

## The Russian ride

PM Modi's meeting with the Russian President signals a necessary recalibration

**W**ith his visit to Sochi to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin for a day-long "informal summit", Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared to set a new normal in his foreign policy outreach. As was his Wuhan meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Sochi visit was aimed at resetting and rebalancing bilateral ties that have weakened over the past few years. The special understanding between India and Russia has frayed, with India drifting closer to the U.S. and Russia to China. The personal touches – hugs, handshakes, a boat ride on the Black Sea – projected the impression of two strong leaders addressing each other's concerns "man to man". Substantively, Mr. Modi's visit was premised on a number of new realities facing India. First, India's existing dependence on Russian military hardware, with orders for about \$12 billion more in the pipeline, must not be jeopardised at any cost. These have been made more difficult by a new U.S. law (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) that would hit India's big-ticket hardware purchases and energy deals from Russia, and Mr. Modi would have wanted to reassure Mr. Putin that India will not bow to such pressure. Second, Russia's recent military exercises and helicopter sales to Pakistan as well as its outreach to the Afghan Taliban have been viewed with deep concern by India, which has sought to extract assurances that this would not in any way hurt its national security interests. Third, the new push to strengthen ties is driven by the global instability that the Donald Trump administration has set off. India appears to have decided it can no longer depend on consistency in the U.S.'s foreign policy.

As a result, the recalibration of Mr. Modi's foreign policy from its perceived Western tilt to a more even-handed approach of aligning with all in India's interests is welcome. Informal summits of the kind in Sochi and Wuhan are also useful to break the ice and reset relations when needed. But a comprehensive shift in foreign policy must be accompanied by greater transparency. If India is contemplating a turnaround from its earlier postures with world powers, it needs to explain the change of course. The secrecy surrounding Mr. Modi's dashes to Wuhan and Sochi is intriguing since he is already scheduled to meet both Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin at least twice in the next two months, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Qingdao and the BRICS summit in Johannesburg. Even more curious are the official outcomes of the informal summits that India and China will cooperate in Afghanistan, while India and Russia will coordinate on the Indo-Pacific. Both have hitherto only been referenced in India's ties with the U.S. and its allies, Europe, Japan and Australia. Without clarity, at a time of global flux India may appear to be attempting to travel in two boats at once.