India's Neighbourhood Policy
A Collaborative Approach or a Bid for Dominance

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ABSTRACT

The turmoil in India's neighbouring countries can largely be attributed to the framework of India's neighbourhood policy: its underlying principles, strategy, and implementation. The principles refer to the norms and practices guiding the policy; the strategy involves how priorities are structured; and the implementation pertains to the methods of execution. These norms shape the actions taken to achieve set objectives, while priorities dictate the order and significance assigned to those objectives. The modes represent the pathways through which the policy is carried out. This paper critically examines the principles, priorities, and methods of India's policy towards its neighbors, suggesting that India seeks to establish dominance and often presents its national interests as those of the entire region.

Keywords: *India's Neighbourhood Policy, Regional Instability, Hegemonic Strategy, Strategic Dominance, Entire Region.*

Introduction

On 8 August 2024, a group of experts issued an unprecedented statement urging India to refrain from meddling in the internal affairs of its neighbouring countries (The Wire, 2024). The statement highlighted how decades of intervention by New Delhi's political, bureaucratic, and intelligence agencies in countries like Colombo, Dhaka, and Kathmandu have fuelled ongoing political instability and strengthened autocratic regimes. It called on India to focus on fostering stable governance and long-lasting peace in the region by ceasing overt and covert interference in

neighbouring nations' affairs and supporting the democratic aspirations of South Asia's people. Similar accusations have come from Islamabad, alleging India's interference in Pakistan's internal matters and its role in terror financing. Kabul has also raised concerns about India's alleged funding and arming of various militant groups, which has contributed to unrest in Afghanistan. Some observers even claim that India attempted to meddle in and dominate Bhutan, though these accusations remain unproven. Regardless, such allegations persist frequently.

This raises important questions: Why do India's neighbours repeatedly accuse it of interference? What drives their anxiety? And what motivates India's growing assertiveness? This paper seeks to explore these questions in a succinct and analytical manner, avoiding the usual political rhetoric and instead examining the overlooked factors behind India's expanding role in South Asia. It critiques the principles, priorities, and methods of India's policy toward its neighbours and argues that New Delhi is striving for regional dominance. In response, neighbouring countries are seeking to counterbalance India's hegemonic ambitions by aligning with other global powers.

India's neighbouring region is a complex tapestry of diverse ethnicities, languages, and religions, much like India itself (Rich, 1992). The political reorganization in the 1940s was more of a necessity than a deliberate socio-economic or nationalistic project. Throughout history, the region has been a collection of distinct communities, each vying to establish its own zone of influence. Persistent conflict among ruling factions was a long-standing reality. Despite this, the region never fractured culturally, as the dominant ethno-cultural environment absorbed various influences, though never completely. Distinct markers of ethnicity, culture, religion, and language persisted in some form or another (Fukuyama, 2012). The Indian subcontinent, despite repeated attempts to conquer or fully subjugate it, maintained its identity, influencing invaders to temper their more radical tendencies. While the urban elites, rural leaders, merchants, and intellectuals often despised the invaders, they pragmatically embraced their cultural norms, governance models, and educational institutions, gaining substantial benefits (Adiga, 2009). Even after India gained independence in 1947 and underwent subsequent political, economic, and educational reforms, the influence of entrenched elites remained unshaken. These elites continue to wield significant power, particularly in foreign policy, which remains their domain.

