

Neighbourhood First to Neighbourhood Lost? An Assessment of India's Diplomacy in Neighbourhood

Chaudhary S^{1*}

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.15589693

^{1*} Seema Chaudhary, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, VMLG College, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

India, the world's largest democracy and a rapidly growing economy, follows a complex foreign policy that has evolved significantly since its independence in 1947. At the heart of this policy lies India's relationship with its neighbours, which has oscillated between collaborative attempts and confrontational stances. This paper aims to comprehensively assess India's diplomatic journey with its neighbouring countries from 1947 to 2025, highlighting key agreements, initiatives, and Policies that have defined these relationships. As we go through this historical landscape, we will analyse why India finds itself at a critical place today, having seemingly lost ground in maintaining good relations with its immediate neighbours, and what systemic factors contribute to its current scenario.

Keywords: south asian geopolitics, india-china strategic rivalry, regional diplomacy, foreign policy, india's neighbourhood first policy

Corresponding Author

Seema Chaudhary, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, VMLG College, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.
Email: seemachaudhary9036@gmail.com

How to Cite this Article

Chaudhary S, Neighbourhood First to Neighbourhood Lost? An Assessment of India's Diplomacy in Neighbourhood. Soc Sci J Adv Res. 2025;5(3):56-64.
Available From
<https://ssjar.singhpublication.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/257>

To Browse



Manuscript Received
2025-04-08

Review Round 1
2025-04-25

Review Round 2

Review Round 3

Accepted
2025-05-19

Conflict of Interest
None

Funding
Nil

Ethical Approval
Yes

Plagiarism X-checker
5.74

Note



© 2025 by Chaudhary S and Published by Singh Publication. This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> unported [CC BY 4.0].



1. Introduction

India showed its commitment to the "Neighbourhood First" policy, even as domestic discourse increasingly acknowledged the strategic autonomy of its neighbours and recognised that internal factors driving regime changes or anti-India sentiments were grown and often beyond New Delhi's control. Prioritising its neighbours has been a longstanding tradition in Indian foreign policy from ancient times. From Nehru's Panchsheel principles in the 1950s, advocating non-interference and peaceful coexistence, to the Non-alignment movement, to regionalism pursued through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the 1980s, and the Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s, which emphasised non-reciprocity and respect for smaller neighbours, India has consistently sought to ground its diplomacy in South Asia.

The Modi government's "Neighbourhood First" launched in 2014, beginning with the Invitation of SAARC leaders, including Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, at Modi's first swearing-in ceremony. This tradition continued into 2019 and 2024, as the re-elected Modi government celebrated a decade of this policy by inviting regional leaders to the inauguration of its second and third term; however, Pakistan was notably excluded this time. Regional stability is very important for India's security and economic growth. A peaceful neighbourhood ensures secure borders, reducing military expenditures, infrastructure development and allowing focus on development. Stable neighbours foster trade, energy cooperation, social and cultural ties and connectivity—key to India's "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First". Instability, however, invites external interference, as seen in China's expanding influence in Maldives, Myanmar, Afghanistan and through BRI in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan also. Conflict spillovers, like terrorism from Pakistan or refugee crises from Myanmar, directly threaten India. Additionally, regional integration under SAARC or BIMSTEC hinges on political harmony. Thus, India must with practical approach prioritize diplomacy, economic aid, and conflict resolution to maintain a stable, prosperous periphery aligned with its strategic goals.

2. Historical Context

India's influence in South Asia has deep civilizational roots, shaped by ancient empires like the Mauryas, Guptas, and Cholas, who spread political power and cultural ties across the region. Emperor Ashoka's Buddhist missions created enduring links, especially with Sri Lanka, while the Cholas expanded maritime trade and cultural exchange with Southeast Asia. The Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire maintained regional connections through trade, infrastructure like the Grand Trunk Road, and cultural integration, despite frequent conflicts. British colonialism disrupted these bonds by drawing arbitrary borders and fostering divisions. Post-independence, India sought to reclaim its regional role through initiatives like the Non-Aligned Movement and SAARC, though Cold War tensions and conflicts with Pakistan and China posed challenges. Today, India's soft power—religion, culture, yoga, Bollywood, cuisine, and commerce—continues to shape its relations. The Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP), launched in 2008 and reinforced after 2014, emphasizes connectivity, trade, peace, and cultural ties with its South Asian neighbours.

