



MODI IN THE EAST

With the Indian Prime Minister committed to turn the 'Look East Policy' into 'Act East Policy', India's 'Eastern Connections' are shifting gears, writes **RAJIV BHATIA**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's three-nation tour – covering Myanmar, Australia and Fiji – showcased an advanced India's eastern policy in clear-cut terms. Historically speaking, India's ties with the East flourished extensively in pre-colonial times. Despite its adverse effects, the British Raj contributed to them further, especially through large-scale emigration of Indians to the region stretching from Burma to Fiji. Through his travels and writings, Rabindranath Tagore helped in the re-discovery and consolidation of age-old bonds forged by monks, priests, traders and artisans. Jawaharlal Nehru saw in the attainment of freedom by Burma, Indonesia and other nations as the emergence of a new Asia. However, from the 1960s to 1980s a debilitating hiatus occurred, mainly due to Cold War-related considerations.

In this background, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to embark on the path of liberalising the Indian economy in the early 1990s, he turned to Asia-Pacific, more particularly Southeast Asia, to draw support and ideas as well as forge trade and investment linkages. In his celebrated speech at Singapore in September 1994, he emphasised that there was nothing 'new' in India turning to the East. "If a new relationship is to be forged," he said, "it is only the visible superstructure that needs to be erected over the very sound and solid foundation that already exists." Later, he was aptly regarded as the architect of the Look East Policy, although he probably never used the specific phrase. This policy and its implementation in the next twenty years developed well, but it has its share of supporters and critics.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated (diplomatically) a mixed view on this policy

as she observed in Chennai on July 20, 2011: "The United States supports India's Look East Policy, and we encourage India not just to look east, but to engage East and act East as well..." At the time, it seemed an unfair criticism, because India had indeed taken concrete measures to strengthen its relations in political, economic and other domains with ASEAN and other nations of East Asia. Yet, there was a widely shared perception in the country and outside that more was needed to be done; greater emphasis was required on implementational aspects; and geographical scope of the policy needed to be expanded.

In its last two years, 2012-14, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government showed signs of moving in the desired direction, with the India-ASEAN relationship elevated to the level of strategic partnership. Singh stressed that the future of India and ASEAN was "interlinked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region" was "critical for their progress and prosperity". Both sides took inspiration from the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons' Report which called for unleashing "a creative surge" and imparting "even greater momentum to the Asian resurgence."

In this light, it is worth recalling that the term "Act East" made its first appearance in the India-US joint statement, issued on September 30, 2014 during Modi's visit to the US. However, to ensure that no one was left in any doubt about the future direction of the policy, the Indian Prime Minister stated categorically at the East Asia Summit on November 13, 2014: "Since entering office, six months ago, my government has moved with a great sense of priority and speed to turn our 'Look East Policy' into 'Act East Policy.' He added: "The East Asia Summit is an important

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pillar of this policy."

By reviewing the outcome of summit meetings in Myanmar, one could appreciate how the new policy began to unfold in its initial stage. While doing this, it is necessary to remember that the new government had earlier taken other important initiatives such as the Prime Minister's visit to Japan, the visits by the Indian President and External Affairs Minister to Vietnam, and New Delhi's hosting of the visits by the Foreign Ministers of China and Singapore as well as of the Chinese President.

Modi-Thein Sein Summit

Held on the first day (November 11) of Modi's visit, the meeting between the Indian



BEYOND ASIA PACIFIC: Prime Minister Narendra Modi being welcomed by the Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama, at traditional welcome ceremony, in Suva, Fiji

that "it is a unique relationship in that it has never been a troubled relationship."

The two leaders focused on "connectivity between India and Myanmar, cultural contacts and commercial ties", said the Indian spokesman. They undertook a broad review of on-going projects of mutual cooperation. Most new projects, started after PM Singh's visit in 2012, have been under execution at a satisfactory pace. However, the two flagship projects started several years ago have continued to defy deadlines. These are the Trilateral Highway Project and the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project. A critical test for the new 'Act East Policy' would be their speedy completion.

Political relations have been strengthened considerably, but the time is now ripe for upgrading bilateral ties to strategic partnership. Myanmar has been using this term unhesitatingly. It is, therefore, suggested that New Delhi should now start drafting an agreement to establish strategic partnership. This should be signed at the next summit that might take place next year.

Wisely Modi found time to meet opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This is an indicator of the success of India's Myanmar policy as it shows the breadth of our political access in the troubled nation. It should, however, be added that in terms of substance India hardly seems to be in a position to help Suu Kyi's cause, her main agenda being to garner support for the constitutional amendment that clears the way for her Presidential candidature. For this, she turned to the US and obtained President Obama's public support, although it appears that this too may not make much difference.

The Chinese premier too, was in the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, but he showed no inclination to connect with her. Surprisingly, four years after her release from long house arrest and unmistakable evidence that she continues to be an important political player, Suu Kyi has not yet visited China. Following untiring efforts by the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, she is now reportedly planning a visit to Beijing in December 2014.