Fast forward to today; the Subcontinent faces a myriad of challenges: social collapse, economic struggles, cultural stagnation, political instability, and environmental crises such as floods, droughts, and ecological degradation (Sen, 2006). Bangladesh is gripped by political unrest (IISS, 2024), Pakistan is in economic distress (USIP, 2023), Nepal faces socio-political confusion (Le Monde, 2024), Sri Lanka grapples with economic and communal strife (USIP, 2022), Afghanistan is in institutional chaos (SIGAR, 2021), the Maldives is caught in geopolitical tensions (ORF, 2024), and Bhutan is embroiled in China's strategic manoeuvres (FP, 2023). India, too, is confronting these challenges amidst a highly polarized political climate. While these issues may seem domestic, they are often exacerbated by external influences. A significant external force contributing to these crises is India's involvement in the internal affairs of its neighbours. This is not to discount the internal factors at play, but rather to recognize that India's interference amplifies these domestic challenges. Social and economic upheaval, political

India's Neighbourhood Policy a Collaborative Approach or a Bid for Dominance instability, communal tensions, and strategic conflicts are influenced both by domestic dynamics and external forces. It is widely acknowledged that New Delhi plays a role in shaping the region's affairs (HRW, 2017). For instance, India's influence is evident in Nepal's political, economic, trade, and foreign policies, as well as in the affairs of Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

The Policy Principles

India's neighbourhood policy is built on three key principles: historical, cultural, and political. In this context, "principles" are the customs, norms, and behaviours that uphold the existing power structure, typically benefitting the dominant group. In practical terms, this refers to the standards set by the most powerful actor, which others are expected to follow. Given India's dominance in the region — geographically, demographically and economically—its perspective on power has always been one of "preponderance" (Keay, 2010). India's foreign policy establishment views itself as the central and most influential actor in South Asia, believing that other nations should align with its lead. While regional actors are technically free to pursue policies that benefit their own interests, they cannot adopt positions that conflict with India's expansive definition of national interest, which includes maintaining regional dominance. This dominance, in India's view, is necessary and justified. Historically, India held preeminent status in the region for centuries until foreign invasions, weakened by internal strife, disrupted this position. After gaining independence in the late 1940s, India aimed to amend its past, reshape its present, and redefine its future, with its neighbourhood policy serving as a crucial tool for these ambitions. This is where India's interests often clash with those of its neighbours.

Culturally, India has been characterized by its inclusiveness, homogeneity, and adaptability. It has always had a continental cultural influence (Nehru, 2004), though its political borders have never fully aligned with its cultural reach (Khilnani, 2004). Culture, which encompasses beliefs, practices, rituals, language, religion, and art, has long been shared across the Indian subcontinent, despite political divisions. The coping mechanism of both the masses and elites was to pragmatically blend and harmonize competing identities rather than challenge them. This ability to absorb and unify different cultural elements became a key survival strategy. Throughout history, political, economic, and religious disparities were turned into a cohesive force, with native cultures influencing, rather than being overwhelmed by, foreign invaders. From medieval to colonial times, and even post-colonial periods, foreign influences were absorbed into the native culture. Thus, India became a symbol of cultural integration, with its music, art, architecture, festivals, and food serving as icons of this synthesis. The subcontinent, in this sense, has been a melting pot where native and foreign cultures interacted and learned from one another, creating a sense of "unity in diversity" and forming a composite culture. While India's current neighbourhood policy recognizes this shared cultural heritage, it appears unable or unwilling to craft a policy that harnesses this cultural commonality for regional benefit.

Politically, the Indian subcontinent remains a complex issue (Jalal, 2011), despite the fact that the "political" question appears to be settled. The region is now composed of independent, sovereign states with clearly defined territorial boundaries. While these divisions are largely accepted, certain areas, such as Kashmir (Lamb, 1991), remain points of contention. India sees these border disputes

as temporary issues resulting from a misreading of history. In India's eyes, the subcontinent was once a unified civilization, stretching from the Hindu Kush in the north to the Malabar Coast in the south (Doniger, 2015). The disruption caused by foreign invasions, which ultimately ended the Indian Empire, is seen as a temporary setback. India's political elites, who shape foreign policy, are strongly influenced by this historical perspective and seek to restore what they perceive as India's rightful pre-eminence in the region. The idea of "resurrection" is a driving force behind India's neighbourhood policy and is a topic of heated debate today. However, one fundamental question is rarely addressed: Should India attempt to resurrect its glorious and dominant past?

