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India's Foreign Policy after the Elections

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Even before they began on 7 April, elections to the 16th Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament, became a landmark in the history of democratic elections in the world. Simply put, it is the largest event of its kind in human history. This time 815 million people are eligible to vote within the boundaries of a single country, a number that exceeds the combined electorate of the United States, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia and Bangladesh. If the turnout is 65%, nearly 530 million people would have actually voted. And they would do so on well over a million electronic voting machines!

Foreign policy does not figure among the key issues on which the election is being fought: these largely centre on the economy, governance, political ideologies and local issues. According to a recent opinion survey, people's three topmost concerns are: "Better job opportunities", "Drinking water" and "Better roads".¹ Nevertheless, India has its own expanding worldview. Indians have become increasingly conscious of the impact of globalisation, technology and interdependence on inter-state relations. They also realise the inter-linkage between their goal of security and prosperity at home and global developments. Therefore, the country's strategic community and other groupings have been engaged in debating the kind of foreign policy India may favour in the future. For example, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), a prestigious foreign policy think-tank, recently hosted a well-attended seminar on this topical theme.

Possible Scenarios

India has been ruled by coalition governments since 1989. This may not change in coming years. An objective analysis would indicate that the

elections will result in one of the three outcomes: 1) A coalition led by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as its principal constituent; 2) A coalition led by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with Indian National Congress (INC) as its principal constituent; 3) A coalition composed of several regional parties, which is supported externally by one of the two national parties. It may be useful to reflect on possible contours of foreign policy in these different eventualities.

During the Cold War period India followed a policy anchored on Non-Alignment; it introduced several adaptations and shifts during the post-Cold War period. Under the NDA government (1999-2004) and the two UPA governments (2004-2014), foreign policy evolved further, becoming increasingly pragmatic, realistic and focused on economic development. It was marked by a broad national consensus, even though opposition parties could always find enough in the policies of the government of the day to oppose and criticise. However, in the past three years several aspects of foreign policy have come under severe criticism, especially management of relations with the United States, China, Pakistan and India's South Asian neighbours.² This is the backdrop to address the question: what broadly will be India's external policy in the next five years?

BJP as Driver

In case an NDA government is formed under BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, the legacy of the previous NDA government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is expected to be an important, though not exclusive, factor. Mr Modi's own thinking, record as the chief minister of Gujarat since 2001 and experience in dealing with foreign governments will be a major determinant, as will the BJP's party manifesto.³ Finally, the complexion of the foreign policy and national security team and, in particular, the views of the national security adviser, foreign minister and defence minister, will also need to be factored in. This

is an unknown factor at present.

Considering that Mr Modi has placed a special focus on his economic development agenda, projecting Gujarat as the model, there is widespread expectation that a policy framework to accelerate reform and economic growth will be adopted. This indicates that the country may exert itself even more (than before) to forge foreign investment, trade and technology linkages. Special attention may be paid to relations with western countries (including Japan) as well as to economic diplomacy. The relationship with the United States will assume considerably more significance, for at least two reasons: first, Mr Modi was denied a US visa for his perceived role in communal violence in 2002, but this presumably would change; second, India-US relations, after the heady days of 2008 under the Bush Administration which lasted until the exciting visit of President Obama to India in 2010, seem to have reached a 'plateau.' As an Indian analyst argued recently, "Broadly, progress has been below par on all key initiatives".⁴ The chapter that began with the arrest of an Indian diplomat in New York in December 2013 and (hopefully) ended with the resignation of the US ambassador in India in April 2014, would need to be closed definitively, and a forward-looking approach adopted in mutual interest.⁵ Sustained endeavours would be needed, both in New Delhi and Washington, to restore energy and dynamism to a relationship that has larger geopolitical salience for the world. According to columnist Sanjaya Baru, "Modi represents a brand of Asian nationalism kindled by China's rise and the West's part-confused, part-duplicitous response".⁶ Modi may accord priority to economic imperatives in his foreign policy and also to strengthening "the relationship between defence and diplomacy".⁷

On relations with China, a country which received Mr Modi with some fanfare, progress could be expected, especially because President Xi Jinping has already announced that he is keen to visit India later in the year. Mr Modi can be expected to calibrate the need to expand political and economic cooperation as well as the imperative to assert India's will to

defend its fundamental interests. Addressing an election meeting in Arunachal Pradesh, he advised China to shed its “expansionist mindset” and “forge bilateral ties with India for peace, progress and prosperity of both the nations”.⁸ This point went down well within India and caused few ripples in China.

On Pakistan, scholars seem divided whether a Modi government would follow the Vajpayee line or a different approach, and how different it would be from the policy approach of its predecessor. Much will naturally depend on how Pakistan responds to India’s new leader. Interestingly, a well-know Pakistani journalist opined, “What is clear is that Pakistanis will continue to distrust Mr Modi, no matter what”.⁹ Concerning relations with other neighbours such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, a BJP Government may too come under pressure from its allies. As columnist C. Raja Mohan has advised, it may need to learn a thing or two from the astute manner in which the Vajpayee government addressed such matters.

