



## Prime minister Narendra Modi's regional strategy in South Asia: Opportunities and challenges

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### Abstract

India's regional strategy towards South Asian countries has shown both elements of continuity and new challenges under Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. PM Modi's administration has followed a proactive and assertive regional strategy, emphasizing the principle of 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy.' The main aim of this approach is to strengthen economic ties, enhance connectivity, and foster security cooperation with South Asian countries. Key initiatives include infrastructural projects, energy partnerships, and increased diplomatic engagements. However, India's regional policy faces significant challenges, including enduring geopolitical rivalries, notably with China, and complex bilateral issues with neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Nepal. Additionally, domestic political dynamics and border security concerns have at times strained relations. Despite these challenges, Modi's foreign policy continues to build on traditional diplomatic frameworks while seeking to address new regional dynamics through a combination of diplomatic outreach, economic initiatives, and strategic partnerships. This balance of continuity and adaptation reflects India's evolving role and aspirations in South Asia.

This paper examines the efficacy of PM Narendra Modi's regional strategy through a critical analysis of key events, policy decisions, and their outcomes. It also considers the broader implications for South Asian regionalism and India's engagement as a potential leader in fostering a cooperative and prosperous regional order. It attempts to highlight India's South Asian policies under PM Narendra Modi, their relations with South Asian countries and resolutions of disputes in the region.

**Keywords:** South Asia, regional strategy, neighbour and act east policy

### Introduction

The South Asian region possesses significant economic potential, supported by its expansive and diverse markets, greater natural resources. While South Asian countries share similarities in language, economy, culture, politics, administration, and legal processes, the region is far from homogeneous (Anwar 2020) [2]. In South Asia, there are numerous opportunities for development, but there are also so many challenges. In contemporary times, South Asia is one of the large integrated spaces and South Asian trade has been plagued by high costs and significant delays in the exchange of goods and services. In South Asian countries, intra-regional commerce accounts for just approximately 5% of overall trade. This potential remains largely untapped due to underdeveloped cross-border transport infrastructure and inadequate trade facilitation (Kumar and George 2020). The big barriers to regional growth and economic integration lies in the lack connectivity. South Asian nations are better associated now compared to 2010; connectivity amid India and Pakistan has gradually declined. At the same time, the advantages of better connectivity are not shared equally. Connectivity challenges differ between large economies and island, mountainous, or landlocked countries in South Asia. We have found that regional integration challenges have increased over time, while regional cooperation has slowed down in South Asia (De, 2023) [8].

In the South Asian region trade regarded as major force behind regional integration and prosperity. Most countries in the region have adopted policies to promote both global and regional trade. To support this, efforts have been made to enhance connectivity through improved infrastructure and trade facilitation measures. Stronger transport networks, efficient border management, and digital trade systems help boost international trade. Since trade and connectivity are

closely linked, better infrastructure supports cross-border trade more effectively than domestic trade. However, challenges such as trade barriers, regulatory differences, and political tensions continue to limit regional trade potential (Brook, 2016) [5].

This region holds vast trade and economic possibilities, especially with reference to India, and its influence is continuously growing worldwide. India's focus on strengthening economic and strategic ties within the Asian region stems from its 'Look East' policy, introduced in 1991. This policy marked a pivotal shift in India's foreign relations, emphasizing greater engagement with East and Southeast Asian nations. It was a time when the Indian government started its economic reforms and liberalization program (Chanda & Sasidaran, 2008) [6]. Since becoming Prime Minister of India in the year 2014, Shri Narendra Modi has prioritized the "Neighborhood First" policy initiative, aiming to enhance relationships neighboring countries, particularly in South Asia. In 2014, PM Narendra Modi announces Neighborhood First Policy, invites all SAARC country leaders to his swearing in ceremony and attends the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit in Kathmandu (Xavier, 2020) [28]. This was to indicate that the neighborhood was the top priorities of Modi's government (Muni, 2015) [14]. At the 2014 SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, PM Narendra Modi advocated for the 'revitalization' and 'reinvigoration' of SAARC. He promised to help his on issues of trade, transit, visas, investments, education, health, communication and space technologies (Sidhu & Godbole, 2015) [24]. PM Narendra Modi's government's 'Neighborhood First Policy' is founded on four key principles. The first emphasizes giving priority to "political and diplomatic engagement with neighboring countries and island nations in the Indian Ocean". Second, India supports

