



SHSS Working Paper Series

Editor: Dr. Mohammad Shamsuzzaman

Working Paper No. 2

India's Persistent Alienation in South Asia – An Alternative Interpretation

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February 2026

<https://doi.org/10.47126/shsswps.n002>

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to answer the question: Why is India alienated in South Asia? Given its centrality in the region's geography, demography, economics, culture and military power, India stands to be the dominant power of South Asia. Surprisingly, however, the neighbors not only reject India's leadership bid but also resist it from exerting regional dominance. References are made to historical legacies and India's hegemonic ambitions that underpin this alienation, a concept defined as India's inability to develop and strengthen mutually beneficial relations with the neighbors and the resultant isolation from them. This paper makes a break from this traditional interpretation and argues for a broader perspective on the alienation issue. It integrates a three-level analysis of factors pertaining to domestic, regional and global politics to offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of why India suffers from, and can hardly avoid, its alienation in South Asia. The alienation issue has added some new dimensions to regional power dynamics in view of China's growing footprint in South Asia – a development India abhors while its smaller neighbors welcome.

Keywords: India, South Asia, alienation, historical legacy, neighbors' resistance, regional and global dynamics

Introduction

Geographically, India is located in South Asia but politically, diplomatically and strategically it is alienated from its home region. This is not just a contemporary problem facing India; it has been the historical case, in varying degrees, since independence in 1947 from British colonialism. In the post-independence period, India got embroiled in a series of conflicts with the neighbors (for example, India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir, Bangladesh-India conflict over sharing waters of common rivers and so on), most notably Pakistan and gradually with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, whose policies frequently reflect skepticism, resistance or defiance toward New Delhi. As time passed by, bitterness with the neighbors kept growing, leading to derailment of India's normal bilateral relations with the neighbors. In the contemporary context, India's alienation in South Asia has further intensified, as recent developments in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives testify. The July 2024 students-led uprising in Bangladesh brought down the pro-India Sheikh Hasina government (in power since 2009), initiating a downturn in Dhaka-New Delhi relations. Sri Lanka's general elections in August 2024 brought to power a Marxist President Anura Kumara Dissanayake who prefers to make a shift from the previous government's pro-India policy to a balanced approach to managing competing influences from China and India. And in the archipelago state of the Maldives, President Mohamed Muizzu, who ran the 'India Out' campaign to win the electoral race in September 2023, still defends his anti-India stance, despite some overtures to mend fences with India (The Diplomat 2024). This pattern is paradoxical, given India's centrality to South Asia's history, geography, economics, and culture. It is also undermining India's aspirations to become a global power.

This paper critically investigates the reasons contributing to India's regional alienation in South Asia. The concept of alienation is defined as India's isolation from or inability to develop and strengthen mutually beneficial relations with the neighbors. It is manifest in New Delhi's failure to create meaningful regional forums for multisectoral cooperation involving the neighbors, gradual but determined alignments of the neighbors with external powers like China, and endless bilateral tensions over border disputes, trade and security. Included here are also India's domestic political issues with cross-border spillover effect, such as rising Hindu nationalism, securitization of refugees and migration policies, negative coverage of the neighbors by the Indian media and so forth.

The basic contribution the paper makes is a shift from the conventional wisdom that India's alienation is defined by historical legacies and its "big brother" attitudes towards its regional neighbors, that is, India's hegemonic ambitions and policies are responsible for India's regional isolation. Instead, the paper develops a multi-layered analysis to present readers with a comprehensive understanding of the alienation issue. Clearly, India's alienation is fostered by no single set of factors or reasons – historical, political or strategic; rather, a complete sense of the alienation phenomenon can be grasped by looking at factors at the three interrelated levels – domestic, regional, and global. All three sets of factors have their own specific dynamics and collectively they reinforce each other. In line with this interpretation, the paper explores historical contexts, India's approach to regional leadership and the neighbors' opposition to it with an analysis of their viewpoints, and considers the impact of external powers and domestic factors that collectively account for India's alienation in the South Asian region.

The Research Gap

Literature on India's South Asia foreign policy goals and ambitions abounds. A thematic breakdown of the literature brings to light a number of themes and trends, covering the general patterns of foreign policy developments, the disputed issue of regional hegemony, the incumbent Narendra Modi government's South Asia policy, the shift from hard power to soft power approach and so on. All these themes and trends are closely interconnected and collectively they help grasp the full meaning of India's South Asia policy.

