

India's Defence Relations with Neighbouring Countries

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Abstract

The geographical position of India is such that it is the centre of South Asia, where its neighbours are strategically important. The level of defence relations with these neighbours is important in protecting the security of the state, the stability of the region and overall the strategic interest of India. The paper discusses the defence association of India compared to its adjacent countries, such as Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and the Maldives. It examines cooperation processes, defence diplomacy, military activities, issues and prospects. The paper has pointed out the Indian strategy of integrating military readiness and diplomacy to achieve peace, stability and strategic equilibrium in the region.

Keywords: India, Defence Relations, Neighbourhood, National Security, South Asia, Military Diplomacy.

1. Introduction

India is geopolitically sensitive in its neighbourhood as it shares borders with a number of countries both on land and on sea. The historical connections, the issues of borders, the concerns of security of the region and the new geopolitical rivalry define the defence relations with the neighbouring countries. India adheres to the principle of Neighbourhood First that focuses on intensifying cooperation in the face of the security threats of terrorism, border tensions, and foreign influence.



Figure 1: India's Strategic Goal: National and Regional Security



The strategic ambition of India to guarantee both the national and regional security, which is the guiding principle of its defence policy and foreign policy. Since India is a central country in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, stability in the neighbourhood is critical to protecting sovereignty, economic development, and geopolitical power (Pant, 2019).

The historical ties and legacy are one of the leading influencing factors since India has strong civilisational, cultural, and political ties with various neighbouring states, including Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. History-related connections have influenced defence relations, military education, and diplomatic confidence, but in some instances, colonial heritage and post-independence crises caused mistrust (Bajpai, 2018). Border conflicts (territorial and nautical) have also been a significant issue with Pakistan and China. Boundaries that have not been resolved along the Line of Control (LoC) and the Line of Actual Control (LAC), maritime boundary issues in the Indian Ocean, also play an important role in shaping the defensive posture and deployment strategy of the Indian defence (Tellis, 2020). Tightly connected with them are regional security issues, such as political instability, insurgency and maritime insecurity in adjacent areas.

The diagram also illuminates terrorism and internal security issues with particular reference to cross-border terrorism, which is also a significant threat to national security in India. Besides this, the external pressures and geopolitical rivalry, especially the increasing role of extra-regional powers in South Asia, forced India to revise its defence diplomacy through prioritising defence cooperation, military diplomacy, joint exercises, capacity building and humanitarian support (Mohan, 2017). In this manner, India is aiming to achieve deterrence and engagement simultaneously, which would strengthen its position to be a responsible regional player and enhance peace and stability in its immediate neighbourhood (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

2. Objectives

1. To examine the defence relations of India to the neighbouring countries.
2. The aim of the study is to examine the role of defence diplomacy in the Indian neighbourhood policy.
3. To discuss security issues, including border conflicts and terrorism.
4. To evaluate the Indian contribution to the regional and maritime security.
5. To offer proposals on the enhancement of regional defence cooperation.



3. Review of Literature on India's Defence Relations with Neighbouring Countries

Author(s) & Year	Title of the Study	Focus Area	Key Findings / Relevance
Bajpai, K. (2018).	India's Grand Strategy	India's strategic thinking	Explains how geography and neighbourhood security shape India's defence posture and long-term strategy.
Pant, H. (2019).	V. Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview	Foreign & defence policy	Highlights the importance of neighbourhood stability for India's national security and diplomacy.
Mohan, C. (2017).	R. Modi's World	Regional and global outreach	Emphasises defence diplomacy and India's growing role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.
Tellis, A. (2020).	J. Troubles, They Come in Battalions	Military preparedness	Analyses border disputes with Pakistan and China and their impact on India's defence planning.
Ganguly, (2023).	S. South Asia's Security Challenges	Regional security	Discusses terrorism, instability, and external influence as major threats in South Asia.
Ladwig, W. (2022).	C. India as a Net Security Provider	Indian Ocean security	Argues that India's defence cooperation enhances regional maritime stability.
Joshi, S. (2022).	India-Afghanistan Security Cooperation	Capacity building	Highlights India's non-interventionist defence approach focused on training and stability.
Acharya, (2022).	A. Regional Security in South Asia	Neighbourhood relations	Stresses cooperative security and institutional engagement over military confrontation.
Kumar, S. (2022).	Defence Diplomacy in South Asia	Military diplomacy	Shows how joint exercises and training strengthen trust among neighbouring states.
Datta, S. (2022).	India-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation	Bilateral defence ties	Demonstrates the shift from mistrust to strategic partnership through defence agreements.
Iyer, R. (2022).	India's Maritime Strategy	Maritime security	Highlights the role of Sri Lanka and the Maldives in India's Indian Ocean defence strategy.
Mukherjee, (2022).	R. Political Change and Foreign Policy	Regional politics	Explains how political instability in neighbours affects the continuity of defence cooperation.

