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CHAPTER 2

INDIA AND NEIGHBOURS

2.1 Introduction

India is the largest country of South Asia and the seventh-largest country in the world by area. Surrounded by *Pakistan to the west, China, Nepal and Bhutan to the north east, and Myanmar and Bangladesh to the east*. The region is not only complex and volatile, but also one of the most socially and politically divided regions of the world.

The South Asian countries-individually as well as collectively represent a world of *historical links, shared legacies, commonalities as well as diversities* which are elaborately reflected in their ethnic, linguistic, religious and political fabric.

The South Asian region is also full of contradictions, disparities and paradoxes. In the post-colonial period, the South Asia has been a theatre of inter-state as well as civil wars, it has witnessed *liberation movements*, nuclear rivalry, military dictatorships and continues to suffer from *insurgencies, religious fundamentalism and terrorism*, besides serious problems associated with drugs and human trafficking.

In South Asia, neither religion nor race nor language constitutes a basis for developing a unique national identity. On the other hand, there is a commonality in dress, food habits, marriage and social customs and, most importantly, the way of thinking of the South Asian people, regardless of religion.

Modern South Asia's political borders are colonial, not natural. A major challenge before all South Asian countries is how to reconcile and harmonize the common cultural heritage of the South Asian sub-continent with the preservation of their separate modern political identities.

2.2 Significance of South Asia

- It is home to **1.89 billion people**, more than **20 percent** of the world population.
- This is a region that lies between the sea routes of the *Indian Ocean* (Persian Gulf and the Asia-Pacific) and the land routes of *Central Asia connecting Europe to the East*.

- It is a large *reservoir of natural and human resources*, making it a prime destination for finance and human capital, a lucrative market for trade, and a source of cheap raw material.
- It also sits at the confluence of the richest sources of oil, gas, rubber, manganese, copper, gold, tea, cotton, rice and jute, and is the transit point for most of the resources and manufactures that criss-cross the world.
- Moreover, it is the most *heavily militarized and bureaucratized zone* in the world and it has a variety of complex and violent primordial ethnic groups
- The region has been registering a healthy growth (average of more than 6% per annum) during the past several years, Democratic forms of governance (however flawed and feeble) are beginning to gain some ground in most parts of the region.
- All modern South Asian countries are *multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies*, and attempts to repudiate the reality that religious and cultural roots extend beyond national frontiers lead to many inconvenient and illogical contradictions.

2.3 Significance of South Asia to India

- This region sits above a vital sea line of communication along which significant amounts of world trade, including energy, travels from Southwest Asia, via the *Malacca Strait*, to industrial Northeast Asia.
- South Asia abuts both China and Central Asia, with both locations able to access the Indian Ocean via Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan. China also seeks access to the Indian Ocean through its projects like *OBOR, Irrawaddy Corridor*. South Asia is developing economically, hence, the developed nations want to reap the benefit of huge number of consumers and market.
- South Asia is considered by some to be a '*nuclear flashpoint*' where an incident could escalate militarily to the point of nuclear weapons being used in a conflict.

- Indian Ocean as a major **trade route** is lifeline not only to India, but also to other littoral countries. Hence, peace and stability of the region is vital
- **String of Pearls (China) and Pivot to Asia (USA)** have made Indian Ocean a theatre of conflict and differences.
- Political and socio-economic development of India is largely dependent on a stable, secure and peaceful neighbourhood.
- To achieve its objective of becoming one of the principal powers in Asia, India needs to maintain cordial relations with its neighbours.
- India can reap huge economic gains from the neighbours which are rich in variety of resources that are unearthed and unexplored till date.
- In this context, it is necessary to have a brief look on the salient features of India's neighbourhood first policy.

2.4 Reasons to have a Good Neighbourhood Policy

- In his inaugural address on March 4, 1933, USA President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated: *"In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbour – the neighbour who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others."*
- This policy gave rich dividends to USA. It helped it to integrate the continent of North America economically and culturally with USA, playing the role of big brother. Till date **USA enjoys luxury of having peaceful neighbours (Canada and Mexico)**.
- This policy helped USA to increase its influence in the neighbourhood and to become major power world. Peaceful neighbourhood ensured USA to concentrate its foreign policy on the world affairs rather than occupying with neighbours, unlike India.

2.5 Challenges Before India, with Respect to its Neighbours

- India's neighbours, **fearful of its overwhelmingly larger size**, power and hence influence over individual countries as well as in the region as a whole, are both envious and suspicious of India and do not fully cooperate with it on its political and security concerns.
- India's neighbours have **traditionally sought some countervailing force** to balance its all-round

domination of South Asia for example, by allowing outside powers (China) to exercise a degree of influence on their policies that makes India uneasy

- India's neighbours have **shied away from too close a relationship** with it since that could blur their essential identity of projecting themselves as not Indians.
- India's policies towards its immediate neighbours over the last six decades have not proved terribly successful.
- Even though India has managed an 8 to 9 per cent annual rate of economic growth in recent years, **it could not take its smaller neighbours along with it**. Economic growth with its neighbours will be a key determinant in India's long-term relations with respect to its neighbours.

