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India's Strategy of Connectivity and Autonomy

By P S Suryanarayana

Synopsis

China and Russia's outreach towards Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has created space for him to explore a new 'Connect East' strategy towards ASEAN and seek nuanced 'strategic autonomy' in engaging big powers.

Commentary

RESPONDING TO China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has articulated a nascent 'Connect East' strategy towards ASEAN. He did not explicitly use the phrase 'Connect East' during his visit to Indonesia and Singapore from 29 May to 2 June 2018. But his pronouncements reflect such a strategy as an apparently emerging new dynamic under his ongoing "Act East" policy.

The context is China's BRI-ambition of seeking full-spectrum connectivity with many countries. Evidently, India is responding through two modest but new aspirations in Southeast Asia – boldness of strategic thinking and a projection of smart power in connectivity-related diplomacy. The current thaw in China-India engagement at the highest political level seems to have encouraged Modi, for at least two reasons:

'Smart Power' Projection

First, Modi is willing to help Indonesia develop ports like Sabang in the northern tip of Sumatra facing a sensitive geostrategic area near India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. By this, he has signalled a bold message, even if India cannot eventually use any such Indonesian port for its own military purposes. The two countries have agreed to set up a joint working group to consider Modi's offer.

In a big-picture perspective, Modi may be trying to emulate China in exploring strategically resonant economic partnerships with other countries. Some consider

India's aspiration in developing the Iranian port of Chabahar as Delhi's answer to China's economic and strategic stakes in promoting Pakistan's Gwadar port, which lies near Chabahar. However, Chabahar, to the west of India, cannot figure in Delhi's apparent calculus of 'Connect East'.

Second, Modi has now sought to position India as a smart player in the high-tech domain of inter-state connectivity projects. This should explain much of the non-conventional focus during his visit to Singapore from 31 May to 2 June.

A few specifics of these two 'Connect East' trends can be noted. Modi and Indonesian President Joko Widodo articulated a "shared vision" for "maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" and expressed "a strong belief" that such cooperation "can be a force of immense stability in the region". Official briefings indicated possibilities of India developing Sabang and gaining greater access to Indonesian ground facilities for Indian space programmes.

India's agreement with Singapore to cooperate in the financial technology (fintech) sector is seen by both as a potential "new driver of the bilateral economic partnership". Artificial Intelligence, Innovation and Space figure among the agreements signed during Modi's visit to Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Digital economy is also emerging as a new collaborative area.

Potential 'Swing-State'?

Modi's 'Connect East' strategy is just one part of Delhi's geopolitics in the wider Indo-Pacific region as evinced from his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore on 1 June. Indeed, the stage for this was set by his informal summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan on 27 and 28 April and with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on 21 May.

Modi was actually invited by those two leaders. That itself signified a new surge in the common interest of China and Russia to engage India. Being very close strategic partners at present, Beijing and Moscow see a United States-supported India as a potential swing-state that could help Washington tilt the scales against Sino-Russian interests.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Xi told Modi during their informal summit that "a sound relationship between China and India is an important and positive factor for maintaining world stability". Clearly, Xi would like India to recognise the imperative of good relations with China, which has been having a turbulent equation with the US for some time now.

Similarly placed with the US today is Russia, a long-time source of India's military hardware and knowhow. Significantly, Modi disclosed at the SLD that he and Putin discussed the importance of a multipolar world.

'Strategic Autonomy' and Hedging

The obvious message is that both Russia and China would like India to work autonomously of the US in global geopolitics and geo-economics. A logical corollary

is that India's "strategic autonomy", Modi's own policy-evocative phrase at SLD, will serve the hedging interests of both China and Russia in their individual and collective dealings with the US.

Modi's new-found enthusiasm for "strategic autonomy" can also potentially help India itself to hedge or balance its relations with the current Russia-China combine on one hand and the functional US-Japan ties on the other. In this context, Modi said at SLD that Delhi-Tokyo ties had now become "a partnership of great substance and purpose".

Moreover, India's relatively new "global strategic partnership" with the US "has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth" of these ties.

For some time now, India has also teamed up with Japan, the US and Australia in a rejuvenated Quad for official-level strategic dialogue. At the time of this writing, a Quad meeting is on the cards. While this is in line with Modi's own hedging against China-Russia partnership, he had also taken care to counter-hedge against the US by not mentioning the Quad at all during his SLD keynote address. However, US Defence Secretary James Mattis said at SLD that he supported the Quad "100 per cent" as an additional strategic mechanism.

Future Complications?

In this kind of signalling and counter-signalling, and as a mark of "strategic autonomy" vis-à-vis the US, India associated itself with China and Russia on 4 June on the Iranian nuclear issue. India did so at the meeting of foreign ministers, which also involved Brazil and South Africa, in Pretoria on that day.

They noted "the importance that all relevant parties" should "fully comply with their obligations" under this deal, which generally favours Iran and which the US has withdrawn from.

Overall, it is with China that Modi faces the most delicate challenge. At SLD, he spoke of India's and China's "maturity and wisdom in managing issues and ensuring a peaceful border". He also alluded to some bilateral economic positives. But he deployed familiar coded language to highlight India's continuing dim view of Beijing's BRI-diplomacy and Delhi's opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Significantly, officials of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan had agreed, on 28 May, to study the "feasibility" of extending CPEC to the India-friendly Afghanistan. With this, Modi's BRI-related challenge may only get compounded.

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