

India's Neighbourhood Policy PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES



“India’s neighbourhood is not just a geography; it is a reflection of our ethos, our culture, and our traditions.”

The centrality of neighbours in India’s foreign policy stems from the clear understanding that a peaceful periphery is essential for India to achieve her multifarious developmental goals. However, India’s neighbourhood presents complex dynamics, with many countries suffering from high inflation, economic instability and popular unrest. Regional cooperation becomes critical as geographic imperative binds neighbours i.e., any challenges faced by people beyond the border has huge potential to spill inside the border. India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ Policy underlines the renewed primacy that the country seeks to attach to its neighbouring countries and achieve the goal of lasting peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

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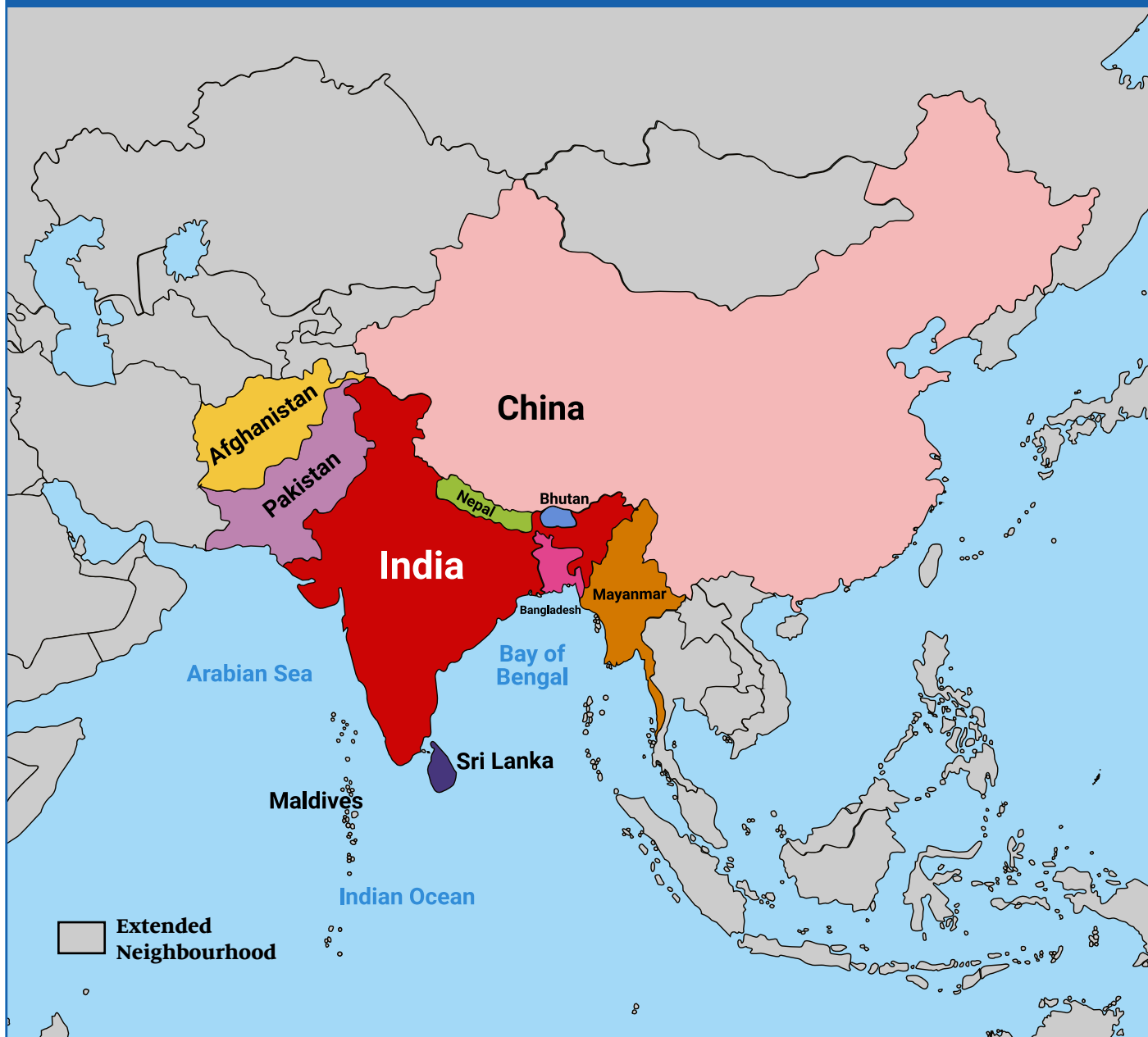
SIKAR

