



# The "Ring of Fire": India's Neighbourhood Policy Amidst Regional Regime Changes

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## Abstract

India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, put into clearer form under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration since 2014, has been, for a long time, the solid base of New Delhi regional foreign policy. The idea imagines South Asia as one more or less connected space of peace, interlinking routes, and common prosperity. But then, between 2021 and 2026, India immediate neighbourhood has been through a rough, almost nonstop sequence of political convulsions, military coups, student driven uprisings, electoral handovers, and the unravelling of long-standing governments that together analysts increasingly call a "ring of fire" near India. Bangladesh saw Sheikh Hasina removed in August 2024. Myanmar has been in civil conflict since 2021. The Maldives picked a China tilting president in 2023. Nepal went through yet another change in government in 2025. Sri Lanka kept switching its high-level engagement between Beijing and New Delhi, in the very same month. This piece looks at how each of these shifts in rule has strained India neighbourhood approach, how China Belt and Road Initiative keeps on deepening its regional presence, and what kinds of strategic readjustments New Delhi needs to make, to stay meaningful in South Asia that is changing quickly, and in a more permanent way.

**Keywords:** South Asia, regime change, India-China rivalry, Neighbourhood First Policy, Belt and Road Initiative, regional geopolitics

## I. Introduction

Think of a house surrounded by fires on all sides. It's kinda like that, several Indian foreign policy analysts say, when they map the regional landscape today, you know, very roughly. On one side, Myanmar is burning through a civil war, on another Bangladesh is dealing with post revolution instability. The Maldives, meanwhile, seems to tilt westward... or rather eastward toward Beijing. Nepal keeps shuffling governments with that unsettling regularity. Sri Lanka keeps hedging its bets between the two big Asian giants. And Pakistan stays, yeah, a stubborn outlier, too fraught for normal diplomacy, it does not really fit the pattern.

India's "Neighbourhood First" approach was built on a confident idea: that deeper economic integration, stronger connectivity, and steady political goodwill would keep South Asia inside India's influence, more or less. For a chunk of the 2014–2022 period, there were real wins. The "Golden Chapter" in India-Bangladesh ties became a bit of a showcase for how neighbors can cooperate, productively, even quietly. India's development help, estimated at over \$15 billion from 2008 to 2020, according to the Ministry of External Affairs, helped cement its role as a credible partner in the region (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2024).

But the years after 2022 feel like a disruption lesson. Regime changes, some kind of orchestrated, others more spontaneous, have upended the bilateral relationships India built over years, patiently. And China runs through virtually every one of these crises like a thread you can't ignore. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative has broadened its economic and strategic reach across South Asian capitals, and it often steps in to fill the vacuum created by regional turbulence. China has now become the biggest trading partner for most South Asian states, with total trade nearly reaching \$200 billion in 2024.

This article unpacks what India's neighbourhood has actually become, and what the "Neighbourhood First" policy needs to transform into if India wants to remain South Asia's primary partner rather than its most anxious bystander.

## **II. The Architecture of Neighbourhood First: Origins and Ambitions**

### **2.1 From the Gujral Doctrine to Modi's Vision**

India engagement with its neighbors has never been ideologically neutral, not really. The Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s tried to set up a kind of non-reciprocity bargain, where India would make concessions to smaller neighbors without asking for the same level of returns, sort of to build goodwill, and keep things steady. Then Modi "Neighbourhood First" took that idea and kind of wrapped it into a more ambitious, infrastructure-tilted package, like everything had to move, not just talk.

The policy's main pillars are pretty well documented: boost physical connectivity, widen trade, encourage people-to-people links and use India's economic weight as a development resource, not as a coercive lever. New Delhi's Neighbourhood First Policy is basically grounded in strengthening political trust, deepening economic collaboration, and improving regional linkages.

The early results were genuinely impressive. India financed hydropower projects in Bhutan, built roads in Nepal, extended a credit line to Sri Lanka during its 2022 economic meltdown, and developed the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline which supplies fuel across the border. India put Rs 5,000 crore into Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan, and the Punatsangchhu-II hydropower project is often described as a model of government-to-government partnership. These aren't minor gestures at all, they're visible, and they stick.

The problem is that goodwill built through infrastructure and economic assistance is not automatically durable when the political leadership of a neighboring country changes. And in South Asia between 2021 and 2026, political leadership has changed with alarming frequency.

