

# India's Neighbourhood First Policy in South Asia: A Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Partnership

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**Abstract:** *Conventionally, geo-strategic and economic considerations determine a country's foreign policy interests. However, in case of India, especially in context of its neighbourhood, its cultural similarity, shared colonial past and scale of its own capability additionally puts an onus to act big brotherly in the region. PM Modi's 'Foreign Policy 2.0' imperative is to refurbish and give an active push to regional participation and cooperation which shall be mutually beneficial to all. The paper analyses contemporary directions in PM Modi's neighbourhood policy based on changing external strategies that suit the international political milieu. The paper further takes into consideration the salient elements responsible in shaping the sub-continent relations, inter-alia political integration, economic ties and regional connectivity, while emphasizing on India's soft Power credibility. Also, China's position and status, threatens India's ambition of creating a 'Greater South Asia'. Lastly, the paper puts forth new prospects of integration further invigorating sustained regional engagement, peace and prosperity.*

**Keywords:** neighbourhood policy, strategic role, India, South Asia, foreign policy

## 1. Introduction

South Asia as a region, due to its geo-strategic and locational peculiarity has been tarnished by several challenges and inter-state enmities. The shared civilizational, historical and linguistic commonalities, a colonial legacy and co-dependencies have failed to intertwine the interests of varied nations and provide coherence to the region. Moreover, the region is still submerged in serious issues challenging their security, dominated by political tensions, poor infrastructure and further prevalent border disputes. Being known as a region that is least integrated; it is a greater challenge for India now and in future to play a vital role as an emerging regional and a global player, as the current geo politics unfolds. India strives to promote greater linkages and enduring partnerships in the South Asian sphere as a part of its foreign policy priorities. Internally, any nations' domestic policies and its socio-economic developments are largely centred on its neighbourhood and thus it is India's policy imperative to seek for a stable, secured and peaceful region, an important aspect of any country's Foreign policy. The enduring primacy assigned to the neighbourhood comes with the geographical proximity and where the domestic concern intersects with external relationships. In this context, it is clearly understandable that the domestic policy and the foreign policy shares a proportionality in further defining a country's vital national interest and thus giving prime importance to its neighbourhood.

With the advent of globalization and technological advancements, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the intertwining of domestic and external interest has acquired impetus. The emergence of sub-nationalism and ethnic exclusivity demanded renewed tolerance and mutual understanding to foster better partnerships (Chattopadhyay, 2016). Today, India's policies vis-à-vis South Asia is formulated with regard to the challenges emanating from this global phenomenon. The prevalent power asymmetry, with India's obvious domination followed by its humongous population, territorial vastness and steady economic and military

capability is often misperceived by its smaller counterparts as a threat (Kugiel, 2012). This has further challenged India's ambitious strategy to become a regional player. Its dominance is often viewed as a source of apprehension. Furthermore, due to its territorial enormity, it is the single nation in South Asia that shares physical borders with almost all the countries of the sub-continent with an exception (Afghanistan). With Afghanistan and Pakistan at its west, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar at its East, Sri Lanka at its South and Maldives, India has been struggling since its independence to maintain a stable relation with the neighbours.

The current government, with its second term at the office, Prime Minister NarendraModis' foreign policy objective in regard to South Asia is dominated by a constant thriving for regional acceptability. The fear complex among the smaller neighbours is addressed by pursuing policies guided by the principles of peaceful co-existence and a big brother attitude that dictates further friendly relations, peaceful settlement of disputes and good neighbourliness. The Indian policy makers, still pursuing the path advocated by former Indian PM and External Affairs Minister, Mr I.K. Gujral in his ostensibly famous 'Gujral Doctrine' as a guide to conduct foreign relations, endorse non-interference in the internal affairs of neighbour, promotes equality and upholds a mutually beneficial partnership prospect.

