

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIA FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA (1998 - 2007)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the trajectory and core determinants of India's foreign policy in South Asia between 1998 and 2007, contextualizing this era within the broader historical evolution of Indian diplomacy since independence. Transitioning from post-independence Non-Alignment and cold war strategic constraints to post-Cold War market liberalization, India's regional posture underwent significant reorientation. The decade spanning 1998 to 2007 marked a decisive shift characterized by the 1998 nuclear tests, the 1999 Kargil conflict, and the post-9/11 global strategic environment. During this period, New Delhi leveraged anti-terrorism partnerships, enhanced economic clout, and expanding defense cooperation—including landmark nuclear agreements—to assert its regional prominence and counter security threats along its borders. The study evaluates how India balanced its foundational principles—such as peaceful coexistence and anti-imperialism—against realpolitik objectives, specifically its efforts to isolate regional rivals like Pakistan, manage asymmetrical security ties with peripheral neighbors (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh), and project itself as a dominant regional power and an indispensable global actor.

INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY:

Foreign Policy is a set of principles, decisions and actions made by a state to deal with other states and international organizations to protect its national interest, security, and economic benefits.

C. C. Rodee:

“Foreign policy involves the formulation and implementation of a group of principles which shape the behaviour pattern of a state while negotiating with other states to protect or further its vital interests.”

Policy is a tool to serve a country's national goals and interest. It has to be framed in a manner that follows the changing contours of international politics, so as to defend and promote the national interests. India's foreign policy has come a long

Joseph Frankel:

“Foreign policy consists of decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent relations between one state and others.”

way and passed through different phases since independence.

In the years immediately after independence, India formulated a foreign policy, which envisaged a role for her in the international politics. Since the fifties India through its policy of non-alignment began to play a mediatory role in the conflicting areas in the cold war-infested bipolar world.

Towards the mid-sixties India's foreign policy began to take a different course. The foreign policy that Nehru had formulated and the role that he had envisaged for India came under sharp criticism after the Chinese attack over India in

1962. It was strongly felt that India's foreign policy required recasting and reshaping in the context of emerging geo-strategic perspectives. A greater emphasis on strengthening regional policy with an objective to settle down problems with the South Asian neighbors was laid down.¹

During the 1970's, as the United States and China improved relations and China became closer in turn to Pakistan, India's strategic position became more intertwined with cold war issues, and the Soviet connection became even more important. The overall result was India's weaker international situation in the view of some Americans.

takeover of Sikkim in 1975, and the 1989 closure of the border with Nepal over economic disagreements all added to the picture of a big country hounding its smaller neighbors. Thus even though the country officially remained at peace during the 1980s, India's growing military power and the intersecting problems of regional dominance and cold war ambivalence drove an ambitious foreign policy.

The Indian strategic position changed dramatically in the early 1990s.

The disintegration of Soviet Union and the end of cold war politics on the one hand and the emergence of a new international order characterized by globalization, liberalization and privatization on the other, influenced the foreign policy perception towards the beginning of nineties.

India's regional perception and attitude changed from government to government and party to party.

In the mid 1990s, India attracted the world attention towards the alleged Pakistan-backed terrorism in Kashmir. The Kargil war resulted in a major diplomatic victory for India. In 1998, India

Basic Principles of Indian Foreign Policy

Sir Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, had the privilege of formulating and molding the foreign policy of this country.

He said, "We have to develop close and direct contacts with the other nations and to cooperate with them in the furtherance of world peace and freedom we propose as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned

During the 1980's, then, India was still officially a nonpartisan nation but infect found itself deeply embedded in cold war strategy. 1980's, witnessed a major expansion of Indian naval forces. The growth of the Indian navy had major implications for the regional balance of power within South Asia.

From 1987 to 1990, the Indian peace keeping force of more than 60,000 personnel was active in Sri Lanka and became embroiled in a fruitless war against Tamil separatist guerrillas. Regular problems with Bangladesh after 1971, the Indian

tested nuclear weapons, which resulted in several US, Japanese and European sanctions on India.

