

Reviving 'Neighbourhood First'

Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi's critics acknowledge his uncanny ability to take bold decisions and this reflects in his foreign policy initiatives. Interestingly, he is also demonstrating an ability to undertake course corrections. The informal summit at Wuhan, China, last month and a visit to Nepal this month reflect a change aimed at reviving the 'neighbourhood first' policy announced in 2014. The big challenge, however, will be providing a sense of direction to the policy on Pakistan which has oscillated between 'jhappi' and 'katti'.

The China outreach

Mr. Modi had received Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2014 in Gujarat reflecting his personalised diplomacy even though the ongoing stand-off in Chumar in eastern Ladakh cast a shadow on the visit. The personalised diplomacy was reciprocated the following year when Mr. Modi visited China and Mr. Xi received him in Xian, but its limits soon became apparent.

In mid-2016, China blocked India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) despite a meeting between the two leaders in Tashkent on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit. This was followed by China vetoing Masood Azhar's listing as a terrorist in the UN Security Council even though the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) is a banned entity. China's veto continued even after the Uri Army camp attack by JeM cadres later that year, adding to India's growing annoyance. Hydrological data sharing stopped amid reports of diversion of Brahmaputra river waters. The 73-day stand-off at Doklam last year and accompanying rhetoric reflected a marked downturn. India responded through all this by voicing scepticism regarding Mr. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), stepping up maritime engagement with the U.S. and Japan and reviving the Quad (with Australia) in Manila last year.

Both leaders soon realised the risks of the downward spiral of confrontation and were pragmatic enough to understand the need to restore a degree of balance to the relationship. Mr. Xi had emerged stronger after the 19th Communist Party Congress and the decision by the Central Committee to remove the restriction of two terms for a President made it clear that he would continue beyond 2023.

Significant messages were carried by Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Politburo member Yang Jiechi last December during their visits to Delhi. Follow-up visits to Beijing by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman earlier this year prepared the ground for the informal summit meeting in Wuhan last month. The leak of the government circular advising officials to stay away from events commemorating 60 years of Dalai Lama's exile in India and declining Australia's suggestion to participate in Malabar naval exercises indicated Indian interest in a reset.

The Wuhan summit was projected as 'informal' (something the Chinese have engaged in with U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump), without an agenda. Over two days, the two leaders met for 10 hours, four times one-on-one and twice with their delegations. Instead of a customary Joint Statement, there were separate briefings by Mr. Gokhale and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou indicating the key takeaways. It is clear that messages have gone out to the Army to improve communications and understanding and prevent the stand-offs that were becoming frequent. Both sides have agreed to undertake a joint project in Afghanistan. No softening of Chinese position on the NSG or India's reservations on the BRI was visible though these issues would have figured in the discussions. However, with three more meetings likely during the SCO,

G-20 and BRICS summits later this year, it is clear that there is an effort to bring the relationship on track.

Rebuilding trust with Nepal

A similar exercise appears to be under way with Nepal. Mr. Modi's visit in 2014 had generated considerable goodwill but subsequent decisions queered the pitch. India's public display of unhappiness with Nepal's new Constitution and support for the Madhesi cause created ill-will. The economic impact caused by the disruption of supplies of essential items such as liquefied petroleum gas, petroleum products and medicines fed the anti-Indian sentiment which K.P. Oli effectively exploited to score a decisive electoral victory late last year. Clearly, Delhi was disappointed with the election outcome but decided that the relationship with Nepal was too important to let past misunderstandings fester. A new beginning was necessary.

A couple of phone calls between Mr. Modi and Mr. Oli followed in December-January and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj was in Kathmandu even before Mr. Oli was sworn in as Prime Minister to convey congratulations and an invitation from Mr. Modi to visit India. Mr. Oli responded positively and much was made of the fact that in keeping with tradition, he made Delhi his first foreign destination last month. A surprise one-on-one meeting with Mr. Modi on the first day provided the two leaders an opportunity to clear the air about the past and rebuild a degree of trust.

A return visit by Mr. Modi to Nepal within a month (on May 11-12) indicates that both sides are keen to show positive movement. Expectations are being kept low key but the optics of positive messaging are evident. Included in the itinerary are a visit to Janakpur to offer prayers at Janaki Mandir and a public address which will announce the inauguration of the Ramayana pilgrimage circuit linking Ayodhya and Janakpur. The same idea had been shot down earlier when the Nepali authorities had cited 'security issues'. In addition, Mr. Modi will visit Muktinath and the pension paying office at Pokhara, highlighting the historical, cultural and religious ties between the peoples of the two countries. Undoubtedly, the fact that he begins his visit to Nepal by landing in Janakpur, capital of the sole Madhes-ruled province will give comfort to the Madhesi community, but Mr. Modi realises that his challenge is to repair ties with the wider Nepali community.

The Pakistan challenge

With Pakistan, after the opening when the then Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, visited Delhi in 2014 and Mr. Modi dropped in to have tea with him in Lahore in December 2015, relations stalled in 2016 following the Pathankot and Uri attacks. Firing across the Line of Control (LoC) has intensified leading to higher casualties on both sides, both civilian and military. In September 2016, India launched 'surgical strikes' as retaliation for the Uri attack but this has not reduced infiltration. Since Burhan Wani's death, local recruitment by radical groups is also on the rise. India has successfully stalled the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit since 2016 and Mr. Trump's tweets criticising Pakistan have given Delhi satisfaction. But limits to the policy of isolating Pakistan are also apparent.

Elections are likely in July and the Army would prefer to keep Mr. Sharif's PML(N) out of power. Mr. Sharif's dismissal and disqualification for life from politics by the Supreme Court makes it clear that the Army is determined to control the political transition. Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa has, on more than one occasion, emphasised the need for improving relations with both India and Afghanistan.

The resumption of the stalled Track II Neemrana Dialogue last month in Islamabad indicates that a shift may be likely. Pakistan realises that the time frame for a shift is limited before India goes into election mode. The question is whether Gen. Bajwa can make good on his suggestion by showing

forward movement on the issues flagged by India — curbing the Lashkar-e-Toiba and JeM, the Kulbushan Jadhav and 26/11 trials, etc. Faced with a similar situation, Gen. Pervez Musharraf had gone in for an unilateral ceasefire on the LoC in 2003. The guns fell silent, tensions were defused and Pakistan hosted the SAARC summit in 2004.

A change in the Pakistan policy may well be the reset to enable Mr. Modi to reclaim his 'neighbourhood first' policy.

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