

## **From Inwardness to Interdependence: Connectivity as the Driver of India's Foreign Policy Shift in an Age of Geoeconomics**

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### **Abstract:**

India's foreign policy, over the years has undergone gradual yet significant transformations, shaped by domestic priorities and structural shifts in the international system. At the very beginning as a newly independent country, India grappled with the aftermath of partition and a massive wave of displaced population. As a result, India placed more emphasis on integrating territories under its sovereignty, addressing security concerns, and state-led economic development. This nation-building priority produced an inward-looking orientation in which external connectivity remained limited in scale and strategic articulation. During the Cold War period, India took a very measured diplomatic engagement with the outer world and cross-border infrastructural integration got very limited attention in its foreign policy design. After the 1962 Indo-China war and 1965 Indo-Pak war, the peripheral areas were treated as barriers, not as bridges in India's strategic calculation. Though the 1990s liberalisation reforms expanded India's external outreach through initiatives such as the Look East Policy and regional frameworks like SAARC and BIMSTEC, connectivity remained uneven in execution and secondary to broader economic reform priorities. Although a substantial existing literature examines India's connectivity initiatives in its neighbouring countries and beyond, there is very limited work that focuses on the broader shift in India's foreign policy approach. This paper argues that a substantial transformation came to India's foreign policy design after 2014, where connectivity emerged as a defining driver of its external outreach. By employing qualitative and interpretive methodology based on policy documents, official statements, and secondary scholarly sources, this paper takes a historical analytical approach to trace this transition from boundary-conscious state consolidation to connectivity-led external outreach. The paper concludes that connectivity has become central to the understanding of India's foreign policy shift in an age where influence is exercised increasingly through networks of interdependence rather than traditional geopolitical forces.

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## Introduction

Connectivity has, over time, become one of the most prominent themes in discussions of twenty-first-century International Relations. It is commonly associated with the movement of goods, people, capital, energy, and information across borders through transport corridors, trade routes, digital platforms, and infrastructural networks. Yet, connectivity today cannot be understood only in developmental or economic terms. According to Yaduvendra Mathur (2014), connectivity operates in a space where economic interaction and strategic intent overlap. Infrastructure projects, energy networks, and logistics corridors are no longer viewed merely as instruments of growth; they also shape political relationships, strategic influence, and regional order.

This broader shift is often discussed through the framework of geoeconomics. Blackwill and Harris (2016), for instance, describe geoeconomics as the use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical objectives. Wigell (2015) similarly argues that states increasingly rely on economic leverage, supply chains, investment, and connectivity networks to pursue strategic interests and structure regional influence. Roberts, Moraes, and Ferguson (2019) further note that the contemporary international order is gradually moving towards a more geoeconomic phase, where infrastructure, technology, trade, and connectivity become important arenas of competition. In such an environment, economic linkages rarely remain politically neutral and they often contribute to the creation of influence, dependence, and strategic positioning.

India's foreign policy evolution needs to be situated within this changing international context. In the decades immediately following independence, India's external orientation was shaped largely by domestic priorities such as territorial consolidation, economic reconstruction, and state-led development. The experience of partition, refugee flows, and the challenges of nation-building encouraged a more inward-looking approach in which questions of sovereignty and security occupied central importance. The policy of non-alignment reflected this orientation by allowing India to maintain strategic autonomy in a bipolar world while avoiding formal military alignments (Majumdar, 2024). At the same time, external connectivity remained limited in both scale and strategic articulation.

Economic policy during this period also reinforced inwardness. A protectionist development model centred on import substitution restricted external economic integration, while security concerns further shaped how borders were imagined. The wars with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 contributed to a perception of border regions primarily as zones requiring defence rather than spaces of interaction. Rail and road links between India and East Pakistan, many of which had historically connected regions across Bengal, were disrupted after the 1965 war and remained closed for decades (Thapliyal, 2008). In this sense, connectivity did not occupy a meaningful place within India's foreign policy framework during the early decades after independence.

A gradual shift became visible after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and India's balance of payments crisis in 1991 compelled a reassessment of both economic and foreign policy priorities. Economic liberalisation encouraged greater engagement with global markets and regional actors, while globalisation itself increased the importance of external economic linkages. As Grare and Mattoo (2003) observe, this period reflected a transition in India's foreign policy from "*moral speak*" towards a more pragmatic orientation which they describe as "*realpolitik*". Initiatives such as the Look East Policy and participation in regional platforms like BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation indicated a growing recognition of the importance of connectivity and regional integration. Nevertheless, implementation remained uneven, often constrained by bureaucratic delays, domestic political instability, and limited infrastructural capacity (Ghosh & Chaudhury, 2023).