its neighbors when needed by providing resources, equipment, and training. Third, “a crucial aspect of the policy is strengthening connectivity and integration to facilitate the free flow of goods, people, energy, capital, and information”. Finally, the fourth element focuses on promoting a regionalism model led by India that aligns with the interests and needs of its neighboring countries (Pal, 2018)<sup>[15]</sup>.

PM Modi’s strategy observed as a combination of collaboration and challenges. A key strength of Modi’s foreign policy is his active involvement in regional forums and initiatives. He took part in organizations like SAARC to increase economic and political collaboration. e SAARC to foster economic and political collaboration. Under his leadership, the NDA alliance continues to promote regional connectivity. Programs like SASEC and BIMSTEC highlights its commitment to regional integration. Though, his foreign policy has encountered difficulties in encouraging regional integration. Ongoing historical tensions and geo- political issues, particularly of Pakistan, have created major problems in cooperation in the South Asia. Despite initial efforts, the SAARC process has struggled due to conflicts between member countries, hindering regional integration (Kumarasingha, 2024)<sup>[12]</sup>.

### Regional Cooperation in South Asia

South Asia is a strategically important space with limitless economic opportunities. Symbiotic regional integration has been seen as an important way for increasing economic growth and stability in the political terms in the region. However, the region has encountered several obstacles to achieving effective integration, including political conflicts, trade imbalances, and infrastructure deficiencies (Rao, 2012)<sup>[19]</sup>. Infrastructure development has also been impeded by the lack of regional cohesion. A fragmented network of infrastructure with limited connectivity across nations is the outcome of the region’s countries’ lack of coordination. Promoting regional commerce and investment has become difficult as a result of this impeding the growth of transportation and communication networks. Further, the absence of proper regional integration has also hindered efforts to address issues related to social development, such as poverty, health, and education (Kumarasingha, 2024)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Indian attitude on South Asia has been shaped by its geographical expansion, historical legacy, and self-perception as the region’s major power. This was demonstrated by Nehru’s security treaties with Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim, and later by Indira Gandhi’s proactive regional strategy, notably the 1971 Bangladesh intervention, which crystallized the ‘Indira Doctrine’. Following the Cold War, the ‘Gujral Doctrine’ marked a shift toward diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation with the neighbouring countries. However, initiatives like SAARC and SAFTA have yielded limited success, largely due to Indo-Pakistani tensions and India’s preference for bilateralism over multilateral frameworks (Stroikos, 2024)<sup>[26]</sup>.

India is adapting to globalization in 1990sand shifting power dynamics by enhancing economic performance and foreign policy engagement. It actively pursues regional trade agreements and border trade reforms. While geo-economics has not substituted geo-politics, emerging economic opportunities could reshape regional geopolitics, influencing India’s strategic positioning in Asia and beyond.

Accelerated growth and policies of trade and investment liberalization have also influenced India’s foreign policy (Sachdeva, 2011)<sup>[21]</sup>.

There are a number of agreements in existing to promote trade and cooperation South Asia. Further, to promote strategic alliances amongst South Asian nations, “the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was founded”. The SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was formed in 1994, followed by the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement a decade later in 2004 (which took effect in 2006) (Sinha & Saren, 2020)<sup>[25]</sup>.

The agreement of SAFTA was signed during the SAARC summit in Pakistan to develop free trade zone for 1.4 billion peoples on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2006. It came in to force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2006. It said that India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to reduce tariffs by 20% by 2007 and remove them by 2012. However, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, being less developed, got three extra years to remove tariffs completely (Akram, Ciddikie, & Khan, 2014)<sup>[1]</sup>. SAARC’s recent performance has been unsatisfactory. Pakistan’s obstructive stance has caused problems within SAARC. The 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, scheduled for Kathmandu in 2014, was cancelled due to Pakistan’s refusal to cooperate. SAARC has had various issues since the postponement of SAARC 2016 meeting. Because of the terror attack in Uri, India and the other three countries have boycotted this summit (Kaura, 2019)<sup>[10]</sup>.

