

# India's South Asia policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-2019) from: a security perspective

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Received 10 May 2022; published 15 September 2022

**Abstract:** *Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, India has been concerned about the rise of China, especially its involvement in South Asia. Prime Minister Modi, in his first term, formulated a new South Asia policy associated with the "Neighborhood-first policy" in the context of a strategic competition between India and China which has gradually been unfolding in this region. On that basis, the article analyzes India's new South Asia policy under Prime Minister Modi in the context of China's growing involvement in South Asia and clarifies the process of implementing this policy during his first term mainly from a security perspective.*

**Keywords:** South Asia Policy, Neighborhood-first Policy, Security, India, China, South Asia, Narendra Modi

## 1. China's involvement in South Asia in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

After a long time adhering to the "hide your strength, bide your time" policy in the nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China has started to emerge and headed towards establishing its superpower status in the region and the world, including South Asia, since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China has intensified involvement and developed relationships with almost every neighboring countries of India in the South Asia region. China's growing diplomatic and strategic relationships with these countries have

indeed raised significant concerns for India. Prior, China had only provided economic and military support to Pakistan in efforts to compete with India's hegemonic ambitions. But starting from the late 1990s, China has also started to develop positive relationships with other countries in the South Asia region (Jain, 2017). China rose as a major regional power as it started to invest in infrastructure and economic projects for almost every South Asian nations, generating huge influence over these small nations which had traditionally depended on India (Swaran, 2004). Not

only has China imposed influence to countries in the region, it has also pushed for military presence here, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. This has begun to change the geopolitical game in the South Asia region. As such, from the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has officially challenged India's power status in South Asia, and moreover to the whole Indian Ocean region. The "String of Pearls" strategy is developed by China to curb India's naval power build-up in the Malacca Strait and to conduct a strategy which surrounds India starting from South Asia to the larger Indian Ocean area (Tien, 2012: 64-80). From the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the signal of a strategic competition between India and China has begun, starting from the South Asia region and expanding to the Indian Ocean region.

It could be contended that the emergence of China, particularly the country's strategic expansion in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, has forced India to tremendously shift its strategic mindset and policies in the region. South Asia has become an important strategic geopolitical area in the new policy shifts of India, which is under pressure from China's powerful emergence. However, governments before Prime Minister Modi's era still had not defined any specific or effective policies in the region. This has created favorable conditions for China to expand its growing sphere of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. After swearing into office in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has highlighted India's interests in South Asia and embarked on

crafting a specific foreign policy for the region, directly targeting smaller nations while also acknowledging an unavoidable strategic competition with China (Ranjan, 2019: 259-274).

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India is considered as undergoing significant and drastic foreign policy transformation, heading towards the goal of becoming a global power (Basrur, 2017: 7-26). This is clearly demonstrated in the Election Manifesto of the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party - BJP) in 2014, which marks Modi's individual flair and shows commitments to "basically reboot and restore the goals, directions and foreign policy processes in a way that positions India's strategic global engagement in a new model" (BJP, 2014). Modi government's foreign policy focuses on three main themes: "Prosperity, national benefits, and recognition as a global power" (Kugelman, 2017: 74). Prime Minister's policies not only focus on attracting foreign investment and technology but also identify foreign markets for domestic goods, at the same time focusing on tightening stability, peace and prosperity in South Asia as a fundamental principle.

## **2. The Modi government's South Asia Policy from the traditional security perspective**

Under the Modi regime's worldview, South Asia is considered an important region for India to balance its strategy to respond to external threats and safeguard the country's security and stability. Immediately after taking office, Prime Minister Modi has strived to strengthen India's status in South Asia - a region where China is also

expanding its sphere of influence. Together with the Southeast Asia region, India views South Asia as a strategic area for the country to boost its competitive edge against China. As the United States' power wanes in several areas, the Modi regime's actions contribute significantly to creating a balance of power in the region, challenging China's long-established predominance. India is believed to lead the world economy, as soon as after 2030 when the country's power status is elevated internationally with a stronger leadership role and more economic influence. Therefore, it is not surprising that many developed nations wanted India to be successful and become a global stakeholder in the role of a new responsible power. To achieve that vision, India needs a peaceful periphery to advance sustainable economic development. Thus, it is unrefutable that South Asia assumes an important role in the making of India's foreign policy.

