



## **INDIA'S 'NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY' UNDER NARENDRA MODI ADMINISTRATION: AN ANALYSIS**

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### **Abstract:**

Once, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee said, 'You Can Change Your Friends, But not Neighbours'. Neighbouring countries play very crucial role in maintaining regional Peace, Security and Cooperation. In 2014, when Shri. Narendra Modi assumed the office of Prime Minister; He paid his first official bilateral foreign visit to Bhutan. The second official bilateral foreign visit was to Nepal. Modi administration's these initial visits highlight the approach of the government to International Politics. Since 2014, Modi government has been working on strengthening India's position in the regional politics and consolidation of relations with neighbouring countries through initiatives such as Development diplomacy, Economic cooperation, Political relations through regular visits, Social diplomacy and Security and Defence Cooperation.

The realistic approach of newly formed government to International Politics, pursue the National Interests of India in the region. Under Modi administration India has successfully maintained cordial relations with neighbouring countries but countries like Pakistan and China continue to pose the challenge to India. Pakistan's cross border terrorism and China's String of Pearls policy try to challenge the influence of India in the region. India has strategically succeeded in countering these two major security challenges. This article studies the Indian endeavors to maintain the cordial relations with neighbouring countries and also countering the major political, economic and security challenges from the region.

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### **Introduction:**

Every region has certain common regional goals in international politics such as Peace, Security, Economic prosperity and scientific development. To pursue these goals each and every country in International Politics tries to establish cooperation with regional states, primarily with neighbouring states. The regional cooperation and friendly relations not only help in achieving the regional aspirations but also increases the collective bargaining power of the region in International Politics.

Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi focuses primarily upon establishing cordial relations with neighbouring countries. When Narendra Modi was elected as the Prime Minister in 2014, he took a historic decision by inviting the SAARC states (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) for his swearing-in ceremony<sup>1</sup>. Leaders from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Mauritius



(Who is not a member of SAARC) attended swearing-in ceremony<sup>2</sup> in 2014. In 2019, when Narendra Modi was reelected to the office of Prime Minister he invited the BIMSTEC nations for his swearing-in ceremony. For 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive term as a Prime Minister, Narendra Modi again invited leaders from neighbourhood and Indian Ocean region. Leaders from Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, Bangladesh, Mauritius, Nepal and Bhutan accepted the invitation by Narendra Modi<sup>3</sup>. Calling leaders from regional organizations or neighbourhood for a swearing in ceremony was not a general decision. It highlights the Modi Administration's policy towards establishing regional cooperation and peace.

Though Narendra Modi Administration has been focusing and taking initiatives to establish good relations with neighbouring nations, states like Pakistan and China continue with the challenging moves against India to instable the region. Pakistan's Cross border terrorism and China's desire to establish dominance in the region pose challenge to Indian position in the region. While dealing with these cases, Realistic approach of government of India can be observed. On realistic lines, Modi Administration has countered the endeavors of Pakistan and China to instable the region.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's Foreign Policy has been giving utmost importance to the doctrine of 'Neighbourhood First'. This approach places states from South Asia at focal point of India's foreign policy. Let us discuss the Indian endeavors to establish cordial relations with neighbouring countries for Peace, Security and Prosperity in the region.

#### **Relations with Himalayan Nations (Nepal and Bhutan):**

Nepal and Bhutan share deep rooted Historical, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural linkages with India since ages. Modi administration since 2014 has been trying to consolidate these relations further to institute the unbreakable bond with these two Himalayan Nations. In 2014, when Mr. Narendra Modi assumed the office of Prime Minister for first time, his first bilateral visit destination was Bhutan (15-16 June, 2014)<sup>4</sup>. The second bilateral visit was paid to state Nepal (November 26, 2014)<sup>5</sup> becoming the first Indian Prime Minister in 17 years to visit Nepal. These visits carry very strong symbolic and strategic significance. These two buffer states (between India and China) are very important to India from point of view of Territorial integrity.

