

## Delhi to Manila

As he joins the annual round of regional consultations in the Philippines, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) will find himself in a very different Asia than the one he has been familiar with. Delhi's challenge in the recent past was to cope with the sweeping agenda on trade liberalisation and climate change. Over the last three years, Modi has made India enthusiastic about green energy. But on commerce, he has found it hard to bridge the gap between regional expectations and India's slow pace of trade reform. Meanwhile in Manila, Modi will find that President Donald Trump's America, the long-standing champion of free trade, has turned a critic of economic globalisation and walked away from climate change commitments. On both counts, China has stepped in to fill the breach. As it reels under a massive trade deficit with China, chafes at President Xi's Belt and Road initiative which is limiting its regional space, and tries to catch up with China's lead on green technologies, Delhi will have considerable difficulty in accepting Beijing's leadership claims.

China's growing military power and political assertiveness have profoundly destabilised the regional security environment. Washington is struggling to find a reasonable accommodation with Beijing while trying to reassure its regional allies and retaining America's regional primacy. This churn has produced an unexpected strategic enthusiasm for India in Trump's Washington. The US president has surprised his regional friends and adversaries by replacing the term "Asia-Pacific" with "Indo-Pacific" to describe the region. He has also encouraged the renewal of a quadrilateral American dialogue with India, Japan and Australia. On its part, Delhi has signaled readiness to negotiate the terms of a new partnership.

China's rise is weighing heavily on the unity of the Association of South East Asian Nations and its centrality in shaping the regional agenda. Beijing's relentless pressure has tilted smaller states like Cambodia towards China, weakened US ties to long-standing allies like the Philippines and Thailand, and has begun to neutralise others. In inviting India as a founding member of the East Asia Summit in 2005, the ASEAN hoped that Delhi would actively contribute to peace and prosperity in the region and ensure a measure of balance among the major powers. If India's Commerce Ministry never stops disappointing the ASEAN on trade issues, the obduracy of the Defence Ministry has frustrated those in the region looking for stronger military partnerships with Delhi. Having invited all the leaders of the ASEAN to join India's Republic Day celebrations in January at a critical moment in Asia's economic and political evolution, Modi can hopefully convince his regional interlocutors that Delhi has something more than the long Rajpath parade on offer.

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