



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2024; 6(1): 27-33
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 04-10-2023
Accepted: 05-11-2023

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Evaluating India's neighbourhood first policy: Decoding the China factor in south Asia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i1a.299>

Abstract

India has a substantial hold over South Asia due to its strategic geo strategic location, strong economy, and powerful military. India's foreign policy towards its smaller neighbours in South Asia has seen significant development since its independence but it has undergone a considerable change under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, with a distinct emphasis on prioritising neighbouring countries in the South Asian region. Through this paper an effort has been made to examine India's Neighbourhood First policy in South Asia during the last decade. This research article analyses the current state of India's diplomatic ties with its bordering nations. This study is an attempt to scrutinise the challenges pose to India's neighbourhood policy with growing Chinese influence in South Asia. In the concluding section few suggestions have been offered how India can contribute to its neighbouring countries to strengthen its neighbourhood first policy.

Keywords: China, India, neighbourhood first policy, South Asia

Introduction

There is an undeniable consensus among international scholars that a nation's status in international politics is significantly dependent upon the nature of its relationships with its neighbouring countries, among other influential factors. This phenomenon becomes particularly conspicuous when examining the circumstances surrounding a nation such as India, which is currently positioned on a rising trajectory as both an economic and military force within global politics. India possesses a geopolitical milieu characterised by a confluence of small and big nations, within which two states have attained nuclear capability. It has become imperative for India to diligently uphold amicable relations with its neighbouring countries to rise through the ranks of global politics. India is consistently pursuing its "Neighbourhood First Policy," which aims to enhance its diplomatic relations with neighbouring nations in the South Asian region. The increasing dominance of China within India's vicinity further exacerbates India's apprehensions regarding safeguarding its national interests in the South Asian region. Pakistan has witnessed a discernible surge in its economic reliance on China, as neighbouring countries in the South Asian region are likewise exhibiting a growing inclination towards forging stronger bonds with China ^[1]. China is actively endeavouring to fortify its military footprint in the South Asian region, with the strategic objective of encircling India.

India is geographically surrounded by a grouping of nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Notably, most of these neighbouring countries fall within the South Asian region, except China. India is working harder to strengthen its ties with its neighbours due to growing Chinese influence in South Asia. India's policies towards its neighbouring nations have exhibited a lack of consistency ever since the country gained independence. Remarkably, Indian shares show an uncanny similarity to the governments of South Asia in various aspects, such as their colonial past, geographical attributes, climatic conditions, cultural practices, linguistic diversity, societal organisation, economic challenges, the problem of terrorism, and religious discord. Consequently, this convergence of circumstances has fostered a compelling imperative for collaborative efforts among neighbouring countries. The region commonly referred to as South Asia encompasses approximately ten per cent of the land surface of the Asian continent and is home to nearly 35% of the total population residing in Asia.

The South Asian region boasts a commendable nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of approximately 4.36 trillion United States (US) dollars in 2022^[2].

