

SIGNIFICANT SHIFTS IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES DURING MODI'S ERA

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Abstract— Since Narendra Modi took office as prime minister in 2014, she has worked hard to bring India to the level of a great power by strengthening its hegemonic position in South Asia and extending its influence into the Indian Ocean. In general, foreign policy has seen a great deal of success. However, five years after Modi took office and invited the leaders of all SAARC nations to his inauguration, the enthusiasm for his government's neighborhood policy and the effort put into promoting it appear to have waned, which has caused attention to turn to BIMSTEC. This essay examines India's bilateral ties with its neighbors and makes the case that the main issues stem from inadequate perception control and a lack of regional connectivity; there have been notable changes in India's foreign policy toward its neighboring countries during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. The main changes and advancements in India's diplomatic ties with its neighbors are examined in this article, along with the factors that influenced them and how they may affect regional geopolitics. This article analyses India's foreign policy dynamics during the Modi period by examining the country's interactions with Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Keywords— Modi Government, Foreign Policy, Sri Lanka, China influence, international relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's foreign policy towards its neighbors has always been crucial for national security, economic development, and regional stability. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has pursued a proactive and assertive approach in its neighborhood diplomacy, aiming to enhance connectivity, promote economic cooperation, and address security challenges. The Indian government body in charge of managing the country's international affairs is the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), sometimes called the International Ministry. India is a nuclear power in the region, a rising force globally, and a prospective superpower with the second-largest armed force, the fifth-largest nominal GDP, and the third-largest purchasing power parity economy (NBR, April 2, 2009). India is becoming more and more influential internationally and has a strong voice in world affairs. Centuries of economic exploitation by colonial powers have left India with severe social and financial problems.

Over the past 70 years, there have been a number of these changes, but they have ultimately added to continuity. The best way to characterize this phenomenon is as "transformation through incremental adaptation," according to foreign policy specialist C. Raja Mohan. While Indian foreign policy has evolved to reflect shifting geopolitical realities worldwide under previous prime ministers, Modi has given it fresh vibrancy and coherence.

India is entering uncharted territory as a result of his audacious actions, which are drawing the nation closer to the US while also reaching out to China and Pakistan on multiple occasions despite some setbacks. These actions are coupled with quick changes in the panorama of the world. The first step in evaluating the changes in India's foreign policy made by past Indian administrations is pinpointing "inflection points" in the world economy.

This article draws attention to the significant shifts and strategic realignments in India's foreign policy towards neighboring countries during the Modi era, analyzing these diplomatic initiatives' drivers, challenges, and outcomes. If Modi's foreign policy has been defined by an inclination to take risks and a desire to break with the past, he has also come under fire for putting appearances before content.

He is one of the few prime ministers from India who have spent enormous amounts of time and effort on foreign policy. He started his tenure as prime minister with a rush of foreign visits to large and smaller countries (Basrur 2017: 7).

He has, therefore, clearly departed from some aspects of earlier Indian foreign policy while enhancing and broadening already-existing ties in other areas (Ganguly, 2017a, pp. 131–143).

India's neighborhood policy since independence has been predicated on the idea that "the Subcontinent is India's

exclusive sphere of impact and New Delhi must strive to combat the intervention of great powers in the affairs of the region" Chandra, V. (2017). "India would neither intervene in the internal affairs of any states in the particular region, unless requested to do so, nor tolerate such intervention by an outside power," declared Indira Gandhi. Garcia Gonzalez, E. A. (2015). "States should first look within the region for help" if external assistance is needed to address an internal crisis (Devotta, 2003, pp. 367–368).

The new approach improved India's "ability to pursue its interests with minimal reference to other major powers" at the regional level (Hall 2016: 3) while leading India to "emphasize an institutionalized, classic multilateralism" (Narlikar 2013: 596) at the global level.

The security challenges India faces due to its neighbors have significant implications for its national security and foreign policy. The longstanding conflicts and territorial disputes with Pakistan have created a pervasive security dilemma in the region, encompassing various issues such as territorial conflicts, energy shortages, and geopolitical tensions. Additionally, internal security challenges like Naxalism and religious violence further complicate India's path to becoming a great power (Pardesi, 2015).

