

New foreign policy parameters

Prime Minister Modi's engagements are founded on the belief that a resurgent India is a pre-condition for a resurgent Asia. He has set the goals high indeed



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There is, perhaps, a lack of incomprehensibility with regard to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign trips; or to be more particular, with his foreign policy orientation. It is surprising that even in an era of technological globalisation, where people are increasingly being connected and exposed to a tsunami of information via numerous social networking sites and online platforms, such feeling prevails. The Prime Minister's foreign trips, including his recent visit to Germany, Spain, Russia and France, have been weighed on account of wastage of public funds and its extravagant media coverage. Commentators have even sarcastically remarked that Modi is always on a "flight mode".

Though the criticism deserves some serious consideration, but it has steered off any discussion with regard to the changes the Prime Minister has been bringing in India's foreign policy, more significantly the push towards formulating a Modi doctrine. Compared to advanced countries like the US, where foreign policy is often an important issue for public debate, Indian foreign policy has never been a part of public scrutiny, except for notable issues such as cross-border terrorism from Pakistan or the imminent Chinese threat.

Similarly, India lacks geopolitical reasoning similar to that of American foreign policy doctrines which have always tried to coalesce national interest with other countries and attempted to educate Europe, Latin America and its Asian partners to share its imperialist geopolitical reasoning of the world.

Initiatives such as the non-aligned movement gave some initial push, but they were locked within domestic constraints and ideological commitments. This prevented any further enhancement in India's potential. The Prime Minister's numerous foreign trips need to be gauged for a deep and ever continuous interest displayed by India to deepen its diplomatic and strategic footprint; to establish its presence as a formidable emerging power in world politics.

The Prime Minister, during his run-up to the office, promised a strong foreign policy with an aim to improve relations with immediate neighbours. He emphasised on the need to increase bilateral trade and cooperation on matters such as counter-terrorism, to secure peace and stability in the South Asian region. Modi also proposed an idea of "para-diplomacy", where every state or city could forge bilateral ties with foreign countries or federal cities, leading, even though theoretically, to a de-centralisation of foreign policy.

Ever since he assumed office, Modi has pursued his foreign policy commitments and tried to enhance ties by engaging on a wide range of areas such as cooperation in defence partnership; nuclear technology; fuel transfer; bilat-



eral trade; cooperation in fighting global terrorism. The Prime Minister's approach towards major powers such as the US, the UK, France and Russia have remained by and large in accordance with his promises.

Though many of these steps, such as the purchase of Rafale fighter jets from France; agreement for the co-development of fifth generation fighter jet with Russia; US support for India's bid for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council etc, have been in pursuit of earlier policies, but it's in the domain of strategic presence in Asia that Modi is evolving a doctrinal approach.

Modi's bilateral engagements, even while drawing from his predecessors, permeates novelty as it attempts to project a discourse regarding the emergence of Asian power, with India occupying a key position within this process. For example, the Prime Minister's proposal for an Asia-Pacific economic corridor connecting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), Japan and India, reflects Modi's attempt to evolve an Asia-Pacific economic sphere of influence which would disperse economic prosperity for the Asian continent. Similarly, the project Mausam is aimed at enhancing maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, and also to strengthen cultural ties with the Indian Ocean countries such as Maldives, Seychelles etc.

Besides, Modi has also replaced the decade-old 'Look East' policy with 'Act East' policy that emphasises on India's engagement with the Asean countries for the construction of a common economic community and security architecture

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in the Asia-Pacific region. Interactions with the Asean and their people have been evoked on political, economic and cultural/civilisational theme like 'Asian century' and 'shared values'.

Besides deepening civilisational ties, the Prime Minister is also engaged in consolidating economic and strategic relations with Asean through different multilateral forums such as the Asean Regional Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the East Asia Summit, the Asean Defence Ministry meeting, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and many more.

These initiatives, though many opine that they do not indicate the emergence of any concrete doctrine, project non-reciprocity and common cultural capital as the two standpoints on which a possible Modi doctrine is being built. Enhancing age-old cultural linkages across the Indian Ocean region; recalling the Buddhist tradition across Central Asian republics such as Mongolia to recuperate the age-old silk route; using satellite diplomacy as a tool to share technological innovations such as e-learning, weather mapping and natural disaster warning with its neighbours — all point towards a non-reciprocal approach which aims to build on an element of developing goodwill as the base for strengthening India's regional foothold in Asia, unlike China which is being increasingly criticised for its predatory capitalist intrusions.

Additionally, this new emerging doctrine aims to unify the Asian powers under an emerging liberal and democratic India, based on principles of shared cultural affinity. The Prime

Minister has used the cultural symbols of Buddhism to propose a cultural symbiosis between India and central Asia across Afghanistan and the need to resurrect it as it will benefit the central Asian region. Similarly, India had trade and cultural linkages with Asean and South Asia. It still carries vestiges of Buddhism and Hinduism across South-East Asia. Thus, cultural capital as background for developing common economic and political tie-ups is being pursued.

This corresponds to a geopolitical imagination of Hindu nationalist ideology which has advocated towards achieving a status of a super power for India alongside establishing its historical glory with the sphere of influence across Asia. Thus, as Modi, in all his bilateral engagements has asserted, a resurgent India is inevitable for a resurgent Asia. But such imperialist aspirations are not without spill-overs as even though a projection of national power might mobilise domestic electorate, it could certainly disturb local power equations and lead to diplomatic and arms competition within Asian continent, particularly in relation to China. China has increasingly viewed Indian association in the Indian Ocean, with Asean and Japan as an act of indirect containment. Modi's doctrinal overtures, even while reflecting a new Asian imagination with India as its vanguard, also carries risks of jeopardising the prevailing balance of power in Asia.

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