With its intricate tapestry of geopolitical dynamics and multifaceted sociocultural nuances, South Asia stands as an exceedingly complicated region within the global landscape. It suffers from the scourge of terrorism, religious upheavals, linguistic strife, socioeconomic deprivation, insurgency, and political turbulence. The mere 5% contribution of intra-regional trade to the member countries' total volume of international trade demonstrates the South Asian region's notable lack of integration and connectivity in trade and commerce^[3]. The limited extent of economic interdependencies among South Asian nations is regrettably impeding the potential for enhanced collaboration in various other domains. The effectiveness of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been compromised due to the political rivalry between India and Pakistan, coupled with limited progress in regional economic integration^[4]. India, a nation of considerable magnitude within the South Asian region, boasts a substantial military force and exhibits remarkable economic prowess. The power asymmetry between India and its neighbouring nations in South Asia gives rise to apprehensions within the strategic discourse of India's neighbours, who perceive India as exhibiting characteristics of a regional hegemon or policeman in the region. India has, on multiple occasions, engaged in interventions within the domestic political affairs of its neighbouring nations, with the primary objective of safeguarding its national interests. Consequently, this has generated a prevailing perception of India as a hegemonic power among its neighbouring states. On the contrary, India has consistently extended its assistance to neighbouring nations, enhancing its reputation as a benevolent hegemon. India has perennially grappled with the dilemma of not being perceived as a hegemonic power while simultaneously striving to safeguard its national interests in the South Asian region. Many South Asian nations have devised strategies to curtail the asymmetrical power wielded by India within the region through active engagement with China. As a way to counterbalance India's influence, South Asian nations have started to play the Chinese card^[5]. Amidst the burgeoning Chinese influence in the South Asian region, India has strategically recalibrated its neighbourhood policy, thereby affording primacy to its neighbouring nations. The trajectory of Indian foreign policy has undergone significant transformations under the astute guidance of Prime Minister Modi. In this scholarly article, we shall undertake a comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics of India's policy towards its neighbouring countries, with a particular focus on the tenure of Prime Minister Modi. In the 2014 general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) achieved a significant triumph, resulting in Shri Narendra Modi assuming the position of Prime Minister of India. He implemented the Neighbourhood First Policy by inviting the heads of state of South Asian countries to attend his swearing-in ceremony^[6]. This move was perceived as a paradigm shift in India's approach to neighbouring countries. The main explanation is that India can effectively exert its influence on the international scene only when it can maintain amicable relations with neighbouring countries, mainly when there is a significant power imbalance between India and other

nations^[7]. In 2014, the Indian government, led by Prime Minister Modi, modified India's Look East Policy to Act East Policy to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian countries, India's extended neighbours^[8]. Prime Minister Modi conducted his first official visit to Bhutan following his election, aiming to underscore the significance of neighbouring states in India's foreign policy before expanding its global focus^[9]. It has been speculated that Modi will prioritise business ties with neighbouring nations and aim to position India as the regional leader within the SAARC institutional framework^[10]. Recently, India has placed greater importance on international trade agreements with other nations than its South Asian neighbours. This suggests India is becoming less optimistic about achieving economic cooperation with its neighbouring countries in South Asia, mainly due to continuous conflicts with Pakistan and China^[11].

India has signed the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with Bangladesh, which involves exchanging certain territories and establishing the international border between India and Bangladesh. In 2015, PM Modi also visited Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Seychelles. Previously, he attempted to look into particular aspects of cooperation with Pakistan, but ultimately, it was unsuccessful. Several analysts have referred to Prime Minister Modi's proactive neighbourhood approach as the Modi Doctrine^[12]. China has been steadily expanding its influence in South Asia in recent years. Some commentators have labelled India and China's actions in South Asia revisionist due to their emergence as global powers and their desire to increase international prestige^[13]. The Chinese influence in South Asia has significantly risen since the launch of the Belt and Road initiative. China's utilisation of its economic prowess to exert influence over the geopolitical landscape of South Asia is causing anxiety in India. This study seeks to explore the current status of India's relations with its neighbouring countries and assess the influence of China on these relationships. India has implemented various measures to counterbalance China's influence in South Asia. The paper will evaluate the effectiveness of India's "neighbourhood first" strategy and propose valuable recommendations.

Research Methodology

This research has utilised various methodologies, encompassing descriptive, analytical, historical, comparative, and qualitative research methodologies. A thorough examination of the existing literature is undertaken to obtain a foundational understanding of the research problem. The present study had utilised a blend of primary and secondary sources. The primary data sources, specifically government papers and publications, records, reports from international bodies, and speeches of multiple leaders and the secondary sources consisting of wide range of scholarly materials, such as books, journal articles, newspapers, periodicals, and readily available previous research work were taken into consideration. Several methods have been utilised to analyse documents to understand the behaviour and activities of various entities, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, in the South Asian region.

