



by Harsh
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Why PM's Nordic outreach matters

AFTER decades of neglect, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Sweden this week has finally underscored that relationship with the Nordic states is an important part of rapidly evolving Indian foreign policy priorities. This was not only the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Sweden in 30 years but also an attempt to reach out to the wider Nordic region with the first India-Nordic summit which saw India interacting with the Prime Ministers of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on a single platform.

Changing scenario

New Delhi's focus, for far too long, has been on traditional Western powers, with the US on one side and major European powers like the UK, France and Germany on the other. The result was a complete neglect of advanced Nordic nations with whom India shares some significant political and economic complementarities and which rank highest in various human development indices. The Bofors scandal too cast its own shadow on relations with Sweden in particular, with reluctance on the part of India to move beyond past troubles. On the other hand, the Nordic states too were absorbed in trying to manage their European identities in multiple ways and India was not really on their radar.

But with the changing global context in which states like China and Russia are busy remoulding the rules of global governance to their advantage and with India standing out as an economic powerhouse with strong democratic credentials, the discourse in the Nordic states too has undergone a dramatic shift. A strong partnership with India is seen as not only desirable but also imperative of changing global realities.

Modi's visit to Sweden, therefore, comes at an appropriate time and India's outreach to the wider Nordic region with the first India-Nordic summit is most welcome. In Sweden, Modi galvanised top Swedish firms to invest in India, underlining the importance of strong bilateral business relations for the people of the two countries. Sweden has been a strong supporter of India's 'Make in India' campaign with the Swedish Prime Minister leading a big delegation to the Mumbai summit in 2016.

India and Sweden are working on reviving their traditionally strong defence ties in light of the latter's interest in proposing the Saab Group's Gripen-E single-engine jet fighter for the Indian Air Force and with a

Request for Information having been issued earlier this month to Stockholm. India and Sweden have decided to set up a common task force on cyber security and are working towards finalising a bilateral agreement on exchange and mutual protection of classified information for cooperation in the defence area as well as encouraging private sector stakeholders to develop supply chains for small- and medium-sized enterprises with major defence and aerospace original equipment manufacturers.

The highlight of Modi's visit to Sweden was the signing of the Joint Innovation Partnership pact and adoption of the Joint Action Plan. The Joint Innovation Partnership is aimed at embedding the wider relationship in a larger innovation ecosystem in order to "initiate a multi-stakeholder Innovation Partnership for a Sustainable Future, underpinning the mutual commitment to drive prosperity and growth and address societal challenges such as climate change and sustainable development through innovation".

Global order

The Swedish government will be providing more than \$59 million (₹387 crore) for innovation cooperation with India in the field of smart cities and sustainability, two key priorities of New Delhi. With the Joint Action Plan, meanwhile, the two nations will try to enhance cooperation in key areas of renewable energy, women's skills development and empowerment, space and science, and health and life sciences.

Issues such as trade, growth, global security, smart cities, renewable energy and climate change were also on the agenda of India's broader engagement with the Nordic countries. The first India-Nordic summit reaffirmed the commitment of

both sides to work towards supporting free trade as a catalyst for achieving inclusive growth and realising the Sustainable Development Goals at a time when major economic powers are becoming protectionist and tariff wars are becoming the new normal. Being the beneficiaries of the rule-based global order, it is important for India and the Nordic states to raise their voice against the challenges emanating from some emerging and some extant powers towards the multilateral normative order.

New priorities

In this context, India received key support from the Nordic countries for its membership of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) and a seat at the UN Security Council as a permanent member. The NSG support from the Nordic states is particularly significant because there was a time when these states had adopted a strong moralistic approach on India's nuclear programme. Today, there is a recognition and acceptance of India's credentials as a responsible nuclear actor despite not being a formal member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Both China and the US under Donald Trump are challenging the global institutional framework in multiple ways and it is important for the liberal democratic states to stand up for the sanctity of that order by enhancing engagements.

As India redefines its foreign policy priorities in Europe and as a changing Europe comes to terms with a rising India, Modi's engagement with the Nordic states has managed to showcase the potential that exists in this partnership with a much neglected part of the world.

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