

# Introduction:

## India's rise at 70

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The 70th anniversary year of India's independence after two centuries of British colonial rule provides an excellent occasion to take the measure of a country that, today, is pivotal for both Asian and international stability. At 70, despite the persistent domestic challenges of poverty and inequality,<sup>1</sup> India is widely considered a rising power,<sup>2</sup> and is indisputably the world's largest democracy. In 2015, the Indian economy grew at a rate of 7.5 per cent, faster than that of China.<sup>3</sup> As a nuclear-armed state, India enjoys recognition as a responsible nuclear power by key stakeholders in the non-proliferation regime, despite not being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>4</sup> And the past three presidents of the United States, a country once dismissive of India,<sup>5</sup> have sought to engage New Delhi as a close economic or strategic partner, or both.<sup>6</sup> To some, India is likely to become 'the most important swing state' in the international system.<sup>7</sup>

These facets of India as 'a rising power at 70' have been some decades in the making. However, in May 2014 the rise to the Indian premiership of Narendra Modi, a controversial political figure, presented a further cause for reflection and analysis. While at the time of writing, towards the end of 2016, the outcomes of this year's referendum vote on the UK's exit from the EU and the US presidential election are still fresh—and to some, raw<sup>8</sup>—it is worth remembering that two years previously India faced a similarly seismic democratic moment. In the

<sup>1</sup> Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For more critical engagement with the concept of India as a rising power, see Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'The role of beliefs in identifying rising powers', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9: 2, Summer 2016, pp. 211–38; Kate Sullivan, 'Introduction: creating diversity in readings of India's global role', in Kate Sullivan, ed., *Competing visions of India in world politics: India's rise beyond the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1–14.

<sup>3</sup> 'India outpaces China in 2015 economic growth', BBC News, 8 Feb. 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35519671>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 Nov. 2016.) For analysis of China, see the special issue of this journal on 'Chinese foreign policy on trial: contending perspectives', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Sullivan, *Is India a responsible nuclear power?*, policy report (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, March 2014); Mahesh Shankar and T. V. Paul, 'Nuclear doctrines and stable strategic relationships: the case of south Asia', *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 1–20.

<sup>5</sup> President Eisenhower once famously dismissed Indians as 'funny people'. Quoted in Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in crisis: India and the United States since 1947* (London: Hurst, 2014), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ashley Tellis, 'India as a leading power', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 4 April 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/04/04/india-as-leading-power-pub-63185>.

<sup>7</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, *India as a new global power: an action agenda for the United States* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Menon and J.-P. Salter, 'Brexit: initial reflections', *International Affairs* 92: 6, Nov. 2016, pp. 1297–318.

words of one commentator, India found itself divided between ‘one segment of people who felt that Modi’s victory signified the glorious consolidation of their own economic and social ascendancy, and another segment who felt devastated by the result, seeing in it a crushing of their dreams for themselves, their communities and their country’.<sup>9</sup> This perhaps familiar portrait of a divided citizenry was accompanied by speculation at home and abroad over India’s possible foreign policy directions in Asia and beyond after Modi’s ascent to power.<sup>10</sup> Just as analysts and politicians have, in 2016, sought to compute what Brexit and Trump will mean for the future of world politics, from 2014 commentators have wondered whether and, if so, how Modi’s leadership matters for India’s foreign policy and, by extension, for the world.

Driving the assessments of India’s rise and recent foreign policy trends that comprise this special issue of *International Affairs* are two key objectives. The first is to consider India’s rise in the light of the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister and to assess both his foreign policy record so far and the potential for continuity and change under his leadership. The second is to engage with the perspectives of three major global players—the United States, China and the United Kingdom—in order to understand how India’s rise is viewed internationally.

