

# INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBORHOOD: INDIA'S ROLE IN RESTORING PEACE AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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## Abstract

Asian Continent is most populous region in the world comprising of rising economies and developing nations. The region is culturally and politically diverse. Asia's Regional security, particularly south Asian countries, where there has been instability and contentious issues between the neighbouring nations has deteriorated the peace and regional security among the countries. India, as largest Democracy in the world and member of community of democracies, it has played Big brother and guardian role towards neighbouring countries in establishing popular Democracy. Since its democratic inception, India stood by a republic and sovereign features, even after sustaining external and internal threats surrounded by the nations where peace and security was hampered by military coups, internal conflicts and war. Whenever necessary, India has intervened and extended solidarity with neighbouring nations to resolve internal conflicts through diplomatic means and by deploying peace keepers. This effort has been applauded by world nations. For example, India's treaty with Bhutan in 1949 was renewed after Bhutan declared democracy in 2007. India extended its arms in liberating Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in establishing security and peace. Therefore, the paper focuses on how India exercised the tools of statecraft and diplomacy in the neighbourhood for maintaining peace and security.

Keywords: Asia, south Asia, democracy, peace, security.

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## INTRODUCTION

**South Asia** or **Southern Asia** is a term used to represent the southern region of the Asian continent, which comprises the sub-Himalayan SAARC countries and, for some authorities, adjoining countries to the west and east.

Topographically, it is dominated by the Indian Plate, which rises above sea level as Nepal and northern parts of India situated south of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush. South Asia is bounded on the south by the Indian Ocean and on land (clockwise, from west) by West Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. The terms "Indian subcontinent" and "South Asia" are sometimes used interchangeably.

The current territories of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka form the countries of South Asia, with

deviating definitions based on often substantially different reasons, the British Indian Ocean Territory, Mauritius, and the Tibet Autonomous Region are included as well.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an economic cooperation organization in the region which was established in 1985 and includes all eight nations comprising South Asia.

South Asia covers about 4.4 million km<sup>2</sup> (1.7 million mi<sup>2</sup>), which is 10% of the Asian continent or 3.3% of the world's land surface area. Overall, it accounts for about 45% of Asia's population (or over 25% of the world's population) and is home to a vast array of people with varying ideologies, culture, history and ethnicity. It has been observed that South Asian countries share a linkage of history, culture and colonialism; these countries maintain their indigenous population.

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### **South Asia- The neighborhood**

The ideas that Jawaharlal Nehru powerfully espoused and vigorously applied for newly independent India's engagement with the world have left an enduring framework of reference for the political class. The traumatic partition and the unending conflict with Pakistan have strongly influenced the way India conducts its external relations. India's socialist orientation at home and third world radicalism abroad in the first decades of independence has been the highlighting features of India's perspectives on the world.

The nature of interaction with India's neighborhood, and the imperatives of ensuring India's security both on its land and maritime frontiers were adopted from the colonial past. There was always a school of thought in the foreign policy establishment that India was the legatee of the British role for peace and stability in the Indian Ocean, and many neighbors of India suspected that Delhi was determined to play the role of a hegemon in its neighborhood. But these views were generally drowned out by the rhetoric on non-alignment and anti-imperialism in post-Colonial India.

Post-independence, the new state merged with the South Asian subcontinent was well prepared to be a regional leader. The country possessed potential to use hard power and military which was tested in two world wars, the country also possessed soft power in terms of a large economy with a historical culture, diplomacy and bureaucratic corps.<sup>i</sup>

India's foreign policy with its neighbors have been unilateralist in approach and hegemonic in nature. Since the establishment of foreign affairs department, India has intervened several times in the neighborhood. The nature of benign hegemony can be analyzed in events which have taken place since independence. In 1961 India annexed the territory of Goa from Portuguese and in 1971 claiming Sikkim principality, it also proclaimed a doctrine against foreign intervention in South Asia. India mounted a peace keeping operation on Sri Lanka while covertly supporting Tamil rebels against Sri Lankan government, this was an attempt to forcibly impose peace in the region and India also insisted other powers not to interfere in the region.

India's invasion in East Pakistan created Bangladesh, which was in December, 1971 superpowers like China and USA opposed it strongly. Deploying 700,000 troops on India-Pakistan border in 2002 shows India's use of hard power when required and exercised hegemony in the South Asia to ensure its territorial sovereignty, oppose regional adversaries.