I. Who are India's neighbours and what is India's neighbourhood policy?

Although **there isn't a single, universally accepted official definition of India's neighbourhood**, the concept of neighbourhood is often a matter of geopolitical interpretation and can vary based on historical, political, economic, and security considerations. Largely the term neighbourhood includes:

- ▶ **Immediate neighbours or countries in the South Asian Region** with which India shares its geographical land/maritime boundaries. These include countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- ▶ With these countries, India enjoys **civilizational relations** characterized by **shared history, culture and people-to-people contacts**.
- ▶ These immediate neighbours have been India's **"first circle of priority"** since Independence **provided** they remain **sensitive to India's core security concerns**.
- ▶ **Extended neighbours or countries geographically located further away from India** (such as in the Indian Ocean Region, South-east Asia region or West Asian region) but still have significant political, economic, cultural and strategic interactions with India.
- ▶ The policy of **Neighbourhood First** has been an **integral component of Indian foreign policy** since 1947. It aims to foster stronger ties, enhance regional cooperation, and address mutual concerns with immediate neighbouring countries.
- ▶ **The Policy** is driven by India's **consultative, non-reciprocal and development-oriented** approach.

Figure 1.1. India's Neighbours



BOX 1.1. Extended neighbourhood: A gateway to India's global leadership

- As India aspires to be a regional superpower and global leader, it is pursuing as strong relationships with its **extended neighbours** as with its neighbours.
- **These extended neighbours include countries in the following regions:**
 - **Asia-Pacific:** India's 'Act East' policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote **economic, strategic and cultural relations** with the region at different levels. The **Act East Policy** rests on four central themes – **Connectivity, Commerce, Culture and Capacity-Building**.
 - » **ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS)**, etc. are the key institutional structures that have lent support to expanding bilateral engagements in the region.
 - **Indo-Pacific:** India's policy for the region is based on the principles of **"inclusiveness", "openness" and the concept of "ASEAN centrality"**.
 - » India's **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region) **policy** aims to pursue and promote **India's** geo-political, strategic and economic **interests on the seas**, particularly in the Indian Ocean.
 - **African seaboard countries:** The spirit of **"developing together as equals"** defines this partnership.
 - » **Island Nations** like Seychelles, and Mauritius **have a large number of India diaspora**.
 - **Central Asia:** India has pursued the **Connect Central Asia** policy to establish **deeper economic and cultural ties in the region**.
 - » India has emphasised on the need to work on **4Cs: commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity, and contact**.
 - **West Asia:** India's policy of **"Look West"** has been converted to **"Link and Act West"**.
 - » **Link and Act West** policy broadly includes the more important **sub-region of the GCC** (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, alongwith **Iran, Israel and other Arab countries**.
 - » Recent launch of the **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** is a testimony to India's rising position in this region.

1.1. How has India's Neighbourhood policy evolved?

India has always strived for huge level of humility when it comes to dealing with neighbours. Based on preferences and perceptions towards the South Asian region, the strategies and priorities with regard to neighbouring region has evolved over time. This evolution can be summarised as follows:

- **Colonial phase: Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism**, (Asian Relation Conference of 1948) cemented India's relations with its neighbours.
 - » **Liberation of Bangladesh** from Pakistan in 1971 and signing of **Shimla agreement** between India and Pakistan in 1972.
 - » India's **militarily involvement in Sri Lanka in 1987**.
 - » **SAARC** was established in **1985 to cement the cooperation** from neighbours.
- **1950s and 1960s (India was driven by Idealism and Focussed on immediate neighbours in order to pursue only India's security interests)**
 - India chose to deal with its neighbourhood by **engaging in bilateral talks and treaties** and not in a regional framework.
 - » **Treaty of Friendship** was signed with **Bhutan (1949) and Nepal (1950)**.
 - » **Panchsheel Agreement(1954)** was signed between **India and China**.
- **1960s - 1990s (Phase of Regional Assertion and Establishing sub-continental hegemony)**
 - Foreign policy was **based on the 'Monroe Doctrine'** to position India in its South Asian neighbourhood and not accepting foreign interference in the region.
 - » **Sikkim was included (later merged with India in 1975) under Indian territory**.
 - **1990s - 2000s (Being a Responsible Big Brother)**
 - 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**.
 - » **Gujral Doctrine** was **introduced** under which India made an attempt to **assure the region** of its **support** through the policy of providing **unilateral concession**.
 - » Post-1990s **economic reforms**, India took initiatives for **economic integration of the region**.

