

Modi unveils vision for **India-China** ties, open Indo-Pacific

SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE PM calls for equality, mutual respect, sovereignty in the region; criticises protectionism

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SINGAPORE: Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together while remaining sensitive to each other's interests, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Friday as he unveiled New Delhi's comprehensive vision for the Indo-Pacific region.

Modi's keynote speech at a key defence and security conference in Singapore highlighted India's historical role in the Asia-Pacific – which he pointedly referred to as the Indo-Pacific stretching from Africa to America – and was unambiguous in its claim to a future role in the region.

He emphasised that India's engagement in the region will be positive and inclusive, and aimed at creating a “rule-based, open, balanced and stable trade environment”.

“I firmly believe that Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests,” said Modi, the first Indian Prime Minister to address the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Modi said his informal summit with President Xi Jinping in April had helped cement the under-



■ PM Narendra Modi greets people before delivering a keynote address at the IISS Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore on Friday. REUTERS

standing that strong and stable relations between India and China are key to global peace and progress.

An “Asia of rivalry” will hold the region back while an “Asia of cooperation will shape this century”, he said.

India and China have displayed maturity in managing issues and ensuring a peaceful border, he said.

“No other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China... Our cooperation is expanding,” he added.

In a speech that was uncharacteristically bold for India, Modi

took his “Act East” policy – the successor to former prime minister PV Narasimha Rao's “Look East” policy of the 1990s – to its next logical step.

Modi, known for pursuing active diplomacy that marks a shift from India's classical non-confrontational approach to foreign policy, spoke to an audience of about 500 delegates, including US defence secretary Jim Mattis and defence chiefs of more than 40 countries.

Much of the speech was aimed at members of Asean as much as at China.

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In an apparent reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative that India has not joined, Modi said connectivity unites a region but could succeed only if there is trust.

"There are many connectivity initiatives in the region. If these have to succeed, we must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust. And for that, these initiatives must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability," he said.

"They must empower nations, not place them under impossible debt burden. They must promote trade, not strategic competition."

The speech was peppered with the term Indo-Pacific, which Modi used 11 times, as he said India does not see the region as a "club of limited members" or a "grouping that seeks to dominate".

"And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country... India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region is, therefore, a positive one," he said.

"This region, and all of us, have benefited from globalisation... But there is growing protectionism—in goods and in services. Solutions cannot be found behind walls of protection, but in embracing change. What we seek is a level playing field for all," he said.

India stands for an open and stable international trade regime and will support such a rules-based environment in the Indo-Pacific Region too, Modi noted.

"There are shifts in global power... The foundations of the global order appear shaken. And, the future looks less certain," he said. "For all our progress, we live on the edge of uncertainty, of unsettled questions and unresolved disputes; contests and claims; and clashing visions and competing models."

Modi's speech came a day after the US renamed its Hawaii-based Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command as a nod to India's growing strategic influence in the region. It also comes at a time when the US and China are facing off in an increasingly likely trade war.

The Indo-Pacific region is the key theatre in a potentially more contentious test of wills to dominate important sea lanes. So far, China has been unimpeded in its years-old effort to reclaim and militarise islands in disputed waters.

The US, which has patrolled these waters since World War 2, is not as dominant as it once was. Members of Asean have for years wooed India to play a more active role in the region by forging bet-

ter trade links, a sentiment the US shares. Historically, the Indian Navy, which is well regarded in these parts for its role in combating piracy, has over the decades built close ties with several countries in the region.

China, for its part, has made clear its intention to play a bigger role on the world stage. President Xi announced at the last Communist Party congress that China is now ready to "claim its place" on the world stage. This clearly marked a shift in Beijing's thinking during Chairman Mao's time, when the founder of modern China held that the country would first develop itself before waging any ideological battles overseas.

In January, India hosted the ten Asean leaders on Republic Day. "The Asean-India Summit was a testimony of our commitment to Asean, and to our Act East policy," Modi said.

"For India," declared Mr Modi, "no region now receives as much attention as this. And for good reasons."

On Wednesday, Modi met Indonesian President Joko Widodo and pledged to develop infrastructure and an economic zone at Sabang on the northern tip of Sumatra island at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

His talks with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Friday included an agreement for continuous and institutionalised engagement between their navies, including exercises.

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