

Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy in Modi Era.

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Abstract

This article examines continuity and change in Indian foreign policy since Narendra Modi took office. It proceeds with analyzing six issues that dominated India's foreign engagement between the prime ministerial regimes of Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh as a reference point. To evaluate the level of change, it defines major change as a major shift in the goals and strategies of a state's foreign policy and argues that most often a major change in foreign policy is a result of changes in the systemic variables followed by a change in either state- or individual-level variables. Indian foreign policy under Modi is witnessing a proactive turn infused by a strong leadership. The new government has redefined India's foreign policy priorities, and the level of external engagement has also gone up. However, areas like democracy promotion have not upheld their momentum, and the government's regional policy has failed to utilize the opportunities that were available to it when it began its tenure. Also, foreign policy changes under the new government cannot be regarded as a major change because the goals and strategies of Indian foreign policy have not changed.

Keywords- Major change, strategic autonomy, multi-alliances, democracy promotion, power transition, soft power, proactive foreign policy

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Narendra Modi completed 5 years in office in May 2019. He is among the few Indian prime ministers who have dedicated much time and energy to foreign policy. He launched his 'tenure as prime minister with a flurry of overseas visits to large and small powers alike' in his thirty-one foreign trips to six continents, he has visited more than forty-nine states, including eight states twice and five times the USA.¹ To rejuvenate India's foreign engagement, the new government has taken several initiatives such as the Act East policy and Neighbourhood First policy. These initiatives have raised the hope that Indian foreign policy will witness significant changes. To tap the dynamics of Indian foreign policy under Modi's prime ministership, numerous scholars have studied the different dimensions of the Indian foreign policy. However, their opinion is divided. Some have talked about the substantial change and described him as a rescuer of Indian foreign policy, while others do not see any major shift. Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and former Minister of State for External Affairs in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, Shashi Tharoor, for example, maintain that 'foreign policy always operates within a framework of continuity and the core interests of a nation do not change for long periods' (The Wire 2015). Rajesh Basrur (2017) has found that 'foreign policy under Modi picks up from where his

predecessors left off and is characterised by essential continuity'. Ian Hall virtually concurs with this view and argues that despite bringing a proactive turn in Indian foreign policy, 'Modi has not made major modifications to the aims and methods of Indian foreign policy' (Hall 2017: 127). In contrast, another group represented by C. Raja Mohan sees the changes as 'so seminal as to mark the beginning of the "Third Republic"'² in Indian foreign policy (Bajpai 2017; The Wire 2015). Kanti Bajpai (2015) has found a 'new zeal' and rebooting of Indian foreign policy under the new regime. Sumit Ganguly (2015) also maintains that 'there is little question that Modi's foreign policy constitutes a departure from India's stances of the past'. To assess these competing claims objectively, this article takes six issues that have been the linchpin of Indian foreign policy since the end of the cold war, namely, (a) alignment pattern, (b) neighborhood policy, (c) the role of soft power, (d) international power transition, (e) democracy promotion, and (f) democratization of foreign-policy-making. It traces the evolution of the issues and evaluates the extent to which they have gone changed, if any, under the new regime. The article is divided into four sections. The first section evaluates the debate and sets a platform. The second section defines 'major change' and examines what variables lead to it. The third one identifies the six major issues that have dominated Indian foreign policy between Rao and Manmohan Singh and evaluates whether these have undergone major changes under the new government. The last section draws conclusions based on the analysis and seeks to answer why some scholars think otherwise.

What Is a Major Change?

What is a 'major' change and when does it occur? Answers vary significantly, especially in the later part of the question. A realist reply will differ from liberals, constructivists, and Marxists. The answer may differ to some degree even within a school of thought. In a state's foreign policy, a major change is demarcated by a substantial change in goals and strategies from its existing foreign policy. A major change occurs when existing goals are significantly redefined, and strategies are reconsidered to suit the redefined goals. However, the mere redefinition of goals and reconsideration of strategies does not constitute a major change until and unless the foreign policy departs to a good extent in the desired direction from its earlier position. To qualify as a major change, the departure should be to the extent that a disjuncture can clearly be observed. To be recognized as a major change, all these changes must take place in the concourse of a regime's policy change. Such a disjuncture can be caused by a change in forces working at three levels: a change at the individual or leadership level; changes in domestic variables such as ideology, ruling party, and economic and military capabilities; and the systemic or the international system-level variables (Jackson and Sørensen 2013: 259). While analyzing the relative impact of the three variables in shaping state behavior, Kenneth Waltz has concluded that the third image (system level variables) describes the framework of world politics, but without the first (individual level) and second images (state-level variables) there

can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.