3. Periodic Analysis

From **1947 to 1971**, India was navigating its newfound independence, grappling with the task of nation-building while simultaneously defining its foreign policy. During this phase, India's relations with its immediate neighbours—Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and later Bangladesh—were influenced by shared colonial legacies, border conflicts, and the partition fallout. The Kashmir conflict with Pakistan began almost immediately, and the seeds of long-term mistrust were sown through successive wars. Meanwhile, India attempted to maintain cordial ties with other neighbours through treaties and diplomatic engagement, as seen in its supportive stance toward Nepal's monarchy and Bhutan's sovereignty. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 marked a turning point, not only leading to the birth of a new nation but also demonstrating India's strategic and humanitarian assertiveness in the region.

The **1971–1991 period** was marked by both cooperation and contention. As India matured on the international stage, it sought to balance regional leadership with non-alignment.

It continued to assist in the development of Bhutan and Nepal, intervened in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict through the IPKF, and maintained robust ties with Afghanistan during the Soviet-backed regime. Relations with Pakistan, however, remained hostile, marred by the Kashmir issue and the rise of terrorism. India also began to recognize the strategic importance of Myanmar and the Maldives, especially in the context of maritime security. The region's dynamics were influenced by Cold War rivalries, and India positioned itself as a stabilizing force in a politically volatile South Asia.

Between **1991 and 2014**, India underwent economic liberalization, and its foreign policy reflected greater pragmatism and regional ambition. Relations with neighbours were reoriented toward trade, connectivity, and energy cooperation. The 'Look East' policy and the foundations of the 'Neighbourhood First' approach emerged during this period. India signed key agreements with Bangladesh, improved infrastructure ties with Bhutan and Nepal, and responded to regional crises with increasing diplomatic agility. However, challenges like political instability in neighbours, China's growing influence, and episodic tensions (e.g., with Nepal in 2015) persisted. With the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, India sought to reinvigorate its neighbourhood policy, inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony.

From **2014 to 2025**, India's neighbourhood diplomacy entered a more assertive phase under the "Neighbourhood First" policy launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Symbolic gestures—such as inviting regional leaders to his inaugurations—were coupled with strategic outreach in trade, infrastructure, defence, and cultural diplomacy. India signed landmark agreements with Bangladesh (e.g., the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement), deepened defence cooperation with Bhutan and Maldives, and enhanced connectivity with Nepal and Myanmar through road, rail, and energy projects. However, regional challenges intensified: Pakistan-based terrorism led to surgical strikes and air raids; Nepal's constitutional crisis and border blockade soured ties; Sri Lanka and Maldives drifted closer to China; and the Taliban's return in Afghanistan forced a recalibration of India's strategic posture. India's diplomacy in this period oscillated between proactive engagement and damage control, as it sought to counter growing Chinese influence while maintaining its traditional leadership in South Asia.

India-Pakistan Relations

India and Pakistan have shared one of the most complex and conflict-ridden relationships in South Asia since their independence in 1947. The partition triggered the first war over Kashmir, a dispute that remains unresolved and continues to influence their bilateral relations. The wars of 1965 and 1971, the Kargil conflict in 1999, and cross-border terrorism have solidified deep-rooted mistrust. Several peace initiatives, including the Tashkent Agreement, Simla Accord, and Lahore Declaration, failed to yield lasting peace. The 2001 Parliament attack and 2008 Mumbai terror strikes further hardened India's stance on security.

From 2014 onward, India adopted a firmer posture. The Uri attack (2016) led to surgical strikes, while the Pulwama attack (2019) resulted in the Balakot airstrikes. Revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir further deteriorated relations, with Pakistan downgrading diplomatic ties. Trade has declined sharply, and India withdrew Pakistan's Most Favoured Nation status. Despite international calls for dialogue, Pakistan's political instability and continued support for cross-border militancy remain major hurdles to reconciliation. The United Nations renewed its calls for diplomatic dialogue in 2022, especially over the contentious Kashmir issue, but these efforts failed to yield substantive progress.