The open border shared by India and Nepal presents security challenges that both countries must address (Aryal, 2022). Furthermore, India's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean reflects India's broader external security concerns (Khalid, 2021). India's foreign policy is shaped by contemporary security challenges, emphasizing the need for strategic responses to regional threats (Mukherjee & Malone, 2011).

The common non-traditional security challenges faced by India and Pakistan underscore the shared complexities in the region (Mahsood, 2023). Post-Cold War developments have prompted a re-evaluation of the India-Pakistan relationship and the Kashmir issue (Baba, 2014). India's role as a global security actor sheds light on the constraints and challenges India faces in navigating a multi-polar world (Schöttli & Pauli, 2014).

The implications of these security challenges extend beyond bilateral relations, impacting regional dynamics and strategic partnerships (Gopal & Ahlawat, 2015). The strategic uncertainty in India's nuclear doctrine further complicates the security landscape in South Asia (Hayat et al., 2020). The geopolitical contest for the Indo-Pacific between China and India enhances another layer of complexity to India's security concerns (Robertson et al., 2019).

Since the start of the economic reform program in 1991, India has changed its own. Globalization and economic liberalization have increased GDP growth rates.

Redistributive policies persist even as socialist planning policies are abandoned because in democracies, the more people with low incomes, the more they matter.

India's human development index is still poor and ranks at the bottom of middle-income nations. As a result, maintaining regional and international peace and creating an atmosphere conducive to rapid economic growth continue to be the primary goals of foreign policy. Additional goals include the security of energy, food, and water; the safety of Indians living abroad; and global concerns, including the environment, fair trade, and nuclear disarmament.

The steps taken by the current Modi government toward other states after he took office as head of the state on May 26, 2014, are the subject of the Modi Doctrine, often known as the foreign policy of the Modi administration (Harsh et al., February 2015). India's foreign policy is implemented by the Ministry of External Affairs, which External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar leads. The present goal of Modi's foreign policy is to strengthen ties with South Asian neighbors. (Lakshmi, Rama. "Modi's speech in Nepal shows India is paying attention to its neighbors." Washington Post. He was accessed on August 6, 2014).

Interactions with the major world powers and Southeast Asia's broader surroundings. In the first 100 days of his administration, he traveled on official business to Bhutan, Nepal, and Japan. US, Myanmar, Australia, and Fiji.

Under the approval of Western nations such as the US, Modi traveled abroad on multiple occasions while serving as the chief minister of Gujarat to strengthen his commercial ties with significant Asian economies. This involved getting to know Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe personally over two meetings in 2007 and 2012. (Swarajeev Rao June of 2014) According to departing Israeli Ambassador Alon Ushpiz, he also pursued investment agreements with China [Zeenews. India.com2014) and Israel (Moskowitz July 2014), who aimed to expand commercial relations beyond defense and agriculture. (Indian Times, August 5, 2014). His efforts to host the biennial Vibrant Gujarat international business event, which welcomed investment and bolstered the state's reputation as a pro-development and business-friendly destination, were warmly received.(The Times of India August 2014).

Modi, the newly elected prime minister, dispelled the notion that he was a hardliner even before he officially entered office by calling the leaders of the state and the governments of India's neighbors to his first foreign policy declaration. Nearly all of the SAARC presidents were present at Modi's swearing-in event, along with Mauritius' Navin Ramgoolam, an observer at the organization. Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Tshering Tobgay of Bhutan, Abdulla Yameen of the Maldives, Sushil Koirala of Nepal, Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka, and Navin Ramgoolam of Mauritius were among the guests. Also, Speaker of the House of Representatives Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury arrived. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, also traveled for the ceremony. Notably, the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-

exile, Lobsang Sangay, was also relaxing in the press gallery. Uppuluri Krishna (May 25, 2014).

II. SHIFTS IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

1. India-Pakistan Relations:

India's neighborhood is the government of Narendra Modi's primary foreign policy objective. After visiting Bhutan, India's neighbor, on his first official overseas trip, Modi traveled to every country whose borders are connected with India in less than a year, except Pakistan and the Maldives, where a scheduled visit was abruptly canceled owing to political difficulties. In an unprecedented move, he called Mauritius and the other seven SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014. The next day, he held his first round of meetings with these leaders, which included Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He is scheduled to travel to Pakistan for the SAARC summit in late 2016, marking the first visit to the nation by an Indian prime minister.

