

## **From Looking East to Acting East**

**- C. Raja Mohan**

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi surprised the world with his passion for foreign policy, Asia has inevitably taken the centre stage in the conduct of his government's diplomacy. It was widely expected that the emphasis of Mr. Modi, when he became the Prime Minister of India at the end of May 2014, would be on reviving India's economic growth that had slowed down in the first years of this decade. For Mr. Modi though diplomacy and economic development are deeply interconnected.

Summing up the government's expansive diplomatic activism in the second half of 2014, the external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj told the parliament at the end of the year that the "Prime Minister has consistently advocated a proactive and innovative approach to foreign policy that is aligned with our Government's primary goal of accelerating national economic development. India needs access to capital, technology, resources, energy, markets and skills, a secure environment, a peaceful neighbourhood and a stable global trading system"

Once Indian diplomacy was put at the service of India's development, Asia with its economic dynamism has become a major priority presented for the Foreign Office. In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao unveiled the Look East Policy to reconnect with Asia as part of India's economic globalisation. Nearly quarter of a century later, Mr. Modi has again turned to Asia to improve India's economic fortunes. The policy of 'Acting East' is about injecting new vigour and purpose into India's Asia policy.

In the intervening decades India's economic engagement with the region has grown considerably and Delhi is very much part of the regional institutions led by the ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations). Yet there was no denying the sense that India had not realised the full potential of its partnerships with the Asian nations.

Mr. Modi was in a good position to change this, given his personal interest in the region. As the chief minister of Gujarat for more than a decade, Mr. Modi had traveled the region extensively. His destinations included China, Japan, Singapore and Australia, where he had actively sought investments from the region into Gujarat. Leading businesses in the region were impressed by the level of development and the ease of doing business in the state. East Asia The region therefore was quick to welcome the arrival of the Modi government and embrace its agenda for economic development.

During his visit to Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, promised to mobilise nearly \$35 billion dollars of aid and investment into India in the next five years. The Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to India set an investment target of about \$ 20 billion in the coming years. As the business and economic environment improves under Mr. Modi, more investments are likely from across East Asia, including Korea, Australia and the South East Asian nations. A significant part of these investments, Delhi hopes, will be directed at the modernisation of India's physical infrastructure.

Mr. Modi has tapped into the interest in both Japan and China in the development of high speed railways in India. Tokyo and Beijing have ambitious plans to build trans-border transport corridors between India and East Asia. China is pressing for the Indian participation in the the development of the so-called BCIM corridor that will connect China's south western province of Yunnan with Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. Tokyo has promised to

modernise road networks in the north eastern provinces and contribute to the development of maritime corridors between peninsular India and South East Asia. Connectivity—over land and sea— is also a major priority for the new government in its engagement with the ASEAN.

Modi has also significantly expanded the geographic scope of India's Look East policy. He has become the first prime minister in 28 years to visit Australia that has emerged as a major partner for India. Modi also became the first Indian PM in 33 years to travel to Fiji, which has a sizeable population of Indian origin. Modi also took the opportunity to host a meeting in Fiji with all the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Mr Modi and Ms Swaraj have put a special emphasis on promoting India's soft power in the region—through a vigorous engagement with the diaspora and a strong commitment to build on shared civilisational bonds. For the new government renewing cultural and spiritual connectivity with Asia are as important as physical connectivity.

The Modi government is also fully engaged with the emerging political challenges in East Asia. Modi has reaffirmed the centrality of ASEAN in building a stable and prosperous order in East Asia and the Pacific. He cautioned the region, where territorial disputes are threatening peace, against the expansionist concepts of the 19th century and sustain the focus on development. On the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Modi was firm in stating India's deep interests in the freedom of navigation in sea and air. He underlined the importance of all parties abiding by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas.

Under the previous governments, Delhi's Look East Policy did recognise the centrality of maritime security and the need to expand India's defence partnerships with Asia. The Modi government's Act East Policy is pursuing these objectives with a new sense of urgency. Amidst a historic power shift in the region and the increasing uncertainty in the relations among the major powers, including the U.S., China and Japan, there has been a growing demand for a larger Indian security role in the region.

In the last few months, India has begun to deepen defence ties with the United States, Japan, Australia and Vietnam. Delhi does not however, view its defence diplomacy in the region as part of an alignment with one great power against another. The objective of India is to engage all powers, strengthen the regional institutions and contribute effectively to maintenance of a stable balance of power in Asia and its waters.

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