

Winning the neighbourhood

As India stoops to conquer Nepal by laying out the red carpet for the visit of prime minister Khadga Prasad Oli later this week, it is indicating a new self-awareness that its foreign policy missteps have allowed China to gain ground in the neighbourhood, and demonstrating its willingness to sweat behind the scenes to make up for lost time.

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's recent visit to Kathmandu to meet and greet Prime Minister Oli is an example of this new-found pragmatism. In the space of three years, Swaraj has gone from pushing the lost cause of the "roti-beti rishta"— a kinship with the Madhes — and informally backing a blockade so as to send Kathmandu the message that it must treat all its citizens equally; in Kathmandu, she told Oli that Delhi is ready to deal with Nepal as an important neighbour, irrespective of how it wants to discriminate against the people of the Terai.

It is interesting that in this last year before the 2019 general elections, Swaraj is being able to put her stamp more forcefully on foreign policy. Perhaps Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) is increasingly distracted by several upcoming elections at home or dealing with the somewhat disaffected NDA coalition.

Fact is, India's "neighbourhood first" policy is in a bit of a shambles. Modi's impatient dealing with the craftiness, guile and plain independent-mindedness of sovereign nations in India's near abroad has led to several false fits, starts and stops. The prime minister and early foreign office perhaps couldn't get over the fact that these nations didn't fall over themselves in responding to Modi's warm handshakes and embraces soon after he came to power in 2014.

The learning has come at a price. When nations like Nepal and the Maldives scampered to Beijing for assurance, India, instead of assuaging them, drew itself up to its full height, puffed up its chest for full impact and read them the riot act. The neighbourhood is replete with terrible stories of the arrogance of Delhi's men and women snorting and stamping their feet when these neighbours "don't listen". Or there is the version of The Icy Glare. One probably apocryphal story about a visiting Indian official in Kathmandu has him telling local leaders, "Why are you complaining to me, now?"

Certainly, the Chinese pushed the Maoists and Oli's moderate communist party to come together during the elections and announce their reunification on April 22, Lenin's birth anniversary. But the first law of politics is to treat your neighbour with full respect, especially if he has won his elections as resoundingly as yours.

Not for nothing is Chinese president Xi Jinping determined to keep his job for life. Certainly, he will want a second Chinese consulate in Pokhara, build north-south highways from the Tibet border and infiltrate the Terai with listening posts — within kissing distance of India's open border. Nor does officially atheist China have a problem shoring up a majority Hindu nation Delhi so assiduously helped to transform into a republic in 2006.

China's assertiveness, as it grows to take on the world, is manifest in South Asia, from Pakistan to the Maldives. Pakistan's army chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa's visit to Male is a prime example of how Beijing is pushing its strategic ally, Pakistan, to make new friends and influence people at India's cost. Talks with Bhutan have been postponed, but Beijing may not be averse to another incursion across the disputed Line of Actual Control to create another distraction as the countdown to elections begin.

One answer to "What India should do?" to take on China's expansiveness is clear. Egged on by

the Americans, the PM was not afraid to confront China in the recent past. The low point came in the summer of 2016 when he asked President Xi on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Summit why he was standing in the way of India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Xi just smiled. India's prime minister came away, empty-handed. He had been shown his place by Asia's other big power.

Two years later, aggression has given way to circumspection. Deng Xiaoping's famous phrase from the 1980s describing China's foreign policy, which is to adopt "tao guang yang hui", has been long in coming. At the time, Zhao Qizheng, dean of the School of Journalism of Renmin University and head of the State Council Information Office, had described "tao guang yang hui" as "to observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile and never claim leadership".

Ending the face-off at Doklam, absorbing Oli's poison darts on India and telling the Maldivian opposition that it has to fight its own battles with the China-friendly Abdulla Yameen are all part of the new "reset" with China. So is Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale's meeting with the Dalai Lama soon after he was named to the top job. Requests by the Tibetan spiritual leader to meet the President and Vice-President are being considered.

With one-fifth the economy of Beijing, Delhi has finally realised it cannot battle with the Chinese on a daily basis. And that India's neighbourhood must, hopefully, be won differently.

Many centuries ago, when Kautilya lived in Takshashila — part of present-day Pakistan, another of the PM's current antagonists — the story goes that he was walking in the grounds one day and espied a man pouring honey in front of a colony of ants. What are you doing, he asked. I'm giving them honey, the man replied, adding, Why kill them when I can subdue them with sweetness and light?

Prime Minister Oli, welcome to India.

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