

Towards a regional reset?

Change often comes unannounced, and the government's foreign policy moves over the past few months represent an unannounced but profound shift in its thinking about the neighbourhood. This could change the course of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy before the general election next year.

On the mend

The most obvious in this is what is now being called the "reset" with China. While the trigger for the rapprochement between the two neighbours was the peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff and Mr. Modi's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Xiamen last year, the outcome of the easing of tensions is being seen in New Delhi's public postures this year.

To begin with, the government has taken care not to respond with any heat to reports of the Chinese build-up at Doklam. Construction by the People's Liberation Army of new bases, bunkers and helipads, as well as its troops staying in the erstwhile grazing grounds there through the winter is far from normal activity. Keeping its responses cool, New Delhi has been repeating that the Doklam standoff point is untouched and Chinese construction on their side of the boundary is "not a threat" to India. The government has also gone to some lengths to tone down planned celebrations marking the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's arrival from Tibet. New Delhi and Beijing have now embarked on a flurry of high-level visits that are meant to lead up to a summit meeting between the two leaders; they may even meet more than once. The shift has given rise to speculation that the two sides are intent on making significant progress in smoothing ties on outstanding issues such as boundary negotiations and also narrowing the trade deficit, an issue discussed during the Chinese Commerce Minister's visit to India recently.

This flexibility is also mirrored in the government's dealings in the South Asian region. Despite several appeals by the Maldivian opposition, and nudges from the U.S., the Modi government decided not to exert hard power in bringing Maldives President Abdulla Yameen around after he declared a state of emergency in the country. Nor did it engage China in a confrontation when Mr. Yameen sought Beijing's support in this regard. The government remained silent as Male went a step further and held discussions with Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, on joint patrolling of its Exclusive Economic Zone, an area of operation in the Indian Ocean considered to be India's domain.

With Nepal, instead of seeing red when a victorious Prime Minister K.P. Oli made it clear that he would step up engagement with China in infrastructure development, India rolled out the red carpet for him earlier this month. Nor did India raise concern over Nepal's Constitution which had sparked the confrontation between India and Nepal in 2015-16. There has also been outreach to Bhutan and Bangladesh in recent weeks. Both Bhutan and Bangladesh are to hold elections this year, and with incumbent governments more favourably disposed to New Delhi than their challengers in the opposition, the results will have an impact on India's influence in these countries as well.

Quiet progress with Pakistan

One area of foreign policy where few would bet money on a reset, namely Pakistan, has also seen some quiet movement. This year, the government admitted in Parliament for the first time that National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval had met his Pakistani counterpart, Nasser Khan Janjua, as a part of "established channels of communications at various levels" between the two sides in the past few years, post-Pathankot. Officials have confirmed that talks between the two

NSAs have also taken place on the sidelines of conferences as well, and quite regularly telephonically. Meanwhile, the resolution of the standoff over the treatment of diplomats in Delhi and Islamabad indicates that neither government has the appetite for escalation at this point.

All around, it would appear that India's hard power strategy in the region is being replaced with a more conciliatory one. However, the next steps will be defined not by a quiet or defensive approach to redefining India's foreign policy in the region, but with a more bold and proactive one. The reset with China will work only if there are transactional dividends for both New Delhi and Beijing, in case the two governments go back to the default antagonism of the past after the summit meetings. Two issues on which both governments can show flexibility are China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership.

On the NSG, China could remove its block to India's membership by adopting a more inclusive approach within the nuclear export control organisation. Indian membership, which the Modi government seems to have made its objective, will only strengthen the international nuclear regime. Even if withdrawal of China's objections does not soften the objections of more hardline "non-proliferationists" or Non-Proliferation Treaty-proponents, the goodwill from such a move would propel India-China relations forward.

On the BRI, if there is political will on both sides, they needn't look too far for creative solutions around India's three concerns: on territorial integrity, transparency of projects and their sustainability. The solution to the first is contained in a proposal under consideration — to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. While it may have not been the outcome discussed, the shift from the CPEC to what could be called PACE or the Pakistan-Afghanistan-China Economic corridor would necessitate a shift away from projects in Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Those projects may still be built and funded by China, but then would not constitute a part of the BRI route; as a result, India's concerns on sovereignty could be dispensed with.

Meanwhile, several countries, from Europe to Central and East Asia, are now echoing India's concerns about the environmental and debt trap risks that BRI projects pose. India could take the lead in creating an international template for infrastructure and connectivity proposals, one that would seek to engage China and other donor countries in a structured approach towards debt financing. This would win India goodwill in the neighbourhood too, where every other country (apart from Bhutan) has signed on to the BRI, but has felt alienated by India's rigid opposition to the initiative.

SAARC re-engagement

However, the real tipping point in India's regional reset will come if the government also decides to reconsider its opposition to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit this year, with Pakistan as the host. At a press conference recently, the Foreign Secretary repeated India's concerns over cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, saying: "Given the current state of play where there is cross-border terrorism and where this is a disruptive force in the region, it is difficult in such circumstances to proceed with [SAARC]." But the argument is beginning to wear thin.

Afghanistan, which supported India's move to pull out of the SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016 following the Uri attacks, is engaging with Pakistan again; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi signed a seven-point Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity early this month. Sri Lanka and Nepal, both sympathetic to India's outrage over Uri, are pushing for a summit this year; their sentiments were conveyed publicly by Mr. Oli in Delhi, and by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on his visit to Islamabad in

March.

The trick is for Mr. Modi to attend the summit in Pakistan when some of India's neighbours are still asking "why", and not when all of its neighbours begin to ask "why not". While this may require the government's much touted "Doval Doctrine" to take a leaf out of the much derided "Gujral Doctrine" book, it may be in keeping with a larger desire for a regional reset, bringing Mr. Modi's last year in this term of office more in line with his first.

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