In pursuing these objectives, this special issue makes three new contributions. First, it draws on a spectrum of different theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses in order to present an extensive portrait of contemporary India’s global role and foreign policy directions. It engages with variables such as ideas, norms, interests, institutions, individual leaders, state perceptions and beliefs, and with topics spanning India’s key relationships and tensions, history, and foreign policy changes and continuities. This breadth is important because detailed discussions of Indian foreign policy tend to be scattered across and confined to regional or India-specific academic journals, think-tanks and the media. Rarely have western International Relations (IR) journals engaged seriously with India.<sup>11</sup> This special issue represents, to our knowledge, the first time that Indian foreign policy has been the central focus of an English-language IR journal edited in ‘the West’.

Second, the issue surveys the record and weighs the potential of not only a single leader but a current prime minister. In doing so it deals, perhaps a little ambitiously, in the currency of uncertainty and seeks to draw early conclusions about the impact of Modi’s leadership on future foreign policy directions. We believe that such a task is necessary and important, both to bridge a much lamented academic–policy divide,<sup>12</sup> and to offer robust analysis to complement the few book-length studies of Modi’s foreign policy that have gone to press in India, some of which have been questioned for their pro-Modi bias or hagiographical tone.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Harsh Mandar, *Looking away* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015), p. xxxvi.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Why Modi matters’, *Time* magazine, 18 May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Rajesh Basrur, ‘Scholarship on India’s international relations: some disciplinary shortcomings’, *International Studies* 46: 1–2, 2009, pp. 89–108.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Kristof, ‘Professors we need you!’, *New York Times*, 16 Feb. 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Talmiz Ahmad, ‘Book review: scholarship lost in hagiography’, *Asian Age*, 14 Nov. 2016, <http://www.asianage.com/books/131116/book-review-scholarship-lost-in-hagiography.html>; T. R. Ramachandran, ‘Modi’s world’, *Free Press Journal*, 28 June 2016, <http://www.freepressjournal.in/book-reviews/modis-world/613054>.

The third contribution of this special issue is the diversity in views it presents, both of India's rise and of Modi's foreign policy. The issue brings together contributions from scholars based in Australia, Germany, India, Singapore, the UK and the US. As such, it presents perspectives that span a broad arc of the globe and, as will become clear, a broad range of perspectives on both Modi and India. It also includes a review essay by Aseema Sinha that further emphasises the need for new frameworks with which to analyse India's foreign policy and changing global status.

## **India's rise at 70: foreign policy under Narendra Modi**

The first part of this issue comprises assessments of Indian foreign policy, and its stasis or change, under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Modi's election victory in 2014 saw a parliamentary majority achieved by a single party for the first time in India since 1984. Moreover, that party was the same Hindu nationalist party—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—whose hold on government between 1998 and 2004 presided over events of lasting, and global, magnitude: India's nuclear tests, and two significant crises between India and Pakistan. Modi's image as a controversial and unpredictable leader and a self-styled 'strong man' who had pledged to take a firm line on national security led to prognoses that he would substantially change the direction of India's foreign policy. A number of predictions circulated: that Modi would turn out to be a pragmatist,<sup>14</sup> that he would dismantle India's long-held policy of non-alignment,<sup>15</sup> and that his 'single-mindedness', which led to the rapid economic transformation of the state of Gujarat during his tenure as chief minister, would transform India.<sup>16</sup> Such expectations of change were further underscored by the Prime Minister's well-known commitment to *Hindutva* or Hindu nationalism, which it was supposed would affect not just domestic politics but also foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some predicted that his apparently substantial mandate in the election<sup>18</sup> would position him as a powerful national leader with the necessary authority and support to instigate the changes he desired in India's foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

In response to such predictions, the articles that comprise this section of the special issue point, by and large, to a powerful set of constraints that limit what any individual leader can achieve in seeking to transform India's foreign policy, even while some acknowledge the personal will of Modi to effect change.