Figure 1.2. Principles of Gujral Doctrine

5 key Principles Gujral Doctrine



India does not ask for reciprocity with the neighbours but gives all that it can in good faith and trust.



No South Asian country will allow its territory to be used **against the interest of another** country of the region.



All South Asian countries must **respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.**



Non interference in the **internal affairs** of another country.



Settle all the **disputes** through **peaceful bilateral negotiations.**

➤ **2008 onwards:** The **Chinese influence** in India's periphery started **growing**. Therefore, India pursued the '**Gujral doctrine**' more vigorously.

➤ '**Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) was conceived in 2008** wherein the **principles of engagement** under NFP has been outlined in the **form of 5Ss**:

- » **Samman** (respect),
- » **Samvad** (dialogue),
- » **Shanti** (peace),
- » **Samriddhi** (prosperity) and
- » **Sanskriti** (culture).

➤ **2014 onwards: Revamping NFP** to strengthen ties through economic cooperation, development assistance, and addressing shared challenges.

➤ The **NFP received a boost from all neighbours except Pakistan**. India's cooperation hinges on Pakistan's creation of a peaceful environment without terror, hostility, and violence.

➤ **Greater emphasis on regional and sub-regional initiatives**, through SAARC and BIMSTEC.

Box 1.2. Mandala theory: Looking back at the neighbourhood policy in ancient India

➤ The Mandala **theory of statecraft** was proposed by Kautilya (Chanakya) in **3rd century BC**.

➤ The theory is guided by the philosophy that "**Your neighbour is your natural enemy** and the **neighbour's neighbour is your friend**."

➤ The Mandala theory is **based on the principle of the balance of power** and **depicted through concentric circles**.

➤ In this circle, an immediate neighbour state is most likely to be an enemy (real or potential), and a state next to the immediate neighbour is likely to be one's friend, and so on.

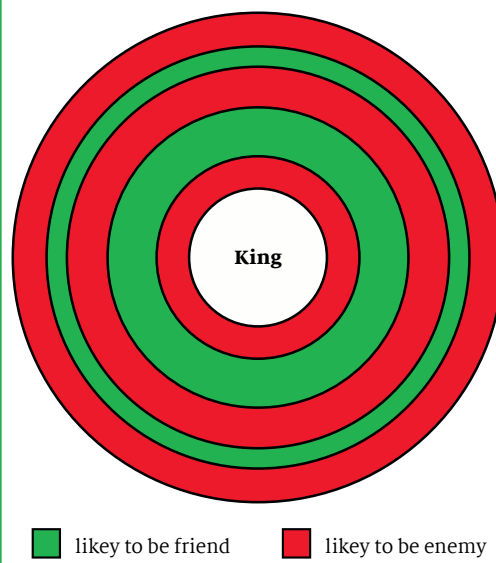
➤ The **litmus test** for any state in the centre of the concentric circles is **to maintain the balance of power between other nations in the region to safeguard its sovereignty**.

➤ In a system of Mandala, **Kautilya advocated a six-fold policy to interact with neighbors**: co-existence, neutrality, alliance, double policy, march, and war.

➤ To achieve this, **he advised the king to use following tactics**: conciliation, gifts, bribery, dissent, deceit, pretense, and open attack or war.

➤ On the question of **treaties and alliances**, he suggests, "a king should not hesitate to break any friendship or alliances that later prove to be disadvantageous."

Mandala Theory



2. What is the relevance of India's Neighbourhood Policy in today's geopolitical landscape ?

Geographically, the neighborhood is a country's first point of diplomacy and key to growth. India's relationship with its neighbouring countries is crucial for its economy, social and geopolitical growth.