India-ASEAN Summit

This summit, held on November 12, enabled the two sides to review past prog-

PM and the President of Myanmar helped in building personal chemistry between the two leaders who were seeing each other for the first time. In the past Myanmar portrayed China as 'a cousin' and India as 'a friend.' At this meeting, however, Thein Sein said, according to the Indian spokesman, that "he (i.e. the President) sees India and Myanmar as brothers". Modi was invited to pay a full-fledged bilateral visit when, the President advised, he should visit Bagan and Mandalay in order to see and experience first-hand "the commonality" and "the extensive links" between the two countries. The Buddhist connection was also highlighted. An Indian official referring to India-Myanmar relations, presumably in recent years, pointed out

EAST ASIA SUMMIT

EAS, the assembly of top leaders of ten ASEAN nations and its eight partner countries, namely China, Japan and the Republic of Korea; India, Australia and New Zealand; and US and Russia, took place on November 13. Amidst efforts by some countries to restrict its role, EAS portrayed itself as the region's apex forum for "strategic dialogue and cooperation" on political, security, economic and social issues as well as the complex challenges facing East Asia. The leaders agreed to enhance cooperation in six priority areas: finance, environment and energy, education, global health issues, disaster management, and ASEAN connectivity.

The summit Chairman's statement runs into fifty paragraphs, but it is possible to pinpoint the issues of key importance. Regional economic integration has received encouragement as it is promoted on four separate tracks: ASEAN's FTAs with EAS participating countries; RCEP; Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Free Trade Area of Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). How these initiatives might compete, clash or converge is a question that has been left unaddressed. The 'centrality' of ASEAN in EAS affairs was reaffirmed amidst recent developments that had created adverse impact for the regional grouping. PM Modi, at this summit, articulated India's view: "ASEAN is an inspiration for broader integration in the Asia-Pacific region. India has great confidence in ASEAN's centrality and leadership in pursuing that goal." Maritime security and cooperation rated high billing at this meeting, with the participants depicting it "as an important element" in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Whether future actions by some of them would match with their commitment remains to be seen. Further, a clear call for effective implementation of the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) as well as for "consultation" on Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea was issued, but it was without a sense of urgency in a clear concession to China. India referred to these matters pointedly, expressing the hope that efforts to conclude COC would be successful "soon".



ACT EAST POLICY: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the President of Myanmar, U Thein Sein and his wife Khin Khin Win, at the ASEAN summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar

ress in mutual cooperation and outline the contours of their working together closely in the future. The Indian PM emphasised the importance of ASEAN by noting that it had acquired a unique voice and role in global affairs, but there was no reference to 'the centrality' of ASEAN in his remarks. On the other hand, ASEAN leaders were impressed by the new Indian leadership's commitment to further deepen the relations; yet they did not switch completely to the Act East Policy as evident from the following formulation in the Chairman's statement: "The ASEAN Leaders welcomed the 'Act East' emphasis in India's 'Look East Policy' and expressed their fervent belief that this would contribute to the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership..."

While pinpointing the key elements of this relationship, trade and economic cooperation would no doubt retain their high importance. Having reached the level of nearly \$68 billion in 2013, bilateral trade must touch or surpass the previous target of \$100 billion in 2015. In this context, the need for full operationalization of the recent Agreements on Trade in Goods and Services and on investment was emphasized by both sides. Notably PM Modi suggested "a review" of the free trade agreement in goods "to improve it further and make it beneficial to all." The other important track is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

(RCEP) Agreement that is under negotiation, with end 2015 as the deadline. The two sides agreed to expedite negotiations and timely implementation of India-ASEAN FTA.

Connectivity remains the buzz word as before, but the nature of links and emphasis seems to be changing in a perceptible manner. ASEAN appreciated India's support for its Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) and highlighted the importance of building physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity between India and ASEAN nations. While on-going infrastructure projects on connectivity would be completed, there was little talk of new projects of this kind. Instead, the stress is now on "Information Highways or I-ways" and "bridges of knowledge and skills, entrepreneurship and vocational training, travel, trade and investment." Besides people-to-people connectivity would be expanded through multiple ways.

This summit also resulted in an agreement to enhance cooperation on a whole range of maritime issues, including maritime security and addressing "emerging challenges at sea." India's profile at the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) is likely to go up. The central point of India-ASEAN relationship thus relates to their "shared vision for a stronger partnership, which would contribute to the lasting peace, prosperity and

well-being of our peoples," as the summit Chairman's statement put it aptly.

Australia Segment

Modi's Australia visit had several dimensions, but for this essay's central theme the bilateral segment relating to discussions and agreements at the government level deserves mention here. A qualitative transformation of bilateral ties seems to be a clear outcome, even though everything would depend on subsequent follow-up.

Among the agreements signed, the most important and imbued with long-term value is the 'New Framework for Security Cooperation.' It defines in some detail how the existing strategic partnership between India and Australia would be guided and implemented in the future. It spells out "bilateral collaboration across the security spectrum", as the official joint statement put it, covering defence, counter-terrorism, cyber policy, disarmament and non-proliferation and maritime security. The Framework's provisions concerning defence planning and coordination such as service to service "engagement including regular high-level visits, annual staff talks, joint training and regular exercises as agreed" as well as exploration of joint research and development cooperation have considerable geopolitical significance. To this should be added the agreement to hold annual political summits, special chemistry between the two Prime Ministers, mutual enthusiasm and synergy between the business communities, and the evidence of unprecedented excitement and engagement of the Indian Diaspora. One can then appreciate the full import of why PM Modi described India-Australia relationship as "the natural partnership, arising from our shared values and interests, and our strategic maritime locations."

Fiji, the last stop, further helped in raising public awareness in India about the Pacific dimension of Asia. Notably, it was an opportunity to connect not only with one nation but the entire region through the meeting between leaders of the Pacific Islands and the Indian Prime Minister. Evidently the call of the East promises to be a compelling one for the makers and managers of the Indian foreign policy in the coming decade.

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