Ganguly and Pardesi (2009) present a brief but intellectually stimulating analysis of three distinct periods in Indian foreign policy (1947 to 1962, 1962 to 1991, and 1991 to 2009) and the underlying reasons and forces shaping the three periods. The authors identify three distinct themes that characterized the three periods – idealism in the first period, self-assessment of capabilities in the second period, and pragmatism and realistic tone in the third period. It is the third period that largely initiated realistic understanding of regional and international relations. India's South Asia foreign policy, at the same time, has been dominated by the imperatives to assert regional supremacy and to keep extra-regional powers away from gaining political and military foothold in the region, as Mazumdar (2012) claims. The Indian leaders pursued interventionist policies to realize these two objectives. A closely related argument is presented by Chottopadhyay (2011). While discussing the evolution of India's neighborhood policy, he points out that India's policy, in the absence of articulated policy guidelines, was directed by interest-based strategies with a focus on immediate needs and goals. This is what the author calls adhocism.

Destradi (2011) approaches India's South Asian foreign and security policy from a different perspective. She employs a theoretical framework, informed by the notions of 'empire', 'hegemony', and 'leadership' to examine India's relations with the three eastern and southern neighbors of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. She argues that India's hegemonic strategies failed to pressure the three neighbors into accepting its regional foreign policy goals. The significant point Destradi (2011) makes has clear relevance for India and other dominance-seeking regional powers: possession of power and capabilities do not necessarily translate into actual influence or dominance. Singh (2013) draws our attention to the impact of competing domestic visions (ideas and identities of India) that played significant roles in India's post-1947 history, from the Nehru era to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) epoch. The domestic-foreign policy nexus better explains how the Indian political elites have responded to domestic political interests and how that defined India's foreign policy choices in South Asia and beyond. Sridharan (2017) ponders over possible future foreign policy directions of India. He argues that conflict dynamism in the Indo-Pacific region, an outcome of China-Russia-US rivalry, will set the general directions in India's foreign policy. But India's goal to join the great power ranks will remain constrained by geographical difficulty and the opposition of its nuclear neighbors – China and Pakistan.

The more hotly debated issue is India's hegemonic foreign policy behavior in South Asia. South Asia is greatly India-centric but India's actual influence or impact has been minimal, argue Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier (2010). This is primarily because of, according to them, India's failure to play a leadership role in regional affairs. That is, on the surface, India looks like a hegemon but, in reality, it is no hegemon. A contrasting picture is presented by Burgess (2009) who argues that a series of factors, such as the 1974 detonation of a nuclear device, the 1983 proclamation of the "Indira Doctrine" (the equivalent of the US "Monroe Doctrine") and India's military intervention in Sri Lanka's civil war in 1987 turned India into a regional hegemonic power. In the post-1991 period, however, the decline in US role in South Asia, coupled with Russia's withdrawal from the region, created an opportunity for India to shift from hegemonic to multilateral leadership role in South Asia. Yet, hegemony is a matter of perception, so argues Mitra (2003). India perceives itself as a status quo power, while the neighbors view it as a regional bully. The differences in perceptions create a deadlock in South Asian security order.

Indian foreign policy under the Narendra Modi government has drawn huge scholarly attention, debating whether Modi's foreign policy makes a break from the past or repackages the past foreign policy practices with a new label. C. Raja Mohan published a provocative book on Modi's foreign policy in 2015 (Mohan 2015). He forcefully argued that Indian foreign policy under Modi changed fundamentally, characterized by a reinvigorated course and the shedding of the cliché that constrained independent foreign policy choices of the previous governments. For example, the Modi government delinked India from nonalignment, increased its foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis the West. Arguing from the opposite angle, Gupta et al. (2018) advance the argument that, despite his personal stamp (meaning changes like concentration of foreign policy

decision-making power, religious diplomacy, nationalistic foreign economic policy and “neighborhood first” policy), Indian foreign policy under Modi did not change substantially. In terms of relations with major powers and in significant issue areas Modi’s foreign policy is a continuity of, not a break from, the past. A similar argument is made by Ranjan (2019), with regard to India’s South Asia policy. Like his predecessors, Modi is pursuing the same, traditional policy, without making any fundamental shift. The “Modi Doctrine”, premised on “neighborhood first” policy (improvement in relations with the neighbors and expansion of the parameters of relations with them on a priority basis), represents no doctrinal change, as the “Gujral Doctrine” of the 1990s (named after the former Indian prime minister Inder K. Gujral) sought to promote similar objectives. Hall (2016) labels Modi’s foreign policy as a “multi-alignment” foreign policy strategy. He explains this strategy as an attempt to secure India’s core interests (acceleration of economic development, promotion of national values, culture etc.) through active engagements in regional and global multilateral forums, and the development of strategic partnerships with other states. Success was not, however, up to expectations.

