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Foreign Policy À La Modi

India's Next Worldview

By Manjari Chatterjee Miller

APRIL 3, 2014



A Modi supporter after a rally in Gurgaon on the outskirts of New Delhi, April 3, 2014. (Adnan Abidi / Courtesy Reuters)

Between April 7 and May 12, some 814 million Indian voters will have a chance to exercise their fundamental democratic rights by selecting a new government. In a country that has faced scrutiny for its chaotic administration, contentious politics, and vast inequity, the democratic process will unfold in routine and expected ways. Despite India's massive corruption problems, the ballot will be mostly free and fair. Voter turnout from all classes, and particularly the poor, will be substantial. Following a more recent precedent, no single party will gain an absolute majority in parliament. And, in the aftermath of a relatively smooth transfer of power, the new government will take the reins and begin the task of forming a cabinet.

Predictability also applies to foreign policy. Observers in the United States blanch at the prospect of a Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the candidate of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whom they believe may apply his Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist, beliefs to Indian foreign policy. Their worry is shared by many Indians, who believe him to be at best indifferent to, and at worst hostile to, the concerns of Indian Muslims. What the effect of a Modi government would be on Indian domestic politics is an open question. But no matter who assumes the country's highest office, the broad contours of Indian foreign policy are not likely to change dramatically.

ALL THE SAME

A look at Indian foreign policy since 1964 confirms that it has been characterized more by continuity than by change. And even those changes that have occurred, while important, have been incremental, and unrelated to the political ideology of the party in power. After all, as a serving Indian ambassador recently told me, “An elephant is not prone to making sharp turns.”

India's top defense relationship continues to be with Russia. No matter what Russia does in its own region, it seems, India will not rock the boat.

For many years, much to the Indian government's annoyance, the country's relationship with Pakistan defined India on the world stage. Despite regime changes in New Delhi and Islamabad and numerous diplomatic initiatives, cease-fires, and bilateral talks, Kashmir's status is as unresolved today as it was 50 years ago, and relations continue to be overtly hostile, with the ever-present possibility of war. Although the conflict is often framed as one between Hindus and Muslims, a secular Congress Party-led government has been no more or less likely to be conciliatory toward Pakistan than a Hindu Nationalist BJP-led government. In fact, three major peace initiatives with Pakistan occurred under BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's watch: “bus diplomacy” in 1999, the Agra summit in 2001, and the Islamabad summit in 2004.

China is another neighbor that is a thorn in India's side. Prior to 1960, India and China were good friends. Popular slogans such as “*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*” (Indians and Chinese are brothers) encapsulated their joint opposition to imperialism and colonial powers; Indian socialist leaders admired Mao; and India even allegedly refused a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council as a show of solidarity with communist China, whose UN seat had been given to the Republic of China (Taiwan). But the 1962 war between the two over their shared Himalayan border irrevocably damaged Sino-Indian relations and led to a border conflict that is still unresolved today. India continues to see China as the major threat, a view that is shared across party lines. In 1998, when the BJP government tested nuclear weapons, Prime Minister Vajpayee wrote a letter to President Clinton citing China as the main motivation. And, despite the economic gains in the relationship since, incidents such as China's incursions over the border in April 2013, weeks before Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang was due to visit India, have not helped the government trust its northern neighbor more. As a powerful former Indian foreign secretary remarked to me recently, “Pakistan is just an enemy. China is the adversary.”

As for the United States, New Delhi's relations with Washington are marked by ongoing mutual suspicion, but, despite that, there is little chance of armed conflict between them. There have certainly been pragmatic shifts in the relationship: the rapid increase in bilateral trade, from \$6 billion in 1990 to \$86 billion in 2011; the 2005 signing of the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal that allowed for civil nuclear cooperation; and the United States' designation of India as a rising power and a strategic partner. However, India's steadfast reluctance to actually be that strong ally whose military closely cooperates with the United States has baffled Washington for years. And U.S. President Barack Obama's relatively cool shoulder to India during the Congress years has not helped.

Like India's major bilateral relations, its ties to other countries have remained steady over the years, no matter the party in power. India's top defense relationship continues to be with Russia. No matter what Russia does in its own region, it seems, India will not rock the boat. Shiv Shankar Menon, India's national security adviser, recently said of Ukraine, “We hope that whatever internal issues there are within Ukraine are settled peacefully ... there are legitimate Russian and other interests involved.” India's refusal to support “unilateral measures” against the Russian government prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to specifically thank India for its support.

