



Continuity and Change in Narendra Modi's Neighbourhood Policy: From Normative Regionalism to Strategic Pragmatism

Bisakha Baidya

B.Ed. Faculty, Uluberia Collegeia

University of Calcutta

Abstract

India's neighbourhood has historically constituted the core of its foreign policy imagination, shaped by geography, civilizational linkages, and security imperatives. From Jawaharlal Nehru's idealistic emphasis on peaceful coexistence to Manmohan Singh's cooperative engagement, India's regional diplomacy was largely driven by normative regionalism rooted in moral leadership and restraint. The coming to power of Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a significant reorientation through the articulation of the "Neighbourhood First Policy," which foregrounded security, connectivity, and strategic competition, particularly in response to China's growing influence in South Asia. This article examines the nature of continuity and change in India's neighbourhood policy by tracing its evolution from the post-independence period to the Modi era. It argues that while normative elements such as regional cooperation and people-to-people diplomacy continue to persist, Modi's approach reflects a shift toward strategic pragmatism characterized by interest-based diplomacy, assertive security postures, and geopolitical calculations. Drawing upon Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and the concept of strategic pragmatism, the study employs qualitative discourse analysis of official statements and existing scholarly literature. The findings suggest that Modi's neighbourhood policy represents neither a radical rupture nor simple continuity but rather a recalibration shaped by contemporary geopolitical realities. The article concludes that the success of India's regional leadership will depend on its ability to balance strategic interests with inclusive and cooperative regional engagement.

Keywords: Neighbourhood First Policy, continuity and change, strategic pragmatism, Indian foreign policy, normative regionalism, South Asia

1. Introduction

India's neighbourhood has always occupied a central position in its foreign policy discourse due to historical ties, shared borders, and enduring security concerns. The subcontinent's colonial legacy and post-colonial state formation processes created a regional environment marked by asymmetries of power and persistent mistrust. Consequently, India's engagement with its neighbours has reflected a tension between normative aspirations for cooperation and pragmatic concerns for security and influence.

In the immediate post-independence period, India under Jawaharlal Nehru articulated a vision of South Asia grounded in principles of peaceful coexistence, non-alignment, and moral leadership. This approach, often described as normative regionalism, sought to transcend power politics by emphasizing diplomacy, restraint, and multilateral cooperation. Over time, however, regional conflicts, domestic political changes in neighbouring states, and shifting global power structures compelled India to adopt more pragmatic strategies. The liberalization of India's economy in the early 1990s further reinforced a shift towards engagement driven by economic and strategic interests.

The election of Narendra Modi in 2014 represented a critical juncture in Indian foreign policy. Modi's government explicitly prioritized the region through the formulation of the "Neighbourhood First Policy," signalling renewed attention to South Asia. This policy emphasized connectivity, infrastructure development, counter-terrorism cooperation, and strategic partnerships. Symbolic gestures such as inviting leaders of South Asian countries to Modi's swearing-in ceremony underscored the importance accorded to regional diplomacy. Yet, this renewed focus was accompanied by a more assertive posture, particularly in response to security challenges and China's expanding presence in the region.

Scholarly debates remain divided on whether Modi's neighbourhood policy constitutes a fundamental departure from earlier traditions or a continuation with modified instruments. Some scholars argue that Modi has abandoned Nehruvian idealism in favour of a realist, interest-based strategy. Others contend that normative principles of cooperation and regional stability continue to inform India's approach, albeit within a changed geopolitical context.

This article seeks to address this debate by examining the continuity and change in India's neighbourhood policy from independence to the Modi era. It asks four central research questions:

1. What elements of continuity characterize India's neighbourhood policy across different leadership periods?
2. In what ways does Modi's policy signify a shift from normative regionalism to strategic pragmatism?
3. What geopolitical factors have driven this transformation?
4. What are the implications of this shift for India's role as a regional leader?