<sup>14</sup> Brahma Chellaney, 'Narendra Modi's imprint on foreign policy', *Livemint*, 2 Sept. 2014, <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/Rx9Waq6uNG6yHJaSJMurTL/Narendra-Modis-imprint-on-foreign-policy.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Harsh Pant, 'Out with non-alignment, in with a "Modi Doctrine"', *The Diplomat*, 13 Nov. 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/out-with-non-alignment-in-with-a-modi-doctrine/>.

<sup>16</sup> 'Narendra Modi: India's most powerful leader since Indira Gandhi', *Telegraph*, 16 May 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Ankit Panda, 'Modi: *Hindutva* will be an asset in foreign affairs', *The Diplomat*, 24 April 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/modi-hindutva-will-be-an-asset-in-foreign-affairs/>.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Macdonald and Babak Moussavi have problematized the idea of a landslide victory for Modi's party by arguing that 'the Bharatiya Janata Party won only 31% of the vote and its vote was highly geographically concentrated': Geoffrey Macdonald and Babak Moussavi, 'Minoritarian rule: how India's electoral system created the illusion of a BJP landslide', *Economic and Political Weekly* 50: 8, 2015, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> 'Narendra Modi: India's most powerful leader since Indira Gandhi'.

The opening pieces by Basrur, and by Miller and Sullivan de Estrada, assess material and ideational continuity in Indian foreign policy. Basrur emphasizes the manner in which India's application of material power, its preferences *vis-à-vis* major powers and its quest for status transcend any single Indian leader. The realities of the international power structure, India's relationships with major players, and its security and status interests mean that Modi will continue to opt for restraint, pursue partnerships with players such as the United States and the other BRICS countries, and seek membership in status-enhancing elite clubs such as the UN Security Council. Miller and Sullivan de Estrada argue that pragmatism, as many have suggested, does not mean dispensing with longstanding Indian foreign policy ideas. Rather, Modi's pragmatic engagement with foreign policy involves working within the constraints of ideas and ideologies, and responding to their political and social logics, rather than working outside them. In this Modi is no different from other Indian leaders in that he displays deference to longstanding ideational frameworks, even in policy initiatives that seem to break with the past. This can be observed in his territorial diplomacy with Bangladesh, and his cultural diplomacy through the Indian-led establishment of an International Day of Yoga.

Hall and Narlikar both examine the impact of norms and institutional agendas on Modi's capacity for change, but come to quite different conclusions. Hall argues that although India has always sought to be a 'norm entrepreneur' in international politics, Modi has so far been unable to offer and set a new normative agenda. The intellectual traditions he draws upon, *Hindutva* and the thought of Vivekananda, provide limited resources for the construction of alternative norms. Narlikar, on the other hand, is more optimistic about Modi's potential as an agent for change in international institutions and regimes, partly on the basis of the innovative way in which she sees Modi selectively drawing on an Indian cultural repertoire. In addition to this, she argues, Modi also has a strong mandate to achieve economic growth, and is more willing to play along with the existing rules and structures of global economic governance than previous leaders.

Bajpai and Sridharan take distinctive views on the same dynamic: the relationship between Modi and the region. Bajpai's primary focus is on Modi's agency within the region, arguing that India under his premiership is moving away from restrained bilateralism in dealing with both China and Pakistan, and towards coalition-building against them. He sees both as indicating Modi breaking with the past. Complementing this analysis, Sridharan examines the structural constraints faced by India in the region, arguing that a state's power is defined not just by its capabilities but by those of its neighbours and opponents. The key constraint that confronts the rise of India is regional contestation, with the result that New Delhi is likely to continue its search for security *vis-à-vis* China and Pakistan and its realignment towards the United States and away from Russia.

Taken together, these six pieces underscore the constraining role of both geopolitical realities at the regional and global levels and frameworks of influential domestic ideas, even as they point to innovation in the style, method and energy of Modi's approach to foreign policy. In other words, while Modi's agency may

signal something new for India, these pieces collectively demarcate a limited space within which foreign policy innovations will unfold.

