

# Eastward ho!

The planners of the Prime Minister's journey to East Asia in November scored high in terms of making the optimal use of his presence in the region. The real challenge lies ahead in following up on the agreements signed and the commitments made. BY RAJIV BHATIA

THE 10-day, three-country voyage, to Myanmar, Australia and Fiji, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November had foreign policy watchers riveted because of its many "firsts". It was for India's new leader his first appearance at the G20, the powerful forum of world leaders, to deliberate on global issues. His participation in the India-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Summit and the East Asia Summit, too, was a novelty. On the sidelines of these summits, Modi met many heads of state and government, thus becoming "the most-sought after leader", as an official put it. The bilateral visit to Australia was the first by an Indian Prime Minister in three decades. The public meeting attended by some 18,000 members of the Indian diaspora in Sydney was one of the highlights of the tour. The listing of Fiji on the itinerary revealed the breadth of India's new world view. The journey offered Modi a global platform via the G20 and a regional stage centred on East Asia.

## MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

With the continuing impasse over the reform of the Security Council and the growing marginalisation of the United Nations, other international institutions have acquired salience in world affairs. The most

prominent among them are the G20, the G7 grouping, and emerging economies and other nations that played a significant role in tackling the international financial and economic crisis of 2007-08. The G20 accounts for 90 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), 80 per cent of its trade, and over 66 per cent of the population. Its economic clout assured, the G20's top leaders meet every year as a climax to a series of official and ministerial deliberations. The summit in Brisbane on November 15 and 16 this year addressed economic and political issues over a wide spectrum.

The G20 leaders determined that the recovery of the global economy was still "slow and uneven" and that it was not delivering the jobs needed. They, therefore, decided to finalise a macroeconomic strategy that had "the ambitious goal" of lifting the G20's GDP by "at least an additional 2 per cent by 2018", as the Leaders' Communiqué stated.

To achieve this, a substantial increase in investment, trade and employment and initiatives to support development and inclusive growth have been envisaged. The expected result is an addition of \$2 trillion to the global economy. In a significant pragmatic gesture, the leaders resolved to monitor and "hold each

leader to account" for the implementation of these commitments.

Other key subjects of discussion were increasing financing for infrastructure and establishment of a global infrastructure hub; reducing the gap in employment of men and women; issues relating to climate change, food security and energy efficiency; reform of the international tax system; and formation of an anti-corruption plan. On the last two issues, Modi articulated India's ideas strongly, and that led to the strengthening of the language of the relevant paragraph in the communiqué. His stress on the need to make economic reforms people-centric also had considerable impact on the participants.

An area where very little progress was expected and virtually nothing happened was the strengthening of global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The summit reiterated its commitment to governance reform and expressed its disappointment that the





MYANMAR, 2014

# 9<sup>th</sup> EAST ASIA SUMMIT

Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, 13 November



**PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI** with leaders from the Asia-Pacific region during the 9th East Asia Summit at Nay Pyi Taw in Myanmar.

reform package agreed in 2010 remained unimplemented because of the refusal of the United States Congress to ratify it. All that the G20 leaders could do was to direct the IMF “to build on its existing work and stand ready with options for next steps”. This was seen as a fig leaf that barely concealed the inaction and the failure of the G20 in according due place to steadily growing economies such as China and India.

## SUMMITS IN MYANMAR

On the first leg of the trip, Modi participated in two summits in Myanmar. The India-ASEAN Summit on November 12 showcased the close political and economic cooperation forged between the two sides over 20 years of dialogue and summit partnership and two years of strategic partnership. Cooperation encom-

passes trade and investment links and working together on counterterrorism, capacity building, maritime security and other areas. Officials have been asked to finalise the plan of cooperative action for the next five years (2016-21), which will help in further deepening multidimensional linkages.