The modern India under PM Modi's leadership does not aspire for a hegemonic or expansionist ambition. Moreover, Modi's hyper-energetic diplomacy, seeking further integration and strategic autonomy that can be done through strengthened partnerships calls for greater integration among the nations in the region. His policy of neighbourhood first does render primacy to its peripheries and also fosters development through greater connectivity, stronger geo-economics and building on cultural and religious ties, aid assistances framed to rejuvenate bi-lateral relationship with its neighbours. The heightened sense of developmental cooperation is part of Modi's economic advances serving mutual interest and beneficial to all. The vigour in India's ties with the neighbours and increasing visibility and

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deliverance on a number of longstanding promises has not only given a renewed dimension in India's approach towards South Asia but has also helped India to establish a new image globally.

## 2. Methodology

The article is conceptualized by qualitative method of social science while using both theoretical and empirical approach in making the analysis, further consulting the views, debates and discussions of various authors and experts on the said field. All the materials used in this study are from secondary sources ranging from journals, newspapers, online scientific cites and academic discussions. The analysis additionally includes review of government reports and interviews of the Indian ambassadors and policy experts.

## 3. Historical overview of India's Relations with South Asia

India, after the decolonization and independence forged for an idealist foreign policy towards its immediate neighbourhood. The prime concern for the policy makers in New Delhi was to secure its contested borders and other challenges emerging post-independence. Primacy was also given to the economic revitalization of the nation. It was Nehru's chosen path of non-alignment in the face of a bipolar world order shaped by the politics of the Cold War, arguing that India would have to 'plough a lonely furrow' (Appadorai, 1982).

The 1962 China War brought a defeat in India's mind set and a change in policy trajectory followed by the 1965 Pakistan War. Initially Nehru's focus was more towards uniting and decolonizing African continent and practising non-alignment at global level, refraining from participating in any bloc and its politics. Guided by the horrors of colonial era, Nehru emphasised on constructing a third bloc and championed itself as the leader of the third world, of newly de colonized nations of Africa, Asia and South America. This left the neighbourhood off-guard and thus wars were inevitable. From the mid 1960's New Delhi's concern shifted to its neighbourhood and policies were mostly directed towards securing its territory. Moreover, Nehru's socialist ideology, as a backdrop of India's foreign policy largely motivated by self-sustenance further discouraged regional trade and links. The nativist approach towards neighbours and closed door economic policies added concerns to the relationship.

Indira Gandhi's policies even reflected the socialist legacies of Nehru's and thus relationship with its neighbours stayed cold. There were tensions at the borders promoted by Pakistan at the Indian provinces that intensified India's security concern and thus foreign Policy of India vis-à-vis its hostile neighbours were only contemplated through the prism of security instead of integration and cooperation (Malik, 2016). The next few years, India's priority in the region was to establish its sub-continental hegemony in order to protect itself and its territory from surrounded hostilities. This was the overriding goal of IFP and though India defended its role in the Bangladesh Liberation War of

1971 on the ground of its national security being threatened by the humanitarian crisis in East-Pakistan and after requests to the U.N. to act against Pakistan failed to yield results. However, despite all justifications, the role played by India in the emergence of Bangladesh is viewed even today as an evidence of regional apprehensions (Das, 2016). India's primary motive was to set the tone of strength and fear in the region and being the largest nation it had the power and ability to alter the geo-political landscape of South Asia. Rajeev Gandhigovernment's military interventions at Sri Lanka are seen as a reinforcement of India's hegemony in the region followed by another military involvement in Maldives to thwart an attempted coup.

But, the situation improved with the foundation and formation of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation in 1985 at the initiative of Bangladesh, India was a reluctant participant. There was a suspicion from Indian perspective that SAARC was a ganging up of mostly hostile smaller neighbours against it as a containment strategy (Sharan, 2017). Up until then, India firmly prescribed to the notion of bilateralism in dealing with its neighbours, and SAARC's existence was undermined to a great extent. Lack of unanimity, strained bilateral relations and political differences between member nations and long dominant conflict of interest were some of the reason for the failure of the organization. Channelizing a successful regional framework was full of hardships when it came to South Asia and statistics say, SAARC account only 2 per cent of the region's global trade and not more not more than 10 per cent of the regional trade (Muni, 2015).

