



AN OVERVIEW OF INDIA'S INTERACTIONS WITH BHUTAN, NEPAL, AND BANGLADESH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MODI ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH: A FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS INDIA'S NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

Dr. D. Chandramouli Reddy

Assistant Professor, The Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuramu, Andhra Pradesh.

Abstract

When advancing a country's national interests, that country's foreign policy has a significant role. The same reasoning may be applied to the situation in India. By pursuing its national interests through its foreign policy and maintaining its international connections, India ensures the safety of its people on both domestic and international fronts. Panchsheel and nonalignment are guiding principles for the Indian government's approach to international affairs. When it comes to its relationships with the countries that border it, India has pursued a foreign policy that is both harmonious and constructive. This paper focuses on India's relationships with Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. India views all three nations as reliable partners and prioritizes maintaining peaceful relations. All three nations share this value. For India to access the markets of its neighboring countries in this age of globalization, India needs to cultivate positive relationships with other countries.

Keywords: India, Foreign policy, Modi's Government, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Introduction

The rise in prominence of Indian foreign policy on the international stage is one of the many significant accomplishments of the government that Narendra Modi currently leads. Shree Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India, is well-known for the courageous decisions that he has made at the international level to expand India's impact on the politics of other countries. The audacity seen in other areas of the Modi government's policies has also been seen in its neighborhood policy. Since he became Prime Minister, he has worked to preserve Indian concerns and enhance India's relations with all of its neighbors, except for Pakistan. He has not been able to improve relations with Pakistan. He has given great emphasis on offering appropriate respect to those countries that have been close friends and allies of India, like Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. He has effectively isolated China from these countries. These countries include Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Since he took office as Prime Minister, his goals for India's international relations and interactions with its neighbors have been crystal clear. His focus has been strengthening India's ties with its neighbors^[1]. This is clear from the fact that, during the swearing celebration that marked the beginning of his first term in office, he asked all of the SAARC members to attend as guests and commenced establishing Modernity.

When he began his second term as President after romping to victory in the General Election in 2019, he continued the same practice by inviting all of the members of BIMSTEC to attend the ceremony when he took the oath of office. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation is an intergovernmental organization that includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan as members. Its purpose is to promote economic and technical cooperation across various sectors in the Bay of Bengal region^[2]. It is an essential medium for these countries to use to resolve their issues, and it also helps to speed up the pace of development while also helping to keep the peace in South and South East Asia. Similarly, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is another significant regional organization with



numerous accomplishments to its credit in terms of enhancing relations with the countries that are members of the organization. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives are some of the countries that belong to this organization, which has eight members. It is essential to remember that Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Nepal are members of these two influential organizations together with India.

Even those citizens who are philosophically opposed to Prime Minister Modi and have been a continuous critic of the Modi government are beginning to acknowledge the strategy that PM Modi takes concerning his commitment to foreign policy. "Also, the government's toughest detractors acknowledge, even if only behind closed doors, that if there is one area in which the Modi administration has excelled, it is in the realm of foreign policy^[3]. There is a prevalent belief that Asia will dominate the 21st century. Because of this, every nation on earth plays a unique part in the workings of the international community. The same reasoning may be applied to the situation in India. Due to its vast populous, the fact that its democracy is the largest in the world, and its improved economic conditions, India has a greater sense of duty to its immediate neighbors. India is a prominent nation in the South Asian region. However, the entirety of South Asia is confronted with various challenges due to the many inconsistencies, differences, and complexities within the socioeconomic and political conditions of the countries that make up South Asia. These challenges have the potential to affect the national interest of our country. Insurgency, radicalization or fundamentalism, terrorism, economic instability, border and water disputes between neighboring nations, poverty, illiteracy, and inadequate health facilities are some of these difficulties. Many of these nations are either affected by or contribute to the challenges^[4]. Because India shares borders with all other countries that make up South Asia, Indian interests are bound to be affected by whatever transpires in any of the South Asian countries. India is a responsible country not only in the South Asian area but also globally because of its robust democratic structure, vast population, large geographical expansion from North to South and East to West, accelerated economic growth, and nuclear state status.