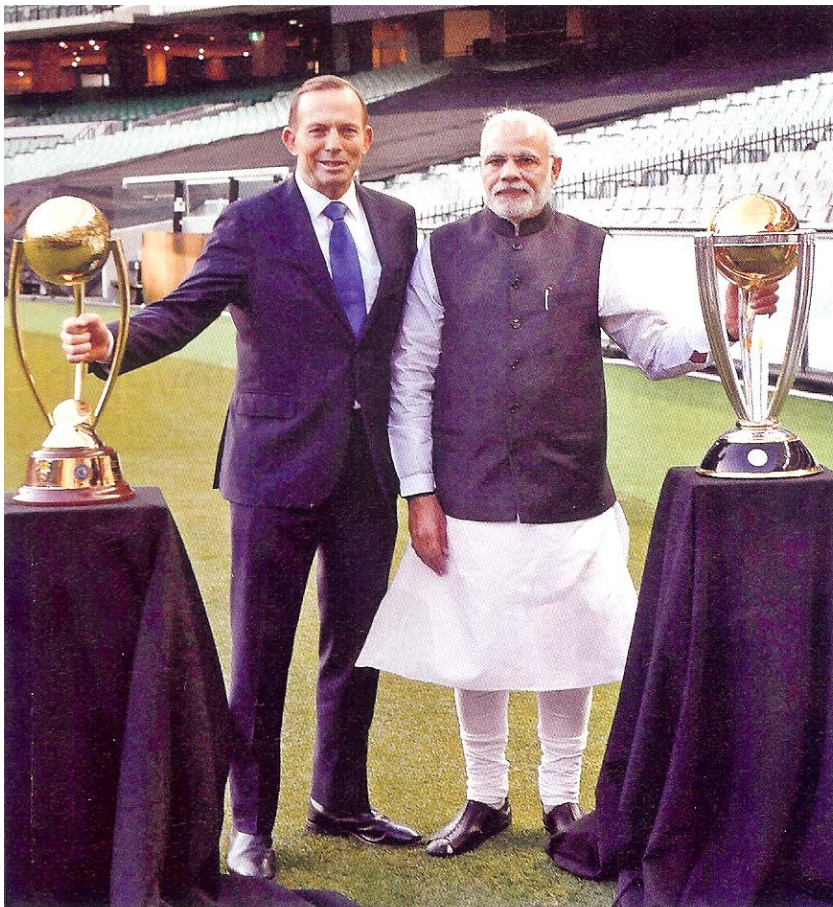
Modi's stress on an action-oriented approach was in for much appreciation, with ASEAN leaders welcoming the “Act East” emphasis in India's “Look East Policy”. Whether this was wholehearted is debatable. It was noted that trade between ASEAN and India was heading to its 2015 target of \$100 billion (from \$67.9 billion in 2013). Connectivity remained a priority, although it appeared that digital and institutional connectivity might score over infrastructural connectivity in the future.

“Bridges of knowledge” rather than new road projects have become the order of the day. Greater attention is expected to be devoted to forging people-to-people exchanges through the activities of the ASEAN-India Centre, the Delhi Dialogue, the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT) and “the ongoing special interface” among participants at the annual ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) on November 13 attracted a high degree of attention, given its unique composition. The 10 ASEAN nations are joined in this grouping by their eight partner countries: China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and Russia. At this meeting, Modi signalled a clear shift from India's previous Look East Policy to the new Act East Policy.

There was a sense of anticipation as to how the EAS would address the issue of growing tensions and con-





KAMAL SINGH/PTI

**NARENDRA MODI** and Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott during a civic reception at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on November 18.

flicts in the South China Sea. EAS leaders called for calm and resolution of disputes through peaceful means. Modi stressed the urgency for the conclusion of a code of conduct between ASEAN nations and China, thereby extending valuable support to the former in their current travails.

Amidst ASEAN's worry over losing its pivotal role in the affairs of East Asia, the EAS Chairman's statement expressed support for "ASEAN's central role in the EAS and its commitment to working closely with regional partners". The discussions focussed on six priority areas: finance, the environment and energy, education, global health issues, disaster management, and ASEAN connectivity. Multiple mechanisms for regional economic integration too received encouragement. However, the fact that this could cause confusion and conflict among them was a question EAS participants left unattended.

Modi began his trip to Myanmar with a meeting with President Thein Sein, covering all facets of India-Myanmar relations. The visit took place at a time when Myanmar's reform process, which had registered considerable success earlier, was running aground owing to challenges about reconciling divergent interests. The Prime Minister expressed support for the nation's transition to democracy and economic reforms and stressed the need to further strengthen the age-old relationship. Thein Sein said that he considered India "a brother" and invited Modi to pay a full-fledged visit later. They reviewed on-going projects of development cooperation. The Prime Minister's likely visit to Myanmar next year might lead to new initiatives to strengthen the relationship that witnessed much expansion under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's watch.

It was Australia that figured at the centre of India's bilateral diplo-

macy during this long tour. Not only did Modi travel to four important cities there, but he held wide-ranging interactions with government leaders, parliamentarians, business and social leaders, sportspersons and the Indian diaspora. His message was clear: Australia, once regarded as "a distant land at the southern edge of the world", was now "at the heart of Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean". An all-round endeavour was made to deepen strategic and economic aspects of bilateral relations. With China in mind, both sides laid stress on defence and maritime cooperation. Addressing the joint session of the Australian Parliament, Modi highlighted the need for all nations, "big or small", to "abide by international law and norms even when they have their disputes".

The value of dialogue with Australia was enhanced by the signing of five agreements relating to diverse domains such as drug trafficking, cultural cooperation and the "Framework for Security Cooperation". This spells out the contours of political, defence and security cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

The planners of the Prime Minister's complex journey to East Asia scored high in terms of making the optimal use of his presence in the region. Modi also participated in a meeting of fellow leaders of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). India's participation in the G20 summit was judged to be purposeful.

However, the real challenge lies at home. The image of an economically resurgent India has been presented abroad persuasively. It is important to ensure that reality catches up with the positive perception and, in fact, stays ahead. Finally, vigorous follow-up on the agreements signed and the commitments made would be watched closely, both in India and abroad. The long-term success of the historic journey will thus depend on what follows next. □

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