The advent of economic liberalization and reforms, 1991, changed India's outlook externally and the changes were visible in the New Delhi's policy pursuance. India understood the importance of its neighbourhood and subscribed to the notion that a peaceful and prosperous periphery is utmost essential in order to play a stronger part globally. India's strive for a multi-polar world order accords primacy to closer political, economic and cultural ties with its neighbours thus promoting a stronger and enduring partnership within the region (Chattopadhyay, 2011). Furthermore, when I.K. Gujral became the Prime Minister, At the core of his ideas was the belief that as the largest country in the region, India could afford to be more generous while protecting its fundamental interests' (Dutt, 2007). Instead of viewing the security dilemma in South Asia as conflictual in nature, efforts were made to create a social structure in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war. Hence, with 'The Gujral Doctrine', India made an attempt to assure the region of its support through the policy of providing unilateral concession to neighbours in the sub-continent without seeking reciprocity (Das, 2016).

The Gujral doctrine was thereby followed by all the successive governments' and is still considered as the cornerstone of India's Foreign Policy vis-à-vis South Asia. The partnership has faced several challenges from then and efforts made are mostly over-shadowed by the regional tensions, strained bilateral relation and misplaced trust. India's efforts of engagements and diplomacy, so far has not

been able to unfold expected outcome and has been highly motivated by internal and external influences.

#### 4. The Modi Factor in India's South Asian Policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's primary policy objective has been very clear since he has assumed office and changes are visible in his policies. He wants to rebuild relations within the neighbourhood and for two consecutive oath taking ceremonies, has invited the members (some) of SAARC which implies the utmost importance of India's neighbours in its foreign policy objective. Followed by individual visits made to the countries, his determination for greater bi-lateral relations within the region under regional framework is evident. Since 2014, the first term of his office a vibrant change and renewed impetus was strongly visible. Modi's emphasis on foreign policy and his influence as a leader has re-furbished the relations with the SAARC countries that were otherwise at a state of stagnation under UPA government. His 'neighbourhood first Policy', for instance, gave a much needed push to regional cooperation and can be seen through his proposed initiatives, the B2B (Bharat to Bhutan), HIT in Nepal, INCHEs to MILES to describe China ties (Passi & Bhatnaga et.al, 2016). PM Modi even in his initial term made visits to Islamabad twice but in light of numerous Pakistani insurgencies and terrorist attacks the relations between the nation's sharecold-feet for the time-being. Modi government's relation with Pakistan has primarily been security driven and Kashmir centric. Pakistan's promotion of China's Belt and Road Initiative has further been a concern for New Delhi as it endorses projects through the disputed lands of Kashmir and is perceived as a threat to India's security (Muni, 2017).

Modi's unique sense of diplomacy has so far borne positive outcome in shaping better relations with the South Asian counterparts. Whether delivering weapons to Afghanistan, ignoring Pakistan's apprehensions or engaging bi-laterally and multi-laterally with East and South East to undermine China's growing dominance over the region and at the same time fostering better trading relations with China, as a strategy to accelerate India's economic progress shows the versatility of Modi's style of engagement (Panda, 2014). The vigour that he has introduced to India's neighbourhood ties is appreciated and highly acclaimed at all quarters. He has successfully created an improved image of India globally as well as projection of his own persona. His way of conducting relations and instant rapport further acts as an incentive to bridge the communication gap and stagnation in relations with these South Asian nations.

India's has announced a soft credit line of dollar 1\$ billion for infrastructure to Nepal, to develop irrigation and energy projects. This is another instance of Modi's aid diplomacy in the region counterbalancing China. In case of Bhutan, his emphasis continues on the idea of the trans-Himalayan regionalism his visit to Bhutan and Nepal and reiterated its significance of being the keystone for Asian cultural, environmental, political and regional security (Chaturvedi, 2014). The effective articulation of India's policy towards these countries and his instant rapport with the people helped in bridging the communication and

confidence gap that had crept in for the past few years in mutual relations between India and these countries (Muni, 2015).

