neighbourhood First Policy represents an important evolution in India's foreign policy by seeking to integrate diplomacy, development, security, and regional cooperation within a single strategic framework. Although considerable progress has been made in strengthening bilateral relations and promoting regional engagement, persistent geopolitical and domestic challenges continue to influence the policy's overall effectiveness. The long-term success of the policy will depend on India's ability to sustain constructive diplomatic engagement, deepen economic integration, strengthen regional institutions, and respond effectively to emerging security and developmental challenges. As South Asia continues to evolve within a changing global order, the Neighbourhood First Policy is likely to remain a central instrument of India's foreign policy and an important determinant of regional peace, stability, and prosperity.

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