

India's Neighbourhood Realignment

What is the issue?

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- India is moving swiftly to ease frictions with neighbouring countries.

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- But any neighbourhood policy can't overlook India equations with Pakistan, which is presently not on desirable terms.

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How has the relationship with China evolved under Modi?

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- **China** - The new regime in 2014 started off the Indo-China diplomacy with much euphoria and personal touch, but things went off track soon.

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- In 2016, China blocked India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

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- This was followed by China blockading India sponsored resolutions in the "UN Security Council" in order to protect Pakistan based terror outfits.

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- Additionally, China stopped sharing hydrological data on Brahmaputra river waters and reports emerged that China is building tunnels to divert water.

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- All these culminated in the 73-day stand-off at Doklam (Bhutan Sikkim China tri-junction), which saw a massive troop mobilisation on both sides.

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- **India's actions** - India vociferously criticised China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) as a project intended to create debt traps.

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- It also stepped with maritime engagements through the annual Malabar Naval Exercise involving U.S., Japan and India.

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- India also played a key role in establishing the Quadrilateral (Quad), which is a security arrangement among India -US - Japan - Australia.

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- **Course Correction** - There currently seems to be a realisation on both sides that the risks of the downward spiral ties are in nobody's interests.
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- Hence, leaders on both sides have moved swiftly to change the confrontational attitude and opt for a more fruitful cooperative engagement.
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- On that note, sustained high level engagements started off almost immediately after the Doklam crisis got diffused.
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- The Indian government was also conscious when it avoided the ceremony that marked the 60th Anniversary of Dalai Lama's India arrival.
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- Also, Australia's request for joining the 2017 Malabar Exercise (which took place near Chennai), was turned down to lower the rhetoric.
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- Recently, the Indian PM visited China and for a long and exhaustive informal meet that is said to have covered almost all aspects of Indo-China relationship.
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- Border patrols on both sides are said to have been instructed clearly to improve communications with the other side and avoid stand-offs.
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- Although no progress has been made regarding disagreements on the NSG and BRI issues, a visible softening of the overall equations seems palpable.
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- With three other international summits (SCO, BRICS, and G20) for the year already on the calendar, there is every indication for a sustained engagement.
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What is the situation with Nepal?

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- Mr. Modi's visit in 2014 had generated considerable goodwill but subsequent decisions queered the pitch.
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- India's public display of unhappiness with Nepal's new Constitution and support for the Madhesi cause created ill-will.
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- Additionally, tacit Indian support was broadly suspected for the border economic blockade in the Terai region that disrupted essentials for Nepal.
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- All these had fed into an anti-Indian sentiment among them Nepali masses, something that Mr. K.P. Oli capitalised effectively in the election campaigns.
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- The victory of Mr. Oli was indeed a disappointment for India, but the government seems to have swiftly swung into action to undo the animosity.
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- A high profile delegation was sent to Nepal to congratulate Mr. Oli even before he was sworn in as PM, and an invitation to India was presented to him.
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- Mr. Oli seems to have taken these positively and had made India his first foreign destination - which is now the tradition for all Nepali PMs.
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- Modi is now expected to go to Nepal soon, which is again indicative of the fact that the tension of the past are fast waning.
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- There are expectations that the stalled Indian proposal for a Ramayana pilgrimage circuit linking Ayodhya and Janakpur in Nepal could be revived.
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- Significantly, while the expectations are being kept low, the optics of positive messaging are evident through the highlighting of cultural connections.
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How are the equations with Pakistan changing?

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- With Pakistan too, the Modi dispensation began its rule with a positive outreach, which also attracted a good response from the Pakistani PM.
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- **The Downswing** - Subsequent cross border terror attacks by Pakistani based terror outfits turned the initial friendship sour.
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- Also, the seeming reluctance of the Pakistani state to reign in the activities of anti-India forces on its soil further ruined the relationship.
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- The September 2016, India launched 'surgical strikes' to target terrorist bases in Pakistan (along the border), but this operation too proved ineffective.
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- Firing across the Line of Control (LoC) also intensified leading to higher casualties on both sides, both civilian and military.
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- The encounter killing of Hisbul Mujahedeen Commander Burhan Wani in Kashmir fuelled local radicalism in J&K - Pakistan is said to have aided this.
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- **Indian Actions** - India stalled the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit since 2016 in protest against Pakistan's actions.
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- The Trump administration too seems to be largely sharing India's outlook towards Pakistan, which has brought some cheer to Indian policy makers.
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- Minor fumbles in according comfort to the posted diplomats recently blew into a big controversy that saw actions and retaliations - which is concerning.
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- **Future** - Elections are likely in July 2018 in Pakistan - but Nawaz Sharif is disqualified by the Supreme Court and there seems to be no strong alternative.
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- This only strengthens the Army's position in determining the immediate political realities in Pakistan.
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- Significantly, Pakistan Army Chief Bajwa has been emphasising the need for improving relations with both India and Afghanistan.
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- The stalled "Track II Neemrana Dialogue" has been revived recently, which is a positive for both countries - which needs to be sustained till its logical ends.
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- Pakistan needs to address India's core concerns like - 26/11 investigations, curtailing JeM and other anti-India groups and the Kulbushan Jadhav case.
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Source: The Hindu

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