



Evolution of 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' Since Independence

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Abstract

The 'Neighbourhood First Policy' is the anchor point of India's general foreign policy since independence in 1947. Subsequently, the Neighbourhood First Policy has evolved, was debilitated, and has been reformed under the various prime ministers of India. Based on preferences and perceptions about the South Asian neighbourhood, the Neighbourhood First Policy has been implemented differently. This article aims to analyse the Neighbourhood First Policy of India under four different prime ministers (Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Inder Kumar Gujral, and Narendra Modi). The article investigates the pretexts behind each premier's way of handling the Neighbourhood First Policy followed by an empirical analysis.

Keywords India's foreign policy · The Neighbourhood First Policy · Gujral Doctrine · South Asia · Modi

Introduction

Bhutan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan all share borders with India, and these states vary in strengths, resources, and sizes. The connection between India and the countries of South Asia is the focus of the Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP), which is also known as the South Asian Foreign Policy (SAFP). India's strategy towards its near neighbours is based on efforts to promote South Asian peace and cooperation. Its NFP approach prioritises countries on the periphery, with an emphasis on promoting trade, connectivity, and contact among people. It is critical for India to build long-term links between its domestic ambitions and its foreign policy objectives if it is to play a significant role in the growing politics of a multipolar world.

India's political and socioeconomic progress is highly dependent on the stable, safe, and peaceful environment of its neighbours (Das, 2016). 'No nation can become a genuine power in the world arena', according to Mohan (2007), unless it has long-term primacy in its own neighbourhood. According to Muni and Mohan (2004), 'India's ability to manage its

own neighbourhood will determine whether it achieves its goal of becoming one of Asia's major powers.' India considers its NFP as a main instrument of its foreign policy. At the same time, the policy has been criticised for being inconsistent and misinterpreted. Our aim is to investigate India's NFP from the point of view of four prime ministers of India.

First, we evaluate the approach of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru towards his neighbours. Nehru took a broad view of India's neighbours and placed them within a larger Asian context. Iran, Russia, and Central Asia were among India's strategic neighbours at that time. Due to its interest in Tibet and Xinjiang, China became India's new neighbour at the same time in 1950–1951. New Delhi had previously dealt and communicated with Tibet and Xinjiang as separate entities (Singh 2019). In this section, we explore how the NFP got trapped between Nehru's attempt to balance idealism and realism.

Second, we evaluate the approach of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi towards the neighbourhood. During the Indira Gandhi era, India's foreign policy was far more focused on regional issues in South Asia than it had been on the preceding two decades of independence. There are various pretexts on which Gandhi became assertive in regard to the handling of the Indian neighbourhood, which is briefly discussed in this review. It is difficult to separate her unique position and contribution from other elements, such as domestic political events and external relations and conditions, when discussing India and its neighbours.

Third, Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral attempted to redefine India's NFP by adding a 'big brother responsibility' flavour to it. The Gujral Doctrine is a set of five principles

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laid out by Gujral, who had served as India's foreign minister before becoming prime minister, to guide the conduct of India's diplomatic relations with its near neighbours. The Gujral Doctrine is credited for significantly altering the way India's bilateral interactions with its immediate neighbours, particularly the smaller ones, were conducted. The philosophy was also well received by the latter, who were enthusiastic about the concepts it outlined (Murthy, 1999).

Fourth, since 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to revive the NFP by first inviting all heads of state from South Asia to his oath-taking ceremony. Modi picked Thimphu as his first port of call 3 weeks after beginning his first term as the prime minister of India with a glittering swearing-in ceremony in New Delhi attended by the leaders of numerous South Asian countries (Bhaumik 2021). Kathmandu was his second overseas destination in the area, which he visited on August 3 and 4, 2014. Throughout the first term and in his second term, Modi supposedly anchored his foreign policy through the NFP. However, the scenario of bilateral relations of India with most of its neighbouring states and the current situation on regional integration tell us otherwise.

This is a qualitative study based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources. It applies discourse analysis and comparative analysis to these sources. Discourse analysis means analysing the speeches and decisions made by the prime ministers and the resulting transformations in how the NFP was construed. The study focusses on four prime ministers to delineate the following sequence. First, Nehru laid a foundation by being more region-centric and pragmatic in his last phases as the prime minister. On the basis of that, Indira Gandhi portrayed herself as an assertive realist in terms of her NFP. The Gujral Doctrine laid an optimistic and wise NFP, and based on that foundation, Modi has tried to revive the NFP since 2014.