India and Pakistan have fought three major wars over Kashmir and one on Bangladesh since gaining their independence almost 70 years ago. Following their respective acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998, these turned into less forceful military conflicts. After his predecessor discontinued bilateral peace negotiations over a spike in aggression and firing by Pakistan across the Line of Control (LoC) dividing the conflict situation in the Kashmir region, Modi inherited tense relations with Pakistan.

The India-Pakistan relationship has been marked by persistent tensions and occasional escalations, particularly in the aftermath of terrorist attacks and cross-border infiltrations. However, Modi's tenure witnessed both highs and lows in bilateral ties, with moments of diplomatic engagement and periods of heightened hostilities. The Modi government's initial efforts to engage with Pakistan, such as the surprise visit to Lahore in 2015, aimed at exploring possibilities for peace and reconciliation. However, subsequent incidents like the Pathankot attack and the Uri attack led to a downturn in relations, with India adopting a more assertive stance, including surgical strikes and diplomatic isolation of Pakistan on the international stage.

2. India-China Relations:

A complex interplay of cooperation, competition, and occasional confrontation has characterized India's relationship with China. It is critical to understand that India, under Modi, is approaching China as a nation seeking to close the power disparity with an asymmetric neighbor and competitor. As a result, India under Modi has chosen a hybrid approach to China that combines collaboration and deterrence at the same time. India and China collaborate at several multilateral forums, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the G-20, the SCO, and the BRICS. At the same time, India is

investigating potential strategies to thwart Chinese ambition in the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific region, and the Himalayas.

Additionally, India is attempting to counter China's unilateral ambitious actions, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. However, India does not have a practical strategy to match or overtake China's military and economic might. India's response to this has been a protracted diplomatic battle. However, isolating China diplomatically is difficult in an era where China wields decisive influence over numerous nations on multiple continents through its numerous infrastructure projects, loans, and propaganda apparatus. China's reaction to Modi's 2014 inauguration as prime minister was friendly. China congratulated Modi on his election victory.

Nevertheless, China's reaction to India became muted as soon as Prime Minister Modi made hints that a visit to Arunachal Pradesh was imminent. China strongly objected and demanded that the trip be canceled. The Chinese State's main takeaway for India was to avoid becoming involved in delicate matters. However, Prime Minister Modi refused to buy peace by appeasing the dragon. He knew that previous attempts at conciliation and compromise with China had failed. During the Modi era, concerted efforts have strengthened economic ties and enhanced people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. However, strategic mistrust and unresolved border disputes have remained significant challenges, especially along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The Doklam standoff 2017 underscored the regional tensions and strategic competition between India and China. Despite efforts to maintain stability and manage differences through mechanisms like the Wuhan and Mamallapuram summits, the border clashes in Galwan Valley in 2020 further strained bilateral relations, leading to a re-evaluation of India's strategic approach towards China.

3. India-Bangladesh Relations:

India-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated as a result of New Delhi's inability to take advantage of the favorable political conditions in Bangladesh since Sheikh Hasina of the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) held power in recent years and has taken significant political risks to revitalize bilateral relations since 2008. Bureaucratic inertia and a political deficit have prevented India from making substantial progress on unsolved bilateral issues. Bangladesh and India have developed closer ties recently, so Dhaka is New Delhi's most important strategic ally in this region. When New Delhi and Dhaka acknowledged the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea's verdict in July 2014, a protracted dispute over maritime orders was settled.

During Modi's June 2015 visit to Bangladesh, the two countries signed ratification paperwork for a land border agreement whereby Bangladesh agreed to return 51 enclaves to India while India vowed to restore 111

enclaves to Dhaka. Then Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj refuted longstanding criticisms of India's substantial brotherly mentality by saying in parliament that "Elder Brother" symbolized a caring mentality, but "Big Brother" was a sign of arrogance. An additional \$500 million was added to an existing \$4.5 billion credit line for Bangladesh's purchase of defense equipment during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in April 2017. Bangladesh is currently leading India's counterterrorism efforts. Under the Modi government, India's relations with Bangladesh have witnessed a significant transformation, marked by closer cooperation across various sectors, including trade, connectivity, and security. The signing of landmark agreements such as the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and the Teesta River water-sharing pact signaled a new era of strategic cooperation and mutual trust between both states. India's proactive engagement with Bangladesh, including infrastructure development projects and defense cooperation, has strengthened bilateral ties and fostered regional stability.

