



## 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)**

**Source: TH**

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