Nehru's Approach to Neighbourhood: A Mixture of Ignorance and Optimism

India's NFP was shaped primarily during the British rule as a form of geopolitics, and it continued in the postcolonial era in the subcontinent. The British conceived the neighbourhood in terms of a 'diplomacy of dependency' (Mohan, 2013, p. 4). Wilson (1990 pp. 42) observed that the foundation of India's post-independent NFP started with a speech by the first prime minister of India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, specifically about Nepal. However, the speech regarding Nepal reveals India's overall intention regarding its small-state neighbours in South Asia. On 6 January 1950, Nehru said in the Indian Parliament: '... As much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened, because that would be a risk to our

own security' (Thapliyal 2012). After the speech about Nepal, Indian neighbourhood policy extended to the Himalayan group states (Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim) and later expanded to the second group of countries which included Pakistan, East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and Sri Lanka.

Singh (2020) argued that Nehru was successful in dealing with South Asian countries, and his major achievement was bringing Bhutan and Nepal into the domain of Indian security interests. For example, the 'Treaty of Friendship' with Bhutan was signed in 1949, and one year later (1950), the 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' with Nepal was signed. A similar kind of treaty was also signed with Sikkim in 1950. While China's expansion towards Tibet has posed security concerns in South Asia, the agreement with Nepal and Sikkim was specifically targeted to mitigate China's march towards India's neighbourhood. Based on the agreement, New Delhi got the right to deploy troops in Sikkim which reflected realism in Nehru's approach. Here, Nehru showed a strong realist tendency to manage the Himalayan state of South Asia, which was important for India's security perspective, but it also led to various criticisms (Mohan, 2013, p. 2). 1-2.; Singh, 2020, p. 11-12). As it was against Gandhian principles, this move was criticised by fellow party members of the Indian National Congress (INC).

Basically, Nehru considered the subcontinent as 'an exclusive sphere of influence for New Delhi'. He pragmatically tried to promote democracy in the Himalayan states in order to pursue India's security interests. Mitra (2020) defined the Nehruvian approach as 'a special relationship' with these Himalayan states, and Nehru's approach was centred on the ideas of democracy, motivated treaty, manipulation, and overwhelming diplomacy. All this pushed the Himalayan states strategically towards the buffer states. Nehru's increasing strategic closeness with the Himalayan states made the Chinese anxious about the intentions of India. As a result, the 1962 Sino-Indo war occurred which violated 1954's *Panchsheel* Agreement signed between India and China (Mitra, 2020, pp. 235-236). Although *Panchsheel* was an agreement signed between India and China, it remained India's leading foreign policy for the South Asian states. The principles of *Panchsheel* included (1) mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) mutual non-interference, (4) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence. The 1962 war with China exposed India's poor defence strategy and forced New Delhi to improve its defence. The war worked as an alarm for India's strategic thinking as the leaders realised that India cannot rely only on an idealistic mindset of a peaceful coexistence.

Dutt (1980) argued that Nehru's overall Himalayan and immediate neighbourhood policy was driven by a sentiment which Dutt described as a 'big brother approach toward little brothers'. Nehru instructed Vallabhbhai Patel (the then former deputy prime minister of India) to activate 'democratic forces' in Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim. The instruction

projected Nehru's intention to create an environment where states such as these three would show a willingness to join India or choose to remain in India's sphere of influence zone. This was carried out as a part of Nehru and Patel's attempts to accommodate many princely states in India after independence. This move cautioned Nepal, and Nepal made it clear that they would accept India as a defence partner bounded by the friendship treaty, but would not compromise their sovereignty. The concerns of Nepal turned out to be well founded later when the friendship treaty between India and Sikkim was terminated and Sikkim chose to be part of India (between 1974 and 1975) with a special status (Article 371F as per the Indian constitution). Nepal and Bhutan both got membership in the United Nations (UN) in 1955 and 1971 respectively. In addition to Bhutan and Nepal, other independent Himalayan states remained dependent in terms of trade and security which secured the fact that India remained a dominant actor in these states. India continues to provide development assistance to these Himalayan states to advance its geopolitical motives (Dutt, 1980, pp. 71-78).