Prime Minister has pushed for diplomatic activities in India's peripheral region in the hope of restating the country's eminent status in the sub-continent. In the policymaking process of its "neighbour-first" policy, the Modi regime focuses on its relationship with members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), specifically Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Notably, as China's influences grows in the region, the Modi regime has expanded India's sphere of influence to the Indian Ocean region, which currently includes Mauritius and the Seychelles. This is a sign of a shift in definition of India's periphery which was

traditionally linked to South Asia. The new geographic expansion includes territories, both in land and on the sea, and is a distinct feature of different priorities and a new approach. With the expansion of regional networks and changes in its own map of neighboring countries, South Asia is redefined to include both the sub-continent and the Indian Ocean in India's South Asia policy contemplations under Modi (Kaura, Rani, 2020: 10-27; Ghosh, 2020: 146-150). On security, the Modi regime takes the role of a big nation safeguarding security for South Asian countries based on established historical foundations. After gaining independence in 1947, India had taken the role of a security guardian entity for neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, India continued this role with countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Those historical roles have helped India again revive its security role towards South Asian countries. With growing economic power and demonstrated military capacity, India has always publicly indicated its ambitions and commitments to become "a reliable security partner" (Upadhyaya, 2020: 66; further reference: Muni, Chadha, 2015) for immediate neighbors in South Asia and farther neighbors in the Indian Ocean region as a safeguard for Asia's stability and order.

At the midst of the region's current turmoil particularly with China's rise, India has strived to become an actor responsible for maintaining power and development balance in the region. One of the issues that Modi regime needs to resolve is historical

conflicts between India and neighboring South Asian countries. India has shared inland borders with six countries (Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar) and sea borders with seven countries (Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia). Except for Myanmar and Bhutan, India has had border conflicts with almost every neighboring countries in history. This country used to engage in huge four large-scale wars with Pakistan and China over border disputes, which are still not resolved over decades of tension. To build a legal and acceptable status in South Asia, India needs to resolve conflicts with neighboring countries, including the Kashmir dispute which is still in resolution.

### **3. The implementation of India's South Asia policy during the first term of Prime Minister Modi**

Right after taking office in the first term (2014-2019), Prime Minister Modi has promoted cordial relationships with neighboring South Asian countries. Modi states that: "My vision for our neighbourhood puts a premium on peaceful and harmonious ties with entire South Asia. That vision had led me to invite leaders of all SAARC nations, for my swearing in" (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, 2017). Thus, there was a major shift towards India's stance towards its neighbour in the "Neighborhood-First" policy released afterwards. During his meetings with neighboring countries' leaders, Prime Minister Modi always mentioned about "a thriving well-connected and integrated neighbourhood". Modi stressed that "Our actions and aspirations,

capacities and human capital, democracy and demography, and strength and success... [represent] a regional and global opportunity of great significance. It is a force for peace, a factor for stability and an engine for regional [South Asia] and global prosperity" (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, 2017). The "Neighborhood-First" policy has revitalized India's relationships with its neighbors in an unforeseen fashion. At the same time, the relationships with South Asian neighbors have improved significantly, except with Pakistan (Rana, 2018: 20).

Modi's statement could be viewed as an effort to gain support from neighboring countries, while reassuring them the opportunities that India – a power responsible for bringing peace and development to the region. As such, all of India's strategic calculations are largely formed on the basis of Realism, expressing its endorsement of coexistence, cooperation and cooperative partnerships with traditional and new neighbors. The Modi government started to construct a foreign policy away from "hard nationalism", which is established on military power and expansionism. Instead, the policy is founded upon the "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (The World is One Family) (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, 2020). On the spirit of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" (Together with all; Development for all), the Indian Government has proactively partnered with almost every neighboring countries, in a way that signifies Prime Minister Modi's style and image (Chinoy, 2020).

