

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Philippines to attend the ASEAN-India summit, the East Asia Summit and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership summit has put India centre-stage in the Asian region now referred to as "Indo-Pacific". Equally, it puts the "Indo-Pacific" and ties with the U.S. centre-stage in India's Act East policy, in all three spheres: political, strategic and economic. Mr. Modi's arrival in Manila was preceded by the first meeting of the India-U.S.-Japan-Australia quadrilateral, a grouping first mooted in 2006 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It ended with statements on cooperation for a "free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region", a direct signal that it will counter China's actions in the South China Sea if necessary. Next, Mr. Modi's meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump saw a similar emphasis on cooperating in the Indo-Pacific, a term now widely adopted by the U.S. The 'Quad' doesn't just pertain to maritime surveillance, it also aims at enhancing connectivity in accordance with "the rule of law" and "prudent financing" in the Indo-Pacific together, a reference to American plans to build an "alternative financing model" to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, Mr. Modi's speech to ASEAN vowed to bring India's economic and business ties with the region up to the level of their "exceptionally good political and people-to-people relations". This sets the stage for closer engagement ahead of the 25th year Commemorative Summit to be held in Delhi in January 2018, with ASEAN leaders also expected to attend Republic Day festivities.

The clarity in India's purpose in East Asia at this juncture is important, but the next steps are equally vital. To begin with, despite a government statement to the contrary, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Quad, also called a "coalition of democracies" of the Indo-Pacific, is a front aimed at countering China's influence. As the only member of the proposed coalition that is also part of another security arrangement involving China and Russia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, India's ability to balance its interests will be tested. Finally, while there will be much to navigate on the political front, Mr. Modi would be keen to keep a sharp focus on the economic tailwinds during his engagements in Manila. The 10 ASEAN countries account for about 11% of India's global trade. For the past few years India has joined the ASEAN "plus six", including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, to discuss the RCEP free trade agreement. Talks have often run into rough weather over India's stand on visas and services access, while also holding out against free trade that could give China an unfair edge in goods trade. Mr. Modi's work is cut out as he clarifies India's pivot in east Asia.

Revving up infrastructure spending is necessary, but not sufficient

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