The Bay of Bengal initiative for multi-sectoral technical and economic cooperation (BIMSTEC) has increased growing importance in the global space. India has given more emphasis to BIMSTEC during 2014-1919. In 2016, BIMSTEC leaders participated actively in the outreach summit of BRICS in Goa. Additionally, member countries adopted a resolution condemning terrorism and terrorist organizations. Discussions within BIMSTEC have also covered key issues such as climate change, visa facilitation, energy collaboration, and poverty alleviation. After achieving political victory, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited the leaders of BIMSTEC for his oath ceremony for his second term in May 2019, they reaffirmed their support for India, marking a notable shift in regional diplomacy. In 2016, during the Goa summit, PM Modi declared BIMSTEC as a crucial component of India’s neighborhood policy. Furthermore, India clarified that the objective of BIMSTEC is not merely to isolate Pakistan but to foster trade, economic growth, and strategic partnerships among its member countries (Bramhayya, 2020)<sup>[4]</sup>.

### PM Narendra Modi’s Regional Strategy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a charismatic leader who pursued foreign policy in a more assertive manner during his short stint and based his policies on economic pragmatism (Poudel, 2015)<sup>[17]</sup>. He has focused more on strengthening cooperation with South Asian countries, which is reflected in his foreign policy. His foreign policy has focused on soft nationalism, strengthening relations with Asian nations, and promoting a market-driven economy to build strategic partnerships.” Modi’s foreign policy has encouraged new Asianism, soft nationalism, and market-oriented economy to play a vital role in the contemporary global world” (Bramhayya, 2020)<sup>[4]</sup>.

India will aim to form strategic alliances with big nations while also pursuing a dynamic neighborhood foreign policy in the South Asian region. Indian diplomacy has prioritized

bilateral connections with its South Asian neighbors. But considering the geopolitical situation, India needs to resolve its issues with neighboring countries to uphold strong relations (Kaura 2020). PM Narendra Modi being an excellent and charismatic figure and he increased the dynamism in the Indian foreign policy. C. Raja Mohan has examined the development of Indian foreign policy, paying particular attention to the Republic. According to his analysis, 'First Republic' indicates from the initial independence time to the advent of liberalization era and the 'Second Republic' indicates post-cold war period; and whereas the 'Third Republic' has witnessed the multi-alignment and furthering India's image in the global world (Mohan, 2015) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Narendra Modi became first time India's Prime Minister in 2014, marking a significant moment in the nation's political landscape. A prominent figure in Indian politics for decades, Narendra Modi's government was marked as a shift towards new era of governance and India's development in various sectors. He is recognized for his strong leadership style, which has been instrumental in implementing a series of reforms in the economy aimed to enhance India's economic progress and increasing India's influence in world-wide. Additionally, Modi has garnered praise for his diplomatic "efforts to strengthen India's relationship with other nations, striving to elevate India's presence and influence on the global stage".

NDA led Modi's government introduced the 'Neighborhood First' policy initiative to emphasize India's dedication to regional cooperation and connectivity in South Asia. Previously, India followed a strategy of isolation during the Cold War and later adopted a cautious approach to regional cooperation. However, its policy has now permanently shifted toward actively strengthening cross-border ties (Xavier, 2020) <sup>[28]</sup>. India actively engaged with various countries of the world and also its neighbours through the "Neighbourhood First" policy, which acknowledges the significance of regional cooperation and stability in fulfilment of the larger national goal. Under his leadership, Indian government has strengthened ties with neighboring countries, promoting mutual trust, economic growth and people to people connections (Reykandeh and Falarti 2023) <sup>[20]</sup>.