There is a persistent yet subtle belief in the idea of resurrecting India and restoring its greatness. Considering India's vast geography, large population, growing economy, industrial breadth, and technological advancements, coupled with relative political stability, its aspiration to dominate the region is not unexpected. Moreover, India's dominance seems not only logical but also necessary, as it possesses the essential elements—territory, population, and military strength—required to lead South Asia. Should India fail to take on this leadership role, outside powers like the US or China may step in to fill the gap. Additionally, most neighbouring countries, with a few exceptions like Pakistan, are open to India's leadership but expect it to act with greater generosity. Thus, India's neighbourhood policy revolves around three core aspects: historical, cultural, and political dominance. However, a broad interpretation of history could potentially lead to conflicts. For example, India might pressure Nepal to adjust its borders or demand similar adjustments with Bangladesh. Conflicts over islands between India and Sri Lanka could also arise. Additionally, historical ties might even be used to justify forced unification (Farid & Ashraf, 2025).

Second, cultural assertiveness can gradually solidify into cultural identity. However, using cultural identity as a pretext for redrawing national boundaries is problematic. Culture is a fluid and evolving concept and it is not a stable foundation for building national identity (Thapar, 2000). Different communities have varying definitions of culture, often excluding others. Culture typically reflects the values, norms, and language of the dominant group, sidelining minority cultures. Therefore, cultural homogeneity alone is insufficient to unify a diverse social structure. Relying on cultural similarities to achieve national integration is risky. Strong, resilient nations are built on diversity, acceptance, and tolerance of multiple ethnicities, religions, castes, and languages. Although the subcontinent shares a general cultural identity, culture alone may not be a suitable basis for political unity. Smaller states, in particular, might resist cultural nationalism as a unifying force.

Finally, attempting to unify the subcontinent politically through force could lead to instability. Politics is about distributing power and privileges, often for self-interest. In pursuing self-interests, some states may end up subordinating others, leading to preferential treatment and, essentially, a policy of "divide and rule." This strategy is often employed by stronger states to increase their power relative to others. Interference in internal affairs and the use of force are examples of this in practice. Powerful states often create a state of dominance (Mearsheimer, 2003), justifying their actions under the guise of promoting unity, peace, or prosperity. Methods like meddling in neighbours' internal politics, fostering tensions, deploying spies, and

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manipulating media narratives are often employed to maintain dominance. India's
neighbours accuse it of using such tactics to sustain its regional pre-eminence.

The Priorities

India's priorities in the region are clear: political consolidation, economic
dominance, military superiority, and strategic stability. Although India claims its
foreign policy is 'neutral,' 'non-aligned,' or 'multi-aligned,' its approach to its
neighbourhood has remained singular, aimed at regional unification through
diplomacy, economic cooperation, political strategy, and military force. To justify
these actions, India often invokes liberal values and principles, masking its
hegemonic ambitions. The supposed neutrality and non-alignment are designed for
both domestic and global audiences, to prevent criticism or backlash against its
pursuit of dominance. Successive Indian leaders, regardless of their ideology, have
consistently aimed for regional supremacy. This ambition has rarely been
questioned by the intellectual community. In fact, India has often distracted its
public from its hegemonic goals by focusing on border disputes with China,
Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Despite several rounds of high-level consultations, India
has been unable to resolve these disputes, notably with China and Pakistan. While
India cannot bear all the blame for unresolved conflicts, it has done little to prepare
its population for the compromises necessary for resolution. Public discourse in
India, whether in political debates, private conversations, or academic discussions,
tends to be one-sided and blames neighbouring countries entirely for the lack of
progress. Below is a brief analysis of India's key neighbourhood priorities.