India's balancing role in the region is represented both through hard power and soft power. India has wisely used the tool of soft power and it is also known for its multilateral leadership which was clearly seen during the time Non Alignment Movement and in United Nations. Later in the year 1991 after economic reforms India became a beneficiary of globalization with other developing countries and became less defensive in the approach. Today, India reignited its engagement with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and has helped foster democracy in Sri Lanka and Nepal through the signing of peace and friendship treaties.

Statistically, India dwarfs its neighboring countries in terms of population, land mass, GDP and economy. India's population is more than 1.13 billion followed by Pakistan's 165 million, Bangladesh with 150 million followed by small states like Afghanistan which is 32 million, Nepal with 29 million and Sri Lanka with 21 million; micro states like Bhutan which has population of 672,000 and Maldives which is less than 400,000. These figures represent India's capability to naturally dominate its neighbors as well as attract them economically. India is using its soft power and striving to develop consensus with its neighbors for establishing democracy which would also help to develop a single regional voice to reform international order.

To harmonize and integrate the South Asian region, countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal took the initiative to form South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 and approached India, Pakistan, Bhutan and Maldives to join. However, the conflict between India and Pakistan has been a disturbing force to enhance cooperation among the SAARC nations in the region.

SAARC acted as an alternative platform to Indian unilateralism and India's foreign policy in unipolar

world. It also proved useful to India for confidence building measures and creating a free trade area in the region. India is the most stable country in the region and it is trying to build mutual cooperation between all South Asian countries and also on other hand trying to maintain the notion of democracy. India has had its past experiences with all these nations in terms of aid and assistance, and getting involved in contentious issues. Many countries consider India as “a factor for the stability and protection of democracies and human rights in the South Asian region.”<sup>ii</sup>(madhavi bhasin- india’s role south asia)

### **India’s Presence and Role in the Region:**

#### ***Nepal***

Nepal geopolitically, is situated on the north eastern border. For India it acts as a natural barrier against china. After India’s defeat to China, Nepal was inclined towards china and rejected the defense pact. India strongly opposed absolute power and monarchy by King Gyanendra in 2005 and chooses not to participate in regional summit with the king. Indian stance was quickly shifted when Prime Minister of India and King met in Afro-Asian summit held in Jakarta, April, 2005. Democratic forces in Nepal eventually brought down the monarchy, public opinion influenced Nepal to establish a democratic republic. This was chance for India to regain its position by promoting democracy in Nepal. The Prime Ministers of the both the country met in June, 2006 and agreed to extend help to Nepal in creating a new democracy. Both nations also agreed to enhance the “India-Nepal development partnership for expanding rural and economic infrastructure, developing education and healthcare facilities and building human resources”.<sup>iii</sup>

#### ***Bhutan***

India-Bhutan relations are amongst the first after India’s independence, the kingdom is also a buffer state between India and China. The signing of friendship treaty in 1949 defined India’s relation with Bhutan, the highlights of this treaty was India’s non-interference in Bhutan’s isolated status, while India will manage the kingdom’s defense and external affairs. Bhutan willingly cooperated in clearing out the insurgent camps in 2003. In 2007 the royal government of Bhutan in the leadership of 27 year

old monarch King Jigme Khesar and government of India renewed the 1949 friendship treaty under which the kingdom will conducts its defense and foreign policy. Through this treaty it was eminent that India would play a guiding role in establishing democracy and helping them in modernization and bringing internal/administrative changes. The treaty also included fresh provisions for expanding economic relations and cooperation in the fields of education, culture, health, sports, science and technology and hydroelectricity.<sup>iv</sup>

