

# ISAS Insights

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## India's New Neighbourhood-Test

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### *Abstract*

*India's political landscape is likely to be dominated by a new leader, Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in ways that the international community is yet to decipher. For now, as Mr Modi assumes the mantle of Prime Minister after a landslide electoral triumph, India's neighbours might look out for signs whether he would pursue a **Hindutva** agenda (centred on the 'supremacy' of the country's Hindu-majority) contrary to the policy-priorities he articulated during the recent poll campaign. India's neighbours are also likely to watch whether he will implement the BJP's pledge to "revise and update" India's nuclear security doctrine and make it more 'credible' and 'practical'. However, Mr Modi's leadership credentials in the macro-economic domain of an Indian province, and the gradual emergence*

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*of provinces as stakeholders in the country's foreign policy, can also become factors in his diplomacy in India's neighbourhood and beyond.*

## **Introduction**

Greetings and good wishes that India's new Prime Minister-designate Narendra Modi has received from countries far and wide – the United States, China, and Pakistan, in particular – certainly conceal the challenges that he will face in foreign policy. Prior to his landslide electoral triumph on 16 May 2014 as a leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and during his hectic campaign earlier, Mr Modi's image in many circles in as well as outside India was stereotyped. He was often portrayed as a polarising leader with a singular 'commitment' to uphold the political rights and economic interests of secular India's Hindu-majority alone. This 'commitment' was seen to eclipse every other aspect of a long governance-agenda, which he himself had in mind for the world's second-most populous country, which was now struggling to sustain itself as an emerging economy on the global stage.

Unsurprisingly, as he criss-crossed the campaign trail, his party's poll-time slogan of 'One India, Excellent India' was hardly noticed outside India. Such international attention as he received as the prime ministerial candidate was almost divided between his pro-foreign-investment credentials and his suspected political trait of alienating India's huge Muslim minority. In fact, a dominant talking point in the international circles was the fact that the US was unwilling to grant him a visa on account of his alleged negative attitude towards the Muslims in India.

## **Obama 'Recognises' Modi**

Now, the US, in a neat diplomatic U-turn, has lost not a moment to make the new Indian leader feel that he will be an honoured guest in America. As soon as the BJP's "success in India's historic election" became clear, US President Barack Obama telephoned Mr Modi to congratulate him and to offer him an instant American visa as it were. The US President, according to the White House, "invited Narendra Modi to visit Washington at a mutually agreeable time to further strengthen our [US-India] bilateral relationship". The crisp White House statement, hardly hiding the reason for this U-turn, emphasised that Mr Obama "looks forward to working closely with Mr. Modi to fulfill the extraordinary promise of the U.S.-India

Strategic Partnership”. It was further noted that the two leaders “agreed to continue expanding and deepening the wide-ranging cooperation between our two democracies”,<sup>2</sup> i.e. the US and India, situated continents apart.

The strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi has in recent years become a potential factor that might help India in its efforts to equalise its asymmetric but increasingly-vibrant equation with neighbouring China. In another strand of India’s neighbourhood diplomacy, China’s enduring “all-weather friendship” with Pakistan is a factor that New Delhi has not yet come to terms with. In this matrix, China’s comments on Mr Modi’s political ascendance as India’s next Prime Minister merit attention for their nuanced message.

Congratulating the BJP, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying has noted as follows: “China is willing to join hands with the new government of India to maintain high-level exchanges, deepen exchanges and cooperation in various fields and bring the Strategic Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity between China and India to a new height”.<sup>3</sup> The prospective celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the enunciation of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, as well as the observance of 2014 as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between China and India, has been described by the Chinese Spokesperson as milestones that would herald “new opportunities” in Sino-Indian ties, going forward.

### **China’s Nuanced Message to Modi**

Now, Beijing knows full well that Mr Modi, while campaigning, was reported to have warned China to keep off India’s border-state of Arunachal Pradesh, which the Chinese view as their ‘southern Tibet’. The warning impinged on the Chinese claim to that area, but Beijing’s measured reaction to that warning did not provoke any further comments from Mr Modi on that sensitive issue during the remainder of the Indian poll campaign. Beijing knows full well, too, that it was during a previous BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee’s tenure that India comprehensively recognised the Tibet Autonomous Region as an integral part of the People’s Republic of China. In the process, China acknowledged, in a calibrated fashion, Sikkim’s status as a part of India. Not only that. It was during Mr Vajpayee’s tenure that China and India had

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<sup>2</sup> The White House (United States of America), ‘Readout of the President’s Call with Prime Ministerial Candidate Narendra Modi of India’, 2014-05-16, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on India’s General Election’, 2014/05/18, [www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn)

agreed to appoint Special Representatives to evolve a “framework solution” so that the long-standing Sino-Indian boundary dispute could be settled from a “political perspective”. The mechanism of Special Representatives has remained on course to this day. Viewed in this perspective, the BJP and China are no strangers to each other.