➤ **Geostrategic interests:**

- **Regional leadership:** Cooperation from neighbours in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that has become a pivotal zone of global strategic competition would **reinforce India's central position in South Asia.**
- **Countering China:** Cooperation with neighbours will help India counter **Chinese influence** and meet the aspiration of becoming a '**net security provider**' in the IOR.
- **Support in multilateral forum:** Cooperation with its neighbouring partners is critical for India's leadership as a **representative of Global South** in various multilateral fora like UNSC, WTO, IMF, etc.
 - » Cooperation with them at multilateral fora has introduced a **regional/sub-regional dimension to bilateral relations** and led to a **stronger understanding of the region.**

➤ **Security**

- **Territorial integrity:** Separatist groups may find refuge across borders. **India needs neighbours** who respect her sovereignty and territorial integrity and **do not allow any insurgent group. For example,**
 - » **Myanmar** is seen as a **key partner** in the fight to **end insurgency in India's North-Eastern states.**
- **Maritime Security:** Maritime domain **enables a ready flow of threats** and challenges, such as the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack.
 - » Cooperation with neighbouring countries like Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar will help **India effective policing of its waters.**

➤ **Economic interests**

- **Energy security:** India's **northern neighbours**- Nepal and Bhutan-have a huge hydro-power potential. Also, cooperation with **neighbours in the Indian Ocean** is critical to prevent **disruption in import of oil and gases.**
 - » **More than 80% of India's oil** and over 50% of gas is sourced from various parts of the world that travels over the sea.
- **Bridging development deficit in the North East:** Active outreach to neighbouring countries would also be helpful in the development of India's North-Eastern states. **For example,**
 - » **Bangladesh** has approved the use of its **Chattogram and Mongla** ports by India for **transit and trans-shipment of cargo** to its North-East states.
 - » **North East** could also be **connected to Southeast Asia** for trade and economic cooperation through **Myanmar** (the only ASEAN country sharing a land border with India).
- **Soft power diplomacy:** India's rich cultural and historical ties with its neighbours **help promote its diverse cultural values** and soft power influence in the region.
 - For instance, the prevalence of Buddhism in India and Southeast Asia acts as a tool to strengthen people-to-people ties and diplomatic relations.

3. What are the challenges that India face in pursuing the spirit of its Neighbourhood First Policy?

In its pursuit of the Neighbourhood First Policy, India faces a diverse array of challenges that range from historical tensions to complex security dynamics. These include:

- **Lack of a comprehensive policy:** Experts claim that due to the lack of a **well-defined neighbourhood policy**, India has focused more on '**managing** its relationships with its neighbours **rather than shaping them.**
- **Strained bilateral relations** among some nations in the region have posed severe challenges to implementation of policies at a regional level.
 - For instance, out of the three agreements on cross-border energy, motor vehicle movement and railway cooperation presented in the last **SAARC summit**, only one was signed on energy cooperation as **Pakistan** refused to sign the other two agreements.

➤ **Security risks:**

- **Cross border terrorism:** The existence of permeable borders, backing from the host nation such as Pakistan, and the escalation of extremism in neighbourhood may collectively contribute to emergence of terrorist activities within India.
- **Drug Trafficking:** India's drug trafficking problems have been exacerbated by its proximity to **Golden Triangle, and Golden Crescent.**
- **Piracy off the coast of Somalia** and use of waterways by terrorist.