The concept of collaborative and harmonious involvement with India's neighbors' underpins the country's approach to its neighborhood policy. Because it holds the belief that violence has the potential to impede the process of prosperity and the potential to disturb harmony and peace throughout the entire region, it has never followed an aggressive foreign policy with its neighbors, which demonstrates that the theoretical and practical features of India are the same in many ways. India has been a victim of terrorism for many decades, but despite this, it has never adopted an aggressive foreign policy. Because of its status as a responsible nuclear state, it advocates for eliminating nuclear weapons not just in the South Asian region but also on a global scale.^[5] The Panchsheel and Non-alignment Movement's guiding philosophy of non-interference in one's neighbors' internal affairs has significantly impacted India's foreign policy toward its neighbors. In its stead, India has been a strong proponent of collaborative and forward-thinking partnerships with its surrounding countries. The positive aspect of this is that if a nation can maintain positive relations with its immediate neighbors, it can successfully meet any challenge that may originate in other parts of the world. "No country can change its neighbors," said the late Prime Minister Shree Atal Bihari Vajpayee. "No country can alter its neighbors'." In the same vein, we cannot influence our neighbors', so maintaining cordial relationships with them may be beneficial to accomplishing our nation's goals and objectives.^[6]

This driving idea is mirrored in the Modiniti as well. "Neighborhood First" expands Modi's agenda as "Nation First," which is the basis for Modiniti's approach to the nation's foreign policy regarding its



neighbors. Under the current Prime Minister of India, India's foreign policy has reached new heights that have never been achieved in the country's history under any of India's previous Prime Ministers.^[7] From the beginning, India's relations with Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh have been cooperative, peaceful, friendly, and development-focused. These are characteristics that have persisted over time. The sections that follow will provide more information on these.

The Relationship between India and Bhutan

After they gained their independence, India and Bhutan established bilateral connections. The "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" between India and Bhutan is the primary foundation for the two countries' diplomatic ties. 1948 was the year that saw the two countries officially sign this treaty. On the other hand, official relations between the two nations were not established until 1968.^[8] This treaty is still in effect, adhered to, and acknowledged by both countries in the same spirit. In 2007, following the completion of 60 years of friendship, this treaty was rewritten based on the present demands of both nations. This enabled both countries to fulfill their future needs and aspirations, which was the primary motivation for the revision. The fact that the heads of state and government from both countries travel to the other's countries annually indicates the depth of their mutual engagement and the resilience of their connections. It is also important to note that there is a tradition between both countries in which, after every general election in both countries, the heads of government of both countries make their first visits to the other country to demonstrate a consolidation in their bilateral relations. This takes place every four years and is an important part of the tradition. The same attention was shown by Prime Minister Shree Narendra Modi when he visited Bhutan on June 15 and 16, 2014, as part of his first state visit to a country outside of India. During his visit, both countries inked agreements and memorandums of understanding that would contribute to Bhutan's economic growth. On June 16, 2014, Prime Minister Modi delivered a speech to the Parliament of Bhutan joint session. In addition, he was responsible for laying the cornerstone of a hydropower plant and inaugurating a new building for Bhutan's Supreme Court, both of which were made possible with India's financial and technological assistance. PM Modi also announced that the amount of money donated by India as part of the Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship will be increased to 2 crores per year and that new electronic libraries would be established in every district of Bhutan. During his tour, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, made it clear that he intends to make the India-Bhutan relations stronger than they were during the previous administrations and that he will offer Bhutan all aid he can.^[9]

At the initiative of the King of Bhutan, the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, traveled to Bhutan from November 7-8, 2014, intending to strengthen the existing mutual relations between India and Bhutan. The leaders of both countries met and discussed various bilateral topics and shared their perspectives. The President gave a speech to the public that focused on the topic of relations between Bhutan and India. In addition to that, he launched three projects at once, including the School Reform Project, an upgraded version of the East-West Highway, and a training center for the electricity sector. India provided financial support for every one of these initiatives. In addition, three Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were also signed between the two countries in the education sector. These MoUs would assist Bhutan in equipping its children with a comprehensive education.^[10]

This quality ensures that people may believe each other in their relationships, contributing to Bhutan's security status. In 2018, India and Bhutan marked the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Even though there is a trade imbalance between the two countries due to India's imports being greater than Bhutan's exports, India and Bhutan maintain highly close



business connections.^[11] The visit of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to the friendly country of Bhutan on August 17–18, 2019, would further cement India's dedication to the country's development. Additionally, it is anticipated that he will officially open the. After the clash at Docketlam, which took place between India and China on the border of Bhutan, which China claims as its territory, this would be the first time that Prime Minister Modi would visit Bhutan.

