



INDIA'S KEY FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES WITH SRI LANKA - AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

*India's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution in the twenty-first century. India and Sri Lanka hold a special strategic position of their close proximity. There are maritime and historical linkages to Sri Lanka. China has become more involved in Sri Lanka. Due to this, India's foreign policy has become strategic and proactive. This study examines India's foreign policy priorities towards Sri Lanka. It focuses on neighborhood diplomacy, maritime security, regional cooperation, and economic engagement. The study discovers the impact of changing geopolitical conditions on bilateral relations. The research follows a descriptive and analytical approach. Based on secondary data collected from government reports, policy documents, books, journal articles, and institutional publications. The findings show that Sri Lanka holds a vital place in India's foreign policy. The **Neighbourhood First** policy gives priority to stronger ties with neighbouring countries. The **SAGAR** doctrine also recognizes Sri Lanka as an important maritime partner. India's Indo-Pacific strategy further highlights the island's strategic value. The study finds that China's growing presence in Sri Lanka has encouraged India to strengthen its regional engagement. India's assistance during Sri Lanka's economic crisis also improved bilateral trust and cooperation. The study concludes that maritime security will remain a key priority. Economic diplomacy and regional stability will continue to shape India-Sri Lanka relations. Geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean will also influence India's future foreign policy towards Sri Lanka.*

Keywords: *India, Sri Lanka, Foreign Policy, Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security, Neighbourhood First, Regional Cooperation, Strategic Diplomacy.*

Introduction

Foreign policy means the framework of policies and principles adopted by a nation to manage its relations with other countries and international institutions. It designed to protect national interests, maintain sovereignty, ensure security, promote economic growth, and strengthen international cooperation. India's foreign policy has changed predominantly since its independence in 1947. Primarily guided by the principles of non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, and strategic autonomy, India's foreign policy today reflects a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional approach aimed at balancing national interests with global responsibilities.

The post-Cold War international order, globalization, technological advancements, changing security dynamics, climate change, economic interdependence, and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific province have transformed India's external rendezvous. India seeks to establish itself as a major global power by fostering strong regional partnerships. It also aims to ensure peace and stability across South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. (Mohan, 2015).

India's foreign policy priorities in the contemporary period include:

1. Promoting regional peace, stability, and neighbourhood cooperation.
2. Geostrategic Significance of Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean



3. Economic diplomacy with trade expansion.
4. Counter-terrorism and national security.
5. Energy Security and Regional Connectivity.
6. Indo-Pacific strategic partnerships.
7. Climate Resilience, Diplomacy, and Sustainable Development.
8. Strengthening Global Governance Institutions.

Sri Lanka's location in the Indian Ocean has increased its geopolitical relevance, making it an important component of India's maritime and security policy (Pant, 2019). India's "Neighborhood First" policy emphasizes regional cooperation, economic integration, and the strengthening of relations with neighboring countries. Its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine focuses on maritime stability, security, and strategic partnerships across the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka is central to these initiatives because developments in Sri Lanka directly influence India's regional security interests. The increasing presence of China in Sri Lanka has added a new dimension to India-Sri Lanka relations. This involvement is evident through infrastructure projects, port development initiatives, and investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India views these developments as part of a broader geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region (Brewster, 2018).

Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 underscored India's role as a reliable regional partner. It also demonstrated India's position as the first responder during times of crisis. India provided extensive economic assistance, humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka in the crisis period, strengthening bilateral trust and cooperation. This research paper aims to examine India's key foreign policy priorities with special reference to Sri Lanka. It focuses on regional diplomacy, maritime security, economic cooperation, and global geopolitical changes.

