



From Crisis to Cooperation: India's Role in South Asia

This editorial is based on “[With Bangladesh in turmoil, why India should exercise caution](#)” which was published in The Indian Express on 06/08/2024. The article highlights the need for India to navigate the shifting political landscape in Bangladesh with sensitivity, balancing support for democratic processes while safeguarding its strategic and economic interests.

For Prelims: [India-Bangladesh, 2021 military coup in Myanmar, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Hambantota Port](#) , [Radcliffe Line](#), [Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020](#), [Teesta River agreement](#), [Belt and Road Initiative](#), [Katchatheevu island issue](#), [Doklam issue](#), [Rohingya refugee](#), [Act-East Policy](#), [India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway](#).

For Mains: Issues in India's Neighbourhood, Measures that India can Adopt to Enhance its Relations with Neighboring Countries.

The evolving [geopolitical landscape in South Asia](#) underscores the need for India to adapt its approach towards its neighboring countries with prudence and pragmatism. The recent upheaval in [Bangladesh](#), resulting in the resignation of Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Army's interim governance, highlights the **volatility of regional politics** and the imperative for India to support the democratic aspirations of its neighbors while maintaining strategic relationships. The parallels with **Nepal's 2006 movement for multi-party democracy** remind us that India's diplomatic stance should align with the popular will, fostering stability and positive engagement.

As regional dynamics continue to evolve, India's commitment to fostering peace, stability, and development in its neighborhood will not only secure its **own strategic interests** but also contribute to the broader **goal of regional harmony and prosperity**.

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Why India's Neighbourhood is Facing Continuous Political and Economic Turmoil?

- **Military Interference in Civilian Governance:** Many countries in South Asia have a history of military coups and interventions, undermining democratic institutions.
 - **Pakistan has experienced direct military rule** for nearly half its existence since independence.
 - The [2021 military coup in Myanmar](#), where the military (Tatmadaw) seized power, detaining civilian leaders sparked widespread civil unrest.
 - In Bangladesh, the military has intervened multiple times, most notably in **2007-2008**.
 - These interventions often **lead to political instability, human rights violations, and economic disruptions**.
- **Economic Vulnerabilities and External Dependencies:** Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 is a stark example, with external debt reaching all time high.
 - Bangladesh's dependence on the garment industry which accounts for **80% of its exports**, makes it vulnerable to global garment demand fluctuations.
 - The Maldives' tourism sector contributes about **28% to its GDP**, exposing it to external shocks like the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), which caused its economy to contract.
 - Pakistan's external debt stood at **USD 130.6 billion by the end of 2022**, with China

holding about **30% of it**, creating potential for economic leverage.

- **Geopolitical Competitions and External Influences:** China's investments in Pakistan's infrastructure through the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#) have significantly increased Beijing's influence.
 - In Sri Lanka, the **handover of Hambantota Port to China** on a 99-year lease due to debt issues exemplifies how economic dependencies can translate into strategic concessions.
 - Nepal's balancing act between India and China is evident in infrastructure projects like the **Pokhara International Airport, built with Chinese assistance.**
- **Climate Change and Environmental Challenges:** The [Maldives](#), with **80% of its land less than 1 meter above sea level**, faces an existential threat from rising sea levels.
 - Bangladesh, according to the World Bank, could have **13.3 million internal climate migrants** by 2050.
 - In 2022, Pakistan experienced catastrophic floods affecting millions of people and causing high economic loss.
 - Nepal's glaciers are retreating at rates of **10 to 60 meters per year**, threatening water security for millions.
- **Legacy of Colonial Structures and Fragile Institutions:** The [Radcliffe Line](#), hastily drawn in **1947**, created numerous border disputes, including the ongoing India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir.
 - Bangladesh's creation in 1971 further exemplifies the instability of colonial borders.
 - According to the [Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020](#), most South Asian countries fall into "**flawed democracy**" or "**hybrid regime**" categories, highlighting political instability rooted in fragile institutions.
- **Demographic Pressures and Socio-Economic Disparities:** India's neighborhood has a significant youth population.
 - In Pakistan, **approximately 64% of the population is under 30**, creating significant pressure to generate jobs and prevent them from being drawn towards extremist ideologies.
 - Youth unemployment rates are high: **20.5% in Nepal (2022), 24.74% in Sri Lanka.**

What are the Current Major Challenges that India Faces in its Neighborhood?