Relations between India and Nepal

India counts Nepal as one of its oldest and most valued friends and the country's closest and most trusted ally. India and Nepal have open border ties, one of the unique aspects of their bilateral relationship. This establishes the deeply ingrained links with both countries, which are widely recognized and appreciated by the people in the form of unrestricted movement over the border in both countries. These countries also have mutual respect for one another due to these relations. This is an extraordinary circumstance in India's relations with any other nation.^[12] The cornerstone of the current peaceful and friendly relationship between India and Nepal is the treaty between the two countries in 1950. As a result of this treaty, inhabitants of Nepal are granted access to a variety of chances and amenities on Indian territory that are not available to the citizens of any other country. The fact that the Indian Army has a Gorkha regiment, whose soldiers are all members of the Gorkha population in Nepal, is another factor that contributes to the significance of the relationship between India and Nepal. In addition, the two nations have signed many agreements that improve their cooperation in culture, education, the economy, defense, health, and the power sector. In addition, both countries share the equipment in the power industry to cut costs in the regions that share a border. This helps reduce the environmental impact. A power agreement was made in 1971, creating the criteria for sharing equipment in the power sector. This was done so that the two countries could interchange power. A new agreement on "Electric Power Trade, Cross-Border Transmission Interconnection and Grid Access" was signed on October 21, 2014, following the same pattern as the previous one. This agreement has been drafted to satisfy both countries' requirements and enable Nepal to become energy autonomous, which will be India's long-term advantage.^[13]

The fields of education and culture are also quite significant in the context of the bilateral relations between these two countries. At the moment, individuals who are nationals of Nepal can apply for one of India's three thousand available scholarships to assist them in obtaining a higher education there. Both the government of India and Nepal place a strong focus on encouraging individuals from their respective countries to interact with one another to foster positive relations. Both nations host various cultural and artistic events, academic conferences, and symposia to strengthen their cultural ties. It is also important to note that many contracts have been signed between India and Nepal. Some of these contracts include an agreement between the Sahitya Kala Akademi and the Nepal Academy, an agreement between Doordarshan and Nepal TV, an agreement between the Press Council of India and the Press Council of Nepal, an agreement between the Lalit Kala Akademi and the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, and an agreement between the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Nepal Academy of Music and Drama. An additional significant agreement was reached between the two nations to encourage the practice of Indian culture in Nepal.^[14] By the terms of this accord, a cultural center of distinction in the name of Swami Vivekanand Centre for Indian Culture was founded in Nepal in 2007 to advance the cause of Indian culture there.

Nepal's economic progress has been greatly aided by India's consistent willingness to assist and collaborate with Nepal's efforts to meet its development needs. Nepal has been able to accomplish a



variety of developmental projects with India's financial and technological assistance. These projects have been focused on education, health, defense, power, water resources, roads and highways, and railroads, amongst others. India's support of Nepal has been very important in bringing about change in the lives of the people there. The two nations often exchange high-level visitors, essential in bolstering bilateral relations. Since 2014, the Modi government has worked to keep the social and productive connections it has established with Nepal. One indication of this can be seen in the fact that Prime Minister Modi has traveled to Nepal three times. Because of his travels to Nepal, a previously unexplored interaction has emerged between the two nations.^[15]

Relations between India and Bangladesh

The nation of Bangladesh is another significant neighbor of India and is regarded as one of the country's most reliable friends. It is essential to keep in mind that Bangladesh, formerly known as West Pakistan, became a sovereign nation in 1971 as a direct result of the actions of the government of India. Not only was India responsible for rescuing Bangladesh from Pakistan's oppression, but it was also the first nation to recognize Bangladesh's status as an independent nation and establish diplomatic relations with Bangladesh on that basis. India did all of this without the least bit of concern for Pakistan's potential reaction. This contribution of India has always been recognized both by the political leadership of Bangladesh and by the general people of Bangladesh. This recognition has never changed. "Historically, geographically, and culturally, India and Bangladesh are so intertwined with one another that the two countries can't avoid having major bilateral links." Both countries have built systems for high-level visits and exchanges, which play an essential role in consolidating the bilateral relationships between the two nations. Both nations have signed many agreements in various fields, including defense and security, culture, health, education, science and technology, infrastructure development, roads and highways, water, and border issues.^[16]

