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"NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY" UNDER NARENDRA MODI: INDIA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract: *After becoming the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi made many efforts to consolidate his dominance in South Asia and expand India's influence in the Indian Ocean. The "neighborhood first policy" was highlighted in India's foreign policy. Based on historical and logical research methods and studies in international relations, the paper aims to examine the implementation of "neighborhood first policy" through bilateral relations between India and its neighboring countries. These relationships have been facing challenges from the more profound influence and interference of China as well as frequent terrorist incidents due to border disputes, which threatened regional security. Although this policy connected India with its neighboring South Asian countries, there were still challenges. It can be seen that the "neighborhood first policy" was Prime Minister Modi's effort to nurture bilateral relationships, enhance regional connectivity, and strengthen and elevate India's position in the region. The progress of the "Neighborhood First" policy is expected to continue more successfully in the next phase.*

Keywords: *Foreign Policy; Neighbourhood First; India; Strategy, Narendra Modi*

INTRODUCTION

India's neighborhood policy encourages it to focus on national security and economic development to strengthen its position as a regional power while motivating it to become a global power. The nation's geopolitical and geostrategic position has also prompted New Delhi to pursue particular relationships with its neighbors. The focal turning points in the history of relations between India and its neighbors after the Cold War were India's nuclear tests in 1998, the Kargil War in 1999, and the US global war on terror directly related to South Asia, India's backyard. With the foundation of Gujarat's development model and inspiration from the Gujral doctrine, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, after coming to power, embarked on a pragmatic and proactive foreign policy of "neighborhood first". After one term of implementing policy with neighboring countries, besides initial positive results, PM Modi's administration needs to have a new point of view and a practical approach to neighboring countries to become an economic and political power country in the region and the world, especially in the context of the essential strategic competition between India and China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic has received the interest of many researchers, and numerous study projects have been published. Regarding India's neighborhood policy, Das (2016) presents new prospects for enhanced integration and several solutions to foster sustainable commitment between India and its

neighboring countries, aiming to build peace in the region. As a regional power experiencing high economic growth and rapid integration into the global economy, India's policies towards its neighboring region, coupled with recent efforts to establish peace in South Asia, have been analyzed in detail by the author. The analysis delves into the complex relationships between India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Pal (2018) analyzes that in order to become a regional power, New Delhi needs to reassess its priorities in foreign policy. The author proposes several solutions to address conflicts and build peace in the region, especially considering China's increasing influence over India's neighboring countries.

Regarding Modi's role and perspective, Chaulia (2016) highlights the significance of Modi as a critical factor in shaping India's foreign policy. Having held essential positions in India, Modi has taken numerous actions to promote international cooperation and enhance India's image regionally and globally. Under his adept leadership, India is gradually moving towards becoming a global power. Ganguly et al. (2018) emphasize that India's foreign policy under Modi's tenure has made remarkable progress towards stability, peace, and prosperity in the region. With Modi's skilled leadership, India is poised to become a "diplomatic superpower". Additionally, numerous research works are on the bilateral relations between India and its neighboring countries, factors influencing these relationships, and overall neighborhood policies. These studies highlight the increasing presence of China, escalating tensions with Pakistan regarding the Kashmir issue, and activities supporting terrorism, all of which pose threats to India's national security and regional peace.

METHODS

In terms of research methodology, this paper employs a range of research methods, including historical and logical methods, to examine different historical periods and chronological aspects simultaneously, along with specific social science methods like analysis, statistics, synthesis, and comparison to present data descriptions, statistics, and explore patterns within specific spatial and temporal contexts. In addition, this research uses popular methods in political science, especially for analysis of recent periods, such as content analysis, comparative analysis, and event analysis, to explain the foreign perspectives of India and its neighboring countries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Neighbourhood First Policy" of India before PM Modi

Since independence in 1947, India has pursued a regional policy based on the argument that the subcontinent, solely influenced by India and New Delhi, must strive to prevent the intervention of great powers in the affairs of the region (Mohan 2003). Neighbors are an important region for national security and a market that can contribute to India's economic development.

