



India Elects: what are the implications for the country's foreign and security policy?

by Lars Tore Flåten

Takeaways

- Security policy is important in this year's election. This is mainly due to the recent tensions in Kashmir.
- India's two largest parties, the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have different approaches when it comes to responding to terror attacks from groups based in Pakistan. The BJP has a lower threshold for applying military force against Pakistan.
- The two parties also seem to differ when it comes to India's approach to alignments, particularly with Japan and the United States.

The Indian election is already underway and takes place in seven phases, from 11 April to 19 May. India had entered election mode when the terror attack in Kashmir claimed the lives of forty police force personnel. This event, as well as the subsequent Indian response, placed security policy higher up on the agenda than it usually is in Indian elections. For this reason, it is pertinent to explore the foreign policy legacy of the current government in India, which is dominated by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The article also examines what is at stake for India and Asia when the country's 900 Million eligible voters cast their ballot.

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THE BJP AND THE CONGRESS PARTY

The two largest parties in India are the BJP and the Congress Party. The latter governed India from 2005 to 2014. It derives much of its political appeal from India's freedom struggle and the legacy of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. The Congress Party is also closely associated with the idea of secularism as the foundational principle of the modern Indian nation state. By contrast, the ideological aim of the BJP is to strengthen and promote the Hindu nature of India – often at the expense of religious minorities, namely Muslims and Christians. Although not particularly visible during the election campaign in 2014, Hindu nationalist ideology has represented a constant factor during Prime Minister Modi's reign, and more than ever before an authoritarian form of Hindu nationalism characterizes Indian society. A key element throughout Modi's reign has been his efforts to convey an image of a strong, confident and Hindu-based India. When it comes to foreign policy, however, the differences between the two parties are more difficult to grasp. India is still a developing country, and the foreign policy of both the Congress Party and the BJP tend to be driven by economic considerations. Another factor that both the previous Congress government and the current BJP government has had to take into account is how to respond to the growing influence of China. China's expansion in the South Asian region has become evident throughout the last decade. China is India's most important trading partner, at the same time as it is perceived as a threat to India's security. To India, it has become increasingly difficult to find the right balance between engaging economically with China at the same time as it expands its strategic ties with both the US and Japan – to some extent against China. In the remainder of this article, I examine the foreign policy legacy of the BJP government in light of these challenges. I pay particular attention to any differences between the BJP and the Congress Party.

NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST

A key pillar of the foreign policy during the Modi administration has been the so-called "Neighbourhood first" doctrine. This line of policy denotes an attempt to improve India's relations with the South Asian neighbours. To a certain extent, it is motivated by the significant inroads made by China into India's traditional sphere of interest.¹ Modi's announcement of this policy in 2014 was met with cautious optimism throughout the region and Modi invited all South Asian leaders to his inauguration, including the Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. Relations with most of the neighbours, however, soon deteriorated. With growing unrest in Kashmir, culminating in the recent escalation between India and Pakistan, the relationship between the two nuclear neighbours is colder than it has been in decades. For Modi, whose political image as a proactive and strong leader of a resurgent India, the recent conflict might rally support for him in the ongoing elections. This is, however, only one possible outcome. Modi has received substantial criticism from opposition parties for exploiting the issue for political gain. Moreover, the opposition has also questioned if the air attack against the alleged training facilities of the Jaish-e-Mohammad in Pakistan was necessary and whether it was successful.² Both the BJP and the opposition seem to be balancing a tight rope when referring to this topic. All parties obviously want to stand up for the nation in times of distress, at the same time as there are obvious risks connected to placing too much emphasis on security threats or for criticizing the armed forces. When it comes to Pakistan no Indian government wants to appear compliant, but there are some interesting differences between the previous Congress-led government and the current BJP-government. In the aftermath of the terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008, the Congress-led government chose not to retaliate against Pakistan. By contrast, the BJP-government appears to have a lower threshold for applying military force. In 2016, Indian security forces in Kashmir were attacked by terrorists. India chose to respond by conducting

surgical strikes on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control in Kashmir. The recent events in Kashmir show that the BJP government is willing to go even further by employing its air force, also outside of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.³ Thus, it might be difficult for the BJP to abstain from using force in the event of renewed tensions with Pakistan in the future.