2.6 India's Policy Towards its Neighbours Since Independence

- **Nehru as Prime Minister** of India had a clear policy on neighbourhood. According to him **South Asian subcontinent is India's sphere of influence** where India can be the only power that can intervene. **India's ideal policy is not to allow outside powers to intervene in South Asia** and it feels that South Asia is its exclusive sphere of influence.
- Prime Minister Nehru took a broad view of India's neighbors and placed them within a larger Asian context. He believed in promoting South Asian peace and cooperation through India's Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP). The NP approach aimed to establish friendly relations with neighboring countries and to promote regional stability and economic development. Nehru's NFP also focused on non-alignment and maintaining India's independence in foreign policy.
- **Indira Gandhi** brought about a change in India's neighbourhood policy. She added a new **component of bilateralism** in the neighbourhood policy. She insisted that India should bilaterally resolve issues of the region without any Third country intervention. For example this clause of **"non-intervention of third party"** was explicitly mentioned in **Shimla agreement**.
- Indira's neighbourhood policy also has element of strong high handedness, as she resorted to **military interventions** with a neighbour if it threatened India's security (1971 Bangladesh liberation war). Many of

the neighbours began to perceive India's military strategy as an interventionist approach.

- **After Rajiv Gandhi** assumed control, India intervened in Maldives and Sri Lanka in 1980s, and these interventions *transformed India into a perceptual regional hegemon*. India, during Indira and Rajiv's times *did not provide economic and security benefits to the neighbours*. This made the South Asian states to perceive India's doctrine as interventionist in nature.
- After the end of cold war **P V Narasimha Rao** became the PM, he evolved a fresh approach to the neighbourhood policy as India began to realise that the *interventionist approach had become unsustainable*.
- He followed a *hands-off approach*. According to this approach India should not interfere in the functioning of the neighbouring states. Hands-off policy did not create new tensions, at the same time it also did not contribute to reducing old problems
- Later on **I K Gujral**, as Prime Minister, he is the first PM to introduce a proper doctrine for the neighbourhood.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF GUJRAL DOCTRINE

- With neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India *does not ask for reciprocity* but gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust.
 - No South Asian country *should allow its territory to be used against the interest of another country* of the region.
 - No country should *interfere in the internal affairs* of another.
 - All South Asian countries *must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty*.
 - They should *settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations*.
- Neighbours and the other states appreciated non-reciprocity and generosity of Gujral Doctrine. However, the main drawback of Gujral Doctrine was that, Gujral did not have ample amount of time as the PM to force the foreign bureaucracy of India to accept the value of cooperation. Despite advocating generosity Gujral was reluctant to open foreign trade in India.
 - In 1998 **Atal Behari Vajpayee** became Prime Minister. Most of the energies of the Vajpayee were spent

into managing *Pakistani state sponsored terrorism* and *Pokhran-II* test. Issues like hijacking of the Indian Airlines *IC-814* aircraft made the government to increasingly focus on Security issues rather than neighbourhood policy.

- Second term of Vajpayee government (1999- 2004) made attempts to reconcile Neighbours through **SAARC** platform. However, the government was not able to achieve much success in using SAARC as a platform due to problems caused by Pakistan.
- Vajpayee in the personal capacity has made some unique initiatives, particularly in case of Pakistan like *Bus Diplomacy to Lahore* as a kind gesture. Vajpayee and Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif, signed *the Lahore Declaration*, the first major agreement between the two countries since the 1972 Shimla Accord to promote *Confidence Building Measures' (CBMs)*.
- The UPA government (2005-2014) under **Manmohan Singh** also *tried to use SAARC as a platform* to further integration amongst the neighbouring states. The UPA government favoured political dialogue with neighbours. It almost followed all dimensions of the Gujral doctrine without publicly accepting the same.
- Modi's NFP focuses on strengthening India's ties with its neighbors through initiatives such as the "Act East" policy, which aims to enhance economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries. He has also emphasized the importance of connectivity and infrastructure development in the region, with projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar port in Iran. Additionally, Modi has sought to address security concerns in the region through initiatives such as the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the US, Japan, and Australia.

2.7 Neighbourhood First Policy

It is aimed at pursuing vigorous regional diplomacy by engaging with neighbouring Nations and *building political connectivity through dialogue*. Deepening and *strengthening the bilateral relations* with the neighbours is an important feature of India's neighbourhood first policy.

India's neighbourhood first policy has following aspects

- Willingness to *give political and diplomatic priority* to its immediate neighbours and Indian Ocean Island States.
- Providing them *assistance and support* in any and every form when required.
- Develop *greater connectivity* and *deepening integration* with neighbours.
- Promote a model of *India-led regionalism* with which its neighbours are comfortable.
- Maximise *security* of India.
- Expand *sphere of influence* of India in the neighbourhood.
- Securing *Economic growth*.