- **Pakistan:** The India-Pakistan relationship remains strained, with continued tensions over **Kashmir and cross-border terrorism.**
 - Recent developments include **Pakistan's economic crisis**, political instability and ongoing negotiations with the IMF.
 - The country's growing closeness to **China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor** poses strategic challenges for India.
 - The recent terrorist attacks in the [Reasi district of Jammu](#), allegedly sponsored by Pakistan, have exacerbated the issue.
- **Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is experiencing significant political upheaval with the current Prime Minister's resignation **amid protests.**
 - This change could potentially affect the **positive trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations** developed over the past decade.
 - Key issues include managing shared water resources, particularly the [Teesta River agreement](#), addressing **illegal migration**, and maintaining economic cooperation.
 - Concerns about illegal migration, **particularly from Bangladesh, have long been raised by Indian states such as Assam.**
 - In August 2024, a regional party expressed concern about an increase in immigration due to unrest in Bangladesh and unfenced stretches of the border.
 - There are apprehensions that the influx of illegal migrants could reduce the Assamese people to a minority in their own state, similar to what happened in Tripura and Sikkim.
 - The potential military rule in Bangladesh could exacerbate these issues, including **increasing migration pressures and minority concerns.**
- **Nepal:** Nepal's political landscape remains complex, with **frequent changes in government affecting policy consistency.**
 - The country's **growing economic ties with China**, including through the [Belt and Road Initiative](#), are a concern for India.

- Border disputes, particularly the **Kalapani issue**, continue to be a source of tension.
- However, cultural and people-to-people ties remain strong, and there's potential for enhanced cooperation in hydropower and infrastructure development.
- **Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka is slowly recovering from its severe economic crisis, with India playing a crucial role in **providing economic assistance** and India was the first country to hand-over its letter of support for financing and debt restructuring of Sri Lanka to the [International Monetary Fund](#).
 - The [Katchatheevu island issue](#) and ill treatment of Tamil minorities and the implementation of the **13th Amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution** continue to be important issues in bilateral relations.
- **Maldives:** The recent election of Pro-China President has led to a shift in Maldives' foreign policy, with calls for reducing Indian military presence in the country highlighted by the **Indian-out Campaign**.
 - This presents a **challenge to India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region**.
- **Myanmar:** The **military coup in Myanmar** and subsequent civil unrest have created complex challenges for India.
 - The [Rohingya refugee influx](#) into India's northeastern states and the potential for increased Chinese influence in a destabilized Myanmar are significant concerns.
 - While India has strategic and economic interests in Myanmar, including **countering insurgency in its Northeast** and implementing connectivity projects through its [Act-East Policy](#), it must balance these with concerns over human rights and democracy.
- **Bhutan:** While India-Bhutan relations remain strong, **Bhutan's efforts to diversify its foreign relations** and reduce economic dependence on India present new dynamics.
 - The unresolved [Doklam issue involving Bhutan, India, and China](#) remains a strategic concern.
 - India continues to be Bhutan's principal development partner, but there's a need to update the relationship to reflect Bhutan's evolving aspirations.
- **Afghanistan:** The **return of the Taliban** to power has reshaped the geopolitical landscape, but India has managed to maintain cordial relations through humanitarian assistance and hosting the Afghanistan cricket team.
 - However, India's significant investments in Afghanistan's development remain at risk as its strategic influence has waned.

How has India Remained Resilient Despite History of Neighboring Political and Economic Turmoil?

