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India's Foreign Policy under BJP: Pragmatism and Proactive Diplomacy?

By Manaswini Ramkumar

Synopsis

Despite the party's Hindu-tinged nationalistic zeal, the BJP's election manifesto emphasises pragmatism and proactive diplomacy in India's external relations. The new government needs to translate its foreign policy aims effectively to mend and renew relations with the US, Russia and the immediate neighbourhood.

Commentary

INDIA HAS pronounced the Bharatiya Janata Party leader Narendra Modi as its next prime minister. In a landslide victory, the BJP and its coalition partners have swept 316 out of 543 seats in the upper house of Parliament (Lok Sabha), securing a parliamentary majority. What this means is that the incoming prime minister Modi will hold the most decisive mandate to govern the country - a feat unheard of in the last 30 years.

Modi's campaign speeches only provide vague glimpses of his vision for the country's foreign policy; however, the BJP's election manifesto alluded to the need for a reorientation of India's foreign policy goals, to create a 'self-reliant and self-confident' India. Despite the party's Hindu-tinged nationalistic fervour it emphasises the twin aspirations of pragmatism and proactive diplomacy, in mending ties and renewing relations with key partners and within the neighborhood.

BJP's goals: Soft power enhancement

While lamenting the lack of harnessing India's soft power potential, the manifesto outlines the BJP's goal of using India's spiritual and cultural traditions to inform the country's foreign policy priorities. According to the BJP, India's cultural heritage has bequeathed it principles of harmony and equity that will guide the country. India's overtures of partnership and alliances will be based on mutual interest alignments, as opposed to the current government's one-size-fits-all universal behaviour of nonalignment.

The manifesto talks about enhancing India's soft power by strengthening ties with multilateral institutions like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN and by increasing the country's engagement in global fora like the G20, BRICs, the India-Brazil South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). To realise these goals, the BJP has pledged to revamp and expand India's foreign policy establishment that is currently woefully understaffed. Approximately 900 diplomats operating in 162 embassies and consulates represent the second most populous country in the world. For a nation vying for increased international clout, India's diplomatic strength is closer to tiny Singapore than it is to

its BRIC counterparts.

Weak representation at international institutions has also given the country a reputation of being difficult in negotiations as a cover for the lack of time and resources in its diplomatic corps. The manifesto accuses the outgoing Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government of failing to build enduring relationships with allies and partners and creating a perception of an India that is floundering on the world stage. The BJP will inherit a country that has wintry relations with the United States, is silent on Russia's current standoff with Ukraine, and is confused in its dealings with neighbours.

India's juggernaut relations: US and Russia

India's relationship with the US peaked in 2005 when the two countries signed a deal for civil nuclear cooperation and Washington designated India as a strategic partner. However, America's generous overtures towards Pakistan and India's perception of the Obama administration's mishandling of the Taliban insurgency have lent to the country's general suspicion towards the US. The strain in the relationship became even more apparent when India became incensed with the US for humiliating its deputy consul Devyani Khobragade following a domestic labour dispute.

Although the BJP has not explicitly mentioned resetting India's relationship with the US in its manifesto, it does seek to utilise its vast diaspora as a reservoir for articulating the country's interests and affairs globally. Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) account for approximately three million or one percent of the American population, with the Indian American community being well-represented in the field of politics, medicine and higher education. The BJP can engage in proactive diplomacy by leveraging on the Indian diaspora's active involvement in American political life.

Unlike the frosty relationship with the US, India and Russia have remained staunch allies since the country's independence 66 years ago. Indo-Russian amity and cooperation covers a vast array of issues ranging from joint military equipment development programmes, oil and gas projects, infrastructural development, to counterterrorism cooperation. Despite international condemnation, India's restraint position on Russia's actions towards Ukraine and refusal to support unilateral measures against the Russian government have met with Russian approval and gratitude.

A BJP-led government will continue to enhance and deepen relations with Russia, particularly in the realm of defence production as the manifesto emphasises India's aspiration to become self-reliant in weapons production. Russia's traditional help in developing the Indian defence industry will be encouraged further.

India's immediate neighbourly relations: Pakistan and Nepal

Pakistan's successful elections last year brought a renewed sense of hope to the stalled and fractured India-Pakistan relationship. While Pakistan is traditionally wary of having a Hindu-nationalist party at the helm of government, it was under the BJP's previous tenure in the central government that India-Pakistan relations moved significantly forward with three peace initiatives – 'bus diplomacy' in 1999, the Agra summit in 2001 and the Islamabad summit in 2004.

Relations thereafter took a turn for the worse as a result of terrorist attacks on Mumbai and other Indian metropolises in the last decade. However, the BJP's election manifesto emphasises the need to pursue friendly relations in India's immediate neighbourhood, with a view to rebranding India through increased trade and technology. In a display of policy pragmatism, the BJP has wedded the quest for political stability, progress and peace in South Asia to India's growth and development, creating the possibility of constructive engagement with its hostile neighbour through economic linkages.

While the Indo-Pak relationship is tense, India and Nepal share a dynamic relationship with crests and troughs. Nepal was on the path of transforming from a Hindu monarchy to a secular democracy during the BJP's national rule a decade ago. Scholars are wary that the party's discomfort with the decade-old transformation might make a BJP-led India seek to rewind the clock by supporting Nepal's royal elite against the nascent democratic government. India, however, will strive towards strengthening relations with Nepal - in light of the latter's increasing partnership with China - by leveraging on its soft power potential through a shared historical and cultural legacy with its Hindu majority neighbour.

Now that the BJP is in power, the party has, in sum, to tone down its zealous Hindu-nationalistic rhetoric and base its foreign policy initiatives on pragmatism and proactive diplomacy so as to reassure allies and countries in the neighbourhood.

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