India’s Foreign Policy under a BJP-led Coalition Government

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Key Points

- Indications are that the Bharatiya Janata Party will lead the next coalition government.
- India’s foreign policy, however, is likely to maintain its present course.
- A Narendra Modi government will almost certainly emphasise the economic and commercial aspects of India’s foreign policy.
- Nevertheless, a BJP-led government will not hesitate to take a hard line if it feels it is being threatened in any way.

Summary

As the Indian electorate exercises its political mandate, virtually every indication is that the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by its Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, the present Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, will form the next government, in all likelihood a coalition. It is no secret that the BJP is directly linked to (and, some would argue, takes its direction from) the fervently nationalistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organisation. It is claimed by many observers, therefore, that if Modi and the BJP win the election, they will bring that nationalism to bear in India’s domestic and foreign policies.

This study will attempt to determine if this is indeed the case.
Analysis

Modi himself has provided very few insights into any future foreign policy directions under a BJP-led government. There are, nevertheless, some indications as to what that might be. As Modi remarked in an interview with The Indian Express newspaper, ‘I believe in Hindutva which is based on the age-old concept of “Vasudeva Kutumbakamu”. I believe mutual respect for one another and co-operation should be the basis for relationships with foreign nations. … I will follow the (foreign) policies of the Vajpayee-led NDA government.’ He was essentially saying that he would base his foreign policy on “Hindutva” or “Indian-ness”, which is, in turn, predicated upon the principle of “Vasudeva Kutumbakamu”, a Sanskrit term that broadly translates as “universal brotherhood”. Interestingly, the RSS has been known to employ this term previously. It is difficult to reconcile the two terms, but it is telling that Modi was willing to express his thoughts in terms of Hindu nationalism.

The recently-released BJP Manifesto 2104 gives one indication of the stand a BJP-led coalition will take in its foreign policy.1 Page three of the manifesto summary states, ‘[The] Congress Party lowered [the] dignity of Government, [and] the dignity of India. This is driving recent adversities like the falling rupee and countries riding roughshod over us.’ This would appear, on the face of it, to speak of the RSS’s nationalistic perception that India is not given the respect it deserves by some members of the international community and the consequent hard line that the BJP might take in its foreign relations. The manifesto goes on to remark that ‘equations will be mended through pragmatism and a doctrine of mutually beneficial and interlocking relationships, based on enlightened national interest.’

In contrast to the opacity of that statement, the general introduction to the section of the manifesto devoted to foreign policy (page 39) states:

[The] BJP believes a resurgent India must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions. The vision is to fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India’s global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvass, that is not just limited to political diplomacy, but also includes our economic, scientific, cultural, political and security interests, both regional and global, on the principles of equality and mutuality, so that it leads to an economically stronger India, and its voice is heard in the international fora.

After excoriating the performance of the current Congress Party-led UPA coalition, it adds, ‘… our foreign policy will be based on best National interests. We will create a web of allies to mutually further our interests. We will leverage all our resources and people to play a greater role at the international high table.’ Laying out the guiding principles of the BJP’s foreign policy it also states:

- Instead of being led by big power interests, we will engage proactively on our own with countries in the neighbourhood and beyond.

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In our neighbourhood we will pursue friendly relations. However, where required we will not hesitate from taking [a] strong stand and steps. Indian foreign policy, however, has historically remained fairly continuous in its promotion of its non-alignment stance over the course of (or, perhaps, despite) the various governments since 1947. As a senior Indian diplomat remarked, ‘An elephant is not prone to making sharp turns.’ Within this continuum, however, there has been a major re-thinking of India’s place on the world stage concomitant with its up-until-recently strong economic growth. The first of the two points above which refers to India’s proactive engagement with states beyond its immediate neighbourhood highlights this change in thinking. The “extended neighbourhood” concept is not the brainchild of the present BJP or even the current UPA government. BJP-led governments since 1998 and their Congress counterparts since 2004 have used the concept in their foreign policy declarations. While the present manifesto emphasises India’s soft power in its foreign policy section, the extended neighbourhood concept is concerned with India’s power projection through hard and soft power, i.e. through economic and military might, and through cultural and ideational incursions. Thus, the 2006 statement by then-External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee: ‘India’s foreign policy today looks at India’s environment in expanding circles … starting with the immediate neighbourhood … moving on to … the extended neighbourhood.’ The circles metaphor which derives from Kautilya’s ancient treatise on politics, the *Arthashastra*, is more recently elucidated upon by the Indian strategist, C. Raja Mohan.

The second point listed above highlights the BJP’s stance in the immediate neighbourhood. This derives from the fact that, while India has normal ties with more distant states, there remain tensions with some states geographically closer to it. Two of these come to mind immediately: Pakistan and China. It is worthwhile examining Indo-Pakistan and Sino-Indian relations in some closer detail, therefore, before moving to India’s ties with two other major powers, the United States and Russia.