Former external affairs minister of India, Sushma Swaraj, officially visited Hanoi, Vietnam; stressed the need for an 'Act East Policy'. She stated that it should replace India's over two-decade-old 'Look East Policy', emphasizing a more proactive role for India in the region (Sharma & Mehta, 2020) <sup>[22]</sup>. As part of 'Look East policy' of India, PM Modi launched 'Act East Policy' which is more inclusive with reference to culture connections and paves the way to promote India's connectivity with Asian nations. Much of this has been accomplished through religion like Buddhism, which, more than any other region or ideology, unites the whole Asian continent. This year, India organized the International Buddha Purnima Divas, a worldwide event honoring the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death. PM Narendra Modi initiated the decision to host, and he conducted the prayers that day. Prime Minister, mentioned that "without Buddha this century cannot be Asia's century". After that India's Home Ministry also announced that there would be a government sponsored annual celebration of the anniversary (Pethiyagoda, 2015) <sup>[16]</sup>.

India proposed to established a center for Buddhist worship and Learning in New Delhi. Through this initiative, "Modi's government aims to position India as the spiritual birthplace of Buddhism and the land of the Buddha, despite his birth in present-day Nepal". The promotion of Buddhism aligns with Hindutva ideology, which seeks to preserve and promote India's cultural heritage, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Cultural diplomacy was actively employed in India's neighboring regions. Through Buddhism, India focuses to make strong cultural relations with Bhutan, Nepal and some South East Asian countries. PM Narendra Modi announced the four "Cs" of his official visit to Nepal, and culture was one of them. In one of the oldest Buddhist nations, Sri Lanka, Modi's initiatives may have had the biggest impact. India would fall behind China in terms of its reputation on the island if New Delhi's standing were solely determined by its geopolitical past and its strategic priorities. Modi has managed to reduce this gap in part through appealing to ancient Indo-Lankan Buddhist ties, dating back to the Mauryan Empire, under the king Ashoka (Pethiyagoda, 2015) <sup>[16]</sup>.

India's aims to create a peaceful and stable region to support economic growth and strengthen its influence while countering the presence of China. Regions of South Asia and Indian ocean have become key areas of rivalry among India and China. Traditionally, India has been the dominant power due to its size, population, and military strength. However, China's rising relation with smaller South Asian nations challenge this position. In response, the Modi government has adjusted its foreign policy with the "Neighborhood First" approach, focusing on four main principles to improve relations with neighboring countries.

- 1. Political and Diplomatic Prioritization:** New Delhi emphasizes its diplomatic relations with neighboring states and island nations in the Indian Ocean.
- 2. Support in Development:** India commits to assisting neighbors with resources, training, and equipment when necessary.
- 3. Connectivity and Integration:** A crucial focus is on enhancing connectivity to facilitate the free movement of goods, services and information.
- 4. Regional Leadership:** India aims to promote a model of regionalism that is inclusive and led by itself (Arnold, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>.

PM Modi has adopted an active foreign policy agenda aimed at expanding India's worldwide influence, strengthening regional partnerships, and deepening engagement with the Indian diaspora to enhance its authority and soft power worldwide. However, "predicting the future trajectory of India's foreign policy under Modi remains challenging". However, based on his past statements and policies, Prime Minister Modi has emphasized several key aspects of India's foreign policy (Reykandeh & Falarti, 2023) <sup>[20]</sup>.

#### **Modi's doctrine of Indian Foreign Policy**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave top priority to foreign affairs and transformed several aspects of India's Foreign Policy, such as economic diplomacy, defense diplomacy,

cultural outreach, and more (Pradhan & Sahu, 2024)<sup>[18]</sup>. He highlighted significant shifts in Indian foreign policy. His foreign policy's principal objective has been referred to as 'Modi's doctrine of Indian Foreign Policy.' The following elements comprise Modi's foreign policy philosophy for India: (i) establishing economic connectivity and relations with world; (ii) promoting multilateralism by actively engaging on different regional and multilateral organisations; and (iii) establishing strategic defence cooperation with United States of America, European Union, France, Australia, Israel along with Russia. (iv) Supporting Indian foreign strategy on soft power. There are several chances for PM Narendra Modi to implement structural and dynamic changes in the modern world. Additionally, he has significantly changed the character of foreign policy of India. He was more focused on the active engagement with the major powers by replacing the strategies of the cold war; and promoting and developing Indian tradition of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" by extensively focusing on the principles of democracy and democratization (Bramhayya, 2020)<sup>[4]</sup>.

