Policy Brief

India's Neighbourhood Policy and Non-Traditional Security: Reframing Regional Priorities through Justice and Resilience

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India's neighbourhood policy is undergoing a critical transition as it confronts an expanding spectrum of non-traditional security concerns that extend across national boundaries. These include climate volatility, forced migration, fragile ecological systems, and the growing reach of digital surveillance. Each challenges the traditional state-centric paradigm premised on sovereignty, territoriality, and strategic rivalry. This shift parallels the human security framework (UNDP 1994; Paris 2001), which broadens security to encompass the protection of individuals and communities from structural vulnerabilities as much as from military threats. In an era when vulnerabilities spill across frontiers, the need for cooperative frameworks rooted in justice and resilience becomes ever more apparent.

Cooperative resilience provides a conceptual lens for rethinking regional priorities. It refers to the collective capacity of states, communities, and institutions to anticipate, withstand, and adapt to crises through mutual trust, resource sharing, and joint strategies (Hillman and McCalpin 2019). Rather than reinforcing zero-sum approaches, it encourages flexible and collective responses that enhance security for all (GIGA Focus 2021). Insights from resilience theory highlight that adaptation is not static but a continuous process of managing shocks (Holling 1973; Adger 2000). By placing this principle at the heart of India's neighbourhood policy, the focus shifts from the defence of borders to the protection of people and ecosystems across the region.

This reorientation is visible in both policymaking and scholarship. Sheopuri (2025) describes India's "Neighbourhood First" policy as a more coherent regional vision built on shared infrastructure, connectivity, and human exchange. Tiwary (2025), by contrast, highlights emerging credibility dilemmas with Nepal and Sri Lanka, urging consultation and principled engagement over paternalism. These debates also resonate with liberal institutionalist arguments that institutions and regimes mitigate anarchy and enable cooperative gains (Keohane 1984; Keohane and Nye 1977).

The rise of India's Indo-Pacific vision has further infused its neighbourhood strategy with broader geostrategic imperatives. Analysts note that India now seeks to align its South Asian outreach with wider Indo-Pacific engagement, emphasising maritime resilience and shared strategic identity (FRS 2025). From a constructivist perspective, this reflects not only external strategy but also a redefinition of India's regional identity and norms, suggesting that security practices are shaped as much by shared ideas as by material imperatives (Wendt 1992; Acharya 2001).

This brief therefore examines how India's regional posture is evolving in response to these emerging challenges. It explores how climate insecurity, displacement, and digital governance are producing new vulnerabilities; analyses India's pivot from SAARC to sub-regional platforms such as BBIN and BIMSTEC; and considers the perspectives of neighbouring states as they recalibrate their strategies in response to India's policies. Recognising that security is experienced acutely in spaces where administrative and ecological boundaries intersect, the brief also highlights the agency of marginalised communities. Research from the climate-affected borderlands of southwest Bangladesh illustrates how ecological fragility, dispossession, and the erosion of everyday peace

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make visible the urgency of justice-oriented cooperation (Khandaker Prova, Robbani, and Kabir 2025). This reflects the normative turn in security studies that foregrounds emancipation as a prerequisite for meaningful security (Booth 2007; Sabaratnam 2011).

The analysis situates India's neighbourhood policy within a wider South Asian framework of interdependence, arguing that resilience cannot be secured unilaterally. It concludes with recommendations that emphasise inclusive, accountable, and ecologically responsible cooperation, challenging realist framings of South Asia as defined solely by India–Pakistan rivalry (Tellis 2001) and engaging scholarship that reimagines the region through non-traditional security and interdependence (Bajpai 2021; Behera 2023).

Neighbours' Perspectives and Transboundary Interfaces in Regional Security Dynamics

India's neighbourhood policy is embedded within evolving regional security dynamics shaped by intensifying non-traditional challenges. Climate volatility, displacement, and fragile infrastructure increasingly expose the limits of unilateral responses. In this context, the operationalisation of cooperative resilience has begun to take shape across South Asia.