- ▶ **China's inroads in South Asia:** With the push of OBOR, **China's trade volume with SAARC countries has grown significantly** and at a fast pace over the past decade.
 - ▶ Time and again India's neighbours including Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal among others have played **Chinese card** against India.
 - » For example, Nepal projected China as a possible alternative to India as a source of essential supplies during the border blockade.
- ▶ **Suboptimal confidence building with neighbours:** India's neighbours have long felt that it **doesn't treat them equally**. India's **military involvement** in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives is viewed even today as **evidence of regional apprehensions**.
- ▶ **Economic crisis in the neighbourhood:** For example, economic uncertainty and acute scarcity of foreign exchange in Sri Lanka have hit India's major exports to the island nation.
- ▶ **Connectivity and Border Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure limits the impact of free trade and investment deals. Many of the border districts are less developed.
 - ▶ There were **more railway connections between India and East Pakistan in the early sixties** than there are today with Bangladesh.
 - ▶ The **India-Nepal border is an open border** on paper. But **circulation is extremely difficult** due to the absence of basic infrastructure.
- ▶ **Effect of domestic politics:** Domestic-political compulsions and **ethnic considerations** have many a time dictated India's neighbourhood policy and impacted it adversely. For example;
 - ▶ **Teesta Waters agreement** got delayed due to opposition by West Bengal.
 - ▶ **Support for the Sri Lankan Tamil** struggle against Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism was due to ethnic considerations.
 - ▶ **Support to the cause of Madhesis** in the Terai region of Nepal as they share close familial ties with India.
- ▶ **Delayed implementation of development projects:** India's **Line of Credit (LOC) projects** to its neighbours increased from \$ 3.3 billion in 2014 to **\$14.7 billion in 2020** (50% of India's global soft lending goes to its neighbours).
 - ▶ However, there is a huge **delay** in the implementation of such projects which can **lead to frustration, mistrust and reduces India's influence** in the region.
- ▶ **Climate Change and Natural Disasters:** The region is prone to natural disasters and climate change-related challenges. These environmental issues **can disrupt development efforts** and may even lead to issues of **Climate Migration**.

Box 3.1. COVID-19: A challenge as well as an opportunity for Neighborhood First Policy

COVID-19 pandemic had placed enormous challenges on the entire South Asian region in terms of rising **inflation, reduced food security and increasing political instability**. India emerged as a major provider for public-goods and services such as healthcare, education, training and providing scientific and technical support in the neighborhood during the crisis.

Opportunities during COVID- 19

- ▶ **Vaccine Diplomacy:** India prioritized providing COVID-19 vaccines to its immediate neighbours under the **Vaccine Maitri** initiative. It served as a **powerful soft power tool to counter china's influence**.
- ▶ **Leadership role:** As part of NFP, India **reactivated SAARC forum** to formulate a **regional action plan** to combat the pandemic and adopted bilateral diplomacy to reach out to its neighbours.
- ▶ **Build Trust and Cooperation:** India mobilized **military relief, set up laboratory for testing, and delivered critical medicine and hospital supplies** thus strengthening bilateral ties with countries like Maldives.
- ▶ **Goodwill:** India's **initiatives to help its** neighbours including extended neighbours **enhanced its global image and earned goodwill**.

Box 3.2. In conversation: India's Neighbourhood Developmental Initiatives



Vinay



Vini

Vinay, India's neighborhood developmental initiatives are intriguing, aren't they?

Absolutely, Vini. India provides assistance in various forms to its neighbours. Including grants, credit lines, disaster relief, scholarships, and capacity-building programs.

Yes, India has also established multilateral platforms like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN which are integral to its Neighbourhood First Policy.

I'm particularly intrigued by India's role in BIMSTEC. India is leading the security pillar which covers areas like Counter-Terrorism, Disaster Management, and Energy Security.

Indeed. Also the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement signed among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal in 2015 is promising, especially with ongoing efforts to make it operational despite Bhutan's withdrawal from the agreement.

That's a great step towards enhancing regional connectivity. Unfortunately, SAARC has faced obstacles to its optimal functioning, primarily due to issues with Pakistan.

Certainly Vinay, but despite these challenges, India's efforts, such as the SAARC-level COVID-19 Emergency Fund and the financial support to member states during the pandemic are commendable.

Absolutely, Vinay. Regional cooperation is vital for shared prosperity and stability.