Statement of the Problem

India's foreign policy priorities significantly influenced by globalization. Climate change, energy insecurity, terrorism, economic interdependence, and technological advancements have shaped its diplomatic and strategic agenda. Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 created new diplomatic challenges for India and in the South Asian region. The crisis generated economic and strategic concerns that required regional cooperation and support. India has responded by focusing on regional stability, economic diplomacy, and maritime security in its engagement with Sri Lanka. These efforts, challenges in political instability, ethnic issues, debt dependency, and geopolitical competition continue to affect bilateral relations. Therefore, it is essential to examine India's foreign policy priorities toward Sri Lanka in the context of broader regional and global developments.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives

1. To examine India's key foreign policy priorities in the contemporary global order.
2. To analyze the strategic importance of Sri Lanka in India's foreign policy.
3. To study the role of neighbourhood diplomacy in India-Sri Lanka relations.
4. To evaluate the impact of globalization and geopolitical changes on bilateral relations.
5. To analyze how maritime security and Indo-Pacific cooperation influence regional and global security dynamics.
6. To study India's economic and humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka.
7. To suggest policy measures for strengthening Indo-Sri Lankan relations.



Research Questions

1. What are the major priorities of India's foreign policy?
2. Why is Sri Lanka strategically important to India?
3. How does the "Neighbourhood First" policy influence Indo-Sri Lankan relations?
4. What role does maritime security play in bilateral cooperation?
5. How have global geopolitical changes affected India-Sri Lanka relations?
6. What impact has China's expanding presence in Sri Lanka had on India's strategic interests?
7. How did India respond to Sri Lanka's economic crisis?

Hypotheses

H1 Significant relationship exists between India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and enhanced bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

H2 Economic cooperation positively influences diplomatic relations among India and Sri Lanka.

H3 Global geopolitical competition significantly impacts India's strategic engagement relating to Sri Lanka.

H4 Maritime security cooperation contributes to strategic stability in the Indian Ocean Region..

H5 India's humanitarian assistance during Sri Lanka's economic crisis improved bilateral trust and cooperation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It focuses on examining India's foreign policy priorities and their implications for India-Sri Lanka relations.

Sources of Data

The present study based on secondary data collected from various published sources. The required data collected from Ministry of External Affairs reports, Government publications, books, journal articles, policy papers, and reports of research institutions. In addition, newspaper reports, publications of international organizations, official speeches, and diplomatic statements used to support the analysis.

Tools for Analysis

The study employs the following tools Comparative analysis, Trend analysis, Policy analysis and Descriptive interpretation. Comparative analysis to compare India-Sri Lanka relations across different periods. Trend analysis to identify the changing patterns and developments of India-Sri Lanka relations over time. Policy analysis to examine the influences of major bilateral policies and agreements, and explain the findings based on historical and secondary data.

Scope of the Study

This study primarily focuses on India's foreign policy priorities with special reference to Sri Lanka. It emphasizes the implications of these priorities for regional economic cooperation. It examines the importance of maritime trade security and economic diplomacy in strengthening bilateral relations. It analyzes the impact of the evolving global economic and geopolitical environment on India-Sri Lanka relations. Finally, it examines the role of bilateral cooperation in enhancing trade connectivity and creating investment opportunities supports sustainable economic growth in the region.



Limitations of the Study

- The study based only on secondary data.
- The research is restricted to India-Sri Lanka relations.
- Rapid geopolitical changes may alter policy dynamics in the future.

Review of Literature

Several scholars, researchers, diplomats, and policy analysts have examined India's foreign policy and Indo-Sri Lankan relations from different perspectives. Table 1 summarizes the review of literature related to India–Sri Lanka relations. The table provides a clear understanding of the existing body of knowledge and serves as the foundation for identifying research gaps addressed in the present study.