India's relations with Israel and Iran have likewise stayed stable. After India established formal diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, a shift initiated by the Congress Party and endorsed and deepened by the subsequent BJP government, Israel rapidly became its second-largest defense supplier. But India continues to vote, as it always has, against Israel in the United Nations General Assembly. No Indian head of state, no matter the party, has yet set foot in Tel Aviv. Last year, meanwhile, India finally bowed to U.S. pressure and voted at the IAEA to refer Iran to the UN Security Council. Yet Iran and India have historically had a conflict-free relationship, and that continues to this day. In 2013, two Iranian warships and a submarine paid a goodwill visit to Mumbai.

In other words, the broad shape of Indian foreign policy has remained the same for nearly five

decades. And the shifts that do occur are not sudden and have rarely, if ever, been political. The Indian nuclear tests in 1998 under a BJP government, for example, are often cited as a dramatic reversal on the country's previous nuclear stance, and are attributed primarily to the Hindutva ideology of the BJP government. However, as a 2004 paper by K. Subramanyam, former director of the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, pointed out, India's nuclear arsenal was made operational by Congress leader Narasimha Rao's government. It was only divisions among the scientific community that led to a lack of consensus on whether to test and prevented Rao from doing so. And the tests themselves unified Indian parties across the political spectrum in jubilation.

Similarly, there is a perception among observers, as a Western intelligence official with experience of India said to me, that Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was courageous to "burn political capital" and respond to President George W. Bush's initiation of a shift in the relationship with India. Between 2005 and 2008, Bush implemented the civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India, recognized India's security concerns, and emphasized its importance as a rising power. In return, Singh decided to change the tone of a bilateral relationship that had never been smooth. Still, Bush's overtures to India started before Singh came to power. A former Indian ambassador to a Western country confirmed to me that Brajesh Mishra, who had been national security adviser to the outgoing BJP government, and Jaswant Singh, who had variously held the positions of minister of finance, minister of external affairs, and minister of defense, had been highly receptive to Bush's initial outreach.

When Bush stepped down, Indian journalist Ashok Malik emphasized the former president's popularity across the Indian political spectrum, calling him "the best American president India has ever had." Since then, the relationship has grown somewhat frostier -- not because Indian politics have changed (they haven't) but because American politics have. Both major Indian parties believe that the Obama administration has done little to soothe tensions between the countries, and are unified on issues such as the Devyani Khobragade case, in which an Indian diplomat in New York was accused of exploiting her children's nanny and arrested and strip-searched by U.S. authorities.

STATE OF PLAY

All this is not to say that Indian foreign policy is unchangeable. Irrespective of which party forms the government, state politics, administrative capacity, and the individuals who are appointed by the prime minister to key offices will matter a great deal for foreign policy.

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India is a federal system with 28 states and seven union territories. Most foreign observers understand how that affects domestic policy, but not why it matters for foreign policy. And regional issues can be a major driver in India's foreign policy. India's relations with Bangladesh, for example, can hinge on how the chief minister of the Indian state of West Bengal responds to a boundary settlement or a water sharing agreement with Bangladesh. In 2011, Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal, opposed the Teesta River water sharing treaty, an agreement between India and Bangladesh. Her intransigence -- she was breaking with the federal government's policy on the agreement -- nearly derailed Singh's first-ever visit to Bangladesh. And that was despite the fact that her party, the Trinamool Congress, was a part of the United Progressive Alliance, the coalition that presently forms the Congress Party-led central government.

Tensions between India and Sri Lanka have increased, thanks to local state politics. Indian fishermen in the Palk Straits between southern India and Sri Lanka are regularly apprehended by the Sri Lankan navy, which claims that they are in Sri Lanka's territorial waters. The Indian government alleges that the Sri Lankan navy is responsible for the deaths of some fishermen, the jailing of others, and, in some cases, fishermen's mysterious disappearances. The fishermen are Tamil, and because of that, the two major state parties in the state of Tamil Nadu, despite being bitter foes, have come together to pressure the New Delhi to take a hard line on Sri Lanka. For issues such as these, the hue of the political party or coalition in power at the center is irrelevant.

Pressure from state governments aside, the winning party or coalition will have another

important problem to deal with. India's foreign policy establishment is severely understaffed. Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officials admit they are constantly firefighting -- that is, responding to immediate issues rather than strategizing about the future. Foreign diplomats have noticed the problem and claim that it hurts India's performance in negotiations and meetings. Individual Indian diplomats can be excellent, a senior diplomat from a Western country who was, until recently, stationed in New Delhi told me, "However, the lack of people has led to serious hampering of policy and forces many diplomats to cling on to old ways of thinking and doing things because they don't have enough time and energy to change outmoded patterns. In India, diplomats will hang up on you mid-conversation, not return phone calls, not reply to emails." He continued that, in negotiations, India "will turn up with two people," whereas "China is better equipped. Many more people will turn up for meetings. They will be a well-drilled, well-organized group. In turn, India has a reputation of being difficult [which has] become a substitute for time and resources."

