

With spring in the legs

On the wings of popular ratings, Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fly abroad

After a considerable gap, Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarks on a four-nation trip on Monday. He should have spring in his legs given that the Government he leads has not just completed three years in office but that it also enjoys a high level of acceptability among the people — evident in the ratings that are there in the public domain. It's not surprising that Prime Minister's personal popularity remains enormously high, belying the Opposition's claims that he has lost sheen. He, therefore, meets foreign heads of Governments on an even stronger footing than before and is more than adequately placed to present and hardsell India's advantages and its concerns. After all, the trip is no pleasure jaunt; at one level it is an effort to reinforce existing bonds and at the other it is a fresh attempt to establish new relationships. True, the countries he visits have been India's friends — either since long or through recent years — and it is reflected in the various levels of engagement in diverse sectors of cooperation. But there will be a level of novelty when Prime Minister Modi meets France's newly elected President Emmanuel Macron — new to the high office, as Modi was when he became Prime Minister in May 2014. Modi would want to fully



utilise the two days he will be in France to establish a personal rapport with the young President. France and India have a strong trade and defence partnership which received further boost recently, with New Delhi clearing the purchase of Rafale fighter planes — a deal that took a long time in coming, and one that would have taken even longer had Prime Minister Modi not stepped in to expedite it. Most certainly, President Macron will back India's claim to the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, and one can also expect a greater cohesiveness between the two countries on countering terrorism. Prime Minister Modi's Germany visit will largely be business in nature, where the Indian head of

Government will be doing what he does best — securing the best trade deals he can squeeze out for his country and its people. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and he will jointly address a business meeting to be attended by top industry leaders. His Spain halt too is business-oriented, though it would be useful if he could gain an insight into how Spain successfully manages its organ donation drive. Spain is a world leader in organ donation.

The 'highlight' of this foreign trip — if one can use the term without downgrading the importance of his visits elsewhere — remains Russia. There are two primary reasons for this. The first is that Russia remains the oldest friend India has had, and it has stood by New Delhi through thick and thin. It was the first country with which India instituted an annual summit meeting between heads of Governments. The second reason is that certain quarters have spoken of a dilution in India-Russia ties given that Moscow has inched close to Pakistan and has supposedly been less than serious in persuading China to allow for India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The concerns, even if inflated, must be met with the candour and transparency expected of an old friend.