The period after 2014, however, appears to mark a more visible change in emphasis. Connectivity increasingly moved closer to the centre of India's external engagement through initiatives such as Neighbourhood First, Act East, SAGAR, and the broader Indo-Pacific framework. Cross-border railways with Bangladesh, hydropower cooperation with Bhutan and Nepal, multimodal transport corridors through Myanmar, and projects such as Chabahar Port and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) indicate a growing attempt to build regional and transregional linkages. As S. Jaishankar remarked during an interaction at Chatham House in 2025, the past decade has witnessed a significant increase in roads, waterways, electricity grids, fuel supplies, and the movement of goods and people across India's neighbouring regions.

*"In one looks at Connectivity and by Connectivity I am talking here of roads, of waterways, of electricity grid connections, of fuel supplies, of movements of people. In*

*fact in last ten years has seen an extraordinary pickup that whether it's Bangladesh-Nepal-Myanmar....that every one of these countries are today in some form compared to where they were five or ten years ago, are either importing or exporting more energy, are trading more, are seeing much greater flow of wagons, buses, people...much more goods transiting through countries or to countries..." (S.Jaishankar, Chatham House Interview, 05/03/2025)*

What becomes significant here is not merely the expansion of infrastructure, but the broader strategic logic behind it. Connectivity projects increasingly create repeated flows of trade, energy, transport, and communication across borders, generating patterns of interaction that gradually deepen interdependence between states. Keohane and Nye define interdependence as situations characterised by reciprocal effects arising from flows of goods, people, capital, and information across borders (Keohane & Nye, 2011). In this sense, connectivity is not simply about physical infrastructure; it also contributes to the creation of structured regional relationships that shape economic and strategic behaviour over time. In this context, India's initiatives reflect an effort to reconceptualise borders as bridges (Saran, 2016), transforming geography into opportunity and strengthening its position as both a regional stabiliser and an emerging global actor.

This dynamic becomes particularly important in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's expanding infrastructural and financial presence across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean has altered the strategic environment in which India operates. As Naskar (2024) argues, the BRI functions not merely as a developmental initiative but also as a geoeconomic strategy capable of generating long-term asymmetric interdependence. India's own connectivity initiatives therefore emerge within a competitive regional landscape where infrastructure, trade corridors, and connectivity networks increasingly shape geopolitical influence. For India, ensuring a stable and cooperative neighbourhood becomes essential for both economic growth and strategic positioning. As Prime Minister Modi (2014) emphasised during the 69th United Nations General Assembly, a country's future is closely linked to the well-being of its neighbours. India's approach has therefore taken a dual form: deepening economic integration and connectivity with its neighbourhood while also responding to competing initiatives, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Although there exists a substantial body of literature on India's connectivity projects and regional initiatives, relatively less attention has been given to how connectivity reflects a

broader transformation in India's foreign policy orientation itself. This paper argues that connectivity has gradually evolved from a relatively marginal developmental concern into an important driver of India's foreign policy shift in an age of geoeconomics. More specifically, it argues that India's external engagement reflects a movement from an earlier inward-looking orientation towards a more connectivity-driven framework centred on regional linkages and interdependence.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section outlines the objectives and methodological approach of the study. The discussion then turns to the relationship between connectivity, geoeconomics, and interdependence, examining how infrastructure and cross-border linkages have acquired strategic significance in contemporary international politics. This is followed by an analysis of India's changing external orientation and the growing importance of connectivity within its foreign policy framework. The subsequent section examines the strategic dimension of India's connectivity initiatives, particularly in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative and the wider regional competition surrounding connectivity and influence. The final sections bring together the main findings of the study, briefly discuss its limitations, and conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of connectivity for India's foreign policy in an increasingly interconnected international order.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The primary objective of this paper is to examine how connectivity has gradually emerged as an important driver of India's foreign policy shift in an age increasingly shaped by geoeconomics and interdependence. More specifically, the study seeks to understand how India's external engagement has moved from a relatively inward-looking orientation towards a framework that places greater emphasis on regional linkages, connectivity networks, and cross-border interaction.

The paper addresses this broad objective through three interconnected areas of inquiry. First, it examines the changing trajectory of India's foreign policy over time, tracing the movement from the security-conscious and developmentalist orientation of the post-independence decades to the more outward-looking approach that gained momentum after economic liberalisation and became more pronounced after 2014. Rather than treating this transition as abrupt, the paper understands it as a gradual shift shaped by changing domestic priorities, regional dynamics, and transformations in the wider international order.

Second, the study situates connectivity within the broader framework of geoeconomics and economic statecraft. It argues that infrastructure projects, transport corridors, energy cooperation, and digital networks can no longer be viewed solely as developmental initiatives. Increasingly, such linkages also operate as strategic instruments through which states pursue influence, create networks of interaction, and shape regional environments. In this context, the paper explores how connectivity contributes to the creation of interdependence through repeated flows of trade, energy, people, and communication across borders.

