

The Elusive Pivot: An Analysis of India's Regional Diplomacy and its Strategic Limitations

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Abstract

This article offers an in-depth analysis of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, exploring its regional diplomatic efforts alongside notable achievements and persistent challenges. Using game theory, international relations frameworks, and case studies, it identifies key obstacles hindering India's pursuit of regional leadership. These include internal constraints such as political instability, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited funding; external challenges like China's expanding influence, cross-border terrorism, and unresolved historical disputes; and strategic shortcomings characterized by reactionary diplomacy, over-reliance on hard power, and underutilization of soft power tools. The study concludes by advocating for a recalibrated regional approach, focusing on confidence-building measures, cooperative frameworks to address shared challenges, and strategic use of soft power to strengthen India's leadership in South Asia.

1. Introduction

India's "Neighborhood First" policy was conceived as a cornerstone of its foreign strategy, aiming to deepen ties with its immediate neighbours and establish India as the leading power in South Asia. This vision is grounded in the region's shared histories, interconnected challenges, and complex tensions, striving for economic integration, cultural synergy, and cooperative security arrangements. While progress has been evident in bilateral relations with countries like Bangladesh and Bhutan, the broader implementation has faced significant roadblocks. Persistent issues, including strained relations with Pakistan, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the expanding influence of China, have diluted the policy's impact, exposing critical gaps in India's regional approach.

Scholars like C. Raja Mohan (2013) contend that India's centrality in South Asia represents both a strategic advantage and a significant challenge. Its geographical and economic dominance naturally position India as the region's leader, yet historical grievances and imbalances in power dynamics often provoke resistance from smaller neighbours. For example, India has achieved notable successes with Bangladesh in areas like border demarcation and water-sharing agreements (Chatterjee, 2020). However, its relationship with Pakistan remains mired in deep-seated mutual distrust, perpetuated by unresolved issues such as the Kashmir dispute (Ganguly, 2016).

The theoretical underpinnings of India's regional

diplomacy can be understood through the lens of international relations frameworks. Realist scholars like John Mearsheimer (2001) highlight how power asymmetries in South Asia compel India to adopt a strategy of balancing against external threats, particularly China. Beijing's growing influence, manifested through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), directly challenges India's regional dominance. Conversely, liberal theorists such as Joseph Nye (2004) emphasize the importance of economic and cultural soft power in fostering regional cooperation. India's rich cultural heritage and its role as a major economic player provide it with unique tools to influence its neighbours, but these have often been underutilized in its foreign policy.

Despite its ambitious goals, the "Neighborhood First" policy has been criticized for its lack of coherence and long-term vision. Bajpai and Pant (2020) note that India's approach has often been reactive, responding to crises rather than preemptively addressing potential flashpoints. For example, India's delayed response to Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 allowed China to fill the vacuum through swift financial and infrastructural aid, undermining India's influence.

This article delves deeper into the successes and shortcomings of India's regional diplomacy, examining empirical realities through case studies of its interactions with neighbours such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. By employing game theory and international relations frameworks, the article identifies internal, external, and

strategic barriers hindering India's aspirations for regional leadership. Finally, it offers a path forward through a recalibration of priorities, emphasizing trust-building, regional connectivity, and the strategic deployment of soft power. By addressing these challenges, India has the potential to solidify its role as a stabilizing force in South Asia while counterbalancing external influences, particularly those of China.

This study examines the complexities and challenges of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, focusing on internal constraints, external influences, strategic shortcomings, and the potential for leveraging soft power and cooperative frameworks to enhance India's regional leadership. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the internal constraints, such as political, bureaucratic, and resource-related challenges, that affect the implementation of India's "Neighborhood First" policy?
2. How do external factors, including China's growing influence, cross-border terrorism, and historical disputes, impact India's regional diplomacy efforts?
3. In what ways do India's strategic approaches, such as reliance on reactionary diplomacy and disproportionate focus on hard power, limit its effectiveness in South Asia?
4. How can the deployment of soft power and cooperative frameworks enhance India's leadership in the South Asian region?
5. What trust-building measures and policy recalibrations are necessary for India to overcome its diplomatic and strategic limitations and strengthen its regional dominance?