#### ***Pakistan***

Pakistan since its inception is known for anti-India approach and hindering the regional development, the nation also destabilize notion of democracy in India’s neighborhood. Despite the four wars and other territorial conflicts, both the sides have also developed various forms of confidence building measures (CBMs) in the nuclear, conventional and non-conventional fields. One of the example is the Indus Water Treaty, which was signed between India and Pakistan with the mediation of World Bank in 1960. Because of the treaty’s binding regulations, water has not been used as a weapon in the wars by both the nation. India has also worked to sustain peace with its nuclear neighbor by using of diplomacy. The efforts were notable since 1980’s when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his counterpart Benazir Bhutto agreed to exchange lists of nuclear installations which were present in both the countries in 1988 and exchanged list should not be attacked in war, since 1992 the list are exchanged every year. In 2007 an agreement was signed between both the countries for reducing the risk of accidents with nuclear weapons. The new political and economic stability was marred after 2010 by various attacks and incidents. The number of ceasefire violation increased at Loc in Kashmir, 60 in 2011 and 117 in 2011. All confidence building measures between India and Pakistan fails due to terrorism, illegal trade, border skirmishes and internal politics. South Asia, along with the international community, has witnessed positive efforts taken by India and Pakistan in order to shape bilateral relations and bring stability in the region, however due to the increasing threat perceptions and security dilemmas, the region continues to serve as a battlefield for these two nuclear states.<sup>v</sup>

### **Bangladesh**

India is concerned about Bangladesh declining stability and state capacity to act. On the other hand, China is gaining more influence in the country. The relations have deteriorated due to the border problems and security related issues like arm-trafficking, human movement, transit and gas pipeline. 2 \$ billion worth of Indian goods are smuggled every year into Bangladesh whereas goods worth 1.5 \$ billion enter legally in the country. In 2010, both the Prime Ministers launched a bold effort to revamp the Indo-Bangla relations. Dhaka is also addressing the issues on cross-border terrorism by security cooperation. In return, Delhi has also removed most of the trade barriers on Bangladeshi exports in India.<sup>vi</sup>

The private sector of India is much more interested in Bangladesh; efforts towards reviving bilateral relations can be noted. Tata group has been progressing towards an investment worth \$2.5 billion in steel, fertilizers and power plants. Another initiative is the opening of a high facility hospital in Dhaka with collaboration of India's Apollo group. The Indian information technology companies and garment houses are already involved in the region.

India has also proposed a FTA (Free Trade Agreement) between India and Bangladesh. Also, Bangladesh given a status of Least Developed Country (LDC), Bangladesh is in a good position to get more concessions and increased investment from Indian companies. The FTA would give duty-free access to the Indian market for goods, including readymade garments. India is also working on developing east-west highway and rail links which would connect India with South East Asia. Another development is to construct Chittagong port, which in the future has potential to serve as an access point for countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. To materialize the initiatives taken by the Indian government, considerable level trust is needed to be developed. Delhi and Dhaka are naturally interlinked, which is other because the border between India and Bangladesh is nearly 4,000 km long. The strategic cooperation between both the nations will produce a win-win situation for the eastern subcontinent.

### **Sri Lanka**

The Indo-Sri Lanka relations have grown closer through the time even though the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil minorities has resumed. India is strongly in favor of a politically negotiated settlement acceptable to all the sections of Sri Lankan society without harming the democracy, pluralism and respect for human rights. The infrastructure links are improving and defense collaboration is getting stronger by Indian armed forces assisting Sri Lankan military in carrying out training which takes place in India and a notable rise is seen in trade and investment because of FTA which became operational in 2000 between both the countries. India as being guardian was the first country which was approached by Sri Lanka to assist them during tsunami floods in 2004. It also helped clearing the major oil spill in the ocean in 2006 and Indian forces also evacuated Sri Lankan citizens from Lebanon in July 2006.<sup>vii</sup>

The negative incident for India in South Asia is the intervention of 1971. India is accused of using the accord of 1987 to mount its military potential in the littoral. The accord allowed India's diplomatic involvement in resolving the conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese people in Sri Lanka. Though the intervention was later not diplomatic in nature, the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka forced India to get militarily involved.<sup>viii</sup>

The future seems bright between India and Sri Lanka because the manifesto of the new government in Colombo specially commits to improving relations with India, "with an attitude that would be neither anti-Indian nor dependent."<sup>ix</sup>

### **Maldives**

India was the first nation to establish bilateral relations with Maldives after its independence in 1965, also settled maritime border in 1976 and signed trade agreement in 1981. The major step was taken when India intervened and crushed a coup against the Maldivian government in 1988. The Indian armed forces restored peace and Indo-Maldivian relations reached a new high. Since then India has provided economic assistance and training in fields of health,

developing civil society and infrastructure, also assisting in disaster relief and telecommunications.<sup>x</sup>