Change at Individual Leadership Level

Change at the individual or leadership level affects foreign policy. Byman and Pollack (2001: 109) have contended that ‘the goals, abilities, and foibles of individuals are crucial to the intentions, capabilities, and strategies of a state’. The state leadership is responsible for reading or misreading the systemic signals. ‘Based on their perceptions and interpretations, they (leaders) build expectations ... and plan strategies’ (Hermann and Hagan 1998: 126). They play a linchpin role in mobilizing resources, deciding the course of action and implementing the decisions. In a decision-making process, a ‘leader’s personality and character can also influence a state’s response’ because some leaders are keen to take risks while others not (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 63). Under a qualified and experienced leadership, sometimes a state can achieve more than what its capability allows. India’s foreign policy achievements under Nehru signify the role of leadership. The success of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin can be attributed to his personality. Another example is the Nixon regime’s policy change toward the People’s Republic of China from hostility to engagement, led by Henry Kissinger (Wohlforth 2012: 44). Nevertheless, the role of leadership is circumscribed by the domestic and international circumstances.

Change in Domestic Variables

Domestic variables are regarded as a primary determinant of foreign policy. Changes in domestic variables such as regime type, ideology, ruling party, economic and military capabilities, media, business, and public opinion, among others, also can decide the degree of continuity and change in foreign policy. In international relations theory, liberalism and neoclassical realism emphasize over the domestic variables in foreign policy analysis. According to liberals, the ‘state–society relations—the relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded—have a fundamental impact on state behaviour in world politics’ because ‘Societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behaviour by shaping state preferences’ (Moravcsik 1997: 513). The preferences are at the core of driving foreign policy. Moreover, by assuming that democracies do not fight with each other, democratic peace theory, a variant of liberalism, stresses the role of ‘regime type’ in foreign policy analysis. Unlike the structural realism, by recognizing the role of domestic variables in foreign policy analysis, neoclassical realists argue that domestic-level factors such as leader images, state-society relations, strategic culture, and institutions play an intervening role between dependent and independent variables (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 58–79). Changes in these variables can lead to a change in goals and strategy. For instance, the Soviet

Union's decision to introduce Glasnost and Perestroika in the late 1980s was predominantly shaped by a poor economic performance at home.

International System-level or Systemic Variables

Pertaining to the impact of system-level forces on a state's foreign policy, Margaret G. Hermann and Joe D. Hagan have observed that 'the systemic imperatives of anarchy or interdependence are so clear, leaders can choose from only a limited range of foreign strategies. If they are to exercise rational leadership and maximise their state's movement toward its goals, only certain actions are feasible ...' (Hermann and Hagan 1998: 124). Structural realism maintains that 'the systemic distribution of power among states is the most important level for analysing and explaining foreign policy' (Jackson and Sørensen 2013: 259). Although structural realism is not a theory of foreign policy, yet the structure of the international system, that is, 'conditions in the international system compel or pressure states towards acting in certain ways, that is, to follow a certain foreign policy' (Ibid.: 257). The distribution of power in the international system bounds a state's foreign policy choices. Availability of choices or lack of it affects foreign policy goals and strategies. In anarchy, by restricting or providing incentives for specific alliance patterns, the systemic variables shape the way (and in collaboration with whom) a state will pursue its national interests. For instance, the post-Second World War goals of Indian foreign policy ensuring the independence of foreign policy by keeping the country out of the ongoing power politics—and the strategy to pursue it through the Non-Aligned Movement underlines the role of systemic variables in shaping foreign policy goals and the strategies of a state. In a bipolar international system, there was a fear that aligning with any superpower may compromise the independence of foreign policy. Although leadership and domestic variables play an important role in determining foreign policy behavior, the role of structural variables cannot be ignored. Any of the three factors can bring about change in foreign policy, but none of them can bring about a major change on its own. Even change in more than one variable may bring a major change but not necessarily. Most often, a major change is a result of a change in systemic variables followed by a change in either or both of the remaining variables. The post-Second World War and post-Cold War foreign policy changes of India, among others, throw ample light on the role of the systemic variables in shaping a state's foreign policy.