The soft power issue has gained currency in India’s South Asia policy over the past years. Kugiel (2024) has broadly analyzed the shift from hard power to soft power (the power to attract other nations through non-military foreign policy tools) and how this shift has created an impact on Indian foreign policy. He also maps out India’s soft power assets and liabilities and shows how India is realizing its foreign policy objectives by employing soft power tools (like offering scholarships to foreign students, development assistance, exports of Bollywood movies, religious diplomacy and so forth). In another publication Kugiel (2014) characterizes India’s soft power approach as an outcome of the unsuccessfully tested hard power approach to dominate the neighbors. India resorted to the soft power approach to rebuilding rebuild a positive regional image and opines that the approach can potentially transform intra-South Asian relations.

Wagner (2005) reports that India began implementing soft power strategies in the 1990s. Manifest in economic cooperation and cultural exchanges with the neighbors, the soft power strategies helped India to greatly change its image of a “malign” hegemon of the 1980s to a “benign” hegemon of the 1990s, argues Wagner (2005). Thussu (2013) presents a contrasting point. He analyzes why India, despite possessing adequate soft power, has limited influence outside India’s borders, and cautions that possession of soft power does not automatically create a benign image for any nation. Neither does soft power make a nation attractive to neighboring or distant states. What is important is the effective use of soft power capital any nation holds.

This literature review on India’s South Asia policy reveals the significant point that no scholar has attempted an academic analysis of India’s alienation in the South Asian region, providing a multi-level analytical perspective. The present article fills in the scholarly void.

Methodology and Structure of the Paper

On the methodological front, this paper is primarily an interpretive study based on data and information from multiple sources – historical, contemporary political, economic, strategic and cultural as well as web-based platforms. This qualitative research approach is helpful to navigate different sources of information and present a new and unique perspective on the concept of India's regional alienation. In other words, the paper substantially builds on qualitative and content analysis research method. The paper is structured into two main parts along with a concluding section. The first part maps out conventional historical perspectives on India's regional alienation, with an added hegemonic interpretation latched onto it. The second part delves into an analysis of the regional, global and domestic factors that facilitates and offers a complete understanding of India's increasing isolation from the smaller South Asian states. The third part sums up the main points and findings of the paper.

Historical Interpretation of India's Regional Alienation

India's bilateral and multilateral relations with the South Asian neighbors are fraught with tensions, suspicions, and feelings of insecurity. History played its role being the witness to colonial trauma, the 1947 Partition of the Indian Subcontinent based on “two-nation theory” (that there are two distinct nations in the Indian Subcontinent – the Hindus and the Muslims) (Verma, 2001), and the geopolitical reshaping of the region in the subsequent decades. Independence from British colonial rule gave the South Asian peoples free spaces to pursue independent choices; it also created violent cross-border divisions giving rise to one of the greatest but bloodiest migratory movements in human history, with the concomitant effects of enduring rivalries, protracted conflicts, strategic divergences and geopolitical competitions. It was no less than a “catastrophic division” (Khan 2008) the peoples of South Asia can hardly forget.

The impact of the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan still influences postcolonial South Asia's present and future politics and geopolitical landscape (Jalal, 1994). Pakistan's very foundation as a Muslim nation was never accepted by India (Jalal, 1994). The conflict over Jammu and Kashmir – a Muslim majority princely state whose king decided to accede to India without consulting his subjects – has been a highly contentious outcome of Partition (Cohen 2003). Both India and Pakistan claim complete sovereignty over Kashmir putting the Kashmiris into the lines of fire. The Kashmiris were never given the right or the scope to make their own choices – whether they would like to be a part of India or Pakistan or prefer to form an independent state. The endless Indo-Pakistani tussle over Kashmir has so far resulted in multiple wars (1948, 1965, and 1999) and border skirmishes, ensuring a permanent rupture in India-Pakistan relations, with clear impact on their bilateral security, strategic environment and economic integration. India's latest major military responses, such as the 2016 “surgical strikes” and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes, and the May 2025 brief military showdown in response to Pakistan's alleged support for terrorist attacks on tourists at Pahalgam in India-controlled Kashmir,

led to further deterioration in their bilateral ties, creating a persistent war-like situation across their borders. The people of South Asia will not be surprised if India and Pakistan get involved in another major war in the years to come. Jaffrelot (2016) emphasizes that the lingering Kashmir conflict has become the focal point of New Delhi-Islamabad animosity, embedding mistrust into the core of South Asian geopolitics. In other words, the Kashmir conflict drastically erodes the possibility of peace, security and regional cooperation in South Asia.