- **Political Consolidation**

India's foremost goal is political consolidation in the region (Subrahmanyam, 2013).
This objective is supported by three key elements: preference, primacy, and posture.
India expects its neighbouring countries to prioritize issues that impact Indian
interests. For instance, it demands that its neighbours commit to resolving disputes
peacefully. This is likely a message aimed at China, encouraging it to resolve their
border issues amicably and avoid using aggressive tactics. However, India itself
applies strong-arm tactics when dealing with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh,
often disregarding their perspectives. For example, India insists on a quicker
resolution to the Kashmir dispute, knowing full well that this would require
territorial concessions from both sides—not just Pakistan. However, India rarely, if
ever, outlines areas where it is willing to compromise. Instead, it has taken unilateral
actions, such as the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, which have further
hardened its position. Despite this, India continues to demand preferential treatment
for its concerns (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Moreover, India seeks to establish primacy in regional affairs (Dixit, 2010). This
involves aligning the goals and objectives of its neighbours with India's own
interests. Neighbouring countries are expected to adopt a pro-India stance, adjust
their national goals accordingly, and amplify India's position on regional issues. For
instance, if India disapproves of regional organizations like SAARC, its neighbours
are expected to follow suit and support India's stance for the supposed greater good
of the region. According to India, only New Delhi has the wisdom to determine what
peace and prosperity look like for the subcontinent. However, India has been
systematically undermining multilateral arrangements like SAARC without offering
any alternatives. While this might be an attempt to isolate Pakistan, selectively

disengaging with any member could ultimately harm the entire regional framework instead of improving it.

Finally, India is actively encouraging its neighbours to adopt and support its stance on key transnational issues such as cross-border commerce, money laundering, religious extremism, separatism, cyber security, and terrorism. Interestingly, this approach has not garnered much scholarly attention. New Delhi's expectations have expanded beyond traditional areas of cooperation like diplomacy, defence, and climate change. It now seeks an expansive and, at times, intrusive partnerships. The scope of this partnership is broad, spanning various domains, while its intrusiveness stems from its influence on domestic matters. For instance, expecting collective alignment on separatism requires a deep understanding of the unique circumstances that fuel such movements. The key question is how a country, like India, which grapples with multiple separatist challenges, can effectively manages or mediate separatist conflicts in other nations. Moreover, India, which faces criticism for its own human rights issues, raises scepticism among its neighbours when it presents itself as a regional peacekeeper. Many neighbouring countries remain doubtful about the practicality of India's calls for regional cooperation, viewing them as exaggerated rather than genuine multilateral efforts. They often lack the financial, institutional, and political resources to fully align with India's vision and prefer to address their internal issues independently (Sarwar & Farid, 2025).

- **Economic Ascendance**

Economic growth is at the heart of India's strategic priorities, with key components including the development of road networks, airports, ports, economic zones, technology parks, and trade. However, this rise in economic power does not extend equally to all neighbours, as some are treated with neglect or hostility. Since the 1990s, India's economy has grown at an impressive average rate of 7%, making it one of the world's fastest-growing economies. This surge was triggered by significant economic reforms initiated in the 1990s (Baru, 2025). These reforms, combined with the end of the Cold War, attracted new investments into India (Das, 2007). As a result, millions were lifted out of poverty, and the surplus wealth was directed toward sectors like heavy industry, ICT, transportation, and education (Shankar Acharya, 2010). India also capitalized on its early socialist policies, which had laid a foundation for the development of critical sectors like advanced technology, agriculture, and higher education. This early advantage allowed India to amass significant wealth and transform into an economic powerhouse (Panagariya, 2011), while its neighbours lagged behind. A portion of this wealth was channelled into military expansion, as evidenced by India's nuclear tests in May 1998, signalling its future defence strategy, regional dominance, and strategic ambition (Khan, 2008).