4. India-Pakistan Defence Relations

India and Pakistan have one of the most hostile defence relationships in modern international politics. The two countries have engaged in several wars and have had repeated military crises since their independence in 1947, with Jammu and Kashmir being the bone of contention. The borders have become militarised because of the unresolved territorial conflict and have continued to be volatile in South Asia (Pant, 2022).

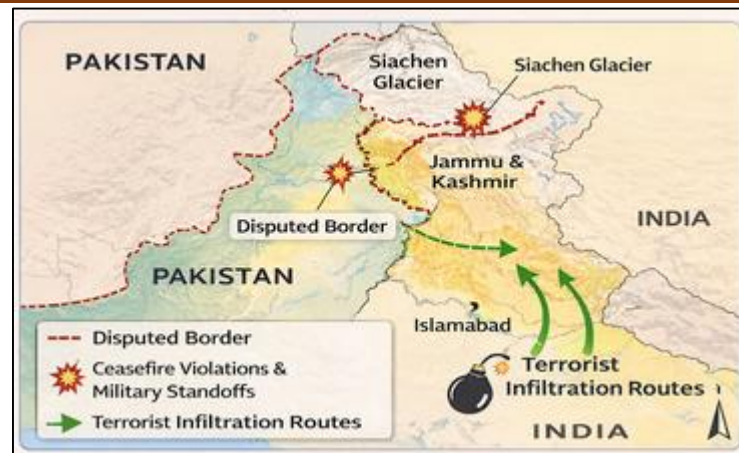


Figure 2: Strategic and Security Challenges on the India–Pakistan Border

One of the main characteristics of the Indian-Pakistani defence relations is that there is an ongoing tension along the Line of Control (LoC). Although there have been ceasefire agreements every now and then, there are still cases of violations of small arms fire, artillery exchanges, and mobilisation of troops, which do not instil trust in the two states. The Siachen Glacier, which is considered the highest battlefield in the world, is another symbolic representation of the long-standing strategic competition and the great human and economic extremity of engagement (Tellis, 2023).

Cross-border terrorism is also another significant issue that has defined the direction of defence relations. India has always claimed that Pakistan has been sponsoring militant groups that penetrate through the LoC and threaten internal security, especially in the border states. The infiltration paths and proxy warfare necessitate putting counter-terrorism activities, intelligence organisation, and border patrol as the main defence priorities of India (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

As a reaction, the defence policy of India has started to focus more on deterrence, quick military reaction, and readiness to resolve domestic security. Defence procurement changes, better border systems and unified command systems are indicative of the Indian efforts in ensuring that escalation does not occur and strategic stability is maintained. Nonetheless, the military measures of building confidence between the two nations are somewhat limited and weak, and they are easily upset due to political crises or security incidents (Joshi, 2024).

5. India–China Defence Relations

The international relations between India and China in the sphere of defence are determined by the strategic rivalry, the unresolved border conflicts, and the different geopolitical interests. Despite both nations having economic and diplomatic relations, the defence relationship between the two countries is strained, as there is no resolution on the boundary along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The lack of an agreed boundary has turned into intermittent military tensions, the

most recent occurring in eastern Ladakh since 2020, which have fundamentally changed the bilateral defence dynamics (Pant, 2022).

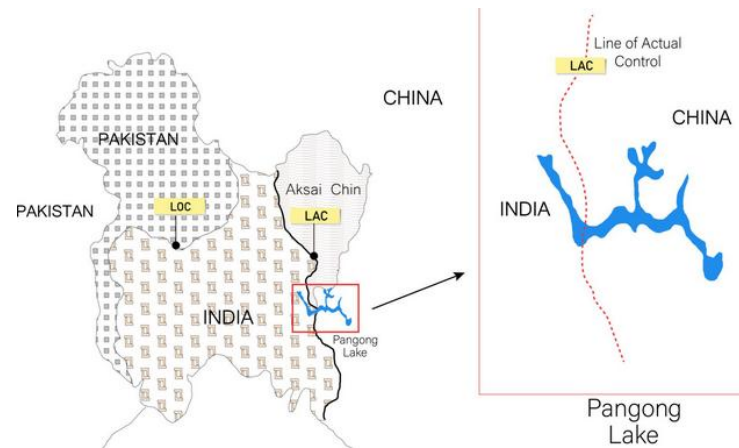


Figure 3: India–China Defence Tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

The border issue between Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, among other parts of the Himalayas, is a major factor that has affected defence relations. The infrastructure development in China and the forward deployment of troops in the LAC have been reciprocated by increased military presence of India, improved logistics and improved infrastructure along the border. The Doklam confrontation and further conflicts in Ladakh showed just how flimsy confidence-building institutions under the previous agreements are (Tellis, 2023).

