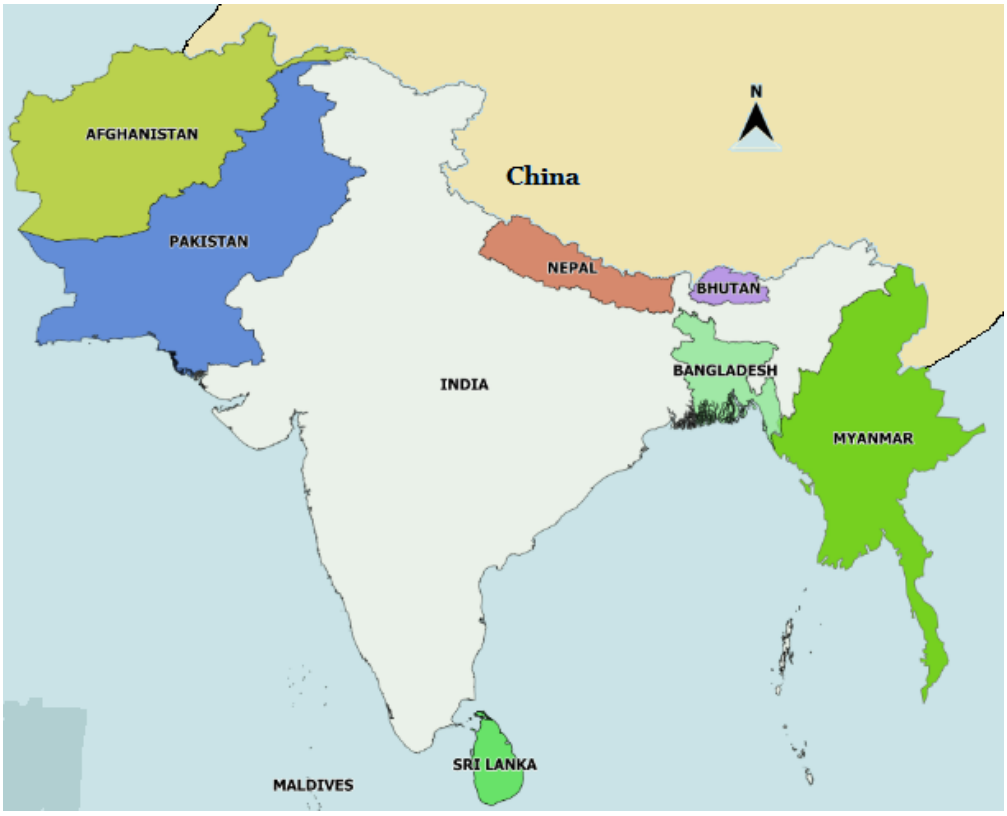
Evaluation of India's Neighborhood Policy

Why in news?

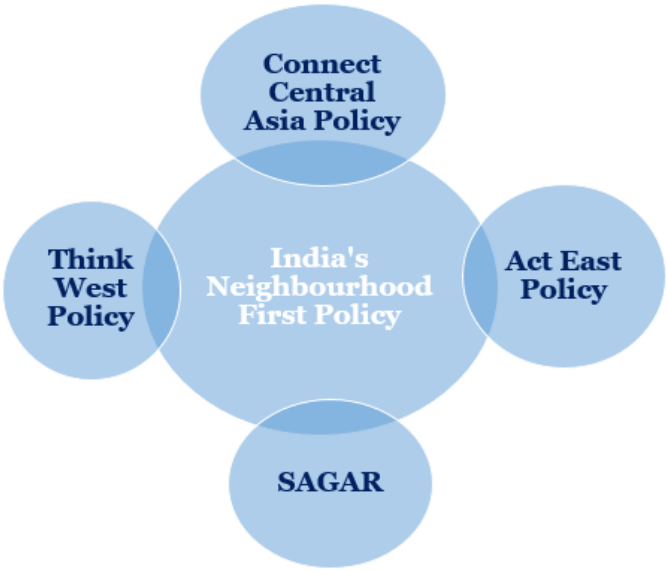
The presence of leaders from South Asia and the Indian Ocean at the swearing in of Indian PM underlines India's continuing commitment to the 'neighbourhood first' policy.

What is the India's neighbourhood first policy?

- **Background** – India has historically shared deep cultural, economic and political ties with its neighbours.
- **India's neighbourhood** – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.