Evolution of India's Neighborhood Foreign Policy

Establishing and maintaining diplomatic ties with neighbouring nations holds paramount significance for

every sovereign state across the globe. India has strongly emphasised upholding robust relations with its neighbouring countries since its independence. India underwent a profoundly tumultuous partition during its independence. This event has indelibly shaped the political landscape of the South Asian region, leaving an enduring impact that persists to the present day. Since achieving independence, various governments have established distinct priorities for neighbourhood policies and implemented them differently. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, adopted a comprehensive perspective on India's neighbours, encompassing West Asia, Russia, and Central Asia as part of India's neighbouring regions. Nehru adopted an idealistic position, desiring to cultivate a harmonious and friendly relationship with communist China. To accomplish this objective, India entered into the "Panchsheel Agreement" with China in 1954, aiming to cultivate amicable relations between the neighbouring nations^[14]. In 1962, China renounced its aspiration for Asian unity, initiated war against India, and annexed a substantial portion of Indian land. The lack of action by international organisations regarding Pakistan's illegal occupation of Kashmir in 1947, coupled with India's loss in the 1962 war against China, has caused a shift in India's neighbourhood policy from idealistic to realist.

Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister of India witnessed a notable paradigm shift in India's foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries, deviating from the approach promoted by Jawaharlal Nehru. Under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, India has adeptly implemented a proactive and stringent approach towards its neighbouring nations, deftly navigating through complex and crucial decisions. The neighbourhood policy she implemented yielded two notable triumphs: the integration of Sikkim into the territory of India in 1975 and the attainment of independence for Bangladesh in 1971^[15]. Indira Gandhi astutely implemented a policy akin to the renowned "Monroe Doctrine" in South Asia. This strategic approach entailed India's steadfast commitment to safeguarding its regional interests, precluding any external power from encroaching upon its sovereignty. Consequently, this visionary doctrine has been aptly christened the "Indira Doctrine" by discerning analysts and scholars alike. She believed South Asia constituted the exclusive sphere wherein India's supremacy prevailed. She held the conviction that resolving all problems in South Asia ought to be achieved through bilateral means, without any external powers being permitted to encroach upon the region's affairs^[16]. Indira Gandhi has demonstrated a discernibly assertive and pragmatic approach in South Asia. Following Indira Gandhi's proactive and realistic foreign policy, Inder Kumar Gujral, the former Minister of External Affairs of India, implemented a vital strategy that emphasised the utmost importance of prioritising our neighbouring nations. In 1997, Gujral became the Prime Minister of India. His policy received widespread praise and was later called the "Gujral Doctrine." The Gujral doctrine has significantly transformed India's bilateral relations with its smaller neighbouring countries. The establishment of this doctrine was based on a set of five principles that define India's behaviour towards its neighbouring nations. These principles are: (1) India does not enforce a reciprocal obligation on its smaller neighbouring countries but instead provides assistance and accommodation to the maximum extent possible, guided by principles of respect and trust; (2)

It is crucial that no country in the South Asian region permits the use of its land for activities that could harm the interests of neighbouring nations; (3) It is crucial for nations to abstain from meddling in the internal affairs of other countries; (4) It is crucial that all countries in the South Asian region strictly follow the basic principles of maintaining and honouring each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity; and (5) It is crucial that any potential conflicts are promptly and successfully resolved through peaceful bilateral dialogues^[17]. The Gujral Doctrine has effectively transformed India's reputation from a hegemonic power in South Asia to that of a responsible big brother, thus improving India's relations with neighbouring countries. The Gujral Doctrine has served as an effective mechanism for resolving conflicts in South Asia.

The Gujral doctrine has garnered significant criticism due to its purported passing of incorrect signals to the nation of Pakistan. Atal Bihari Bajpayee, the successor of Gujral, has expressed his disapproval of Gujral's perspective on the intricate dynamics of regional politics in South Asia. The BJP government has officially repudiated the Gujral Doctrine, opting to establish India's diplomatic ties with neighbouring nations based on reciprocity. Atal Bihari Vajpayee also initiated a discourse on his neighbourhood's first policy by eloquently stating, "We can change our friends, but we cannot change our neighbours," but regrettably, he did not make substantial progress^[18]. The nuclear test carried out by India in 1998 has engendered renewed apprehensions among neighbours and precipitated a discernible asymmetry of power within the South Asian region. After acquiring nuclear capabilities, India has strategically shifted its foreign policy orientation from its immediate neighbouring nations to Western countries. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi endeavoured to invigorate India's "neighbourhood first" policy, which can be perceived as a revival of the Gujral doctrine, albeit infused with Modi's unique perspective.