However, in a subtle message to Mr Modi now, the Chinese Spokesperson, while congratulating the new Indian leader, has drawn attention to a couple of significant statements that India’s outgoing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress had made. These statements, as paraphrased by Beijing and now regarded by it as reflecting some kind of new-normal in Sino-Indian public diplomacy, are: “China and India are cooperative partners rather than competitors”<sup>4</sup> and “the world has enough room to accommodate the common development of both China and India”.<sup>5</sup> By recalling in this fashion some comments made by Dr Singh, who is said to have received “considerable respect from the Chinese people”, China has now sent a nuanced message to Mr Modi to follow suit.

### **India’s Nuclear Doctrine and China**

Such a nuanced message to Mr Modi from the Chinese side acquires unusual importance in the context of the BJP’s poll-time pledge to “revise and update” India’s nuclear security doctrine. The BJP’s pledge of this magnitude is open to different interpretations, one of which is that Mr Modi might seek to renounce India’s dual commitments to (1) the No-First-Use of nuclear weapons (NFU) and (2) a voluntary and unilateral moratorium on nuclear-weapon tests. Any such departure from India’s current nuclear security doctrine can upset the existing strategic stability in the Sino-Indian equation and also produce a new dynamic in India-Pakistan relations. Like India but unlike Pakistan, India’s other neighbour in this triangular geopolitical web, China too has a proclaimed policy of NFU.

Some “realists” tend to argue that New Delhi’s NFU pledge has been meaningless *ab initio* with reference to China, because India, according to these experts, has not yet developed a credible second-strike capability, i.e. the ability to launch a retaliatory nuclear attack after absorbing the first-nuclear-strike from an adversary. The “realists” further argue that China, too, is in a similarly weak position with reference to the US. While NFU pledges are not really

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

taken seriously by the larger international community, the question of higher-tech nuclear-weapon testing can add to the salience of NFU commitments.

On the salience of NFU in the current Sino-Indian equation, Yao Yunzhu, a Chinese Major General and a Senior Researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences, makes a pertinent point as follows: “China and India have based their strategic stability on NFU doctrine, which the Indian government declared after its tests of nuclear weapons [in 1998]. . . . . This NFU-based strategic stability is much more reliable than one based on asymmetric deterrence and mutual vulnerability”<sup>6</sup> which define the US-China nuclear equation.

As a logical corollary, Dr Yao emphasises the centrality of NFU in the Sino-Indian nuclear equation and argues that India’s quest for ballistic missile development (BMD) could upset the current NFU-based strategic stability in the relations between Beijing and New Delhi. Dr Yao’s argument is as follows: “Apart from Pakistan, China is more often than not cited as a factor behind India’s BMD program. Both China and India have been securely locked in a relation of mutual deterrence, and if both adhere to NFU doctrine, the nuclear threshold should be safely high. Yet, missile defense capabilities are destabilizing in a mutual deterrence situation”.<sup>7</sup> The implicit point in this non-official Chinese analysis, which is relevant to the now-emerging Indian political context, is that India’s decisions, if any, to annul its NFU pledge and nuclear-test-moratorium might only ruin the existing strategic stability in the Beijing-New Delhi equation.

### **Indo-Pak Nuclear Dilemma**

As for Islamabad, it does not adhere to the NFU doctrine at all. However, a change, if any, in India’s nuclear posture, with reference to this doctrine, will sweep away an existing but extremely-slim chance of a change in Pakistani stance. The really-slim chance is that the Pakistanis could at some stage in the future adopt the NFU principle as a strategic stabiliser in their relations with India. The extremely-slim chance is based on a subtle reasoning which is as follows. Pakistan wants to match India, step for step, in the domain of nuclear-arms build-up. So, if Pakistan does succeed in this endeavour, with or without external help, it will then

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<sup>6</sup> Lora Saalman, Editor & Translator, *The China-India Nuclear Crossroads*, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., 2012, p. 71

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 74

be a matter of a subtle insight that a Pakistani NFU pledge (unthinkable now), coupled with India's (current) NFU doctrine, could serve as a strategic stabiliser in the relations between these two neighbours. However, a change, if any, in India's nuclear posture could induce Pakistan to act in ways that might accentuate a particularly-deep concern which the international community has about Islamabad in this domain.

In an essentially empathetic study of Pakistan's nuclear-arms-related compulsions, Mark Fitzpatrick has highlighted this international concern. Writing well before the latest electoral result in India, he noted that Pakistan's "lowering of the threshold for nuclear use is the gravest concern" in the world at large. The relevant argument, in his view, is that Islamabad's "policy most at odds with what is commonly seen as responsible nuclear behaviour is Pakistan's declared doctrine of nuclear use in response to a conventional [Indian] military incursion that does not [however] threaten the integrity of the [Pakistani] state".<sup>8</sup>

While the nuclear issue does figure prominently in New Delhi's foreign-policy calculus with regard to both China and Pakistan, India's economic ties with these two neighbours, if managed imaginatively, can have a more positive salience.

With reference to Pakistan, in particular, a more immediate issue in the context of Mr Modi's political ascendance is the path he might chart to earn and sustain the trust of India's huge Muslim-minority. In this respect, the controversial issue of a uniform civil code for the diverse communities in India is essentially its domestic affair. However, Pakistan might evince more than normative interest in this Indian internal matter. The reason is quite obvious: Pakistan continues to see itself as an informal standard-bearer of the 'exclusive' identity of all Muslims across South Asia.