- **Officially launched in** – 2008.
- **Aim** – To enhance physical, digital and people to people connectivity across the region, as well as augmenting trade and commerce.



- **Act East Policy** – It was upgraded in 2014 from erstwhile India's 'Look East Policy' that was launched in 1992.
- It aims to further strengthen ties with countries of the *Southeast Asian region* and with countries in the *Indo-Pacific region*.

India has enhanced its engagement in the Southeast Asian region through engagements with ASEAN, East Asia Summit, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Commission, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, QUAD, among others.

- **Think West Policy** – It is India's outreach to the *Gulf and West Asian countries* which are important for India's energy security and for the welfare of the Indian Diaspora.
- **Connect Central Asia Policy** – It envisages a deep, meaningful and sustained engagement with the *Central Asian region.*
- **SAGAR** – The '*Security and Growth for All in the Region*' (SAGAR) concept was first articulated by the Indian PM in Mauritius in 2015.
- India envisages a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and *prosperous Indo-Pacific region*.
- **Significance** – It guides India's approach towards the management of relations with countries in its immediate neighbourhood.

To know about India's bilateral neighborly relations, click here

Gujaral Doctrine

• *IK Gujaral* was the only Prime Minister with a foreign policy approach identified with his name.
• Doctrine – It was based on the understanding that India's size and population by default made it a *major player in South East Asia*.
• Its position and prestige could be cemented by adopting a *non-domineering attitude towards its smaller neighbours*.
• It also emphasised the importance of keeping dialogue going, and avoiding needless provocations by commenting on the internal matters of other countries.

Evaluate the effectiveness of India's neighbourhood first policy?

- While the policy has yielded benefits in certain areas, it has also encountered challenges and setbacks along the way.

Neighbourhood First policy - Succeeded

• **Diplomatic engagements** – It has resulted in increased dialogue and engagement across various platforms.
• Bilateral visits, summit meetings, and joint initiatives have helped in improving ties and addressing mutual concerns.
• **Infrastructure development** – Regional grouping have facilitated infrastructure development projects in neighbouring countries, enhancing connectivity and promoting economic integration.
  - SDF – SAARC Development Fund
  - AIIB – Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
• **Security cooperation** – Collaboration is done on security issues, including counter-terrorism efforts, border management, and maritime security.
  - IONS – Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
• **Regional initiatives** – India is an active participant in regional groupings like
  - BIMSTEC – Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
  - BBIN grouping – Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India
  - IORA – Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).
• Altogether, these have contributed to regional stability, economic cooperation, and collective security in the Indian Ocean region.
• **Cultural exchanges** – The cultural exchange platforms have helped strengthen people-to-people ties and build neighbourly goodwill in the region.
  - ITEC – Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation

Neighbourhood First policy – Challenges and failures

• **Unresolved border disputes** – Tensions along the Line of Control (LOC) and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) continue to flare up and impede progress in bilateral relations.
  - LOC – Indo-Pakistan border
  - LAC – Sino-Indian border
• **Geopolitical rivalries** – Growing geopolitical competition, *especially with China*, has complicated India's neighbourhood dynamics and impacted its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy.
• Power struggles and influence games in the region have often overshadowed efforts.
• **Economic gaps** – Big *disparities in economic development* between the neighbouring countries have affected the effectiveness of economic cooperation initiatives.
• Infrastructural deficits, trade barriers, and bureaucratic hurdles have prevented the full potential for regional economic integration from being realised.
• **Internal instability** – *Political instability, ethnic conflicts*, and governance challenges in neighbouring countries have been affecting closer cooperation and regional stability.
• Issues such as *cross-border terrorism and insurgencies* have also strained relations and undermined trust between India and its neighbours.
• **Limited progress in SAARC** – It has been affected by *bilateral tensions and a lack of consensus* on key issues between Pakistan and India.
• This has limited its effectiveness as a platform for regional cooperation and integration.

What lies ahead?

- India should make the most of its *soft-power assets*, such as Bollywood, yoga, and traditional arts, to enhance its image and influence.
- Initiatives like the *International Solar Alliance* can be leveraged to promote renewable energy adoption and environmental sustainability in the region.
- A *no-strings-attached* Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) commitment will go a long way to building a positive and benign image.
- *Economic assistance* to our neighbours should continue unhindered even in the face of provocations as it only enhances our image as a 'friend in need'.
- By implementing these measures, the new government can reinvigorate India's Neighbourhood First policy and realise its vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and interconnected region.

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