India's extensive network of roads, airports, and ports is a crucial element of its economic ascendancy (The Economist, 2023). This network has two key dimensions: domestic and regional. Domestically, India has developed a vast road infrastructure connecting the country from north to south and west to east, with multiple interlinking corridors. These large-scale infrastructure projects are focused in key regions, such as the north, west, and south of India (GOI, 2024). These projects have connected major industrial, commercial, trade, technology, and educational hubs, contributing to national prosperity, social stability, unity, and

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strategic foresight. This road network is particularly significant for integrating remote border areas along China, Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Not only have these projects helped develop previously neglected regions, but they have also eliminated economic bottlenecks, spurred growth, and pacified historically "disturbed areas." Additionally, India's road network is closely integrated with railways, airports, and ports, creating a seamless infrastructure ecosystem designed to further cement its regional dominance.

In the past two decades, the number of airports, railways, and ports in India has multiplied significantly. This expansion was driven by the large-scale privatization of public assets, including airports, ports, and railway properties, with the aim of modernizing and enhancing them to world-class standards. The primary goal of this strategy was to create a strong commercial, economic, political, and cultural network, ultimately fostering the generation of wealth. These transportation hubs do much more than simply move passengers; they also facilitate the movement of goods and materials, generating significant profits. Additionally, they have connected previously isolated and strategically important regions in the north, south, east, and west of the country (Baruah, 2018). The northern, eastern, and western sectors, which are significant in strategic terms, have witnessed rapid development. India has been transparent about the impact of its transport and communication networks on its neighbours, as reflected in its various policies like the Neighbourhood First Policy, Look East Policy, Act East Policy, and Look West Policy. These policies are a clear testament to India's growing regional dominance.

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are another essential element of India's economic growth. SEZs are areas where business, trade, tax, tariff, and regulatory requirements are relaxed to promote growth (GOI, 2024). Over the last decade, India has established nearly 300 SEZs. Although these zones have not generated many jobs or significantly transformed local economies, they have contributed to large profits and boosted India's overall GDP. SEZs have become symbols of prosperity and are often highlighted as beacons of development (ISID, 2022). The distribution of SEZs is relatively balanced across the country, though the northern, western, and southern regions have a greater concentration. Nonetheless, no part of the country is entirely without SEZs, underscoring India's economic influence both within and beyond its borders. Despite continuing to grapple with poverty, India has made remarkable strides in reducing it and lifting millions out of destitution. Given the scale of its infrastructure expansion — in roads, railways, airways, and ports — India is poised to become even wealthier in the future.

A related aspect of India's economic rise is the creation of technology parks. These parks are specialized areas that house offices, research institutes, and laboratories focused on science and technology (Krishna, 2022). They include various types of high-tech clusters such as science parks, innovation hubs, and cyber cities. These spaces offer state-of-the-art facilities, such as high-speed broadband, laboratories, and advanced transportation systems like metro lines, smart buses, and airports. Tech parks provide ICT-based solutions and create tech-enabled environments for businesses, whether they are established companies, start-ups, or new ventures. They integrate essential services like education, healthcare, banking, entertainment, hospitality, and more, all supported by reliable access to water, electricity, food, and security.

Every Indian state has developed its own tech cities, which are now seen as symbols of modernity (Vaidyanathan, 2008). Cities like Pune, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Ahmadabad, and Chennai are globally recognized as major high-tech hubs. Across the country, dozens of cyber cities have emerged, solidifying India's position as a leading centre for technology and innovation. India's rise as an economic, commercial, and scientific powerhouse is largely sustained by this combination of world-class infrastructure, including roads, railways, airports, ports, SEZs, and high-tech cities. Its economic dominance is further strengthened by advancements in software, digital sectors, and other cutting-edge industries. As a result, New Delhi's economic influence continues to expand both within the region and beyond.