A brief analysis of BJP’s manifesto is also useful. The party lays much emphasis on national (both internal and external) security. It plans to study India’s nuclear doctrine (including ‘No First Use’ commitment) and revise and update it “to make it relevant to challenges of current times”. It is committed to maintaining a credible minimum deterrent “that is in tune with changing geostatic realities”. On foreign policy, BJP’s vision is “to fundamentally reboot and reorient... the goals, content and process”, locating “India’s global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvas”. The party will be driven by its basic conviction that “a resurgent India must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions”. It also believes that political stability, progress and peace in the region are “essential” for South Asia’s growth and development.¹⁰

Congress as Driver

In the case that Congress gets yet another opportunity to form a coalition government, this will enable the party to elevate its vice president Rahul Gandhi to prime minister of India. A Gandhi government can be expected to be guided by the legacy of previous Congress governments, especially those of Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. While addressing a conference of Indian ambassadors in November 2013, the outgoing prime minister delineated the five core elements of foreign policy as below:¹¹

- India's relations with world are increasingly defined by its development priorities;
- Greater integration with world economy will benefit India;
- India seeks stable, long-term and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and is ready to create global economic and security environment that is beneficial to all nations;
- The Indian subcontinent's shared destiny requires greater regional cooperation and connectivity;
- Foreign policy is not defined merely by India's interests, but also by the values dear to its people.

The party's 2014 manifesto contains a short section on its thinking and goals regarding external relations. It speaks of the Congress's commitment to "the articulation and implementation of a robust and dynamic foreign policy". Under a Congress government, India would build "peaceful, stable and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers and all our Asian neighbours". Reference is made to combatting global terrorism, India's quest for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and the country's role "as a critical bridge between the developed and the developing world". Strengthening the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to help it to realise a "South Asian economic community" and managing relations with China, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are identified as other priorities. On Afghanistan, the manifesto expresses the party's conviction that "the real threat is not within but from terrorism

from beyond its borders”. A Congress government will support the peace process if it remains “Afghan owned and Afghan driven”. In a nod to the domestic constituency, the document stresses that protecting Indians overseas from exploitation or threat would remain “a permanent concern”.¹²

Regional Parties as Drivers

Opinion polls and experts have been predicting that the two major national parties between themselves may garner only half or a little over half of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. The other half may be won by an array of smaller national and regional parties. This explains their clout and ability to influence the formation of the next government as well as the formulation of its policies. However at this stage it is very difficult to visualise how this ‘third option’ may play out and, more precisely, how it may impact on the nation’s foreign policy.

All that is known is that the incumbent chief ministers of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu played a crucial role in influencing India's Bangladesh and Sri Lanka policies respectively in recent years. Inclusion of their parties in a future government under the “third option” or as coalition partners with BJP or Congress is likely to mould India's neighbourhood policy to some extent. This aside, regional parties are not much interested in foreign policy issues.

A brief mention of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) should be made here, which has been described as “small, young, idealistic, hotheaded and underfunded, with its platform still evolving”.¹³ But to claim that AAP has “the two big parties running scared” is an exaggeration. Significantly though, AAP’s manifesto has a section on national security and foreign policy.¹⁴

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis suggests that in case the second or third scenario

materialises, there may be very little change in India's foreign policy. If the first scenario manifests there may not be radical shifts or drastic changes but "foreign policy priorities and response mechanism vis-a-vis foreign policy" might change, to quote Seshadri Chari, convenor of the BJP's foreign affairs cell.¹⁵

On any scenario, the "Look East Policy" is likely to continue as enjoying strong bipartisan support. The next government is expected to nurture and deepen the policy, with relations with ASEAN as well as other key players such as China, Japan, Vietnam and Australia likely to receive heightened attention. Australia, in particular, has invested heavily in political, economic and Track II diplomacy with India in the past three years. Australia's economic achievements, its geopolitical sensibilities and its responsibilities as chair of G20 and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) create conducive conditions for closer understanding and cooperation with India. An early opportunity of interaction at the highest political levels should be seized.

Contrary to Robert Kaplan's views, India does not suffer from a leadership vacuum.¹⁶ Never before have Indian voters been as demanding as they are today; never before has the Indian media been as critical in its scrutiny of leaders as now; and never before have 100 million new voters been added to the electorate as is the case for this election. From this intensely competitive electoral process will emerge a group of leaders who will bear the weighty responsibility of leading 1.2 billion people. Their capabilities and commitment should not be underestimated.

India needs a stable government, decisive and inclusive leadership, broad policy consensus, working cooperation between the government and opposition and a new compact between the rulers and the ruled. Contours of the next government's policy framework, covering both internal and external domains, will start to become clearer from 16 May onwards. The world will be watching the unfolding phenomenon with deep interest

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¹ The survey was conducted by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and Daksh.

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² Please see Vivek Katju, “Without a strategic compass”, *The Indian Express*, 2 April 2014.

³ Deepak Parekh, “A Blueprint For Governance”, *The Times of India*, 10 April 2014. The author, explaining the value of party manifestos states: “Manifestos are only statements of intent, but they reveal the basic line of thought within a party.”

⁴ Pranab Dhal Samanta, “How the relationship soured”, *The Indian Express*, 2 April 2014.

⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, “Getting India-US Ties Back on Track”, *India Today*, 21 April 2014. The author argues that, if gaps and deficits between the two countries are filled and “India's return to economic success assured, there is enough to sustain a fruitful engagement that serves mutual interests for a long time to come.”

⁶ Sanjaya Baru, “The world of Narendra Abe”, *The Indian Express*, 27 February 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “China should shed expansionist mindset: Modi”, *The Hindu*, 22 February 2014. <

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-should-shed-expansionist-mindset- modi/article5716591.ece>> (accessed on 7 April 2014).

⁹ Huma Yusuf, “Bumps ahead on Indo-Pak road”, *The Asian Age*, 2 April 2014.

¹⁰ C. Raja Mohan, “Modi’s world”, *The Indian Express*, 9 April 2014. The author argues

that the BJP manifesto is “a classic committee document...”, but “its vagueness should offer

Modi...considerable freedom to put his own stamp on India's foreign policy.”

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