

# The Shangri-La moment



PM Modi's speech framed continuities, nuance in foreign policy. It needs full force of India's example behind it

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's much lauded speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue was remarkable for two reasons. Much attention has been focussed on the increasing use of the term Indo-Pacific to describe a geopolitical constellation that, at least linguistically, recognises India's centrality to global flows and influences. But the two things that really stand out in the speech are these. First, it underlines the deep continuities of India's foreign policy. Historical memory is very short, but the central tenor of the Shangri-La remarks is right out of Manmohan Singh's early speeches in 2004 and 2005. And these principles are consistent with India's underlying existential position in the world.

Despite best efforts to junk the concept, this existential condition pushes India closer to an intelligent non-alignment and cautious prudence than those wanting to position India as a frontline state for the US in Asia would have us believe. Obviously, its institutional articulation will change as the world and India's needs change, but the echo of deeper principles is unmistakable. The second thing that stands out is this: The sharp contrast between the assets India would like to project abroad, its exemplarity as an open, robust, inclusive, deeply institutionalised democracy, and the increasing tenuousness of these ideas at home is also more striking than ever.

The speech was replete with classic Indian themes: An old civilisation discovering the power of a rising East, amid profound political and economic shifts. The pathos of the speech is that it encapsulates India's deepest multi-faceted engagement with the world but it also reflects India's profound loneliness among the big powers, where it needs to engage with all, without relying totally on any of them. It is courted by all but not aligned with any. This was the essence of our structural non-alignment. If China poses a threat to an open maritime, rules-based and security order, the US can no longer be counted on as the custodian of an open economic order. Without naming anyone, the speech is a sotto voce acknowledgement of both threats.

It may not be said quite as starkly, but the Trump administration has brought home one plain truth traditional Indian policy un-

---

More than he realises it, Modi's speech has had to, by force of circumstance, recreate Nehru for the 21st century: A wariness that neither of the big powers will wholly serve India's interests, that great power rivalry will hold the world back, an investment in avoiding polarising confrontation, a guarded acknowledgment and deference to the reality of Chinese power, the rediscovered importance of Russia, and a vigorous pursuit of coalitions of middle and small countries as stabilisers in a global order, while at the same time acknowledging their limitations. This is not something that will be acknowledged either by the establishment, or sections of India's strategic community that had hitched India's star to being a frontline state in a Sino-US rivalry that was a figment of their imagination.

derstood. First, that the US itself can betray its allies depending on the political circumstances, and its policies on trade and immigration cannot be taken as unproblematically good for India. It is not an accident that in the last couple of years, India is again rediscovering its long lost relationships with countries like Russia, relationships that the Panglossian view of the US that had come to dominate certain circles had obscured. The speech acknowledges that reality.

The speech is also a return to acknowledging the complexity of our China policy. It acknowledges the "many layers" of our relationship with China. This is a relationship that will have to be artfully negotiated; it cannot be an in-our-face or confrontational. It has to be approached prudently, not with the polarising zeal of the Cold War. The sense of presumptuousness in dealing with China and Russia has gone.

The complexities of dealing with the two major powers have always led India to seek out support for other intermediate powers and coalitions across the world. The old G-77 was not an ideological construct, as much as it was, in limited ways, mobilising a power source outside of the Great Powers. This strategy has its limitations; its effectiveness in confronting the hard power realities imposed by the Great Powers has always been in doubt. But India is still looking for that functional substitute: A coalition that stands a little apart from the Great Powers.

In many ways, the rediscovered fascination for the ASEAN, Africa, and the admirable commitment to pursue these relationships is, with some regard to changing circumstances, a redux of the old coalition building of the 1950s. In many ways, India's quest in Asia now sounds like a new Bandung, a coalition that worries about both Chinese hard power expansion, and mercurial American economic intervention. Like in the Fifties, the coalition cannot confront the great powers deeply. But it is a useful one nevertheless.

More than he realises it, Modi's speech has had to, by force of circumstance, recreate Nehru for the 21st century: A wariness that neither of the big powers will wholly serve India's interests, that great power rivalry will hold the world back, an investment in avoiding polarising confrontation, a

guarded acknowledgment and deference to the reality of Chinese power, the rediscovered importance of Russia, and a vigorous pursuit of coalitions of middle and small countries as stabilisers in a global order, while at the same time acknowledging their limitations. This is not something that will be acknowledged either by the establishment, or sections of India's strategic community that had hitched India's star to being a frontline state in a Sino-US rivalry that was a figment of their imagination.

The most significant moment was the compliment paid to Singapore. Modi said, "Singapore also shows that when nations stand on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other, they earn the respect of the world and a voice in international affairs. And, when they embrace diversity at home, they seek an inclusive world outside." "Standing on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other." This is a difficult ideal, with its combination of idealism and realism. And it also entails an occasional hypocrisy. But if this phrase is not a tribute to the underlying logic of non-alignment, then what is?

The continuities and sophistication of the speech as an exercise in foreign policy were reassuring. But the speech would have been more poignant if it had the full force of India's example behind it. Modi extolled the virtues of a law-based society, openness and pluralism, civilisation founded on compassion, a rights-based global order where everyone can thrive. He poignantly linked a domestic sensibility with foreign policy. He said of Singapore, "and when they embrace diversity at home, they seek an inclusive world outside." The implication was that intolerance and fear of diversity at home is intimately linked with creating an exclusionary world order.

Having rediscovered his inner Nehru in foreign policy, Modi will do well to remember his own words: We can build a free and inclusive world outside only if we build one at home first. Otherwise, to use Modi's own words, our quest for power will remain as elusive as Shangri-La.

*The author is Vice-Chancellor, Ashoka University. Views are personal*