The recent World Bank study, From Risk to Resilience: Helping People and Firms Adapt in South Asia (Raiser et al. 2025), shows that more than sixty per cent of households and three quarters of firms in the region have already endured extreme weather events. Adaptive responses remain narrow in scope, with measures such as climate-resilient seeds, crop diversification, or planned relocation still uncommon. The analysis underscores the centrality of public intervention: access to climate insurance, climate-sensitive infrastructure, and reliable weather forecasting enables private actors to mitigate risks and could avert one third of projected economic losses.

This is reinforced by the World Bank's Building Resilience and Uplifting Communities in South Asia (World Bank 2025), which records how targeted initiatives reshaped recovery trajectories. In Pakistan's Sindh province, communities benefitted from reconstructed housing, strengthened infrastructure, and restored market access, with women comprising nearly half of participants. In India's Uttarakhand state, more than 747,000 people gained from multi-hazard reconstruction and participatory planning that recognised women homeowners as decision makers. These examples illustrate how inclusive resilience strengthens both material security and social cohesion.

Recent assessments by the Asian Development Bank (ADB 2025) estimate that climate-related infrastructure losses in the region exceed fifty billion dollars annually, underlining the inadequacy of ad hoc disaster relief. The ADB calls for embedding resilience into planning cycles and integrating cross-border risk assessments into infrastructure design. Similarly, UNESCAP (2025) emphasises the role of subnational actors, noting that local governments are often first responders to climate emergencies. Their inclusion in regional frameworks is indispensable for justice-oriented resilience building, echoing climate justice scholarship and the broader human security paradigm (Adger 2000; UNDP 1994). Yet regional hydro-diplomacy is frequently undermined by asymmetries of information. The lack of transparent hydrological data sharing between China and India continues to exacerbate mistrust and limits the scope for cooperative resilience (ORF 2025b).

Taken together, these interventions demonstrate that cooperative resilience is not an abstract construct but a practicable orientation for public policy. Such approaches also build on existing local practices, including flood-sharing mechanisms in the India–Nepal Terai and indigenous ecological management along the India–Myanmar frontier (Ziipao 2022). For India's neighbourhood policy, the implications are evident: regional cooperation must expand through institutional platforms that foster trust, while public–private partnerships mobilise financial and

technical resources. Above all, adaptation needs to be grounded in the lived realities of populations at the frontlines of climate and ecological disruption.

Neighbourhood States and Strategic Positioning

Nepal continues to balance its engagement between India and China, participating in subregional forums such as BBIN and BIMSTEC while retaining SAARC's symbolic value as a site of inclusive regional identity (Tiwary 2025). This reflects Kathmandu's pursuit of strategic autonomy amid intensifying great power competition. In 2025, youth-led "Gen Z" protests erupted in Kathmandu after the government blocked dozens of social media platforms, escalating into demands for transparency, reform, and the resignation of the prime minister (Raiser et al. 2025; AP 2025). These political dynamics are underpinned by dense social and ecological linkages: open-border mobility, shared river systems, and kinship across the Terai have long shaped India–Nepal relations, often mitigating the impact of strategic friction.

Sri Lanka's diplomacy illustrates calibrated positioning. While India's swift aid during its 2022–2023 crisis enhanced Indian influence, Colombo has concurrently maintained economic ties with China, seeking diversified investments to preserve strategic flexibility (Carnegie Endowment 2025). The "Aragalaya" protest movements in 2022 and again in 2025 mobilised citizens around economic distress, corruption, and governance failures, forcing leadership changes and altering legitimacy dynamics (Carnegie Endowment 2025; AP 2025). India's neighbourhood strategy must also note subnational and cultural affinities: Tamil communities in northern Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu share religious, familial, and linguistic ties that continue to shape cross-border political sentiment (Rasaratnam 2016).

Pakistan remains largely aloof from India's regional architecture, but civil society discourses reveal an interest in incremental cooperation on issues such as trade and climate adaptation. At the same time, protests in Pakistan-administered Kashmir in 2025 over autonomy, governance, and economic grievances have amplified internal instability and influenced Islamabad's external posture (AP 2025).