In the context of the bipolar world order during the Cold War, India chose the path of non-alignment based on its global role as the third-world leader. It built on the view of "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (Panchsheel), first signed on 28 April 1954, between Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, including respect for sovereignty and integrity, territorial integrity, no mutual aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality,

mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. The Panchsheel agreement was considered one of the significant bases for building foreign policy with neighboring countries that India pursued after independence (Khan 2017). However, Prime Minister Nehru is particularly interested in building and strengthening international cooperation, especially among developing countries. The Indian foreign policy during this period has focused more on international relations than neighborhood relations. Therefore, as a regional country, India has only limited activities concerning security interests and its preeminent position in the region (Harshe and Seethi 2005, 204). By the time Prime Minister Indira Gandhi held office, she had argued that India's neighboring region was the supreme exclusive zone of Indian domination, that the problems in the region must be resolved bilaterally, and that external powers should have no role in the region (Mohan 2003).

After the end of the Cold War, India was forced to make significant adjustments in its foreign policy in the face of international and regional changes and internal difficulties. During this time, the achievements have brought India step by step to occupy a significant role on the strategic chessboard in the region and the world. By the way, India increasingly appreciates neighboring countries, and neighboring countries need to have an essential and priority position in planning India's foreign policy, as stated by the former Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee: "Friends can be changed but not neighbors" (Vajpayee 2003).

Entering the 21st century, after a decade of economic reform and transformation, India has strong economic development. It has quickly established its power to affect its influence in the region and the world (Tien 2021). On that basis, India adjusted its foreign policy toward significant countries and some regions. For the South Asian region, India has set an orientation to cooperate with neighboring countries as well as the world powers based on the aim of suppressing the growth of deeply ingrained and violent extremism in this area.

Besides, with the enormous rise of the 21st century, China has also increasingly strengthened its role and position in South Asia, associated with deeply intervening and manipulating India's neighbors through its actions related to economic and military aid and many projects such as infrastructure development projects with Nepal, debt conversion to equity capital for Sri Lanka, investment in commercial ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, etc. (Jacob 2019). In addition, China, which is a significant factor in the conflict between India and Pakistan, considers itself an ally in all circumstances of Pakistan, leading to India's concern about losing its influence over neighboring countries to Beijing. As a result, it leads to favorable conditions for China, increasing its impact in the region (Mahesar et al. 2016).

A person who thought ahead about the close relationship with neighboring countries was former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, known for his Gujral doctrine, a policy orienting the relationship between India and its neighbors. What came to be known as the Gujral doctrine was a policy that sought friendship based on sovereign equality and non-interference, with "non-reciprocal magnanimity" towards smaller countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Dixit 2015). Former PM Dr. Manmohan Singh once said, "The real test of foreign policy is in the handling of neighbors" (Haran 2017). With the foundation of the Gujral doctrine, by the time of Prime Minister Modi, the "neighbors first policy" had become a top priority in India's foreign policy, with the desire to effectively contribute to the construction and architecture to establish a stable foundation of peace and cooperation in South Asia in particular and Asia in general as a responsible power country. Prime Minister Modi and his associates clearly understand that the above strategic goals depend entirely on

India's leadership and creating a long-term position in South Asia. India's thrust for strengthening its border infrastructure is a significant effort to boost national security and complement existing ones while enabling substantial prospects for cross-border economic development and security cooperation (Chatterjee and Sharma 2020).

The Fundaments of Modi's "Neighborhood First Policy"

After becoming the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi took new directions, showing distinct imprints in his policies. He has formulated his foreign policy doctrine (Modi doctrine) and introduced new pillars of India's foreign policy (*Panchamrit*), including five pillars: dignity, dialogue, shared prosperity, regional and global security, cultural and civilization linkages aimed at affirming India's position as a rising power in the world (Chaulia 2016; Sharma 2017; Ganguly et al. 2018).