India has always emphasized its goals in ensuring regional peace and stability,

keeping naval routes in the regions open. For India, the neighborhood is India's place of existence and its backyard needs to be stable, peaceful and prosperous (Sinha, 2015: 174-180). Aside increasing economic cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia, India also expanded strategic cooperation through joint military exercises, generous credit loans, military training, and arms sales to countries in the region (Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, 2018: 98-112). India's balancing role in the region is not only exhibited in military exercises, patrols, port visits, anti-piracy operations and humanitarian support; it is also demonstrated through India's support for nations with conflicts or territorial disputes regarding maritime sovereignty, etc. During Prime Minister's first term, the Indian Navy has enlarged their presence, expanded and increased the number of multilateral joint exercises with island nations in the Indian Ocean region, as China's rise increasingly interferes with India's national interests in the region. India was also the country suggesting and conducting the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) - a naval forum in the Indian Ocean that attracted participation from 32 maritime countries in the Indian Ocean, including six peninsula countries (Das, 2018). Attracting engagement from regional countries in the IONS conference has helped India enforce its position and further curb China's expanding influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

As it enhances development partnership in the region, India has changed its approach by promoting multilateralism in cooperation and regional connectivity,

as well as in bilateral relationships with neighbors in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Together with South Asia, India also wants to become the leader in the Indian Ocean region. India has a coastal line of more than 7,700 km. Many islands situated in the Arab Sea and the Bengal Bay has important strategic positions on the Sea lines of communication (SLOC). With its current development pace, India's energy demand has also risen, which increases its dependence on the Indian Ocean region in terms of commerce and energy as 90% of commercial goods are transported via sea routes. After the Cold War ended and particularly after India emerged strongly in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian Ocean has taken a key role in India's development strategies and policies. At the same time, China also pushed for its military presence in the Indian Ocean region to control the whole region as part of its scheme to become a maritime power. China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean has directly interfered with India's interests in a region where the latter has always assumed control throughout its course of history.

From the strategic point of view, New Delhi is very sensitive to China's growing influence in the neighboring region, especially as its geographic advantages could be diminished as China set up positions in the Indian Ocean. In face of this situation, after taking office, Prime Minister Modi has spelled out the Indian Ocean as a part of India's immediate and extended neighbors, ranking it as a priority in New Delhi's foreign policies. The Modi regime was determined to implement its comprehensive and proactive foreign

policy, including substantiating its stance towards protecting core national interests and territorial disputes with China (Brewster, 2018: 10-38; Chaudhuri, 2018: 56-74). Today, India's top concern is China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean.

To compete with China, India has actively approached countries in the region in many ways, such as through conducting diplomatic visits to Mauritius and the Seychelles in 2015, signing a naval base development agreement on Assumption Island with the Seychelles, and participating in developing Iran's Chabahar port (Marjani, 2020). In the Indian Ocean region, India invests in the largest projects in Mauritius and the Seychelles, focusing mainly on rail and land infrastructures. As several countries in the Indian Ocean start to become more wary of China's loans, India's presence has facilitated infrastructure development demand without having to fall into China's "debt-trap diplomacy". To build more trust from countries in the Indian Ocean, India has called for external partners such as Japan and the Asia Development Bank (ADB) to participate in the development strategy of cross-border infrastructure projects in order to reinforce connections to smaller neighbors. At the multilateral level, India also strived to organise multilateral forums to connect countries in the Indian Ocean and promote cooperation in order to curb China's influence over these countries. In March 2015, Prime Minister Modi has declared the strategic vision over the Indian Ocean under the name "Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)" (Bisht, 2020: 182-201). This is seen as a new vision for the Indian Ocean Region,

with New Delhi assuming a key role (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018: 98-112).

#### **4. India's reaction towards the "Belt and Road" Initiative of China in South Asia**

One of India's concerns is China's implementation of the BRI project in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The "Belt and Road Initiative" BRI was launched by China in 2013 and has been constantly revised to accommodate China's growing status. Under the Initiative, South Asia is becoming a "top priority area" in China's plans, particularly as projects multiplied in numbers. From the beginning, India has expressed concerns towards China's BRI and has always taken a hard stance when refusing to join the Initiative several times. India believes that China's BRI is largely unilateral, that it is only "China's national initiative" and does not have any consultation with stakeholders, including India, when the Initiative is implemented in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The projects that China is implementing in the region on the basis of cooperation with India's neighboring countries mostly serve China's goal to expand its influence through "debt-trap diplomacy", deeming these countries more dependent on China (Jain, 2018: 21-36). In fact, many BRI projects that China carries out in India's South Asian neighbors have violated India's sovereignty<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> China has sponsored the development of the China - Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) crossing through territories in Kashmir, where Pakistan holds control but is also claimed by India as its territory. In India's perspective, China has given up its neutral stance on this dispute to side with Pakistan and funded an initiative that violates India's sovereignty (Reference: Yuan, 2019).