Bangladesh represents an equally significant actor in India's neighbourhood policy. As one of the most climate-vulnerable states in the world, it is central to regional resilience debates, particularly in relation to riverine cooperation, migration management, and energy connectivity. Dhaka has deepened economic integration with India while also engaging selectively with China, reflecting its desire for balanced partnerships. Its stance in the ongoing Ganges and Teesta water-sharing negotiations illustrates its capacity to shape regional agendas, while debates over the Digital Security Act reveal tensions around rights, sovereignty, and governance (World Bank 2025; UNESCAP 2025). Bangladesh's position thus highlights the importance of recognising smaller neighbours not only as sites of vulnerability but as agents capable of reshaping the contours of South Asian cooperation.

China's expanding role further reshapes regional strategic calculations. Many South Asian states, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, pursue multi-vector partnerships to avoid overdependence on a single power. Scholarship has also highlighted opportunities for Sino-Indian cooperation in Himalayan cryosphere studies, creating space for trust-building in shared ecological challenges (Carnegie Endowment 2025). At the same time, cross-border infrastructure and hydropower projects financed by China in Nepal and Pakistan continue to generate debate about dependency, sovereignty, and competing development narratives (ORF 2025a; Al Jazeera 2025).

Borderlands as Sites of Evolving Security Practice

Borderlands in South Asia contest conventional notions of state sovereignty. Sahana Ghosh's recent study challenges traditional cartographic approaches by presenting the Eastern Himalayas as zones of dynamic negotiation, social interaction, and cultural renegotiation (Ghosh 2025). Such perspectives resonate with broader critical border studies, which conceptualise borders as socially constructed, fluid, and continually re-negotiated rather than static territorial lines (Paasi 2009; Iossifova 2012). These spaces manifest adaptive cross-border practices rooted in everyday life and embodied eco-cultural resilience. In Nagaland, for instance, the village of Longwa physically straddles the India–Myanmar border, with households and kin networks extending across the boundary. Such arrangements demonstrate how borderland life is articulated through shared cultural practices and social ties rather than the strictures of territorial sovereignty (Ziipao 2022).

The scale of climate-induced displacement is increasingly apparent. Gupta's systematic review highlights poverty, weak governance, and recurrent environmental hazards as drivers of migration between Bangladesh and India, while formal legal frameworks for recognising climate migrants remain absent (Gupta 2025). Projections using agent-based modelling estimate that Bangladesh alone could experience as many as twenty-two million internal climate migrants by 2050 (O'Neill 2025). This underscores the human security dimension of climate change, where the primary referent of security is not the state but the survival and dignity of vulnerable communities (UNDP 1994; Paris 2001). Such a demographic shift would have far-reaching implications for neighbouring regions. In the Bengal delta, a shared ecology and common linguistic heritage mean that mobility often follows cultural solidarities across the Sundarbans, indicating that displacement is structured as much by pre-existing social networks as by formal state boundaries (Raiser et al. 2025).

These trends indicate that cooperative resilience must account for institutional imperfections in border communities. Legal recognition for cross-border movement, inclusive governance mechanisms involving local stakeholders, and co-designed adaptation plans are essential for bridging state-centric policy gaps. Without such embedded approaches, India's neighbourhood strategy will remain misaligned with the lived realities of its borderland constituents.

Digital Governance and Emerging Security Challenges

The rapid expansion of digital infrastructure across South Asia has created new opportunities for connectivity and economic growth, but it has also generated vulnerabilities that complicate regional security. India has positioned itself as the region's digital hub, extending platforms such as the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to Nepal and Bhutan, and advocating regional cooperation on digital commerce and fintech. Yet digital governance has become a contested arena where concerns about surveillance, privacy, and cybersecurity shape relations between states and societies. Digital connectivity is also informed by cross-border social practices: Nepali workers employ Indian platforms to remit earnings, while Tamil and Bengali cultural communities maintain digital networks that extend across national borders and sustain a shared communicative space (UNESCAP 2025).

