

RONOJOY SEN

THE major nations of South Asia have been going through a remarkable period of political stability over the past three years or so.

When Mr Nawaz Sharif was elected as prime minister of Pakistan in June 2013, it was the first successful transition between two democratically elected governments in that country.

A year later, Mr Narendra Modi was appointed India's prime minister on the back of a convincing electoral victory by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which saw a single party majority in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) for the first time in 25 years.

The same year, Ms Sheikh Hasina was re-elected prime minister of Bangladesh in an election that had been boycotted by all the major opposition parties.

In Sri Lanka, there was a smooth transition after President Mahinda Rajapaksa was voted out in 2015 and Mr Maithripala Sirisena became the country's president.

The political stability in large parts of South Asia has given governments elbow room to be proactive in reaching out to neighbours.

This has been particularly true for Mr Modi, who has made India's immediate neighbourhood one of the priorities of his foreign policy.

Mr Modi set the tone during his swearing-in, where in an unprecedented move, he invited all the heads of government in South Asia to New Delhi.

All of them attended with the exception of Ms Hasina, who sent a representative.

Mr Modi then made his first bilateral visit to Bhutan in June 2014.

Since then, he has visited Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan in the neighbourhood. In fact, Mr Modi's visit to Nepal in 2014 was the first by an Indian prime minister in 17 years.

The Bangladesh visit was a particularly successful one where he signed the Land Boundary Agree-

Spotlight on South Asia

Blessed with political stability and a young population, the region now faces the challenge of creating jobs



Warm ties... Mr Modi presenting a transcript of parliamentary debates on the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement to Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina when he visited Dhaka last June. Watching on is Ms Mamata Banerjee.

PHOTO: PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU

ment, which enabled the two countries to exchange more than 160 tiny settlements, home to some 50,000 people.

Mr Modi also managed a coup by getting West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, whose eastern Indian state neighbours Bangladesh, to accompany him.

Mr Modi made a surprise private visit to Pakistan on his way back from Afghanistan in December 2015, on Mr Sharif's birthday.

While no statement was released on their two-hour discussion, Mr Modi's visit had stimulated relations between the two countries.

Nearly half of South Asia's roughly 1.6 billion population is below 25. This provides exciting opportunities as well as significant challenges. Employment generation is a major challenge for all

South Asian leaders.

Ambitious programmes

In India, Mr Modi has unveiled ambitious programmes like 'Make in India,' but they are yet to make a discernible impact.

This, along with the demand for white and blue-collar workers in developed countries, has led to a growing number of young people migrating from South Asia to the other countries.

Remittances are a boon for South Asian countries. According to the World Bank, remittances in 2011 contributed to nearly 11 per cent of Bangladesh's GDP; for Sri Lanka, it was nearly 9 per cent.

In a sharp departure from his predecessors, Mr Modi has reached out to the Indian diaspora during his foreign trips, addressing large

crowds of non-resident Indians in countries like the US, United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore.

Despite the region's buoyancy, South Asia faces manifold challenges, including the threat of internal and cross-border terrorism.

The upcoming South Asian Diaspora Convention in Singapore will be a much-needed platform to discuss many of the issues that are critical to the region's domestic politics, their impact on relations between the different countries and the role that the diaspora can play in addressing these issues.

Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Governance and Democracy) at Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore.

Sign up for diaspora meet

HOSTED by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), the 3rd South Asian Diaspora Convention (SADC) will be held on July 18 & 19 at Raffles City Convention Centre, Singapore.

Themed Growth through Interaction: the South Asian opportunity, SADC 2016 will bring together 1,000 distinguished guests and over 50 of the region's leading policymakers and business leaders, academics and civil society leaders.

The speakers will discuss and debate critical topics in business, economy and policy that would affect the region's future and its role in global geopolitics in the 21st Century.

Sessions include:

- PM Lee Hsien Loong In Conversation with Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary of India
- Geopolitics of South Asia: Prospects for Peace and Prosperity in 2016
- Regional Integration
- Investing in Infrastructure
- Captains of Industry — Catalyst for Change
- Law and Business in South Asia
- Partnership in Education
- Intrepreneurship & Start-Ups
- Diaspora and Citizenship

For registration and programme details, visit www.southasiandiaspora.org.

