

## **Indian Foreign Policy in South Asia: Challenges and Consequences**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper aims to analyze the challenges faced by India in formulating and implementing its foreign policy in the South Asian region and to assess the consequences of these challenges on regional dynamics. The paper delves into the historical context, the evolution of Indian foreign policy, and the contemporary issues that shape its engagement with South Asian neighbors. By examining diplomatic, economic, and security challenges, this paper provides insights into the complex nature of India's relationships in the region and the potential ramifications for regional stability.

### **Introduction**

The development of India's foreign policy has been happening since the pre-independence era. This development has mainly taken place in three phases namely pre-independence period, post-independence period and post-cold war period. It is necessary to know this period. After 1991, there has been a change in the nature and objectives of Indian foreign policy. India is no longer confined to South Asia. India is now trying to exert its influence on the politics of the Asian continent and the entire international community. Therefore, the objectives of Indian foreign policy, the determinants of foreign policy and its nature have all changed. The current government is giving more and more emphasis on foreign policy and try to increase its friendly relationship with neighbouring countries that is south asian region. Indian diplomacy is using foreign policy as a tool to meet India's economic development needs.

### **Geo-Political Identity of South Asian Nations**

South Asia consists of eight countries namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Geographically, South Asia is a contiguous landmass lying north of the equator. The northern boundary of South Asia is formed by the Himalayan mountain range and the Indian Ocean on all three sides to the south. The region falls under the temperate climate zone and has developed its rainfall and climate, soil texture, forest, trees and flowers, crop varieties and agricultural characteristics etc. And because of this, the living conditions and lifestyle of the people of South Asia have also been affected. Socially, life in South Asia gave birth to many races, castes, religions and sects, languages, forms of dress, customs and traditions. Hence, South Asia has many types of diversity. But even this diversity is a strong thread of mixed cultural unity and a holistic and spiritual vision of life that binds the region together and unity in diversity becomes a common thread that characterises this region. This cultural trait and holistic outlook on life has emerged from thousands of years of ideological exchange, brainstorming and creative experimentation. Along with this, the countries of this region are economically interconnected and their economies have complemented each other due to geographical proximity. The countries of South Asia have endured wars, foreign invasions and colonialism in history and have also experienced intense struggle against them. After independence, all South Asian countries, including India, were suffering from almost the same economic, social and political problems. Globally, these countries are considered as third world developing countries. South Asian countries have always been neglected in the power struggle of

the rich and powerful countries of the world. Due to the similarity of the problems, the countries of this region were looking for an inclusive forum through which mutual exchange and mutual problems could be resolved. In this regard, the establishment of SAARC in 1985 gave these countries such a platform. Along with SAARC, these countries have started efforts to achieve development and regional security along with national security through other means. As the biggest brother in South Asia, India has continuously tried to frame its foreign policy in terms of regional peace, development and security. But in these ways and means of development and security, especially a country like India is facing many obstacles.

### **Emphasis on South Asia**

The current Indian government seems to have given a major focus of its foreign policy to South Asia. There are two reasons for this. One is that both India's economic development and India's security are closely related to its neighbours. Therefore, ignoring these neighbouring countries will not work. China has taken advantage of their neglect so far and has tried to encircle India by providing massive financial aid to these nations. So now this government has emphasised on increasing relations with these countries. Another reason is that India also needs new markets. Also, India has a great need for energy to achieve economic development. Neighbouring countries of India can be useful in fulfilling this need. Therefore, if the way of connectivity in South Asia is paved, India's economic needs will also be fulfilled along with its energy needs. With that in mind, the new government seems to have prioritised South Asia in its foreign policy.

Indian foreign policy in South Asia has been shaped by various geopolitical, historical, and strategic considerations. The region is crucial for India's security, economic interests, and regional influence. However, there are several challenges that India faces in its foreign policy in South Asia, and these challenges have consequences for the country's diplomatic efforts and regional dynamics.

### **Challenges Before Indian Foreign Policy in South Asia**

There are some major challenges Before Indian Foreign Policy in South Asia as follows :

#### **Historical Legacy Among the Countries**

India's historical legacy, including the partition in 1947, has left a complex and sometimes contentious relationship with the Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan. Historical issues, such as border disputes and conflicts, can hinder diplomatic initiatives.

#### **Political Instability**

Some South Asian nations like Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives face internal political instability, which can impact regional stability. India's foreign policy needs to navigate through these challenges while promoting democratic values.

#### **Economic Disparities**

Economic disparities among South Asian nations can create tensions. While India is the largest economy in the region, there are significant economic gaps among neighbouring countries. Bridging these gaps and fostering inclusive economic growth can be challenging.

#### **Terrorism**

Persistent issues of cross-border terrorism, particularly emanating from Pakistan, have strained India's relations with its neighbors. Managing security concerns while fostering regional cooperation is a delicate balancing act.

### **River Sharing and Resources**

Water scarcity and disputes over shared rivers are recurring issues in South Asia. Managing water resources and resolving disputes require diplomatic finesse and cooperation.