The central argument advanced here is that Modi's neighbourhood policy represents a hybrid model combining normative commitments with strategic pragmatism. Rather than a complete break from the past, it reflects an adaptive recalibration shaped by evolving regional and global dynamics.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the **continuity and change framework** in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) to examine the evolution of India's neighbourhood policy. Continuity refers to enduring principles, objectives, and norms that persist across different political regimes, while change denotes shifts in priorities, instruments, and strategic orientations. This framework is particularly useful for analysing long-term foreign policy trajectories in states where historical legacies exert a strong influence on contemporary policy choices.

To explain the nature of change in the Modi era, the article employs the concept of **strategic pragmatism**. Strategic pragmatism emphasizes flexibility, interest-based decision-making, and outcome-oriented diplomacy. Unlike ideological or normative approaches, it prioritizes national security, economic benefits, and geopolitical advantage. In the Indian context, strategic pragmatism manifests in the emphasis on counter-terrorism, infrastructure diplomacy, and strategic partnerships.

In contrast, **normative regionalism** refers to a policy orientation grounded in moral leadership, peaceful coexistence, and multilateral cooperation. Nehruvian foreign policy epitomized this approach through principles such as Panchsheel and non-alignment. Normative regionalism sought to create a stable and cooperative regional order through persuasion rather than coercion.

Additionally, Joseph Nye's concept of **soft power** provides an analytical lens to understand India's use of culture, values, and diplomacy in its regional engagement. Soft power complements both normative and pragmatic strategies by shaping perceptions and building legitimacy.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this article seeks to explain how Modi's neighbourhood policy combines elements of continuity and change, blending normative aspirations with pragmatic strategic considerations.

3. Literature Review

The literature on India's neighbourhood policy can be broadly categorized into three strands: normative approaches, pragmatic and realist analyses, and contemporary assessments of Modi's foreign policy.

3.1 Normative Foundations of India's Regional Policy

Early scholarship emphasizes the moral and ideological foundations of India's foreign policy. Nehru's vision of peaceful coexistence and non-alignment sought to position India as a leader of the post-colonial world. Scholars argue that India's regional policy was shaped by a desire to avoid domination and foster

cooperation among newly independent states. Panchsheel principles provided the normative basis for bilateral relations, emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference.

Rajiv Sikri (2017) highlights that India's early engagement with its neighbours was characterized by restraint and diplomatic persuasion. Even when conflicts arose, India attempted to maintain an image of a responsible regional power. This normative orientation persisted, albeit in modified form, during the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era.

3.2 Pragmatism and Strategic Reorientation

With the end of the Cold War and the onset of economic liberalization, scholars note a gradual shift towards pragmatism in India's foreign policy. Economic interdependence and regional trade became central objectives. Manmohan Singh's approach emphasized cooperation through economic integration and confidence-building measures, particularly with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

C. Raja Mohan (2015) argues that India's foreign policy increasingly reflected realist considerations, especially in response to China's rise and regional instability. Strategic partnerships and security cooperation became more prominent, marking a departure from earlier restraint.

Harsh V. Pant (2019) similarly notes that India's neighbourhood policy began to balance normative goals with security imperatives. He suggests that India's growing capabilities and aspirations necessitated a more assertive regional role.

3.3 Modi's Neighbourhood Policy

The literature on Modi's foreign policy highlights both continuity and transformation. Scholars recognize the symbolic and substantive importance of the Neighbourhood First Policy. Modi's outreach to regional leaders and emphasis on development partnerships signal continuity with cooperative traditions. However, his assertive stance on security and willingness to employ coercive measures mark a significant shift.

Shashi Tharoor (2018) cautions that excessive assertiveness risks undermining India's soft power and moral leadership. He argues that regional trust is best built through inclusivity rather than strategic dominance. In contrast, Pant (2020) contends that strategic competition, particularly with China, necessitates a more pragmatic approach to neighbourhood diplomacy.

Despite these contributions, existing studies often focus on specific countries or descriptive accounts of policy initiatives. There remains a gap in systematic theoretical analyses that integrate continuity and change across historical periods while conceptualizing Modi's policy as a transition from normative regionalism to strategic pragmatism. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a comprehensive and theoretically informed assessment.

4. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative and analytical research design** to examine the continuity and change in India's neighbourhood policy from the post-independence period to the Modi era. The research is grounded in the **Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)** framework and the concept of **strategic pragmatism** to interpret shifts in policy orientation and diplomatic practice.

A **descriptive–analytical and comparative approach** is adopted by analysing three phases of India's neighbourhood policy: the Nehruvian and Cold War period, the post-Cold War and Manmohan Singh era, and the Modi period (2014–2024). Data are drawn primarily from secondary sources, including official documents of the Ministry of External Affairs, policy statements, and speeches, as well as scholarly works by Rajiv Sikri, C. Raja Mohan, Harsh V. Pant, and Shashi Tharoor.

The study applies **comparative analysis**, **discourse analysis**, and **theoretical interpretation** to identify patterns of continuity and transformation. While the research relies on documentary and secondary sources rather than fieldwork, it provides a systematic and theoretically informed assessment of India's evolving neighbourhood policy.

This study employs a **qualitative and analytical research design** to examine the continuity and change in India's neighbourhood policy from the post-independence period to the Modi era. The research is grounded in the **Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)** framework and the concept of **strategic pragmatism** to interpret shifts in policy orientation and diplomatic practice.

A **descriptive–analytical and comparative approach** is adopted by analysing three phases of India's neighbourhood policy: the Nehruvian and Cold War period, the post-Cold War and Manmohan Singh era, and the Modi period (2014–2024). Data are drawn primarily from secondary sources, including official documents of the Ministry of External Affairs, policy statements, and speeches, as well as scholarly works by Rajiv Sikri, C. Raja Mohan, Harsh V. Pant, and Shashi Tharoor.

The study applies **comparative analysis**, **discourse analysis**, and **theoretical interpretation** to identify patterns of continuity and transformation. While the research relies on documentary and secondary sources rather than fieldwork, it provides a systematic and theoretically informed assessment of India's evolving neighbourhood policy.

5. Normative Regionalism in India's Neighbourhood Policy (Nehru to Manmohan Singh)

India's early neighbourhood policy was deeply shaped by the intellectual and moral vision of Jawaharlal Nehru. As the first Prime Minister of independent India, Nehru sought to construct a regional order based on principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-alignment. His foreign policy was rooted in the belief that newly independent states should avoid entanglement in great power rivalries and instead promote

cooperation through diplomacy and moral leadership. This orientation, often described as normative regionalism, aimed to transcend power politics in favour of ethical engagement.

The Panchsheel principles—mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—formed the normative foundation of India's relations with its neighbours. These principles were not merely rhetorical commitments but guided India's diplomatic conduct in South Asia. Nehru envisaged India as a benign regional leader that would encourage stability through persuasion rather than coercion.

However, normative regionalism was repeatedly tested by geopolitical realities. Conflicts with Pakistan over Kashmir and with China in 1962 exposed the limits of moral idealism. Yet, even in the aftermath of these conflicts, India continued to articulate its neighbourhood policy in normative terms. The emphasis remained on dialogue, multilateralism, and restraint. This duality between idealism and realism became a defining feature of India's regional diplomacy.

During the Cold War, India's neighbourhood policy evolved within the framework of non-alignment. While maintaining strategic autonomy, India sought to insulate South Asia from superpower rivalries. Regional initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, reflected this normative aspiration for regional cooperation. Although SAARC's effectiveness was limited, it symbolized India's commitment to multilateralism and collective development.

Rajiv Sikri (2017) observes that India's regional diplomacy during this period was characterized by caution and a preference for bilateral engagement over overt dominance. India's role was often perceived as that of a reluctant hegemon—possessing the capacity to shape regional outcomes but restrained by normative commitments and domestic political considerations.

