

## ● 'INDO-PACIFIC' REGION

# With ports, ships and promises, India asserts role in SE Asia

Modi takes several concrete foreign policy steps in Southeast Asia involving Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia

REUTERS  
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**ALMOST LOST IN** the din of the upcoming US-North Korea summit and fresh tension between Washington and Beijing last week, India cemented its diplomatic and security ties across Southeast Asia in a clear challenge to China.

It's not clear just how far New Delhi will take these relationships, given years of promise, and a general election due in 11 months that could be a distraction for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And if India is already rattling China, it won't want to spark open confrontation.

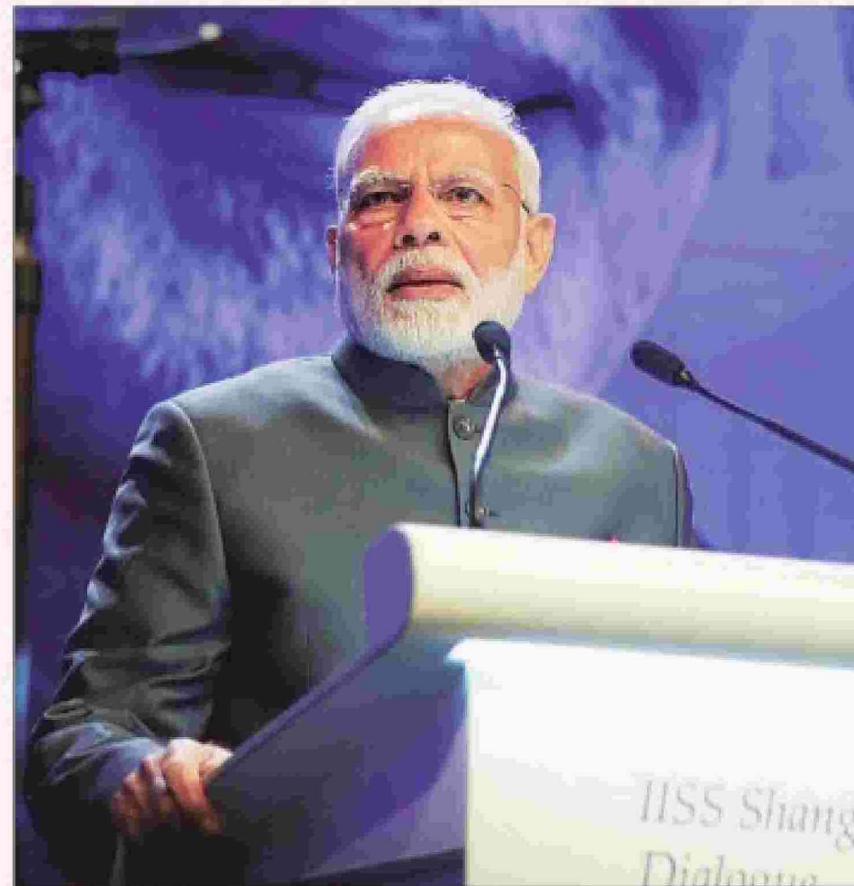
But Modi took several concrete foreign policy and security steps in Southeast Asia in recent days. He signed an agreement with Indonesia to develop a port in the city of Sabang that would

overlook the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's busiest waterways, and agreed a pact with Singapore on logistical support for naval ships, submarines and military aircraft during visits.

Modi also flew to Kuala Lumpur for a late-scheduled call on Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad effectively cementing ties with three of the most influential Southeast Asian nations.

On Friday, Modi told the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Asia's premier defence forum, that India would work with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region," he said in the keynote speech at the forum.



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Several delegates, including US defence secretary Jim Mattis, voiced support. At the end of the forum on Sunday, Singapore

defence minister Ng Eng Hen said: "I am sure many countries are delighted that India has indicated its firm commitment

to the region."

The term "Indo-Pacific" has grown in usage across diplomatic and security circles in the US, Australia, India and Japan in recent years, shorthand for a broader and democratic-led region in place of "Asia-Pacific", which some people have said places China too firmly at the centre.

In a nod to India's growing regional stature, the US military's Pacific Command in Hawaii formally changed its name to the US Indo-Pacific Command in a ceremony on Wednesday.

Despite an outward show of friendship between China and India, and Modi's comments about the strong relations between them, Beijing gave a distinctly cool response to his strategy.

The state-owned Global Times warned in an editorial last week: "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."