### Five Pillars of Modi's Foreign Policy

India, rooted in its great tradition and values, embraces "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*," meaning 'the world is one family', promoting global unity, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence across cultures, nations, and communities. India has a long history of advancing the universal humanitarian ideals of peace and harmony, and it is thriving in the modern world. After assuming office as PM Modi taken a new approach, making a strong impact on his policies and also included some key principles of foreign policy. He created a foreign policy strategy called the Modi Doctrine, which focuses on building better international relationships and introducing new ideas to shape India's role in the world (Thanh, 2023)<sup>[27]</sup>.

In April 2015, PM Narendra Modi introduced the five pillars of foreign policy of India from the concept Panchamrit. The five pillars of his foreign policy are (i) engagement, dialogue (samvad), (ii) cultural and civilizational linkages (Sanskriti evam Sabhyata) (iii) Global and regional security (Suraksha) (iv) dignity, honor (Samman) (v) shared prosperity (samridhhi) (Ganguly 2019). During his first term, PM Narendra Modi's foreign doctrine of 'neighbourhood first' policy, Numerous beneficial developments have occurred in the linkamong India; her neighbours in South Asia, and the linking sector has also been encouraged. His top priorities were diplomatic and political ties with the surrounding nations. However, China's growing presence through the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has created problems to India's strategic interests (Thanh, 2023)<sup>[27]</sup>.

### Opportunities for India in South Asia

India has significant opportunities to the governing position in terms of polity and economy in South Asia through regional collaboration. Enhanced trade can drive economic growth by opening new markets and improving supply chains in key industries like textiles and agriculture. Strengthening ties with neighbours like Sri Lanka Bangladesh and Maldives can boost India's power in the Indian ocean to counter China's BRI through infrastructure investments and trade agreements. Energy cooperation, particularly in hydropower projects with Nepal and Bhutan,

can improve regional energy security. Cultural diplomacy and soft power, including diaspora engagement and educational exchanges, can foster goodwill and strengthen regional bonds. Security cooperation on counter-terrorism, maritime security, and intelligence sharing can enhance regional stability. Additionally, improving infrastructure connectivity, promoting tourism, addressing climate change collaboratively, and leading multilateral initiatives through SAARC and BIMSTEC can further India's influence, ensuring long-term regional growth, security, and prosperity (Kumar, R. and Singh, M. 2009)<sup>[11]</sup>.

All South Asian countries, except India Except India and Bhutan, all the South Asia countries have signed the MoUs with China on BRI. In the recent time, Pakistan and the Maldives maintain close ties with China, posing economic and security challenge to India. Hence, PM Narendra Modi has emphasized strengthening connectivity with neighbouring countries in South Asia and expanding inter-regional broader vision, which is the priority of India's foreign policy during his second term (Thanh, 2023)<sup>[27]</sup>. Indian foreign policy faces significant challenges in balancing the country's goals with its available resources and the limitations set by global political dynamics (Joshi, Rajeev, & Gurung, 2020)<sup>[9]</sup>.

### Challenges faced by India in South Asia

Bilateral disputes, economic inequality, non-tariff barriers, local politics, security issues are some of the challenges what India is facing. In this regard, India trying to have strong regional connectivity and integration in South Asia to over these challenges and obstacles. Since 2014, PM Narendra Modi has focused on the 'Neighbourhood First' policy to improve relations with neighbouring countries. His efforts have had both successes and difficulties. He has supported regional forums like SAARC and promoted projects under SASEC and BIMSTEC to boost connectivity. However, challenges remain, making regional integration a complex process that requires continuous effort and cooperation. (Kumarasingha, 2024)<sup>[12]</sup>.