To India, China is a long-term strategic and military challenge. This increasing disparity in military bases, along with China's aggressive regional stance, has necessitated India to concentrate on deterrence, rapid mobilisation, as well as jointness between the armed forces. Meanwhile, India has improved surveillance, airlift capacities and high-altitude warfare preparation to secure its territories (Ministry of Defence, 2023). Simultaneously, China considers management of its borders as a component of a wider regional security approach connecting the Himalayan frontier with its Indo-Pacific and Belt and Road agendas. This game of geopolitical rivalry has diminished the level of trust in each other, as well as the danger of miscalculation, even though military and diplomatic negotiations continue (Joshi, 2024).

6. India–Nepal and India–Bhutan Defence Relations

India and Nepal have a unique defence relationship which is based on common geography, historical connections and effective people to people connection. The unguarded and generally demilitarised border between India and Nepal is what requires a good level of coordination of security so as to control the movement of people across the border, thwart criminal and insurgency activities, as well as to effectively respond to natural calamities. Instead, defence cooperation is a mandatory support of bilateral relations, but not a traditional military alliance (Pant, 2022).



Figure 4: Geopolitical Map of India–Nepal–Bhutan–Bangladesh Region

Military training and capacity building are also important points in this connection. Institutional interoperability and linkages have been enhanced with Nepal Army officers and soldiers having been trained in various Indian military academies. Frequent combined military exercises, the best-known being Surya Kiran, boost operations coordination, disaster response and trust. India also provides defence aid, infrastructure, and humanitarian aid to Nepal during earthquakes, floods and other disasters, further asserting India as a quality security ally (Ministry of Defence, 2023). Mutual dependence in this context is reflected in the defence relationship, as political conflicts and boundary-related matters sometimes occur, though the defence relationship has not been very susceptible to the ups and downs in diplomatic relationships.

India–Bhutan Defence Relations

India also has some of the best and most strategically valuable defence ties with Bhutan in South Asia. The external security system in Bhutan is based on profound trust and cooperation between institutions and is correlated with the strategic interests of India. India is at the core of training, equipping, and capacity building of the Royal Bhutan Army, which allows Bhutan to be prepared to defend itself without interfering with its sovereignty (Joshi, 2024).

The geopolitical significance of Bhutan is highlighted by the Doklam Plateau that would be seen on the map in the Himalayan security framework of India. The intervention of India in the 2017 Doklam standoff showed its interest in the territorial integrity of Bhutan, and it revealed the similarity of interests between India and Bhutan in fighting against external pressure. As opposed to Nepal, India-Bhutan defence cooperation is more specifically geared towards external threat management, especially against regional power competition (Tellis, 2023).

Strategic Significance

The maps clearly show how the relations between India and Nepal in the sphere of defence are more oriented at managing the borders, training, providing humanitarian aid, and protecting the internal security, whereas the relations between India and Bhutan are more defence-based and strategy-oriented. Nepal and Bhutan can be discussed as important buffer states in the Himalayan region. Close defence relations with the two nations support India by strengthening the security of the northern frontiers, enhancing stability in the region, as well as the role of India as a responsible and stabilising power in South Asia.

7. India–Bangladesh Defence Relations

India and Bangladesh have recorded a significant change in their relationship in defence during the past 10 years to become one of the most cooperative bilateral security relationships in South Asia. The factors that are facilitating this change include common security interests, political goodwill and institutionalised defence discussion. The map focuses on the eastern land boundary of India and Bangladesh as well as the shared maritime territory in the Bay of Bengal, which are the key areas of modern defence cooperation (Acharya, 2022).

The collaborative milestones in one of the largest areas are the joint military exercises and training programmes. The Indian Army conducts regular bilateral drills with the Bangladesh Army called Sampriti aimed at counter-terrorism warfare, humanitarian aid, disaster management, and war preparedness. These drills increase operational interoperability, mutual trust, and coordination, especially in border areas and riverine terrain, which is a challenge to both security and logistics (Singh, 2023).