### **2.2 The China Variable**

Any honest read of India's neighbourhood policy has to sit with China. Beijing has, over about two decades, built up economic and strategic ties across South Asia in a very consistent way, using the BRI. How China threads around India with strategic ports and shipping paths is often called the "string of pearls", and the naval lift around key places like Gwadar, and Hambantota matters a lot, because it changes the economic, geopolitical, and even the security picture from the Strait of Malacca all the way to the Strait of Hormuz.

China has also poured in serious money. Almost \$16 billion has gone into projects in the Maldives and Sri Lanka alone from 2000 to 2018. If you zoom out, cumulative BRI engagement across all partner countries hit about \$1.175 trillion since 2013. Out of that figure, roughly \$704 billion were construction contracts, and another \$470 billion was non-financial investment.

India's answer has been to press harder on its own development diplomacy. Still, the difficulty is structural not just tactical. China can move with deeper pockets, tends to face fewer domestic political limits when it ships capital overseas, and—this is the big one—there's no long record that smaller South Asian states read as culturally, or economically, hegemonic. So when the Maldives, Nepal, or Sri Lanka take loans from China they don't always experience it as "big brother" behaviour. And in a strange twist, they sometimes feel that way about India instead.

## **III. When Neighbours Change: The Crisis Cascade of 2021–2025**

### **3.1 Bangladesh: The Fall of the Golden Chapter**

For about a decade, the India Bangladesh relationship was kind of the jewel in the Neighbourhood First crown, you know, the top highlight. Under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the two sides cooperated on counterinsurgency, cross border commerce, connectivity infrastructure, and even the energy delivery side. Then, the sudden regime change in Bangladesh during August 2024 really shook things up, and bilateral trade plus infrastructure work took a hard hit. Those projects had actually been climbing earlier under the "Golden Chapter" of India Bangladesh ties. India's exports to Bangladesh dropped by 13.3% between April and October 2023, mainly because of problems at some key land ports, where things just slowed down and got disrupted.

Bangladesh also went through a political upheaval. It started with student-led protests over job quotas, and then it snowballed into a much larger mass movement. That wave eventually pushed Sheikh Hasina out in August 2024, after she had been long time Prime Minister. Hasina reportedly came to India on August 5, 2024, saying it was for safety. Since then, she has stayed in India, even while Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal issued a death sentence against her. In Dhaka, this has helped pour fuel on deep anti-India sentiment, and it is now being discussed everywhere.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's GDP growth has slipped a lot, from 7.88 percent in 2019 down to about 3.8 percent for 2025. A World Bank report says Bangladesh lifted 34 million people out of poverty during Hasina's time, but now around 3 million or more have fallen back below the poverty line. With this kind of economic stress, India becomes an easy political punching bag. Radical groups are then using the anti-India mood as a tool for domestic objectives, kinda turning foreign tensions into local leverage.

Suspicion lingers between Dhaka and New Delhi after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, the Bangladeshi premier whom India had backed. Further strain on ties would hurt both countries. The relationship entered a difficult holding pattern through 2025, India was unwilling to fully engage Muhammad Yunus's interim government, partly because of domestic political calculations in West Bengal and Assam. Fresh elections held in February 2026 have opened a narrow window for re-engagement.

### 3.2 Myanmar: A Slow-Motion Catastrophe Next Door

Myanmar kinda represents India's most complicated neighborhood issue, not only in diplomatic terms, but also in very human terms, if you get what I mean. The coup in Myanmar on February 1 2021 sparked broad resistance and armed clashes, and that has pushed around 95,600 refugees into India by December 31 2024, with about 73,400 coming after the coup.

Now, three years since that coup, Myanmar has basically spiraled into civil war, and only 14 percent of its land is under stable junta control, at least according to most reporting. The fighting has displaced millions, and it's turned into a humanitarian emergency that touched 18.6 million people in 2024.

And the spillover for India's northeast is real, and honestly it's getting worse. Even though the India-Myanmar border stretches roughly 1,100 miles and runs across three key northeastern states—Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—the Myanmar conflict hits Manipur's security setting especially hard. India moved in early 2024 by suspending the Free Movement Regime that had let indigenous communities cross the border rather easily, and then it announced plans to fence the entire India-Myanmar border. That felt like a dramatic policy backtrack, because the FMR had been one kind of cornerstone for the Act East Policy, especially the people-to-people connectivity idea.