With Bangladesh, India has concluded a historic settlement in 2015, the ratification of 41 years of longstanding boundary dispute that has accumulated into Land Boundary Agreement, a milestone and a peck in Modi's successful foreign policy career so far. Moreover, he has announced a fresh credit line of \$ 2 billion to Bangladesh. Apart from mending the regional cooperation and partnership, India has also successfully bridged the gap that has saddled the Indo-Bangladesh relations for decades now. Mutual cooperation is the key of Modi's foreign policy objectives and fostering better partnership with Bangladesh only opens renewed opportunities for the North Eastern part of India, underdeveloped due to absence of proper infrastructure, connectivity and investments. India's ties with Sri Lanka premises upon a foundation of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction. Although the relation has been stained due to ethnic clashes between Tamils and Sinhalese for a few decades now but Sri Lanka holds major strategic importance in New Delhi's foreign policy. China's hold on strategic real estate in the Island is foreseen as a threat and the future prospect of Chinese military expansion is a perceived challenge towards Indian security. Moreover, Maldives is another important nation and its growing proximity towards China, signing a FTA recently, later making steady inroads in Maldives, has been a matter of New Delhi's unease. India's aid diplomacy is countered by China's huge loan sanctioned to the region. The Chinese sponsored developmental and infrastructure building projects by Chinese companies themselves under Yameen Government. In this context, it is important to render stress on Maldives internal stability and security as it is linked with India's national interest. A strong democratic Maldives is thus a priority.

Therefore, Modi's Foreign policy in his last term and in his second term, both give centrality to its neighbourhood as a part of his foreign policy objective (Livemint, 2019). The renewed impetus is distinctly visible in his initiatives towards the South Asian countries. The primacy of the region in India's strategic calculus is extensive.

#### 5. Prospects of Integration in India and South Asia relation

The South Asian region has immense prospect for growth and keeping in mind India's growing economic clout and search for foreign market, South Asia is the perfect place for New Delhi to look at. The past decade has marked observable change in its policy approach, especially under PM Modi's leadership. The growing recognition of vitality of peaceful and integrated neighbourhood for strategic growth has been the cornerstone for the policy makers and South Asia has been indispensable for India, so far.

##### 5.1 Economic Integration

Rapid economic growth and development in the region, moving beyond the differences created in the past can only mend the otherwise prevailing stagnation in South Asian

sphere. With a defunct SAARC, after the India-Pakistan rift, post-Pulwama attack a strong requirement for a functioning regional framework is the need of the hour. In the SAARC region, India's trade with its neighbour is no more than 3 per cent and the growth trajectory is negatively aligned. There is a need of greater and deeper regional trade and connectivity. This clearly projects a necessity for better investment in the region and to reap strategic dividends (Sabarwal, 2012). Deeper regional trade and connectivity can reduce the isolation of the north eastern part of India. This will not only give the investors an opportunity but will also open the market access in South and East Asia. The substitution of fossil fuels, through generation of cleaner hydro-power by imports made from Nepal and Bhutan will be beneficial for India's growing economy and further foster integration in the region. Removal of trade barriers and creation of a tariff free zone will increase economic gains and an incremental approach towards deeper trade cooperation will be further helpful. The India-Sri Lanka air-service liberalization and India-Bangladesh border 'haats' are a few examples cited by World Bank in its report (Kathuria, 2018). Regional trade and connectivity needs to improve and in this, India under Modi's leadership can play a crucial part in fostering mutual economic and welfare gains (The Economic Times, 2018). The liberalization of India-Sri Lanka air services have improved connectivity and brought a reduction in air fare. This is also seen in case of Bangladesh haat/ small markets that locally provide a platform to engage in transactional facilities for both the countries in terms of goods and services, although at a very small scale but the initiative is a big step taken towards regional economic integration. Also, China's growing proximity needs to be countered that seeks cheaper market for its finished products and thus making inroads in the region with an intention to play crucial role in their functioning. Moreover, SAFTA needs modification as the body is discriminatory towards its own counterparts as the protection is greater in case of South Asian nations as compared to the rest of the world (Sirohi, 2018). Higher cost of trading, that includes charges acquired during transportation and logistics, customs and border procedure are considerably higher than other regions. The non-transparent tariff measures hardly grant market access to these products. Thus, for a rapid economic growth in the region, India needs to create opportunities through connecting its North East with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan by roadway to reduce the trade deficit and allow further market access. The proposed plan by the Indian Ministry of shipping recommends two in-land waterways (route). The national waterways, NW 1 stretching from Haldia (Ganga) to Allahabad and NW 2 from Brahmaputra is expected to link the regions via waterways, promoting free transportation of goods and passengers (Malik, 2016). The NW 2 will provide connectivity in the least connected path of India's north east and can be done in collaboration with Bangladesh. The Ganga-Namani project with Bangladesh and Nepal endorses management of river water for domestic usage (Surie, 2015). The project of extracting hydropower potential of the Indian regions of Arunachal Pradesh, developing cleaner alternative to thermal power can only happen if the corridor runs through Bangladesh again which otherwise makes the project very expensive and null and void.