## **India's rise at 70: the view from outside**

Turning the lens back on India from the outside, Pant and Joshi, Pu and Scott deliver assessments of India's rise and of Modi's leadership, taking into account the interests and visions of the United States, China and the United Kingdom, respectively.

Pant and Joshi review Indo-US relations under the Modi leadership and argue that India is decisively responding to US overtures in a manner that no prior leader has been able to achieve. What is different under Modi, they argue, is India's focus and delivery on thorny bilateral issues, such as defence agreements and the issue of nuclear liability, that have long stood as impediments to a fruitful Indo-US partnership owing to India's hesitancy. They view, by implication, the United States as happily accommodating India's rise, not least because India stands as a potential counter to the rise of China.

In contrast, Pu's reading of China's response to a rising India is one of ambivalence. While China's general framing of India is as a global partner rather than a threat, China supports India's status aspirations only partially, conditionally and inconsistently. To explain this, Pu points not only to the asymmetry of power between the two countries, but also to the gap in perspective between the Chinese elite, who promote a 'sensitive' narrative emphasizing developing country solidarity, and the Chinese public, who overall take a more nationalistic line.

Finally, the question raised by Scott's analysis of India through British eyes is less whether the UK will accommodate India than whether India will accommodate the UK. Scott argues that India's economic growth has transformed the Indo-British relationship, such that India's economic strength is strengthening its political hand *vis-à-vis* the UK, whose importance is far diminished. Trade and investment between the two will continue, predicts Scott, but it is unclear whether Brexit will see India shifting its economic focus to the EU as a partner or whether a bilateral free trade deal will bring the two countries into a closer embrace.

## **India's rise at 70: some takeaways**

India today is a formidable economic force and is gaining in both political power and status. Taken collectively, the articles in this special issue underscore both the importance of India's rise and the challenges and benefits of weighing systematically the contribution of the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, to India's foreign policy.

The ascendance of Narendra Modi can and should be seen in the light of the global trend of the emergence as leaders of 'strong men' with hyper-nationalist agendas, such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Recep Erdogan and Donald Trump.

While this special issue does not take Modi's domestic policies as its central focus, nor does it intend to suggest that he is a leader in the tradition of Indian prime ministers before him. Since he rose to power in May 2014, Modi's Hindu nationalist leadership has provided legitimization for extremist discourses and actions, frequently along religious lines. Domestic movements associated with the BJP-affiliated Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a radical right-wing Hindu nationalist organization and a key source of political support for the BJP, have challenged India's secular social order, and Modi has offered little in the way of condemnation in response.<sup>20</sup> As Sumit Ganguly has argued: 'Even as [Modi] courts foreign leaders with grace, projecting professional cosmopolitanism, his government has tolerated, even abetted, a dangerous, parochial social agenda at home.'<sup>21</sup> Modi's willingness to accept religious and other forms of bigotry within India could eventually pose a threat to his ambitions to gain higher status for the country on the world stage.

None of our contributors would dispute that India's status in the international system has evolved substantially since 1947. Nor would any of them contend that Indian foreign policy is static and incapable of shifts. However, most would suggest that, overall, any transformation of India's foreign policy has to operate in a narrow space. While Modi may have the personal drive to effect changes, such as the repackaging of India's approach to international cooperation on climate change, and while these changes may lead to some transformative policy successes, his role at the helm of national foreign policy is less original and groundbreaking than some commentators have supposed. Future radical changes are unlikely and most apparent shifts, such as the closer Indo-US relationship, predate Modi's premiership. If India is likely to become 'the most important swing state' in the international system, Modi will have played only a modest part in this emergence.

<sup>20</sup> Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'An act of tyranny', *Indian Express*, 16 Feb. 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Sumit Ganguly, 'Modi's balancing act: India's conservative social agenda threatens its foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 26 March 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2015-03-26/modis-balancing-act>.