Figure 5 : Geographical Location of Bangladesh in South Asia

Defence agreements and capacity-building initiatives are also another important dimension. India has also provided a line of credit and logistic support on defence-related issues to help modernise the armed forces of Bangladesh. The professional linkage and institutional trust are further enhanced by the training of Bangladeshi military officers in the Indian defence institutions. These efforts mark an obvious change in the historical mistrust, with the beginning of a pragmatic strategic alliance through common regional interests and defence collaboration (Datta, 2022).

The maritime aspect that is evidently seen in the Bay of Bengal map has become increasingly significant in recent years. The process of maritime security cooperation involves joint naval patrols, intelligence sharing, and countering piracy, illegal trafficking and maritime terrorism. The amicable resolution of the maritime boundary issues has also strengthened stability and cooperation in the region of the Bay of Bengal so that both nations can concentrate on collective maritime security instead of contesting the territorial issues (Ganguly, 2023).

8. India–Sri Lanka and Maldives Defence Relations

India’s defence relations with Sri Lanka are shaped by close geographical proximity, shared maritime boundaries, and overlapping security interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Sri Lanka’s location along major Sea Lines of Communication makes it strategically significant for India’s maritime security architecture. Defence cooperation focuses on naval coordination, maritime surveillance, training programmes, and humanitarian assistance, reflecting India’s emphasis on cooperative security in its southern neighbourhood (Kumar, 2022).



Figure 6: Geographical Location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean Region

The joint navy drills like SLINEX facilitate the interoperability of the two navies in aspects like search and rescue, counter-smuggling and awareness of the maritime environment. Defence training and disaster relief have also been other ways by which India has helped to stabilise the



situation in Sri Lanka after the conflict, establishing confidence and long-term strategic involvement (Kaplan, 2023). These efforts reiterate the importance of India as a stabilising force as opposed to a forceful force in the region.

India–Maldives Defence Relations

India-Maldives defence relations are a pillar of India in the maritime strategy of the central Indian Ocean. The location of the Maldives astride major shipping routes is such a strategic point that it will be necessary to cooperate to secure the maritime security of the region. India has also assisted the Maldives via coastal radar, surveillance platforms, and capacity-building programs to enhance the capacity of the country to patrol its vast maritime domain (Ladwig, 2022).

India is commonly considered a first responder in the security crisis and humanitarian crisis of the Maldives, whereby it offers quick responses during natural calamities and crises. Frequent defence consultation, joint patrols, training courses, and other efforts remind that India will not allow destabilising foreign pressure in the region but will respect the Maldivian sovereignty (Olsen, 2023).

Strategic Significance

Both Sri Lanka and the Maldives are important pillars to the Indian Ocean security of India. The defence collaboration with both nations helps in the freedom of navigation, in the non-traditional security threats, and in the strengthening of India as a net security provider. The strategic engagement increases the stability of the region and strengthens India to comprehensively cope with security issues in the broader Indian Ocean Region (Iyer, 2022; Hall, 2023).

9. India–Myanmar and Afghanistan Defence Relations

The nature of India-Myanmar relations in defence is mainly determined by their close borders, security issues within India, and the link between the regions. India has a long and porous land border with Myanmar, especially in the northeastern states, where the insurgent groups have used challenging topography and inadequate border infrastructures to their advantage. Consequently, the border management, counter-insurgency operations and intelligence sharing become the priorities of defence cooperation (Pant, 2022).



Figure 7: India–Myanmar Border Region and Security-Sensitive Areas

India and Myanmar engage in synchronised military exercises and combine patrols in order to reduce the insurgent movement across the border. Defence ties are further enhanced by training programmes, provision of non-lethal military supplies, as well as institutional military dialogue. Myanmar is a significant part of the Act East Policy of India as well, which is why security cooperation is necessary to protect the infrastructure and connectivity initiatives in the country (Mohan, 2023). India has had practical defence involvement with Myanmar even when the country is experiencing political instability in order to protect its own strategic as well as internal security interests.

India–Afghanistan Defence Relations

Indian defence relationship with Afghanistan has traditionally been centred on capacity building, training and aid in stability issues as opposed to direct intervention. Before the recent political developments, the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces had been trained in Indian military schools and provided with defence equipment such as helicopters and transport vehicles (Joshi, 2022).

The Indian policy of Afghanistan focused on empowering the local security systems to fight terrorism and achieve regional stability in the long term. Cooperation in defence was buttressed with other strategic goals of India to counter extremism and the propagation of instability in South Asia. Although the prevailing circumstance has changed the way India conducts formal defence interaction, Afghanistan still plays a strategic role in the regional security considerations of India because of the fear of terrorism and foreign influence (Tellis, 2023).



