



Keeping Neighbourhood in Sight

This editorial is based on [“Don’t Lose Sight Of The Neighbourhood”](#) which was published in Hindustan Times on 24/04/2022. It talks about India’s relations with its immediate neighbours and the scope of improving it.

For Prelims: Neighbourhood First’ policy, India’s bilateral relations with immediate neighbours, Indian Ocean, BIMSTEC, SAARC

For Mains: ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy and challenges, Significance of India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy Vision, The Indian Subcontinent, India’s bilateral relations with its immediate neighbours

[“Neighbourhood First”](#) has been a cardinal component of [India’s foreign policy](#). Unless India manages its periphery well in the subcontinent, its pursuit of a more significant role in the Asian region and the world will remain suboptimal.

Recurrent **political or economic crises in neighbouring countries** draw India back into the subcontinent and constrain its ability to deal with larger regional and global issues. Moreover, **adversaries like China seek to keep India tethered in the subcontinent.**

Amid the recent global as well as internal political and economical shifts within the neighbouring countries, India has a **fresh opportunity to energise its Neighbourhood First policy**. It must grab it with both hands.

What is the Indian Subcontinent?

- The Indian subcontinent is a single geopolitical unit with strong economic complementarities among its constituent parts.
- It is a **shared cultural space with deep and abiding affinities** among the people of the countries located in the subcontinent because of a **long and shared history**.
 - It includes the countries of **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.**
- However, despite this overarching unity, the subcontinent is divided into several independent and sovereign States, each with its challenges and aspirations.

How India is a Significant Player in this Region?

- **Proximity** is a significant asset, enabling **low-cost and timely flow of goods**, services, and people across borders.
- The asymmetry of **economic and technological power** which India enjoys is an asset in transforming the economy of the entire sub-region.

- India is the **biggest transit country for the subcontinent** and has land borders with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh and maritime borders with Sri Lanka and the Maldives.
- India has also extended a helping hand to Sri Lanka and Nepal facing severe economic setbacks.
 - The [\\$400-million currency swap facility extended to Sri Lanka](#) has been renewed.
 - [During the recent visit to India by Nepal's PM](#), a number of **economic assistance programmes have been revived** and some **new ones have been announced**.
- [India's relations with the Maldives and Bhutan](#) are also in a **positive territory**, but must not be taken for granted. They need to be nurtured on a continuing basis.

What could be the Roadblocks in Securing an Friendly Subcontinent?

- **External Influence:** It is quite predictable for the smaller neighbour countries to be **wary of being dominated by a more powerful India** and consequently seeking to **balance India's influence** through closer relations with external powers. In the past, such an external power was the US and [now it is China](#).
 - Over the past few years, China's actions and policies all through South Asia and also in India's maritime neighbourhood, including in the [Indian Ocean island countries](#), have raised the need to give **deep consideration to India's approach to its neighbours**.
- **India's Bilateral Issues with:**
 - **Bangladesh:** The **domestic political rhetoric in India about illegal Bangladeshi migrants** and their alleged **involvement in communal riots** has had a negative resonance in the country and cast a shadow on our relations.
 - It is essential to ensure that the compulsions of domestic politics do not affect India's foreign policy adversely.
 - **Pakistan:** With Pakistan too, India has historical **adversity dating back to Independence and Partition** and also the four wars that the former lost.
 - Even more critical to the restoration of normalcy in bilateral ties is **terrorism**.
 - **Nepal:** In the Indo-Nepal ties, the [Kalapani boundary dispute](#) is a major issue.
 - In 2019, Nepal released a new political map claiming Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh of Uttarakhand and the area of Susta (West Champaran district, Bihar) as part of Nepal's territory.
 - **Sri Lanka:** [Killing of Indian fishermen](#) by the Sri Lankan Navy is a lingering issue between these two nations.
 - In 2019 and 2020, a total of 284 [Indian fishermen were arrested](#) and a total of 53 Indian boats were confiscated by the Sri Lankan authorities.
- The recent **political instability in Pakistan**, the [economic crisis in Sri Lanka](#), the **'India Out' campaign in Maldives** and [China's growing footprint in Nepal](#) are other major challenges for India.

How can India be a Significant Player in this Region?

- **A Revised Foreign & Security Policy:** Being the largest and most powerful country in the subcontinent, India's **security perimeter goes beyond its national borders**, a strong Indian foreign and security policy must **ascertain that its neighbourhood remains peaceful**, stable, and benign, and **no hostile presence** can entrench itself anywhere in the subcontinent and threaten India's security.
 - The challenge for Indian foreign policy lies in **creating effective and enduring incentives for our neighbours** to remain sensitive to India's security interests and use India's more powerful economy to become an engine of growth for them.
 - India shall **emerge for its neighbours as a net security provider** for the region.
- **Lesser Interventions:** To deal with the increasing engagement of the smaller neighbours with external partners **India should not clearly articulate red lines** with each country as it would openly invite charges of disrespect of the sovereignty of neighbours.
 - A better way would be to **intervene less** in the internal political affairs of its neighbours and subtly make it known that what **India will never accept is the physical presence of a hostile foreign power** in a manner that would adversely impact its security especially in a case of open borders.
- **Taking Advantage of Political Shifts:** There are significant shifts taking place in the neighbourhood. There is a **leadership change in Pakistan**, which offers the **prospect of**

reviving the [India-Pakistan engagement](#).

- The objectives should be modest, these include the **resumption of bilateral dialogue** in a format similar to the earlier comprehensive dialogue template.
- It is in **India's interest to promote regional economic integration**, and **SAARC** is the one important available platform for that purpose.
- **BIMSTEC** should **not be looked upon as an alternative to SAARC** but should pursue it on its own merits.

How can India Utilise its Strengths to the Fullest?

- **Cross-Border Connectivity:** To bring into use its proximity with the other countries, India requires efficient cross-border connectivity **both in terms of infrastructure and procedures** to allow the smooth and **seamless transit of goods and peoples**.
- **Opening More to Trade:** The economic and technological power of India is a vast and expanding market.
 - Even if this market were **opened up fully to whatever our neighbours can produce and sell**, this would constitute only a small fraction of India's market but would mean a great deal for them.
- **Transportation:** Given its much more developed land and maritime transport system, **India should develop its role as the partner of choice for trade and transportation**.
 - This will also **create strong inter-dependencies** with our neighbours, thus creating more sensitivity among them to our security concerns.

Drishti Mains Question

"India's linkages with the neighbourhood are civilisational, which are unique and non-replicable. With patience and perseverance, it can reap the dividends of cultural, economic and physical proximity".
Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Q. Consider the following pairs: (2016)

| | Community sometimes mentioned in the news | In the affairs of |
|----|---|-------------------|
| 1. | Kurd | Bangladesh |
| 2. | Madhesi | Nepal |
| 3. | Rohingya | Myanmar |

Which of the pairs given above is/are correctly matched?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 3 only

Ans: (c)

Q. Elephant Pass, sometimes seen in the news, is mentioned in the context of the affairs of which one of the following? (2009)

- (a) Bangladesh
- (b) India
- (c) Nepal
- (d) Sri Lanka

Ans: (d)

Q. Consider the following statements: (2020)

1. The value of Indo-Sri Lanka trade has consistently increased in the last decade.
2. "Textile and textile articles" constitute an important item of trade between India and Bangladesh.
3. In the last five years, Nepal has been the largest trading partner of India in South Asia.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

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