- **Robust Constitutional Framework and Institutional Strength:** India's democracy is anchored in its **comprehensive Constitution**, which has withstood numerous challenges since 1950.
 - The Constitution's basic structure doctrine, established in the landmark [Kesavananda Bharati case \(1973\)](#), safeguards the essence of the constitution.
 - India's independent judiciary, exemplified by **crucial interventions like the 2G spectrum case verdict (2012) canceling 122 telecom licenses**, acts as a strong check on executive power.
 - Additionally, the **separation of power** among the executive, legislature, and judiciary ensures a balanced and accountable governance structure.
 - The [Election Commission of India](#) has consistently **conducted free and fair elections**, managing the world's largest democratic exercise.
 - These institutions, despite occasional controversies, have shown resilience in upholding democratic norms.
- **Vibrant Civil Society and Free Press:** India boasts a dynamic civil society and media landscape that actively participates in democratic discourse.
 - The [Right to Information Act \(2005\)](#) has empowered citizens to demand accountability, with over 4800 RTI applications being filed every day.
 - Civil society movements have significantly influenced policy, as seen in the **Jan Lokpal movement** leading to anti-corruption legislation.
 - India's press faces challenges of political biases but remains largely free and diverse, with over 100,000 registered publications.
 - The digital revolution has further democratized information access, with India having over **759 million internet users as of 2022**.

- **India's Apolitical Armed Forces and Civilian Control:** India's armed forces have consistently maintained their **apolitical stance**, respecting civilian authority since independence.
 - Unlike some neighboring countries, **India has never experienced a military coup.**
 - The principle of **civilian control is deeply ingrained**, with the [President as Supreme Commander](#) and policy decisions made by elected representatives.
 - The **armed forces' focus on national security rather than political power is evident** in their crucial role during natural disasters, such as the **2013 Uttarakhand floods** rescue operations and current rescue operations in Wayanad, reinforcing their commitment to serving the nation under civilian leadership.
- **Federal Structure and Decentralization:** India's federal system allows for power distribution and regional autonomy, crucial for managing a diverse nation.
 - The [73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments \(1992\)](#) strengthened local governance.
 - The [Goods and Services Tax \(GST\) implementation](#) in 2017, despite initial challenges, showcased cooperative federalism.
 - India's federal structure allows for special provisions to accommodate unique regional needs.
 - **Article 371** of the Constitution provides special status to several Northeastern states, respecting their distinct cultural identities.
 - The [reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019](#), while controversial, was carried out through constitutional means.
 - The creation of new states like **Telangana (2014)** in response to regional demands showcases the system's flexibility.
 - States' autonomy in various sectors allows for policy experimentation and localized governance, as seen in **Kerala's successful Covid-19 response or Gujarat's economic policies.**
- **Political Alternation and Multiparty System:** India's democracy has demonstrated the **peaceful transfer of power multiple times**, a key indicator of democratic health.
 - The **2014 election** resulted in a shift in leadership, while the **2024 elections** saw a robust democratic exercise with **no single party securing a clear majority.**
- **Economic Liberalization and Middle Class Growth:** India's economic reforms since **1991 have contributed to democratic stability** by fostering a growing middle class and reducing poverty.
 - The middle class, estimated to be about **350 million strong, acts as a stabilizing force in democracy.**
- **Managing Divergent Interests and Separatist Tendencies:** India's democracy draws strength from its cultural diversity, with the **Constitution recognizing 22 official languages** and numerous affirmative action policies.
 - The reservation system, despite controversies, has increased representation of marginalized communities.
 - India has shown remarkable ability to address regional aspirations and separatist movements within its democratic framework.
 - Examples include the **2015 Naga Peace Accord** and the tripartite agreement with **Tripura's NLFT in 2019.**
 - India's approach of **negotiation and political integration**, rather than solely military solutions, has been crucial in maintaining unity amid diversity.

What Measures can India take to Enhance Relations with its Neighbors?