With regard to the smaller neighbours in South Asia, the BJP government has had limited success. At the start of Modi's tenure, there was widespread fear in India regarding the significant inroads China made in Sri Lanka. This culminated as the two countries signed an agreement concerning the lease of the port of Hambantota to China for 99 years.⁴ India was worried that this would enable China to establish a stronger presence in the Indian Ocean. To some extent, relations with Sri Lanka have improved. This is partly due to increased skepticism regarding the long-term consequences of Sri Lanka's debt to China. Moreover, Chinese initiatives have not created more jobs for the population in Sri Lanka. This has opened the door to other external actors, including India and Japan. In fact, India has on several occasions tried to convey a contrast to China by stating that all of its investments abroad are to be accompanied by responsible debt arrangements.⁵

Modi has received a lot of domestic critique for his dealings with Nepal. This is mainly due to Indian attempts to interfere in Nepal's constitution-writing process in 2015-16. Nepal refused to comply with Indian demands, which again led to an official Indian blockade of Nepal which lasted for several months.⁶ The blockade again opened the door for China, and in the following months China and Nepal signed several agreements on infrastructural development, security cooperation and also agreed to conduct a joint military exercise.⁷ This development created large headlines in New Delhi, as India feared that China was in the process of getting the upper hand in Nepal – a country that has traditionally been firmly placed within India's security orbit. So far, there is little that suggests that China has overtaken India's prominent position in Nepal. To a certain extent,

the relationship between India and Nepal has improved since 2016, but it has not been fully restored.

When it comes to improving relations with neighbouring countries, Bangladesh is the only positive example. These improvements date back to 2008, but they have intensified significantly during Modi's reign. India and Bangladesh have settled their border disputes, increased bilateral trade and expanded their security cooperation – especially at sea.⁸ This development, however, has not taken place at the expense of China's influence in Bangladesh. To the contrary, Bangladesh and China established a strategic partnership in 2016 and as much as 20 percent of China's arms exports go to Bangladesh. Moreover, Bangladesh is fully committed to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which also includes the construction of ports close to India's border.⁹

To conclude, Modi's neighbourhood first policy has not contributed to improving India's standing in the South Asian region. China has continued to make significant inroads into India's immediate neighbourhood, and India is still perceived as dominant and somewhat arrogant by its smaller neighbours. Thus, in this respect there are high degrees of continuity between Modi's BJP and previous governments.

ACT EAST

A second major priority of the Modi government is Act East. This line of policy refers to Indian aims to upgrade its relations with the ASEAN¹⁰ powers and with East Asia, particularly with Japan. This policy was not an invention of the BJP government. It was initiated in the early 1990s, and has been adhered to by every government since then – under the name "Look East". What Modi wanted to convey was that the time had come for a more proactive approach that would not only include improved economic relations but also security cooperation.¹¹ To some extent, Modi has been able to facilitate such cooperation. He has placed great emphasis on deepening the partnership with Japan. In 2016, India and Japan signed two important deals: *Security Measures for Protection of Classified*

*Military Information and Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology.*¹² This signals a significant deepening of the partnership between India and Japan, which go beyond the level of ministerial dialogue mechanisms established under the previous Congress-led government. Moreover, the BJP government has prioritized naval cooperation in the Bay of Bengal, particularly through the BIMSTEC-forum – which consists of the littoral states to the Bay of Bengal.¹³ Thus, Act East has been a moderate success. India has steadily improved its economic ties with the ASEAN countries, and its trade with South East Asia is now much larger than within the South Asian region.¹⁴ One might argue that this development would have taken place under any Indian government. Perhaps that is true, and India's engagement with South East Asia and Japan will probably continue to expand regardless of the outcome of the election. However, it is also fair to say that the energy Modi has put into the Act East policy is a probable reason for its success in recent years. A possible consequence of India's security cooperation with Japan and the United States is that it might affect India's relations with ASEAN negatively. The ASEAN powers are key supporters of a multipolar order and fear the emergence of great power rivalry between China and the United States in the region.

INDIA'S APPROACH TO ALIGNMENTS

When Modi and the BJP assumed power in 2014, there was much uncertainty concerning India's role in a changing Asian security setup. Some of this uncertainty was due to the way in which the BJP referred to the urgent need to “seek for new allies” in its election manifesto.¹⁵ Moreover, when Modi chose not to participate in the annual meeting of the non-aligned movement in 2015, there was much speculation in Indian media whether India was on the brink of deviating from its official policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy.¹⁶ These speculations intensified as India deepened its security cooperation with both Japan and the United States. In 2015, Japan became a regular

participant of the Indo-US naval rehearsals – known as the Malabar exercise – and in 2018, India and the US signed several important agreements concerning technology and intelligence sharing.¹⁷ Moreover, in the autumn of 2017, rumours that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) had been revived gained traction.¹⁸ The Quad group consists of the United States, Japan, India and Australia and is generally considered to be directed against Chinese expansion in Asia. However, the story did not end there. In the spring of 2018 Modi visited China, and only days after the meeting India announced that it would not allow Australia to participate in the Malabar exercise, which is closely associated with the Quad. Furthermore, Modi also stated that India was fully committed to its policy of strategic autonomy and he warned against great power rivalry between China and the USA in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹

Did Modi's behaviour reflect incoherence with regard to India's foreign policy? Not necessarily. As the strategic analyst, Ian Hall, has pointed out, it rather reflects what appears to be the consensus in Indian strategic thinking. Since the early 2000s, Hall argues, India has been fully committed to multilateralism.²⁰ Security cooperation with the United States and Japan was in fact initiated under the previous Congress-led government. Although this cooperation has been intensified under Modi, it does not represent a deviation. India does not only seek cooperation with Japan and the United States. Throughout the last decade, India has joined the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and was a founding member of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Thus, security cooperation with Japan and the United States as well as continued engagement with China and the ASEAN powers represent the most probable future course of India regardless of which party that emerges victorious in May. There might be some differences concerning the balance point between security needs on the one hand and economic considerations on the other, but the Congress Party and the BJP seem to concur when it comes to the main course. There is, however, one complica-

ting factor. Did India's cold shoulder to the Quad reflect the strategic outlook of the BJP government or was this move temporary and due to pragmatic considerations alone? Modi is well aware that the voters have not forgotten his promises of significant economic growth and job creation. Moreover, he is also well aware that these promises would be impossible to fulfil if India was to fall out with China – its main trading partner – one year before the elections. Thus, if Modi gets a second term, the Quad, and with it also the question of Indian alignments, may very well resurface again.

IDEOLOGICAL REVIVAL?

During the last year, the BJP has been under considerable pressure. The government has not delivered as promised with regard to job creation, nor with many of its highly promoted economic initiatives. So, how will these broken promises influence the BJP in the election campaign? One possibility is that it might resort to religious polarization in order to secure more Hindu votes, as it has often done before. Such polarization might affect India's bilateral relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh negatively. Most analysts seem to concur that the BJP will lose the majority, although it is still likely to become India's largest party. Thus, the BJP will have to rely on the support from alliance partners in order to stay in power. This may have a moderating effect on the party. However, the reverse outcome is in fact also a possibility. Since the BJP was founded in 1980, there has been one constant factor throughout its history: when the party experiences setbacks – the larger Hindu nationalist movement interferes with demands of a revival of Hindu nationalist ideology.²¹ The BJP does not merely constitute a political party with an organization connected to it. The BJP is rather to be understood as the political wing of the larger Hindu nationalism movement, which revolves around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). No leader in the BJP has been appointed without the support of the RSS and no major decision is taken without the consent of RSS leaders.²² If the BJP gets a se-

cond term, it is indeed possible that the party will pursue a more ideological agenda. What would then be the consequences with regard to Indian foreign and security policy?

When it comes to foreign policy, the RSS is mostly concerned with Pakistan and China. It views the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 as fundamentally illegitimate and rather promotes the idea of Akhand Bharat – greater and undivided India.²³ There is little that suggests that the RSS actually aims to unmake the partition and include Pakistan in the Indian state. However, the movement clearly advocates that India ought to apply more aggressive measures and teach Pakistan a lesson.²⁴ Moreover, the RSS views China as an imperialist power that seeks to undermine India in every way, partly by supporting secessionist movements in India. The RSS also holds that China's claim to Tibet is illegitimate and it demands that all territory acquired by China after the war in 1962 has to be returned to India.²⁵ Furthermore, the RSS has passed several resolutions regarding how India should respond to the threat from China. These resolutions include to upgrade and to modernize the armed forces, to establish civil militias in border areas and to oppose China more aggressively in international institutions.²⁶ It needs to be added that since the RSS is a civil organization it does not need to seek approval from Indian voters or to consider how its views are perceived by potential alliance partners in India or by the international community. Moreover, Modi's five-year tenure suggests that he is primarily a pragmatist. He is, however, also a lifelong member of the RSS.

Thus, to conclude, with regard to Indian foreign and security policy there are small, yet important differences between India's two largest parties – the Congress Party and the BJP. These differences are perhaps most notable with regard to how to respond to cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, the pace of India's engagements with South East Asia and Japan, and India's commitment to strategic autonomy. Moreover, there are some uncertainties as to which version of the BJP that may emerge victorious after the elections. If the views

promoted by the RSS become more influential, one might expect sharper tensions with both Pakistan and China, and probably also a significant expansion of security cooperation with Japan and the United States.

NOTER:

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Publisher: Kjell Inge Bjerga

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