In order to exert significant influence and play an essential role in multipolar world politics, India must build a close alignment between its domestic priorities and its foreign policy objectives. To accomplish that goal, Narendra Modi is pursuing vigorous regional diplomacy by engaging with neighboring countries and building political connectivity through dialogue (Das 2016, 23).

In the context of China leveraging its advantages to increase its presence and create significant influence in Asia, especially in South Asia, India has been trying to maintain, strengthen, and enhance its prestige and influence in the region. It takes measures to overcome barriers and deal with internal and external challenges. During the high-level discussion in the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, Prime Minister Modi said, "The destiny of a country is linked to its neighborhood. That is why my government has placed the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with neighbors" (Modi 2014). The statement argued that "neighbors are the number one priority", which is considered a bright spot in India's foreign policy.

In addition, the creation of a peaceful environment, stability, and economic integration in the region also contributes to helping India play an essential role in the new multipolar world politics by strengthening its dominant position in South Asia, preventing China's influence in the region, and expanding its sphere of influence beyond the Indian Ocean with the desire to achieve the status of great power on the main chessboard of international rule at the same time (Das 2016, 28-29). South Asia and the Indian Ocean are becoming two of the fiercest battlegrounds for India and China. Located in the center of South Asia, with a large geographical area, population, economic scale, and superior military power compared to other countries, India has always been a powerful country with strong influence in the region. However, over the past decade, China's intensifying partnerships with small South Asian countries have threatened India's number-one position. Based on China's challenges in South Asia and other countries, India must adjust its dominant foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, one of which is the policy with neighboring countries.

PM Modi's government's "neighborhood first policy" was accepted with four elements. First, New Delhi is willing to give political and diplomatic priority to its neighboring countries and island nations in the Indian Ocean. Second, India is supporting neighboring countries (if needed) in areas such as resources, equipment, and training. Third, the most critical issue is strengthening connectivity and integration to improve the free flow of goods, people, energy, capital, and information. The fourth is to promote a model of regionalism led by India and relevant to its neighbors (Pal 2018, 223).

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The contents overview shows the strategic goals in the Modi government's foreign policy; the top strategic goal is "prioritizing an integrated neighborhood - 'neighborhood first'" (Pal 2018, 223).

After the first term of implementing the new neighborly policy, "neighborhood first" (2014-2018), the relationship between India and its South Asian neighbors has undergone numerous positive changes, and the linkage sector has also been promoted. However, China's growing presence through the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has directly threatened India's strategic interests. India is particularly concerned about Beijing's deployment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to encroach on its territory and strengthen military infrastructure in Tibet to put pressure on India at the border or Bangladesh's attempt to forge closer ties with China, Pakistan, and Muslim countries as an opposing force to decrease the pressure and tension in New Delhi (Chakma 2009, 404). Realizing that the disconnection with neighboring countries is a big challenge for economic and security interests, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasized strengthening connectivity with neighboring countries in South Asia and expanding inter-regional broader vision, which is the priority of India's foreign policy during his second term.

Speaking on the importance of the Indo-Pacific region at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018, Prime Minister Modi emphasized India's new strategy: Connectivity is vital. It does more than enhance trade and prosperity. It unites a region. India has been at a crossroads for centuries. We understand the benefits of connectivity. There are many connectivity initiatives in the region. If these ideas become successful, we must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust" (Ministry of External Affairs 2018). In the process of building a new foreign policy for India, South Asia also continues to be a "priority", and in the official statement, the Modi government emphasizes that "neighborhood first policy" is about connectivity, commerce, and relationships (Xavier 2020). In addition, India's periphery approach also changed to realism when New Delhi decided to realign the priorities of the neighboring regions. India's prioritization of engagement with its neighbors in the context of the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China has traditionally been seen as its sphere of influence. Delhi is letting the US keep the pressure on China in its periphery to leverage the situation to further its strategic interests (Yhome 2019). This is an integral part of a new approach in India's policy towards its neighbors placed in a new strategic space - the Indo-Pacific.