4. How can India make its Neighbourhood policy more robust and impactful?

Strengthening the impact and resilience of India's Neighbourhood First Policy requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the diverse challenges and opportunities within the region. India can consider the following strategic measures:

- **Rejuvenating Regional Forums and Organizations:** To foster sustained diplomatic engagement among neighbouring countries, India should actively utilize regional platforms such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), among others.
 - These forums can serve as **vehicles for continuous engagement**, dispute resolution, and the promotion of regional integration.
- **Engaging China:** Ongoing negotiations should **prioritize** a clear **definition of the Line of Actual Control (LAC)**. Simultaneously, India should be ready to firmly **oppose any incursion that violates** the established norms outlined in the **Border Defence Cooperation Agreement** between both nations.
- **Addressing Terrorism from Pakistan:** Proactively collaborate with regional and international organizations to create a unified platform for countering terrorism within the framework of the NFP.
 - Additionally, India could **explore the possibility of fostering economic connections** with Pakistan, should it demonstrate a commitment to promoting broader people-to-people interactions.
- **Strengthening internal security architecture:** To elicit a proactive response from neighbouring nations, India must first **bolster its own internal security architecture to effectively address the challenges posed by terrorism**.
- **Cooperation with global powers:** India's historical approach focused on keeping major powers out of its neighbourhood. However, in the face of challenges posed by China and Pakistan, a reorientation of foreign policy is necessary to address them effectively:
 - This involves **forging strategic partnerships** with the United States, Russia, and the European Union and **active participation in multilateral organizations and forums** such as the United Nations, BRICS, and G20.
- **Sustained engagement with smaller neighbours:** India's diplomatic efforts should be attuned to the expectations and apprehensions of its smaller neighbours.
 - This can be accomplished by **enhancing domestic coordination** and **promoting closer collaboration** between the foreign and security ministries to craft individualized strategies for each country and the wider region.
- **Bridging Connectivity Deficits:** Make **substantial investments** in the enhancement of infrastructure, encompassing roadways, railways, inland waterways, ports, energy networks, and digital customs.
 - Also, there is a need to think about economic openness and connectivity to the neighbourhood as an advantage and not its a threat to India's security.
 - The parliamentary committee has suggested to establish a **regional development fund under the BIMSTEC** for this purpose.
- **Promoting Tourism:** Under the NFP, channelling investments into the tourism sector, including medical tourism, can significantly **bolster people-to-people ties, amplify India's soft power, and foster economic integration** within the region.
 - Numerous Bangladeshi nationals seek medical treatment in India. Additionally, India witnesses a considerable influx of visitors from Nepal for religious tourism, exemplifying the potential for enhancing regional tourism exchanges.
- **Water Sharing and Environmental Cooperation:** Collaborative efforts on water sharing, sustainable resource management, and environmental protection can help **address common challenges** and promote cooperation among neighboring countries. This can be achieved through the **exchange of data and scientific research**.

Box 4.1. European Union (EU): A Model for Regional Integration

- **Prior to 1945**, European history was marked by prolonged periods of conflict, with intermittent, shorter phases of peace.
- **Post-World War II**, the recognition that closer collaboration could prevent the horrors of war led to the establishment of the European Union (EU).
 - **Joining the EU requires member countries to relinquish some political and economic authority.** In return, they enjoy the **benefits of a single European market, encompassing a free-trade zone**, as well as the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital throughout the EU bloc.
 - This framework **fosters stability, prevents conflicts among members and enhances economic**

competitiveness.

- ▶ This makes the EU a unique governing body and the **world's first supranational organization.**

Lessons from EU's success:

- ▶ **Historical reconciliation:** Success of EU is attributed to historical reconciliation between France and Germany. Success of other regional organisations also need similar reconciliation. For example,
 - ▶ **Reconciliation** between **Pakistan** and **India** is a necessity for **success of SAARC.**
 - ▶ Similarly, a genuine reconciliation between **Japan and China; and Japan and Korea** is needed for success of **East Asia.**
- ▶ **Political and public will:** If integration is to succeed, the **public along with the government should believe** that it is in **their vital national interest.**

Conclusion

India's Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) is a dynamic policy that adjusts to its renewed interests in the region while evolving according to regional circumstances. India's commitment to its neighbourhood will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the future of South Asia and beyond. As India navigates the complexities and opportunities of its neighbourhood, a comprehensive approach is needed to ensure a stable and prosperous neighbourhood that aligns with India's national interests and foreign policy objectives.

TOPIC AT A GLANCE

India's Neighbourhood Policy: Prospects and Challenges



India's neighbours and neighbourhood policy

- ⊖ **Immediate neighbours:** India shares borders and civilizational relations with them. They are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- ⊖ **Extended neighbours:** Located further away from India but still have significant political, economic, cultural and strategic interactions with India.
- ⊖ **Neighbourhood First Policy:** This has been a core element of Indian foreign policy since 1947, focusing on strengthening regional ties, fostering cooperation, etc.