Lastly, India being the largest among all and due to the enormity of its economy and territorial vastness, by the virtue of its big brother attitude need to take into consideration the interest of these smaller neighbouring nations before establishing a greater regional integration through partnerships (Prasad & Das, 2019). Also, for enhancing greater economic cooperation, like China, India needs to grant soft loans and provide assistance to its neighbours for large infrastructural projects that include ports, hydro power transport, roads. Such initiatives will not just boost economies of the neighbouring countries but will equally be beneficial for India's economic integration and interdependence that will help in shaping South Asian region.

## 5.2 Sub-regionalism and regional Connectivity

Due to its strained relations with some South Asian nations especially Pakistan, there has been untimely delays and challenges of implementation of projects that India and rest of the South Asian nations are currently facing. To revitalize and refurbish SAARC, sub-regional grouping are needed that can engage India's neighbours constructively. Further integration not only boosts economic relations but lessens the power asymmetry between smaller nations and India; thus an incentive for these nations to overcome the fear complex. Today, since India and its South Asian partners are aiming for greater economic integration, it is vital for the region to improve its connectivity for the same. To overcome the hostility of strained Indo-Pak relations, a Motor Vehicle agreement was signed in 2015 between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN). This sub-regional cooperation, through BBIN framework vouches for smooth and seamless road and rail travel across these borders. It operates through Joint working groups and the member states formulate, implement and review quadrilateral agreements across areas such as water resources management, connectivity of power, transport, and infrastructure (Das, 2015)

The proposed India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway is India's priority at the moment that further enhances regional cooperation. Coupled with projects that include South East and South Asia, India's prime objective is to incorporate nations and promote connectivity for developing its under-developed regions of North East through BBIN and IMT trilateral highway in the Mekong sub region. This also incorporates present government's plan to revamp its "Look East" policy and renewed "Act East" through the regional and sub-regional framework (Mukherjee 2015).

The revival of plans for a power grid with Bangladesh via Nepal and Bhutan is another priority for Delhi. India is already supplying power to Bangladesh and to Nepal. Bhutan sells power to India. Additional power lines for transmission at a BBIN framework could further play an impetus in strengthening sub-regional framings. There is a possibility of BBIN rail agreement and talks are in process. Proximity is central to the plans of refurbishing South Asian regional framework. Cross-border infrastructure promoting free flow of goods and people can extract best form of cooperation, integration by reducing transport cost of trade and sharpening the competitiveness of South Asian

economies (Sharan, 2017). Connectivity requires mutual transit in the territories of these nations but due to hostile situations prevailing in some SAARC countries, India has not been very forthcoming in extending such facilities to its neighbours. This has posed as an impediment in regional and national economic growth and development. For example, a container usually takes 20-30 days and might take longer to travel from New Delhi to Dhaka since the maritime route is via Bombay and Singapore and Colombo to Chittagong that further travels through rail to reach Dhaka. Long route, consumes more energy, money and time for trading between the regions, can easily be reduced to a few days with direct rail connectivity from Delhi to Dhaka. Also, inland transit is allowed between Nepal and Bangladesh across the Siliguri corridor but only accommodates bi-lateral trading and not third party trade. Through Mangla court in Bangladesh, with required infrastructure and networks (direct rail connection between Birgunj, Nepal and Khulna, Bangladesh and a road-link to Mangla) Nepal can access the sea route for trade.