India's economic growth is strongly tied to its trade relationships with neighbouring countries as well as the broader global market. India conducts trade with several key neighbours, including Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. These countries serve as markets for India's finished goods, critical inputs, and raw materials, creating a mutually beneficial two-way exchange of imports and exports. Nepal, for instance, shares deep commercial, educational, political, social, and cultural ties with India (K. V. Rajan, 2024). India provides essential resources and services to Nepal, while also importing goods and services from Kathmandu with relative ease. Similarly, Bangladesh is closely connected to India (Islam, 2022), not only as a trading partner but also as a source of regional stability. Bangladesh, which shares a long, porous border with India, plays a strategic role in facilitating access to the north-eastern states of India. Dhaka allows India to transport goods, equipment, and logistics through its territory, offering the shortest and most commercially viable routes to India's north-east. A trade corridor is already in place, enabling back-and-forth movement of goods.

Sri Lanka also relies heavily on its trade relationship with India. The trade connections between the two countries are dense and crucial, and Colombo holds a significant position in India's evolving security framework (Raju, 2007). Bhutan, another neighbouring country, is similarly dependent on India. Surrounded by Indian Territory, Bhutan relies on India for managing its security, integrity, and foreign relations. Trade between Bhutan and India is substantial, and Bhutan benefits from high-value tourists from India and other parts of the world. It also takes advantage of India's transport, communication, and technological networks, although this dependence has been reportedly declining. China, Bhutan's other major neighbour, has been working to strengthen its commercial, political, and diplomatic ties with Thimphu (Mohan, 2023). The Maldives, India's maritime neighbour, is equally important to the security of the Indian Ocean region (Bussa, 2017). Integrating the Maldives into India's strategic goals through trade, commerce, and cultural ties remains a priority. In sum, India's economic rise is underpinned by its regional trade relationships, which are essential for maintaining its influence and ensuring stability in the surrounding regions.

- **Military Dominance**

India's pursuit of political consolidation and economic ascendancy is underpinned by its firm commitment to military dominance (Jaishankar, 2022). This dominance revolves around three key dimensions: land, sea, and air. India's land forces, the Indian Army, rank as the second-largest in the world, with 1.4 million active personnel. However, it is not just the size of the army that makes it formidable but

also its advanced weaponry and training (Stimson Centre, 2074). The army operates in both conventional and non-conventional realms, managing artillery, tanks, armoured vehicles, and cluster munitions on one side, while handling nuclear warheads and missile delivery systems on the other. India currently possesses 160 nuclear warheads and approximately 700 kg of weapons-grade plutonium, which could produce 213 warheads. The Indian Army forms the core of India's defence structure, responsible for managing and positioning strategic and non-conventional weapons (Farid, 2023).

India's naval strength, represented by the Indian Navy, ensures its dominance in the Indian Ocean Region. Reports indicate that the Indian Navy comprises 118 warships, 14 submarines, 216 aircraft, 122 helicopters, and 14 unmanned aerial vehicles. The Navy frequently participates in joint exercises with global powers like the US, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, signalling its preparedness for potential maritime conflicts. The extension of US naval power from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, now referred to as the 'Indo-Pacific,' underscores the growing importance of maritime security, especially in light of China's increasing presence in the region (Brookings, 2070). China's Belt and Road Initiative has led to partnerships with countries like Sri Lanka to develop key infrastructure, positioning China as a potential maritime rival. In response, India has been steadily enhancing its naval capabilities (Honrada, 2023), especially as it must also consider Pakistan's naval strength on its western coast. While the Pakistan Navy poses a challenge, India's naval superiority remains evident, despite China's support for Pakistan, including the development of strategic ports like Gwadar in Baluchistan. India keeps a close watch on the growing naval cooperation between Beijing, Colombo, Islamabad, and possibly Dhaka.

In the skies, the Indian Air Force (IAF) maintains its air dominance (TOI, 2023). The IAF plays a critical role in providing battlefield support, including air cover, tactical and strategic airlifts, and intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and rapid mobility. The force works in close coordination with the army and navy under the emerging 'Integrated Theatre Commands,' where the IAF is expected to play a pivotal role (ORF, 2024). India's air arsenal includes a formidable collection of fighter jets, bombers, attack helicopters, and drones. Among its aircraft are the Rafael, Sukhoi-30, Tejas, and Mirage 2000, many of which are equipped to carry nuclear warheads. Additionally, India has acquired advanced electronic surveillance systems from nations like Israel, the US, and France. Barring Pakistan, no other neighbouring country can match India's air capabilities. Countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are vulnerable due to their challenging topography, while China remains the only country with the potential to challenge India's air superiority. However, Beijing seems reluctant to do so, as its primary focus lies on the Himalayan border rather than South Asia's air dominance.