Modi Government and Changing Patterns

Alignment Pattern

Non-alignment, meaning to keep away from power politics was a defining feature of Indian foreign policy. Being 'a weak postcolonial state, India had a strong desire to prevent other powers from limiting its own room for manoeuvre' (Mohan 2008). The non-alignment policy was adopted to ensure the 'independence' of Indian foreign policy. But in the post-Cold War

era, where the Non-Aligned Movement was declared dead and aligning with the USA became a fashion, to provide maximum options to foreign policymakers, India adopted a strategy called 'strategic autonomy' (Gupta and Chatterjee 2015: 104–107; Monsonis 2010: 613–614). The new strategy led India to 'emphasis on an institutionalised, classic multilateralism' (Narlikar 2013: 596) at the global level while enhancing India's 'capacity to pursue its interests with minimal reference to other major powers' at the regional level (Hall 2016: 3). Thus, despite virtually giving up the policy of non-alignment, by adopting the strategy of strategic autonomy, India retained its space 'to manoeuvre at the international stage' (Wulf and Debiel 2015: 29). However, India could not go far with strategic autonomy and in the late 1990s adopted a new strategy called 'strategic partnerships' (Panda 2013) or 'strategic connectedness' (Brewster 2014). Multi-alignment turn in Indian foreign policy was a repercussion of the change in foreign policy strategy. Vajpayee government laid the foundation of a strategic partnership in 1998 when India signed its first strategic partnership agreement with France. Under the policy, India aligned with status-quo powers such as the USA, France, and Japan but did not forget to align with 'revisionist' states such as China and Russia. It aligned with 'established powers' such as the United Kingdom and France but did not hesitate in aligning with 'rising powers' such as Germany, Brazil, and South Africa. Simultaneously, it is trying to persuade the established/status-quo powers to give state-of-the-art technology to enable it to raise its status and seeking accommodation in the existing international order as well as participating in alternative institutions such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Bank. Thus, as a consequence of strategic partnerships, Indian foreign policy is moving from the 'age of strategic autonomy' to the 'age of multi-alignment'. In the absence of systemic change, the Modi government's policy thrust is in continuation with that of its predecessors. Priority has been given to the West, especially the USA and Israel. But prime minister's personal interest has introduced a new rigour. The new government invited President Barrack Obama to India's Republic Day event. The prime minister's four visits to the USA and seven meetings with the US President in two years speak of the increasing bond between the two states. A result of these meetings was an extension of the US support for India's bid to be part of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Although India bid for the NSG membership could not succeed, however, it succeeded in joining the latter. Continuing the tradition to establish a strategic partnership, Modi government has also signed strategic partnership agreements with Seychelles, Mongolia, Singapore, the UAE, and Rwanda. The rise of China has compelled the USA and India to come together. Therefore, to bring two 'estranged democracies' closer, a process started in the post-Cold War era and strengthened by the Singh government through signing of Indo-US civil nuclear deal, Modi government has signed a deal that will govern 'the use of each other's land, air and naval bases for repair and resupply' (Deccan Chronicle 2016). For the first time since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, India's president and

prime minister have paid a state visit to Israel. All the while, older friends like Russia have received relatively less attention.