The post-Cold War era and the economic liberalization of the early 1990s introduced new dynamics into India's neighbourhood policy. Economic integration and development cooperation emerged as central objectives. Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's "Look East Policy" complemented regional engagement by linking South Asia with Southeast Asia, thereby expanding India's strategic horizons. Nevertheless, the normative emphasis on peaceful coexistence and regional harmony remained intact.

Under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), India's neighbourhood policy reflected a blend of normative regionalism and economic pragmatism. Singh articulated a vision of South Asia as a shared economic space, emphasizing trade liberalization, cross-border connectivity, and confidence-building measures. His approach towards Pakistan prioritized dialogue and economic engagement, despite recurring crises. Similarly, improved relations with Bangladesh culminated in the resolution of long-standing border and maritime disputes.

Manmohan Singh's diplomacy exemplified what may be described as cooperative pragmatism. While economic interests gained prominence, they were pursued within a framework of mutual benefit and regional stability. India avoided overt coercion and continued to rely on diplomatic persuasion. This period thus represented continuity with Nehruvian normative regionalism, albeit adapted to a globalized context.

Despite these efforts, India's neighbourhood policy faced persistent challenges. Political instability in neighbouring countries, anti-India sentiment, and the growing influence of external powers, particularly China, complicated India's regional leadership. These challenges set the stage for a more assertive and strategically oriented policy under Narendra Modi.

6. Strategic Pragmatism under Narendra Modi

The advent of Narendra Modi's government in 2014 marked a visible reorientation in India's neighbourhood policy. While reaffirming the importance of regional cooperation, Modi introduced a more proactive and interest-driven approach encapsulated in the "Neighbourhood First Policy." This policy sought to prioritize immediate neighbours in diplomatic engagement while aligning regional diplomacy with broader strategic objectives.

One of the most striking features of Modi's approach was its symbolism. By inviting leaders of all South Asian countries to his swearing-in ceremony, Modi underscored the centrality of the neighbourhood in India's foreign policy. This gesture signalled both continuity with cooperative traditions and an intent to redefine regional leadership through personal diplomacy and political visibility.

However, beneath this symbolism lay a more pragmatic orientation. Modi's neighbourhood policy emphasized security, connectivity, and strategic partnerships. Counter-terrorism cooperation became a central pillar of regional engagement. India adopted a more assertive stance towards Pakistan, exemplified by the surgical strikes following terrorist attacks. This shift marked a departure from earlier restraint and reflected a willingness to employ coercive measures to protect national security.

Connectivity and infrastructure diplomacy emerged as key instruments of strategic pragmatism. India invested in cross-border transport networks, power grids, and development projects aimed at integrating neighbouring economies with India's growth trajectory. These initiatives were not merely developmental but strategic, designed to counter China's expanding influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. By offering alternative development partnerships, India sought to reinforce its position as the primary regional partner.

C. Raja Mohan (2015) characterizes Modi's diplomacy as a realist recalibration that prioritizes national interest and geopolitical competition. Unlike earlier periods, where moral leadership dominated discourse, Modi's approach explicitly linked regional engagement to India's global aspirations, including its role in the Indo-Pacific. The integration of neighbourhood policy with the Indo-Pacific vision reflects a broader strategic outlook that situates South Asia within a wider geopolitical framework.

Soft power also plays a role in Modi's strategic pragmatism, albeit in a more instrumental manner. Cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as the promotion of Buddhist heritage and civilizational narratives, are used to strengthen ties with neighbours while reinforcing India's image as a cultural leader. However, these initiatives are embedded within strategic objectives, linking identity with geopolitics.

The Neighbourhood First Policy also reflects a shift in the instruments of diplomacy. High-level visits, defence cooperation agreements, and regional security dialogues have become more frequent. India has sought to institutionalize partnerships through mechanisms such as BIMSTEC, which is increasingly viewed as an alternative to the stalled SAARC framework. This institutional realignment underscores India's preference for functional cooperation over normative multilateralism.