These three elements—political consolidation, economic growth, and military supremacy—are closely interlinked to serve India's broader goal of regional dominance. Each component supports the next, creating a unified approach to ensure India's influence in the region. Military strength supports economic growth, while economic progress fuels political consolidation, and together they reinforce India's military ambitions. India's quest for regional supremacy, particularly in its neighbourhood is driven by its desire to secure political, economic, and strategic advantages. This ambition is often presented under the guise of India's role as a

'Vishwa-guru' (global leader) (Sahstrabuddhe, 2017). However, it is this desire for dominance that propels India toward its larger goal of reclaiming its past stature on the global stage, with the neighbourhood serving as the first step in this grand strategy.

The Modes of Execution

India's approach to executing its regional agenda involves a combination of pretence, coercion, and a carrot-and-stick strategy. One of the primary methods India employs is pretence, which manifests through exaggerated displays of generosity or importance (Destradi, 2011). This often takes the form of financial aid, charitable gestures, or grandiose ceremonies. However, the true intention is self-aggrandizement. India seeks recognition and endorsement of its rising status. Whether or not these actions genuinely benefit neighbouring countries is often secondary. Hyperbole, another tool in India's arsenal, inflates its self-image through rhetorical devices that make the country appear more powerful or influential than it truly is. For instance, hosting international events like the recent G70 Summit helps India project an image of global leadership and support for its aspirations, such as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. While these displays create an impression of importance, they often lack substantial or lasting impact.

Another tactic India uses is humbug, a form of empty praise or self-flattery. This tactic involves creating noise and fanfare without real substance, giving the illusion of grandeur. An example is India's emphasis on the peaceful resolution of international disputes, a principle it does not always apply to its own conflicts with neighbouring countries. In essence, India presents itself as a benevolent power, but its actions do not always align with the magnanimity it projects. This pretence allows India to avoid accountability on critical issues such as nuclear proliferation, border disputes with China, the Kashmir conflict, and climate change.

In addition to pretence, India does not shy away from coercion when its interests are at stake (Kanwal, 2006). Coercion involves using force or the threat of force to compel neighbouring countries to act in alignment with India's goals. This pressure can be applied physically, verbally, or psychologically. India generally prefers verbal and psychological coercion, but it has resorted to physical force in the past. For example, it intervened militarily in East Pakistan in the 1970s, Sri Lanka in the 1980s, and Afghanistan in the 2000s, forcing these countries to adjust their political stances in line with India's interests.

India frequently exerts diplomatic, economic, political, and strategic pressure on its neighbours (Basrur, 2017). Countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan have long complained about India's unrelenting pressure to align their policies with its own. When pressure fails, India issues threats, either covert or overt. These threats can range from economic sanctions to warnings of military action. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives have all been threatened with severe consequences if they do not meet India's demands on issues like trade routes, river water sharing, cross-border terrorism, and investment opportunities. Intimidation is also a common tool; for instance, Pakistan has faced repeated warnings of dismemberment, while Bangladesh has been threatened with economic blockades. Nepal is frequently reminded of its dependence on Indian markets. Even minor Indian officials can make disparaging remarks about neighbours without facing consequences. However, when it comes to China, India

India's Neighbourhood Policy a Collaborative Approach or a Bid for Dominance exercises considerably more caution. Bullying, particularly in diplomatic settings like the UN General Assembly, is another tactic India employs, especially against Pakistan. Public mocking, insults, and open hostility are common, with both countries engaging in verbal duels that often escalate into aggressive rhetoric. Other neighbours, like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, are occasionally subjected to demeaning language as well, such as being referred to "servants" or "predators."