India in 2014 was the first responder to Maldives call for help in time of grave crisis. The water sewage treatment plant in country's capital caught fire which left 100,000 without access of drinking water. When asked for aid, India dispatched five planes carrying bottled water and two ships containing spare parts and mechanics to fix the damaged treatment plant. This incident gave a good chance to India to show its capacity to serve as the 'first responder' in the time of crisis.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Afghanistan***

India extended hand for reconstruction and development assistance, India also pledged to give \$450 million aid which would also include a highway (Zaranj-Delaram) which would connect Kandahar to the Iranian border. For the security of Indian officials working there Indian government has deployed Indo-Tibetan Border Police for safe guarding of workers and the Indian embassy in Kabul. This move indicates that India is ready to play more active role in providing security against Taliban.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Challenges in South Asia**

The South Asian region suffers from a high degree of conflict, both within and across countries. Nepal witnessed a long-running civil war from 1996 to 2006, in which more than 12,000 people were killed. Afghanistan and Sri Lanka have also been the scenes of long-running conflicts. The provinces of Balochistan and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan are widely regarded as conflict-ridden places. In India, 749 people were killed in incidents of Naxalite violence in 2006; such incidents have been reported from 13 different states, and 70 per cent of these deaths occurred in the lagging regions of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar.

More than 70 million people have been displaced by conflict in South Asia and incidents of terrorism are also on the rise across these countries. There are several potential causes for a higher degree of conflict in the lagging regions, many of which have been found to be significantly associated with the incidence of conflict in cross country studies. These include geography, economic factors such as poverty

and unemployment, social diversity, and institutional factors such as poor property rights, landlessness, inequality of access to public infrastructure, and weak state capacity in the delivery of services. Within South Asia, areas with historically poor property rights have been found to display higher levels of violent crime.

District-level research in Nepal finds that geography and poverty are very significantly associated with the intensity of conflict, while measures of social diversity based on caste or language play a much smaller role. Dealing with conflicts within countries has led to the suffering of significant conflicts between countries. Two well-known examples are the long-drawn conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, and the Afghan-Pakistan conflict over the Taliban issue. Less open, yet unfortunate, is the low-level conflict between Bangladesh and India over the perceived rise of terrorism in the region.

The development costs of these conflicts have been tremendous in terms of loss of life, restrictions on people to people contact across countries within the region, high financial cost of military and other security-related operations, and the loss of benefits from lack of economic, social, and political cooperation.

Cross-country conflict is the most important reason why South Asia is the least integrated region of the world. What can South Asia do to transform conflict into cooperation? South Asian countries have implemented different measures to control internal conflict. In most countries, the official government policy has been to combine implementation of development schemes with the deployment of additional security forces.

By and large, efforts to curb ethnic conflict with force appear to have exacerbated the intensity of conflict. In Nepal, after several years of trying a military response, the government signed a peace deal with the Maoist rebels in 2006. The challenge for South Asia is how conflict can be converted into cooperation and the resources channeled towards achieving growth and sharing the benefits of growth with minority and disadvantaged groups.

Nepal's success in reaching a peace accord with the Maoists and bringing them into the democratic

process sets a good example for other countries regarding how to address long-term conflict at its source. Ensuring good governance that allows participation and voice of all citizens in the development effort can play a key role in reducing in-country conflicts. Better economic cooperation and stronger trade relations can be helpful in reducing cross-country conflicts.

### **Possibility of Cooperation and Restoring Peace in the Region**

South Asia is one of the conflict prone regions in the world. The region contains local, national, bilateral and regional conflicts. In addition to the growing tensions in the South Asian region, India being a nuclear state shares its borders with other two nuclear states namely China and Pakistan. The regional organization SAARC has no scope or mandate which would contribute in security policy and conflict management, it focuses mainly on economic, social and technical cooperation. SAARC does provide a framework for multilateral cooperation on issues like cross-border terrorism, fighting international crime and illicit drug trade. These frameworks failed to kick-off because of unresolved Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan has prevented South Asia from deeper integration. Another point is the huge trust deficit between most neighbors.

