

TWO-LEGGED DIPLOMACY

In Singapore and Qingdao, a foreign policy shift became visible
— straddling the maritime and continental

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent participation in two important regional forums — the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Qingdao and the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore — has shone a light on India's new diplomatic possibilities as well as challenges. On the face of it, the SCO has little in common with the SLD. The SCO is an inter-governmental organisation and the SLD is a track 1.5 dialogue in which top officials as well as representatives of non-governmental organisations participate. The scope of their geographies, too, is different. The SCO brings together the continental states of Eurasia under the leadership of China and Russia. The SLD is a forum for the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific, where the US looms large. For Delhi's foreign policy traditionalists, the SCO-SLD divide fits quite nicely with the East-West paradigm that had completely enveloped India's thinking during the Cold War.

Since the end of the Cold War, the logic of economic reform and globalisation has been pushing India to break out of this constrictive framework. But ideology and inertia tended to reinforce old ways of thinking. Despite the growing expanse and intensity of India's international engagements in all directions, the tension between new and old ideas has endured. The renewed conflict between the great powers in the last few years has also lent a sharper edge to India's dilemmas. In delivering the keynote address at the SLD in Singapore and celebrating India's full membership of the SCO in Qingdao, PM Modi articulated an approach to Indian foreign policy that we might call "walking on two legs". This approach is more in tune with India's changed weight in the international system and its consequent ability to shape its environment. Walking on two legs demands that India engage all major powers. It rejects the idea of becoming a camp follower to anyone else. The emphasis is on self-interest and the self-assurance that Delhi can manage the contradictions from simultaneous engagement with all powers.

In both Singapore and Qingdao, one of PM Modi's emphases was on connectivity. While connecting with maritime Indo-Pacific is relatively easy, it is much harder with continental Asia. The SCO could help India's long-overdue integration with Eurasia that has remained physically inaccessible to Delhi because of the conflict with Rawalpindi. PM Modi strongly supported SCO's connectivity initiatives while underlining India's reservations on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. He was making it clear he was not going to mask differences on key issues, for example with China on the Belt and Road Initiative. His bet is that by a deeper personal engagement with President Xi Jinping and regional cooperation with China, India could achieve its core national objectives of connectivity and countering terrorism. These objectives are the main goals of the SCO and are strongly reflected in the Qingdao declaration and other agreements signed at the summit.