



Meeting of IMCG on Neighbouring Countries

For Prelims: Neighbourhood First' policy, SAARC, Quad

For Mains: 'Neighbourhood First' policy and challenges, Significance of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy Vision

Why in News?

Recently, the **first meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Coordination Group (IMCG)** at Secretary level was convened by **India's Foreign Secretary**.

- The **IMCG has been set up as a high-level mechanism** towards mainstreaming of India's **'Neighbourhood First' policy** vision that **sought to develop better relations with the country's neighbours**.
- **IMCG** is supported by inter-ministerial Joint Task Forces (JTFs) convened by joint secretaries in the external affairs ministry.

What are the Key Highlights of the Meeting?

- **About:**
 - The **IMCG provided a comprehensive direction** with a whole-of-government approach to promote better connectivity, stronger interlinkages and greater people-to-people connect with the neighbours.
 - The focus of the meeting was **construction of border infrastructure** that would **facilitate greater trade with neighbours** like Nepal; special needs of countries such as Bhutan and Maldives in terms of supply of essential commodities; opening **rail connectivity with Bangladesh**; **Humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan** and Myanmar; and **Fisheries issue with Sri Lanka**.
- **Significance:**
 - IMCG will **further improve institutional coordination across government** and provide **comprehensive direction to this whole-of-government approach to India's relations** with its neighbouring countries.

What is the Purpose of 'Neighbourhood First' Policy Vision?

- **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.
- **Improving Relations with Neighbours:**
 - Priority is to improve the relations with immediate neighbours as peace and tranquillity in South Asia is essential for realising development agenda.
- **Dialogue:**
 - It **focuses on vigorous regional diplomacy by engaging with neighbouring nations**

and building political connectivity through dialogue.

- **Resolving Bilateral Conflicts:**
 - The Policy focuses on **resolving bilateral issues** through mutual agreement.
- **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.
 - One such example is the **Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN)** grouping for energy development i.e. motor vehicles, waterpower management and inter-grid connectivity.
- **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.
- **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.

What are the Issues in India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy'?

- **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**.
 - The **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** also provides China an opportunity to **expand** in India's neighbourhood as for instance in the case of the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, has brought the Chinese presence close to the Indian border whether in **Pakistan Administered Kashmir** or in the **Sir Creek area**.
 - Proposed in 2013, the BRI is an ambitious programme of China.
- **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.
- **Focus on Military Measures:**
 - India is **focusing on Military Measures rather than social elements** has also helped increase tensions across the region, increasing anti-India sentiment.
- **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.
 - Many ordinary Bangladeshis find the political leadership of India under current leadership as Islamophobic or anti-Islam.
- **Impact of India's Tilt towards West:**
 - India **draws closer to the West**, particularly through the **Quad** and other **multilateral and mini-lateral initiatives**.
 - But Sri Lanka's connections with the West are not moving in a good direction as the country's current government faces increasing criticism from Western capitals on **human rights** issues and freedoms.
 - As a result, Sri Lanka has begun moving toward China, increasing the possibility that Indo-Sri Lankan ties might deteriorate at some point.

Way Forward

- India's neighbourhood policy **should be based on the principles of Gujral Doctrine**.
 - This would **ensure India's stature and strength cannot be isolated** from the quality of its relations with its neighbours and there can be regional growth as well.
- Integrating **India's regional economic and foreign policy** remains a major challenge.

- Therefore, **India should resist compromising bilateral relationships** with neighbours for short economic interests.
- Regional connectivity **must be pursued with greater vigour** while security concerns are addressed through **cost-effective, efficient and reliable technological measures** which are in use in other parts of the world.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Q. Belt and Road Initiative' is sometimes mentioned in the news in the context of the affairs of (2016)

- (a) African Union
- (b) Brazil
- (c) European Union
- (d) China

Ans: (d)

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