Third, the paper examines the strategic dimension of India's connectivity initiatives, particularly in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the wider geoeconomic competition unfolding across Asia and the Indian Ocean region. It analyses how India seeks to position its own connectivity initiatives through approaches centred on consultation, partnership, and regional cooperation, while simultaneously responding to the changing strategic landscape created by China's expanding infrastructural presence.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach. The analysis draws primarily on policy documents, official statements, speeches, government reports, and secondary academic literature related to India's foreign policy, regional connectivity, and geoeconomics. Alongside this, the paper employs a historical-analytical perspective to trace the gradual evolution of India's external orientation over different phases.

The study also makes use of content analysis to identify recurring themes and policy patterns within official and scholarly discourse. Elements of narrative and discourse analysis are incorporated where necessary to examine how connectivity is framed within India's foreign policy thinking. This approach allows the paper to study connectivity not only as a material process involving infrastructure and economic integration, but also as a broader strategic and political idea linked to India's changing role in an increasingly interconnected international order.

### **Connectivity, Geoeconomics, and Interdependence**

In recent years, connectivity has acquired growing importance within discussions on international politics, particularly in relation to the changing nature of power and influence in the global order. Infrastructure corridors, transport networks, maritime routes, energy grids, and digital systems are increasingly viewed not only as developmental tools but also as

strategic instruments through which states shape regional environments and pursue geopolitical objectives. This shift reflects the growing relevance of geoeconomics, where economic instruments and strategic interests become closely intertwined.

As Wigell (2015) notes, states increasingly rely on economic leverage rather than military force alone to secure influence and advance national interests. Blackwill and Harris (2017) similarly identify trade, investment, finance, aid, energy, and technological systems as important geoeconomic instruments through which states pursue strategic goals. Roberts, Moraes, and Ferguson (2019) further argue that the contemporary international order is gradually moving away from a relatively liberal economic framework towards a more competitive geoeconomic environment, where infrastructure, technology, supply chains, and connectivity networks emerge as central sites of strategic competition. In such a context, connectivity becomes more than a question of development; it increasingly operates as part of statecraft itself.

Seen from this perspective, connectivity permeates at economic, political, and strategic levels. Infrastructure projects facilitate trade, movement, and communication, but they also shape patterns of interaction and influence between states. Shyam Saran (2015), while discussing India's changing approach to regional engagement, argues that borders are increasingly being imagined not merely as defensive frontiers but as "bridges" capable of generating economic opportunity and regional cooperation. This shift in thinking reflects a broader attempt to transform geography from a source of strategic vulnerability into an instrument of engagement and integration.

At the same time, the significance of connectivity lies not simply in physical infrastructure itself, but in the forms of interaction and dependence that such linkages gradually produce. In *Power and Interdependence*, Keohane and Nye define interdependence as situations characterised by reciprocal effects among states arising from flows of goods, people, capital, and information across borders. However, they distinguish interdependence from mere interconnectedness by arguing that interdependence exists only where these interactions generate significant costs, constraints, or forms of mutual reliance. In this sense, infrastructure and connectivity projects acquire strategic significance because they create repeated and sustained cross-border exchanges that increasingly shape economic and political behaviour and promote interdependence.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant in understanding contemporary connectivity diplomacy. Railways, energy pipelines, transport corridors, electricity trade, and digital systems do more than connecting territories; they also generate patterns of interaction that gradually deepen interdependence between participating states. Keohane and Nye (2011) further observe that expanding economic transactions increasingly blur the distinction between domestic and foreign policy by making external linkages more deeply connected to domestic economic activity. As a result, connectivity can influence not only trade and development, but also broader political relationships and strategic calculations.

India's recent foreign policy initiatives reflect this evolving understanding of connectivity. Particularly after 2014, projects involving transport infrastructure, energy cooperation, digital connectivity, and maritime engagement have increasingly been linked with broader strategic and diplomatic objectives. Cross-border railway restoration with Bangladesh, petroleum pipelines and electricity trade with Nepal, hydropower cooperation with Bhutan, and multimodal transport initiatives through Myanmar illustrate how connectivity is being used to facilitate movement, increase economic interaction, and create more sustained regional linkages.

The restoration of connectivity with Bangladesh offers a particularly important example in this regard. Prior to the 1965 India–Pakistan war, railway networks such as the East Bengal Express, East Bengal Mail, and Barisal Express connected regions across India and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) through routes passing via Gede and Petrapole (Thapliyal, 2008). The suspension of these links after the 1965 war disrupted older regional patterns of movement and exchange, reinforcing the perception of borders primarily as security barriers. Their gradual revival in the post-Cold War and post-2014 periods therefore reflects more than infrastructural restoration alone; it represents an attempt to rebuild channels of economic interaction and regional interdependence that had been fragmented for decades.

A similar logic is visible in India's energy diplomacy in the neighbourhood. Hydropower cooperation with Bhutan has generated deep economic linkages between the two countries, with electricity exports becoming a major component of Bhutan's economy while also contributing to India's energy requirements. At present, Bhutan exports roughly 1,000–1,200 MW of electricity to India. In addition, the construction of two 400kV double-circuit cross-border transmission lines is underway, and once completed, these projects are expected to increase the overall power transfer capacity between the two countries to nearly 4,250 MW.

