

HD India adopting a proactive stance

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FOR all the "Look East, Act East" stance taken by its new government, India was the odd man out at Beijing's Apec Summit that ended, ironically, on the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on a high profile three-nation tour of the east.

India did not attend despite Modi being invited by **Chinese** President Xi Jinping. New Delhi has, in the past, avoided forums where it could get into confrontation with **China** or Pakistan. This kind of exclusivist approach does not help.

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For its eastward thrust to succeed, Modi should be knocking at Apec's door while seeking a **stake** in free trade blocs, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific.

One would have liked Modi to invite the Myanmar president, and also the **Chinese**, for his swearing-in ceremony in May along with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders, with the ethnic Indian-majority Mauritius being an exception.

But then, **China** is not a SAARC member and Myanmar, an Asean member, belongs to Southeast Asia. Yet, it has a physical proximity and is India's gateway to Southeast Asia.

As this is published, Modi will likely have met Myanmar's leadership and in particular, for the first time, its charismatic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Like other nations, India is watching with interest if the country will amend its law to facilitate her contesting the elections.

Myanmar's dark phase is over and the new leadership, despite halts and road blocks, is working towards democracy. India has invested much in Myanmar in the past decade, which really should be stepped up.

Using India as the nodal point, the United States and Japan have a unique opening in building greater East-West connectivity through Myanmar into Southeast Asia.

At Nay Pyi Taw, Modi attended the Asean-India Summit and the East Asia Summit, seeking and renewing contacts with two scores of leaders, together and some bilaterally, including those of Thailand, South Korea and Singapore.

At his meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Modi invited Malaysian companies to come to India, saying there are a "lot of opportunities" for them in his ambitious "Make in India" campaign.

Indeed, in this month of summits, these two come as the world's geopolitical focus shifts increasingly to Asia, marked by **China**'s rise, an assertive Shinzo Abe government in Japan and the US pivot towards the region.

The contrast with a West Asia in turmoil, unfortunately, is too obvious to be ignored.

But that also carried cautions for all summit attendees at Apec, Asean, East Asia Summit and G20 – on the need for managing efficiently and fairly political, social and ethnic imbalances and not allowing non-state actors to terrorise legally and democratically established orders.

For all those meeting at these summits, **China** is the elephant in the room they must learn to deal with. Not the least, India has, for a decade now, begun to adopt a proactive stance.

In Modi's case, it was evident first during his Japan visit, then when Xi came visiting and soon after that, during the visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

Despite the lengthening frowns on **Chinese** faces, India has doggedly stuck to its **stake** in the South **China** Sea. Vietnam responded with new **oil** exploration blocs to India's defence pact that includes **sale** of naval patrol boats and a USD100 **million** (RM320 **million**) Indian credit line.

There are challenges and opportunities. Successive Indian governments have been good at identifying the challenges, but they have been cautious about exploiting the opportunities. Sensitive but promising, defence and security cooperation in Southeast Asia is one such area.

Quite apart from its growing capacities in this area, India is unique in being a non-threatening power in this region, in a contrast to widely perceived **Chinese** aggressiveness.

Modi is gradually seeking to make a difference. It will be some time before concrete results are in evidence.

Amarnath Ram, a former envoy to Thailand who had worked on the nuts and bolts of India's "Look East Policy" under then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, credits Modi with bold and clear ideas when it comes to foreign policy.

He thinks Modi's vision, put into timely, concrete action, could have long-term impact on India's ties with the entire region.

Visiting Australia 28 years after the late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi did, Modi is scheduled to address a joint session of its Parliament. This underscores the increasing strategic complementarities between New Delhi and Canberra, as is also evident from the civil nuclear deal.

The business honchos accompanying him can grab from the huge opportunities in areas, such as **energy**, **mining** and services.

Modi's outreach to the Indian community in Sydney and Melbourne promises to compare with the one at New York's Madison Square Garden. But more significant would occur in Fiji, the South Pacific island that has 42 per cent ethnic Indian population.

On Nov 19, Modi will hold a mini-summit in Suva with top leaders of 13 other countries of the region. His discourse could yield tangible diplomatic gains for India if it focuses on global climate change talks where the so-called "Durban coalition" of small islands and developed countries is cracking.

This coalition had pressed emerging economies like India to accept binding carbon emission targets.

These island nations form one of the largest voting blocs at the United Nations. India had earlier set up an online communications system there to win their support for the Indo-US nuclear deal.

Modi's mini summit could send an important signal that India is ready to assert its interests in the Far East. With a substantial diaspora, Fiji can enhance India's reach in the region. **China** is there already. But Modi's outreach will not go unnoticed in Beijing.

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