

India's Neighborhood

by Amb Ashok Sajjanhar

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the "Neighborhood First" Policy of his administration on assuming power for the first time in May, 2014. From the very beginning he was determined to improve relations with India's neighbours and remove the misconstrued distrust about India's dominance and interference in their internal affairs. He sought to achieve this by convincing them of India's support and goodwill for their security, stability, well-being and prosperity.

As a first step, he invited leaders of all countries of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and the Prime Minister of Mauritius to the oath taking ceremony of his government on 26th May, 2014. PM Modi met all the visiting leaders to promote trust and strengthen bilateral ties.

This initiative was expanded when PM Modi invited leaders of all countries of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand) and PM of Mauritius and President of Kyrgyzstan, who at that time was the informal coordinator of Central Asian countries on 30th May, 2024. Invitees for PM Modi's third oath taking ceremony on 9th June, 2024 included leaders of neighboring countries as well as Seychelles, a maritime partner covered by the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) Initiative launched by PM Modi in 2015 to improve India's maritime engagement.

Through these initiatives PM Modi sought to take bilateral ties to a higher level of trust and cooperation.

In 2014 PM Modi further advanced this Initiative by making Bhutan the first country of his foreign visit in June, 2014. Addressing the Joint Session of the Bhutanese Parliament, PM Modi stated that "The entire region, especially the SAARC countries, would benefit if India is prosperous. Only a strong, prosperous India can help alleviate the problems that its neighbours face."

PM Modi visited Nepal soon thereafter in August, 2014 and Addressing the Nepalese Constituent Assembly, the first foreign leader to do so, said that India would not interfere in Nepal's internal affairs but will support it. India will do all it could to assist Nepal in its endeavors. He expressed his strong wish that Nepal becomes a developed nation by supplying power to India.

Addressing the UN General Assembly, the next month on 27th September, 2014 PM Modi said "India expects a peaceful and stable environment for its development. Our future is linked with our neighborhood. That is why my Government from its first day has given the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with our neighboring countries." He reiterated the same policy for Pakistan asserting that India is "prepared to engage in a serious bilateral dialogue with Pakistan in a peaceful atmosphere, without the shadow of terrorism, to promote our friendship and cooperation. However, Pakistan must also take its responsibility seriously to create an appropriate atmosphere for bilateral dialogue."

Over the ensuing 11 years PM Modi has sought to "Walk the Talk" of "Neighborhood First" through myriad actions, initiatives, ventures and projects.

PM Modi's visit to Nepal in August, 2014 was the first bilateral visit by an Indian PM to that important neighboring country after a long interregnum of 17 years. He followed it up by visiting Nepal 4 more times viz. in May, 2018, November, 2014, August 2019, and May, 2022. All these visits sought to advance the bilateral partnership to a higher level of trust, physical and energy connectivity, economic partnership and cooperation. India was the first responder to reach out to Nepal after its destructive earthquake in March, 2015 as well as during the 2023 Jajarkot earthquake and the 2024 floods and landslides. As is normal between neighboring countries, some hiccups on bilateral ties relating to contested borders, domestic protests etc. did appear over this period but India has sought to resolve them through dialogue.

Pm Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in March, 2015 was the first bilateral visit by an Indian PM after a hiatus of more than 30 years. He visited Sri Lanka thrice again in May, 2017, June, 2019 and April, 2025 as the first foreign leader to visit Sri Lanka after the advent of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) government led by President Anura Kumar Dissanayake (AKD). Moreover, India pro-actively reached out to Sri

Lanka by extending a substantial financial support of US\$ 4.5 billion to ameliorate its worst economic crisis in several decades in 2022. This had a salutary impact on the perception of the Sri Lankan people and government about India's honest and honorable intentions in its dealings with Sri Lanka. This resulted in the first foreign visit by the newly elected Sri Lankan President AKD to India although there were apprehensions about his stance on India when he was elected as JVP has always been inimical to India's presence in the island nation. AKD invited PM Modi to be the first foreign leader to visit Sri Lanka after his victory in the elections in September, 2024.

India has also been successful in mending ties with the recently elected Muizzu government which came to power on the campaign call of "India Out" in November, 2023. Displaying strategic patience and maturity even in the face of hostile comments against India and PM Modi by some Maldivian leaders, India invited Muizzu to PM Modi's oath taking ceremony in June, 2024 and for a State visit in October, 2025. India generously helped Maldives to rescue it from its grave economic crisis. Maldives realized the significance of the selfless support by India in its times of need. This led to the visit by PM Modi as Chief Guest at Maldives' 60th independence day celebrations in July, 2025. Leaders of both Sri Lanka and Maldives categorically stated that they will not allow their territory to be used against India's security.

On relations with Pakistan, India has categorically stated that "Terror and Talks will not go together". Pakistan will have to irrevocably and demonstrably abjure its support for terror against India for normal relations to emerge. No change in Pakistan's policy of supporting terrorism against India has been visible so far.

Even after the advent of the Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan in August, 2021, India has supported the Afghan people by sending Covid-19 vaccines, medicines and 40,000 tons of wheat.

Some challenges remain like the situation in Bangladesh where the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was unseated a year ago through domestic protests. India is confident that through strategic patience and abundant goodwill it will be able to normalize relations after an elected government assumes power, hopefully in the near future.

In addition to specific bilateral projects with most neighboring countries relating to economic and commercial cooperation, culture, spiritual tourism, development partnership etc., India has reached out to all neighbours in their time of need or whenever they have been faced with some natural or manmade disasters. In this context India supported its neighboring countries by sharing its Covid-19 vaccines with them immediately after it had commenced the vaccination drive of its own senior citizens. In total, India shared more than 300 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccines as well as large quantities of medicines and medical devices with more than 100 countries, much of it gratis, including with all its neighboring countries (except Pakistan). Right at the beginning of his tenure PM Modi floated the idea of launching a satellite to help the people of SAARC countries for their economic and cultural development. This satellite was put into space soon thereafter and supports many South Asian countries in their economic, social and educational development.

Prime Minister Modi has used a clear-headed approach to reach out to countries in India's neighborhood to carve out stronger relations with them on the philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutmbakam" (The Whole World is a Family). PM Modi has been bold, creative, resolute and steadfast in seeking better relations with the neighbours. It is a measure of success of India's "Neighborhood First" Policy that its relations with most neighboring countries today are significantly better than they were when PM Modi took over power in 2014.