Neighbourhood First Policy under PM Modi

In 2014, the BJP emerged victorious in the general election, forming the NDA and establishing a strong central government under the competent leadership of Prime Minister Modi. A strong and stable national government strengthens a country and allows its leaders to make firm and timely decisions, particularly in international affairs. The Indian government has adopted a practical and proactive approach to engaging with neighbouring nations in the South Asian region. Initially, his foreign policy was mainly defined by his wide range of diplomatic trips to strengthen and improve relations with neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that the geopolitical tensions in the South Asian region and India's bilateral problems have necessitated carefully reconsidering his foreign policy approach in the subsequent years^[19]. Prime Minister Modi demonstrated a clear preference for prioritising the neighbourhood policy by graciously inviting the leaders of the SAARC countries to participate in his swearing-in ceremony. The Indian government has consistently promoted friendly relationships with its South Asian counterparts.

Pakistan

India and Pakistan are prominent nations in South Asia, and the state of their bilateral relationship has consistently

influenced the region's geopolitical dynamics. Following his election in 2014, Prime Minister Modi pursued a constructive and reconciliatory strategy, sparking initial optimism and raising expectations for improved relations. Nonetheless, the terrorist attack on the Pathankot airbase in January 2016, carried out by Pakistan-based terrorists, strained relations between the two countries. Another major terrorist attack occurred in Uri in September 2016, killing 19 Indian soldiers. In response, India conducted "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, escalating tensions between the two countries ^[20]. The terrorist attack in Pulwama in February 2019, which killed 40 Indian security personnel, heightened tensions. India launched airstrikes in Balakot, Pakistan, specifically targeting suspected terrorist training camps. Despite the conflicts, a positive development occurred in November 2019 with the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, which allows Sikh pilgrims from India to travel to the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara in Pakistan. In August 2019, India repealed Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, infuriating Pakistan and resulting in its severing diplomatic and trade ties with India ^[21]. Both countries made an unexpected announcement in February 2021, expressing a renewed commitment to maintaining a ceasefire along the Line of Control. This development has sparked hope for an improvement in relations. The decision was viewed favourably despite having a limited impact on reducing border tensions.

Bangladesh

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has improved significantly since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014. Both nations swapped enclaves in 2015, resulting in the implementation of the historic Land Boundary Agreement. Bilateral connectivity has improved, allowing for the seamless transportation of commodities and people. India has provided substantial development assistance to Bangladesh, funding various infrastructure projects. The ratification of the Ganges Water Sharing Agreement in 2019 marked a significant step forward in resolving the two countries' water-related concerns ^[22]. Relations have been hampered as some Bangladeshi ministers cancelled planned official visits to India in 2019 in response to India's Citizenship Amendment Bill. They have worked together to address common security challenges and protect their borders because they are concerned about regional stability. During the global COVID-19 outbreak, the two countries worked together on public health issues, exchanging information and providing assistance. This emphasised the importance of regional cooperation in overcoming common challenges.

Bhutan

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan in 2014 showcased an initial dedication to fostering mutually beneficial relationships. India and Bhutan collaborate closely in hydropower, as exemplified by the significant contributions of the 720 MW Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Project and the 1,200 MW Punatsangchhu-I Hydroelectric Project to Bhutan's economy. India has substantially contributed to Bhutan's infrastructure development initiatives by raising its annual financial aid to approximately Rupees 2400 Crores in 2023 ^[24]. Due to Bhutan's advantageous geographical position, it is a crucial ally for India in upholding regional

security and stability. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, India provided medical assistance to Bhutan, including vaccines. Bhutan has dramatically benefited from India's "Neighbourhood first" policy and has established a prime example of a bilateral relationship as a large-small neighbouring country.