India-Bangladesh Relations

India's relationship with Bangladesh began on a strong footing with its crucial support in the 1971 Liberation War. The 1972 Treaty of Friendship laid the foundation for cooperation in trade, connectivity, and cultural exchange. Over the decades, ties strengthened through the resolution of border enclaves, cooperation in counter-terrorism, and water-sharing agreements. The 1996 Ganges Water Treaty and the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement are significant milestones in bilateral diplomacy.

Since Sheikh Hasina returned to power in 2009, India-Bangladesh relations have experienced a golden era. Both countries collaborated on energy trade, infrastructure, and riverine transport. India's development aid has supported numerous projects, including rail links and power plants. However, issues like illegal migration, Teesta river water sharing, and communal sentiments occasionally strain ties. China's increasing investments in Bangladesh also challenge India's influence.

Despite these issues, the overall trajectory remains positive, marked by strategic cooperation and growing people-to-people ties. However, the political landscape in Bangladesh shifted significantly with the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the installation of Mohammad Yunis. This transition marked a turning point in bilateral relations, as Yunis adopted a more cautious stance towards India and appeared more receptive to Chinese outreach. The resulting strain has disrupted ongoing joint initiatives and created a noticeable diplomatic rift, challenging the momentum built over the past decade. India's efforts are now focused on recalibrating its approach to safeguard strategic interests and reestablish trust with the new administration in Dhaka.

India-Nepal Relations

India and Nepal share a unique bond, shaped by geography, culture, religion, and history. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship formalised open borders, economic integration, and mutual security concerns. Over the decades, India supported Nepal's transition from monarchy to democracy, contributed to infrastructure and education, and became its principal trading partner. However, Nepalese perceptions of India's political interference, especially during the 2015 blockade and constitutional crisis, led to a downturn in ties.

Nepal's growing ties with China and rising nationalist sentiments have further complicated bilateral relations. The border dispute over Kalapani and Nepal's updated map in 2020 created additional friction. Still, India remains vital for Nepal's economy, energy supply, and connectivity. Projects like the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline and cross-border rail links are signs of renewed engagement. Sustaining this relationship requires sensitivity to Nepal's sovereignty and a recalibrated diplomatic approach.

India-Bhutan Relations

India's relationship with Bhutan is among its most stable and cooperative in South Asia. Rooted in the 1949 Treaty of Friendship, updated in 2007, the partnership emphasizes non-interference and mutual support. India has assisted Bhutan in key sectors, particularly hydropower, education, and health. It remains Bhutan's largest trade partner and development aid provider. The cooperation on hydropower projects provides electricity to India while generating revenue for Bhutan.

The 2017 Doklam standoff marked a significant moment when India militarily supported Bhutan's territorial integrity against Chinese encroachment. Bhutan's cautious foreign policy, focused on preserving independence and balanced development, aligns well with India's regional objectives. High-level visits, educational scholarships, and infrastructure investment reflect the strength of this enduring partnership.

India-Maldives Relations

India and the Maldives have maintained close relations, with India playing a key role in ensuring the Maldives' sovereignty, such as in the 1988 coup attempt. Strategic cooperation includes maritime security, development aid, and disaster response. India has contributed to key projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Project and provided medical assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the Maldives' foreign policy has fluctuated with political leadership. President Ibrahim Solih's pro-India stance led to strengthened cooperation, while the return of President Mohamed Muizzu has revived the "India Out" campaign, demanding Indian military withdrawal. China's economic presence has also grown, challenging India's traditional role. Despite these challenges, India remains an essential partner, committed to balancing security and development in the Indian Ocean region.

India-Afghanistan Relations

India and Afghanistan share a long history of civilizational contact and cooperation. Since the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, India has invested significantly in Afghanistan's development, especially after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Major contributions include building the Afghan Parliament, Salma Dam, highways, and educational institutions. India provided over \$3 billion in aid and scholarships for Afghan students.

