

India's Conciliatory Neighbourhood Policy

What is the issue?

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- The government's foreign policy moves over the past few months represent an unannounced but profound shift in its thinking about the neighbourhood.

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- This assumes significance in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

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What were the perceptible changes?

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- **China** - The peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff had facilitated the possibility for a rapprochement between the India and China.

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- Mr. Modi's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Xiamen last year also enhanced the scope for positive posturing from both sides.

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- Significantly, India hadn't opposed the construction of bunkers and helipads by the Chinese army at the border near the site of the Doklam standoff.

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- While China has also stationed a permanent force to man the point, India has maintained that as long as it is within Chinese boundary, it doesn't worry it.

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- India had also visibly toned down planned celebrations marking the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's arrival from Tibet.

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- A flurry of high-level visits are also on the cards and a summit meeting between the topmost political brass is also being planned.

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- The easing of tensions has given out the possibility for progress in resolving the tricky border issues, narrowing trade deficit and other polarising aspects.

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- **Maldieves** - The Maldivian government imposed an emergency and arrested judges and opposition leaders and suspended several MPs recently.
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- Maldives President Abdulla is a close Chinese ally and any hard headed Indian intervention against him would've driven a wedge between India and China.
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- In this context, despite demands from the Maldivian opposition, and the US, the Modi government largely remained aloof of the Maldieviaan crisis.
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- More significantly, India had even ignored the visit of the Pakistani Amry Cheif Gen. Qamar Bajwa to Maldieves.
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- **Nepal** - India had rough patch with Nepal's new PM K.P. Oli during his previous short stint at power due to his open engagements with China.
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- This time too, Mr. Oli emerged on his own with a comfortable majority and has asserted with confidence that he would step up engagement with China.
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- Additionally, there was a perceptible anti-India rhetoric in his campaign and a clear sidelining of Indian concerns regarding the Madesh issue.
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- But despite this confrontational positions, India was quick to reach out to him immediately after his victory and had succeeded in making peace with him.
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- He had recently visited India, which is in continuance with the tradition of Nepali PM making India their first foreign destination.
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- India too had mellowed down its interventionalist attitude and has proposed enhanced cooerpation across sectors (hydel power, infrastructure, oil).
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- **Pakistan** - It was recently revealed that the National Security Advisers (NSA) of both countries had always maintained channels of communication open.
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- This is significant as the tensions that erupted in due to the Pathankot and Uri attacks was thought to have compeletely disrupted all communication lines.
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- Additioanlly, another standoff that got triggered due to the mistreatment of each other's diplomats also seems to have been put to rest amicably.
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- **Others** - In both Bhutan and Bangladesh, the incumbants are more

positively inclined to India than the challengers (opposition).

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- Both nations are facing election this year, the results of which will have significant bearing on relationships ahead.

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- Nevertheless, India has maintained a consistent commitment towards them.

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What are major areas of engagement ahead?

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- **Transactional Relationship** - The softening of India approach towards China will sustain only if there are transactional dividends for both countries
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- India could reduce its rhetoric against China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) and in return ask China to relax its opposition to India's bid for "Nuclear Suppliers Group" (NSG) membership.
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- While India's bid for NSG membership might still get thwarted by others, a Chinese abstention would definitely create a lot of goodwill in Indo-China ties.
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- On BRI, India has 3 major concerns - "territorial integrity, transparency, and financial sustainability", creative solutions are needed to address these.
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- **Leadership** - Several countries are now echoing concerns that were initially raised by India about the environmental and financial risks in BRI projects.
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- This provides India an opportunity to take the lead in designing an international template for infrastructure and connectivity proposals.
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- This would involve consensus building between receiver and donor countries and establishing a structured approach for debt financing.
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- Notably, India currently stands isolated in the neighbourhood due to its rigid opposition to BRI and a pragmatic approach is needed to overcome this.

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- **Multilateralism** - South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit is slated to be held in Pakistan this year.

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- Notably, India had stalled SAARC summit in 2016 as it was annoyed due to terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

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- Most SAARC members were sympathetic to India's concern in 2016, but almost all of them are currently vouching in support of the summit.

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How does the future look?

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- While India hasn't spelt out its position on SAARC, there is a good possibility that it would attend the summit and send out a positive vibe.

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- Overall, it appears that India's hard power strategy in the region is being replaced with a more conciliatory one.

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- While quiet diplomacy has dominated the discourse thus far, further progress would require a more bold and proactive engagement.

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Source: The Hindu

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