Table 1:Review of Literature

S. No.	Theme	Author(s) & Year	Major Findings
1	Strategic Transformation of India's Foreign Policy	Mohan (2015)	Explained that India's foreign policy has evolved from an idealistic approach to a more realistic and pragmatic one due to changing geopolitical realities and emerging strategic challenges.
		Sridharan (2017)	Argued that India increasingly follows strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, replacing the traditional policy of non-alignment.
		Raja Mohan (2020)	Observed that India's foreign policy has become more proactive in addressing regional and global security concerns, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.
		Saran (2022)	Highlighted that economic interests, national security priorities, increasingly influence India's diplomatic engagements and global power shifts.
2	Neighborhood Policy and Regional Stability	Pant (2019)	Emphasized that India's neighborhood policy closely linked to regional peace and security.
		Jacob (2020)	Stated that the "Neighborhood First" policy aims to strengthen connectivity, economic cooperation, and security partnerships with neighboring countries.
		Kugiel (2021)	Argued that India's engagement with South Asian countries is important for continuing regional stability and countering external influences.
		Saran (2023)	Noted that regional cooperation remains a key pillar of India's foreign policy in addressing economic and security challenges.
3	Maritime Security and Indo-Pacific Cooperation	Mohan (2015)	Highlighted the growing importance of maritime security in India's foreign policy framework.
		Mallempati (2025)	Examined India–Sri Lanka maritime cooperation and observed that naval exercises and security partnerships have strengthened bilateral relations.



		Brewster (2020)	Argued that the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a strategic region where maritime security is important for maintaining peace and trade.
		Scott (2021)	Emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation to address maritime threats and ensure freedom of navigation.
4	Geopolitical Competition in the Indian Ocean Region	Brewster (2018)	Examined China's growing influence in South Asia and its implications for India's strategic interests.
		Hall (2017)	Argued that the Indian Ocean has become a focal point of geopolitical rivalry among major powers.
		Rehman (2022)	Observed that strategic competition in the Indian Ocean increasingly shapes regional security dynamics.
		Panda (2024)	Noted that infrastructure investments and maritime connectivity projects have become instruments of geopolitical influence.
5	Economic Cooperation and Bilateral Integration	Rafi (2025)	Highlighted the importance of trade, connectivity, tourism, and energy cooperation in strengthening India–Sri Lanka relations.
		Kelegama (2018)	Argued that economic integration contributes significantly to regional development and mutual prosperity.
		Weerakoon (2021)	Emphasized the role of bilateral trade agreements and investment flows in promoting economic cooperation.
		Das (2023)	Observed that enhanced connectivity and economic partnerships create new opportunities for growth and regional integration.
6	India–Sri Lanka Defence and Security Relations	Mallempati (2025)	Discussed the expansion of defense cooperation through joint naval exercises and maritime security initiatives.
		Suryanarayan (2019)	Highlighted the strategic importance of defense cooperation in enhancing peace and security in the Indian Ocean Region.
		Brewster (2020)	Noted that security partnerships have become increasingly important in addressing non-traditional security threats.
		Panda (2024)	Argued that defense cooperation contributes to strengthening mutual trust and regional security.
7	India's Response to Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis	Reuters (2025)	Reported that India extended nearly USD 4 billion in assistance during Sri Lanka's economic crisis.
		World Bank (2024)	Recognized India's support in addressing Sri Lanka's immediate economic and humanitarian challenges.



	IMF (2024)	Indicated that India's financial assistance is an important role in stabilizing Sri Lanka's economy.
	Observer Research Foundation (2025)	Noted that India's timely intervention strengthened bilateral trust and reinforced its image as a reliable regional partner.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature highlights the importance of India's foreign policy in shaping India–Sri Lanka relations. It emphasizes the role of neighborhood diplomacy and maritime security in strengthening bilateral ties. The studies underline the significance of economic cooperation and geopolitical competition in influencing the relationship between the two countries. Most of the studies focus on these aspects independently. There is paucity of comprehensive research that integrates foreign policy priorities within a single analytical framework. Existing studies examine regional economic cooperation, maritime security, and economic diplomacy as separate dimensions. Limited attention has given to analyzing these aspects together in the context of changing global geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a holistic examination of India's foreign policy priorities with special reference to Sri Lanka.