Overall, Lal (2009) identified three assumptions in Nehruvian foreign policy: (1) After independence, New Delhi continued the British role and responsibility as a leader of the Indian subcontinent. The subcontinent lies between Iran and Indonesia, the Indian Ocean, and the Hindukush-Himalayas. (2) India was the main leader of the anticolonial struggles and wanted to create a buffer for the third-world countries and influence the balance between the first and second world. After World War II, the world was caught in the dilemma that ensued during the Cold War between two power rivals. Nehru became a torchbearer of the Non-Alignment Movement to balance peace and stability as well as security in the subcontinent along with other newly independent countries. (3) Nehru's idea was to collaborate with China to maintain the freedom of Asian states with superpower rivalry (Lal, 2009; Mitra, 2020, p. 237). In general, Nehru wanted a safe environment in the Indian subcontinent and a strong security link around the Indian territories to maintain India's new independence and mitigate internal as well as external challenges. There were external and internal defence challenges, and at the same time, India was engaged in the strong task of internal unification. Nehru's assumption that the Himalayan states would be easier in terms of maintaining security and close relations also turned out to be a challenging task.

For Nehru, Panchsheel remained the leading policy for dealing with India's neighbours (Sahoo, 2016, p. 70-71). But Nehru's idea of neighbours had a broader Asian framework with a geostrategic spectrum that included Iran, Russia, and Central Asia. Similarly, India projected its interest to maintain autonomous state-level relationships with Tibet and Xinjiang during 1950–1951. Muni (2003 pp. 187) argued that Nehru wanted to build an 'East Federation' of India along with the major Asian countries. This was an idea that sought a 'broader vision of unity and solidarity'. On this front, Muni also argued

that in the aspiration to build a broader role for India, Nehru had a 'tendency to take smaller neighbours for granted'. Nehru considered New Delhi's strategic interests primarily in terms of 'ensuring peace and stability in its neighbourhood'. On the contrary, Nehru's adversary Ram Manohar Lohia (leader of the Socialist Party of India) presented an 'idea of confederation with Pakistan and other neighbourhoods' (Chattopadhyay, 2011, p. 95) which was neglected by Nehru. According to Singh (2019), Nehru propagated the 'family approach' as a main anchoring idea of his NFP aiming to treat its neighbour as 'part of a one whole'. As a result, Nehru chose to micro-manage its neighbours, which in many instances turned out to be counterproductive. One among them was the fact that the Nehruvian NFP was mainly concentrated on security aspects rather than economic dimensions. The building of infrastructure and development projects had barely been part of Delhi's strategy towards its neighbours under his tenure.

Indira Gandhi and the Neighbourhood: A Phase of Regional Assertion

Indira Gandhi abandoned the 'family approach' of the Indian NFP. Gandhi took some decisive actions in India's neighbourhood. Two major successes were credited in her neighbourhood approach: (1) the inclusion of Sikkim (later merged with India in 1975) under the Indian protectorate and (2) the liberation and independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan (Singh, 2019). As forcefulness and decisiveness had never been a part of Nehru's leadership towards the neighbourhood, Indira showed a more assertive and realist approach in South Asia. Indira Gandhi's foreign policy was based on the famous 'Monroe Doctrine' to position India in its South Asian neighbourhood. Mohan (2003) explained Gandhi's belief in the 'Indian neighbourhood', where she believed it to be an exclusive zone of supremacy and dominance. She also wanted that 'no foreign power would be allowed to interfere' in the region. Mohan regarded India's Monroe doctrine as 'buttressed by the principle of bilateralism'. He called it the 'Indira Doctrine', and New Delhi believed that the problem of the South Asian region must be resolved bilaterally and there is no place for external players to interfere in those affairs. (Sahoo, 2016, p. 71).

Wariavwalla (1983 pp. 278-281) characterised the 'national security of Indira's India' as an era of 'high defence spending'. These were reflected in the mobilisation of India's security strength against any external enemy. Gandhi believed that India is surrounded by multiple security threats. Similarly, Wilson (1990) argued that Gandhi was more concerned about the 'greater challenges to New Delhi's geostrategy in the region'. Naming it 'India interest', Indira's policies to safeguard Indian benefit in the neighbourhood are often described as 'more than what Nehru did'. She forged the idea of South Asia as a 'troubled region' which then gave her an opportunity

to intervene in the regional matters. Her intervention in Sikkim and Bangladesh is the best example of protecting India's interests (Wilson, 1990, p. 43-51). Chattopadhyay (2011 pp. 96) regarded Indira Gandhi's NFP as 'a wide range of assertive and realistic Indian-centric orientation[s]' where she also included the dynamics of 'technological defence capacity' in India. It was a warning to neighbours that India will act aggressively in a hegemonic nature if New Delhi got a sense of threat to its unity and territorial integrity. (Dixit, 2001, p. 30).