Nepal

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Neighbourhood First Policy towards Nepal is an intentional and planned attempt to establish solid diplomatic relations and foster regional collaboration. In April 2015, Nepal had a devastating earthquake. India quickly launched Operation Maitri, supplying significant humanitarian assistance, undertaking rescue operations, and assisting relief efforts. The relationship between Nepal and India was strained in September 2015 when Nepal accused India of imposing an unexpected embargo on Nepal during the Madhesi movement ^[24]. Frequent exchanges of high-level officials between the leaders of both nations have become the norm. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Nepal in 2018 highlighted the importance of people-centred diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India gave medical help to Nepal, including vaccines and crucial medical equipment. The Maitri Setu, a freshly inaugurated bridge connecting India's Tripura to Bangladesh and then Bangladesh to Nepal, shows India's efforts to improve connectivity and foster regional integration. While yet to be fully implemented, the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement demonstrates a commitment to enhancing regional connectivity. Nepal announced its redesigned political map in May 2020, which featured disputed areas with India ^[25]. Although the Neighbourhood First Policy provides a positive framework for interacting with Nepal, it is critical to acknowledge the complexities of diplomatic connections and to encourage open communication and collaboration.

Sri Lanka

India's Neighbourhood First Policy has significantly impacted its diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka. In 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka for the first time, India and Sri Lanka signed four bilateral agreements covering many areas, such as visa regulations, customs, youth development, and the construction of a memorial dedicated to Rabindranath Tagore ^[26]. In 2017, India extended a Line of Credit (LoC) worth \$318 million to bolster the advancement of Sri Lanka's railway infrastructure. In 2018, India and Sri Lanka established a formal agreement to improve the infrastructure and functioning of the East Container Terminal situated at the Colombo Port. In 2019, India sent an advanced offshore patrol vessel to the Sri Lankan Navy to enhance security collaboration in the Indian Ocean region. However, the issue of fishing rights in the Palk Strait has persistently been a cause for worry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India helped Sri Lanka by providing 500,000 vaccines and 150 tonnes of oxygen to aid in the battle against the pandemic. India has extended a financial aid package of USD 3.8 billion to Sri Lanka to address its acute financial and economic turmoil ^[27].

Maldives

Like Sri Lanka, Maldives is also significant in India's

"neighbourhood first" strategy, leading to substantial progress in economic cooperation and infrastructure development. In response to a drinking water crisis in Malé on December 4, 2014, India sent heavy-duty transporter planes and navy vessels to provide drinking water to the people of the Maldives [28]. After re-election as Prime Minister in 2019, PM Modi visited the Maldives. He formally inaugurated two significant projects during his visit: the Coastal Surveillance Radar System and the Maldives National Military Forces Composite Training Centre. In 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, India provided financial, material, and logistical assistance to the Maldives. In 2021, the Maldives and India entered into a \$500 million infrastructure agreement known as the "Great Male" project [29]. India's financial assistance clearly illustrates the firm and dependable partnership between the two countries. Nevertheless, the 'India Out' campaign has shown instances when some segments of society have expressed substantial opposition towards India. This has harmed the relationship between the two countries.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a crucial strategic partner in South Asia, reaping significant advantages from India's "neighbourhood first policy." In December 2015, Prime Minister Modi visited Afghanistan and inaugurated the new Afghan Parliament building in Kabul, representing India's unwavering commitment to fostering and advancing Afghanistan's democratic development [30]. India has allocated about \$3 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan, prioritising key sectors such as education, healthcare, food security, infrastructure, and capacity building. The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 was a turning point in the geopolitical dynamics of the region. India has adopted a cautious stance in acknowledging the Taliban government, emphasising the need for inclusive governance, respect for human rights, and the necessity of a peace process led and commanded by the Afghan people [31]. Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of China's strategic influence in Afghanistan, coupled with its growing proximity to the Taliban through its association with Pakistan, has elicited apprehension within India's strategic community. China's growing dominance in South Asia poses a formidable challenge to India's neighbourhood first policy.