Theoretical Framework

This study based on the theory of Realism and Regionalism in international relations. Table 2 summarizes the theoretical framework adopted for the study. It presents the relevant theories, their key proponents, core concepts, applications to India–Sri Lanka relations, and key elements. These theories provide a strong conceptual framework for analysing India–Sri Lanka relations. They help explain the historical evolution, strategic interests, and economic cooperation between the two countries. They also support a systematic analysis of regional dynamics and bilateral relations.

Table 2: Theoretical Framework

Theory	Key Proponent	Core Concept	Application to India–Sri Lanka Relations	Key Elements
Realism Theory	Morgenthau (1948)	States primarily act to protect their national interests, security, and power in an anarchic international system.	India's foreign policy toward Sri Lanka understood through a realist perspective as it seeks to safeguard strategic interests and strengthen its position in the region.	Protection of maritime security. Countering external influence. Maintaining regional dominance. Safeguarding national interests
Regionalism Theory	Nye (1968); Haas (1958)	Regional cooperation among neighbouring countries promotes economic growth, security, stability, and development.	India's "Neighbourhood First" policy reflects regionalist principles by promoting cooperation and integration with Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries.	Economic integration. Regional connectivity. Regional stability. Cultural cooperation. Collective security



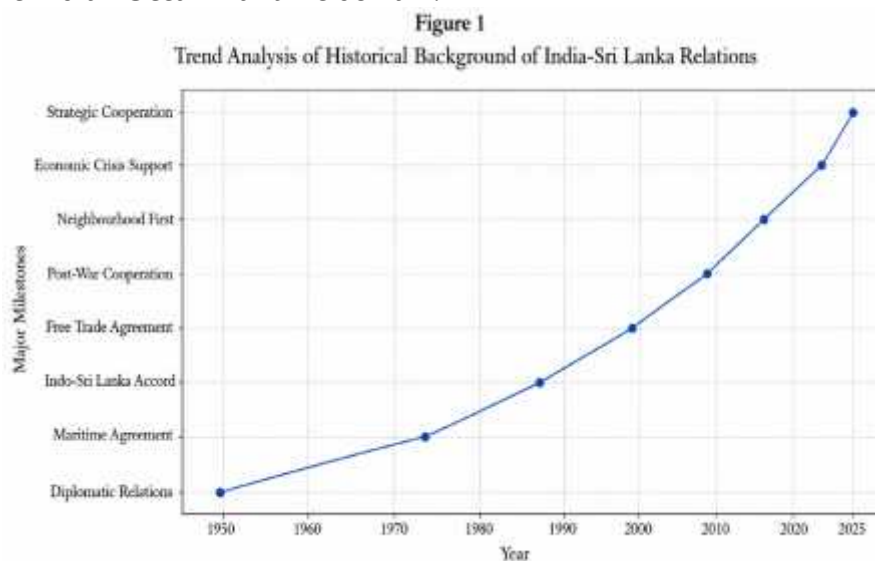
Theory	Key Proponent	Core Concept	Application to India–Sri Lanka Relations	Key Elements
Theoretical Implication	—	Realism focuses on security and strategic interests, While regionalism emphasizes cooperation and integration.	Together, these theories explain India's foreign policy priorities toward Sri Lanka in strategic security concerns and regional cooperation objectives.	Strategic competition Economic cooperation Maritime security Regional development

Origins and Evolution of India–Sri Lanka Relations

India and Sri Lanka share a long history of cultural, religious, economic, and political interactions. These relations date back to ancient times and have evolved through different historical periods. Over time, diplomatic cooperation and economic partnerships have further strengthened the association between the two countries. Strategic and maritime cooperation has also become an important aspect of bilateral engagement in recent decades. **Table 4** presents the Origins and Evolution of India–Sri Lanka Relations across different periods. It gives the major characteristics, key areas of cooperation, and future implications associated with each period. The table provides a chronological understanding of the evolution of India–Sri Lanka relations and their significance for regional cooperation and stability.