Bhattarai and Pulami (2020, p.42) presented Indira Gandhi's NFP as an intention of 'keeping foreign powers away from any kind of conventional influence in the regional security framework'. Appadorai (1982) perceived Indira's neighbourhood approach as 'far from idealism, not guided by sentimentalism, and a mixture of very clear thinking and hard-headed decision making of the situation' (Das, 2016, p. 21). Biswas (2020, p. 1321) mentioned Indira Gandhi's policies were motivated by establishing a subcontinental hegemony to protect India from territorial hostilities. Likewise, Richter (1987) argued that 'Mrs. Gandhi's Neighbourhood policy was anchored by her personality and the style of functioning'. He also added that not only did Mrs. Gandhi reduce the size of Pakistan by forming a separate nation, Bangladesh (1971), but also her vision helped to form the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Although it has been argued that the establishment of SAARC was a 'small states gang-up against India', it nonetheless shows Indira's intention to unite the region as one. Richter defined Indira's NFP in three arguments: (a) regional relations took place within a well-established Indo-centric and India-dominant geopolitical context, (2) her personal style of reacting to internal and external threats with a massive force had a considerable impact on relations with neighbours, and (3) India's relations with other South Asian nations during this period depended greatly on the mixture of leadership and her personal attributes (Richter, 1987, p. 250).

During Indira Gandhi's prime ministership, Indo-Pakistan relations were hostile because of the tri-party struggle for the independence of Bangladesh. The recognition of Bangladesh became the responsibility of Mrs. Gandhi, which led to her visit to the US and European capitals to gain a vote of confidence—and she emerged victorious. In 1972, Gandhi and the Pakistani president settled their differences peacefully in Shimla, known as the 'Shimla Agreement'. During her tenure, the predominant position of India in the region was widely recognised, especially by the USA. Having dealt with domestic political issues, Gandhi was also criticised for her 'increasing authoritarian nature' domestically and in South Asia. During Gandhi's era, there was considerable political drama in the South Asian region. There was no place for a 'cultural cooperation'; rather, it was the game of geopolitical supremacy among these states. Richter said that the Indian authors used the term 'neighbour' and 'neighbourhood' to refer to its smaller neighbouring countries. In fact, Burma

(Myanmar) and China shared a long border with India, but both countries were 'frequently excluded' from the status of 'neighbourhood'. The inclusion of Afghanistan in India's neighbourhood was conditional based on political interest (Richter, 1987, p.; Behuria, Pattanaik & Gupta, 2012, p. 236).

We found that her domestic politics was based on a socialist structure, but her approach to the neighbours was assertively realist in nature. Most authors have analysed Mrs. Gandhi as a powerful lady, and it was reflected in India's neighbourhood policy. But it was Tharoor (1982 pp. 55) who manifested the personality of Mrs. Gandhi as one driven by insecurity and a 'desire to dominate or else she will be dominated'. Thus, she 'transformed the system to ensure her personal survival and dominance'. She made many controversial decisions to hold her power, for example, the 1975 emergency and military footsteps in the Golden Temple of Amritsar, Punjab. So, domestically, she faced major challenges and lost her power in the 1977 General Assembly election, which was the first occasion when a non-Congress party made the government. That was the phase where she faced criticism both domestically and externally. Unlike her father, her policy towards the neighbourhood was implemented mainly in a geopolitical arena. Her role in India's foreign policy can be summed up as an era of New Delhi's footprints dominating the region of South Asia.

The Gujral Doctrine: The Dream of Being a Responsible Big Brother

After Indira Gandhi's assertive neighbourhood engagement, a notable NFP was initiated under the Union minister of external affairs, Inder Kumar Gujral (who later became the prime minister of India from April 1997 to March 1998). The policy that he had initiated became famously known as the 'Gujral Doctrine'. The Gujral Doctrine is credited for significantly altering the way India's bilateral interactions with its immediate neighbours, particularly the smaller ones, were conducted. The doctrine is based on five principles that suggest how India should treat its neighbours. The five principles are (Murthy 1999):

- (a) India does not demand reciprocity from its neighbours Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, but instead gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust.
- (b) No country in South Asia should allow its territory to be used against the interests of another in the region.
- (c) No country should interfere in another's domestic affairs.
- (d) All countries in South Asia must respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of each other.
- (e) All of their disagreements must be resolved through peaceful bilateral dialogue.