The India and Myanmar “Kaladan project” linking Sittwe Port of Myanmar to Mizoram, India through river (Kaladanriver) and road is an alternative to build connectivity and greater access to the north eastern region via Kolkata port, Sittwe port, kaladan River and Road. This is an alternative to the existent Siliguri corridor.

Also, illegal trade is a problem that the Indian economy has to incur every year and at a significant scale. The borders are more prone to such illegal activities that often trade goods from third countries. Chinese goods get easy access to the Indian mainland through Tamu-Moreh, India-Myanmar border. What Ambassador ShyamSharan proposes, is, if India permits trade through these points at normal duties, irrespective of where the goods are coming from, or taken to, would not just eventually prevent criminalization of border trade but also the Indian government will earn some revenues much needed (Sharan, 2017)

India’s future plans for integrating the region should include strategies for positioning itself as most convenient, operative and cost effective trade and transit hub for the entire subcontinent. Free flow of goods and appropriate transit will boost economic ties and promote regional partnerships.

### 5.3. Modi’s Soft Power credibility in South Asia

Cultural diplomacy is a significant part of India’s foreign policy especially under the current leadership. The Indian neighbourhood policy fosters and thrives on people to people exchanges. Similar culture, religious belief, language and ethnicity has glued the sub-continent together for centuries and can be used as an asset to promote values and portraying the image of the country internationally, and as a tool of foreign policy. Although India subscribe to the policy of free flow of goods and people but in practise only little is achieved so far. India’s extremely stringent visa policy need ramification to promote exchanges in academia, Scholars, journalist, cultural representatives and this could facilitate greater cooperation and build trust among the SAARC members. It further helps correcting India’s image and misperceptions prevailing in the region. Strengthening

socio-cultural ties as an objective can be promoted through language and literature, sports, Bollywood and lifestyles.

One of the key features of Modi government’s foreign policy is its impeccable record of promoting culture and Indian beliefs internationally and using it as a tool to leverage national interest and foster better relations among the nations. He has promoted Buddhism, a philosophy that connects the entire north eastern part of the sub-continent (Pethiyagoda, 2015). International Buddha Purnima is hosted celebrating the birth of Buddha internationally where he has used his “Buddha’ connect to shape India’s political and economic diplomacy in Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Modi’s efforts perhaps yielded most significant results in Sri Lanka where he took recourse to underlining ancient Indo-Lankan Buddhist ties, dating back to the Mauryan Empire, under king Ashoka (Pethiyagoda 2015).

Also, India should likewise promote education as well as employment opportunities in the region, should create job prospects and higher academic scopes that can guide the younger generation to thrive for a settled and prosperous life who are otherwise prone to fall under the fodder of organizations inimical to state and to mankind at large (Sabherwal, 2016).

## 6. Challenges in India-South Asia relations

The South Asian region, full of contradictions, paradoxes and disparities, since de-colonization have been a hot bed for inter-state conflicts, border disputes, civil wars and ethnic rivalries. The competition and mistrustfulness towards each other has restricted greater partnerships in the region to thrive. Instead of fostering economic and developmental cooperation within the region, it still struggles with a number of internal and external challenges. Religious fundamentalism, terrorism, cross border insurgencies has beenmajor hindrances in cross country collaboration. Following are some of the challenges that the region is facing.

### 6.1 A defunct SAARC

The organization was formed in 1985 with seven countries as it’s joining members- Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The organization grew to eight in 2007 when Afghanistan joined the club. Although it has mainly aimed at promoting peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity based on shared understanding, good neighbourly relations and mutual cooperation (SAARC Charter, 2018), it has clearly failed to achieve the same. One of the primary objectives of SAARC was to promote inter-regional trade. However, statistics show that the regions trade rate is as low as 5 per cent total (The World Bank, 2016). It lacks a cooperative outcome and socialization of member states and given the structural fragility of SAARC and its inability to promote South Asian regional integration, an attempt to reboot the organisation would be futile (Kumar, 2018).

