

## **MODI'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: STRIKING FEATURE AND CHALLENGES AHEAD**

**Nikhil Jaindra Borkar**

*Lecturer, Anand Niketan College, Anandwan, Warora (Mh.)*

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is an attempt to analyze India's policy towards its immediate neighbour refers to SAARC member countries. The paper traces India's relations with its neighbour after Narendra Modi became prime minister of the country in 2014, different approaches adopted under the 'Modi doctrine', and challenges ahead. Paper also suggests a set of recommendations for sustained engagement in between India and its immediate neighbour.*

**KEYWORDS:**

*SAARC, neighbourhood, foreign policy, India, government*

**INTRODUCTION:**

India has a diverse socio, political culture which share its boundaries with nations varying in size, resources and strength. With reference to SAARC, immediate neighbor to India includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Srilanka. The socio-political development of India is largely dependent on stable, secure and peaceful neighbor. After Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, the striking feature of 'Modi doctrine' was 'Neighbours First'. Government emphasized on tightening the bond between India and its neighbour, better serving India's economic and social development strategy by promoting regional and sub-regional connectivity.

After Modi became PM he chose Bhutan as the destination for his foreign visit. Since then, he has visited to almost all neighboring countries except Maldives. Reason being too called off planned visit to Maldives was internal political disturbance in the country. The article is not an examination of how much India's foreign policy has different than previous government, but it discusses various dimension of foreign policy under Modi government, particularly the recent debate that India has been losing clout in its neighborhood. This can be seen from the strategic challenges posed by China, Pakistan, and tussle with Nepal, Bangladesh, Srilanka and uncertainty in Afghanistan. The paper also suggests a set of recommendation to establish a peaceful regional order.

**MODI'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: STRIKING FEATURE:**

The dis-connectivity imposed a major challenge to India's economic and security interest, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made both intra and inter-regional connectivity a policy priority in 2014. Narendra Modi pursued a vigorous regional diplomacy by engaging with neighboring nations and building political connectivity through dialogue. Modi has appreciated the much-neglected fact that foreign policy begins at the nation's borders (C. R. Mohan, Five point someone. The Indian Express 2014)

PM Modi made efforts to establish routine contacts with these immediate neighbours, he visited Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Sharing a bond of special relationship with Bhutan, he declared his government aim of expanding bilateral relations with the country as "Bharat to Bhutan" (B2B) relations. In the past seventeen years Modi became the first prime minister to visit Nepal first in August and then in November 2014. Rightly balancing the approach, Modi stressed that future relations between two should not get spoiled due to the past failed promises. He took up the work of starting the 5,600 MW Pancheshwar project, which remained stalled for 18 years. But, things turn ugly when Nepal announced a new constitution; it affected Madhesi people in the country's Terai region. Therefore, it created blockade and stopped all essential supplies from India from reaching to Nepal. Kathmandu blamed New Delhi for the economic blockade and in 2016, Nepali government cancelled the visit of President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to India, this radical step creates difficulties in relations of two.

PM Modi visit to Bangladesh, marked the settlement of 41-year-old boundary dispute, and also he announced a fresh line of \$ 2 credit to the country which has been appreciated widely. Government has opened up new opportunities to the North-Eastern part by strengthening economic ties with Bangladesh. January 2016, India entered into a preliminary agreement to supply 100 MW of electricity daily to Bangladesh from the gas-based ONGC Tripura Power Company (OTPC) at INR 5.50 a unit more or less identical to the weighted

average generation tariff (Taka 6.50) in Bangladesh (Businessline 2016). In return, the Bangladeshi government responded by initiating the process to allow access to the Chittagong port. It also has plans to implement the proposed rail connectivity between Agartala and Akhaura junction in Bangladesh.

Modi toured Sri Lanka, and became the first prime minister in 28 years after Rajiv Gandhi to visit the country. Modi government approach was to start a fresh relation with Srilanka. There he addressed Sri Lankan parliament, made a trip to Northern Province of Jaffna, again during his visit to the country in May 2017 Modi inaugurated a specialty hospital built with Indian assistance. Modi stressed that Maldives' stability and security is directly linked to the national interests of India and assured the island of support required to strengthen democratic institutions. The countries also signed other pacts in the field of tourism, taxation, conservation, and SAARC satellite (Roy, India, Maldives sign six pacts; resolve to expand defence cooperation 2016).

When Ashraf Ghani elected president of Afghanistan in September 2014, country underwent major changes. Ghani first visit to India in April 2015 and Modi first visit to Afghanistan in December 2015, made Afghan parliament building into reality with the assistance of Indian. Among the regional partner India was the biggest donor among regional countries. While, during the surprise visit to Pakistan, he held a meeting with Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, in Lahore sparked a great deal but, Pathankot terror attack and frequent ceasefire violations has hit and caused another damaged to relations.