India's diplomatic position on Myanmar has been equally tortured. New Delhi maintained ties with the junta while slowly building quiet links with ethnic armed organizations controlling border areas. In September 2024, the key foreign policy official dealing with Myanmar visited Aizawl and informed the Mizoram state government of plans to provide electricity across the border to Paletwa township, which by that point was controlled by the Arakan Army. This is India playing a cautious, pragmatic game, working with whoever controls the territory it needs.

China, meanwhile, has far more leverage. Close ties between Beijing and Myanmar, and Beijing's growing leverage over the junta and the ethnic armed organisations, has meant that when compared to India's footprint, China has a definite edge in the region.

As shown in Figure 1, India's neighbourhood has seen cascading political instability across multiple countries in a compressed time window, while China's BRI engagement has deepened simultaneously, creating a strategic environment fundamentally different from what existed when the Neighbourhood First policy was formulated in 2014.

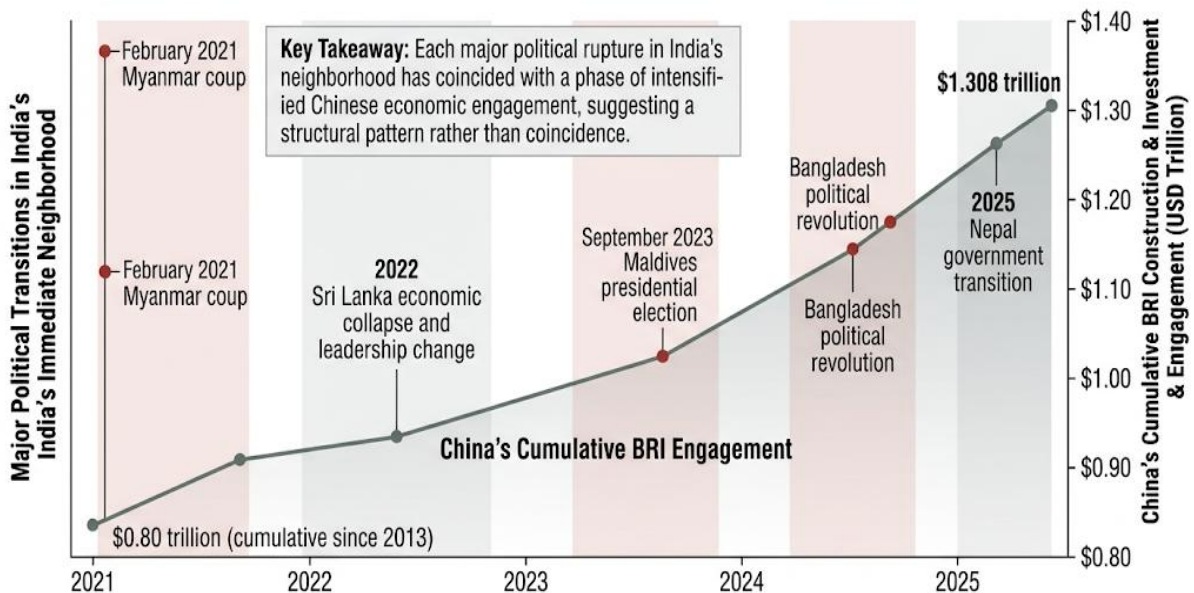


Figure 1: Timeline of Regime Changes in India's Neighbourhood vs. China's BRI Engagement Growth (2021–2025)

This figure presents a dual-axis timeline chart. The left axis tracks major political transitions in India's immediate neighbourhood (Myanmar coup 2021; Sri Lanka economic collapse and leadership change 2022; Maldives presidential election 2023; Bangladesh political revolution August 2024; Nepal government transition 2025). The right axis shows China's cumulative BRI construction and investment engagement in South and Southeast Asia, which grew from approximately \$800 billion (cumulative since 2013) in 2021 to \$1.308 trillion by mid-2025, per Green Finance & Development Center data (Griffith Asia Insights, 2026). The key takeaway is that each major political rupture in India's neighbourhood has coincided with a phase of intensified Chinese economic engagement, suggesting a structural pattern rather than coincidence. Data sourced from Green Finance & Development Center BRI Investment Reports (2024, 2025) and Observer Research Foundation regional analyses.