Numbers of reasons are held responsible for the organizations’ dysfunction. Failed regionalism in South Asia due to lack of political harmony has added to the failure

coupled with regular cancellation of summits or postponement of regular meetings. Also, SAARC lacks unanimity in thought and decision-making process that bars discussions on contagious bi-lateral issues. Besides SAARC is crippled with many inter-state and inter regional conflicts. Global terrorism and insurgencies unofficially sponsored by some states has by large affected the functioning of the organization. The region is conflict prone and hostile that further disrupts regional integration. Prevailing conflict of interest, power asymmetry and India's perceived dominance is a steady source in inflicting mistrust among the smaller nations. Often this perceived threat complex of smaller countries enabled Chinese involvement in the region to counter balance India. This is further detrimental to the regional integration. For India, involving China not only makes the internal matters internationalize but also china is a threat to India's security.

Lastly, India-Pakistan crisis post Uri attack and Pulwama has wrecked the relations between the two nations completely. The long lingering Kashmir dispute, terrorism and border insurgencies by the later has affected the bi-lateral functioning and put a pause at greater cooperation (Yhome, 2019). The inter-state disputes, sour relations and mutual distrust has held many of the SAARC decisions pending. India finds Islamabad's stances on SAARC initiatives either too slow or obstructive. Pakistan's dilemma in SAARC is also apparent; it foresees Delhi as a resistant to genuine cooperation in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Certain steps are required to be taken by all the leaders specially India and Pakistan and through discussions and bi-lateral talks the revamp to SAARC is not impossible.

## 6.2 China's presence in South Asia

China's growing involvement in the region has been a matter of suspicion for New Delhi since the last decade. The suspicion is further enhanced with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia (Haran, 2017). As a part of this project, greater connectivity will be promoted through BBIN framework. China has been conducting multi-dimensional cooperation with all most all the South Asian countries while expanding its outreach in the fields of economy, communication, cultural exchange, energy and untraditional security cooperation (Muni, 2015). Although, the relations with South Asia does not run back to the history and is significantly a new development. China's accession of Tibet brought the country closer to the Indian sub-continent. The present importance of South Asia in China's geo-strategic calculus is remarkable. China has successfully overcome the geographical barriers through its economy, technological innovations and trade. The Chinese desire to engage with South Asia is largely centralized on its perceived threat of its periphery, the Tibet and Xinjiang region (Muni, 2019). The instability in the region is a threat to China's internal security and since both the regions share borders with South Asia, China has strategic interest in South Asia to keep an eye on the rebellious group and terrorist groupings, ensuring no support is provided to such cause across borders. Secondly, China's economic drive has been another reason for the increase in engagement. China is at constant search for opportunities, market, investment and natural resources to sustain its growing economy. South

Asia is a cheaper and bigger source with huge potential and population, the growing South Asian economy is a promising market for China. Therefore, China is funding the infrastructural developments at these smaller South Asian regions not just as an aid but for clear self-interest. The Chinese, with an objective of countering India's influence and gaining foot-hold at the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean for its maritime feasibility is taking special interest in the region. This will provide China with an alternative to Malacca ensuring uninterrupted trade and commerce (Muni, 2015). Therefore, China's over enthusiasm in the region is a direct threat to India's security as the country is aiding some of the Indian adversaries at the neighbourhood with whom India share contested viewpoints. Also China's involvement is a challenge to India's age old power dominance over the region.