Modi administration has strategically reaffirmed the friendship with these two Nations. Continuous High-Level Political visits are being conducted from both the sides. Infrastructural and developmental initiatives such as launching 'Jayanagar-Kurtha' railway line<sup>6</sup> and inaugurating South Asia's first cross-border oil (petroleum) pipeline 'Motihari-Amlekhgunj' (on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019)<sup>7</sup> in Nepal have increased engagements between India-Nepal. People to People contact and trusts are built with such initiatives. Humanitarian assistance such as 'Operation Maitri' during 2015 Nepal earthquake has earned goodwill for India under leadership of PM Narendra Modi. Equal emphasis has been given on developing cultural and religious linkages with initiatives such as development of Ramayana Circuit and Buddhist Circuit. Power and Energy sectors have been key sectors for developing cooperation between India and Nepal. Modi administration has developed these sectors further with considerable weightage.



Bhutan was the first foreign country visited by Modi. It highlights the special place of Bhutan under the foreign policy of India. Continuous high level meets have been arranged to strengthen the relations. India is Bhutan's top trade partner, since 2014 India's trade with Bhutan has substantially increased from USD 484 million in 2014-15 to USD 1,777.44 million in 2024-25, accounting for over 80% of Bhutan's trade<sup>8</sup>. During the Doklam standoff between India and China highlights Modi government's commitment of defending territorial interests of Bhutan. Hydropower Cooperation is one of the key factors for the cooperation between two nations, by inaugurating the 'Mangdechhu Hydro Project' in 2019 PM Modi strengthen it further. India was the first country to supply COVID vaccines to Bhutan under 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative. New areas have been developed by two nations for collaboration such as space technology, climate change, education sector, connectivity projects, digital and financial sectors.

#### **Relations with neighbouring countries in Indian Ocean Region (IOR):**

##### **Sri Lanka:**

India shares very ancient cultural, religious and linguistic ties with Sri Lanka. Since 2014, India's foreign policy has given priority to restoring the mutual trust and cooperation. In 2015, PM Narendra Modi paid visit to Sri Lanka, becoming first Indian Prime Minister to visit Sri Lanka in past 28 years. So far he has paid three visits to Sri Lanka Since 2014. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka 7 times since 2019<sup>9</sup>. These visits highlighted the intension of the government to improve the relations strategically and diplomatically. In 2022 when Sri Lanka faced the Economic Crisis, India was the top lender to her disbursing USD 377 million in loans<sup>10</sup>. India is the largest trading partner to Sri Lanka, with that India is also one of the largest foreign direct investor in Sri Lanka investing USD 2.2 billion till 2023.

In March 2015 PM Narendra Modi unveiled his strategic vision for the Indian Ocean with SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative. Sri Lanka is a key country in this initiative, being neighbouring country of India and strategically located in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka is becoming major beneficiary of this initiative, building the relations between India and Sri Lanka. But still concerns are raised by India due to Chinese presence at Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka. Under pressure from India, Sri Lanka denies permission to Chinese 'Spy' Vessels to Dock for one year<sup>11</sup>. India has strategically responded to this threat by building Security, Developmental and Political Engagements.

##### **Maldives:**

Due to its strategic location, Maldives holds significant position in Indian Ocean Region. In India's Maritime security policy, Maldives occupies important status as she is located near key ocean routes of communication. Fire erupted in the complex of Male Water and Sewerage Company on December 4, 2024, due to which Maldives faced water crisis. Under 'Operation Neer' within 12 hours of the request government of Maldives, India sent fresh water to Maldives<sup>12</sup>. This Humanitarian assistance operation by newly elected Modi government strengthened India-Maldives relations during crisis period. Despite this initial gesture of India, under leadership of President Abdulla Yameen India-Maldives relations remained strained. Maldives moves closer to China by joining China's Belt and Road Initiative. In 2018 when Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih became the President of



Maldives, he reaffirmed his country's 'India First' foreign policy<sup>13</sup>. Several high level visits were conducted between two states.

India is Funding the largest infrastructure project in Maldives named 'Greater Male Connectivity Project' with grant of USD 100 million and Line of Credit of 400 million<sup>14</sup>. India equally focuses upon building Security and Defence Cooperation with Maldives through conducting regular joint Military exercise 'Ekuverin' as well as by providing Patrol vessels, Radar system and communication networks. But again under the President Mohamed Mauizzu India-Maldives relations changed the trajectory when he called for 'India Out'. Maldives again accelerated the engagements with China.