**India – Pakistan Relations**

The BJP leader, Giriraj Singh, recently said to the Press Trust of India, ‘I stand by my statement that those trying their best to stop Modi from coming to power have no place in India and should go to Pakistan whose interests these Modi-haters have sought to espouse by opposing him in the polls.’ This statement is telling for its implication that those Indians who oppose Modi are the enemies of India and ought to move to Pakistan, India’s nuclear-armed neighbour with which it has fought four wars and is, therefore, itself an implacable enemy of India. Despite this vitriolic statement, however, Modi has sent emissaries to Islamabad to meet leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) Government, as *The Hindu* newspaper alleges. If this is factual, it would appear that Modi sees the need to reassure the Pakistani Government that he will seek to forge better relations with that country. For its part, Pakistan says it wants better relations with India. As Pakistani High Commissioner in New Delhi, Abdul Basit, notes, Pakistan looks forward to engaging and furthering relations with the next Indian Government:

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Let’s wait for May 16 to know who will form the next government. As I said earlier, we need to build on the bilateral progress made so far. We hope the next government in India would be forthcoming and willing to move decisively towards attaining a viable peace. The new government in India would not find Pakistan wanting in this regard.

Modi has specifically stated that there will be no radical departure in India’s policy vis-à-vis Pakistan under a government he leads. In an interview with ANI, Modi was at pains to point out that the time for eye-to-eye confrontation was past and the focus was on engaging Pakistan. In this, he will indeed follow the precedent established by former BJP Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, who also tried to engage Pakistan. Modi also made it clear that there would be no change in India’s no-first-strike nuclear policy.

Recognising that electioneering rhetoric is poles apart from actual policy when in government, the Pakistani Government no doubt hopes that a strong leader like Modi might be better equipped to push through legislation enabling better ties with Pakistan than did his predecessor, Manmohan Singh. Islamabad no doubt recalls Vajpayee’s trips to Pakistan and his initiation of dialogue with Pakistan. It will be compelled to draw the distinction between the Hindu nationalist Vajpayee and the more “secular” Congress that refused to allow Singh to travel to Pakistan.

All that aside, Modi will no doubt take a hard line with Pakistan should there be, say, Pakistani incursions across the border in Kashmir or a terrorist attack like the one in Mumbai. Despite any reservations he may have, he will be hard-pressed to rebut the pressure his colleagues in his government and, especially, the RSS will put on him. There is, however, little doubt that he will try to enhance Indo-Pak ties and simultaneously erode the Pakistan-China relationship, leaving India free to concentrate on its competition with China.

Essentially, then, Modi will offer the velvet glove of economic co-development and better bilateral ties to Pakistan, but he will also ensure that Islamabad is aware of the iron fist within it.

**India-China Relations**

The India-China relationship has been described as this century’s most important bilateral relationship, but it has distinctly failed to live up that expectation so far. In fact, due to Indian imports from China far outweighing its exports to that country, the balance of trade is hopelessly skewed in China’s favour, a situation New Delhi finds itself unable to control. Moreover, trade aside, the level of investment by each country in the other is almost negligible due to India’s cumbersome and labyrinthine licensing system.

On the other hand, Chinese investment in, and loans to, Gujarat has been outstanding. Many Chinese organisations see Gujarat as India’s answer to Guangdong province in China. Modi’s reputation as a business facilitator is partly responsible for this perception. His deliberate

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cultivation of mutually beneficial relationships in Beijing has also helped. Thus, when two Gujarati diamond traders were arrested in China and the Singh Government’s attempts to free them came to naught, they were freed after Modi visited China in 2011. Far more importantly, while Chinese investment in India has been remarkably poor, despite calls from the current Indian Government for China to do so, Beijing has offered to meet a full 30 per cent of India’s total demand for investment in its infrastructure until 2017 since Modi’s nomination as the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate in late 2013. This investment is estimated at around US$300 billion and is seen as a direct result of Modi’s ability to get things done.

Indeed, so strong are the Modi-Beijing ties that when he toured Arunachal Pradesh in India’s remote east and strongly told China to cease its claim to that state (China claims Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet), the Chinese press quickly suggested that that was nothing more than election rhetoric.

Even more than with Pakistan, however, Modi will need to carefully weigh his options in furthering relations with China. China will not provide India with US$30 billion, let alone US$300 billion, without receiving a guaranteed quid pro quo. While any trade-off in terms of disputed territory is unthinkable to India, China will definitely seek entry into India’s communications infrastructure, a lessening in its ties with the United States and, indeed, deeper Indian ties with itself. Indeed, it may also require a reduction in India’s growing ties with Japan and a further reduction of its ties with Taiwan. Insofar as China is concerned, this will further reduce the influence of the US influence in Asia, demonstrate that it can forge relations with the world’s largest democracy and, for the time-being at least, allow it to concentrate on the East China Sea and South China Sea issues without having to worry about a rapidly militarising India. Furthermore, enhanced security ties with India will also enable China to reduce its security concerns regarding its energy SLOCs with the Middle East and Africa, reduce India’s influence in Tibet and, importantly, not have to worry as much as it presently does about its ties with Pakistan, which seemingly goes out of its way to irritate New Delhi. For India, enhanced ties with China mean that it can import energy supplies from Russia either via a pipeline which traverses China or SLOCs which move past China’s east coast, thus improving Indo-Russian ties, expanding its energy sources from dependence upon the Middle East and, most importantly, concentrating on its domestic needs.