4. India-Nepal Relations:

Nepal's geostrategic significance and cultural ties with India make it a crucial partner in India's neighborhood diplomacy. However, bilateral relations between India and Nepal have experienced ups and downs, with periods of friction and misunderstandings. The promulgation of Nepal's new constitution in 2015 and subsequent protests by Madhesi groups strained relations between the two countries, leading to a blockade of essential supplies from India. Mr Narendra Modi became India's Prime Minister following the Bhartiya Janata Party's resounding victory in the 2014 election. In August 2014, Modi visited Nepal as part of his "Neighbourhood First Policy." After a successful tour, Modi addressed Nepal's Constituent Assembly for the first time as a foreign leader.

India requested specific changes to the Nepalese constitution under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, there was evidence of a widening divide in Nepal-Indian relations with the election of K P Oli. The relations between India and Nepal thus suffered another setback in 2015. India conducted an unofficial blockade to keep vital supplies out of the nation while discussing its reservations about the new constitution. However, we also saw India's prompt action following the devastating earthquake that rocked Nepal. It sent US\$ 67 million in relief supplies to Nepal. Relationships between India and Nepal are far more than just treaties and accords. Both nations have regularly arranged exchanges and visits, demonstrating their value to one another. However, since Modi's ascent, bilateral ties between India and Nepal have been altered. The relationship has seen a crisis due to Modi's concerns about Nepal's constitution and the introduction of the economic embargo, which has infuriated many Nepalese. The Modi government's efforts to address the problems of the Madhesi community and restore normalcy in bilateral relations underscored its commitment to maintaining stability and promoting development in Nepal.

5. India-Sri Lanka Relations:

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean region and its cultural ties with India have shaped bilateral relations between the two countries. During the Modi era, India has sought to deepen economic engagement, enhance security cooperation, and address issues of mutual concern with Sri Lanka. On September 26, 2020, Prime Minister Shri. Narendra Modi and Prime Minister H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka conducted a Virtual Bilateral Summit (VBS), which key Ministers and officials from both countries also attended. This was not just the first VBS that an Indian prime minister had with a neighboring country but also the first for Prime Minister H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa following the August 2020 legislative elections. For his first foreign tour as President, Sri Lanka's H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksa traveled to India from November 28 to 30, 2019, where he had bilateral talks with the Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, and NSA.

On February 7–11, 2020, Prime Minister H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa made his first international journey since taking office, paying a State Visit to India. Since 2015, the Sri Lankan public and leadership have joined the High Commission of India in fervently celebrating the International Day of Yoga (IDY) in Sri Lanka yearly. On June 21, 2021, the 7th "International Yoga Day" was celebrated at a special yoga session conducted virtually by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces in collaboration with the High Commission of India and the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Colombo. However, China's growing influence in Sri Lanka, primarily through infrastructure projects like the Hambantota port, has raised strategic anxieties for India. The Modi government's emphasis on people-centric development initiatives and cultural diplomacy has sought to counterbalance China's expanding footprint in Sri Lanka.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the security challenges posed by India's neighbors have multifaceted implications for India's national security, foreign policy, and regional stability. Unlike past leaders, he recognizes the significance of a nation such as China and the need to preserve delicate balances between nations to encourage domestic growth and development. Realistically speaking, he knows that greater regional cooperation and stability in South Asia will facilitate this. Even with this, it will be difficult for PM Modi to advance a realistic agenda in India's best interests, given China's unwavering resistance. Addressing these challenges demands a nuanced understanding of the complex geopolitical dynamics in South Asia.

India's foreign policy towards its neighboring countries has undergone significant transformations during the Modi era, reflecting the government's proactive and pragmatic approach to regional diplomacy. While notable achievements have strengthened ties with countries like Bangladesh and Bhutan, challenges persist in managing relations with Pakistan and China, given the enduring security concerns and strategic competition. As India

navigates the complex geopolitical landscape of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, maintaining a delicate balance between engagement and assertiveness will be crucial for safeguarding its national interests and promoting regional stability in the years to come.

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