India assumed a natural leadership role in the South Asian area due to its size, geography, and economic potential. On the other hand, the overbearing presence of India as a neighbour with aspirations for global leadership caused concerns among India's neighbours. Bhasin (2008) opined that India's presence in South Asia has become a dilemma better captured in the phrase 'Perceived Hegemony vs. Reluctant Leadership'.

Before the reorientation of India's NFP, some of the major developments in the region can be seen to have created a 'fear psychosis' among the small neighbouring states which essentially worked against India. For example, India was accused of exploiting the 1987 India-Sri Lanka agreement as a pretext to show its military might in the region. The agreement enables India to play a diplomatic role in ending the conflict in Sri Lanka between the Tamils and the Sinhalese (Mehta, 2009). Similarly, in November 1988, the Indian military responded to a request from the Maldives' de jure government by assisting in the suppression of an attempted coup on the island. The Maldives episode would not have drawn much attention if it had occurred alone, but the fact that it occurred less than a year after India's military intervention in Sri Lanka exacerbated negative impressions of India (Brewster 2014).

Gupta (1997) argued that for the first time in 50 years, the Gujral Doctrine had lowered tensions and conflicts between India and all its neighbours. In 1996–1997, the contract with Nepal to temper the Mahakali River to generate hydroelectricity practically coincided with the resolution of the water sharing conflict with Bangladesh in barely 3 months. It was followed by agreements with Sri Lanka to deepen developmental cooperation, as well as some unilateral moves by India to overcome the long-standing impasse in Indo-Pakistan relations. The Gujral Doctrine has been known for its action-orientated diplomatic thrusts. Chattopadhyay (2011) argued that the Gujral Doctrine stands out as a conflict resolution mechanism initiated by the Indian government in the South Asian region.

However, the Gujral Doctrine has been criticised for various reasons, although it managed to achieve results. Jain (1999) argued that India conveyed the incorrect signals to Pakistan by promoting such a concept, as the then-foreign minister Gujral did. In fact, Islamabad's leadership circles publicly accused India of isolating Pakistan because the Gujral concept did not need reciprocity from any other South Asian country except Pakistan. Additionally, in the region, the concept smacked of Indian hegemony. Ghosh (1997) agrees with Jain that although the Gujral Doctrine has been argued as a leading policy of conflict resolution in the region, it completely failed to resolve the issue with Pakistan. Jain also criticised the personification of such a doctrine. He argues that the doctrine gives the appearance that, like Eisenhower, Nixon, Kennedy, and Clinton, India is devoted to maintaining its global or superpower status, which is far from the case. Such ideas are untenable in a parliamentary democracy, as opposed to a presidential democracy. Even if this is true, the philosophy should be known as 'the

Gowda doctrine' (the prime minister when the Gujral Doctrine was formed) because in the Indian parliamentary form of government, it was the prime minister, not Mr. Gujral, who benefited from such a privilege.

The successor of Gujral, Atal Bihari Bajpayee, centred his campaign by criticising Gujral's idea of regional politics. The BJP-led federal government abandoned the Gujral ideology. Bajpayee stated that India's relations with its neighbours would be based on reciprocity. This obviously demonstrates that Prime Minister Bajpayee had reversed the Gujral theory, which was at best a political gimmick or an attempt to build Bajpayee's own image as a foreign policy pundit in India. Even after the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008, a piece written in *India Today* managed to connect it to how it was Gujral's fault. During his tenure, Gujral had shut down covert operations in Pakistan (Vinayak 2008).

Although A.B. Vajpayee's NFP begins with the rhetoric that 'We can change our friends but we cannot change our neighbours', his action remained out of focus due to the nuclear test in 1998. After 1998, India's foreign policy orientation shifted towards engaging western countries. Since 2014, Prime Minister Modi has tried to revive the NFP, and his attempts have been interpreted as a re-emergence of the 'Gujral Doctrine' with a Modi flavour.