The Implementation of the "Neighbourhood First Policy"

At the beginning of his first term, Modi made political and diplomatic priorities with neighboring countries due to a special invitation to the South Asian leaders to attend the swearing-in ceremony of his prime minister on May 26, 2014 (Bimstec Leaders 2019). This is seen as not only the first diplomatic activity of Modi's term but also a move to affirm the role and position of neighboring countries in India's foreign policy, marking the first run of the "neighborhood first policy". Besides, Modi's political and diplomatic priorities with neighboring countries were clearly shown when he continuously made trips to most South Asian countries after his inauguration. In 2014, Modi (2014) became the first Indian prime minister to visit Nepal in nearly 20 years. In 2015, Modi also became the first Indian prime minister to make a bilateral state visit to Sri Lanka in nearly 40 years (excluding the short visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1987).

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These diplomatic activities also clearly demonstrate the priority of the "neighborhood first policy" and India's leadership role in South Asia and reshaping international relations.

Bhutan is a country that has a special relationship with India, as there are no disputes between the two countries. As the patron country of Bhutan, which is obligated to protect the country's territorial sovereignty and is an essential strategy for India when the country is located on the Siliguri Corridor (also known as the Chicken's Neck), Modi chose Bhutan as the first destination in a series of his visits after the inauguration. India also offers many cooperation and preferential policies for Bhutan, affirming its commitment to cooperative partnership and agreeing to promote trade and investment relations further. India has provided ₹4,500 crores to support the 12th Bhutan's Five-Year Plan. Next, India also set a budget of ₹2,802 crores to support this country in 2019-2020 (Bhattacherjee 2019).

For Sri Lanka, one of India's important strategic partners, the Modi government has taken many actions to improve and tighten the cold relationship with Sri Lanka under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. During his first term, Modi visited Sri Lanka in 2015 and 2017, marking a new turning point in bilateral relations and creating a balance in India-Sri Lanka– China relations. The two-day visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Nepal on 3-4 August 2014 has shown India's attempt to regain its influence in Nepal with the rise of China's presence as well as its increasing influence in Nepal after two decades without any visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Nepal.

As an island nation in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is strategically vital to India's regional policy. The two countries have signed agreements in defense, taxation, tourism, mosque conservation, and space research, with a particular interest in defense cooperation actions because the security and stability of this small island nation directly impact India's national interests. In addition, this is partly in response to China's security cooperation with countries in the Indian Ocean to increase influence in the region.

During Modi's tenure as Prime Minister, the importance of Bangladesh relations in India's foreign policy is shown through the government's policy and the points of view of policymakers and senior Indian officials (Quader 2019). Bangladesh is a strategic partner and a significant investment source for India, with many projects in electricity, railways, roads, transportation, healthcare, etc., especially in defense. India announced a credit limit of $4.5 billion and an additional $500 million to purchase Bangladeshi defense hardware. Bangladesh is currently at the forefront of India's counter-terrorism strategy (Kashyap 2017).

Nowadays, India has to face security threats from Pakistan due to numerous conflicts since 1947 regarding issues such as Jand K, water sharing, Sir Creek, etc. Pakistan-India relations are central to peace and stability in South Asia (Ijar 2017, 74). The relationship between the two countries became positive when Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's Prime Minister, attended Modi's inauguration as prime minister in May 2014. However, Kashmir or terrorist attacks have become barriers to bilateral relations. In its foreign relations with Pakistan, India regularly cancels dialogue meetings because of the terrorist activities considered by Pakistan against India. As a result, Pakistan does not have goodwill toward closing cross-border terrorism. In addition, India considers counter-terrorism to be at the heart of its policy, which has always prepared a solution to deal with terrorist activities. Precarious relations with Pakistan remain "a bottleneck", and India has always been focused on the "neighborhood first policy" due to China's raising of strategic Islamabad relations.