## **IV. Country by Country: The Shifting Diplomatic Terrain**

### **4.1 The Maldives: Small Islands, Big Signals**

No country really shows the limits of India's Neighbourhood First thing quite like the Maldives. In 2023, President Mohamed Muizzu took over with a fairly openly anti-India platform. Then in 2024, under the new government, anti-India sentiment seems to have been rising, with a handful of leaders urging more intimate links with China. In early 2025, India quietly pulled back some of its defense personnel from the islands.

India has, at the same time, proposed to cut aid to the Maldives by 22% for the 2024-2025 financial year, according to an interim budget document put out by the Indian government. The whole package of developments is obviously concerning for India, because it hints the Maldives might be slowly bending toward China's orbit, driven by Beijing's economic pull and its broader strategic interests in the Indian Ocean area.

This is the kind of movement that's worrying, especially since the Maldives sits so close to what India has long treated as its strategic backyard in the Indian Ocean. Things have steadied a little since then, with people-to-people contact and trade ties still holding strong, and India has leaned more toward soft diplomacy and climate collaboration. Still, the episode laid bare a genuine weakness. India's leverage in the Maldives was built on the idea that political continuity would remain, but one election cycle was enough to shake that assumption.

### **4.2 Sri Lanka: The Art of Strategic Balance**

Sri Lanka has been kinda interesting to observe lately. After its very catastrophic economic collapse in 2022, which India helped to arrest with more than \$4 billion in assistance, Colombo has tried to keep good ties with both India and China, without fully signing up with either one. Then in October 2025, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya went on official visits to China and India in back to back trips, which looks like it's meant to balance Sri Lanka's outside relations between its two main regional partners.

While in China, Amarasuriya basically stressed China's part as a strategic development partner, linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, plus cooperation on infrastructure, the digital economy, and farming too. She also pointed to some Chinese backed projects like Colombo Port City, Hambantota Port, and the Central Expressway, as if to make the case very clear. In the next leg, during her India stop, the Indian side described the trip as a sign of its "Neighbourhood First" policy and also underlined cultural closeness, you know, the familiar kind of proximity that doesn't need a lot of translation.

Sri Lanka is not being duplicitous, it's being rational. A small island state dealing with debt stress and constant economic pressure has a pretty straightforward reason to squeeze out the maximum benefit from having two competing giants, both eager for its goodwill. India can provide soft loans and cultural nearness, while China can deliver larger infrastructure undertakings. Colombo will take both, and India eventually needs to get comfortable with that fact.

### **4.3 Nepal: A New Generation Arrives**

Nepal's political transition represents perhaps the most striking generational shift. In September 2025, a youth-led movement driven largely by Gen Z activists brought down the ruling coalition government. The political momentum generated by this uprising propelled engineer-rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah to the position of Prime Minister-elect, signalling the rise of a new political generation in Kathmandu.

This is both an opportunity and a challenge for India. Younger Nepali leaders carry less of the historical baggage that has periodically soured relations, the 2015 border blockade crisis still stings in Nepali political memory, but they also feel less bound by convention. Their foreign policy instincts are less predictable. India cannot assume that the Neighbourhood First policy's established playbook will resonate with a government that came to power by rejecting the political establishment entirely.

## **V. India's Strategic Recalibration: What Is Actually Changing?**

### **5.1 Moving Beyond Government-to-Government Dependency**

One lesson India should have drawn from the Bangladesh collapse is that a foreign policy built almost entirely on individual leaders, rather than durable institutional frameworks, is fragile. When Sheikh Hasina fell, India's entire Bangladesh strategy fell with her. The relationship had been personalized to a degree that left New Delhi with few alternative channels.

Most traditional political stakeholders in Bangladesh want the bilateral to stabilize. But from an Indian vantage, if New Delhi wanted to engage with Muhammad Yunus, they could do it, they have chosen not to, to a considerable extent because they do not see the interim government as a credible interlocutor. Whether that caution was strategically sound or an over-correction will be debated for years.

The broader principle is clear though: India needs to invest more heavily in civil society, business communities, and institutional linkages that survive electoral transitions. Trade relationships, academic exchanges, and cultural ties create a kind of diplomatic shock-absorption that political relationships alone cannot provide.

