
ENDING MUTUAL NEGLECT

India and Indonesia are finally finding each other again
amid a power shift in the waters of Asia

DURING HIS FIRST visit to Jakarta this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the elevation of bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership and outlined a shared maritime vision for the Indo-Pacific. It is strange that barring a brief anti-colonial moment in the middle of the 20th century, Delhi and Jakarta had no time for each other. After all, there was so much shared culture and history as well as common developmental imperatives, yet India and Indonesia did not figure in each other's list of priority relationships. How the Cold War played out in Asia had a lot to do with it. But even after the Cold War, when Delhi's Look East Policy and the ASEAN's embrace of India brought the two nations together, the relationship remained way below potential. Modi and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo deserve much praise for ending that mutual neglect.

Over the last couple of years, they have pushed hard to impart a new momentum to the partnership. The results of that effort were visible this week. The comprehensive strategic partnership will be built around annual summit meetings between the leaders, sustained high level bureaucratic exchanges, substantive defence cooperation including on arms production, stronger counter-terror collaboration, deeper economic integration and more expansive people-to-people relations. What stands out in this sweeping agenda is the maritime dimension. The joint maritime vision for the Indo-Pacific is founded on the long delayed recognition that the two nations share a vast oceanic neighbourhood. It has acquired an urgency thanks to the power shift in the waters of Asia marked by the rise of China and its growing confrontation with the US, Beijing's growing assertiveness in territorial disputes with neighbours, President Xi Jinping's decision to project economic and military power in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

To have any influence in this fluid environment, Modi and Widodo have rightly concluded, Delhi and Jakarta need to join hands. Modi, however, has a special challenge. The NDA government's protectionism has undermined Modi's promise, repeated in Jakarta, to resolve trade differences with the ASEAN. Modi's faltering efforts on building a defence industrial base continue to constrain the prospects for joint arms production with Indonesia. India's spotty record on implementing infrastructure projects in third countries casts a shadow over the latest plans to develop a port in Sumatra. If the PM can overcome at least some of these structural difficulties in the remainder of his term, he would not only transform ties with Indonesia but also put the conduct of Indian foreign policy on a higher plane.