- **Connectivity Catalyst-Bridging Borders, Building Bonds:** India should accelerate its connectivity initiatives like the [Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal \(BBIN\) Motor Vehicles Agreement](#) and the [India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway](#).
 - India could establish **more Integrated Check Posts (ICPs)** along its borders, similar to the successful **ICPs with Nepal and Bangladesh.**
 - Additionally, expanding digital connectivity through projects like the **South Asian Satellite** can foster regional integration.
 - These initiatives would position **India as a facilitator of regional prosperity**, countering

the **narrative of it being a regional hegemon.**

- **Economic Empowerment- From Aid to Trade:** India should transition from an **aid-centric approach to a trade and investment-focused strategy.**
 - Implementing a **Neighborhood First Economic Zone** with preferential trade terms could stimulate regional economic integration.
 - Establishing joint economic zones, like the **successful India-Bangladesh border haats**, across other borders would boost local economies.
 - This approach would **create mutual economic dependencies**, reducing the appeal of adversarial policies among neighbors.
- **Cultural Confluence-Soft Power Surge:** Leveraging its rich cultural heritage, India should expand initiatives like the **Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)** scholarships and establish more Indian cultural centers in neighboring countries.
 - Promoting **cross-border tourism through initiatives like the Buddhist Circuit** can enhance people-to-people connections.
 - India could also increase its **capacity to host students from neighboring countries in its premier institutions.**
 - Bollywood and India's other regional cinema could be strategically promoted to foster cultural understanding.
- **Disaster Diplomacy-United in Adversity:** Given the region's vulnerability to natural disasters, India should take the lead in establishing a **South Asian Disaster Response Force.**
 - This could involve shared early warning systems and coordinated response mechanisms.
 - India's **expertise in space technology** could be utilized to develop a regional satellite-based disaster management system.
 - This approach would **position India as a responsible regional leader**, fostering goodwill through practical assistance in times of crisis.
- **Multilateral Mediation-Revitalizing Regional Forums:** India should work towards **reinvigorating SAARC** focusing on non-controversial areas like **climate change, public health, and education** to build consensus.
 - Encouraging **Track II diplomacy and think tank collaborations** can help in resolving contentious issues.
 - By championing **multilateralism**, India can **dispel fears of its dominance** and create a more cooperative regional environment.
- **Green Diplomacy- Eco-Allies:** With climate change posing an existential threat to many countries in the region, India should spearhead a **South Asian Green Alliance.**
 - This could involve sharing clean technologies, joint research on climate-resilient agriculture, and **coordinated positions in global climate negotiations.**
 - India could offer its neighbors preferential access to its **emerging green hydrogen and solar technology sectors.**
 - This green diplomacy would position India as a **responsible stakeholder in regional ecological security.**
- **Sports Solidarity-Uniting Through Athletic Endeavors:** India could take the lead in reviving and expanding the **South Asian Games**, potentially including more sports and cultural events.
 - Establishing a **South Asian Sports Development Fund** could help improve sports infrastructure across the region.
 - India could offer its **world-class training facilities and coaches to athletes from neighboring countries.**
 - Organizing **more bilateral and multilateral cricket series**, given the sport's popularity in the region, could foster people-to-people connections.
 - This sports diplomacy would create positive engagement opportunities and showcase **India's soft power.**

Drishti Mains Question:

Examine the challenges and opportunities faced by India in managing its relationships with neighboring countries considering their recent political and economic turmoil. How can India effectively balance its strategic interests with the need for regional stability and cooperation?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims:

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)

Mains:

Q. "China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia". In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbour. **(2017)**

Q. Critically examine the compulsions which prompted India to play a decisive role in the emergence of Bangladesh. **(2013)**

Q. Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of the Indian government to improve relationships with its neighbors. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss. **(2015)**

Q. What is meant by Gujral doctrine? Does it have any relevance today? Discuss. **(2013)**

Q. "The diverse nature of India as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society is not immune to the impact of radicalism which is seen in her neighborhood." Discuss along with strategies to be adopted to counter this environment. **(2014)**