Similarly India has been exporting electricity to Bangladesh since 2013, and the supply has gradually risen to around 1,160 MW. Alongside this energy cooperation, Bangladesh has allowed India to utilise its transit routes and power grid infrastructure to support electricity transmission to India's Northeast (Kaushik, 2025).

In Nepal, projects such as the Motihari–Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline and cross-border electricity cooperation create repeated economic interactions that increasingly integrate local economies and infrastructures. Connectivity in such cases operates not simply through physical infrastructure but through sustained transactional relationships that gradually embed neighbouring states within wider regional networks.

India's engagement with Myanmar also highlights the relationship between connectivity and interdependence. Sharing a 1,643-kilometre border with India's northeastern region, Myanmar occupies an important position linking South Asia with Southeast Asia. Projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Corridor are intended not only to improve trade and transport but also to integrate India's Northeast more closely with regional economic networks. As Chakraborty (2009) notes, colonial disruptions had weakened older commercial routes connecting the Northeast with neighbouring regions such as the Southern Silk Road and the Ledo–Myitkyina–Poshan axis. Contemporary connectivity initiatives seek, in part, to restore these linkages while simultaneously expanding India's regional strategic presence.

Connectivity initiatives also increasingly operate through regional and subregional frameworks. Platforms such as BIMSTEC, BBIN, and SASEC illustrate how India attempts to institutionalise regional integration through transport, energy, and economic cooperation. As Barua (2024) observes, BIMSTEC's Master Plan for Transport Connectivity reflects an effort to deepen regional integration across the Bay of Bengal region. Similarly, the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement seeks to improve mobility and trade across eastern South Asia, even though implementation has remained uneven. These initiatives indicate that connectivity is not limited to bilateral engagement alone; it also contributes to the construction of wider regional architectures of interaction and interdependence.

At a broader level, India's connectivity initiatives also reflect changing global patterns of power. As geoeconomic competition intensifies, infrastructure and connectivity increasingly become instruments through which states seek to shape regional order and secure strategic

influence. Connectivity therefore operates simultaneously as development, diplomacy, and statecraft. In India's case, it increasingly represents an attempt to expand regional linkages, create networks of interdependence, and reposition the country within regional and subsequently in the international order where influence is exercised not only through military capabilities, but also through corridors, networks, and economic connections.

### **India's Connectivity Turn: From Inwardness to Regional Linkages**

India's approach towards connectivity did not emerge suddenly. Rather, it developed gradually through changes in domestic priorities, economic policy, and the wider international environment. In the decades immediately following independence, India's foreign policy remained largely inward-looking, shaped by concerns related to state-building, consolidating sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic self-reliance. Over time, however, shifts in the regional and global order encouraged a gradual rethinking of external engagement. By the post-2014 period, connectivity had acquired a much more visible and strategic place within India's foreign policy framework.

During the early decades after independence, external connectivity remained limited both materially and conceptually. Infrastructure development was primarily directed towards domestic integration through roads, railways, dams, and public institutions. Cross-border economic linkages did not receive comparable emphasis. The developmental model adopted by India, centred on state-led industrialisation and import substitution, reinforced this inward orientation. External trade remained relatively restricted, while strategic thinking was strongly influenced by concerns over newly found sovereignty and security issues.

The experience of conflict further shaped these perceptions. The wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965) reinforced a defensive understanding of borders, where frontier regions were viewed more as zones requiring protection rather than as spaces of interaction. Rail and road links between India and East Pakistan, many of which had historically connected regions across Bengal, were disrupted after the 1965 conflict. Prior to this, railway services such as the East Bengal Express, East Bengal Mail, and Barisal Express connected Sealdah with destinations like Khulna, Goalandu Ghat, and Parbatipur through border points including Gede and Petrapole. Their closure significantly reduced cross-border mobility and trade, increasing the difficulties associated with the movement of people and goods. Even after the emergence of

Bangladesh in 1971, many of these routes remained inactive for years, illustrating how security concerns had come to dominate regional interaction.

At the same time, India's external engagement during the Cold War period remained largely political and normative. Through non-alignment, India sought to preserve strategic autonomy while also projecting leadership within the decolonising world (Majumdar, 2024). As Basrur and Estrada (2017) note, India's international role during this period was informed by an emphasis on ethical and non-exploitative engagement. Yet, despite its active political role within the Global South, this engagement did not translate into significant regional economic integration or connectivity-building.

A gradual shift became visible after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and India's balance of payments crisis in 1991 created pressure for economic and strategic recalibration. Market-oriented reforms accelerated India's integration with the global economy and encouraged greater engagement with external markets and regional actors (Majumdar, 2024). Around the same time, globalisation increased the importance of trade, investment, and connectivity within international politics. As Ghosh and Basu Ray Chaudhury (2023) observe, India's foreign policy during this period increasingly focused on creating a stable regional environment supportive of economic development and external engagement.