For India, the Partition of the Subcontinent was a historical tragedy, a great geopolitical loss, and an unexpected economic and cultural dismemberment. Normal communications links, trade routes, and industrial supply chains were disrupted, weakening regional economic and trade ties. The Post-1947 Indian leaders lamented Partition but also accepted it grudgingly, without giving up the hope of reuniting “mother” India someday (Al Jazeera, 2015). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in New Delhi, in the contemporary context, has championed this hope, overtly or covertly (Al Jazeera, 2015). At the same time, Indian leaders of different political and ideological stripes were forced to reimagine and redefine India’s role in the changed historical and geopolitical context of South Asia.

The impact of Partition did not, however, solely remain confined to India-Pakistan relations. Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, aided by India’s direct military intervention, added another discordant chapter in South Asian geopolitics. This newly independent state inherited water-sharing, migratory, and border disputes with India. In the decades since 1971, Dhaka-New Delhi relations developed along the lines of a “cooperation and contention” model. Bangladesh’s geographic predicament (as it is surrounded by India from all sides except the South that grants access to the Bay of Bengal) and a sense of gratitude to India’s support during the War of Independence from Pakistan dictated Dhaka to pursue friendly relations with New Delhi but the long unresolved border and river water-sharing disputes slowly pooled the two neighbors apart. Bangladesh and India have 54 common rivers, all of which originate in India, giving the latter advantages as an upstream country. The long thorny dispute over sharing the waters of the mighty Padma River was resolved in 1996, establishing a 30-year water sharing arrangement which stands to expire in 2026, unless renegotiated and extended for a second time. The sharing of waters of another major river – the Teesta River continues to remain a highly contentious issue till date. India’s failure to strike out a water-sharing deal exacerbates tensions and encourages Bangladesh to seek alternative partnerships with China to develop and harness water resources for agricultural development of northern Bangladesh (The Hindu, 2025). Added to the bitterness is the ill treatment of Bangladeshi migrants in India, whom New Delhi brands “illegal”. Major Indian political parties exploit the Bangladeshi “illegal migrants” issue to score electoral gains, while negatively affecting Bangladesh-India bilateral relations (Sengupta, 2025). Raghavan (2013) observes that India’s support for the liberation war of Bangladesh had both negative and positive impacts – the war enhanced India’s image as a regional leader, and it also deepened rivalry with Pakistan, pushing the region toward more non-cooperation or isolationist policies vis-à-vis India.

No doubt, the post-Partition realities largely created the ground for India's unilateral or dominant regional role what is often dubbed "big brother" attitudes or "hegemonic behavior" (Ali 2020; Destradi 2011; Mitra 2003). India's overall economic and military standing creates a huge power asymmetry between it and the smaller neighbors. Much of the mistrust, suspicion and resistance among the neighbors directly originate from this asymmetry in power, a problem that discourages them to cultivate close relations with New Delhi but, contrarily, motivates them to look toward China as a highly valued alternative strategic partner to counterbalance India. The neighbors perceive India as a hegemonic force, a force that wields enormous influence, and occasionally interferes in their domestic affairs. For example, India's economy accounts for 75% of South Asia's GDP (Sinha and Sareen, 2020), positioning it to dominate intraregional trade and trade cooperation initiatives. Smaller countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives heavily depend on India for trade and investments, which, in effect, make them vulnerable to India's economic influence. These states have generally huge trade imbalances with India every year, as they import more from and export less to India (Sinha and Sareen, 2020). The trade deficits often lead to criticism of India as an exploitative partner rather than an equal collaborator – a development the neighbors are trying to avoid by diversifying their sources of external trade. A similar situation exists in the military sector. India was the fourth largest defense spender in 2023 (spending a total of US\$83.6 billion), just trailing the US, China, and Russia (The Hindustan Times, 2023). Its military capabilities dwarf that of its neighbors put together, and its total annual military spending surpasses the combined military budgets of all South Asian states (The World Population Review, 2024). This situation creates a sense of insecurity in the neighbors and force them to be cautious.

Equally disturbing for the neighbors is India's unexpected intervention or interjection in their internal politics. For example, to break the stalemate over Bangladesh's 2014 parliamentary election, created by the refusal of opposition parties who demanded election be held under a caretaker government but which the ruling Awami League party rejected, India sent then foreign secretary Sujatha Singh to Dhaka to secretly negotiate and force former President H.M. Ershad to participate in the election. President Ershad, to the surprise of all, eventually confirmed his *Jatiya* (National) Party's participation in the elections, while the major opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) remained strict to its boycott decision (East Asia Forum 2024). Another example is India's blatant intervention in Nepal's constitutional process. India imposed a six-month long undeclared economic blockade on Nepal in 2015, following Nepal's adoption of a new constitution which India deemed discriminatory against Madhesis, an ethnic community living in the Terai region of southern Nepal (The Diplomat, 2024). Madhesis are Nepali citizens with an Indian cultural background. In brief, India's "big brother" attitudes and intervention in neighbors' domestic politics have turned it into an aggressive regional power the peoples in South Asia decry.