### **'External' Dimension of India's Article 370**

A more important aspect of India's internal affairs, i.e. the special constitutional status of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, may, however, raise greater concerns in Pakistan, should Mr Modi seek to alter or abrogate this status. It is a long-standing political plank of Mr Modi's BJP that the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of India's Constitution must be annulled.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, *Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers*, published by Routledge for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, March 2014, p. 160

The BJP, in its recent poll-manifesto, said that the party “reiterates its stand on the Article 370, and will discuss this with all stakeholders and remains committed to the abrogation of this Article”. The party’s objective is that Jammu and Kashmir could then be treated at par with all other Indian states, instead of being retained *ad infinitum* as a no-go area for settlement by Indian citizens from outside that state. This is just one aspect of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, as enshrined in India’s Constitution in line with the political circumstances of the partition of British India into two independent dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Mr Modi’s BJP, despite its latest electoral landslide, will not enjoy in India’s Parliament the kind of majority that will be required to alter or abrogate the special status of Jammu and Kashmir through a constitutional amendment. However, political observers expect Mr Modi’s BJP to woo the other political parties for this purpose if and when he decides to press ahead on this front during his five-year term beginning anytime now.

However, Mr Modi might have to reckon with a major judicial ruling of the 1960s-vintage, even if he manages to secure parliamentary consensus for altering or abrogating the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. This constitutional ruling, by and under India’s then-Chief Justice K Subba Rao, forbade the abrogation of the “basic structure” of the Indian Constitution through the modality of a constitutional amendment in parliament. It is a self-evident argument that an abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir can be seen as a step towards changing the “basic structure” of the Indian Constitution.

Beyond this purely domestic aspect of India’s politics lies the arguably ‘legitimate’ interest in Pakistan in the issues concerning Jammu and Kashmir. So, Pakistan can be expected to raise alarm in the event of a move, if at all, by Mr Modi to alter or abrogate the special status of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Islamabad’s extra-territorial interest of this magnitude can be traced not only to the politics of Partition in 1947 but also to the 1972 Shimla Agreement between India and Pakistan. In the Shimla Accord, India committed itself to “discuss” with Pakistan “the modalities and arrangements” for durable peace and normalisation of relations. It was specified that the process would include discussion on the “question” of “a final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir” issue.

In this complex milieu of politics, security, and diplomacy, the challenge that Mr Modi might face in his neighbourhood diplomacy, with particular reference to either Pakistan or China, is: How best can India evolve a judicious mix of political and economic bargains? Such bargains

may have to be specific to each country despite the formidable Sino-Pak friendship. Much will depend on Mr Modi's ability to make India an attractive economic partner for both China and Pakistan.

## **Stakeholders in India's Foreign Policy**

As a Muslim-majority country in India's neighbourhood, Bangladesh (like Pakistan) may at first be wary of Mr Modi's political evolution as Prime Minister. During the recent electoral campaign in India, he answered his critics by not projecting himself as a passionate shining knight of *Hindutva* politics, i.e. politics of 'the supremacy of the Hindu-majority' in India's public affairs. However, in the initial stages of his prime ministerial rule now, his Indian and foreign critics might look for signs of any 'hidden agenda' of *Hindutva* in his politics and diplomacy. In dealing with Bangladesh, he will also need to reckon with the political sensitivities in India's border-state of West Bengal. This Indian province did not favour his party, and instead stayed with Ms Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress.

Similarly, in dealing with Sri Lanka, especially over the issue of the rights of Sri Lankan Tamil minority, Mr Modi will have to reckon with the political sensitivities in the Indian border-province of Tamil Nadu. This Indian state, too, did not favour his party, and instead stayed firmly with Ms J Jayalalithaa's local party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Here, the states being cited as possible stakeholders in India's foreign policy constitute an illustrative, not exhaustive, list.

On the positive side of India's provinces becoming stakeholders in its foreign policy, Mr Modi knows full well that his home-state of Gujarat has gained international recognition as a foreign-investor-friendly territory with impressive credentials in macroeconomic growth. This Indian state has firmly backed Mr Modi's BJP in the latest national general election.

Similarly, the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where Mr Modi's poll-ally, Mr Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party has won at the provincial and national levels now, is internationally known as an emerging powerhouse of information technology (IT). Interestingly, both Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh have already been identified by US firms for the establishment of major nuclear power plants, one in each of these two states. However, progress on this front has been glacially slow because of America's general displeasure with India's civil nuclear liability law that stipulates, among other subjects, terms of compensation in the wake of accidents, if any, at nuclear power plants. In these circumstances Mr Obama's



congratulatory telephone call to Mr Modi is a gesture that the new Indian leader could capitalise on for a serious dialogue.

It stands to reason that Mr Modi might explore the positives of Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in his foreign-policy dealings with the US. He can also usefully consider promoting strong economic linkages between the two Punjab provinces, situated on either side of the India-Pakistan border, as a potentially positive factor in bringing the two neighbouring countries together. Of course, Islamabad too will have to think alike.

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