The return of the Taliban in 2021 altered the equation. India's diplomatic presence was scaled down, but it continued providing humanitarian assistance. Concerns about terrorism, especially the use of Afghan soil by anti-India groups, persist. India now adopts a cautious approach, engaging with multiple stakeholders while promoting regional security and stability. Afghanistan remains a strategic concern, especially in countering Pakistan's influence and ensuring regional peace.

India-Myanmar Relations

India's relationship with Myanmar is defined by shared borders, cultural ties, and strategic concerns. The 1951 Treaty of Friendship laid the groundwork, followed by collaboration on cross-border insurgency management and infrastructure development. India sees Myanmar as a bridge to Southeast Asia and a key partner in the Act East policy. Key projects include the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

India has balanced support for democratic forces with pragmatic engagement with Myanmar's military, especially after the 2021 coup. India's interests lie in securing its northeastern borders, combating drug trafficking, and countering China's growing influence in Myanmar. Despite political instability, India continues to invest in connectivity, trade, and cultural exchanges, maintaining a delicate but necessary partnership.

3. Why India Lost its Influence over Neighbouring Countries over Time

India, as the largest growing economic and military power especially in South Asia, has historically played a dominant and important role in shaping south Asia regional politics, economics, and security. However, over the decades, its influence over neighbouring nations like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives has fluctuated and weakening, as with some countries drifting closer to China or trying to asserting greater independence. Several factors explain why India's hold over its neighbours has weakened over time.

1. Rise of China as a Counterbalance

China's aggressive economic and strategic expansion in whole world especially South Asia has significantly reduced India's dominance with time. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in Nepal, Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port), Pakistan (CPEC), and the Maldives, and creating debt dependencies on different countries, China starting growing its influence on them. China offer loans with fewer political conditions, unlike India, which sometimes attaches diplomatic expectations.

China start supplies arms to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, reducing their reliance on India.

2. India's Perceived Big-Brother Attitude

Many neighbouring countries resent India's viewing it as interference rather than cooperation. Blockade of Nepal (2015) India's unofficial blockade during Nepal's constitutional crisis angered Kathmandu, pushing it closer to China, India's role in the 1980s (IPKF deployment) left lasting distrust.

3. Failure to Deliver on Economic Promises

While India engages busy in regional initiatives (SAARC, BIMSTEC), its economic projects often lag behind China's speedy and aggressive execution and. As we see many examples one of them was the delays in cross-border rail/road projects (India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway) compared to China's rapid BRI projects.

Trade Imbalances: Neighbours nations often face trade deficits with India, which make Chinese trade more attractive. Inconsistent Aid Policies: While India provides aid (e.g., COVID vaccines), China offers large-scale investments without political strings.

4. Political Instability in Neighbouring Countries

India loosing it's political landscapes in neighbouring nations and growing China influence often lead to anti-India sentiments. Examples like Maldives' "India Out" Campaign: Pro-China leaders like Mohamed Muizzu have demanded the withdrawal of Indian military personnel, Nepal published its Map and show kalapani region in it, Nepal's Communist Leadership: Push for deeper ties with China to counterbalance India. and overthrown of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh's Balancing Act like Despite historical ties, Dhaka seeks diversification in partnerships.

5. Internal Challenges Undermining Foreign Policy Execution

India's ability to assert consistent leadership in its neighbourhood is often hindered by domestic governance challenges. Bureaucratic inertia, complex inter-ministerial coordination, and delays in project implementation have affected the timely delivery of infrastructure and development commitments to neighbouring countries.

Moreover, India's perceived "big brother" attitude—marked by expectations of deference from smaller neighbours—has sometimes alienated regional partners, especially when coupled with a lack of sustained, on-ground engagement. Additionally, while India aspires to play a leading global role through partnerships in forums like the Quad, BRICS, and G20, this global focus sometimes comes at the expense of nurturing its immediate periphery. Neighbours occasionally feel overlooked or taken for granted, undermining the trust necessary for robust regional cooperation.