According to Indian foreign policy scholar Sumit Ganguly, India has had certain difficulties in forging new ties and dynamism with South Asian nations. The concept of strategic autonomy is attained much prominence and significance in the Indian foreign policy during Prime Minister Modi's regime (Bramhayya, 2020)<sup>[4]</sup>. India plays an important role in promoting regional cooperation among South Asian country. But political uncertainties and bilateral disputes among India and remaining South Asian nations are significant problems affecting regional integration. Throughout history, South Asia has seen a rise in bilateral animosity and political unpredictability. Progress towards South Asian integration has been hampered by these challenges which have led the ill trust and cooperation between them. However, India confronts a number of problems in developing South Asian regionalism (Kumarasingha, 2024)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Historically, India has had strong political, economic religious and cultural relations with South Asian countries; however, in the recent year many odds things came in between the mutual relation between India and its South Asian neighbours. China's involvement in South Asia may be seen as a factor in the disruption of India's relations with its neighbours (Chaturvedy 2009)<sup>[7]</sup>. Concern has also been raised by China's increasing influence in South Asia in last

ten years. Chinese activities in the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota, the Bangladeshi port of Chittagong, Djibouti in the horn of Africa, in the South China sea, and Gwadar are part of an encirclement strategy that is dictated by geopolitics rather than economics (Shoukat, Ashraf, Ali and Ali 2021) <sup>[23]</sup>. Until 2005, India and China had similar overall trade volume with South Asia. However, after 2005 China steadily expanded its trade in South Asia, except a slight decline in the financial crisis of 2009. By 2014 China's trade marked at US\$60.41 billion, while India remained at one third of it reaching US\$24.70 billion. Following the 2014 peak, both countries' trade with South Asia declined in 2015 and 2016 (Sinha & Sareen, 2020) <sup>[25]</sup>. India's relations with South Asian neighbours have improved with the implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy. However, China's BRI presents major challenges, mainly the China-Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC) because it threatens Indian territorial integrity and strategic interest. Modi's government recognizes that disconnection with neighbouring countries undermines both economic and security goals. Consequently, enhancing connectivity remains a top priority during Modi's second term. At the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Modi highlighted the regional unity connectivity and prosperity, asserting "We must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust". The "neighbourhood first policy" emphasizes the interconnectedness of commerce and relationships, reaffirming that South Asia are central to India's foreign policy (Arnold, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Conclusion

India has been continuously playing pivotal role in the South Asian region by developing cordial ties and relations with the South Asian nations. Distinguish changes have been brought out in Indian foreign policy by PM Narendra Modi. His frequent travels abroad had been of much benefit to India. In his visits, while promoting Indian Philosophy, PM Modi has promoted India as 'Vishwa Guru.' India's soft policy advocated Indian Yoga, harmony, peace and prosperity for whole world. His foreign policy, particularly the 'Neighborhood First' initiative, has played a pivotal role in shaping India's regional and global engagements. By prioritizing political and economic collaboration with South Asian neighbors, India aims to develop regional connectivity, economic integration, and strategic influence. Collaboration of India with South Asian nations presents immense opportunities for economic growth, strategic influence, and regional stability. By strengthening trade, energy partnerships, security cooperation, and cultural ties, India can enhance its leadership in the region. Proactive engagement through SAARC and BIMSTEC will ensure sustainable development, prosperity, and long-term geopolitical strength.

India encounters numerous challenges in advancing South Asian cooperation, including geopolitical tensions, economic inequalities, and security issues. The India-Pakistan conflict remains a major obstacle, especially within SAARC. Additionally, increasing influence of China in the region complicates India's efforts, as neighboring nations increasingly seek Beijing's investment. To cope up with these hurdles, India must adopt a balanced strategy that considers regional sensitivities while addressing security and economic concerns. Strengthening cooperation requires continuous diplomacy, confidence-building initiatives, and

improved economic connectivity. A strategic and inclusive approach will be key to fostering deeper regional cooperation and integration; and ensuring political and economic stability in South Asia in the contemporary time and space.

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