



INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY- GS II MAINS

Q. Discuss the challenges and opportunities associated with India's neighbourhood foreign policy. (10 marks, 150 words)

News: *Being Neighbourly*

What's in the news?

- The presence of leaders from South Asia and the Indian Ocean at the swearing in of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India for the third time underlines Delhi's continuing commitment to the "neighbourhood first" policy.
- It also represents the stakes India's neighbours have in strong and stable ties with this country.

Key takeaways:

- India will need all the goodwill it can command to navigate the increasingly complex world marked by intensifying conflict among the major powers and the restructuring of the global economic order.
- India also inherits familiar foreign policy challenges in the neighbourhood.
- Over the last decade, Delhi's engagement with its smaller neighbours has seen many twists and turns, and frequent crises have become part of the regional landscape. But the presence of their leaders at the start of Modi's third term underlines the deepening trend of interdependence that provides a basis for stability.
- The absence of Pakistan's leadership on the occasion reflects the continuing challenge of normalizing Delhi's ties with Islamabad.
- A bigger challenge awaits India in managing ties with China and seizing new opportunities for deepening ties with the West.

Neighborhood First Policy:

- The concept of the India's Neighbourhood First Policy came into being in 2008.
- It was conceived to bolster relations with certain priority countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Objective:

- Under its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, India is committed to developing friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all its neighbours.
- India's policy of 'Neighbourhood First' focuses on creating mutually beneficial, people-oriented, regional frameworks for stability and prosperity.

Postulates:

- India's engagement with these countries is based on a **consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented approach**, which focuses on delivering benefits like greater connectivity,



improved infrastructure, stronger development cooperation in various sectors, security and broader people-to-people contacts.

- It uses the **principles** of Samman (respect), Samvad (dialogue), Shanti (peace), Samridhi (prosperity) and Sanskriti (culture) for better engagement.

Need for the Policy:

- The policy is required to handle India's external threats better, achieve the necessary support in multilateral forums like the UN, curtail Chinese Influence in the region etc.

Features of India's Neighbourhood First Policy:

1. Immediate Priority to Neighbours:

- Priority is to improve the relations with immediate neighbours as peace and tranquillity in South Asia is essential for realizing development agenda. The neighbourhood first policy of actively focuses on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours.

2. Connectivity:

- India has entered into MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- These agreements ensure a free flow of resources, energy, goods, labour, and information across borders.

3. Dialogue:

- It focuses on vigorous regional diplomacy by engaging with neighbouring nations and building political connectivity through dialogue.
- First initiative in this direction was extending an invitation to all heads of government of SAARC countries for the oath taking ceremony of the Prime minister in 2014.

4. Resolving Bilateral issues:

- Focus is on resolving bilateral issues through mutual agreement.
- For instance, India and Bangladesh have signed a pact to operationalise the historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA).

5. Economic Cooperation:

- It focuses on enhancing trade ties with neighbours.
- India has participated and invested in SAARC as a vehicle for development in the region.
- Example - Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping for energy development i.e. motor vehicles, waterpower management and inter-grid connectivity.

6. Disaster Management:

- The policy also focuses on cooperating on disaster response, resource management, weather forecasting and communication and also capabilities and expertise in disaster management for all South Asian citizens.



7. Military and Defence Cooperation:

- India is also focusing on deepening security in the region through military cooperation by conducting as well as participating in various defence exercises.
- Various exercises like Surya Kiran with Nepal, Sampriti with Bangladesh aim to strengthen defence relations.
- India has also committed to play a greater role in capacity building of the Afghan National Army by providing training to them in past.

Challenges in India's Neighbourhood First Policy:

1. Growing Chinese Pressure:

- It failed to take a meaningful direction and growing Chinese pressure has prevented the country from winning allies in the region.
- On the maritime front, China is extending its influence across the Indo-Pacific region.

2. Relation with Pakistan:

- Relation with Pakistan, remains India's biggest diplomatic and security challenge.
- India's challenge is to manage relationships with a state which, openly, uses terror as an instrument of state policy and has fractured, multiple power centres.

3. Interference in Domestic Affairs:

- India is interfering in the domestic affairs of neighbouring countries especially in Nepal in the violation of their sovereignty.
- India is also creating hurdles in free transit and free trade within and beyond Nepal and keeps suppressing its people and government.

4. Anti-Indian Sentiments:

- Anti-Indian sentiments are getting rooted in the minds of people of region due to perceived notion of India's big brother attitude and its economic dependence to India.
- For instance, Demonetization done in 2016 impacted many countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar which use the Indian currency as a parallel currency within their borders.

5. Impact of India's Domestic Politics:

- India's domestic policies are creating problems in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, showing India's neighbourhood first policy faces serious challenges even in friendly territories like Bangladesh.

6. Impact of India's Tilt towards West:

- India draws closer to the West, particularly through the Quad and other multilateral and mini-lateral initiatives.



7. Terrorism and Illegal Migration:

- Over the last three decades India has faced threats, tension, and possibility of terrorist and militant attacks from its immediate neighbourhood.
- Challenges of illegal migration and smuggling of weapons and drugs require improved security infrastructure at borders.

Recommendations for a Better Neighbourhood Policy:

1. Improving the Border infrastructure:

- More Integrated Check Posts (ICPs)/Land Customs Stations (LCS) and border haats will be built.

2. Transportation:

- As the largest country, India should be leading to establish cross-border transport and communication links.
- Keeping diplomatic doors open with all neighbouring countries to resolve any arising issues.

3. Dialogue:

- India must ensure its neighbour continuous support for their development.
- Efforts must be made to strengthen Indian exports in the region.

4. Strengthening Markets:

- India should work with its neighbour in strengthening their markets and its own infrastructure to its neighbours.

5. Improving People-People Connect:

- Encouraging tourism and sharing of the bonds of common culture and history across the neighbourhood.

6. Tourism Promotion:

- Since 2020, India has been the largest source of tourist arrivals to Maldives.
- Large number of visitors come to India from Bangladesh for medical treatment.
- Many Indians also visit Nepal for religious tourism.
- India should promote investment in tourism, including medical tourism under the Neighbourhood First Policy.

7. Soft Power:

- India's soft power and common culture provide an opportunity for India to strengthen its cultural roots further in the region.

India's immediate neighbourhood directly impacts it geopolitically, geo-strategically and geo-economically because of its vicinity. Thus, working with them is important for India to rise as a superpower. Emphasis must be on sustainable and inclusive development.