Table 4: Origins and Evolution of India–Sri Lanka Relations

Figure 1 presents a trend analysis of the major milestones in the historical background of India–Sri Lanka relations from 1948 to 2025. The figure illustrates the chronological progression of key events, including the establishment of diplomatic relations, maritime cooperation, the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord, the Free Trade Agreement, post-war cooperation, the Neighbourhood First policy, economic crisis support, and strategic cooperation. These milestones demonstrate the gradual transformation of bilateral relations from traditional diplomatic engagement to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The trend also reflects India's increasing role in promoting regional stability, economic development, and security in the Indian Ocean maritime domain.





India's Key Foreign Policy Priorities:

Table 3 presents the key foreign policy priorities of India with special reference to its relations with Sri Lanka. It identifies the major dimensions of India's foreign policy. The table provides a brief description of each foreign policy dimension. It also outlines the key objectives and priorities associated with these dimensions. The significance of each priority for India–Sri Lanka relations highlighted. These priorities contribute to strengthening bilateral cooperation between the two countries. They also promote regional stability and strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean maritime domain.

Table 3: Key Foreign Policy Priorities of India with Special Reference to Sri Lanka

Dimension	Description	Key Objectives/Priorities	Significance for India–Sri Lanka Relations
Neighbourhood First Policy	India's "Neighbourhood First" policy emphasizes strengthening relations with neighbouring countries through cooperation, connectivity, economic integration, and regional stability.	Promote peace and stability in South Asia. Strengthen trade and connectivity Enhance regional cooperation Prevent external strategic influence Support economic development	Sri Lanka occupies an important place in this policy because instability in Sri Lanka directly affects India's security interests. According to Jacob (2020), India's neighbourhood policy reflects both strategic and developmental objectives.
Maritime Security	Maritime security has become a major priority in India's foreign policy due to the importance of the Indian Ocean for global trade and energy transportation.	Protection of sea lanes Anti-piracy operations Naval modernization Maritime domain awareness Disaster relief cooperation Strategic naval partnerships	Sri Lanka's location near vital sea lanes makes it strategically important for India's maritime security architecture. The SAGAR doctrine emphasizes "Security and Growth for All in the Region."
Economic Diplomacy	Economic diplomacy plays a vital role in India's external relations by promoting economic cooperation and development.	Trade expansion Foreign direct investment Infrastructure development Technology cooperation Energy partnerships	India has emerged as Sri Lanka's largest trading partners. Bilateral trade, tourism, and investment have increased significantly in recent years.
Indo-Pacific Strategy	The Indo-Pacific region has become a major geopolitical and strategic focus of India's foreign policy.	Freedom of navigation Rule-based order Maritime security Strategic cooperation Connectivity	Sri Lanka's strategic location enhances its importance in India's Indo-Pacific strategy. India collaborates with countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and France under Indo-Pacific initiatives.



Dimension	Description	Key Objectives/Priorities	Significance for India–Sri Lanka Relations
Climate Diplomacy and Sustainable Development	India actively participates in global climate initiatives and promotes sustainable development and environmental protection.	Renewable energy cooperation Disaster management Sustainable infrastructure Environmental protection	Climate change and natural disasters affect both India and Sri Lanka, creating opportunities for bilateral cooperation in sustainable development and climate resilience.

India and Sri Lanka share a close relationship that has become increasingly important in the changing geopolitical and economic environment of the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka's strategic location near major international shipping routes makes it a key partner in India's foreign and maritime security policy. China is expanding its strategic presence in Sri Lanka through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its investments in Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City, has posed significant strategic challenges for India and intensified geopolitical competition in the region. India has reinforced its engagement with Sri Lanka by expanding economic cooperation, infrastructure development, investment, and diplomatic partnerships. During Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022, India played a crucial role by providing financial assistance, fuel, food, medicines, and humanitarian support, demonstrating its assurance to the **Neighbourhood First** policy and reinforcing mutual trust. The two countries have also enhanced cooperation in maritime security through joint naval exercises, coast guard collaboration, and surveillance initiatives to ensure peace and stability in the Indian Ocean. Under India's **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** vision, Sri Lanka continues to be an important partner in promoting regional security and maritime cooperation. Shared cultural heritage, religious traditions, educational exchanges, and people-to-people interactions between India and Sri Lanka continue to strengthen their long-standing friendship. These strategic, economic, security and cultural linkages have strengthened the partnership between India and Sri Lanka. Together, they continue to play a vital role in promoting peace, regional cooperation, and sustainable development.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study's analysis based on secondary data indicates the following:

A. Growing Strategic Importance

Sri Lanka's importance in India's foreign policy has increased due to

- Maritime security concerns
- Indo-Pacific competition
- China's regional influence

B. Expansion of Economic Cooperation: Trade, investment, tourism, and infrastructure cooperation have significantly expanded.

Economic diplomacy remains central to bilateral engagement.

C. Maritime Security Cooperation: Naval exercises and maritime partnerships have strengthened regional security cooperation.

D. Impact of Economic Crisis: India's humanitarian assistance improved bilateral trust and strengthened India's image as a responsible regional power.



E. Influence of Global Changes: Global geopolitical changes continue to shape India-Sri Lanka relations.

India increasingly adopts a pragmatic and strategic approach toward regional diplomacy.

Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are:

1. Sri Lanka occupies a central position in India's "Neighbourhood First" policy.
2. Maritime security is a major component of Indo-Sri Lankan relations.
3. India's economic diplomacy significantly influences bilateral cooperation.
4. China's growing presence in Sri Lanka has intensified strategic competition.
5. India's humanitarian assistance during Sri Lanka's economic crisis strengthened bilateral trust.
6. The Indo-Pacific strategy has increased Sri Lanka's geopolitical importance.
7. Regional organizations such as BIMSTEC are becoming increasingly significant.
8. Cultural and historical ties continue to strengthen people-to-people relations.
9. India's foreign policy increasingly reflects strategic autonomy and multi-alignment.
10. Globalization and technological changes continue to influence bilateral engagement.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed:

A. Strengthening Economic Partnerships

India and Sri Lanka should expand:

- Trade cooperation
- Investment partnerships
- Tourism promotion
- Infrastructure projects

B. Expanding Maritime Security Cooperation

Both countries should strengthen:

- Naval exercises
- Maritime surveillance
- Disaster response cooperation
- Coast guard coordination

C. Promoting Connectivity

Improved connectivity through:

- Ferry services
- Port development
- Air transport
- Digital infrastructure

will enhance regional integration.

D. Cultural Diplomacy: Educational exchanges, tourism, and cultural programs should be expanded to strengthen people-to-people ties.

E. Climate and Disaster Cooperation

India and Sri Lanka should cooperate on:



- Climate resilience
- Coastal protection
- Renewable energy
- Disaster management

F. Balanced Strategic Engagement

India should continue balancing strategic competition with constructive diplomacy and regional cooperation.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy has evolved expressively in response to changing regional and global realities. Today, India seeks to balance strategic autonomy, economic growth, regional cooperation, and global engagement. Among neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka occupies a uniquely important position due to its geographical location, maritime significance, historical ties, and geopolitical relevance. India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, SAGAR doctrine, and Indo-Pacific strategy collectively emphasize the importance of Sri Lanka in India's regional security and economic priorities. Maritime security, economic diplomacy, connectivity, and humanitarian cooperation have become major pillars of bilateral relations.

The rise of China and increasing geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean Region have further enhanced Sri Lanka's strategic significance. India's proactive support during Sri Lanka's economic crisis demonstrated regional responsibility and strengthened bilateral trust.

Despite challenges such as political instability, debt dependency, and external strategic influence, Indo-Sri Lankan relations continue to expand across multiple sectors. The future of bilateral relations depends on mutual trust, sustainable development, economic cooperation, maritime security, and regional stability. India's foreign policy toward Sri Lanka ultimately reflects broader transformations in India's global role as an emerging power seeking peace, prosperity, and strategic influence in the twenty-first century.

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