

PM affirms India's 'strategic autonomy'

Asks big powers not to return to rivalry

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India's principle of "strategic autonomy" remains strong, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, drawing an equivalence in ties with Russia, the U.S. and China and cautioning against a "return to the age of great power rivalries," at a conference in Singapore on Friday.

In his keynote address at the 'Shangri-La Dialogue,' organised by the London-based think-tank IISS and hosted by Singapore, he also called the relationship with China a "multi-layered"



Narendra Modi speaks at 'Shangri-La Dialogue' in Singapore. ■ AFP

one, as he drew out his seven-point vision for the Indo-Pacific region (Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean).

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The speech by Mr. Modi, the first Indian Prime Minister to have accepted an invitation to address the Shangri-La dialogue, which draws Defence Ministers from the Asia-Pacific region each year, was awaited with much anticipation due to the timing of the conference. In the past year, India has increased its engagement with the ASEAN region, joined a quadrilateral grouping with the U.S., Japan and Australia for the Indo-Pacific, as well as reached out to China and Russia and will join the SCO grouping this month.

Amid India's varied strategic moves, as well as the flux in the region, Mr. Modi's speech was expected to clarify India's position on the "Indo-Pacific" strategy which is often seen as a platform to contain China's moves in the South China Sea.

However, Mr. Modi denied the Indo-Pacific was part of a strategy and called it a "natural" geographical region, placing the 10 countries of South East Asia (ASEAN) at the centre of the forum.

"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. And

by no means do we consider it as directed against any country," Mr. Modi said.

Referring specifically to relations between India and Russia, U.S., and China separately, Mr. Modi made it clear that he believed India, like Singapore didn't stand "behind one power or the other." "No other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China... We have displayed maturity and wisdom in managing issues and ensuring a peaceful border," he said about relations with Beijing.

Mr. Modi's words were significant, days before another visit to China's Qingdao city to attend the SCO summit, a visit which comes a few weeks after he travelled to Wuhan to meet President Xi Jinping.

"President Putin and I shared our views on the need for a strong multi-polar world order for dealing with the challenges of our times" said Mr. Modi, referring to his meeting with the Russian President in Sochi last month. "At the same time, India's global strategic partnership with the United States has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth of our relationship," he added.