2. Method

The study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating game theory, international relations frameworks, and case studies. Game-theoretic scenarios such as the Prisoner's Dilemma (India-Pakistan mistrust), Chicken Game (high-stakes confrontations), and Coordination Games (regional integration initiatives like BBIN) highlight India's strategic interactions. Empirical analysis of India's diplomacy with Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka is used to validate findings, drawing insights from primary sources and scholarly literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

Game Theory and Strategic Interactions

Game theory provides a structured analytical lens to examine India's intricate diplomatic interactions with its neighbours, highlighting the strategic choices that define these engagements. In South Asia, three game-theoretic scenarios frequently recur:

1. **Prisoner's Dilemma:** The pervasive mistrust between India and Pakistan typifies this scenario. Both nations hesitate to engage in cooperative initiatives due to fears of exploitation and betrayal. For instance, the failure to sustain peace processes, such as the Agra Summit of 2001, reflects the inherent mistrust that drives mutual defection (Axelrod, 1984). Scholars like Dixit and Nalebuff (1991) emphasize that breaking the cycle of mutual suspicion requires credible commitment mechanisms, which have been elusive in India-

Pakistan relations. Furthermore, unresolved issues like the Kashmir dispute exacerbate this dynamic, fostering a zero-sum mindset where cooperative gains are often overshadowed by security concerns (Ganguly, 2016).

2. **Chicken Game:** High-stakes brinkmanship has characterized several India-Pakistan confrontations, including the Balakot airstrikes in 2019 and subsequent retaliatory measures by Pakistan. Schelling (1960) highlights that brinkmanship strategies often aim to signal resolve, but they carry significant risks of miscalculation. The Balakot episode underscores how escalation dynamics can spiral, with both states seeking to demonstrate strength while avoiding outright war. Such posturing reflects the challenges of deterrence in an environment marked by nuclear capabilities and asymmetric warfare strategies.
3. **Coordination Games:** Regional initiatives, such as the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement, highlight both the promise of collaborative efforts and the inherent difficulties in achieving consensus. According to Oye (1985), successful coordination in international relations relies on aligning shared interests, fostering clear communication, and addressing asymmetries effectively. In South Asia, however, differing national priorities and domestic political pressures frequently impede such efforts, as exemplified by Nepal's hesitation to fully commit to the BBIN framework.

4. International Relations Theory

India's regional diplomacy is also shaped by the broader paradigms of international relations theory, offering insights into its strategic behavior:

- **Realism:** Realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer (2001), posit that India's foreign policy embodies the power asymmetries characteristic of South Asia, where it strives to assert dominance while mitigating external threats, especially from China. The 2017 Doklam standoff serves as a prime example of India's strategy to counterbalance China's expanding influence in its vicinity. Waltz (1979) further argues that such balancing manoeuvres are essential for a state's survival and its quest for regional stability within the inherently anarchic structure of the international system.
- **Liberalism:** Despite the promise of liberal interdependence, economic integration in South Asia has been hindered by institutional inefficiencies and trade imbalances. Nye (2004) highlights the potential of soft power and economic ties in fostering regional cooperation. However, India's limited success in fostering a robust South Asian economic bloc, exemplified by the ineffectiveness of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), demonstrates the challenges of operationalizing liberal ideals in a geopolitically contentious region.
- **Constructivism:** Constructivist theorists like Wendt (1999) emphasize the role of historical narratives and cultural perceptions in shaping state behavior. In South Asia, the legacy of partition, colonial exploitation, and historical rivalries has perpetuated adversarial relationships. The entrenched hostility between India and Pakistan is not merely a function of material power

but also of ideational constructs that frame the other as an existential threat (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Addressing these narratives is critical to overcoming the deeply rooted animosities that hinder regional cooperation.

