

Familiar moorings

With his Shangri-La Dialogue address, the PM signals a foreign policy re-orientation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, three of India's most important partners in Southeast Asia, could not have come at a more important moment in Indian foreign policy positioning. In the past few months, the government has shifted considerably in its signalling, with Mr. Modi visiting China and Russia for informal summits with Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, respectively. The fact that these visits have taken place at a time the U.S. administration has sharpened its aim at China and Russia with sanctions and threats of a trade war suggests Mr. Modi is also attempting to moderate India's strategic posturing on the global stage, and striving for a more balanced approach in what it increasingly sees as an uncertain world. India has also maintained its commitment to relations with the U.S. in order to build a "free and open" Indo-Pacific region, maintain the "international rules-based order", and work together to combat terrorism and terror financing – as they have done more recently at the UN and the Financial Action Task Force. Meanwhile, India's membership of both the Quadrilateral (with the U.S., Japan and Australia) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (the Russia-China-led grouping of Central Asian countries, whose summit Mr. Modi will attend this week) is also an indicator of the new balance that New Delhi seeks.

It is significant that in Singapore Mr. Modi chose the platform of the Shangri-La Dialogue of defence leaders of the Asia-Pacific region to emphasise Indian "strategic autonomy". In his speech on the concept of the "Indo-Pacific" he referred to India's relations with Russia, the U.S. and China. Given his government's particular distaste for the term in the past, it is telling that Mr. Modi appeared to be channelling some of the "Bandung spirit of 1955" that led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, when he praised Singapore for teaching the world the importance of making "free and fair choices" and "embracing diversity at home". "When nations stand on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other, they earn the respect of the world," Mr. Modi said as he unveiled a seven-point vision for the Indo-Pacific region. While warning the world about the possible return of "great power rivalries", he emphasised the importance and centrality of the ASEAN in the concept of the Indo-Pacific. The "principled" vision Mr. Modi projects is a departure from the transactionalism and pragmatism espoused by many in South Block over the last few years. However, it may also be a return to familiar moorings of Indian foreign policy, necessitated by what the Prime Minister identified as the "shifting plates of global politics and the fault lines of history".