



India's Foreign Policy: A Case Study of India's Neighbourhood First Policy in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

India's foreign policy has increasingly prioritized regional engagement as a core strategic objective in the post-2014 period. The articulation of the Neighbourhood First Policy represents a deliberate attempt by India to recalibrate its relations with its immediate neighbours by emphasizing political trust, economic cooperation, development partnership, and security collaboration. Sri Lanka occupies a pivotal position within this framework due to its geographical proximity, shared historical and civilizational ties, and strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This article examines India's Neighbourhood First Policy through a focused case study of India–Sri Lanka relations. It analyses the evolution of bilateral engagement in the areas of diplomacy, economic assistance, security cooperation, and regional geopolitics. The study argues that while India's engagement with Sri Lanka reflects a shift towards cooperative, development-centric, and pragmatic diplomacy, persistent challenges such as ethnic concerns, domestic political constraints, and external strategic competition continue to shape the outcomes of the policy.

Keywords: India's Foreign Policy, India's Neighbourhood First Policy, India-Sri Lanka Relations, Regional Cooperation.

Introduction

Foreign policy serves as a crucial instrument through which a state seeks to secure its national interests, ensure security, and enhance its international standing. For India, a country marked by geographical centrality in South Asia, the stability and prosperity of its immediate neighbourhood have long been regarded as a prerequisite for its own development. Since independence, India's relations with neighbouring states have been shaped by a complex interplay of historical ties, political sensitivities, security concerns, and economic asymmetries. In recent years, these dynamics have gained renewed significance as India aspires to play a larger role in regional and global affairs.

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The Neighbourhood First Policy, articulated prominently after 2014, represents a conscious effort to place India's immediate neighbours at the centre of its foreign policy priorities. The policy emphasizes proactive diplomacy, mutual economic growth, development cooperation, and shared security. Sri Lanka, as India's closest maritime neighbour, has emerged as a key partner and test case for the effectiveness of this policy. This article seeks to analyse India's Neighbourhood First Policy through the lens of India–Sri Lanka relations, examining both achievements and challenges.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the conceptual foundations of India's Neighborhood First Policy.
2. To analyze the strategic importance of Sri Lanka in India's foreign policy framework.
3. To assess India's political, economic, and security engagement with Sri Lanka under the Neighborhood First Policy.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology. It is primarily based on secondary sources of data, including books, academic journals, research articles, policy documents, official statements of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, and reports published by think tanks. The case study method has been employed to analyse India's Neighbourhood First Policy with specific reference to Sri Lanka. An analytical approach is used to interpret India's diplomatic, economic, and security engagements, while a critical perspective is applied to assess the challenges and limitations of the policy. The study is confined to the contemporary period of India–Sri Lanka relations.

Conceptual Framework of the Neighbourhood First Policy

The Neighbourhood First Policy is not a formally codified doctrine but an evolving strategic framework that guides India's engagement with its immediate neighbours in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. The policy reflects a shift from earlier approaches that were often reactive, security-centric, or influenced by bilateral crises. Instead, it promotes sustained engagement, development partnership, and institutionalized cooperation.

Key objectives of the policy include strengthening political and diplomatic ties, enhancing economic integration, promoting development assistance, ensuring collective security, and fostering people-to-people



contacts. The policy also seeks to counterbalance the growing influence of extra-regional powers by reinforcing India's role as a reliable and responsible regional partner. Scholars argue that the Neighbourhood First Policy aligns with India's broader strategic visions such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and India's aspiration to emerge as a net security provider in the region.

Strategic Importance of Sri Lanka in India's Foreign Policy

Sri Lanka occupies a strategically significant position in India's foreign policy due to a combination of geographical, political, economic, and security factors. Located just a few kilometres from India's southern coastline, Sri Lanka lies along major sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean, through which a substantial portion of global trade and energy supplies pass. Consequently, developments in Sri Lanka have direct implications for India's maritime security and economic interests.

In addition to geography, Sri Lanka's internal political dynamics, particularly the ethnic composition of its population, have historically influenced India-Sri Lanka relations. The presence of a Tamil minority in Sri Lanka and cultural ties with the Indian state of Tamil Nadu have introduced domestic political dimensions into India's foreign policy. Furthermore, the increasing involvement of China in Sri Lanka through infrastructure projects and port development has heightened the country's strategic importance in India's regional calculations.

Political and Diplomatic Engagement

Political and diplomatic engagement forms the foundation of India's Neighbourhood First Policy towards Sri Lanka. Since 2014, bilateral relations have been strengthened through high-level visits, regular diplomatic dialogues, and institutional mechanisms. India has consistently reiterated its support for Sri Lanka's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity while emphasizing democratic values and inclusive governance.

India's approach to Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation process has been cautious yet consistent. It has encouraged the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which provides for devolution of powers to the provinces, as a means of addressing ethnic grievances. At the same time, India has avoided overt intervention, reflecting a pragmatic diplomatic posture that seeks to balance normative concerns with respect for Sri Lanka's domestic political sensitivities.

Economic Cooperation and Development Assistance

Economic engagement constitutes a central pillar of India's Neighbourhood First Policy in Sri Lanka. India is among Sri Lanka's largest trading partners, and bilateral trade has expanded steadily under frameworks such as the India–Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement. Indian investments span sectors including infrastructure, energy, tourism, and information technology.

Development assistance has been a key component of India's engagement, with projects focusing on housing for war-affected communities, railway reconstruction, healthcare, and renewable energy. India's role during Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 marked a significant moment in bilateral relations. Through financial assistance, credit lines, fuel supplies, and humanitarian aid, India emerged as a first responder, reinforcing its image as a dependable and empathetic neighbour.

Security and Defence Cooperation

Security and defence cooperation has gained prominence under the Neighbourhood First Policy. India and Sri Lanka engage in joint military exercises, maritime patrols, intelligence sharing, and training programs. These initiatives aim to enhance Sri Lanka's defence capabilities while promoting regional stability.

India's security engagement is guided by the principle of non-intrusiveness and respect for Sri Lanka's strategic autonomy. Under the SAGAR framework, India seeks to promote collective maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region by addressing non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, trafficking, and disaster response.

Challenges and Constraints

Despite notable progress, India's Neighbourhood First Policy in Sri Lanka faces several challenges. The unresolved ethnic question continues to influence perceptions of India's role among different domestic constituencies in Sri Lanka. Domestic political changes and nationalist narratives occasionally constrain bilateral cooperation.

The growing strategic presence of China in Sri Lanka poses another significant challenge. Chinese-funded infrastructure projects have altered Sri Lanka's external engagement patterns, introducing elements of strategic competition. Additionally, bureaucratic delays, implementation challenges, and local resistance have affected the timely completion of some Indian-assisted projects.



Assessment and Conclusion

The case study of Sri Lanka offers valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. India's engagement reflects a pragmatic blend of strategic interest, developmental assistance, and diplomatic restraint. The policy has contributed to enhanced political trust, economic cooperation, and security collaboration.

However, the long-term success of the Neighbourhood First Policy depends on sustained engagement, sensitivity to domestic political dynamics in neighbouring states, and adaptability to changing regional geopolitics. Sri Lanka will continue to play a crucial role in shaping India's vision for a stable, secure, and inclusive Indian Ocean Region.

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