

India re-defines its regional role

Recent foreign policy moves by New Delhi indicate an inflexion point. Combining orthodox ideas from the Cold War era along with 21st century pragmatism, it appears that India has decided that the emerging multipolar world is becoming far too complicated for the binary choices and easy solutions that some had envisioned for the country's foreign policy. Not only has it recast its approach to the maritime Indo-Pacific but as the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit exemplifies, it is also building deeper and more constructive links with continental Eurasia.

Setting a new tone

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1 laid out a framework that might outlast the present government. The speech was dominated by four themes that collectively tell us about the evolving foreign policy. First, the central theme was that at a time when the world is facing power shifts, uncertainty and competition over geopolitical ideas and political models, India would project itself as an independent power and actor across Asia. One of the most important parts of the speech was when Mr. Modi described India's ties with the three great powers. Russia and the United States were called as partners with whom India has relationships based on overlapping interests in international and Asian geopolitics. And, India-China relations were portrayed in complex terms as having "many layers" but with a positive undertone that stability in that relationship is important for India and the world.

The intended signal to all major capitals was that India will not be part of a closed group of nations or aggregate Indian power in a bloc, but will chart out its own course based on its own capacity and ideas. Notice, for example, the following phrases: "our friendships are not alliances of containment" or "when nations stand on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other, they earn the respect of the world and a voice in international affairs". For some this portends a renewed emphasis on non-alignment. The Prime Minister himself used the more agreeable term "strategic autonomy". In essence, what it really means is that India has become too big to be part of any political-military camp whose design and role in Asian affairs is being conceived elsewhere, upon ideas that India might not fully share, and where India has a marginal role in strategy and policy implementation.

The China factor

Second, even as China's rise has undoubtedly increased the demand and space for India to increase its region-wide engagement, India's role in the vast Indo-Pacific is no longer envisaged as a China-centric one. Mr. Modi removed any lingering impression of an impending crusade or an ideological sub-text to India's Act East policy in the coming years when he remarked, "India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate." If anybody imagined that India's identity as a democracy would position it naturally towards one side in the emerging world order, Mr. Modi clarified that misperception quite emphatically: "India's own engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region — from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas — will be inclusive... That is the foundation of our civilisational ethos — of pluralism, co-existence, open-ness and dialogue. The ideals of democracy that define us as a nation also shape the way we engage the world."

India's Ambassador to Beijing expressed a similar message on the eve of the SCO summit: Big countries "can peacefully coexist despite differences in their systems and that they can work together". In other words, India's democracy is far more comfortable with a world of diversity than the spectre of a clash of civilisations or great powers locked in ideological contests.

Third, despite this policy adjustment, India's approach to the region is not going to be a hands-off policy or one devoid of norms. We continued to hear an emphasis on a "free, open, inclusive region" and a "common rules-based" Indo-Pacific order. Some believe this is aimed squarely at China but it is more accurate to interpret such rhetoric as directed at the type of order India would like to see and actively support. Significantly, Mr. Modi asserted that such "rules and norms should be based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few". Again, this underscored Delhi's belief that the normative basis of the region's future political-security architecture would only find legitimacy if it were based on a consensus among all stakeholders.

Finally, without mentioning either, Mr. Modi urged both the U.S. and China to manage their rivalry and prevent their "normal" competition from descending into conflict. "Asia of rivalry will hold us all back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century. So, each nation must ask itself: Are its choices building a more united world, or forcing new divisions? It is a responsibility that both existing and rising powers have." He made it clear that while India would pursue many partnerships "in the region and beyond", it was not going to choose "one side of a divide or the other" but would remain wedded to its principles and values that emphasise inclusiveness, diversity and of course its own interests.

Did Mr. Modi's speech constitute a turning point in India's foreign policy? As analysts debate this question, the messaging was unmistakable. After drifting towards the U.S. for the past decade, Delhi is rediscovering a posture and policy for a multipolar world as well as taking greater responsibility for its own future and destiny. Reflecting its unique geographical position at the rimland of Eurasia and at the mouth of the Indo-Pacific, India's foreign policy is likely to be driven by a dual attention to the balance of power and order building in the continental and maritime environment around the subcontinent.

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