

Under Modi, India is fast expanding its footprint

Delhi's active foreign policy is securing its interests in the Asean region, West Asia

Two recent foreign policy initiatives of the Indian government have the promise of yielding key gains in the long-term. In January, New Delhi witnessed the unprecedented sight of the leaders of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) being honoured as chief guests at the annual Republic Day Parade after a crucial dialogue. On Saturday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian PM to make an official visit to Palestine during a trip that also took him to the United Arab Emirates and Oman. India's near simultaneous engagements show the change in thinking and depth of India's foreign policy outreach, aimed at balancing its long-term goals of playing a vital role in the region. Many Asean states have strong economic relations with China despite disputes over such issues as the South China Sea. India would do well strengthen its links in a wide range of areas with the regional bloc, especially trade, connectivity and security.

Though the Asean states have signed up for China's Belt and Road Initiative, many members continue to be wary of their larger neighbour because of territorial disputes and Beijing's trade and security policies. In such a situation, India stands to gain a lot by taking on a greater leadership role in the region, not necessarily to confront China, but to offer an alternative path that could be more attractive to other nations. Mr Modi's visit to Palestine was hardly surprising, given his stand-alone visit to Israel last year. The outcomes of the visit, including Mr Modi's support for an independent Palestine, bode well for India's overall outreach to West Asia, home to millions of expatriates.

Besides trade and energy supplies, India has also forged close security ties with countries in West Asia that are crucial for the war on terrorism. There may be little common ground between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership but India enjoys huge constituencies of goodwill on both sides that it can leverage to its advantage in the longer run.