Modi's Hide and Seek with the Neighbourhood

After the landslide victory of the right-wing 'Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)', Narendra Modi became India's prime minister in 2014. India's NFP under his government has been going through many ups and downs. Modi defied conventions by inviting the heads of state in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) members, a move largely regarded as a significant shift in India's foreign policy. The rationale behind India's neighbourhood strategy is that India cannot project its power outside of South Asia unless it can manage its relations with its neighbours, especially when all of these countries have asymmetric relationships with India due to its massive population, military, geography, and economy (Chand 2017). Following this rationale, Modi's government reintroduced the so-called NFP. Likewise, Modi also revised the 'Look East Policy' to an 'Act East Policy' that projected India's intentions to be more proactive in its East Asian Policy, as it is very vital to India's securitization of its northern states. On the other hand, NFP aims to 'strengthen regional forums like SAARC' and 'pursue cordial' in the neighbourhood. Given Modi's decision to invite all SAARC leaders to the organisation's inauguration on May 26, 2014, his first trip out of the country, to Bhutan, demonstrates his commitment to enhancing India's neighbourhood connections before focussing on the rest of the world (Aryal 2021).

Similarly, Panda (2014) argued that Modi, who ran on a platform of good governance and economic growth, would seek to improve India's economy by strengthening ties with its neighbours and, ideally, elevating India to the status of a regional leader within the SAARC's institutional structure. However, by 2022, the intentions Modi began with in 2014 of gathering all the heads of state from South Asia gave a dual impression. In retrospect, Dixit (2016) argued that it appears more like George V's *darbar* (court), with local power brokers gathered to applaud the emperor king. The Modi approach to the neighbourhood came under scrutiny and was declared to have failed to achieve the essence of the NFP. There are three major events which signify that Modi's NFP needs serious reform.

First, India has shown passive interest in the regional integration of South Asia. The SAARC is the only regional organisation that has all the South Asian states as members. The SAARC still lacks an effective platform for discussing and addressing terrorism-related issues in the region (Muzaffar, Jathol & Yaseen 2017). The number of cancelled meetings is another important aspect that adds to the slow pace of progress. Due to bilateral tensions, member state presidents have previously refused to attend the SAARC summit. For example, Pakistan was set to host the 19th SAARC Summit in 2016, but India declined due to Islamabad's role in the Uri incident. The grenade strikes carried out by four terrorists near the town of Uri in the Indian Union state of Jammu and Kashmir are known as the 'Uri attack'. The 'Uri attack' is considered as 'the bloodiest attack on security forces in Kashmir in two decades' (Aryal & Nair 2021). After this incident and India's increasing pessimism regarding SAARC, they have focused more on sub-regional groupings which intentionally exclude Pakistan and Afghanistan. India later advocated for sub-regional organisations such as BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), both of which exclude Pakistan (Gilani 2019).

Second, the bilateral relations of India with most of the South Asian states are facing challenges. The India-Pakistan relation debacle concerning Kashmir has existed since the partition after independence. After the contentious promulgation of the Indian constitution in 2015, India maintained an unofficial blockade in Nepal, causing relations to deteriorate. Modi stated during a visit to Nepal in 2015 that it was critical to protect the rights of the Madhesi minority people in the Terai region (Bhatnagar & Ahmed, 2021). This event triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises in Nepal. As a result, Nepal signed multiple agreements with China to decrease the asymmetric dependency towards India. Due to India's contradictory NFP, China's political participation in Nepal is growing day by day. After the map saga involving the disputed territory of western Nepal with India, relations are worsening. On May 8, 2020, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh opened the 80-km-long road to *Mansarobar*, some of which is being built on Nepalese soil in the Lipu Lekh area, reviving border tensions. In reaction to

Nepal's outspoken opposition to the road's unilateral construction, India's external ministry quickly declared that it was built 'totally within Indian territory' (Subedi & Timilsina, 2021). India's relations with Sri Lanka also have been impacted by turbulence under the Modi government. The Indian academic diaspora claims that Sri Lanka has been pressurised by China to act against India. The following examples are given to support this claim: the Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) project between India and Japan, the suspension of the Japan-funded Light Rail Project, and the potential of abandoning the Millennium Challenge Corporation Project (MCC) funded by the USA. In short, the programme implied that Sri Lanka was losing long-time allies and slipping more towards China's sphere of influence. However, this analysis completely missed the perspective on how India itself created such a space for China to infiltrate Sri Lanka. There is much evidence available that India has supported Tamil rebellion during the first days of civil war in Sri Lanka (Nieto 2008). Thus, the Indian government has always had a strained relationship with the Rajapaksa government of Sri Lanka. President Mahinda Rajapaksa claimed that he lost the 2015 presidential elections due to Indian and other foreign interventions (Fernando 2020).