Despite its strategic orientation, Modi's policy retains elements of continuity. Development assistance, humanitarian aid, and people-to-people exchanges continue to feature prominently. India's response to natural disasters in neighbouring countries demonstrates a commitment to regional solidarity. Yet, these actions are framed within a discourse of national interest and strategic leadership rather than purely moral obligation.

The transformation of India's neighbourhood policy under Modi thus reflects a shift from normative regionalism to strategic pragmatism. This shift does not imply the abandonment of cooperative principles but rather their reinterpretation in light of contemporary challenges. Security imperatives, geopolitical competition, and India's rising status shape a more assertive and outcome-oriented regional diplomacy.

7. Continuity and Change: A Comparative Analysis

An examination of India's neighbourhood policy across different historical phases reveals a complex pattern of continuity and change rather than a simple rupture. While the normative foundations of regional cooperation remain visible, the instruments and priorities of policy have undergone significant transformation under the Modi government.

7.1 Elements of Continuity

Despite the shift in rhetoric and practice, several enduring features characterize India's neighbourhood policy. First, the commitment to regional stability and cooperation remains a central objective. From Nehru to Modi, India has consistently articulated the importance of peaceful relations with its neighbours as a prerequisite for domestic development and international stature.

Second, diplomacy continues to be the primary tool of engagement. Even in periods of heightened tension, India has relied on bilateral negotiations, confidence-building measures, and multilateral forums to manage regional relationships. The emphasis on people-to-people contact, cultural exchanges, and development assistance further reflects continuity with earlier approaches.

Third, India's aspiration to act as a responsible regional power has persisted. Successive governments have sought to project India as a provider of public goods, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and development cooperation. These practices echo Nehruvian ideals of moral leadership and reinforce India's regional legitimacy.

Fourth, economic cooperation remains an enduring pillar of neighbourhood policy. Trade liberalization, connectivity projects, and energy cooperation have featured prominently across different administrations. Although the scale and strategic intent of these initiatives have evolved, their underlying objective of regional integration demonstrates continuity.

7.2 Elements of Change

Alongside these continuities, the Modi era has introduced significant changes in the orientation and execution of neighbourhood policy. The most notable shift lies in the increased securitization of regional diplomacy. Security concerns, particularly terrorism and border management, have become dominant drivers of engagement. Unlike earlier periods characterized by restraint and dialogue, Modi's government has demonstrated a willingness to adopt coercive measures in response to perceived threats.

Another key change is the explicit integration of geopolitical competition into neighbourhood policy. Whereas earlier approaches sought to insulate South Asia from great power rivalries, Modi's policy acknowledges and responds to external influences, particularly China's growing presence. Infrastructure diplomacy and strategic partnerships are framed as tools to counterbalance external actors and safeguard India's regional interests.

The discourse of leadership has also undergone transformation. Earlier governments emphasized cooperation and equality, avoiding overt assertions of dominance. In contrast, Modi's rhetoric increasingly highlights India's role as a regional leader and security provider. This assertiveness reflects India's rising capabilities and ambitions but also risks reinforcing perceptions of hegemonic behaviour among smaller neighbours.

Institutional realignments further illustrate change. The relative decline of SAARC and the increasing prominence of BIMSTEC signify a shift from normative multilateralism to functional regionalism. India's preference for subregional and issue-based cooperation underscores a pragmatic approach focused on tangible outcomes rather than ideological commitments.

Finally, the personalization of diplomacy under Modi represents a departure from bureaucratic traditions. High-profile summits, leader-to-leader engagement, and symbolic gestures have become central to neighbourhood diplomacy. While this approach enhances visibility and momentum, it also introduces volatility, as relationships become closely tied to political personalities.

7.3 Synthesis: Hybrid Policy Orientation

The comparative analysis suggests that Modi's neighbourhood policy embodies a hybrid orientation that combines continuity with transformation. Normative commitments to cooperation and stability persist, but they are embedded within a framework of strategic pragmatism shaped by security imperatives and geopolitical competition. This synthesis reflects India's attempt to reconcile its historical identity as a moral leader with its contemporary aspirations as a rising power.