The former foreign secretary with whom I spoke agrees that the IFS needs more people. Some change is already underway: in August 2008, the government created 314 new posts. At the same time, the cabinet approved a 43 percent increase in the sanctioned batch of IFS recruits. However, any plans for expansion need to include an overhaul in training, as well as the creation of a new research and policy division. Quick expansion has led to the hiring of less able recruits without, for example, English-language skills.

Simultaneously, the lack of emphasis on strategic vision, which is one of the consequences of understaffing, can be addressed with the creation of a research wing. India's Ministry of External Affairs used to have a much-consulted "historical division," as officers refer to it, which focused on strategy. For example, it prepared India's case in the last border negotiations with China, in 1960. But the body has since disappeared. "It became extinct like the cheetah," the former foreign secretary told me with a rueful laugh. Whether these much needed administrative changes will be made by the new prime minister remains to be seen. Incoming political leaders, as the former foreign secretary said, are "not usually aware of this need for reform, and focus on the more prominent issues, such as corruption." What will really matter if Modi comes to power is the team he puts in place, particularly the national security adviser and the minister of external affairs.

Not all ministers are created equal. Both Indian IFS officers and foreign officials stated to me that a recent minister of external affairs appointed by Singh was "inexperienced" at best and "incompetent" at worst. The opposite could be said of the former and current finance ministers Pranab Mukherjee ("hard to understand sometimes, but extremely shrewd," according to the senior diplomat) and P. Chidambaram ("very capable"). That also goes for national security adviser Shiv Shankar Menon ("he is key in the India-China relationship, is an experienced China hand, and knows people like Dai Bingguo and Yang Jiechi," the Western senior intelligence official told me). Similarly, under the last BJP government, national security adviser Brajesh Mishra "multiplied Vajpayee's effectiveness several times over," according to a former Indian ambassador.

If the Congress stays in power, which, according to a recent Pew Center survey, seems unlikely given the 3:1 preference for the BJP over the ruling party, some of these issues may be addressed. For example, the government already initiated the expansion of the IFS, demonstrating that the government is aware of the problem. However, the Congress coalition government has been in power for almost a decade, and the pace of reform has not been promising.

In the event of a BJP government, the assessment of both foreign and Indian officials is that Modi is a very astute leader. In conversations, they seem very hopeful at the prospect of him becoming prime minister. "He is very dynamic," the senior diplomat to India said of Modi. "What worked in Gujarat will translate to the national scene. He will take risks." The former foreign secretary concurs. "He understands globalization, will not be blindsided, and he will be influenced by the overseas Gujarati diaspora, who are very active and networked." And, this official added, Modi "respects the bureaucracy," which bodes well for a politician with little foreign policy experience. How much he allows himself to be guided by top bureaucrats and whom he appoints will be important. Although his preferences for specific posts are mostly unknown, it was suggested to me that his national security adviser would likely be a retired bureaucrat, either from the Ministry of External Affairs or the national security apparatus. One rumored candidate, Ajit Doval, is a decorated officer and was the director of the Intelligence Bureau (India's internal intelligence agency) from 2004 to 2005. Doval currently heads the Vivekananda International Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank.

In these conversations, some officials, both Indian and foreign, did express discomfort with what they believed to be Modi's complicity in the 2002 Gujarat massacre. But they also believed that the Singh government had lost its way. Certainly, the shadow of the Gujarat riots makes Modi a very different political figure from the last BJP prime minister, Vajpayee. However, if Modi were to assume office, any hint of less than complete acceptance of his status as prime minister by the United States would be seen as an unforgivable insult, not just by the Indian elites who support him but by those who do not. And Washington should remember that, at least in the past five decades, Indian foreign policy has been broadly consistent and any changes had little to do with the prime minister's political ideology.

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India's Feeble Foreign Policy

Manjari Chatterjee Miller

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Shakti Sinha · 2 hours ago

I cannot quite figure out what the writer had in mind when she writes that there is little chance of an armed conflict between India and the US. Seriously!

Also India's vote on the Iran issue was not last year but in 2009.

Three, the fishermen's issue in Indo-Sri Lankan ties are minor, it is the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka, particularly the way the war ended, the large-scale displacement of Tamils and the perceived triumphalism of Sri Lankan government that is a political hot-spot in Tamil Nadu.

Lastly, India's elections are not generally free and fair, they are free and fair, with losers graciously bowing out without alleging that they have been cheated.

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