The signs of cooperation can be seen between India and Pakistan through recent meeting of National Security Advisors of both countries in Bangkok. Another initiative being taken by the Indian External Affairs Minister, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, who went for a two day visit to Pakistan to enhance bilateral talks with her counterpart Sartaj Aziz (December 9,2015).<sup>xiii</sup> The issues discussed during the meeting were Jammu Kashmir as it is the most longing conflict between both the nations. Consensus were developed for Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue which will include CBMs, Siachen, Sir Creek, Wullar Barage/Tulbul navigation Project, economic and commercial cooperation, counter terrorism, narcotics control, humanitarium issues, people to people exchanges and religious tourism. Another significant development is underway by Mr. Modi who is expected to attend SAARC summit in Pakistan in September, 2016.

India is also using SAARC as medium to integrate the region, efforts made in the field of education e.g. – establishment of the South Asian University, which will foster people to people contacts, exchange of knowledge. The growing number of initiatives ranging from regional academic network through track-1 diplomacy and cooperation in UN peace keeping missions is gaining momentum. Initiatives like joint military exercises and strategic trainings for UN peace keeping operations or joint maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and curbing the piracy. There is more security cooperation among member countries of the SAARC than is visible in the political and academic debates.

The collaboration is mostly bilateral and depends on the overall relationship between India and its neighbors. The most important reason for the expansion of security cooperation is probably the change in India's South Asia policy since the 1990s. India has been willing to make unilateral concessions in bilateral conflicts and in economic cooperation. Today, India pursues its security interests through cooperation with its neighbors and no longer by interfering in their domestic affairs. A related factor is that most governments in South Asia see the biggest threats coming from domestic challenges, such as various ethnic, religious, and communist rebellions, rather than from external forces, for instance from India, as was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Hence, national security perceptions have converged, thereby opening the door for more security cooperation.

### **CONCLUSION**

The recent development by Delhi government in speeding up cooperation in its littoral is gaining importance. India is reportedly stepping its defense cooperation with its two island neighbors Sri Lanka and the Maldives. According to times of India, the assistance will focus primarily on “capacity building” of the armed forces of both countries. India will supply equipment and assist in training. South Asia since its inception has remained a tenuous region which is why it is the least integrated region in the world compared to ASEAN and EU. Countries in South Asia cooperate in harmony through bilateral relations with non-conflicting parties compared to multilateral ones. SAARC being a regional platform

for these countries does not take bilateral contentious issues in discussions and forums. Therefore, countries remain stranded in a conflicting flux. If one player is infected with conflicts then the whole region suffers. India and Pakistan are obstacles in fully integrating South Asia as an integrated region.

However, there are signs that South Asia is beginning to see the advantages of greater regional cooperation and openness to trade. Deals are being signed to build power transmission lines across borders. A shared sense of culture and history offers much of the promise for changing the dominant mindset. Over the last couple of years, countries have accelerated their efforts to foster cultural and people to people exchanges and to reduce trade barriers, while continuing parallel efforts to diffuse security threats and revolve territorial disputes. By encouraging greater trade and economic investment, South Asia has the ability and capability, and power to move entire communities from poverty to prosperity. Maldives strongly believes that a major key to alleviating poverty in the region is through enhancing stronger trade and economic cooperation. South Asia still remains the most backward and least integrated region in the world. Therefore, the South Asian leadership needs to portray a strong and healthy political will to fully operate South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) by evolving standard trade procedures, which is the only way to increase the volume of trade from 5 percent to a considerable level.

To develop a strong voice on global platform India needs to use its tool of diplomacy and natural resources for integrating the neighborhood which would help foster the region but will also enhance India's image as a guardian and big brother of the region and this will lead India to enhance its influence on global platform.

According to L. Kadirgamar, India has used the analogy of a wheel to depict centrality of its presence in South Asian affairs. According to him at the hub of the wheel lies regionally preponderant India. Radiating as spokes are India's neighbors with each of whom India shares land or maritime boundaries, but no two others are thus joined without at the same time touching India also. The renewed approach towards the neighbors by the big brother will help in

developing strong consensus among the nations to cooperate regionally and India should externally guide the neighbors to establish the notion of democracy, this will take India to act as benign hegemony.

*“The Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. And the seventh, that is India, will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful.” - Bhabani Sen Gupta.*

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