By integrating game theory and international relations paradigms, this framework provides a nuanced understanding of the strategic calculations and structural constraints that shape India's regional diplomacy. These theoretical insights highlight the complexity of India's interactions with its neighbours, underscoring the need for innovative approaches that transcend traditional paradigms.

Internal Constraints

Domestic Politics and Electoral Dynamics

Driven by domestic political considerations, particularly during elections, India's foreign policy can be shaped by the need to garner public support, sometimes leading to hardline stances against Pakistan that may not align with long-term strategic interests (Ganguly, 2016). This reactive approach prioritizes short-term political capital over nuanced diplomacy. For instance, the post-Pulwama airstrikes in 2019 were widely interpreted as both a strategic response to terrorism and a tactic to bolster domestic political support ahead of the general elections (Sahni, 2020). Scholars such as Chandra (2017) argue that this tendency to securitize foreign policy reduces India's capacity to engage in trust-building measures with its neighbours, ultimately undermining regional stability.

Bureaucratic Challenges

Institutional inefficiencies further exacerbate India's foreign policy challenges. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) operates with limited resources and personnel, hampering its ability to engage effectively with regional partners (Mohan, 2013). India's slow response to Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis is a case in point; protracted inter-agency deliberations allowed China to step in with rapid financial assistance, further strengthening Beijing's influence in Colombo (Bajpai & Pant, 2020). Bureaucratic inertia not only delays decision-making but also signals a lack of agility in India's foreign policy apparatus, a critical limitation in a dynamic geopolitical environment.

Resource Constraints

India faces significant financial constraints in its competition with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's massive infrastructure investments in South Asia, such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and road networks in Nepal, far surpass India's development assistance. This disparity not only erodes New Delhi's influence but also creates a dependency dynamic among smaller states, as they increasingly rely on Chinese funding. As scholar Joseph Nye (2004) argues, economic resources are a crucial element of soft power. India's limited capacity to fund regional projects hinders its ability to exert soft power in South Asia and effectively counter China's growing influence.

External Constraints

China's Expanding Influence

China's expanding influence in South Asia poses the most significant external challenge to India's regional diplomacy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$62 billion initiative under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), not only

strengthens Pakistan's economy but also significantly enhances Beijing's strategic foothold in the region, mirroring Mearsheimer's (2001) theory of offensive realism. The Hambantota Port lease in Sri Lanka and infrastructure projects in Nepal further exemplify China's long-term strategy to encircle India economically and militarily, consistent with Schelling's (1960) concept of deterrence. As Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue, China's growing presence exacerbates the regional power asymmetry, forcing India to divert resources towards counterbalancing Chinese influence, thereby hindering regional cooperation.

Non-State Actors and Cross-Border Terrorism

Cross-border terrorism remains a persistent threat to India's regional stability, particularly in its relations with Pakistan. Incidents such as the Pulwama attack in 2019 underscore the destabilizing role of non-state actors, which thrive in the absence of robust regional security frameworks (Ganguly, 2016). Bajpai and Pant (2020) highlight that India's reliance on bilateral mechanisms to address terrorism is insufficient in a fragmented South Asian context. Collaborative efforts, such as joint counter-terrorism task forces, remain underdeveloped, limiting the region's ability to address this shared challenge effectively.

Historical Legacies and Adversarial Relations

The legacy of partition continues to cast a long shadow over India's relations with its neighbours. The unresolved Kashmir dispute, for instance, perpetuates mutual distrust with Pakistan, while border skirmishes with China, as seen in the Doklam and Galwan Valley standoffs, exacerbate geopolitical volatility (Waltz, 1979). Constructivist scholars like Wendt (1999) argue that historical narratives and adversarial perceptions play a crucial role in shaping state behavior, and South Asia's fraught history continues to hinder cooperative initiatives.