Interplay of Regional, Global and Domestic Factors

India's alienation in South Asia is not just an outcome of historical legacy or "big brother" attitudes. A careful scrutiny refers to the interplay of multiple factors at three levels – regional, global, and domestic. And it is this intersectionality of diverse factors and the dynamism they combinedly create remain at the heart of understanding of India's alienation in South Asia.

Regional Factors

Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned India as the natural leader in South Asia, advocating for peace and stability through cooperation. The neighbors have, however, often interpreted Nehru's vision as paternalistic, leading to outright opposition and resistance (Ganguly and Mukherji, 2011). The neighbors see India's regional leadership role as being detrimental to their interest and independent existence – the fear of being overshadowed by a giant India.

In South Asia, India's foreign policy is guided by a set of ambitious goals, including the assertion of its preeminent position, keeping the smaller neighbors rotate around its own orbit, and facing off external powers, especially the expanding influence of China (Majumdar, 2012). India, at the same time, has been suspicious of her neighbors' motives to defy its regional goals, and applied both soft and hard power approaches to dealing with the neighbors. For example, India's initial apathy to join the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) remains a useful point. After long hesitation, the Indian leaders decided to join the Bangladesh-initiated regional cooperation forum in 1985 but hardly was it genuinely committed to regional integration initiatives under the SAARC. New Delhi suspected that the smaller neighbors would use SAARC as a forum to gang up against its regional foreign policy interests (Jain 2003). Upon India's insistence the 'gang up' issue was solved by incorporating consensus decision-making provision in the SAARC charter but the forum soon fell victim to endless India-Pakistan rivalry that largely rendered it ineffective (the last SAARC summit was held in 2014) (Ahmed and Bhatnagar, 2008). To minimize Pakistan's involvements in the regional body, India proposed the alternative platform – the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), involving all South Asian countries (other than Pakistan) plus Myanmar and Thailand from Southeast Asia. This shift from regional to sub-regional cooperation was meant to reenergize economic and maritime cooperation under India's leadership (Jaishankar 2020) but there are still questions about its long-term commitment to sub-regional integration in South Asia. BIMSTEC seems to have lost its original dynamics; it is underfunded, has concluded no free trade agreement as of 2024 and failed to attract any significant foreign direct investments.

New Delhi has traditionally pursued a hard power approach, with forceful bilateral practices, mostly to the detriment of the neighbors. These practices include coercive diplomacy, trade imbalances, security-centric policies and so on. Coercive diplomacy symbolizes policies and

choices India imposes on the smaller neighbors, primarily to protect its narrow national interest. Examples are abundant – the 2015 economic blockade on Nepal, river water-sharing disputes with Bangladesh, stationing of troops in the Maldives and so on. The neighbors not only resent such practices; they simply interpret them as India's overreach in South Asia. Jha (2015) argues that the 2015 economic blockade damaged India's image and fueled anti-India sentiment in Nepal. Similarly, India's trade imbalances with the neighbors have been a major point of contention. India often pursues restrictive trade practices and applies non-tariff barriers to limit the neighbors' access to its markets. For example, Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia with a total trade volume of US \$10.8 billion in 2020-2021, US \$18 billion in 2021-2022, and US \$14.2 billion in 2023-2024. In fact, both import and export trade between India and Bangladesh grew exponentially faster than that of India's total trade with rest of the world (Rai 2024). Bangladesh's export volumes to India, in contrast, have been frustratingly low with just \$2 billion in exports to India in 2022. Bangladesh's meagre exports to India are due to India's imposition of "anti-dumping duties and countervailing duties" on Bangladeshi products that seriously decreases Bangladesh's exports to India (Kibria, 2022). In 2022, Bangladesh and Nepal raised concerns with India about trade imbalances but of no avail. Lastly, India's traditionally military security concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan heavily overshadow its South Asia policy, alienating its smaller neighbors who prefer mutually beneficial economic engagements with China. In a way, India's securitized foreign policy and indifference to neighbors' interests have created a trust gap, and it is this lack of mutual trust that discourages neighbors from aligning themselves with India (Malan, 2011).

The way the analysis on regional factors has progressed so far, it is important to note that South Asia runs on a self-contradiction created by its historical legacy, asymmetrical power relationships and the unfolding nature of regional geopolitics. The answer to this contradiction lies in how the neighbors look at India and how they view its regional leadership bid.