6. Strategic Miscalculations in Regional Diplomacy

India's foreign policy in South Asia has occasionally been reactive rather than anticipatory, limiting its ability to shape outcomes in a rapidly evolving regional landscape. While India has invested heavily in soft power—such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and religious tourism—it has lagged behind China in delivering large-scale infrastructure and financial packages, which often appeal more directly to its neighbours' development needs. Furthermore, India has often responded to crises (like the 2015 Nepal blockade, the Maldives' political turmoil, or Sri Lanka's economic meltdown) only after they escalated, rather than engaging proactively to prevent such situations. These strategic missteps have allowed external actors, particularly China, to fill the vacuum with aggressive economic and diplomatic outreach, thereby eroding India's traditional influence in its neighbourhood.

4. How India Can Regain its Influence over Neighbouring Nations

India's location in South Asia need stronger ties with its neighbouring countries essentially for its regional stability, economic growth, development and national security - a peaceful and stable neighbour is important. However, in recent years, China's growing influence in the region—through infrastructure investments, military partnerships, and economic aids—has challenged India's traditional dominance. To counter this and reassert its leadership, India must adopt a multi-pronged approach combining diplomacy, economic incentives, security cooperation, people-to-people connect and cultural outreach.

The Standing Committee on External Affairs submitted its report on 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' in July, 2023.

1. Strengthening Economic Partnerships

Enhance Regional Trade: through Reduce non-tariff barriers and promote SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area) to boost intra-regional trade, free trade agreements, strengthening supply chain.

Investment in Infrastructure: Increase funding for connectivity projects (roads, railways, ports) under India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, The Committee noted the deficiency in India's border infrastructure and the need to stabilise and develop border regions. For engagement with India's neighbours, connectivity infrastructure such as cross-border roads, railways, and inland waterways and ports need an improvement. It recommended exploring the feasibility of setting up a regional development fund for connectivity infrastructure under regional frameworks.

Offer Better Terms Than China: Compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by providing "transparent, sustainable, and low-debt alternatives" (India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Chabahar Port).

Debt Relief & Grants: Provide financial aid without imposing unsustainable debt (unlike China's "debt-trap diplomacy").

Disaster & Health Diplomacy: Continue COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy (Vaccine Maitri) and rapid disaster response (e.g., Nepal earthquake, Sri Lanka crisis).

2. Boosting Connectivity & People-to-People Ties

Improve Cross-Border Infrastructure: Air, Rail & Road Links- Expand initiatives like Maitri Setu (India-Bangladesh), Raxaul-Kathmandu Rail (Nepal), and Kaladan Multimodal Project (Myanmar).

Digital Connectivity: Extend India's (UPI payments, RuPay cards, and e-visa facilities) to neighbours for seamless transactions. Since 2020, India has been the largest source of tourist arrivals to most south Asian countries, i.e, Maldives. Large number of visitors also come to India from Bangladesh for medical treatment. Many Indians also visit Nepal for religious tourism. The Committee recommended promoting investment in tourism, including medical tourism under the Neighbourhood First Policy.

Cultural & Educational Exchange and Promote Soft Power: Leverage Bollywood, yoga, and Buddhism to strengthen cultural bonds. And also Scholarships & Training: Increase ITEC (Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation) slots for students and professionals from neighbouring countries.

3. Strategic & Security Cooperation

Countering China's Influence-

Defence Partnerships: Supply military equipment (e.g., Brahmos missiles to Philippines, Dornier aircraft to Maldives). The Act East policy focuses on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. India's north eastern region shares land borders with many neighbouring countries. The economic development of north eastern states is integral to the success of the Neighbourhood First Policy and the Act East Policy. The Committee recommended the Ministry to maintain a synergy between these two policies. This can help improve connectivity, economic development, and security of the North-Eastern Region.

Joint Military Exercises: Expand "Milan" naval exercises, BIMSTEC disaster drills, and counter-terrorism ops. And Stronger Defence & Intelligence Ties. Collaboration with neighbouring countries serves India's strategic interests in countering Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This cooperation aligns with India's aspiration to become a 'net security provider' in the region, thereby enhancing regional stability and security. Resolving Border Disputes by Diplomatic Dialogue- Engage in peaceful negotiations (e.g., India-Bangladesh land swap, water-sharing treaties).

Countering Insurgency: Strengthen intelligence-sharing with Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar to curb cross-border militancy.