Strategic Miscalculations

Reactive Diplomacy

India's foreign policy in South Asia has frequently exhibited a reactive posture, often responding to crises rather than proactively shaping the regional agenda. This reactive approach is evident in India's intermittent efforts to revitalize SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), which have been largely driven by crises, hindering the organization's effectiveness in fostering genuine regional integration (Chandra, 2017). As Joseph Nye (2004) emphasizes, successful diplomacy requires proactive engagement. India's episodic approach to regional cooperation demonstrates a departure from this principle, potentially limiting its ability to effectively influence regional outcomes."

Overemphasis on Hard Power

While military preparedness is crucial for India's national security, an overemphasis on hard power can alienate its smaller neighbours. Bhutan's apprehensions during the Doklam standoff serve as a stark reminder of how India's military dominance can be perceived as overbearing, eroding trust and undermining regional

cooperation (Mohan, 2013). To mitigate these concerns, India must strategically invest in soft power initiatives, such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and development assistance. These efforts can help counterbalance India's military projection, foster goodwill among its neighbours, and cultivate deeper, more enduring relationships based on mutual respect and understanding."

Underutilization of Soft Power

India's immense potential as a soft power powerhouse remains largely untapped, despite its rich cultural and intellectual heritage. Joseph Nye (2004) conceptualizes soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, drawing on cultural allure, political ideals, and diplomacy. India is uniquely positioned with an extensive arsenal of soft power assets, including its ancient heritage, vibrant cultural traditions, yoga, Bollywood, and a globally influential diaspora. However, these resources have yet to be cohesively harnessed or strategically embedded within its foreign policy framework.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), established to promote cultural diplomacy, remains underfunded and lacks the institutional capacity to make significant global inroads. Compared to China's Confucius Institutes, which receive substantial state backing to disseminate Chinese language and culture globally, the ICCR's initiatives are modest in scale and reach. Scholars like Chatterjee (2020) argue that India's cultural diplomacy programs require more significant investments and strategic direction to achieve measurable outcomes.

Moreover, Bollywood, which enjoys immense popularity across South Asia and parts of Africa and the Middle East, has been underutilized as a tool of regional diplomacy. Films that emphasize shared cultural narratives or historical ties could foster goodwill and mutual understanding. Similarly, yoga—popularized internationally through the United Nations-designated International Day of Yoga—presents opportunities for cultural engagement but has yet to be systematically aligned with broader diplomatic objectives (Nye, 2004).

Educational exchanges and scholarships are another underused avenue of influence. While India offers programs like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative, these efforts are dwarfed by China's Belt and Road Initiative-backed educational diplomacy, which funds thousands of scholarships annually for students from developing countries (Mohan, 2013).

To fully realize its soft power potential, India needs a coordinated strategy that integrates cultural, educational, and technological tools. By aligning these assets with its foreign policy goals, India could enhance its influence, particularly in South Asia, while countering the growing dominance of China in the region.

Policy Recommendations

Building Trust and Confidence

Institutionalizing Dialogue

Building trust requires sustained engagement through institutionalized dialogue mechanisms. Establishing bilateral annual summits, such as the India-Bangladesh Annual Summit, provides opportunities to address issues systematically rather than sporadically. Trilateral frameworks, for instance, involving India, Nepal, and Bhutan, could enhance regional dialogue on shared concerns like energy cooperation and river basin management (Chatterjee, 2020). These platforms not only enable conflict resolution but also foster policy continuity, reducing the unpredictability associated with leadership changes in South Asia. As Nye (2004) argues, sustained dialogue builds credibility and reduces the trust deficit, a critical barrier in India's relations with Pakistan and other neighbours.

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Existing frameworks like the Indus Waters Treaty, often cited as a successful example of dispute resolution despite geopolitical tensions, can serve as a model for addressing other contentious issues, such as transboundary water disputes with Nepal and Bangladesh (Mohan, 2013). Strengthening these mechanisms through international mediation or arbitration, where necessary, would bolster India's image as a reliable partner. The role of institutions such as the Permanent Indus Commission demonstrates how consistent engagement can manage even adversarial relationships.