Similarly, the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, enacted by the Modi government, has sparked severe tensions between India and Bangladesh; likewise, it opened the whole new range of discourses of immigration and its impact on Indian north-eastern states (Ray 2011). Reference to "Bangladeshis" in a statute that grants citizenship to non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who entered the country on or before December 31, 2014, has raised many concerns in Dhaka (Ahuja 2021). Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reacted to the CAA and stated: 'we don't understand why [the Indian government] did it. It [CAA] was not necessary' (Hindustan Times 2020). When Bangladesh and India had resolved a decades-old border dispute with a land swap agreement that began on July 31, 2015 (Hindustan Times 2015), it was expected that the relationship between them was moving towards mutual cooperation. However, the CAA has jeopardised the progress both sides had made. Likewise, in October 2021, Bhutan signed an agreement with China on a 'three-stage' roadmap to resolve the long-standing border dispute. In 2017, India and China entered a serious border conflict in the Doklam region. Doklam is part of Bhutan's territory, and Beijing and Thimphu have a territorial dispute over it and other areas. Bhutan's claims to this land are supported by India. It is located near India's strategically vulnerable 'chicken neck', a 12-mile-wide corridor that connects India's seven northern states to the mainland (Kumar 2020). And now, Bhutan signing a MoU without any consultation with India has created many speculations about the condition of the India-Bhutan relationship which traditionally was close and stable.

Third, India's relationship with the great powers under Modi has created a similar situation for smaller states of the region, as it was during the Cold War. Although India is a torchbearer of the 'non-alignment movement', India had close economic and defence cooperation with the Soviets during the Cold War, which had put tremendous pressure on small states of the region in terms of choosing a side. At the current time, India's closeness to the USA under the Modi government has also created a similar situation. When India asked the USA for help against Pakistan or China, it appeared that India undervalued its neighbours. At the same time, when India asks for help from the USA, no other superpower seems to step forward, even if they diplomatically support the Indian objectives. As a result, China has become an active participant not only in regional trade but also in the geopolitics of South Asia. Through the goodwill of China's economic and trade power, India has gradually but surely lost its dominance in South Asia to China, allowing China to become an active stakeholder not only in the economy but also in influencing geopolitics in the region—by 'Acting West' (i.e. looking to the USA for support) (Aswani, 2021).

Conclusion

In general, the evolution of India's NFP has gone through various phases. There are mainly three conclusions that we can draw based on the discussions above. First, the approach adopted by the Indian premierships has overlooked the expectation of the small states towards the big brother of the region. Nehru's idealistic perception of world politics has ignored the accommodation of the perspectives of smaller states. For example, Nehru has completely overlooked the impact his proximity towards the Soviets had on South Asian neighbours. Likewise, Indira's assertive approach towards the neighbourhood has certainly produced good results for India; however, it also has worked as a foundation for fear and anger towards India.

Second, inconsistency in NFP has been counterproductive in terms of India's relationship with its neighbours. For example, if we only see how Prime Minister Modi has shaped his NFP, we can see the inconsistency visibly: for example, his calling all the heads of state in his oath-taking ceremony but ignoring the SAARC completely. Visiting Nepal and Bhutan has failed to resolve bilateral tensions, especially with Nepal. Resolving a long-standing border dispute with Bangladesh but creating turbulence through CAA is another inconsistency. Similarly, on the other hand, India's NFP has not been able to translate its economic and defence capabilities into mutually beneficial factors for the region. Thus, it opens up the window for China to engage with India's neighbours.

Third, India's overall foreign policy objective and the neighbourhood approach have been in contradiction. By definition, a successful Indian foreign policy is one that creates the external conditions that allow India to achieve its

fundamental goals, namely, protecting its physical security and decisional autonomy, expanding its economic prosperity and technological capabilities, and achieving its global status claims. However, India lacks a clear road map on how it is going to achieve global leadership and what role neighbouring countries are playing in the journey. In general, to achieve these goals, New Delhi must interact on three levels: within the subcontinent and its immediate perimeter, the intermediate level of the international system populated by various medium powers, and the core level of the international system populated by the great powers.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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