After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Indian intelligence agencies provided the U.S with significant information on Al-Qaeda and related groups activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. India's widespread contribution to the war on terrorism, coupled with a surge in its economy, has helped India's diplomatic relations with several countries.

India's candidate for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council is currently backed by several countries including France, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, German, Brazil and recently China. In 2004, the United states signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with India. The US argued that India's strong nuclear non-proliferation record made it an exception; however this has not persuaded other Nuclear Suppliers Group members to sign similar deals with India.

So India's foreign policy has not been static and has undergone changes according to exigencies of time and requirements of domestic as well as international situations.

against one another, which has led in the past to world war and which may again lead to distress on an even vaster scale. We believe that peace and freedom are indivisible and the denial of freedom anywhere must endanger freedom elsewhere and lead to conflict and war"

The main principles of India's foreign policy are as under.

i. Non-alignment

- ii. Anti-Imperialism and Colonialism
- iii. Opposed to Racial Discrimination
- iv. Faith in Peaceful Coexistence and Cooperation
- iv. Special Bias for Asia
- V. Intimate Relations with Common Wealth
- vi. Faith in United Nations
- vii. Faith in Pious Means

How India's Foreign Policy Supporting her Role as a Regional Power?

India has not been free of difficulties in bilateral relations with any of its neighbors, especially with South Asian States. In recent times these have included demographic overflows from Bangladesh, the flow of goods across India from landlocked Nepal, the spillover effects of ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka, demarcation of maritime boundaries with the two large neighbors of Bangladesh and Pakistan and the eternal problems in relations with Pakistan.

India's position in the region is distinctive also for the fact that all other states save the Maldives share a border with India but not with any other.²⁹

Indian Foreign Policy shows that the India has adopted an aggressive attitude for attaining its two long-term foreign policy goals (a) to attain a hegemonic position in South Asia: (b) to acquire the recognized status of an international actor.

However, India is the status quo power in South Asia in most discussion relating to the resolution of disputes in the region. India's perception of security compels it to perceive extra regional threats through the instrumentality of the states situated on its periphery. During the cold war, when its security perceptions were formed, it acted to prevent the peripheral states from joining up with the wrong ideological camp at the global level. If seen transgressing, it used its status quo advantage as punitive tool to bring them to heel. From this mode of behaviour emerged more disputes between it and the neighboring states while the old ones were not resolved as a matter of security policy.³⁰

Since the last three years India has conducted anti-terrorism meetings at bilateral levels with the US, EU, Britain, Russia and Central Asian States and established joint working groups on terrorism with some of those states. India sees the post 9/11 period as laden with opportunities to isolate

Thus we find that the Indian foreign policy is based on high ideals and attaches great importance to methods. And these principles help a lot to India in adopting a strategic policy to become a superpower in the region.

Pakistan internationally and more importantly in relation to the Kashmir dispute. Therefore, India will continue the aggressive policy towards Pakistan as well as other countries of South Asia; using both fronts to gain the maximum mileage.

Conclusion: Since 2007, India's foreign policy in South Asia has undergone a significant strategic evolution, shifting from a traditional posture of non-interference and regional dominance toward a more proactive, cooperative, and security-conscious approach. This transformation has been driven by the dual imperatives of accelerating domestic economic development and countering China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean Region and immediate neighborhood.

A defining milestone in this evolution was the crystallization of the "Neighborhood First" policy, which gained heightened institutional momentum under Prime Minister Narendra Modi starting in 2014. This policy prioritizes India's immediate neighbors in diplomatic outreach, economic cooperation, and security partnerships. Recognizing that India's growth is inextricably linked to regional stability, New Delhi has increasingly deployed asymmetric diplomacy—offering generous lines of credit, humanitarian assistance, and capacity-building initiatives without demanding immediate reciprocity—to foster goodwill and deepen regional integration through frameworks like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation).

Simultaneously, India's South Asia policy has become more unapologetically security-driven, anchored by doctrines such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative launched in 2015. While India continues to navigate persistent geopolitical frictions—particularly the enduring rivalry with Pakistan and complex strategic balancing with

smaller neighbors like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal—the overarching post-2007 paradigm seeks to weave the region into a cohesive

economic and security community with India acting as a net security provider and economic anchor.

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