Neighborhood Policy

Since independence, India has pursued a neighborhood policy that was based on the premise that 'the Subcontinent is India's exclusive sphere of influence and New Delhi must strive to prevent the intervention of great powers in the affairs of the region' (Mohan 2003). Indira Gandhi asserted that 'India would neither intervene in the domestic affairs of any states in the region, unless requested to do so, nor tolerate such intervention by an outside power; if external assistance is needed to meet an internal crisis, states should first look within the region for help' (Devotta 2003: 367–368). India's regional policy from Rao to Manmohan Singh evolved around four themes. First, as the Rao government decided to link the Indian economy with the world economy, it lost the imperative to have an exclusionist regional policy. It remained no longer feasible to insist on keeping extra-regional powers away from the region. Therefore, India decided not to protest or publicly express strong reservations against extra-regional powers' involvement in regional affairs. Second, intervention—military or non-military (soft)—remains the core of India's regional policy. It is believed that the Mahinda Rajapaksa government adopted a pro-China policy 'only because India dragged its feet over sensitive political (Tamil) issues due to coalition partners' pressure on the previous government in New Delhi led by Manmohan Singh' (Sharma 2015). The third is the announcement of the Gujral Doctrine. The doctrine was aimed at reducing suspicions and generating goodwill vis-à-vis smaller neighbors through the principle of nonreciprocity. Lastly, the influence of states in foreign policymaking has increased. The states are not just directly engaging with other countries but also shaping India's relations with other states. Like its predecessors, the Modi government also pays great attention to the neighborhood. The positive gesture shown by the West Bengal government in the settlement of the land boundary dispute with Bangladesh strengthened the hope. However, India Pakistan relations have worsened over the period. While cross-border terrorism and the rise of fundamentalism in Pakistan threaten India's national security, India's alleged involvement in the tribal areas of Baluchistan threatens Pakistan's security. Surgical strike carried out by India further deteriorated the situation. India's relationship with its neighbors is still evolving under the shadow of intervention. Happyman Jacob has noted that 'India's growing unpopularity in the regional capitals is' on account of 'its increasing tendency to interfere in the domestic affairs of its smaller neighbors, either citing security implications or to offset the target country's unfriendly strategic choices' (Jacob 2016). Recently there was a widespread perception in Nepal that India had blockaded their country. Although an overwhelming majority of the Tarai region supported³ the Constitution in the Constituent Assembly voting, India asked Nepal 'to delay the promulgation of the new Constitution so that the Madheshi parties' demands on citizenship, and provincial boundaries

and their demarcation be incorporated' (Mitra 2016). When Nepal did not fall in line, India 'publicly expressed its displeasure' (Jacob 2016). Nepal saw it as interference in its domestic affairs. In the case of Sri Lanka, to counter a pro-China regime, India 'proactively promoted the coalition led by Maithripala Sirisena' against Rajapaksa (Ibid.). With regard to Maldives, India publicly expressed its concern over the ouster of President Mohamed Nasheed. Prime Minister Modi cancelled his planned visit to that country 'in protest of the subversion of democracy in the island nation' (Passi and Bhatnagar 2016: 10). Maldives considered this as interference in its domestic affairs. When India's Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, visited the Maldives, the Maldives' President's office issued a statement to the effect that his 'government will not tolerate foreign parties interfering with the country's domestic issues' and that such policies on India's part 'pushed Male further towards Beijing' (Ibid.).

The Role of Soft Power

Indian culture and religious thought, especially Buddhism, Bollywood, and Indian cuisine were popular across the globe for ages. But for a long time, they were not seen as an asset of foreign policy. However, 'since the early 2000s it [India] has been actively promoting its soft power credentials around the globe ...' (Chandra 2017: 344; Suri cited in Mukherjee 2014: 48). For the first time, the Vajpayee government started injecting 'democracy into India's international engagement' (Mohan 2014). In 2000, 'his government constituted a High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora' (Chandra 2017: 344). Institution building was defining a feature of the Singh government's policy in this regard. To reach non-resident Indians, Singh government established Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (Hall 2015: 250). Going a step further, the government created a Public Diplomacy Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 2006 and thereafter was active in promoting India in the old and new media (Ibid.). A key goal of the new division was to explain on a day-to-day basis the background of policy decisions in Indian foreign policy, to promote a positive image of India as well as to engage scholars, think-tanks, and media through its outreach activities. He also ensured India's participation in the 'community of democracy', strengthening democracy promotion bodies like the UN Democracy Fund, and assisted neighbors passing through a transition phase to adopt democracy. A major success to India's efforts came in 2007, when the United Nations declared to observe 2nd October, Mahatma Gandhi's birth, as International Day of Non-Violence. It seems that individual preferences have significantly shaped India's approach to soft power. Under Modi, 'the government and the Prime Minister are actively involved in cultivating and spreading India's influence abroad' (Tandon 2016: 59). Unlike Singh government, which refused to sponsor the World Sanskrit Forum in Bangkok, Modi participates in programs on religion, culture, and heritage. In contrast to Singh, Modi believes that 'if we keep criticising ourselves, why would the world look at us' (Indian Express 2016). Therefore, he participated in the World Cultural Festival organized by the Art of Living Foundation in New Delhi in March 2016 and