Rather than representing a complete departure from the past, Modi's policy can be understood as an adaptive recalibration. It retains the vocabulary of cooperation while redefining the means through which cooperation is pursued. In this sense, continuity and change coexist in a dynamic relationship, producing a distinct policy paradigm that blends idealism with realism.

8. Geopolitical Drivers of Transformation

The shift from normative regionalism to strategic pragmatism has been driven by a confluence of regional and global factors. Three interrelated drivers are particularly significant: China's expanding influence, persistent security challenges, and the reconfiguration of India's strategic environment through the Indo-Pacific framework.

8.1 China's Expanding Influence in South Asia

China's growing presence in South Asia constitutes the most important external driver of change in India's neighbourhood policy. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects across the region, including ports, highways, and energy facilities. These investments have altered the strategic landscape by increasing China's economic and political leverage over India's neighbours.

India perceives China's regional engagement not merely as economic cooperation but as a strategic challenge to its traditional influence. Consequently, India has responded by intensifying its own connectivity initiatives and offering alternative development partnerships. This competitive dynamic has transformed neighbourhood policy into an arena of strategic rivalry.

The China factor has also heightened India's security concerns, particularly regarding dual-use infrastructure projects that may have military implications. As a result, India's diplomacy increasingly incorporates strategic calculations aimed at countering China's presence and preserving regional balance.

8.2 Persistent Security Challenges

Security threats, especially terrorism and cross-border militancy, have long shaped India's regional outlook. However, under Modi, these concerns have acquired unprecedented salience. Terrorist attacks have reinforced the perception that traditional diplomatic restraint is insufficient to deter aggression. This has led to a more assertive posture, including punitive actions and heightened military preparedness.

The securitization of neighbourhood policy reflects a broader shift towards linking regional engagement with national security objectives. Defence cooperation agreements, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises with neighbouring countries have become central components of diplomacy. This emphasis marks a departure from earlier approaches that prioritized political dialogue and confidence-building over security mechanisms.

8.3 The Indo-Pacific Framework

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept has redefined India's foreign policy priorities. By situating South Asia within a wider maritime and geopolitical space, the Indo-Pacific framework connects neighbourhood policy with global strategic alignments. India's partnerships with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia have implications for its regional engagement, reinforcing the strategic dimension of diplomacy.

This global reorientation has encouraged India to view its neighbours not merely as partners in regional cooperation but as stakeholders in a broader strategic order. Consequently, neighbourhood policy has become intertwined with India's ambitions as a global actor, further reinforcing the shift towards strategic pragmatism.

8.4 Agency of Smaller Neighbours

An additional driver of transformation lies in the increasing agency of smaller South Asian states. Countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives have diversified their foreign relations, engaging with multiple external partners to maximize their autonomy. This multipolar diplomacy complicates India's traditional leadership role and necessitates a more competitive and pragmatic approach.

India's response to this evolving agency has been mixed. While seeking to strengthen bilateral ties, it has also adopted measures to assert influence, occasionally generating friction. This dynamic highlights the tension between India's strategic objectives and the autonomy of its neighbours.

9. Critical Evaluation: Achievements and Limitations

Narendra Modi's neighbourhood policy has produced mixed outcomes, reflecting both significant achievements and persistent challenges. While strategic pragmatism has enhanced India's regional assertiveness and visibility, it has also generated tensions and exposed structural constraints in India's regional leadership.

9.1 Achievements

One of the most notable successes of Modi's neighbourhood policy lies in India's improved relations with Bangladesh. The resolution of the long-standing Land Boundary Agreement and enhanced cooperation in connectivity, energy, and security demonstrate the effectiveness of pragmatic diplomacy. These achievements reflect continuity with earlier cooperative approaches but are distinguished by greater political will and strategic focus.