India's approach to digital governance combines developmental and securitised logics. On the one hand, the Digital India initiative and India's export of payment technologies to its neighbours demonstrate an ambition to lead regional digitalisation. On the other, the widespread deployment of biometric identification systems, facial recognition technologies, and data aggregation has raised alarms among civil liberties advocates (GIGA Focus 2021). Scholars argue that the extension of these practices into borderland contexts risks profiling minorities and refugees, deepening

exclusion rather than enabling resilience. From a constructivist standpoint, these technologies also shape regional orders discursively: they define who counts as a "legitimate subject" of governance and who is framed as a "threat" (Amoore 2006).

Neighbouring states are watching closely. Pakistan and Sri Lanka have adopted Chinese-supplied "Safe City" surveillance systems, often financed through the Belt and Road Initiative, which integrate facial recognition and predictive policing algorithms (Hillman and McCalpin 2019). These systems have been justified in the name of counter-terrorism and public order but lack transparency or robust privacy frameworks. Bangladesh has experimented with similar technologies in managing Rohingya refugee settlements, raising ethical concerns about the treatment of displaced populations. The diffusion of such technologies underscores the interplay between authoritarian and democratic models of digital governance in South Asia, highlighting a contest over normative standards in global technology politics (DeNardis 2020).

The expansion of surveillance technologies also highlights the strategic competition between India and China. While Chinese firms provide cost-effective turnkey solutions across the region, India promotes a normative alternative rooted in democratic governance, data localisation, and transparency. The credibility of India's digital leadership will depend on its ability to reconcile security imperatives with rights-based digital governance (Chatham House 2025). This resonates with liberal institutionalist insights that regimes and common standards are necessary to build trust, but it also raises the critical question of whether India can maintain normative coherence in the face of its own securitised practices (Keohane 1984; Sabaratnam 2011).

From a justice-oriented perspective, digital governance must both protect rights and enhance collective security. UNESCAP (2025) highlights the importance of inclusivity, ensuring that women, rural populations, and borderland communities have equitable access to digital services while recognising the risks of disproportionate monitoring and data control faced by marginalised groups. Embedding rights-based norms in digital cooperation could form the foundation for a South Asian Cybersecurity and Data Governance Compact, which harmonises standards, prevents misuse, and fosters trust through transparent protocols.

Cooperative resilience in the digital realm therefore requires deliberate institutional innovation, regional agreements on the ethical use of surveillance, and meaningful civil society participation. For India, leadership will depend less on exporting technologies and more on cultivating a digital order that exemplifies fairness, accountability, and regional solidarity. In this sense, digital governance becomes not only a matter of infrastructure but also of political imagination, a struggle over whose values will shape South Asia's digital future (Couldry and Mejias 2019; DeNardis 2020).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

A sustained examination of India's evolving neighbourhood strategy reveals that the central challenge lies not only in addressing discrete security threats but also in embedding justice and cooperative resilience as the organising principles of regional governance. The growing weight of climate-driven disasters, ecological fragility, forced migration, and digital vulnerabilities demands a structural reframing of how India conceives and implements its neighbourhood policy.

The World Bank (2025) projects that nearly ninety per cent of South Asia's population will face severe heat stress, and more than one in five people may encounter major flood risks by 2030. Adaptation in such a context cannot be sustained by national budgets alone, therefore private finance and regional mechanisms are indispensable. Yet, as Sultana et al. (2022) demonstrate, climate finance flows to South Asia remain inadequate relative to its exposure, creating a justice

deficit that exacerbates inequalities between and within states. Saigal and Srivastava (2025) likewise caution that resilience will remain incomplete if questions of gender equity, participation, and inclusion are not addressed. Moreover, India's approach must harness the dense web of subnational cultural and ecological linkages that connect it with surrounding nations, recognising that these interdependencies can bolster formal diplomatic efforts. These include Tamil cultural continuities across Sri Lanka, Bengali solidarities across the Sundarbans, riverine dependencies in the India–Nepal Terai, and ethnic ties between the Northeast and Myanmar. At the same time, new dynamics such as Bangladesh's evolving stance under its Digital Security Act, growing unrest in Pakistan, and continuing political volatility in Nepal and Sri Lanka reveal that neighbourhood relations are being reshaped in ways that are unpredictable and normatively contested.