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In addition to focusing on developing relations with neighboring South Asian countries, India's government has taken financial measures to strengthen regional connectivity. To support Indian companies winning bids for strategic infrastructure projects in neighboring countries, Delhi announced a new Concessional Finance Scheme (CFS) in 2015, extended in 2018 (Ministry of Home Affairs 2018). This program actively supports India's entrance into neighboring South Asian markets and creates fundamental relations between India and these countries to develop the economy and trade. Moreover, India has also established the Border Area Development Programme (BAPD) and the National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL), thereby expanding the allocation of finance to develop critical infrastructure in border areas and strengthening incentives to promote cross-border economic ties (Ministry of Home Affairs 2019).

At the beginning of his second term, based on new adjustments, the Modi administration continued to accelerate connectivity with South Asian neighbors and expand to inter-regional neighbors through the strategic Indo-Pacific space. The Modi government will focus more on access and development with the countries in the Indian Ocean. India seeks deeper engagement and prioritizes the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). It seems to be a real bridge between coastal South and Southeast Asian economies, creating a change in India's neighboring policy to strengthen cooperation among these countries and support regional cooperation to address security issues in the context of globally growing terrorism.

Therefore, after being elected to the second term in May 2019, Modi continued his "neighborhood first policy" and set out appropriate strategies to draw away neighboring countries from China's influence while enhancing India's position in the region. Modi invited BIMSTEC leaders to his second term as prime minister. It shows that he has shifted his attention to its maritime neighbors because of the increasing presence of China through infrastructure investments for countries in the Belt and Road Initiative (Roy 2019).

The Maldives and Sri Lanka, India's neighbors, have an important geopolitical position on the arterial trade routes in the Indian Ocean. These are also considered influential areas for strategic competition between New Delhi and Beijing and a significant point in the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Maldives said that it fully supported the "Maritime Silk Road - 21st Century", part of China's strategy: "Belt and Road Initiative, and shifted its economic, developmental, and diplomatic dependence on China, and became a vital cog in China's Indian Ocean plans (Dilipraj and Pampacka 2019, 3). Sri Lanka is also getting closer to China's strategy. Therefore, Modi has chosen these two countries as the first destinations on his overseas trip after re-election. In the India-Maldives Joint Statement, the two countries also agreed to strengthen coordination in ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean region "through the coordination of air patrols and surveillance, information exchange, and capacity building at sea" (Yến 2019). The trip is defined as a confirmation of engagement with Sri Lanka after the terrorist attacks in April. Furthermore, the agreement among Sri Lanka, India, and Japan on constructing a deep-water port in Colombo is expected to counterweight the Chinese-administered Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka. In addition, the trip demonstrates the purpose of India's efforts to strengthen its position, expand military influence, and curb the deepening incursion of China's influence into the Indian Ocean's coastal regions.

Meanwhile, Bhutan is the only neighbor, along with India, that has rejected China's Belt and Road Initiative. In August 2019, Modi visited Bhutan to promote Indian infrastructure projects there. On his trip, Modi inaugurated the $624 million Mangdechhu power plant, which New Delhi funded

amid plans to purchase any of the facility's surplus electricity (Stratfor Worldview 2019a). India invests in infrastructure development projects in Bhutan to prevent Bhutan from participating in China's ambitious plans and keep the country away from Beijing's influence (Stratfor Worldview 2019b).

For Nepal, the construction and inauguration of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj pipeline, the first cross-border oil pipeline in South Asia, on 10 September 2019, is seen as a New Delhi effort to increase influence in this Himalayan country (Special Correspondent 2019), where China is also making significant inroads and helping India regain its positive image not only in Nepal but also in the whole South Asia region (Karki and Har 2020). The relationship between Bangladesh and India has also undergone some positive changes. During the visit to India by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in October 2019, the leaders signed seven treaties and three projects to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries (Modi 2019). In addition, India continues to support and cooperate with Bangladesh in many fields to benefit both sides and help the country get off the list of least developed countries.