4. Diplomatic & Political Engagement

High-Level Visits & Multilateral Forums-

Frequent PM & EAM Visits: Personal diplomacy (like Modi's visits to Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh) builds trust. Cooperation with neighbouring partners is essential for India's leadership role as a representative of the Global South in various multilateral forums such as the UNSC, WTO, and IMF. Through engagement in multilateral fora, India introduces a regional/sub-regional dimension to bilateral relations, fostering a deeper understanding of the region.

It is common understanding that any relationship, whether it is between two individuals or between two nations, needs constant tending, regular dialogue and a lot of care and cooperation. The back-to-back visits of the Prime Ministers of Bhutan and India to each other's nations is a manifestation of this attention placed on the relationship by both governments. This is a good augury for the continued growth and development of India-Bhutan ties. It epitomises India's Neighbourhood First policy approach.

Revive SAARC or Strengthen BIMSTEC: Push for regional cooperation despite Pakistan's obstructionism And promote Proactive & Consistent Diplomacy

Support Democratic Forces and Back Pro-India Leaders-Engage with governments that share India's vision (e.g., Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Prachanda in Nepal).

Counter Chinese Political Influence- Monitor and counter China's interference in domestic politics (e.g., Maldives, Sri Lanka).

5. Leveraging Soft Power & Media Influence

Counter Chinese Propaganda: Expand DD India, All India Radio, and Indian digital media in regional languages. India's rich cultural and historical ties with its neighbours serve as a cornerstone of its soft power diplomacy. By promoting cultural exchanges and emphasising shared heritage, India strengthens people-to-people ties and enhances its influence in the region, exemplifying the potential of soft power diplomacy to bolster diplomatic relations, Promote Indian Tourism: Offer visa-on-arrival for neighbours to boost tourism and economic ties. One of its important manifestations in today's world is the large number of Yoga centers spread across the world. In 2014, the UN General Assembly recognized the 21st of June as the International Day of Yoga. It has been commemorated on that day across the world since 21st June 2015.

The five pillars of this soft power, used in a strategic sense are:

- A) Samman (dignity)
- B) Samvaad (dialogue)
- C) Samridhi (shared prosperity)
- D) Suruksha (regional and global security)
- E) Sanskriti evam Sabhayata (Cultural and civilizational links).

6. Addressing Energy Security

Cooperation with northern neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan, as well as countries in the Indian Ocean, is critical for ensuring India's energy security. With a significant portion of India's oil and gas imports travelling via sea routes, collaboration with neighbouring countries is indispensable to prevent disruptions in energy supplies. India's energy security has become even more precarious in the past 20 years, as the country's energy imports more than doubled to 40 percent of total energy requirements in 2022 from 18 percent in 2002. In the same period, however, the country diversified its energy partners from 14 to 32. These energy supplies and diversifications are essential to India's overall economic security as the country will require more and more energy supplies to reinforce its economy, which is growing at an annual rate of approximately 8 percent.

5. Conclusion

India's neighbourhood diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation over the past seven decades, shaped by changing geopolitical landscapes, regional aspirations, and global alignments. From its early post-independence years, when it emerged as a regional leader committed to non-alignment and peaceful coexistence, India has continuously sought to maintain cordial and influential relations with its immediate neighbours. However, this journey has not been without challenges. As the regional dynamics evolved, especially in the post-Cold War and post-liberalization era, India faced a dual challenge: managing its internal development priorities while responding to the growing strategic and economic presence of external actors, particularly China, in South Asia. The adoption of the "Neighbourhood First" policy in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked a renewed focus on India's immediate periphery. High-level diplomatic engagements, infrastructure investments, defence cooperation, and cultural diplomacy were reinvigorated to restore India's influence in the region. Symbolic gestures such as inviting regional leaders to swearing-in ceremonies were followed by tangible cooperation in connectivity, trade, energy, and security. Nonetheless, India's efforts have often been offset by internal administrative delays, inconsistent implementation of projects, and perceptions of a hegemonic attitude.

Moreover, while India emphasized soft power—such as shared cultural heritage, yoga diplomacy, and education—China capitalized on aggressive economic and strategic initiatives through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering faster execution and less conditional financial assistance to many of India's neighbours.

