

India's foreign policy on show

Inviting all ten leaders of Asean to the Republic Day celebrations is a neat diplomatic move to deal with the China factor



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When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992, and India's economy was heading into what appeared to be an irrevocable tailspin, we were fortunate to have a farsighted and pragmatic Prime Minister in PV Narasimha Rao. It was he who pulled us out of the crisis by resorting to economic liberalisation and a pragmatic foreign policy across our western and eastern shores. Narasimha Rao's significant contributions in foreign policy were his decisions to integrate India's economy closely with fast-growing economies such as Japan, South Korea and Asean to our east, while establishing full diplomatic ties with Israel. This move asserted to all our Islamic neighbours that India could not be taken for granted on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, by their backing anti-India resolutions on Kashmir, in the OIC. Narasimha Rao's reforms have stood the test of time.

The dawn of 2018 is marked by two significant developments in India's foreign policy, across its 'Indo-Pacific neighbourhood', extending from the Gulf of Aden to the South China Sea. Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel paid a high-profile and successful visit to India, signalling increasing prospects for ties in defence, agriculture and industry. This visit manifested the success of the 'Look West' approach of the Modi government which has de-hyphenated relations with Israel from its relations with its Arab/Islamic neighbours.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Palestine later this year.

India rightly joined the vast majority of countries in the UN to oppose the Trump administration's ill-advised effort to declare the whole of Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel. The holy city is, after all, regarded as the heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The international status of West Jerusalem remains a seriously contentious issue. We have sensibly positioned ourselves to have equally good relations with all major powers across our western shores, notably Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Balancing priorities

This Republic Day we will host all the ten leaders of Asean to mark the 25th anniversary of our association with that organisation as a dialogue partner and participant in the annual Asean-sponsored East Asia Summit that includes India, the US, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Russia. These forums now serve as crucial elements in our policies across what is called the Indo-Pacific region.

An important aspect of this unprecedented visit by Asean leaders is going to be a picturesque projection of the cultural bonds linking India and Asean, with unique depictions of the Ramayana by dance troupes from Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia. There will be discussions on further promoting economic, cultural and security cooperation bilaterally and multilaterally. It is an imaginative effort to enable us to work individually and collectively on the challenges posed

by an increasingly assertive China. It will also provide an opportunity for India to accelerate economic and security cooperation with the largest most populous Asean member, Indonesia.



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China today has maritime boundary disputes arising from its unilateral actions and territorial claims on Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Beijing has used force to construct artificial islands to back its claims and arbitrarily rejected the ruling of the International Court of Justice on its irredentist maritime boundary claims on the Philippines, showing utter disregard for the provisions of international law.

Given its readiness to simultaneously provide credit for infrastructure and other projects at a time when the US is showing signs of disengaging from multilateral economic engagement across the Indo-Pacific, some Asean members such as Brunei, Thailand and Malaysia appear reluctant to challenge Chinese power. Others like Laos and Cambodia do not appear uncomfortable at all with Chinese policies. Only Vietnam and Indonesia appear prepared to assert their rights on territorial issues. India will have

to see how it can work with Indonesia and Vietnam to meet the challenges China poses, while keeping Singapore discreetly on its side.

Opportune moment

The recent Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi provided a good opportunity for greater interaction between members of the Quad comprising India, the US, Japan and Australia, and Asean. The interaction with Indonesia and the visit of its defence minister to New Delhi was particularly important. President Joko Widodo is determined to respond strongly to Chinese attempts to extend its maritime borders into Indonesian waters in the Natuna Sea, northwest of Borneo, located well within Indonesia's 200 nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. During a visit to Japan in 2015, Widodo declared that China's so-called "nine dashed line" had "no basis in International Law".

India and Indonesia are well positioned to challenge China's territorial claims. Indonesia has con-

cluded bilateral agreements with Singapore and the Philippines, demarcating their maritime boundaries. India has, likewise, concluded separate bilateral and trilateral maritime agreements with Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. It is prepared to conclude an agreement based on international law with Pakistan.

Like Indonesia, Vietnam has firmly refused to yield to Chinese pressures and coercion on issues pertaining to its maritime boundaries with China. India has dealt with Chinese maritime boundary claims effectively and imaginatively. It has backed moves to insist that all countries must comply with international covenants on freedom of navigation. Vietnam has insisted on moving ahead with oil exploration along its maritime frontiers. India, in turn is going ahead with oil exploration contracts with Vietnam, noting the ONGC exploration is not connected with territorial disputes. Vietnam also enjoys the support of Japan and the US on its stand on its maritime frontiers. At a recent summit meeting, the US and Vietnam affirmed "full support for peaceful resolution of disputes, without threat of use of force or coercion, in accordance with International Law".

Reaching out

Modi is visiting Singapore later this year for the India-Asean and East Asia Summit meetings. It is evident that the Quad group will reach out to countries like Vietnam and Indonesia for enhanced diplomatic, strategic and economic cooperation, and to expand support for calls to respect international maritime law. These are norms a hegemonic China refuses to observe. Clearly, India is imaginatively shaping the contours for a stable balance of power in Asia.

The writer is a former High Commissioner to Pakistan