Within this broader transition, the Look East Policy emerged as an important turning point. Introduced under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, the policy sought to strengthen India's engagement with Southeast Asia, both economically and strategically. Southeast Asia was increasingly viewed as an important market and as a gateway to the wider Asia-Pacific region (Chakraborty, 2009). Tanwir Arshad (2024) describes this period as one of "*reinvented optimism*" in India-ASEAN relations. Over time, engagement expanded beyond trade to include cooperation in transport, infrastructure, maritime interaction, and regional institutions. Governments led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh further deepened these engagements under the broader idea of a "shared Asian neighbourhood" (Arshed, 2024, p.p-191).

Even so, connectivity initiatives during this phase often progressed slowly. Projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway faced repeated delays, while implementation remained constrained by bureaucratic inertia, uneven infrastructure capacity, and domestic political limitations. External developments such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis also

affected the pace of regional integration (Ghosh & Chaudhury, 2023). Nevertheless, the period between 1991 and 2014 was significant because it gradually altered India's strategic outlook. Connectivity increasingly began to appear within foreign policy discussions, even if it had not yet become central to India's diplomatic practice.

A more visible transformation took shape after 2014. Under the Narendra Modi government, connectivity moved closer to the centre of India's external engagement through initiatives such as Neighbourhood First, Act East, SAGAR, and the Indo-Pacific framework. While many of these initiatives built upon earlier policies, the emphasis on implementation, infrastructure creation, and regional linkage-building became considerably stronger.

The Neighbourhood First policy, in particular, reflected a more active attempt to deepen India's engagement with South Asian neighbours through economic cooperation, infrastructure, energy trade, and people-to-people interaction. As Constantino Xavier (2020) observes, Neighbourhood First is fundamentally about "*connectivity, commerce, and contacts*," highlighting the centrality of regional linkages within India's contemporary neighbourhood policy. Similarly, Chaturvedy (2019) notes that the policy emphasises multiple dimensions of connectivity, including trade, tourism, technology, talent, and cultural exchange. Jaishankar (2024), while outlining India's neighbourhood approach, framed it through principles such as Samman (respect), Samvad (dialogue), Shanti (peace), and Samridhhi (prosperity), reflecting an attempt to combine strategic interests with a consultative and development-oriented framework.

The shift in India's external orientation became visible across a range of projects. Railway restoration and inland waterway cooperation with Bangladesh sought to rebuild regional transport linkages that had weakened after partition and the 1965 war. Connectivity between the two countries expanded further through initiatives taken by the Modi government, such as the 'Bandhan Express' passenger rail service between Kolkata and Khulna, improved facilities for the 'Maitree Express' on the Kolkata–Dhaka route, the revival of the Radhikapur–Biroil rail link, and the development of the Agartala–Akhaura railway connection. Cross-border bus services on multiple routes also strengthened mobility and people-to-people interaction (Shringla, 2018). Alongside this, India's Lines of Credit to Bangladesh supported railway modernisation, power generation, and transport infrastructure, while also contributing to broader economic integration between eastern South Asia and Southeast Asia. However, following the political transition in Bangladesh in 2024, several of these connectivity services

have remained largely suspended at the time of writing this paper. In Nepal, the Jaynagar–Kurtha railway and the Motihari–Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline strengthened cross-border connectivity and facilitated growing economic interaction. Hydropower cooperation with Bhutan deepened long-standing energy interdependence, making electricity trade an important component of bilateral relations (Barua, 2024). In the energy sector, India’s decision to relax the Cross-Border Trade of Electricity (CBIT) guidelines in 2018 further facilitated regional electricity cooperation (Wu, 2024) and opened greater possibilities for the emergence of a more integrated South Asian power market.

Connectivity initiatives also acquired strategic importance in relation to India’s Northeast. Historically, the region remained geographically constrained and economically peripheral due in part to the disruption of older trade routes during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Corridor and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Highway therefore sought not only to improve transport infrastructure but also to integrate the Northeast more closely with Southeast Asian markets and regional supply chains. In this sense, connectivity became linked with broader ideas of regional integration, economic development, and strategic access.

India’s connectivity initiatives further expanded into the maritime domain and the wider Indo-Pacific region. The SAGAR framework highlighted the importance of maritime cooperation, regional stability, and capacity-building across the Indian Ocean (Jaishankar, 2020). Projects such as Chabahar Port and participation in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) reflected attempts to improve access to Central Asia and Eurasia while bypassing Pakistan (Mukhia & Manhas, 2025). More recently, the announcement of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the 2023 G20 summit indicated India’s ambition to participate in larger transregional connectivity frameworks linking South Asia, the Gulf, and Europe (RIS, 2025).

