India’s Conciliatory Neighbourhood Policy

What is the issue?

- The government’s foreign policy moves over the past few months represent an unannounced but profound shift in its thinking about the neighbourhood.
- This assumes significance in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

What were the perceptible changes?

- **China** - The peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff had facilitated the possibility for a rapprochement between the India and China.
- Mr. Modi’s meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Xiamen last year also enhanced the scope for positive posturing from both sides.
- 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.
- 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.
- India had also visibly toned down planned celebrations marking the anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s arrival from Tibet.
- A flurry of high-level visits are also on the cards and a summit meeting between the topmost political brass is also being planned.
- The easing of tensions has given out the possibility for progress in resolving the tricky border issues, narrowing trade deficit and other polarising aspects.
- **Maldives** - The Maldivian government imposed an emergency and arrested judges and opposition leaders and suspended several MPs recently.

- 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.

- In this context, despite demands from the Maldivian opposition, and the US, the Modi government largely remained aloof of the Maldivian crisis.

- More significantly, India had even ignored the visit of the Pakistani Amry Cheif Gen. Qamar Bajwa to Maldives.

- **Nepal** - India had rough patch with Nepal’s new PM K.P. Oli during his previous short stinct at power due to his open engagements with China.

- 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.

- Additionally, there was a perceptible anti-India rhetoric in his campaign and a clear sidelining of Indian concerns regarding the Madesh issue.

- 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.

- He had recently visited India, which is in continuance with the tradition of Nepali PM making India their first foreign destination.

- India too had mellowed down its interventionalist attitude and has proposed enhanced cooerpation across sectors (hydel power, infrastructure, oil).

- **Pakistan** - It was recently revealed that the National Security Advisers (NSA) of both countries had always maintained channels of communication open.

- This is significant as the tensions that erupted in due to the Pathankot and Uri attacks was thought to have competeletly disrupted all communication lines.

- Additionallly, another standoff that got triggered due to the mistreatment of each other’s diplomats also seems to have been put to rest amicably.

- **Others** - In both Bhutan and Bangladesh, the incumbants are more
positively inclined to India than the challengers (opposition).

- Both nations are facing election this year, the results of which will have significant bearing on relationships ahead.
- Nevertheless, India has maintained a consistent commitment towards them.

What are major areas of engagement ahead?

- **Transactional Relationship** - The softening of India approach towards China will sustain only if there are transactional dividends for both countries.
- 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.
- 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.
- On BRI, India has 3 major concerns – “territorial integrity, transparency, and financial sustainability”, creative solutions are needed to address these.
- **Leadership** - Several countries are now echoing concerns that were initially raised by India about the environmental and financial risks in BRI projects.
- This provides India an opportunity to take the lead in designing an international template for infrastructure and connectivity proposals.
- This would involve consensus building between receiver and donor countries and establishing a structured approach for debt financing.
- Notably, India currently stands isolated in the neighbourhood due to its rigid opposition to BRI and a pragmatic approach is needed to overcome this.

- **Multilateralism** - South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit is slated to be held in Pakistan this year.
Notably, India had stalled SAARC summit in 2016 as it was annoyed due to terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

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

How does the future look?

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.

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

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

Source: The Hindu