The analysis points toward several directions that could guide more inclusive and resilient regional cooperation. One possible pathway lies in institutional innovation, such as a South Asian Resilience Council, which could coordinate early warning systems, harmonise insurance schemes, and ensure participation across state, subnational, and civil society actors. Equally significant is the mobilisation of private finance in socially responsible ways, since public funds alone cannot sustain adaptation. Recent delays in Sri Lanka's renewable energy projects highlight the risks of political instability, underscoring the need for regional guarantees. At the same time, strengthening subnational climate governance by supporting coalitions such as CAN South Asia would ensure that local knowledge and first responders are embedded in wider planning processes.

Adaptation must also incorporate gender-responsive strategies, protection for climate migrants, and community-driven approaches, building on gender-transformative frameworks (Saigal and Srivastava 2025). Events such as the 2025 Nepal floods and ongoing India–Bangladesh water-sharing negotiations underscore the need for risk-sensitive infrastructure that anticipates cross-border ecological spillovers. Digitalisation likewise demands cooperative frameworks that reconcile divergent approaches to digital sovereignty. A South Asian Cybersecurity and Data Governance Compact could harmonise standards, facilitate intelligence sharing, and embed rights-based norms, though it would need to navigate conflicting visions of openness and control. Collectively, these directions point towards a neighbourhood policy that is responsive to contemporary vulnerabilities and credible in regional terms.

India is uniquely placed to lead these initiatives, but only if it reframes its approach from unilateral influence to collaborative resilience. India can strengthen regional trust, safeguard ecological and social systems, and create a neighbourhood policy that is credible, inclusive, and responsive to the most pressing vulnerabilities of South Asia. Consolidating climate resilience, migration governance, borderland inclusion, and digital cooperation within a single framework is essential if the region is to avoid fragmented responses that undermine long-term stability. Such an approach requires India to act not only as a regional leader but also as a partner committed to fairness and accountability. If pursued with consistency and inclusivity, it could transform South Asia from a theatre of insecurity into a community of shared resilience and justice.

A deeper analytical view indicates that the challenge before India is not only one of institutional design but also of normative leadership. The regional order in South Asia has long been fragmented by asymmetries of power and competing security discourses. India's size and influence position it simultaneously as a guarantor of stability and as a source of unease among smaller neighbours. This paradox makes the language of cooperative resilience especially important, since it allows India to recast its role from one of dominance to one of stewardship. Such a shift would

acknowledge interdependence, create space for mutual recognition, and address the justice deficits that have historically undermined trust.

At the same time, the pursuit of cooperative resilience must contend with structural constraints. These include uneven capacities across states, entrenched domestic politics, and the intrusion of extra-regional actors. China's expanding economic and strategic presence through Belt and Road projects in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal continues to complicate India's ability to lead regional institutions. To succeed, India's policy will require more than rhetorical commitments. It will demand investment in regional institutions, sustained financial transfers to vulnerable areas, and normative consistency in dealing with issues such as migration, gender equity, and digital rights. If India is able to align its neighbourhood policy with these imperatives, it could contribute to a more stable and credible regional environment, while gradually shaping its global profile as a state whose influence rests less on assertion than on fairness, resilience, and collaborative engagement. Such an orientation would not resolve the deep structural constraints overnight, yet it would signal a commitment to constructive engagement and create openings for trust-building with neighbours.

The very category of South Asia requires critical interrogation, since it is not an objective geographical reality but an historically produced and discursively sustained regional formation. Scholars such as Acharya (2019), Behera (2023), and Bose (2018) have shown that South Asia is not a naturally coherent region but an imagined geopolitical space shaped by colonial mappings, Cold War rivalries, and contemporary strategic discourses. Treating South Asia as a singular entity often obscures the profound diversity of political regimes, cultural affinities, and socio-economic trajectories across its states, and risks reproducing hegemonic narratives that position India as the centre. Problematising South Asia as a category therefore allows for a more reflexive approach, situating cooperative resilience not within a fixed regional bloc but as a fluid set of practices, solidarities, and justice-oriented frameworks that crosscut the boundaries of what is conventionally understood as the region.

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