People-to-People Engagements

Grassroots diplomacy is essential to fostering mutual goodwill. Expanding educational exchanges, such as through ITEC scholarships, and increasing visa liberalization for cultural and academic exchanges can build long-term connections. Scholars like Wendt (1999) emphasize that altering adversarial perceptions requires changing how populations view each other, which grassroots initiatives can achieve. Film festivals, cultural exhibitions, and youth summits could further amplify mutual understanding.

Addressing Shared Concerns

Regional Connectivity

"Enhanced infrastructure connectivity, facilitated by initiatives like the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, has the potential to significantly boost intra-regional trade and mobility. As Kenneth Oye (1985) argued, increased economic interdependence can reduce the likelihood of conflict by raising the costs of disputes. To capitalize on this potential, India must expedite stalled infrastructure projects, such as road and rail linkages with Nepal and Bhutan, to demonstrate its commitment to regional integration. Furthermore, these connectivity projects should be designed to align with the specific development needs of smaller nations, ensuring their buy-in and fostering sustainable regional cooperation."

Economic Integration

Comprehensive trade agreements addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers are vital for fostering economic

interdependence in South Asia. Unlike China's asymmetric trade arrangements, India should focus on equitable agreements that prioritize the developmental concerns of smaller neighbours (Bajpai & Pant, 2020). Revitalizing SAARC's economic agenda and supporting cross-border digital payment systems would further strengthen regional economic ties.

Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

The threat of cross-border terrorism necessitates robust regional cooperation. India could lead efforts to establish a South Asian Counter-Terrorism Task Force, similar to ASEAN's anti-terror initiatives. Collaborative intelligence sharing, joint training programs, and capacity-building measures would address shared security concerns (Ganguly, 2016). However, for such mechanisms to succeed, India must address the trust deficit by engaging Pakistan and other stakeholders in sustained dialogue.

Leveraging Soft Power

Cultural Diplomacy

India's cultural resources, from Bollywood to yoga, represent untapped diplomatic assets. Targeted campaigns, such as regional film festivals highlighting shared cultural narratives, could foster a sense of regional identity (Nye, 2004). Partnerships with organizations like UNESCO to preserve shared heritage sites would also reinforce cultural ties.

Educational Exchange Programs

Expanding scholarships and research initiatives can create a generation of South Asian leaders with strong ties to India. Programs like the ICCR should focus on underrepresented regions to maximize outreach. Chatterjee

(2020) highlights that education-based diplomacy fosters goodwill and trust, which are vital for long-term regional stability.

Strategic Media Outreach

Digital diplomacy, leveraging platforms like social media, could project India's narratives and counter misinformation campaigns, particularly in contentious regions like Kashmir. Collaborative initiatives with media organizations to highlight positive stories of regional collaboration could reshape perceptions.

Reinvigorating Regional Institutions

India must take the lead in revitalizing regional organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC to enhance their efficacy. As Mohan (2013) suggests, these institutions play a pivotal role in addressing transnational issues, including climate change and disaster management. By championing initiatives such as regional public health frameworks, informed by the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, India can set the stage for greater cooperation. Additionally, fostering collaboration on renewable energy and disaster resilience would underscore India's dedication to ensuring regional stability and sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

India's "Neighbourhood First" policy stands as a bold aspiration to establish its pre-eminence and leadership in South Asia. The policy underscores India's intent to foster closer ties with its immediate neighbours by addressing shared challenges, promoting economic interdependence, and bolstering regional stability. However, the journey toward realizing this vision has been marked by significant obstacles, ranging from domestic inefficiencies and bureaucratic inertia