Taken together, these developments point towards a broader transformation in India’s external engagement. Connectivity, once relatively marginal within India’s foreign policy thinking, increasingly operates as an important mechanism through which India seeks to expand regional linkages, deepen economic interaction, and create networks of interdependence across South Asia and beyond. As Lin Wu (2024) notes, the Modi government has sought to combine infrastructure and connectivity initiatives with broader public diplomacy narratives, presenting India as *Vishwamitra* (friend of the world), the voice of the Global South, and *Vishguru* (mentor

of the world), while advocating ideas such as “one region, one family, one future.” At the same time, India’s strategic location provides it with considerable influence in facilitating regional cooperation, particularly in the energy sector, since most South Asian states remain geographically connected through Indian territory (Kaushik, 2025). While this transition has neither been uniform nor free from limitations, it nevertheless reflects a noticeable movement from a more inward-oriented strategic outlook towards a foreign policy increasingly shaped by regional integration and connectivity politics.

### **Strategic Competition and India’s Response**

The growing importance of connectivity in international politics cannot be separated from the broader strategic competition unfolding across Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In recent years, infrastructure, transport corridors, energy networks, ports, and digital systems have increasingly become instruments through which states seek to shape regional order and expand influence. Within this changing environment, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as one of the most significant connectivity projects of the contemporary period, reshaping both economic and geopolitical dynamics across multiple regions.

As Naskar (2024) argues, the BRI operates simultaneously in economic and strategic domains. Through investments in ports, railways, highways, industrial corridors, and digital infrastructure, China extends not only capital and trade networks but also institutional influence and strategic presence. Bhattacharyya (2010) similarly highlights how China combines trade, diplomacy, and connectivity to consolidate influence across South and Southeast Asia. Huang (2015), as cited in Flint and Zhu (2018), further interprets the BRI as a broader order-shaping project capable of restructuring regional hierarchies and patterns of dependence. In this sense, connectivity becomes closely linked with geoeconomic power, where infrastructure projects generate not merely economic integration but also long-term strategic influence.

China’s expanding presence has become particularly visible in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of the BRI, carries major strategic implications for India because it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which India claims as its own territory. Beyond the sovereignty dimension, CPEC also strengthens China’s long-term strategic access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port. Similarly, Chinese infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the

Maldives indicate Beijing's growing regional footprint within India's immediate neighbourhood.

India's response to these developments, however, has not taken the form of direct confrontation or blanket rejection. Instead, India has gradually attempted to expand its own connectivity initiatives while simultaneously strengthening regional partnerships and strategic alternatives. Gowdara Shivamurthy and Bose (2023) describe this approach as one shaped by an "invisible hand," where India seeks to reinforce regional integration through connectivity, trade, and economic engagement rather than through overt coercive strategies.

A significant aspect of India's response has involved strengthening connectivity within its immediate neighbourhood. Railway restoration projects and inland waterway cooperation with Bangladesh, hydropower and electricity trade with Bhutan and Nepal, and energy partnerships with Sri Lanka reflect attempts to deepen regional linkages through economic interaction and infrastructural cooperation. These initiatives are often framed not in terms of dependency, but in terms of partnership, consultation, and mutual benefit (Anirudhan & Mathew, 2024). Nevertheless, they also carry strategic implications by increasing India's economic presence and reinforcing patterns of regional interdependence.

Projects such as Chabahar Port in Iran and participation in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) further reflect India's efforts to diversify strategic access routes beyond the constraints imposed by geography and regional politics. Chabahar provides India with access to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan, thereby functioning both as an economic initiative and as a strategic alternative to connectivity corridors linked to China and Pakistan. In this regard, projects such as CPEC and Chabahar increasingly appear as competing visions of regional connectivity and strategic access.

India's strategic response has also expanded into the maritime and Indo-Pacific domains. The SAGAR framework emphasises maritime security, regional cooperation, and capacity-building across the Indian Ocean region (Jaishankar, 2020). Similarly, the Indo-Pacific vision increasingly situates connectivity within a larger geopolitical framework involving maritime routes, supply chains, and strategic partnerships. Rather than relying solely on bilateral projects, India has increasingly pursued connectivity through coalitional and minilateral arrangements.

Partnerships with countries such as Japan, the United States, Australia, and members of the European Union illustrate this broader trend. Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt complement India's regional connectivity efforts, particularly in Bangladesh and India's northeast. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), developed jointly by India and Japan, represents an attempt to promote alternative models of connectivity centred on consultation, sustainability, and capacity-building (Barua, 2024).

Similarly, frameworks such as the Quad and initiatives like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) indicate the emergence of coalition-based connectivity strategies. Announced during the 2023 G20 summit, IMEC seeks to connect India with the Gulf and Europe through integrated rail, shipping, digital, and energy infrastructure (RIS, 2025). Beyond its economic significance, IMEC also reflects the growing strategic convergence between India, the United States, European actors, and Gulf States in shaping alternative regional connectivity architectures.