Infrastructure and connectivity initiatives constitute another important achievement. Cross-border transport networks, power-sharing arrangements, and development assistance projects have strengthened India's economic integration with neighbouring countries. These initiatives also serve strategic purposes by countering China's Belt and Road Initiative and reinforcing India's role as a regional development partner.

The emphasis on disaster diplomacy and humanitarian assistance further enhances India's regional image. India's prompt responses to natural disasters in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives illustrate its capacity to provide public goods and reinforce regional solidarity. Such actions contribute to India's soft power and legitimize its leadership role.

Modi's personal diplomacy has also increased the visibility of neighbourhood policy. Frequent high-level visits and symbolic gestures have injected momentum into regional relations and underscored the political importance of South Asia in India's foreign policy priorities.

9.2 Limitations

Despite these achievements, significant limitations persist. Relations with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have experienced periodic strains, often driven by domestic political changes and perceptions of Indian interference. These tensions reveal the enduring challenge of asymmetry in regional relations, where smaller states remain sensitive to India's influence.

The securitization of neighbourhood policy has also produced unintended consequences. While assertiveness may deter security threats, it risks undermining India's image as a benevolent regional leader. Shashi Tharoor cautions that excessive reliance on coercive diplomacy may erode trust and weaken India's moral authority in South Asia (Tharoor, 2018).

Another limitation concerns the erosion of normative multilateralism. The stagnation of SAARC and the preference for subregional forums such as BIMSTEC reflect pragmatic calculations but also diminish opportunities for inclusive regional cooperation. This shift may exacerbate divisions within South Asia and weaken collective problem-solving mechanisms.

Moreover, India's competition with China in the region places heavy demands on its resources and diplomatic capacity. Smaller neighbours increasingly pursue multi-alignment strategies, leveraging both India and China to maximize their autonomy. This dynamic constrains India's ability to shape regional outcomes unilaterally.

Finally, the personalization of diplomacy under Modi introduces volatility. While leader-centric engagement can accelerate decision-making, it also makes bilateral relations vulnerable to political fluctuations. Institutional continuity and bureaucratic processes remain essential for sustaining long-term regional cooperation.

10. Conclusion

This article has examined the continuity and change in India's neighbourhood policy by tracing its evolution from normative regionalism in the Nehruvian era to strategic pragmatism under Narendra Modi. It has argued that Modi's approach represents neither a complete rupture with the past nor simple continuity. Instead, it reflects a recalibration shaped by contemporary geopolitical realities, security imperatives, and India's aspirations as a rising power.

Normative commitments to cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and regional stability continue to inform India's regional diplomacy. However, these commitments are now embedded within a framework of strategic pragmatism that prioritizes national interest, security, and geopolitical competition. This hybrid orientation demonstrates India's attempt to reconcile its historical identity as a moral leader with its modern role as a strategic actor.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of Modi's neighbourhood policy depends on maintaining a balance between assertiveness and inclusivity. Strategic pragmatism may enhance India's capacity to respond to security challenges and external competition, but it must be complemented by normative leadership to sustain trust and legitimacy among neighbouring states.

Future research may explore country-specific case studies to assess how this hybrid policy operates in practice and how smaller states negotiate their agency within India's strategic framework. A sustainable neighbourhood policy will require India to integrate pragmatism with cooperation, ensuring that its regional engagement remains both effective and legitimate.

References

- Mohan, C. R. (2015). *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Pant, H. V. (2019). *India's National Security: Challenges and Responses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pant, H. V. (2020). India and China's strategic rivalry in South Asia. *International Affairs*, 96(2), 1–18.
- Pant, H. V., & Passi, R. (2017). India's neighbourhood policy under Modi. *International Affairs*, 93(1), 133–149.
- Sikri, R. (2017). *Strategic Conundrum: Reshaping India's Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Tharoor, S. (2018). *The Paradoxical Prime Minister: Narendra Modi and His India*. New Delhi: Aleph.
- Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). (2014–2024). *Annual Reports*. Government of India.
- Government of India. (2015). *Neighbourhood First Policy Documents and Speeches*. New Delhi: MEA.