Strategic Significance

The maps show that India-Myanmar defence relations are boundary-focused and operational in nature due to the imminent security threats, whereas India-Afghanistan defence relations have been capacity-based and strategic in nature, and geared towards stability in the region. These relations combined outline an adaptive defence policy of India: the amalgamation of domestic security concerns and the long-term interests of the region. The Indian defence relationship with Myanmar and Afghanistan highlights the need of India to fight against terrorism, border security, as well as the advancement of stability within its extended neighbourhood.

10. Role of Defence Diplomacy

As an instrument in the management of foreign and security policy, defence diplomacy has become an important part of the current foreign policy in India, especially with regard to relations with the neighbours. Defence diplomacy is becoming an important non-coercive instrument India employs to develop trust, transparency and encourage strategic partnership to the long term. Such a strategy favours the Indian goal of keeping its immediate neighbourhood in check and sends the message that India is a responsible power that is willing to engage in cooperative security (Kapoor, 2022).

Joint military exercises and officer training programmes are one of the main pillars of defence diplomacy in India. In bilateral and multilateral drills with its neighbouring nations, India improves the interoperability, operational preparedness and mutual confidence in armed forces. Foreign military officers undergo training in Indian defence institutions to create long-term professional networks, and it builds strategic alignment over the long term, even in times of political transformation (Ladwig, 2023).

Another key area is defence exports and technology cooperation. India has been increasing its defence exports to the other neighbouring states through the provision of patrol vessels, helicopters, radars and communication systems. Such programs not only enhance the military might of partner nations but also contribute to India's aim of coming up with an indigenous base of defence production. Strategic Interdependence further enhances dependence on the extra-regional forces, and the dependence of various regions made through defence technology cooperation (Mukherjee, 2022).

One of the most efficient and most apparent tools of Indian defence diplomacy is the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. The Indian Armed Forces have on numerous occasions been among the first responders whenever a natural disaster occurs in neighbouring countries, wherein the armed forces have been able to provide quick relief, evacuation, and medical aid. These activities strengthen India, build goodwill, and increase its influence in the South Asian area and the Indian Ocean Region through its soft power (Nair, 2023).



11. Challenges in India's Neighbourhood Defence Relations

Even though there is significant advancement in the defence cooperation with various neighbouring states, India still experiences a number of structural and strategic obstacles in its defence relationship with the neighbours. Border issues and unsettled conflicts, especially with Pakistan and China, are one of the most enduring problems. Contested boundaries on the Line of Control (LoC) and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) are some of the factors that lead to the frequent occurrence of tensions, military standoffs, and high-risk escalation, curtailing trust and long-term defence-related cooperation (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

Terrorism and internal instability in the neighbouring countries are another significant challenge. Pakistan and Afghanistan: India is directly affected by cross-border terrorism, insurgency, and political instabilities in some areas of South Asia, as a direct impact on its internal security. Insecure states in certain neighbouring countries generate security gaps that can be used by the non-state actors, which forces India to focus on counterterrorism and border security rather than on enhancing deeper collaboration in the security sphere (Ganguly, 2023).

The increasing role of external powers in South Asia also makes the matters of the neighbourhood defence relations of India difficult. The involvement of extra-regional powers in increased strategic and military activity has changed the regional balance in such a way that it occasionally deprives India of the strategic space and affects the defence decisions of the neighbouring states. This has increased the geopolitical rivalry and complicated the defence diplomacy (Ladwig, 2023).

Also, bilateral defence cooperation may be influenced by political developments and changes of regimes in the neighbouring countries. Alterations in leadership, internal political dynamics, and alterations in foreign policy priorities have the potential to destabilise defence accords, mutual training, and long-term security projects, and sustainable collaboration is difficult to maintain (Mukherjee, 2022).

12. Conclusion

The relationship of India and all its neighbour's concerning defence is an elaborate scenario of collaboration, rivalry and discord. Though the existence of defence relationships with countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives shows that Indian defence diplomacy is effective, the ongoing issues with Pakistan and China still penetrate the Indian strategic and military positioning. The relationships illustrate the dual need of deterrence and involvement in the neighbourhood policy of India. The need to have a balanced strategy to combine military preparedness, proactive diplomacy in defence, capacity building, and regional cooperation is critical in the long-term assurance of peace and stability in South Asia. It will be essential for India to strengthen institutional defence relations, deal with the external influence, and cover the issues



of non-traditional security threats in order to remain stable in the region and appear to be a responsible, credible regional power.

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