At the same time, India's approach differs in important ways from China's BRI model. Indian policymakers frequently emphasise consultation, transparency, sustainability, and respect for sovereignty within connectivity partnerships (Jaishankar, 2020). This distinction is often presented as a normative alternative to concerns surrounding debt dependency and strategic asymmetry associated with some BRI projects. However, India's model also faces practical limitations. Implementation delays, bureaucratic constraints, uneven financing capacity, and infrastructural gaps continue to affect the pace of project execution. In comparative terms, China's ability to mobilise large-scale financial resources and rapidly implement infrastructure projects often provides it with a significant advantage.

Nevertheless, India–China relations in the connectivity domain cannot be understood entirely through the language of rivalry. As Roy-Chaudhury (2017) observes, the relationship increasingly reflects a condition of “coopetition,” involving simultaneous competition and selective cooperation. While both countries compete for influence across South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, they also continue to interact within multilateral frameworks such as BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Chaturvedy (2019) similarly notes that India's approach combines strategic caution with pragmatic engagement, balancing periods of tension—such as Doklam—with attempts to preserve dialogue through initiatives like the Wuhan informal summit.

Taken together, India's response to the changing regional connectivity landscape reflects a strategy of calibrated engagement rather than outright confrontation. Connectivity increasingly functions as a central arena through which geopolitical competition, regional influence, and strategic partnerships are negotiated. India's initiatives seek not only to improve infrastructure and economic integration but also to shape patterns of regional order in an increasingly interconnected and geoeconomic international environment.

## **Findings**

The discussion in this paper suggests that connectivity has gradually moved from the margins of India's foreign policy thinking to become an increasingly important component of its external engagement. Although concerns related to sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity continue to remain central, India's foreign policy today reflects a much greater emphasis on regional linkages, cross-border interaction, and economic integration than in earlier decades. In this sense, the paper identifies a broader movement from inwardness towards a more interdependent regional outlook.

One of the central findings of the study is that India's changing approach to connectivity is closely tied to wider transformations in the international system. In the early decades after independence, India's external orientation remained shaped largely by developmental self-reliance and strategic caution. Borders were viewed primarily through the lens of territorial defence, while cross-border infrastructure and economic integration occupied a relatively limited place within foreign policy thinking. The post-Cold War period initiated a gradual transition towards greater outward engagement, but it is particularly after 2014 that connectivity became more visible as an organising principle within India's regional diplomacy. Policies such as Neighbourhood First, Act East, SAGAR, and the Indo-Pacific framework illustrate this shift.

A second major finding is that connectivity in the contemporary period cannot be understood solely as a developmental exercise. Rather, it increasingly operates within a broader geoeconomic framework where infrastructure, trade, transport, energy, and digital systems function as instruments of strategic influence and statecraft. Cross-border railways, pipelines, electricity grids, maritime routes, and logistics corridors facilitate movement and economic exchange, but they also generate more sustained forms of interaction and dependence among

states. In this regard, the paper finds that connectivity contributes to the creation of regional interdependence through repeated flows of goods, capital, energy, and communication.

India's initiatives in South Asia and beyond reflect this evolving logic. Railway restoration with Bangladesh, hydropower cooperation with Bhutan, petroleum and electricity connectivity with Nepal, and transport corridors through Myanmar demonstrate how infrastructure projects increasingly operate as mechanisms for deepening economic integration and regional linkage-building. Such projects do not simply reduce geographical barriers; they also create networks of interaction that shape long-term political and strategic relationships. The paper therefore finds that connectivity has become linked not only with development and trade, but also with the broader restructuring of regional relationships.

At the same time, the study finds that India's connectivity initiatives unfold within a highly competitive geopolitical environment shaped significantly by the rise of China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's expanding infrastructural presence across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean has altered regional strategic dynamics by embedding trade, finance, and infrastructure within broader patterns of influence. India's response has largely taken the form of expanding alternative connectivity frameworks through projects such as Chabahar Port, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), IMEC, and regional connectivity initiatives with neighbouring states.

However, the paper also finds that India's approach differs from China's in important ways. Indian connectivity initiatives are frequently framed around consultation, partnership, sustainability, and respect for sovereignty rather than around large-scale unviable financing and rapid infrastructure expansion alone. This distinction forms an important part of India's diplomatic narrative, particularly in relation to concerns surrounding debt dependency and strategic asymmetry associated with some BRI projects. Nevertheless, the study also indicates that India's model faces practical limitations, including implementation delays, bureaucratic obstacles, infrastructural gaps, and uneven financial capacity.

Another important finding is that the relationship between India and China in the connectivity domain is not defined solely by confrontation. Instead, it reflects a more complex pattern of competition and coexistence, or what Roy-Chaudhury (2017) describes as "coopetition." While both countries compete for influence and strategic space across the region, they also continue to engage within multilateral institutions such as BRICS, AIIB, and the SCO. This suggests

that contemporary connectivity politics cannot be reduced to simple binaries of rivalry or cooperation; rather, it involves overlapping forms of strategic competition, economic engagement, and regional negotiation.