Intending to connect with the region, India also focuses on infrastructure developments with neighboring countries. India has invested in constructing and expanding more than a dozen Integrated Testing Stations (ITPs) to facilitate the development of trade and traffic along its borders with Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. India has also signed and implemented agreements to construct inland transport routes with Nepal and Bangladesh. The number of rail connections with Bangladesh has increased from one to four routes in the stages of 2008 and 2020, and six routes are planned to be implemented in the coming period (India-Bangladesh 2019). According to a new shipping agreement, India and Bangladesh can exchange goods directly instead of connecting in Colombo or other distant seaports. In 2019, India and Nepal inaugurated the first cross-border oil pipeline in South Asia (Sharma 2019). After many years of delay, India has also provided the transportation procedure and convenient customs clearance for Nepalese goods through the country's eastern seaports. India has also aided Sri Lanka in upgrading the international airport at Jaffna, north of Sri Lanka, connecting by air with a direct flight from Sri Lanka to Southern India after more than four decades (Srinivasan 2021). In 2019, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs established an Indo-Pacific division to facilitate the development of various regional connectivity initiatives (Thakker 2019).

During the second term, the Modi administration abandoned the traditional "local" position in South Asia, with India as the sole power with interests in this region. Moreover, India switched to a new strategic approach, focusing on coordinating and promoting cooperation with powers outside the region, such as the United States, Japan, and even Russia, intending to neutralize the growing influence in the region. India has joined with Japan and the United States to form a tripartite infrastructure financing group to support infrastructure development in countries in the South Asian region. In a short time, India and Japan collaborated to build a new harbor in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to facilitate regional connectivity and external expansion (Chansoria 2018). Cooperating with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), India is implementing one of Asia's most significant multimodal connectivity projects along the East Coast and as part of the South Asia Subregion Economic Cooperation (SASEC). In Bangladesh, India is linked with Russia to develop nuclear power plants (Zakharov 2019, 26-27). Russia's presence in South Asia helps India promote regional connectivity and strengthens the strategic relationship between the two countries, which have many similarities in foreign policy.

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However, the two countries are still far apart on some international issues related to the conflicts between India and China (O'Donnell and Papa 2021).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, India was also severely affected. However, the Modi government remains committed to implementing the country's "neighborhood first policy" by extending support to neighboring countries. For two years, 2019-2020, India has implemented the "Aid to Nepal" program to help the country develop its economy. India is running more than 150 development projects in Nepal, accounting for 30% of the country's foreign direct investment (Mirza 2021). In 2020, India provided US$15 million to neighboring Sri Lanka to promote many projects to strengthen the two countries' ties, focusing on developing Buddhist values. By early 2021, India had spent $3 billion supporting 400 development projects in neighboring Afghanistan (IANS 2021). Mainly, India has actively supported Pakistan's request to buy an Indian-made Covid-19 vaccine. As a result, New Delhi's vaccine diplomacy campaign has received effective praise from the receiving governments (Chand 2021). However, at the beginning of 2021, besides the difficulties of the Covid-19 epidemic, India faced a series of troubles from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka (Kugelman 2021). Nonetheless, India is still making efforts with neighboring countries to avoid the outbreak of significant crises.

The Challenges for the "Neighborhood First Policy"

Entering the second term, Prime Minister Modi's administration continues to implement the "neighborhood first policy" and considers it a top priority in the country's foreign policy. Deploying comprehensive cooperation with countries in South Asia and an inter-regional vision in the context of the Indo-Pacific will help India gain a higher position through connectivity through the process of regional integration and inter-regional association with the arterial land and maritime routes in South Asia with East Asia and the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the Modi government has shifted cooperation with neighboring countries on the South Asian continent to extending the countries in BIMSTEC during the second term. In his statement at the online meeting with the participation of all BIMSTEC members in April 2021, "Dr. Jaishankar reiterated India's commitment to further building the momentum of regional cooperation under the BIMSTEC framework and making the organization stronger, vibrant, more effective, and result-oriented" (MEA 2021), while initiatives under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC, including Pakistan) have not made progress for several reasons. In general, implementing India's "neighborhood first policy" has achieved some positive results, promoting the connection between India and its neighbors in South Asia. However, in the new international context, PM Modi's administration will face more external and internal challenges.