In recent years, political shifts within neighbouring countries have further complicated India's regional strategy. The removal of pro-India leaders and the rise of regimes more aligned with China or motivated by domestic nationalist sentiments have created fresh diplomatic challenges. For instance, the replacement of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh with Mohammad Yunis has strained what had been one of India's strongest bilateral relationships in the region. Similarly, the resurgence of pro-China elements in Maldives and political volatility in Nepal and Sri Lanka have required India to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances, often reacting to developments rather than shaping them. Going forward, India must reassess and recalibrate its approach to neighbourhood diplomacy with a greater sense of urgency, pragmatism, and long-term vision. India must deliver on infrastructure and development promises, ensure that aid and trade arrangements are equitable, and avoid perceptions of political interference. Prioritizing people-to-people connectivity, investing in digital and cross-border infrastructure, enhancing energy and water cooperation, and reinforcing security partnerships through joint exercises and intelligence sharing will be key components of success.

In conclusion, while India's influence in South Asia has visibly diminished in certain areas, it is far from irreversible. The country retains immense soft power, strategic depth, and economic leverage. By adopting a more inclusive, efficient, and empathetic foreign policy—one that acknowledges the sovereignty and aspirations of its neighbours—India can rebuild trust and reassert its leadership in South Asia. In a region where geography binds destinies, India's sustained commitment to its neighbourhood is not just a strategic necessity but a historical and civilizational imperative.

References

1. Appadorai, A. (1982). *Select documents on India's foreign policy and relations 1947–1972*, 1. Oxford University Press. Aurora, Bhavna Vij.

2. The Economic Times. (2014). http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-05-05/news/61833609_1_pm-narendra-m. (Accessed 2015 3-November). BBC. BBC News. 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35321974> (Accessed January 16, 2016).
3. BBC News. Pathankot: Gunmen attack India air force base. 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35211265> (accessed 2016 8-January). Behuria, 4. Ashok K., Smruti S. Pattanaik, and Arvind Gupta. "Does India Have a Neighbourhood Policy?" *Strategic analysis* 36, no. 2 (2012): 229-246.
4. Bhaumik, Subir Aljazeera. (2013). <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/2013171148400871>.
5. Html. (Accessed 2015 2-January). *Businessline, The hindu. India Bangladesh agree on power tariff await nod to start supplies*.
6. The Hindu Businessline. (2016). <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/india-bangladeshagree-on-power-tariff-await-nod-to-start-supplies/article8093174.ece>. (Accessed 2016 17-February).
7. Dutt, V.P. (2014). *India's foreign policy since independence*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2007. Ghimire, Y. Becoming best friends. *The Indian Express*. 2014. <http://indianexpress.com/article/>.
8. Ghimire, Yubaraj Madhesis. (2016). *Call off protest, fuel supply back as Nepal border blockaderemoved*. <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/madhesis-call-off-protest-endfive-month-long-indo-nepal-border-blockade/#sthash.gUyfTknv.dpuf>. (Accessed 2016 28-February).
9. Next door Nepal - china is welcome, India is not. *The Indian Express*. 2016. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/k-p-sharma-oli-nepal-india-relations-china-is-welcome2768662/#sthash.1GdrDGNn.dpuf> (accessed 2016 25-April).
10. Jacob, J. (2015). *PM talks of good neighbours, B2B ties in Bhutan*. *Hindustan Times*. 2014. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/pm-talks-of-good-neighbours-b2b-ties-in-bhutan/story0DyOUkSt7nd4l8FmNBYFsM.html>. (Accessed 2015 23-November).
11. <http://www.idsa.in/node/1555>. (Accessed 2015 27-O).
12. Sikri, Rajiv. (2009). *Challenge and strategy: Rethinking India's foreign policy*. *Sage Publications*, 23.
13. Vajpayee, Atal Bihari. (2003). *You can change friends, not neighbours*. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2003-05-09/news/27547221_1_india-and-pakistanjammu-and-kashmir-lahore-declaration. (Accessed July 26, 2016).
14. Muni, S.D. Problem area's in India's neighbourhood policy. *South Asian Survey*, 10(2).

Disclaimer / Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Journals and/or the editor(s). Journals and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.