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 2025 PM Narendra Modi participated in 60<sup>th</sup> Independence Day celebration of Maldives as the Guest of Honour, marking the reset in bilateral ties. Both countries reviewed the progress of the 'Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership', a joint vision adopted by India and Maldives on October 2024 during the State visit of the President of Maldives to India. Both States have called for further strengthening defence and maritime security cooperation under the Colombo Security Conclave<sup>15</sup>. India and Maldives reaffirmed that as Global South partners, they would continue to work on issues such as Climate Change, Weather Science, Disaster risk reduction and promotion of renewable energy. Thus, even if relations between India-Maldives strained due to domestic politics but ultimately reset by deep Strategic, Economic, Security and People to People ties.

#### **Neighbouring countries on Eastern Front:**

##### **Myanmar:**

Myanmar is the only country which gives land access to the ASEAN countries as she is the only ASEAN country sharing land border with India. Myanmar is also the key country when it is about India's 'Act East Policy'. Myanmar is also a crucial territory for North-East India's security. Modi Administration has strategically and diplomatically established relations with Civilian as well as Military leadership (After the 2021 Military Coup) of Myanmar.

Myanmar provides good support to India when the question is about India's territorial integrity. Myanmar has an agreement with India which allows Indian troops to enter the Myanmar's territory to deal with the territorial threats. On June 4, 2015 Indian Security personnel were attacked in Chandel, Manipur. Indian Army's Para Commandoes carried out surgical operation deep inside the Myanmar territory and killed several militants in two separate camps<sup>16</sup>. India has strengthened relations with Myanmar through regular High level visits, developing connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, diplomatic and humanitarian affairs even after the military coup. India supports restoration of Democracy in Myanmar for better future of Indo-Myanmar relations.

##### **Bangladesh:**

Modi administration has successfully strengthened relations with Bangladesh driven by Political engagements, Economic relations, Developmental endeavors and Security Cooperation. The major milestone was set by the Land Boundary Agreement, which came into force in 2015, allowing 51 erstwhile Bangladesh enclaves in India



and 111 erstwhile Indian enclaves in Bangladesh to transfer<sup>17</sup>. This peaceful settlement of decades old issue is one of the major diplomatic triumphs of Modi Administration, consolidating relations with Bangladesh further. India is the second largest trade partner of Bangladesh in Asia. Indian investments in Bangladesh are rising significantly in various sectors such as power, textiles and pharmaceuticals<sup>18</sup>. India has also focused upon developing relations through Energy cooperation, supplying 1160 MW of electricity to Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh under 50:50 joint venture are developing 1,320 MW coal fired power station named “Maitree” Super Thermal Power Project. Through Rail, Road and Inland Waterways India-Bangladesh are developing Connectivity and Transport Cooperation.

#### **Challenges to Regional Stability by China and Pakistan**

China being one of the leading territories in Asia considers India as the major competitor in the region. China poses challenge to Indian territorial Integrity, Economic and Political interests. China’s String of Pearls policy tries to encircle India to pose threat to her and create the environment of Insecurity and Suspicion. Chinese aggressive behavior about the territorial disputes brings India-China in the conflicts. In year 2020 India-China faced very serious confrontation at Galwan Valley. China’s Debt trap policy gives China access to the foreign territories. Presence of Chinese submarines and Spy ships in Indian Ocean Region challenge India’s maritime security. China’s ambitious Road and Belt initiative is the major concern for India. Though China has been challenging the authority of India, Modi administration has successfully countered China on the realistic lines of foreign Policy.

Pakistan continues to act against the interests of India. Since 2014, India-Pakistan relations have seen major deadlocks. Modi administration has shown zero tolerance to Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Pathankot attack of 2016, Uri Attack of 2016, Pulwama attack of 2019 and recent terrorists attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir have seen the staunch counter reply from India. In India-Pakistan relations we can observe the breakdown of trust and thereby the relations.

#### **Conclusion:**

In 2014, when Mr. Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India, one can observe the prioritized developments in improving relations with the neighbouring countries to establish peace, security and cooperation in the region, particularly in South Asia. Though India wants the cordial relations with all the neighbouring countries, Indian government is seen tilting towards the realistic approach of foreign Policy. India has successfully maintained the cordial relations with her neighbors and countered the challenges posed by the competitors and rivals. India with her Economic, Political and Military strengths influences the regional politics greatly. India is the largest democracy in South Asia, supporting the democratic processes in the neighbourhood. India’s ‘Neighbourhood First policy’ has gained significant momentum under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi.



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