## 6.3 Inter-regional Complexes

The South Asian unique geography has been the source of most of the inter-state conflicts since decades. The India-Pakistan drift over territorial claims has been played at every international stage in various forums still. The fight over the disputed region led to wars in 1960-70s and yet insurgencies and cross-border terrorism are prevalent even after an era of independence. The Indo-Pak ties further deteriorated after the 26/11 terrorist attacks at the heart of Indian economic capital, Mumbai. The bi-lateral relation at the time was totally cut-off from New Delhi's side. Recently, the mass terrorist attacks at Uri and Pulwama further severed all diplomatic exchanges from both sides. Moreover, Pakistan's continued engagements with Kashmir Hurriyat leaders have been a concern for Delhi. The bi-lateral engagement with Pakistan has a direct impact on both the nations internally and the domestic factors here play a key role in determining the course of the relation.

Independence has brought its own sets of problems in South Asia and especially for India. Undefined and still contested borders are a source of rivalries and conflicts in the region. The Radcliff partition line between India-Bangladesh, the McMahon Line between India-China is still an unresolved and disputed issue. Besides, importance of Afghanistan in India's strategic interest is crucial. Both India-Pakistan drift over Afghanistan is a matter of concern in integrating the region. Pakistan supports such a regime at Afghan that would serve its interests in countering India whereas, India's priority in the region is to create hurdles for any anti-Pakistan sponsored government to seize power as it will further destabilize the region directly concerning the security. India's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan is to balance out Pakistan and PM Modi's aid strategy has been successful so far.

The India-Nepal relation has further strained due to internal security dynamics. The open borders, lightly guarded are often proving a safe-haven for trans-border illegal activities in Indian territory. Also the chronic political instability in the region, including a decade old violent insurgency had de-imaged Nepal's development. A prevailing anti-India feeling has been constant in Nepal. The withdrawal of Nepalese Army from joint BIMSTEC military exercise has further strained the relations. The India-Nepal relation is

clearly losing the much talked about “special” component. China’s investment in Nepal covers many other projects related to infrastructure development, energy cooperation and transportation facilities (Das, 2016).

Therefore, the South Asian region is a hub of conflicts and dissents but these can be easily solved by participation on regional bodies, through dialogues that would contribute significantly to the transformation of the hostilities in the region. Internal security is vital for the region and the nations at an individual/domestic level and Modi’s initiative through ‘neighbourhood first policy’ will strive for better integration among the regional partners that would serve as a deterrent to the security challenges.

## 7. Conclusion

For India, so far, since the advent of Modi’s ministerial, South Asia has been an area of vital importance in his geo-strategic calculus. Modi’s progression of cooperation and search for partnerships at its periphery, through his mutually beneficial policies has revitalised the regional engagement. Internationally and within the region, Modi has made an effort to re-erect a cleaner image of India, resurrect its credibility and refurbish ties. To this context, the relevance of Gujral Doctrine, endorsed by Indian policy makers has wide acceptability in its neighbourhood. Modi’s policy of ‘neighbourhood first’ provides further impetus to the doctrine, its prescribed philosophy while framing policies towards smaller Asian nations. With time the doctrine has only been modified with the guiding principles remaining same. The future of South Asian policy should render equal importance to the doctrine while framing its strategy. Although, the need of the hour is an alternate rhetoric of politician and officials in pursuing Foreign policy, strengthening of institutions are of prime importance to develop regions and functioning strictly through institutional framework with the region as a whole instead of bilateralism is a prerequisite. India should play a leadership role, given the power asymmetry, credits to its vast territories and huge population and booming economy, its rising stature and profile in the region and at the global level is remarkable. Thus India should play the big brother role in encouraging development. The soft power credibility should be given further impetus in expanding its relations within the neighbourhood. Modi governments thrust for indigenization has borne the much touted “Make in India” initiative that clearly depicts the current leadership’s knack for economic development. As a part of his neighbourhood policy, PM Modi should further promote economic integration, being an upcoming economic giant itself. South Asia has a huge population, hence cheap market; India can explore the opportunities by framing mutually beneficial policies. Whether the reciprocity is possible or not, given the power asymmetry between the nations, only time can tell. But for now, economy should be the driving force in fostering better partnerships within South Asia vis-à-vis India. India needs to change its “statist mind-set”, often a hindrance in wider acceptance of the region and thus a deterrent to regional integration. This can be promoted through higher levels of people-to-people contacts and shared cultural values.

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