Pakistan views India not simply as a powerful rival but as a serious threat to its Muslim identity and national sovereignty (Jaffrelot, 2016). This threat led Pakistan to develop and nurture strong defense and strategic ties first with the US and then with India's nemesis China. During the long cold war period from 1945 to 1991, Pakistan managed to balance its relations with the US and China, citing the India threat, with a gradual tilt, driven by economic rationale, toward China in the post-cold war phase. The formal launch of the CPEC (China–Pakistan Economic Corridor) in April 2015 provided Pakistan with the strategic weight to effectively ride over India's regional dominance. Pakistan has as well attempted to use regional forums like the SAARC to drum up opposition to India's regional leadership. The Pakistani leaders also deplore India's accusation of Pakistan's role in training and funding cross-border terrorist groups, but India's narrative around Pakistan-sponsored terrorism has gained currency in the international media (Ganguly and Blarel 2016), widening the existing gaps between the two countries.

Bangladesh's view on India, in contrast, is a mixed basket of collaboration and opposition. Tensions persist in Bangladesh-India relations because of lingering contentious issues like sharing of transboundary Teesta River water and booming trade imbalances, as mentioned previously. The recent fall of the Sheikh Hasina government, hastened by students-led mass uprisings in July 2024, has added a new dimension to Bangladesh-India relations, with Dhaka attempting to cultivate closer relations with China but causing a political and diplomatic headache in New Delhi (India Today, 2024). Bangladesh and India have 54 common rivers that originate in the Himalayas, and flow down to the Bay of Bengal crisscrossing Indian and Bangladeshi territories. Despite continuing negotiations, there has been no common agreement to harness the water resources of the 54 common rivers (Uddin and Sultana, 2017). Bangladesh is frustrated that India has often ditched efforts at negotiation, much to the chagrin of the people of Bangladesh, and fueling the perceptions in Dhaka that India prioritizes its own interest over neighbors' legitimate interests (The Daily Star, 2023). Similarly, India, Bangladesh's largest trading partner in South Asia, has hardly been sincere to close the yawning trade gaps, prompting Bangladeshi policymakers to look for alternative economic and trade partnerships, China being a prime choice. Despite Indian opposition, China is heavily investing in Bangladesh's infrastructure development what symbolizes Dhaka's policy to reduce dependence on India. China's direct foreign investment in Bangladesh amounted to US \$2.67 billion by September 2024 (The Dily Star, 2025).

The other smaller South Asian neighbors – Nepal and Sri Lanka, in particular, have similar bilateral irritants with India that erode their confidence in the next-door giant neighbor. Nepal-India bilateral relations are beset with conflicts and mistrust, key issues being India's economic blockade, border disputes, and Nepal's steady alignment with China. Jha (2015) reports that anti-India sentiment ran high in Nepal in 2015 in the wake of India's unwanted interference in domestic politics and the economic blockade India imposed to force Nepal to make concessions to the Madhesis ethnic community, a development the Nepali citizens perceived as a punitive measure by India. The Nepalese also disgust India's unilateral infrastructure development projects in or near the disputed border areas, particularly in the Kalapani region which Nepal included in its 2020 political map, creating an uproar in India. Upreti (2010) mentions that India's actions in disputed areas reflect India's aggressive behavior, yielding a deeper distrust in India-Nepal relations. As a policy alternative, Kathmandu has chosen to participate in BRI to counterbalance India's influence, complicating India's bid to assert its regional primacy.

Indo-Sri Lanka relations, similar to other South Asian neighbors, are also underpinned by historical legacy and strategic tensions. India's involvement in the Tamil insurgency issue – first political support and then intervention through the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the island state's civil war in 1987, left a deep scar and a trail of mistrusts in New Delhi-Colombo relations. Abuses of human rights and the failure to defeat and disarm the Tamil insurgents, as Basrur (2008) notes, soon produced contentious narratives in Sri Lanka. Even the more contentious issue, as India perceives, is China's engagement in Sri Lanka through BRI. India views the

modernization of Hambantota seaport, financed by the BRI, as China's attempt to encircle India through the so-called "strings of Pearls" (Devonshire-Ellis, 2009), while Sri Lanka sees the project as vital to fuel its economic development, and has rebuffed India's security concerns as unwarranted intrusions in its internal affairs.

Global Factors

The involvement of external powers has an obvious impact on India's frictions-driven relationships with the neighbors and South Asia's geopolitics at large. China and the US, among other external powers, are more intensely involved in South Asian intraregional relations, heightening a sense of India's regional alienation. Of these two external great powers, China has in recent years made deep economic, political, diplomatic and military inroads into South Asia, adding layers of complexity to South Asia's already vastly complicated geopolitics and intra-regional relationships.