### **5.2 Multilateralism and BIMSTEC**

India has increasingly leaned on BIMSTEC, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, as an alternative to the SAARC framework, which has been effectively paralyzed by the India-Pakistan impasse. BIMSTEC only adopted its charter in May 2025. A second Foreign Ministers' retreat was held in July, and a sixth summit took place in September, a burst of activity that reflects how much the regional grouping has accelerated.

But BIMSTEC has its own structural challenges. Given contentious issues that shake the stability of bilateral relations between India and its neighbours, especially those with Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar, it is too much to expect that a "spillover of cooperation" will happen that will energize BIMSTEC.

The trilateral dialogue between Bangladesh, China and Pakistan at Kunming in June 2025, held just after the ceasefire accord of Operation Sindoor signals a new phase in India relations with its neighbours, where New Delhi has little choice but to step carefully and put its national security over regional cooperation. That meeting in Kunming, with Bangladesh China and Pakistan all in the same room, was a stark reminder that India neighbourhood is no longer just about bilateral arrangements, and it is turning into something more complicated, quietly.

### **5.3 Security Dimensions: A Harder Edge**

In 2024, Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan pointed out the rising threats on both the western border and the northern one, and he underlined that instability in neighbouring countries has a direct effect on India's national security, so it kind of trickles through.

India's response to the Myanmar crisis has taken a noticeably harder security edge, border fencing, the revocation of the Free Movement Regime, deportations of refugees. These are controversial moves, criticized by humanitarian organizations and opposed by the governments of Mizoram and Nagaland. But from New Delhi's perspective, a porous 1,100-mile border with a country in civil war, through states already experiencing ethnic violence, is simply not manageable through soft diplomacy alone.

As shown in Figure 2, the simultaneous pressures on India's neighbourhood create an overlapping security-diplomatic challenge that no single policy framework can neatly address.

	Political Stability	India-China Competition Intensity	Bilateral Trade Health	Strategic Risk to India
Bangladesh	Low	High	Declining	High
Myanmar	Low	High	Stagnant	High
Maldives	Medium	High	Medium Trade Health	Medium
Nepal	Medium	Medium	Medium Trade Health	Medium
Sri Lanka	Medium	High	Growing	Medium

Figure 2: India's Simultaneous Neighbourhood Pressures, A Comparative Stress Matrix (2024–2025)

This figure presents a comparative matrix (table format) assessing five of India's key neighbours, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, across four dimensions: political stability (high/medium/low), India-China competition intensity (high/medium/low), bilateral trade health (growing/stagnant/declining), and strategic risk to India (high/medium/low). Bangladesh scores low stability, high China competition, declining trade, and high risk. Myanmar scores low stability, high China competition, stagnant trade, and high risk. Maldives scores medium stability, high China competition, medium trade health, and medium risk. Nepal scores medium stability, medium China competition, medium trade health, and medium risk. Sri Lanka scores medium stability, high China competition, growing trade, and medium risk. Data derived from World Bank South Asia Development Update (2025), Observer Research Foundation regional analyses, and CSIS strategic assessments (2026).

## VI. Conclusion

India sits at the centre of one of the most rapidly shifting geopolitical environments on the planet. Its immediate neighbourhood has seen more structural political change between 2021 and 2026 than in the previous two decades combined. Regime changes in Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have each, in their own way, tested the assumptions underlying the Neighbourhood First policy.

The policy was built for a more stable neighbourhood, one where relationships could be slowly constructed on economic interdependence and political goodwill. That neighbourhood no longer reliably exists. What exists instead is a region in flux, where public discontent can upend governments within weeks, where China's economic presence creates alternative patronage networks, and where India's own domestic political calculations sometimes prevent it from engaging pragmatically with new governments it didn't favour.

None of this means that Neighbourhood First has failed. The fundamentals, that India's security and prosperity are inseparable from its neighbours' stability, are as true today as when the policy was articulated. What has changed is the implementation environment. India needs a neighbourhood policy that is less dependent on individual leaders, more invested in institutional and civil society ties, more comfortable with the hedging behaviour of smaller states, and more honestly integrated with hard security considerations.

The "ring of fire" around India is real. But fire can be managed, and sometimes, navigated through. What it cannot be managed with is a policy toolkit designed for a calmer world. The Neighbourhood First policy needs not an obituary but a serious, honest update, one that acknowledges the new realities of South Asia's political economy without abandoning the genuine cooperative ambitions that made the policy worth having in the first place.

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