Again, China must ensure that, in order not to be seen as giving with the one hand and forcing the diminished stature of New Delhi in the eyes of Indians, it ceases its military incursions across the common border, corrects the trade imbalance, and treats India as an economic and military equal. It must, furthermore, accommodate India’s major power aspirations. It cannot, therefore, block India’s attempts to find a permanent place on the United Nations Security Council, for instance, or block its applications for development loans from agencies such as the Asian Development Bank. The difficulty lies in gauging what it might require from India in return.

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Any ties with China will offer India great rewards but simultaneously many pitfalls. A thoroughly studied and structured Sino-Indian relationship could uplift the many millions of Indians who now live in poverty to middle class lives but a misjudgement could have catastrophic consequences for India.

The India-United States Relationship

India-US ties, which surged under the George W. Bush Administration, lapsed during the first Obama Administration, no matter that Obama referred to Manmohan Singh as his guru, and then fell further during the second Obama Administration. To make matters worse, the Obama Administration succumbed to pressure from the political and intellectual élite to deny Modi a visa to the US since those élites held him responsible for a vicious anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. This has led Modi to declare that he has ‘no interest in visiting America other than to attend the UN in New York’. In March this year, the US Ambassador to India resigned, having been treated as virtually persona non grata since she took office. If this is any indication of India-US ties under a Singh Government, the prospects for the relationship under a Modi Government are daunting at best.

This is not to imply, however, that Modi can completely disregard the US. While China could arguably provide a major portion of the estimated US$1 trillion India needs for infrastructure development, India also requires intellectual investment, something China cannot provide. Moreover, any such arrangement with China is bound to be conditional, possibly making it difficult for India to agree to such an arrangement. On the other hand, though ties with the US could be just as difficult, Washington does not seek territorial gain from India, nor does it have an on-going dispute with it. While India does have its differences with the US, the fact remains that India and the US have never gone to war. Also, by allying with the US, India stands to gain from a coalition that includes Japan and Australia, not to mention some ASEAN states, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, with which it seeks to further develop ties. It is probably safe to say, then, that the growing military ties between India and the US will continue on their upward trajectory.

While some narratives allege that the political, economic and military influence of the US in Asia is deteriorating while China’s is surging, the US remains, nevertheless, the world’s largest economy and its most powerful military power. While the Obama Administration has erred in many ways and finds itself retreating on many fronts, to dismiss the US out of hand would be to deny the potential of future US administrations and access to what is likely to remain the world’s largest consumer market for some time to come.

For the US, India represents a massive, under-developed market for its goods and services. Its middle class is more likely to buy its products than inferior quality, mass-produced Chinese goods. At a time when the US and its commercial organisations face increasingly difficult times, a market such as India, where the rule of law holds sway more so than in many other countries and where intellectual property rights are respected, represents an opportunity which cannot be ignored.
While these market forces will probably force the US to pay more attention to India, a Modi Government, for all its anti-US rhetoric, will undoubtedly be pragmatic and seek to develop and enhance its ties with Washington.

**The India-Russia Relationship**

Given India’s difficult relationship with Pakistan, its tense relationship with China and a demonstrated lack of interest in it from the US, India has no choice but to reinforce its relationship with its tried and tested partner, Russia. In fact, India demonstrated this renewal of interest in its Russian ties by refusing to vote against Russia’s recent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. This, however, could have been for purely pragmatic reasons. India has invested billions of dollars in Russian energy organisations and projects and would be reluctant to jeopardise those investments. Energy aside, India is also very involved in developing a military industry with Russia, the Brahmos missile project being just one example. India has also invested in the joint-venture fifth generation PAK-FA fighter aircraft project with Russia and plans to purchase around two hundred of the aircraft when it is finally produced.

In the commercial energy sector, India has agreed to purchase more Russian-designed nuclear reactors in addition to the four already built or under construction in Tamil Nadu. It is likely that Russia will finally supply the majority of the sixteen nuclear reactors that India seeks to purchase from international suppliers.

That aside, Russia remains India’s ally against a surging and increasingly aggressive China. While Russia-China relations are slowly normalising, there remains an undercurrent of suspicion in Moscow that China ultimately seeks to recover the territories it lost to Russia, including parts of Russia’s Far East. So, while Mr Putin may make use of China’s need for energy, he will be under no illusion that China is to be treated with a degree of caution, whereas India seeks a relationship with Russia built upon mutual trust and respect, comparatively minor difficulties notwithstanding.

Essentially, the India-Russia relationship will remain strong and will further grow over time.

In conclusion, India’s foreign policy under a Modi Government will be a natural continuation from previous governments, including the current Congress-led UPA Coalition. Modi will more than likely be concerned with domestic issues and events and will treat foreign policy as, firstly, an extension of domestic policy and, secondly, a means to further his domestic agenda. In doing so, he will follow in his predecessors’ footsteps.

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