Evolution of India's Neighbourhood policy

- ⊖ **Colonial phase:** Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, (Asian Relation Conference of 1948) cemented India's relations with its neighbours.
- ⊖ **1950s and 1960s:** India chose to deal with its neighbourhood by engaging in bilateral talks and treaties and not in a regional framework.
- ⊖ **1960s-1990s:** Phase of regional assertion and establishing sub-continental hegemony.
- ⊖ **1990s-2000s:** Gujral Doctrine attempted to assure India's support to neighbours through unilateral concession.
- ⊖ **2008 onwards:** With growing footprint of Chinese in neighbouring region conceived 'Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP)'.
⊖ **2014 onwards:** Revamping NFP to strengthen ties through economic cooperation, development, etc.



Relevance of India's Neighbourhood Policy

- ⊖ **Geostrategic interests:** Regional leadership, countering China, cooperation in multilateral fora like UNSC, WTO, IMF, etc.
- ⊖ **Security:** Neighbours that do not allow any refuge for separatist groups across borders are crucial for territorial integrity and maritime security.
- ⊖ **Economic interests:** Bridging development deficit in the North East, ensuring country's energy security (like Himalayan neighbours are vital for hydro-power).
- ⊖ **Soft power diplomacy:** For example, Buddhism's presence in India and Southeast Asia strengthens people-to-people bonds and diplomatic relations.



Challenges in pursuing India's Neighbourhood First Policy

- ⊖ **Lack of a comprehensive policy:** Therefore, India is more focused on managing relationships with Neighbours than shaping them.
- ⊖ **Strained bilateral relations:** Thus regional forum like SAARC are not able to achieve its potential.
- ⊖ **Security risks:** Cross border terrorism, Drug Trafficking, etc.
- ⊖ **China's inroads in South Asia:** Many of India's neighbours have played Chinese card against India.
- ⊖ **Other issues:** Suboptimal confidence building, Economic crisis in the neighbourhood, Delayed implementation of development projects, Climate Change, etc.



Way ahead

- ⊖ **Rejuvenating Regional Forums:** SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA, etc. can serve as vehicles for continuous engagement, dispute resolution.
- ⊖ **Engaging China:** Prioritize a clear definition of the LAC and oppose breach of provisions of Border Defence Cooperation Agreement.
- ⊖ **Addressing Terrorism from Pakistan:** Collaborate with regional and international organizations to counter such terrorism, also economically engage with Pakistan.
- ⊖ **Strengthening internal security architecture:** It will facilitate a proactive response from neighbouring nations.
- ⊖ **Cooperation with global powers:** It will help tackling challenges posed by China and Pakistan.
- ⊖ **Other:** Sustained engagement with smaller neighbours, Bridging Connectivity Deficits, Water Sharing and Environmental Cooperation, etc.

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1 AIR ISHITA KISHORE

2 AIR GARIMA LOHIA

3 AIR UMA HARATHI N

39 in Top 50 Selection in CSE 2022

8 in Top 10 Selection in CSE 2021

2 AIR ANKITA AGARWAL

3 AIR GAMINI SINGLA

4 AIR AISHWARYA VERMA

5 AIR UTKARSH DWIVEDI

6 AIR YAKSH CHAUDHARY

7 AIR SAMYAK S JAIN

8 AIR ISHITA RATHI

9 AIR PREETAM KUMAR

HEAD OFFICE
Apsara Arcade, 1/8-B,
1st Floor, Near Gate-6,
Karol Bagh Metro
Station, Delhi

MUKHERJEE NAGAR CENTRE
Plot No. 857, Ground Floor,
Mukherjee Nagar, Opposite
Punjab & Sindh Bank,
Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi

FOR DETAILED ENQUIRY
Please Call:
+91 8468022022,
+91 9019066066

1 AIR **SHUBHAM KUMAR**
CIVIL SERVICES EXAMINATION 2020

ENQUIRY@VISIONIAS.IN /VISION_IAS WWW.VISIONIAS.IN /C/VISIONIASDELHI VISION_IAS /VISIONIAS_UPSC