Table 1. Key Findings

Key Areas of Investigation	Findings
Internal Challenges to India's Neighbourhood First Policy	Bureaucratic inefficiencies, insufficient funding, and political instability hinder the effective implementation of regional initiatives. Delays in addressing crises, such as Sri Lanka's economic collapse, highlight institutional inertia.
Impact of External Influences on India's Regional Diplomacy	China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) undermine India's regional dominance. Cross-border terrorism and unresolved historical disputes, such as the Kashmir conflict, destabilize the region further.
Strategic Limitations in India's Approach to South Asia	Reliance on reactionary diplomacy and overemphasis on hard power alienate smaller neighbours. Events like the Doklam standoff reveal how India's military dominance can erode trust and hamper regional cooperation.
Enhancing Regional Leadership Through Soft Power and Cooperation	India's cultural assets, such as Bollywood, yoga, and educational exchanges, remain underutilized. Investing in cultural diplomacy, regional connectivity projects, and cooperative economic frameworks can strengthen India's influence.
Trust-Building and Policy Recalibration for Regional Dominance	Sustained dialogue mechanisms, conflict resolution frameworks, and people-to-people engagements are essential. Equitable partnerships and proactive engagement can solidify India's leadership while counterbalancing China's growing influence.

to the increasing geopolitical competition posed by China's strategic encirclement and persistent cross-border tensions with Pakistan. To emerge as a true regional leader, India must undertake a holistic recalibration of its approach, one that reflects the complexities and sensitivities of its neighborhood.

One of the critical impediments to the "Neighbourhood First" policy has been internal constraints. Domestic political agendas often overshadow long-term strategic imperatives, leading to a reactive rather than proactive foreign policy framework. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as the delayed response to Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis, highlight the need for institutional reform and streamlined decision-making processes. Furthermore, India's limited financial allocations for regional development projects, especially when compared to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), significantly constrain its ability to compete for influence. Addressing these internal inefficiencies requires a comprehensive overhaul of bureaucratic structures, greater financial commitments, and the depoliticization of foreign policy objectives to focus on long-term regional goals.

Externally, India faces a challenging geopolitical landscape. China's growing footprint in South Asia, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and extensive infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives, directly threatens India's strategic interests. Historical disputes, including the Kashmir conflict and persistent border tensions with China, further erode India's position as a regional stabilizer. To address these challenges, India must harness its distinctive advantages—cultural heritage, economic potential, and democratic values—while fostering deeper collaboration with regional partners to tackle shared issues such as terrorism, trade disparities, and climate change.

Strategically, India needs to transition from a reliance on hard power to a more balanced approach that incorporates soft power and economic diplomacy. Initiatives such as cultural exchanges, educational scholarships, and digital diplomacy can help bridge trust deficits and foster goodwill among neighboring populations. By amplifying soft power through platforms like the International Day of Yoga and Bollywood, India can reinforce its image as a benevolent leader invested in regional prosperity. Moreover, sustained efforts to enhance regional connectivity, such as through the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, and to rejuvenate multilateral institutions like SAARC and BIMSTEC, are essential to creating a framework for collective progress.

The way forward for India lies in adopting a multidimensional strategy that combines trust-building measures, economic and cultural integration, and institutional reforms. Trust-building, through consistent dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms, can pave the way for more cooperative relationships. Regional connectivity, encompassing trade, transport, and energy, can strengthen economic interdependence and reduce the likelihood of conflicts. Soft power initiatives can complement these efforts by shaping perceptions and enhancing India's appeal as a regional leader.

In conclusion, the "Neighborhood First" policy holds

immense promise, but its success depends on India's ability to overcome internal and external constraints and embrace a proactive, inclusive, and forward-looking approach. By aligning its regional ambitions with the aspirations of its neighbours and addressing shared challenges collaboratively, India can solidify its position as a stabilizing force and an indispensable leader in South Asia. Such a recalibration, grounded in empirical evidence and informed by the lessons of past missteps, will ensure that India's vision for regional leadership is both sustainable and transformative.

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