



Modi's balancing act

The PM's South-East visit sends a message to China, without rubbing it the wrong way

A twin spectre hangs over Asia. First and foremost, there's the inexorable rise of China and its undisguised ambition to be the leading global superpower. Then, there's the US which, under Donald Trump's capricious leadership, has become an undependable ally that turns on even close friends in matters of trade and defence. That was the backdrop to Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's trip to Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia and the red carpet laid out for him in these countries. The visit to Indonesia was long overdue and came when both countries were eager to upgrade ties. In Singapore, Modi became the first Indian leader to speak at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, the region's top security summit.

For India, the trip was particularly important because we're keen to ensure China doesn't muscle its way into our watery backyard, the Indian Ocean. China is constantly affirming its predominance in the South China Sea to its neighbours' annoyance and both India and Indonesia are keen to ensure this assertiveness doesn't spill beyond the Straits of Malacca. Crucially, the countries have signed a deal to jointly develop Indonesia's Sabang port overlooking the western entrance to the Straits of Malacca, one of the world's busiest waterways. Though Beijing's official response to the accord was muted, the semi-official *Global Times* noted the port is deep enough to allow submarine access and commented sharply: "If India really seeks military access to the strategic island of Sabang, it might wrongfully entrap itself into a strategic competition with China and eventually burn its own fingers." India and Indonesia have also agreed to improve connectivity between Port Blair and Sabang, just 90 km from the tip of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

Modi walked a delicate tightrope while delivering the Shangri-La Dialogue keynote address, evidently keen not to raise China's hackles overly. US Defence Secretary James Mattis saluted India as the "fulcrum" of regional security against Chinese expansionism. But Modi didn't return the fulsome US compliment and was careful not to tug the dragon's tail's too hard. He made a not-so-subtle reference to China's Belt & Road Initiative, saying countries should avoid racking up impossible debt burdens. But he also stressed "Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests." And he slammed US trade protectionism. While Beijing may be privately displeased about India's plans to play a more active counter-force role in the Indian Ocean, publicly it's accentuated the positive. "We highly appreciate such kind of positive remarks," said spokesperson Hua Chunying. This week, the Prime Minister visits China, his second trip since April, to attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. With fickle US foreign policy and possibly pragmatic realisation of China's clout, Modi will likely be performing the same balancing act at the Shanghai forum.