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Modi’s mixed bag

Pushing a Hindu nationalist agenda at home, Indian PM Narenda Modi's foreign policy relies on multilateral cooperation

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On 11 April 2019, citizens began to vote in the world’s largest – and generally well-functioning – democracy: India. Elections will be held over many weeks; results are to be announced on 23 May. Nearly 900 million Indians are called upon to elect the parliament. Although polls put Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s governing coalition ahead, it has lost support in recent months.

Led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi’s party alliance counts on the popularity of the PM, who presents himself a mover and shaker and knows how to inspire the masses. The opposition Congress Party led by Rahul Gandhi, the great-grandson of Nehru and grandson of former PM Indira Gandhi, has forged the United Progressive Alliance. Its election manifesto, ‘Hum Nibhayenge’ (We will deliver), focuses on joblessness, the plight of farmers, women’s security and a minimum income.

At the same time, the Congress Party accuses the current government of failing to fulfil its big campaign promises: revamping the economy, creating a digital India with smart cities and a clean Ganges. However, robust economic growth of over seven per cent and projections of further development are insufficient to create jobs for the 12 million young Indians who enter the labour market every year.

Modi, on the other hand, decries the Congress Party election manifesto as a ‘hypocritical document that’s full of lies’ – because everyone can see what they promised and didn’t deliver in 2009, the last time they were in power. ‘Whenever the Congress has come to power in the country, [...] governance has gone into reverse gear.’ The usual electioneering bluster.

Modi's 'Hindu nationalism' is a mixed bag

In 2014, voters punished the long-ruling Congress Party for political stagnation and elected Modi with an overwhelming majority, celebrating him like a pop star – in India and throughout the Indian diaspora. However, misgivings arose as Modi and his BJP pursued Hindu nationalist, sometimes chauvinistic goals. Their 'Hindutva' (Hindu-ness) ideology, emphasising India's greatness and uniqueness, runs contrary to the idealistic visions of Gandhi and Nehru. While those two leaders also stressed India's identity and independence, they aspired to create a secular society and ensure international peace and disarmament. The BJP and its Hindu hardliners have quite different goals.

They are dreaming of a homogeneous Hindu society. Hindu nationalists are not afraid of offending and discriminating against non-Hindus in India and Muslims in surrounding countries. They want to economically and militarily strengthen India so it can assert itself in a globalised world. They favour Hindus in education, threaten the religious freedom of over 170 million Muslims and other religious groups, and run absurd campaigns to ban beef consumption that have led to vigilantes murdering cattle transporters. They destroy societal cohesion.

Some of Modi's mega-projects like cleaning up the holy river Ganges, currently an open sewer, haven't gotten very far in five years. In other areas, such as fighting corruption and dismantling government bureaucracy, there has been some progress. However, the real surprise was Modi's foreign policy and foreign trade policy – even for India experts.

Modi's multilateralism is unmarked by Hindu nationalism.

In the early 1990s, the Indian economy was liberalised and decades of protecting Indian industry were ended. Modi and his governing alliance have continued this approach and focussed on foreign trade and promote foreign investment. Modi may be obsessed with Hinduism at home but his foreign policy is internationalist and multilateralist.

The Indian commentator Rajesh Basrur wrote that although Modi's domestic policy is appropriately labelled 'Hindu nationalism', '[i]n the realm of foreign policy, its meaning is much less clear'. Upon taking the reign in 2014, Modi sought to relax relationships and promote economic cooperation with India's neighbours. Gentle attempts at rapprochement with Pakistan, however, have been repeatedly destroyed by ongoing border conflicts. In February 2019, new tensions over Kashmir involved

terror attacks and air strikes.

India's foreign policy won't change

In the current election campaign, both the government and the opposition are outdoing themselves to prove their patriotism. India's politicians also occasionally indulge in imperial ambitions and display excessive self-esteem – as when India launched its homemade anti-satellite weapon on 27 March 2019. Yet neither political camp can escape the fact that India's problems, particularly its enormous poverty, are earthbound.

Neighbours like Nepal and Sri Lanka get along better with India than Pakistan does. They regard India as a powerful but good-natured hegemon. Meanwhile, India is preoccupied by its security and economic relationships with China, which are conflictual and competitive, but also sometimes cooperative. In 1962, Asia's two great powers waged a territorial war. Despite numerous efforts to settle the conflict, both sides continue to insist on their claims and refuse to cede a single square centimetre.

New Delhi views Beijing's economic and military support for Pakistan with concern and is troubled by the way China barges ahead on its 'New Silk Road'. The economic corridor through Pakistan and mammoth road, rail and port infrastructure projects raise fears about India's national security. Indian strategists describe the new ports financed by China in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldive Islands, Djibouti and Abu Dhabi as 'a string of pearls' that China is linking through 'India's sphere of influence'. China's spread throughout Asia is a big challenge.

Despite these worries, the India government has not reacted with military force. At a security conference in Singapore in 2018, Modi stated, 'I firmly believe that Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests.' Modi's foreign policy is a balancing act: He notes the worries of India's smaller neighbours, nurtures relations with the US, the EU, Japan and Australia – and tries not to upset the Chinese who are rapidly expanding their political power and geo-strategy. Modi's multilateralism is unmarked by Hindu nationalism.

Some global crises, like climate protection, fighting terrorism and the financial crisis, do require India's cooperation. And no matter who wins the election, its foreign policy won't change much.



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