China exerts tremendous influence in South Asia through three related sectors – economic cooperation, military and strategic partnerships, and border conflicts and regional perceptions. The economic cooperation agenda is primarily driven by the BRI, a transcontinental development project China formally launched in 2013. All South Asian states, except India, are members as well as beneficiaries of BRI funded economic modernization projects and technological cooperation. The largest BRI project in South Asia so far – the CPEC is critical for Pakistan's economic development, elevating China-Pakistan relations to a new height. The CPEC hugely serves the strategic interests of both countries – it guarantees China access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean through Pakistan's deep seaport of Gwadar, countering India's influence (Small 2015). Pakistan, in turn, has cemented strong ties with China to counterbalance India's influence in South Asia.

Additionally, China's BRI investments in Bangladesh's completed mega Padma multipurpose bridge and Bangabandhu Tunnel projects, Sri Lanka's Hambantota seaport, and Nepal's infrastructure development projects have provided these countries with the much-needed economic leeway to reduce their dependence on India. India views China's economic expansion in South Asia as China's encroachments into its traditional strategic backyard, and links the BRI-funded ports modernization projects (Chittagong seaport in Bangladesh and Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar, in addition to Pakistan's Gwadar and Sri Lanka's Hambantota ports) to China's deliberate attempts to encircle India and threaten its security (Brewster 2018).

China's military support and defense cooperation with South Asian states further alienate India and accentuate its security concerns. Bangladesh and Pakistan are the largest importers of Chinese arms and ammunitions in South Asia. Pant and Joshi (2016) point out that China's joint military exercises with Pakistan, coupled with huge arms sales, pose extra security challenges to India. China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean via seaports in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri

Lanka speaks of its maritime ambitions, ostensibly to counter US and India's naval supremacy. Lastly, Sino-Indian border disputes and occasional outbreak of skirmishes not only strain Beijing-New Delhi relations but also cast doubt on India's capacity to manage its own neighborhood. The smaller states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives view China as a dependable alternative strategic and development partner to India. These states are attracted to China because of its adequate provisions of public goods (development aid, project financing, technical expertise, technological innovations and so on) which India lacks and what makes it an unattractive or less effective development partner. China, in other words, creates more appeal to India's South Asian neighbors.

The US engagement in South Asia, in contrast, is more shaped and driven by its perceived interest to counter China. In recent years, Sino-US relations have been evolving centering round strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific Region and competition for global leadership (Nuruzaman, 2023). The competition against China has drawn in India as a partner of choice for the US, as China is the common enemy or peer competitor of both states. India's growing engagement with the US is not, however, without pitfalls as it prioritizes proactive anti-China actions at the global level while ignoring positive partnerships at the regional level (Tellis 2016). India's growing engagements with the US, at the same time, exposes its inherent contradiction – it opposes China while reaping benefits of a series of China-led global and regional organizations, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Indo-US strategic engagement primarily covers increasing defense and security partnership, and economic cooperation to minimize the impact of BRI. India has been an original member of the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), first launched in 2007 but revived in 2017 after the grouping lost traction in 2008, to check China's growing economic and military power. This alignment with the US grants India access to US defense hardware and technologies and thus elevates its global image. On the downside, it further intensifies rivalry and hostility with China, breeding more mistrust and suspicions. India's neighbors are carefully watching her since Quad is clearly directed against their strategically significant economic and business partner, China. On the economic terrain, the US regional and Indo-Pacific economic initiatives often bypass India. Programs under the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF), for example, heavily focuses on Southeast Asian states, where China has developed extensive economic and commercial linkages, compared to India's South Asian neighbors. It ultimately undercuts India's intermediary role to provide the neighbors with economic benefits.

The role of other major powers in South Asian geopolitics and intraregional relations is minimal. Russia, a traditional great ally of India during the cold war period, presently plays no significant role due to its closer alignment with China, growing military ties and anti-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan, and the long war against the West-supported Ukraine. The Ukraine

war, in fact, is distracting Russia's attention from other world regions, resulting in Moscow's indifference to India's regional clout. Moscow may not regain its great power status anytime soon and exerts influence in the neighboring regions, including South Asia. The European Union, as a giant economic bloc, largely pursues developmental cooperation with South Asian states, focusing on non-traditional security issues like trade, climate change and human rights. It prefers a neutral stance on India's conflicts with her South Asian neighbors, avoiding direct involvements.

At a deeper level, external powers' involvements have altered South Asian geopolitical landscape, particularly after China's BRI-driven penetrations into the region. Three visible impacts of China's involvements are – first, China-India geopolitical competition opens the gate for smaller powers to reap benefits, leaving India in a defensive position; secondly, the increasing dependence of the neighbors on China is undercutting India's regional primacy to shape regional outcomes. This means the neighbors can use the "China card" to curtail India's influence. US' strategic alignment with India also produces no significant tangible regional benefits; and thirdly, existing divisions between India and the neighbors continue to make South Asia a fragmented region forcing India to rethink its much sought-after high-profile leadership role in regional affairs.