Finally, the paper finds that connectivity increasingly reflects a broader transformation in the nature of power itself. Influence in the contemporary international system is exercised not only through military strength or territorial control, but also through infrastructure networks, supply chains, transport corridors, energy systems, and digital linkages. In this context, India's foreign policy shift towards connectivity reflects an attempt to adapt to an increasingly interconnected and geoeconomic international order where regional influence is shaped as much by networks and interdependence as by conventional geopolitical capabilities alone.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the paper attempts to examine connectivity as an important driver of India's foreign policy shift in an age of geoeconomics, certain limitations shape the scope of the analysis. These limitations arise both from the methodological approach adopted in the study and from the broader complexity of the subject itself.

First, the study primarily follows a qualitative and interpretive approach based on policy documents, official statements, speeches, and secondary academic literature. This allows the paper to analyse broader policy trends, strategic narratives, and conceptual shifts, but it does not provide a systematic quantitative assessment of the economic or strategic outcomes of individual connectivity projects. Questions relating to trade volumes, investment flows, project efficiency, or measurable economic impact therefore remain beyond the detailed scope of this study.

Second, the paper approaches India's foreign policy evolution through a broad historical and analytical lens. While this helps in identifying larger transitions from inwardness towards greater regional engagement, it inevitably simplifies certain complexities and variations across time periods and regions. India's connectivity initiatives themselves remain uneven in terms of implementation, strategic priorities, and outcomes, and not all projects have progressed with similar intensity or effectiveness.

Third, although the paper situates connectivity within the framework of geoeconomics and interdependence, connectivity alone does not fully explain India's foreign policy

transformation. Domestic political considerations, leadership choices, economic reforms, security concerns, and changes in the wider international order also shape India's external orientation in important ways. The present study focuses primarily on connectivity as one significant dimension among these broader processes rather than attempting a comprehensive explanation of Indian foreign policy as a whole.

The paper also concentrates mainly on South Asia and selected regions connected to India's immediate strategic environment, including parts of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. As a result, India's connectivity initiatives in regions such as Africa, Central Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific are discussed only selectively. A more extensive regional comparison would require a broader empirical framework than the present study allows.

Finally, the discussion on China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's strategic response remains interpretive in nature and is based largely on available secondary sources. While the paper identifies patterns of competition, interdependence, and strategic positioning, a more detailed comparative study of financing structures, project-level outcomes, and long-term regional impacts would require deeper empirical investigation.

These limitations do not invalidate the broader argument of the paper, but they indicate areas where further research can develop a more detailed understanding of connectivity, interdependence, and geoeconomic statecraft in India's foreign policy.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion in this paper has shown that connectivity has gradually become an increasingly important feature of India's foreign policy in the contemporary period. Although India's external orientation in the decades following independence remained shaped largely by concerns of sovereignty, territorial security, and domestic consolidation, changes in the regional and global environment gradually encouraged a greater emphasis on external engagement and regional linkage-building. The transition was neither immediate nor uniform, yet over time connectivity moved from being a relatively marginal concern to a more visible component of India's diplomatic and strategic outlook.

The paper argues that this shift needs to be understood within the wider transformation of the international order, where geoeconomic considerations increasingly shape patterns of influence and competition. Infrastructure, transport corridors, energy networks, maritime routes, and

digital systems are no longer viewed solely as developmental mechanisms; they have also become instruments through which states pursue strategic interests, create regional linkages, and shape political environments. In this changing context, India's connectivity initiatives reflect an attempt to reposition itself within an increasingly interconnected regional and global order.

At the same time, the significance of connectivity lies not only in the construction of infrastructure itself, but also in the forms of interaction and interdependence that such linkages generate over time. Cross-border railways, pipelines, electricity trade, transport corridors, and maritime cooperation create repeated flows of goods, energy, people, and information that gradually deepen regional interconnectedness. India's engagement with neighbouring countries through projects involving Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar illustrates how connectivity increasingly functions as a mechanism for sustaining economic integration and regional interaction.

The paper also highlights that India's connectivity turn cannot be separated from the broader strategic environment shaped by China's rise and the Belt and Road Initiative. China's expanding infrastructural and financial presence across Asia and the Indian Ocean has transformed connectivity into a major arena of geopolitical competition. India's response, however, has largely taken the form of expanding alternative frameworks of regional engagement through initiatives such as Chabahar, the International North-South Transport Corridor, IMEC, SAGAR, and partnerships with actors such as Japan, the United States, and the European Union. In this sense, connectivity increasingly operates not only as development policy, but also as a form of strategic positioning within a competitive geoeconomic landscape.

Ultimately, the paper argues that India's growing emphasis on connectivity reflects a wider transformation in the nature of power and foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Regional influence today is exercised not only through military capabilities or territorial control, but increasingly through networks, infrastructure systems, economic linkages, and patterns of interdependence. India's foreign policy shift from inwardness towards greater regional connectivity therefore represents more than a change in developmental priorities alone; it reflects an adaptation to an international order where strategic influence is increasingly embedded within the politics of connectivity itself.

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