



Mains Practice Question

Q. The 'Neighbourhood First' policy signals India's commitment to improve ties with its immediate neighbours but faces challenges of regional diplomacy. Discuss. (250 words)

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Approach

- Introduce by briefly explaining about the 'Neighbourhood First' policy.
- Discuss the challenges to regional diplomacy and connectivity.
- Suggest some ways to improve the present situation in the region.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

- A nation's destiny is linked to its neighbourhood- this specifies the need of a peaceful and integrated neighbourhood. India's foreign policy that actively focuses on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours which is termed as Neighbourhood first policy.
- Significance of the policy: Former PM A.B. Vajpayee once famously said 'You can change your friends but not neighbours'. For India to play a vital role in the emerging multipolar world politics, it is important to develop enduring linkages between its domestic priorities and its foreign policy objectives.
 - Political and socio-economic development of India is largely dependent on a stable, secure and peaceful neighbourhood.

Body

Challenges to regional diplomacy and connectivity

- **Divided Subcontinent:** The problems generated by the partition of India divided the subcontinent on politico-religious lines.
 - Further, challenges of settling boundaries, sharing river-waters, protecting the rights of minorities, and easing the flow of goods and people, affects regional diplomacy.
- **Emergence of China:** China annexed Tibet 1950-51, this marked the arrival of China at the Indo-Tibetan frontier. This profoundly transformed the geopolitical condition of India.
 - Beyond the bilateral territorial dispute between India and China, the emergence of a powerful state on India's frontiers affected India's relationship with its neighbouring countries.
- **Influence of Domestic Politics:** India's domestic politics always had an impact on our regional policy. The same is true of our neighbours, whose domestic politics impact their engagement with India. For example:
 - Issue of Tamils has been a dominant factor in India's Sri Lanka policy.
 - West-Bengal's Chief Minister pulled out of the Teesta Waters agreement between India And

Bangladesh.

- **Lack of connectivity:** This sorry state of connectivity today reflects decades of geostrategic divergence, political nationalism, and economic protectionism

Way Forward

- **Policy Non-interference:** The size of India is an important factor in the way our neighbors view India and its policies. India accounts for a major chunk of the land area, population, economic activity, resources, of South Asia.
 - Therefore, India as well as other neighbours need to be conscious of its neighbors discomfort of having to deal with a big neighbor and must follow the policy of non-interference in domestic affairs.
- **Establishing a Border Commission:** Demarcation of India external boundaries is yet to be completed. Resolution of border disputes will pave way for stable regional integration. Thus, India must strive for resolution of border by establishing a border commission.
- **Broader Lens of Foreign Policy Goals:** 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.
- **Improving Regional Connectivity:** 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.
- **Implementing Gujral's Doctrine:** 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.

Conclusion

Although there are complex challenges and situations, neighbourhood first policy must be anchored in the sustained engagement at all levels of the political and people to people levels, building upon the deep cultural affinities which are unique to India's relations with its neighbours.

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