described the event like the Kumbh Mela of culture. In the same month, he also participated in the World Sufi Forum organized by the All India Ulama and Mashaikh Board. In May 2017, he participated as chief guest in the 14th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration, a Buddhist festival organized in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the government's effort aimed at recognition of Indian culture and political values succeeded in 2014, when the UN decided to celebrate 21 June as International Day of Yoga (United Nations 2014). Unlike Singh government's emphasis on institutionalization, the diaspora is an integral part of the Modi government's soft power promotion strategy. Unlike previous governments, the Modi government 'has been more direct ... in engaging with overseas Indians' (Parameswaran 2015). Consequently, he has addressed Indian diaspora at several places such as Madison Square Garden, the USA; Allphones Arena in Olympic Park, Sydney; Wembley Stadium, the UK; Dubai Cricket Stadium, the UAE; and SAP Center in San Jose, California. However, the rise of Hindu outfits and increasing cases of attack on religious minorities, their worship place and mob lynching under Modi regime have posed challenges to India's image abroad. Several people, mostly Muslims have been killed by the mob on the mere suspicion that either they were carrying or have kept beef in their homes. Such developments have significantly damaged India's image abroad.⁴

Conclusion

The 2014 General Elections brought change in the leadership and certain elements of state-level variables like the ideology of the ruling elites. But most of the state-level variables remained constant. Similarly, there was no major change in the systemic variables. In the absence of major change in state and systemic variables, what makes the Modi government's foreign policy distinct is Modi's leadership style. Under his leadership, Indian foreign policy has turned Indian foreign policy from reactive to proactive. A proactive foreign policy, according to Rajiv Bhatia, a former diplomat, is characterized by 're-prioritisation, emphasis, and nuance, sharper communication, strategic boldness, vigour, and activism' (Bhatia 2016). He brought India closer to the USA. Pertaining to soft power, he has emphasized on culture and direct link with the diaspora. No doubt these changes are important, but not to the extent to be regarded as a major departure. On the other side of the spectrum, democracy promotion hardly could register any development. On India's response to international power transition, like earlier, dilemma persists. Pertaining to the neighborhood, Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First policy are still waiting for any substantial achievement. So far change in goals is concerned, Dhruva Jaishankar (2016) underlines five goals of Indian foreign policy: prioritizing an integrated neighborhood; leveraging international partnerships to promote India's domestic development; ensuring a stable and multipolar balance of power in Indo-Pacific; dissuading Pakistan from supporting terrorism; and advancing Indian representation and leadership in matters of global governance. Instead of indicating any significant change, these show continuity. For a long time, the neighborhood has been at the focal point of Indian foreign policy. Ensuring economic

development through diplomacy and reform of global governance have been at the core of Indian foreign policy even before Modi took office. Thus, Modi government cannot introduce any major change in foreign policy goals. The evolution of Indian foreign policy shows that change in strategy is introduced by the change in the international system. In response to the unipolar international order, India adopted 'strategic autonomy' as its preferred strategy in the 1990s. By the end of the twentieth century, when multiple centers of power started emerging (at least Indian policymakers perceived so), a consensus about need of a new strategy emerged. Thus, with the change in the international system from unipolarity to an era of decentralization of power, the strategic autonomy made way for 'strategic partnership'. Following the line of strategic partnership and multiple alignments initiated by the Vajpayee government, the Manmohan Singh government has taken India's strategic partnerships to a new height as out of the first twenty-seven agreements signed, more than fifteen were signed during his tenure. Following the tradition, the Modi government has signed new strategic partnership agreements with Mongolia, Singapore, the UAE, and Rwanda. No change in systemic variables, real or perceived, has occurred since Modi has assumed the office. Those scholars, who have concluded that the Modi government has brought a major change or 'third republic', excessively concentrate on individual-level variables. To a large extent, they ignore the impact of systemic and state-level variables in shaping foreign policy. Instead of locating things in a broader context, they take a particular dimension of the new government's foreign policy, especially alignment with the USA and leadership style, and analyze them in isolation. Even in areas like alignment pattern and emphasis on soft power, Modi government has rejuvenated the works of previous governments though with a new zeal. Thus, in the absence of bringing a major change in goals and strategy as well as a remarkable departure from the past foreign policy, any attempt to give credit for bringing about a major change in Indian foreign policy to Modi will be unfair to the Rao, Vajpayee and Singh governments.

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