

Modi on right track to make India world power

There are individuals, not least in the media, who have proffered more criticisms of Prime Minister Narendra Modi than they have had a lifetime of hot meals. The latest one, which resurfaced in the aftermath of Republic Day when the entire ASEAN galaxy was present in Delhi as chief guests, is that he is essentially an accomplished event manager.

This sneering accusation had its origin in the days Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat and initiated the Vibrant Gujarat summit of business leaders — a practice that, incidentally, has been emulated by all States regardless of the political complexion of the Government. When he became Prime Minister and travelled to the United States in 2014, there was a spectacular rally organised for overseas desis at the Madison Square Gardens in New York. This too was replicated in nearly all the foreign cities the Prime Minister has travelled to, including an event at the iconic Wembley Stadium in London in 2015.

Overseas Indians apart, there have been the foreign policy initiatives. At his swearing-in ceremony in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan in May 2014, Modi ensured the presence of the SAARC leadership, including the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Then there was the Africa Summit, a huge gathering involving considerable groundwork and logistical bandobast that saw the leadership of an entire continent — including countries that had never been on India's foreign policy radar — descend on Delhi. Then there have been special red carpet treatment accorded to visiting leaders, notably Xi Jinping of China, Shinzo Abe of Japan and Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. And now, there is this grand outreach to the ASEAN bloc.

Had these events been one-off displays of razmattaz, enjoyed and promptly forgotten, the criticism of Modi as a deft event manager would have been quite justified. Fortunately, this is not the case. Although some initiatives, particularly the overtures to China and Pakistan may not have

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yielded the necessary returns, most of the others were a result on a conscious, long-term approach.

Take the conscious cultivation of the Indian diaspora. The grand events in different cities of the globe, particularly in countries that have significant numbers of Overseas Indians, were aimed at tapping the energies of the diaspora for the service of India. Modi has aimed at transforming the diaspora from being economic refugees into unofficial ambassadors of India by giving them an emotional stake in the progress of India. The growing responsiveness of the Ministry of External Affairs to the consular problems facing Indian passport holders overseas is also a manifestation of this approach. It can be said without exaggeration that the Modi Government has enhanced the worth of an Indian passport.

Likewise, by reaching out to Africa and establishing India's connect with that continent, the Modi Government has achieved three things. First, he has done the groundwork for Indian companies to go out and find new markets for their goods and services. How much they are successful will depend on the enterprise of the corporate sector but at least the Government has set new horizons for India's outreach. Secondly, by connecting to Africa, Modi has strengthened India's clout in global forum. The election of an Indian to the International Court of Justice in the face of P-5 competition didn't happen overnight. It was preceded by the spade work of initiatives such as the Africa Summit. Finally, by putting India in the radar of Africa, Modi has at least offered many countries a possible alternative to China's de-facto neo-imperialism. It is gradually being recognised that as a benign power without hegemonic ambitions, India has a better chance of countering China's forward march than do either the European countries or the US.

That China was the proverbial elephant in the room at the ASEAN gathering in Delhi last week is undeniable. India may not as yet have the requisite economic or military clout to be an alternative to China in Asia but it is robust enough for the vibrant Asian Tigers to look to it for additional succour. Indeed the fact that India is big but not a giant and benign instead of hegemonic that has made it an attractive partner for ASEAN countries, Japan and Australia. In its quest for the US-India-Japan-Australia Quadrilateral, the difficulties of involving the ASEAN bloc in a grand security network in the Indo-Pacific have often been stressed. India has taken an impressive step forward in establishing linkages.

Of course, these are baby steps. Much more will have to be done to ensure that the show on Republic Day is taken to a higher level. First, India must devote itself relentlessly to the task of economic capacity building. To be attractive, India must be an economic power house in Asia. Secondly, exceptional care must be taken to see that the message of the Prime Minister at Davos is not stymied by bureaucratic manipulation. The level of protectionism in the Indian economy must come down significantly. In this context, Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu's stress on trade as an engine of growth is significant. Thirdly, there must be renewed thrust on imaginative cultural diplomacy that lays special emphasis on India as an open society conducive to creativity and personal advancement. Institutions such as the ICCR must be made far more energetic and look beyond the traditional avenues of soft power.

Finally, India must establish its deep footprints on multilateral bodies that are crying out for direction. SAARC may have lost its momentum thanks to Pakistan but bodies such as BIMSTEC, ASEAN and BRICS exist for different types of multilateral engagement. In April this year, the Prime Minister will travel to London for the Commonwealth summit. That too is a body that needs positive Indian direction and involvement.

Sniggering over foreign policy initiatives is easy but establishing India as a world power needs dedication, drive, imagination and, above all, patient application. Modi is on the right track.