### **China's Challenge in South Asia**

China's strategic presence in South Asia has been increased. China's growing influence in South Asia is a major foreign policy challenge before India. China's economic health is increasing day by day. Through economic factor which includes investing in infrastructure projects, promoting trade and commerce and establishing some development partnerships with India's South Asian neighbours. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) passes through South Asia and all countries except India and Bhutan have consented to participate in the project. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have the potential to alter regional dynamics and pose challenges to India's traditional influence. Through the strategic factor, which includes developing defence and strategic ties China created its influence with South Asian countries. China's strategic relationship with Pakistan is well known. It has also entered Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh. Some strategically very important China's projects in South Asia are Gwadar port and CPEC in Pakistan, lease ownership of Hambantota port and development of Colombo port city in Sri Lanka, Trans-Himalayan Multi Modal Connectivity Network between Tibet and Kathmandu in Nepal, Maitri Bridge in Maldives.

### **Consequences**

The above discussed some major challenges that India faces in its foreign policy in South Asia, and these challenges have consequences for the country's diplomatic efforts and regional dynamics. some major consequences as follows :

### **Isolation or Cooperation**

India's ability to navigate regional challenges will determine whether it faces isolation or can foster cooperation. Effective diplomacy can lead to regional stability and economic collaboration among nations in the region.

### **Security Concerns**

Failure to address security challenges could have severe consequences, including potential conflicts or escalation of tensions. A stable South Asian Nations politics is very much important for India's internal external security.

### **Economic Development**

Proper managing relations with neighbouring countries in the region can open up economic opportunities, including trade and investment. A harmonious regional environment can contribute to India's economic development.

### **India's Role in World Politics**

India's approach in South Asia influences its role and image in world politics. A positive role in regional affairs enhances India's credibility and influence in the world politics.

### **Regional Integration**

India's foreign policy choices impact regional integration efforts. Initiatives like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) rely on India's leadership and cooperation for success.

### **India' Strategic move in South Asia**

India's internal security and economic development are linked to peace and stability in neighbouring countries and their economic development. China began to expand its influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. If we want to reduce the intervention of foreign powers especially China and America in South Asia, it is necessary to improve relations with neighbouring countries. India's South Asia policy currently prioritises connectivity at the collective level. There is more emphasis on how South Asian countries will be interconnected by road, rail and air. The main objective behind it is to increase trade. Although India and Bangladesh share a border of 4,000 km., most of their trade takes place via waterways as roads are underdeveloped, while emphasis is being placed on 'power connectivity' to address the power shortage and imbalance between the South Asian nations. Even though Nepal has the highest hydropower generation capacity in South Asia, Nepal has to buy electricity from India. India's priority in policy making with South Asian countries at the bilateral level is to reduce the trust deficit. Apart from providing financial assistance, India is focusing on solving the pending political issues. India has shown readiness to invest billions of dollars in hydropower generation in Nepal and Bhutan. India is also providing similar assistance to Bangladesh. Infrastructure development in Sri Lanka such as railway development in Jaffna, construction of fifty thousand houses has been undertaken. Sri Lanka is India's largest trading partner in South Asia. There is a big problem of trade deficit. Due to higher exports from India, the problem of trade deficit has arisen which India is now trying to reduce by increasing imports. India's two main objectives are to reduce the growing influence of China in Sri Lanka and the political consequences of Sri Lankan Tamil minority. India's close historical and cultural ties with its neighbours, India should strengthen development partnerships, people-to-people contacts and connectivity with South Asian countries under its Neighbours First Policy. India still has a strategic advantage over China in the Indian Ocean. India needs to strengthen its naval presence and partnership with neighbouring countries. Since economic resources are China's main advantage in South Asia, India can approach the alliance of nations like Japan, US, South Korea, France to meet the development investment needs of South Asian countries. South Asia is the least integrated region in the world, with South Asia's intra-regional trade accounting is very less. India should therefore try to strengthen regional cooperation efforts through BIMSTEC and other new mechanisms. Some countries in the region blaming that the India is interfering in their domestic politics. India should stay away from domestic political issues and focus on developing relations with governments in region. The important objective of India's South Asia policy is to improve the credibility and status of the SAARC. SAARC has failed to achieve its objectives and goals. Decisions taken by SAARC are not implemented due to political differences among member countries. Intra-organisational trade is very less. Therefore, the member countries of the SAARC are striving for the membership of other trade unions in the world.

India's foreign policy in South Asia is a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and strategic factors. Navigating these challenges effectively is crucial for promoting regional stability, economic growth, and enhancing India's role in the world politics. The consequences of India's actions in South Asia extend beyond the immediate region and have implications for the broader international community.

**Conclusion :**

The above analysis aims to contribute to the understanding of the challenges faced by India in managing its foreign policy in South Asia and the potential consequences for the region. By examining historical developments, current challenges, and future prospects, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis that can inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in the field of international relations and regional studies.

As a responsible country in South Asia, India has continuously tried to frame its foreign policy in terms of regional peace, development and security to protect it from external interference. But in this process of mutual development and security, India is facing many obstacles. Along with its sovereignty, India has made efforts to maintain the sovereignty of the regional countries intact. In South Asia, China's growing influence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the recent India out agenda by political parties in the Maldives, are seen as limiting China's influence over India. Today, India faces a huge challenge of neutralising China's influence from South Asia and managing its regional interests.

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