The China Factor in South Asia

Recently, the growing level of Chinese economic, diplomatic, and strategic influence in South Asia has become increasingly pronounced, engendering a transformative shift in the region's geopolitical landscape. China's economic dominance in South Asia is evident through its significant investments in crucial infrastructure projects, mainly through implementing strategic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have eagerly adopted Chinese investment to develop infrastructure, including ports, roads, and energy projects. When these economically weak nations could not return the loan within a few years, they were entangled in what is known as "Chinese debt trap diplomacy." As a result, China pressured these countries to provide permission to establish military stations and fully equipped naval facilities for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which poses a significant

threat to India's security in the region [32]. The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and the Gwadar port in Pakistan illustrate the Chinese debt trap policies implemented in the South Asian region. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project under the BRI crosses through the region of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, undermining Indian sovereignty and adversely affecting Indian interests in South Asia. Presently, the Taliban-led administration in Afghanistan has expressed its inclination to partake in the BRI and subsequently expand the CPEC into Afghan territory. China is actively strengthening its trading links with South Asian countries, whereas India, although having free trade agreements with certain bordering countries, is facing comparatively slower progress [33]. China employs trade as a strategic manoeuvre to undermine India's sphere of influence in the South Asian region.

China's shrewd and well-planned strategic manoeuvres in South Asia, including establishing military cooperation agreements, joint exercises, and weapon sales, have undoubtedly strengthened the relationships between Beijing and countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nations such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan have consistently granted consent to the Chinese navy, allowing their submarines and surveillance naval vessels to dock in their ports to closely monitor the strategic positions and activities of India [34]. Bhutan is the only neighbouring country of India that does not have diplomatic ties with China and has not yet participated in the Belt and Road Initiative. Currently, Bhutan is involved in diplomatic discussions on its international boundary with China, a process that unfortunately does not include consultation with India, despite India's admirable efforts to protect Bhutan's territorial integrity from possible encroachments by China [35]. This Bhutanese approach has significantly undermined India's Neighbourhood First policy, especially considering the increasing Chinese influence. China has diligently undertaken diplomatic endeavours with smaller nations, bolstering its soft power and dominance by providing economic assistance, cultivating cultural interactions, and establishing educational initiatives. Due to China's growing influence in the region, it is crucial to conduct a thorough assessment to foresee any potential risks to India's regional strategy. The South Asian countries neighbouring India strategically position themselves as swing states, skilfully offsetting India's power by aligning with China. To get more fruits from India's Neighbourhood First policy, they strategically use the "China Card," predicated on their willingness to contribute to reducing China's influence in South Asia. China deliberately uses these swing nations to undermine India's prominent influence in the region.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy towards its neighbouring countries demonstrates a noticeable change towards a proactive strategy. Prime Minister Modi has consistently expressed India's commitment to emphasising its relationships with neighbouring South Asian countries since assuming office. Moreover, India intends to broaden its use of the "neighbourhood first policy" to include Southeast Asian and West Asian nations, extending its sphere of influence. In the early phases of the present government, the neighbourhood-first approach has seen several mutual visits and a significant emphasis on promoting regionalism in South

Asia. Nevertheless, states such as Pakistan have once again engaged in the old practice of facilitating the movement of terrorists over the border into Indian territory, causing instability in India. Unlike previous governments, the present government has conscientiously recognised and disclosed this malevolent conduct, actively working to bring it to light on a worldwide platform and endeavouring to isolate Pakistan both regionally and internationally. The persistent competition between India and Pakistan has once again impeded the advancement of regional integration in South Asia. China has exploited this position by using Pakistan as a puppet to undermine Indian interests in the region. In recent years, India has seen a noticeable increase in its military and economic might, leading to worries about potential power disparities among South Asian states. In the emulation of Pakistan, several smaller neighbours of India also started pursuing more robust relations with China to offset India's dominance in the region. China's growing influence severely weakens India's policy of prioritising its neighbouring nations despite India's continuous efforts. India should use compassionate and pragmatic strategies towards its smaller neighbouring countries in this situation. India should provide more economic aid, improve trade agreements, expand market opportunities, and provide other diplomatic advantages to neighbouring nations to support their economic progress and socio-economic advancement. However, regarding India's strategic interests, India must take a more realistic approach in its dealings with neighbouring countries. India should incentivise the positive conduct of its smaller neighbouring countries and actively counteract the attempts made by China to undermine Indian interests via the manipulation of smaller South Asian nations. India should explicitly communicate to its neighbouring countries that they stand to gain economic advantages from India's economic growth while warning them of the potential consequences of any attempts to undermine Indian interests in South Asia.

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