**Jaishankar signals ‘business as usual’ for foreign policy**

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar hit the floor running on Tuesday, sending out a message of continuity and “business as usual” for Indian foreign policy in the new government as he assumed charge at South Block for a second term, indicating there would be little change in how the new government would deal with China, Pakistan, UN Security Council reforms, and other pending issues.

On Monday, several hours before his portfolio was even announced, Mr. Jaishankar had called on all seven leaders from the neighbourhood who had been invited to witness Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s swearing-in.

By including Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu, whose government had been at loggerheads with New Delhi until India accepted his demand to withdraw Indian troops from the southern atolls, Mr. Modi has attempted to get ahead of the first of many foreign policy challenges he will face in the neighbourhood during his third term.

While Mr. Jaishankar has served at South Block for much of the past decade, as Foreign Secretary and External Affairs Minister, he will have a new team to work with. None of the three Ministers of State for External Affairs have been retained. The new Ministers of State are Kirtivardhan Singh and Pabitra Margherita. In addition, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra’s extended term ends in October, with Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri widely believed to be the next in line for the post.

Former Foreign Secretary and Chairperson of the National Security Advisory Board Shyam Saran said he did not anticipate “any significant departures in policy”, with Mr. Jaishankar remaining at the helm of External Affairs. “What I would hope to see is re-engagement with Pakistan and an effort to seek a new equilibrium with China. The neighbourhood has suffered relative neglect with the pursuit of a high global profile. I would hope there is a refocus on the neighbourhood which remains the most critical factor for Indian interests,” Mr. Saran told The Hindu when asked about the foreign policy agenda ahead.

While re-engagement with Pakistan seems difficult at present, “lower-hanging fruit” such as restoring High Commissioners and restarting some of the cross-border trade for agricultural goods may be possible, especially if Mr. Modi decides to meet his Pakistan counterpart, Shehbaz Sharif, next month on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan.

**All eyes on the meet**

All eyes will be on whether Mr. Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet there in an effort to resolve the four-year-old stand-off at the Line of Actual Control. In an interview to the Newsweek magazine in April, Mr. Modi called India-China ties “important and significant”, and said the stand-off must be “urgently addressed” through talks, refraining from any criticism of China’s actions.

The next big item on the agenda for the government will be to keep the balance between the U.S. and Russia. In his second term, Mr. Modi had won accolades for navigating India to a “sweet spot” over issues such as the Russia-Ukraine war, where both sides have been keen to court India’s favour. In the next few weeks, more of the balancing act will be on display as Mr. Modi visits Italy on June 13-14 to attend the G-7 outreach with Western countries and is due in Astana on July 3-4, where Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to be present, and will travel to Russia in October for the BRICS summit.

While Mr. Modi is not expected to attend the Swiss Peace Conference on Ukraine this weekend, India’s decision to participate at an official level indicates that it is keeping the door open for an evolving role in resolving the conflict. A balancing posture will also give New Delhi space to wait out the next few months until the U.S. elections — as the possibility of a Trump Presidency and a change in Washington would “upend what is still left of the international order”, Mr. Saran said.