Domestic Factors

Dynamics of India's domestic politics and policies has had a significant impact on India's relations with the neighbors as well, challenging India's dominance in the region. The most controversial and debated issue is the rise of Hindu nationalism and "Hindutva" politics under the BJP, a party that has been in power for the last three consecutive terms, beginning in 2014. BJP's Hindutva ideology – defined as "cultural nationalism", the conception of "Indian nationhood" that symbolizes India's identity – has proved a major political shock to the neighboring states as the Hindu nationalists threatened to draw a "proper map of India" that would include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Pakistan (Malji, 2018). The BJP government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 allowed fast-track citizenship for persecuted minorities from neighboring states, excluding the Muslims. The CAA was soon criticized by Muslim groups across the region on the ground that it was discriminatory, and Bangladesh and Pakistan were quick to express grave concerns (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). The law was premised on BJP's policy of Hindu favoritism driven by a sense of anti-Muslim feelings, alienating Bangladesh and Pakistan, South Asia's two Muslim majority states (Fair, 2019).

The second significant but contentious internal political issue is the refugee and migration policies India pursues in South Asia. Cross-border movements of refugees and migrants from Bangladesh, Myanmar (the Rohingya refugees), and Nepal are often politicized in India for political and electoral gains (Pattanaik, 2014). Such policies lead to negative perceptions and India's alienation from the neighbors. For example, the 2019 National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, a northeastern Indian province sharing common borders with Bangladesh, aims at identifying undocumented immigrants but it disproportionately targeted Bengali-speaking population, a majority of whom were indigenous citizens. It is possible that a small percentage of

them migrated from Bangladesh decades ago but most of the Bengali-speaking people in Assam have been living there permanently for hundreds of years altogether. The NRC has hugely contributed to straining relations with Bangladesh. -Bhaumik (2009) argues that Assam's immigration policies are often used to ignite ethnic discontents and to stoke nationalist sentiments for domestic, political, and electoral purposes.

Sensationalism in the Indian media is another significant factor that exacerbates tensions and create anti-India feelings in the neighboring states. Indian media often depict Pakistan as a den of terrorism and conflicts, and project Bangladesh as a troubled source of illegal immigrants, promoting ill feelings about India. Media narratives about Nepal and Sri Lanka are relatively milder. Jeffrey and Sen (2015) report that the way Indian media cover the neighboring countries question its veracity, undermines its soft power appeal and diplomatic credibility in the region. Equally important to note is how the Indian political leaders exploit regional conflicts. Anti-Pakistan or anti-Bangladesh rhetoric, for example, gains traction during national elections, framing political speeches as actions to protect India's sovereignty and security. Such rhetoric escalates cross-border tensions, alienates India from the populations of neighboring states and damages long-term regional stability for short-term gains, keeping India away from gaining or assuming regional leadership role.

Alongside regional and global factors, a careful look at India's domestic factors confirms two important consequences – a) the domestic factors create mistrust and indignation in the neighboring countries, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan; and b) they contribute to defeating India's foreign policy goals and purposes in South Asia, isolating India from the rest in the region.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed why India, South Asia's largest state, is mistrusted and sidestepped by the smaller neighbors of Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and why they resist India's regional leadership bid, effecting its regional alienation. India's bid to lead South Asia is nothing unusual or unrealistic; rather, it appears a natural outcome of its economic, demographic, geographic and cultural centrality in the region. This centrality, since 1947, has been challenged by persistent historical grievances, regional geopolitical complexities, and global power shifts. Notwithstanding India's advantages, neighbors perceive India's dominance as overbearing and they constantly seek effective ties, if not formal alliance relationships, with external powers, particularly China and the US to contain or counterbalance India. This is no less than a tragic development for India and this development is India's own making.

This paper has contended that India's alienation in South Asia cannot be understood by looking at some selective factors like historical legacy or post-1947 India's regional hegemonic ambitions. A combination of factors operating at the domestic, regional and global levels promotes a better understanding of this alienation. Key important factors intersecting at the three levels

include impacts of Partition, regional asymmetric power relationships, India's coercive diplomacy and unwarranted interferences in neighbors' internal political processes, external powers' inroads, and unfolding ominous domestic political developments in India, such as the rise of Hindu nationalism, securitization of refugee and migration policies, and the spread of fake and sensitive news by the Indian media. Together, these factors contribute to diluting India's influence in South Asia and keep the door for its alienation constantly open. This is the basic contribution this paper makes by presenting a comprehensive understanding of India's regional alienation in South Asia.

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