Lastly, India employs a carrot-and-stick approach (Chattopadhyay, 2011), particularly with more compliant neighbours like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. These countries are offered significant economic incentives, such as trade agreements, investment opportunities, educational partnerships, and technological support. In return, they are expected to align with India's policies. Diplomatic, political, and security assistance are additional rewards for these nations' loyalty. However, for less cooperative countries, the "stick" is used to enforce compliance. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Nepal have all faced punitive measures for failing to meet India's expectations on issues like land disputes, water sharing, and economic cooperation. These punitive actions include the withholding of economic aid, restricting trade, and obstructing diplomatic support at international forums (Farid & Sarwar, 2024).

In summary, India's toolkit—pretence, coercion, and the carrot-and-stick strategy—is designed to ensure its dominance in the region. Given India's significant economic, political, and military power, neighbouring countries often have little choice but to acquiesce to its demands.

The Path Forward

India must prioritize and handle carefully its regional relationships. For too long, the country has been overly focused on building ties with distant nations and global powers. Policies such as non-alignment in the past, and the current "Look East" or "Act East" policies reflect this global obsession, often at the expense of regional engagement. Even India's extensive participation in UN peacekeeping missions appears more aimed at gaining international recognition rather than addressing regional concerns. India has not developed a coherent or systematic policy framework for strengthening its neighbourhood. Additionally, it has done little to make existing regional cooperative platforms effective, such as its lack of effort in reviving the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), despite official claims to the contrary. This excessive focus on global affairs must be abandoned. India should instead earn the trust and goodwill of its neighbours by persistently working toward building a stronger, more unified, and prosperous region. Ignoring any neighbour, such as Pakistan or Afghanistan, weakens regional integration. Therefore, any policy of sidelining or undermining neighbouring countries should be replaced with a strategy of comprehensive engagement. Disagreements or disputes should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation.

Second, India needs to prioritize economic integration within the region. Failing to do so risks missing out on valuable opportunities for mutual prosperity. The currently disconnected road, rail, and port systems, whether as a result of partition or other historical factors—must be repaired and reopened. India should encourage the creation of open borders to allow the free flow of goods, services, and labour, which will foster mutual prosperity. Moreover, India should grant neighbouring countries greater access to its markets, resources, and technology, thereby building

trust and confidence. Existing trade agreements can be expanded to include regional partners. Economic integration is the solution that both India and neighbour need, especially considering that previous efforts to manage the region have largely failed. It is time to draw inspiration from successful models like the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India must overcome any reluctance in exchange for the substantial benefits this integration would bring, both to the region and the world at large.

Additionally, India should push for a regional security pact. Political stability, national sovereignty, and state security are essential foundations for peace and prosperity. When individual states focus solely on their own security, it often leads to regional insecurity, as their efforts are perceived as antagonistic by others. A collective approach to security would be a more prudent way forward. The region also faces a growing problem of nuclear proliferation, which needs to be addressed urgently. India could take the lead by proposing a regional security agreement to tackle these challenges. A multilateral platform, such as a regional security conference, could help iron out the details of such an arrangement. This initiative would likely be welcomed by neighbouring countries.

Concluding Remarks

India must seriously and pragmatically adhere to the core principles of mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality, shared prosperity, and peaceful coexistence. These principles should not just be talked about but practiced. For too long, India has neglected systematic and practical attention to its neighbourhood, squandering opportunities for goodwill and regional cooperation. Its pursuit of economic, military, and strategic dominance has often led to feelings of resentment among its neighbours. What these countries likely seek is a more mature, considerate approach, one that emphasizes inclusive engagement. India must take the lead in revitalizing the region as a collective platform for growth and cooperation, tempering any hegemonic tendencies that risk alienating its neighbours.

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