The increase in China's influence through aid to developing South Asian countries is considered the biggest challenge for Prime Minister Modi's administration in implementing the "neighborhood first policy". India and China are still pursuing competitive strategies to reduce each other's regional influence. While Beijing is increasingly leaving political and economic footprints across India's sphere of influence, which makes these countries (except Bhutan) support and participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, India's refusal to participate in the BRI initiative may create conditions for neighboring countries to increasingly lean towards China, leading to its increasing influence in the region.

As a result, India needs to quickly push for proactive improvement and development in existing relations with neighboring countries. In particular, improving relations with Pakistan is considered an essential factor, as this country still relies on China and the US to find economic and military support for the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Therefore, India cannot get the desired results for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region.

For PM Modi's administration, many challenges in formulating and implementing a "neighborhood first policy" and beyond as a strategy of inter-regional connectivity with the nuclear need to be solved by the Indian government. In the next stage, PM Modi's government must focus on investing in specific areas and projects to enhance its comparative advantage over China. Specifically, India invests more in connectivity aspects, including capacity building for neighboring countries, to reduce India's protracted involvement in investment projects. It will help improve the efficiency of catalytic projects that create long-term interdependence and harmony between India and its neighbors. In addition, the strategic connectivity between India and its neighboring countries will also require economic openness and all investments in cross-border infrastructure. Some ports, roads, railways, and airports will be rendered useless if India cannot remove the barriers to trade and other existing transportation means, which significantly impedes cooperation and connectivity between India and its neighbors. In particular, India's connectivity strategy must be more extensive and more substantive towards building a robust regional integration process rather than being overly focused on security goals to prevent China's BRI. India must focus and prepare more for the commitment and work better and faster on sustainable connectivity initiatives with neighboring countries in the region.

Finally, implementing India's regional connectivity strategy must also be considered in light of neighboring countries' political, economic, and cultural sensitivities. In particular, India should avoid focusing too much on cultural factors as a common point to link the countries in the region. In fact, "India's neighbors find it difficult to endorse proposals that may suggest a re-creation of past unity" (Khosla 2014, 109). Therefore, the implementation of the "neighborhood first policy" during PM Modi's second term aimed at developing regional connectivity to assert its role as a critical player in the region, but this desire is not always shared in other neighboring countries, which are worried about relying on India by connecting outside the region, especially with China. In addition, India needs to avoid conflicts with neighboring countries, even small-scale ones, as they may weaken the "neighborhood first policy". It may lead to opportunities for China and Pakistan to strengthen their influence and diplomacy in India's backyard. Moreover, with the continuous conflicts with neighboring countries such as China and Pakistan, New Delhi could lose the critical task of playing a more prominent role in the world.

CONCLUSION

Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, India is actively pursuing a "neighborhood first policy" to foster more meaningful and deeper engagement with neighboring countries. This endeavor seeks to restore India's prestige, image, and influence in the region. However, successfully fulfilling these objectives and maintaining India's relationships with its neighbors will necessitate overcoming challenges posed by domestic and regional pressures.

India can leverage its soft power, explore alternative regional arrangements, and pursue new avenues for economic development to build trust and strengthen ties with its neighbors.

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Prioritizing bilateral relations and facilitating their development through diplomatic initiatives, including high-level visits focused on building trust, will be critical to the success of the "neighborhood first policy".

Additionally, regional connectivity initiatives, such as infrastructure cooperation and promoting economic linkages, should emphasize establishing common interests among the countries in the region. This approach will contribute to the overall development and prosperity of the region.

PM Modi's administration can establish a more robust and mutually beneficial neighborly policy that benefits the entire region by prioritizing bilateral relations, facilitating diplomatic activities, and emphasizing regional connectivity, particularly in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

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