The Modi regime has officially opposes China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), which aims to control the whole Indian Ocean region. From India's point of view, China's growing presence through investment and port facility lease has allowed this country to forge deep cultural links and more important strategic roles with countries in the region in a dangerous way. And in the far future, China will isolate and block India right at the latter's own "backyard", creating a major tip to maritime power balance. When China's attack submarines docked at a port that China built in Sri Lanka, that has created misunderstanding about the militarization of BRI-related projects in India's neighboring island country. The naval blockade is a serious security threat as India heavily relies on sea transportation for its international trade activities. By and large, India is very concerned about China's investment projects transforming regional security links both in land and on sea, which will in turn hinder India's goal to become a regional power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

It could be stipulated that India's approach in the Indian Ocean region is to increase its influence through diplomatic activities and investment on infrastructure. While India may be unmatched in its competition with China when it comes to military and economic capacity, India's strategic agenda as a responsible nation in South Asia and the Indian Ocean will help India become the partner of choice for developing countries that do not want to rely too much on China. Moreover, India also tries to deepen its economic partnerships with democratic

powers in the region to shape their own visions on integrated development. Right after China's BRI Forum concluded in May 2017, Prime Minister Modi has announced the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a connectivity initiative that is launched by India and Japan and is considered a potential counterbalance to BRI. On a larger scale, as India's strategic interests are threatened by an unstable security structure and mounting pressures from China's BRI implementation, India has tried to enhance security and economic cooperation with other powers, especially the United States and Japan (Hays, 2017).

The Modi regime has led numerous activities and positive cooperation mechanisms to resolve security weaknesses comparing to China by keeping friendly military powers in the region, of which the United States is a key actor. India revised its policies towards the United States by promoting the strategic partnership to create a leverage point in its relationships with other powers. With the U.S., India also takes advantage of the market, access to capital and technology, opportunity to access international nuclear resources and nuclear technology to expand nuclear energy cooperation with other nuclear powers, further curbing Pakistan and countering threats from China. However, India also does not want to become a part of the anti-China alliance led by the U.S., which could make it more difficult for India to come to terms with China. As a result, besides specific strategies and policies to counterbalance China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, India also tries to enhance regional cooperation with China.

## 5. Conclusion

Since his re-election with a landslide victory in May 2019, Prime Minister Modi has embarked on long-term moves to execute the planned grand strategy for India. He continues to emphasize a comprehensive strategy to maintain regional dominance, demonstrated through how New Delhi engaged the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh (Ranjan, 2019: 259-274). In addition, India also carried out “multilateral engagement” with other world powers. It has tried to send messages to smaller neighbors that India is not against these countries’ policies to attract more partners and maximize their interests, at the same time stressing that it is also in India’s interest to do so. To date, India has attracted external partners such as Japan and the ADB in developing cross-border infrastructure projects to enhance connections with smaller neighboring countries in South Asia. In the second term, the Modi regime will engage more partners such as Korea, Australia, ASEAN and the EU among other countries to provide alternative options for India’s neighboring countries as part of its efforts to reintegrate with its neighborhood (Das, 2016: 18-37).

The strategic importance of the “Neighborhood-First” policy on reconfiguring the regional order as part of India’s vision under Prime Minister Modi will still be a key factor of India’s ability to shape development in this extended region. It will also be a basis for India to carry out “strategic competition” with China, and further expanding to another important “front” in Southeast Asia.

Under Prime Minister Modi’s leadership, India’s internal strength and national position have elevated substantially, which means every move it takes will have international repercussions. Prime Minister Modi has reinstated India’s commitment to the “Neighborhood-First” policy, as well as to a vision for peace, security, prosperity and mutual development for all of India’s friends and partners in the region. The message conveying the thrust for neighborhood diplomacy delivered by the Indian Prime Minister to five neighboring countries in the very beginning of 2020 has demonstrated India’s strong determination in changing its current status relative to China in South Asia. Evidently, small neighboring countries hold a key strategic role for India in reaffirming its position in the region and worldwide, especially in its “strategic competition” with China. Promoting good relations with South Asian neighboring countries will help India ensure its stability, security and economic development, broaden its pathways to the external world, strengthen its roles, and contribute to revamp the geopolitical chessboard in South Asia and Asia at large □

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