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first state visit to Bangladesh, which took place on June 6-7, 2015, was to enhance India's relations with Bangladesh. During his tour, the countries agreed on 22 memorandums of understanding regarding various topics. The India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement, which was agreed upon to address the controversy over the border between the two countries, is considered one of the most significant agreements to have been reached on the border problem. "The settlement of long outstanding land and maritime boundaries, involving the concerns of enclaves, etc., was one of the noteworthy events that have taken place since the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in 2015." It is essential to remember that India and Bangladesh share the longest border but that a portion of that border is contested territory between the two countries. "Border management has become an extremely important and sensitive issue in a rapidly changing national and international security environment," said the government official of one of the countries. "But the governments of both countries are obligated to resolve their boundary conflicts with the reciprocated ability to understand."

Additionally, India and Bangladesh share a significant portion of the world's water bodies. About 54 rivers are shared between India and Bangladesh. A Joint Rivers Commission was established in 1972 with the responsibility of resolving any water conflicts that may arise between the two rivers. This commission can settle any water issues that may arise. The Ganga Water Treaty, which was signed in 1996, is another significant treaty that deals with the distribution of water in the Ganges River between the two countries. This is something that is still useful in the modern day.^[17] The two countries have formed a structural system for strengthening India and Bangladesh's relations. More than sixty



institutions are currently active in various fields, including defense, marine affairs, trade and commerce, science and technology, education, health, and culture. The defense sectors of both countries host military training programs for their respective armed forces. Additionally, they participate in combined military, naval, and air force drills to improve their capabilities and capacity to work together in a crisis.

The power and energy sector is another area in which the two countries cooperate. Bangladesh relies on India to supply 1200 megawatts of power to satisfy its energy demand. Since 2014, both countries have observed improvement in this sector, which has led to beneficial outcomes. Companies such as the Indian Oil Corporation, the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, and the Numaligarh Refinery Limited work in Bangladesh to improve the country's energy industry. It is referred to as the "friendship pipeline" and is 130 kilometers long. Its purpose is to transport diesel from Siliguri in India to Parbatipur in Bangladesh. India is assisting Bangladesh in this construction project.^[18] An agreement between both nations to use the ports of Chittagong and Monglan for the transfer of products between each other was reached in October 2018. Both countries are connected by railways, which allow for the transit of both commodities and passengers. In addition, a bus service travels between the two nations on a cross-border basis. The citizens of both India and Bangladesh can travel back and forth between their respective countries via aviation routes. In addition, cultural exchanges between both countries play a very important part in consolidating the countries' connections with one another.

The economic ties that bind India and Bangladesh are in excellent shape. It is essential to consider that Bangladesh is India's most important trading partner in the South Asian region. Bangladesh now has duty-free accessibility to India thanks to India's efforts to expand its commerce with Bangladesh. Both nations have agreed to spend 10 billion dollars between now and 2019.^[19] However, trade relations between India and Bangladesh are unbalanced because India exports a significant quantity of goods to Bangladesh, whereas Bangladesh only imports a small number of goods from India. Bangladesh is adamant about reducing this trade imbalance because it harms the country's overall economic health. The approximate value of this trade imbalance for 2017-2018 was \$ 7.2 billion. The imbalance in trade relations may be responsible for the emergence of other unfavorable challenges that have the potential to damage the two countries' bilateral relations. "Bilateral trade interactions substantially affect the political-economic relation of the affected countries, and as a result, the trade imbalance between two neighboring countries gains importance." A few delicate matters must be discussed between India and Bangladesh to achieve mutual understanding. Illegal immigration from Bangladesh into India is one of the most significant problems, as it raises concerns about national security. "Parties across the political spectrum in the Northeast have voiced numerous times their concerns about the possibility of being overrun by infiltrators from Bangladesh."

Conclusion

The preceding discussion makes it quite evident that India's approach toward countries like Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh in its immediate neighborhood has been remarkably collaborative, reformist, and harmonious. In addition, it is plain to see that each of these countries has been a reliable partner. India's constructive involvement with these countries has been extremely goal driven because India has been willing to comprise China's influence in the South Asian region, which has been China's aspirational policy for the past three decades. This has been made possible by India's involvement with these nations. Because globalization has a more significant impact on India, the nation needs access to other markets to export its goods, and these countries provide India with such a market. As a result, it is



fair to say that the Modi government has effectively constructed a new kind of foreign policy to interact with India's neighbors and move in a constructive path.

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