The above discussion on South Asian region and different approaches followed by Modi government has lightened India's relations with neighbouring countries. Though the effort of reaching out to India's neighbour was good but there are several challenges possess by India that need to be addressed to continue with strong intra and inter-regional connectivity.

#### **CHALLENGES AHEAD:**

India is Nepal's largest trade partner, when Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes were demonetized by the Modi government in 2016, neighbouring Bhutan and Nepal left hold with large sums of currency, though India settled the issue with Bhutan, but it yet to be resolved with Nepal. On other hand China has been attempting to spread its economic and strategic footprints into the Himalayan nation. While the attitude of Nepalese policy-makers would prefer 'Chinese model of economic

engagement' than India's neighbourhood first policy. The Pulwama terror attack which was carried out in February 2019 by the suicide bomber of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and claimed the lives of 40 CRPF personnel, led to deterioration of ties. Pakistan and India are engaged on various bilateral issues, but both the side had failed to demonstrate sincerity in ending cross-border terrorism. Long-standing deal with Bangladesh on the sharing of Teesta river water, two countries yet to sign the agreement (Bagchi, 2017). China boosting its naval power in the Bay of Bengal is a new concern to India.

Another important South Asian country which is possessing challenge to India is Bhutan, India and Bhutan are the two countries that have opted out of BRI plan. However, the China's Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou visit to Bhutan in July 2018 has created tussle. There has been long cooperation in India and Bhutan on hydropower, but India's inability to generate sufficient employment for Bhutan has led Thimphu to seek economic diversification. In several instances China's interference a major concern as it has already undertaken massive modernization of infrastructure in Tibet. Myanmar had suffered international isolation and long period of insurgency, therefore, China's influence grown in the region while India's engagement has reduced. With Pakistan being the mother lode of Jihad, it is quite evident that the ISI will be the elephant in Taliban's Jihad control room in Afghanistan and will use the Sunni terrorist group for setting personal scores in India (The Hindustan Times, 2021). The rise of Taliban in the Afghan will not only pose an internal security challenge to the Modi government with large scale of radicalisation but it will also use Pakistan based terrorist to attack India in near future.

China involvement in Sri Lanka is a major concern to us, huge investment in the projects such as development of Hambantota port one of the major reasons.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT:**

If anything noticeable then it's size of India, which is an important factor for our neighbour, with 75% of land area, population, economic activity, resources or etc in the South Asian region, India need to be safe while dealing with its neighbour. If anything that are most suitable in respect to every neighbouring country then we need proper demarcation of external boundaries that yet to be completed. The diplomatic engagement with SAARC members need to be sustained. On the

policy front, Modi government should take effective steps to deliver the promises made by him during state visits. There should not be gap in executing of promises made by PM.

The Present Modi led government can also work on various fronts to remove challenges and strengthen India's relations with its neighbour,

- 1) Transport connectivity between countries is lacking. India should take the initiative to establish cross-border transport and communication links.
- 2) The government should work with the countries to strengthen their markets and infrastructure.
- 3) India should work towards enhancing its comparative advantage rather than competing blindly with China on infrastructure projects.
- 4) India requires economic openness apart from investment in cross-border infrastructure.
- 5) There is a need to consider the political, economic, and cultural sensitivities of neighbouring countries. Much emphasis should not be given to cultural unity.

Along with building political consensus on development and cooperation at the regional level, it is imperative to build people to people contacts for sustaining peace in the region. With regard to this, newer prospects of integration such as sub-regional cooperation, promoting higher education and culture must be used to tap into the boundless potential that exists in the region

**CONCLUSION:**

The paper traces that Modi foreign policy though focused on 'neighbourhood first' but there has been several issues which are still consider to be roadblocks in sub-regional development. India needs to deliver its promise and sustenance its relations by overcoming the hurdles at domestic levels and some of the regional pressures.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

1. Dutt, V.P. *India's Foreign Policy since Independence*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2007.
2. MEA. *Third Joint Working Group (JWG) Meetings on Sub-Regional Cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) (January 19-20, 2016)*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2016.
3. Mohan, C. Raja. "India's Neighbourhood Policy: Four Dimensions". *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 2, no. 1 (2007).
4. Modi, Narendra. *Full text of Narendra Modi's speech at the 18th SAARC summit*. Press Information Bureau. 2014. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/pmreleases.aspx?mincode=3> (accessed 2015 25-November).
5. Basu, N. (2019, June 6). *SAARC has 'issues', so India will look towards BIMSTEC: New foreign minister Jaishankar*. *The Print*.