



Neighbourhood first

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Neighbourhood first?-In a calibrated move, the Modi government is dialling down aggressive postures in bilateral ties

- When Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down in the Maldives in mid-November to attend the swearing-in of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih as the country's President, it was easy to count the "firsts" in his visit.
- Among them: this was Mr. Modi's first visit to the Maldives, the only country in South Asia he had not yet visited in his tenure, and the first by an Indian Prime Minister in seven years.

All in 2018

- The current year, 2018, has marked a year of reaching out in the region by the Modi government in general, with a view to dialling down disagreements that otherwise marked ties with major powers such as Russia and China.
- But while Mr. Modi's "Wuhan summit" with Chinese President Xi Jinping and the "Sochi retreat" with Russian President Vladimir Putin merited much attention, it is important to take stock of attempts at rapprochement in the immediate neighbourhood.
- With Nepal, the government's moves were a clear turn-around from the 'tough love' policy since the 2015 blockade.
- The frequency of visits in 2018 is in stark contrast to the three preceding years, when Mr. Modi did not visit Nepal at all.
- Similar comparisons abound with India's reaction to major developments in the neighbourhood.
- Perhaps the biggest policy shift this year was carried out as a concession to the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul.
- After a policy of more than two decades of refusing to engage with the Taliban, or even sit at the table with them, in November India sent envoys to the Moscow conference on Afghanistan, where the Taliban's representatives were present.

The Kartarpur link

- Given the context, it may be possible to see the government's latest shift, in sending two Union Ministers to Pakistan this week to join Prime Minister Imran Khan for the ground-breaking ceremony for the Kartarpur corridor, as part of the larger pattern of softening towards the neighbourhood.
- All these moves lead to the question, why has the government decided to make the change from playing big brother in the neighbourhood to a more genial and avuncular version of its previous self.

Reasons of Policy Shift

- One reason is certainly the backlash it received from some of its smallest neighbours like Nepal and the Maldives, that didn't take kindly to being strong-armed, even if New Delhi projected its advice to be in their best interests
- Another could be the conscious rolling back of India's previous policy of dissuading neighbours from Chinese engagement to now standing back as they learn the risks of debt-traps and over-construction of infrastructure on their own.
- India's own rapprochement with China post-Wuhan in the spirit of channelling both "cooperation and competition together" has also led to this outcome.

Temporary or durable

- The most obvious reason for the government's neighbourhood policy shift of 2018, that resounds closer to the "neighbourhood first" articulation of 2014, is that general elections are around the corner.
- This leads to the question, is the new policy simply a temporary move or a more permanent course correction: Neighbourhood 2.0 or merely Neighbourhood 1.2.0?