2.8 Challenges to Neighbourhood First policy

- India's Neighborhood First Policy (NFP) has faced several challenges since its inception. The policy aims to promote peace and cooperation with India's neighboring countries, including Bhutan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. However, the implementation of the policy has been inconsistent, and it has faced several challenges over the years.
- One of the significant challenges to the NFP is the complex and often contentious relationships that India has with its neighbors. For example, India and Pakistan have a long-standing dispute over the territory of Kashmir, which has led to several conflicts between the two countries. Similarly, India's relationship with China has been strained due to border disputes and geopolitical tensions. These issues have made it challenging for India to implement the NFP effectively.
- Another challenge to the NFP is the varying levels of development and resources among India's neighboring countries. Some countries, such as Bhutan and the Maldives, are small and have limited resources, while others, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, are more significant and have more significant economic and political clout. This disparity in resources and development has made it challenging for India to promote cooperation and peace among its neighbors.
- Additionally, the NFP has faced criticism for being inconsistent and misinterpreted. Some critics argue that the policy has been used to further India's strategic interests rather than promoting peace and cooperation in the region. Others argue that

the policy has been implemented in a haphazard manner, with different prime ministers taking different approaches to the policy.

- In conclusion, India's Neighborhood First Policy has faced several challenges over the years, including complex relationships with neighboring countries, varying levels of development and resources, and criticism for being inconsistent and misinterpreted. Despite these challenges, India continues to prioritize its relationships with its neighbors and work towards promoting peace and cooperation in the region.

2.9 Role of Border States of India, in the Neighbourhood First Policy

- The development of Border States will help India to pursue a regional power policy, for example *Tamilnadu* in case of Srilanka, *Punjab* in case of Pakistan, *West Bengal* in case of Bangladesh and *North East states* in case of Myanmar
- India's *Neighbourhood First Policy and Act East Policy*, both will work in tandem for the development of northeast region.
- The recently concluded *BBIN-MV* has been undertaken on the theme of sub-regional cooperation. The north-eastern states are envisaged as hub of the BBIN-MVA

2.10 Initiatives of India to Strengthen its Neighbourhood Policy

SAARC

- The *South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)* is an *economic and political organization* of eight countries in South Asia. It was established in **1985** when the Heads of State of *Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka* formally adopted the charter. *Afghanistan* joined as the 8th member of SAARC in 2007.

Objectives

SAARC aims to *promote economic growth, social progress* and *cultural development* within the South Asia region. The objectives of SAARC, as defined in its charter, are as follows:

- Promote the *welfare of the peoples of South Asia* and improve their quality of life

- Accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region by providing all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and realise their full potential
- Promote and strengthen *collective self-reliance* among the countries of South Asia
- Contribute to *mutual trust*, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems
- Promote *active collaboration and mutual assistance* in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
- *Strengthen co-operation* among themselves in international forms on matters of common interest.
- *Cooperate with international and regional organisations* with similar aims and purposes.

BIMSTEC

- *The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)* is a regional organization comprising *seven Member States* lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity.
- This sub-regional organization came into being on **6 June 1997** through the Bangkok Declaration. It constitutes seven Member States: five deriving from South Asia, including *Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka*, and two from *Southeast Asia*, including *Myanmar and Thailand*.
- The regional group constitutes a *bridge between South and South East Asia* and represents a reinforcement of relations among these countries. BIMSTEC has also established a platform *for intra-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members*.

- The BIMSTEC region is home to around **1.5 billion people** which constitute around **22% of the global population** with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of **2.7 trillion economy**.

Objectives

- To harness *shared and accelerated growth through mutual cooperation* in different areas of common interests by mitigating the onslaught of globalization and by utilizing regional resources and geographical advantages.
- To achieve *sector-driven cooperative organization*, starting with six sectors—including trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries, it expanded to embrace nine more sectors—including agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people to people contact and climate change—in 2008.

2.11 Conclusion

India's involvement in the internal affairs of its neighbours should be avoided to the extent it does not harm India's interest. The idea of neighbourhood first policy need not include any irritant like Pakistan which can be dealt separately. There are other institutional mechanisms such as *BIMSTEC, Mekong Ganga cooperation*, etc. where India can engage with its neighbours multilaterally. Even within *SAARC*, India must work on a SAARC minus one approach. Engaging in deeper investment initiatives like Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal (**BBIN**) initiative to reap the benefit of connectivity, energy, security and water management.

■■■■



TRY SOME MAINS PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

1. "Increasing cross-border terrorist attacks in India and growing interference in the internal affairs of several memberstates by Pakistan are not conducive for the future of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)." Explain with suitable examples. **(2016)**
2. Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of the Indian Government to improve relationships with its neighbours. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss. **(2015)**
3. '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. **(2013)**
4. What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. **(2013)**
5. What is meant by the Gujral doctrine? Does it have any relevance today? Discuss. **(2013)**