

Modi In Myanmar

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At Asean meet, PM outlines the contours of 'Act East' policy

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ongoing three-nation tour is being watched with keen interest by all those interested in deciphering subtle differences between India's 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies. The first leg of the PM's tour, which has just ended in Myanmar, was a demonstration that the new policy represents not a negation but recalibration and further

enrichment of the previous policy.

Naypyitaw, Myanmar's new capital, witnessed deliberations which had three separate – but inter-related – components. First, India-Myanmar relations came into sharp focus at Modi's meeting with President Thein Sein. The host depicted the two nations 'like brothers', calling their ties fraternal. Considering that Myanmar treated China as a 'cousin' in the past, Thein Sein seemed to be indicating a preference for better balance in Myanmar's equations with its two giant neighbours.

For India, Myanmar is 'a valued friend' and strengthening cooperation with it is 'a priority'. The coming year is certain to see a full-fledged Modi-Thein Sein summit.

Modi's meeting with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi showed the breadth of India's political access in a country that stands at a crossroads now. Its reform process including the transition to democracy has progressed well since 2010, but of late it has slowed down. With the political class pondering challenges ahead, Suu Kyi urged India to emphasise that stability and democracy could go together.

This was Suu Kyi's rejection of the traditional view that the military alone can ensure stability. It was also a plea to support her presidential candidacy. While visiting India in 2012, she told an Indian journalist that if the constitution was not amended to permit her candidature, 2015 elections might be 'free but not fair'. This is where the country is heading at present. India's only choice would be to urge wisdom to all sides who should forge a national consensus.

The second component related to India-Asean relations. Its key features and future directions shone through clearly at the bilateral summit and Modi's meetings with individual leaders at the summit's sidelines.

The PM's reasoning was straightforward. A new era of economic development has begun in India; Asean has a unique identity and voice in global affairs; and the two sides are enriched through multiple convergences. They must now build on the strategic

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partnership by enhancing economic cooperation and increasing their contribution to peace, stability and balance in the region.

The new conception of connectivity with Asean goes beyond roads and physical infrastructure. It lays emphasis on digital linkages and expansion of people-to-people relations. India's appreciation for the achievements of Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea in the domains of urban renewal, performance monitoring and industrial competence respectively was articulated, thus indicating where future ties will be deepened. As officials give finishing touches to the cooperation plan for the next five years, they will give ample place in it to skilling, capacity building and a wider use of IT and space applications.

Political discussions also covered issues relating to security cooperation. India's interest in 'everyone' following international norms and laws and upgrading maritime security was conveyed in unmistakable terms. Specifically, with an eye fixed on China, Modi urged Asean to speed up its efforts to conclude the Code of Conduct on South China Sea. Asean is bound to take heart from this clear exhortation at a time when it suffers from calculated procrastination.

The last facet of conference diplomacy centred on India's participation in the East Asia Summit. EAS is an excellent idea. It has the potential to be the apex forum to take decisions on vital political, security and development issues affecting the entire region. But China, for one, has reservations. Its ambassador in Delhi recently called EAS merely an economic grouping.

The central question craving an answer is whether East Asia's future will be moulded by the 'Chinese dream', 'Apec dream' or 'Asian century' passionately advocated by Modi. Clearly India's interests lie in advancing the last. Its fruition, however, depends on harmony at the high table of the four majors – the US, China, India and Japan. Signals from Naypyitaw remain hazy for the present.

The writer is director general of ICWA and a former ambassador to Myanmar. Views are personal.