

Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping: Different yet Same?

Avinash Godbole

Avinash Godbole is Research Assistant at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

May 13, 2015



Summary

Personalities matter. They matter particularly in the making and execution of foreign policy. And they matter even more when foreign policy becomes an extension of domestic policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been compared to a number of present and former foreign leaders ever since he came to power in the summer of 2014. His leadership in helping to attain unprecedented electoral results fuelled the debate on his personality further and led to numerous such comparisons. The one comparison that caught some attention was with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, not only for their nationalist campaigns but also for the bonhomie they already enjoyed. This Issue Brief argues, however, that there are more than a few reasons why Narendra Modi may be more similar to Chinese President Xi Jinping than to anyone else.

Personalities matter. They matter particularly in the making and execution of foreign policy. And they matter even more when foreign policy becomes an extension of domestic policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been compared to a number of present and former foreign leaders ever since he came to power in the summer of 2014. His leadership in helping to attain unprecedented electoral results fuelled the debate on his personality further and led to numerous such comparisons. The one comparison that caught some attention was with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, not only for their nationalist campaigns but also for the bonhomie they already enjoyed. This Issue Brief argues, however, that there are more than a few reasons why Narendra Modi may be more similar to Chinese President Xi Jinping than to anyone else.

The simplest similarity between Xi and Modi is the similar sort of leaders who immediately preceded them at the helm of their respective countries. It is because their immediate predecessors were less vocal and probably less in control that makes Modi and Xi appear more vocal, effective and charismatic.¹ This comparison is useful also from another point of view. In all likelihood, Xi will remain in power for at least eight more years. For his part, Modi has already sought two terms as Prime Minister (ten years) during his post-victory speech. If that transpires, then these two leaders will play a decisive role in shaping their respective country's future and in the process have a significant impact upon the course of India-China bilateral relations.

Among other more substantial similarities, the first is the manner in which each scaled the political hierarchy to reach the apex. The second is popular nationalism, which has seen a steady revival in both countries and is likely to play a guiding role for both these leaders. The third is the sheer amount of power at the top that the two leaders enjoy. The fourth is the similar domestic agendas they both pursue and the circumstances in which they are doing so. And finally, there is the case of their overlapping foreign policies that focus on neighbourhoods and a vocal approach to engagements.

Political Careers

One big similarity between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which the two leaders represent, is that both are cadre-based hierarchical organisations in which ideology and leadership matter the most.² Modi's political career

¹ While Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was criticised for his silence, President Hu Jintao was seen as a more inward and quiet leader who stuck to written scripts in his speeches and had little interaction with the people.

² Recently, the BJP undertook a nationwide campaign aimed at membership enrolment during which it reportedly overtook the CPC to become the world's largest political party. For more see Sahar Khan (2015), "BJP's Membership Drive attracts 7.2 Crore Members", *Daily Mail*, 17 March 2015, Accessed 5 May 2015, URL: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2997799/BJP-s-membership-drive-attracts-7-2-crore-members.html>

began with his association with the RSS. His tenure as a *Pracharak*, a career activist, gave him glimpses into the country's social fabric. For his part, Xi was one of the millions of victims of the Cultural Revolution and had the opportunity to see rural China rather closely when he was sent to Yanchuan County in Shaanxi.³ At that time, Xi had lost the protection of a princely family as his father Xi Zhongxun was jailed. There is a perception that Xi Jinping's generation, which lost the most productive days of its youth during the chaos unleashed by the Cultural Revolution, is more likely to value stability and predictability at the top. On the other hand, Modi's humbleness and detached demeanour is attributed to his days as a grassroots activist. Xi and Modi's experiences at the grassroots should lend greater weight to their policy choices.

Both also had a similar rise to the top; Narendra Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat before coming to Delhi and Xi Jinping was Party Secretary in Zhejiang Province. Both also emerged as clean administrators and tough task masters against corruption. While the 'Gujarat Model' propelled Modi to the national leadership, Xi's clean image and sustained anti-corruption action in Zhejiang brought him into the national spotlight and earned him the top post in Shanghai in 2007. It is noteworthy that even Modi took charge of Gujarat after the factionalism in that state had threatened to destabilise the government.

Nationalism

The revival of popular nationalism is a common thread between contemporary India and China. While nationalism per se is not new to these two countries, in its present form, nationalism is being used as a legitimising and uniting force. One important question in looking at nationalism in both countries is with reference to their bilateral relations; does popular nationalism make it difficult to approach the questions of territorial dispute and sovereignty? And what would be the balance of nationalism vis-à-vis pragmatism in critical situations? Within the two countries, the notion of nationalism is also closely related to the debate on majority and majoritarianism. Therefore, the two leaders also have to ensure a fine balancing on this issue.

Modi represents the BJP, which is a right of centre political party. In fact, the BJP's rise has been based on its adaptation of various forms of nationalism ranging from cultural nationalism in the early days to a militant form of religious nationalism in the early 1990s and economic nationalism since 1998. In several of his speeches before becoming Prime Minister, Modi alluded to himself being a Hindu nationalist on account of being born a

³ Simon Denyer, "Twin Historic Traumas shape Xi Jinping's China Presidency", *Washington Post*, 2 March 2015, Accessed 4 May 2015, URL: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/twin-historical-traumas-shape-xi-jinpings-china-presidency/2015/03/02/b4074516-b2f0-11e4-bf39-5560f3918d4b_story.html?postshare=9281425405018644

Hindu and being a nationalist. He even gave an emotionally charged first speech in the Central Hall of Parliament before the newly elected members of the National Democratic Alliance, where he termed his ascendance to power only as an opportunity to serve the motherland. He continues to refer to India as *bharatmata* and sees the tenure of his predecessor as a lost decade in the modern Indian economic story. This language is a departure from India's history of centrist political discourse at the national level.

In the case of China, there is a perception that popular nationalism has filled the vacuum left by the decline of communism. A lot of present day achievements is seen through the prism of the correction of mistakes and declines in history. While there were other external drivers for Chinese nationalism, like the Belgrade bombing and the EP3 plane incident, internal drivers – such as the Beijing Olympics and China's impressive performance in topping the medals' tally as well as administrative measures like the grant of select permissions for people to hold protest marches against the Japanese Embassy in Beijing – have also played an important role in fanning nationalism. At the same time, Beijing has tended to look the other way at times as far as the spread of nationalist fervour is concerned. Xi Jinping has never shied away from nationalism himself. Xi and his colleagues did exactly that when they visited the exhibition titled "Road to Revival" in China's National Museum almost immediately after the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party from which his ideas of the *China Dream* that involves the concept of the *Great Chinese Rejuvenation* follow. These two ideas are the core drivers of Xi Jinping's style of governance, expression of a collective Chinese identity and the claim to China's rightful place in the international order as a new great power. Xi's China is no longer shy about showcasing its power and demanding its status as one of the Great Powers that has set course to become the biggest economy in the world within the next couple of decades. Xi Jinping has also used nationalism and anti-Westernism in his outreach to the less developed countries and increasing China's economic engagement with them. On the negative side, Xi's nationalist China is also perhaps impatient domestically as evidenced by responses to events in Xinjiang and Hong Kong that pose challenging questions to Chinese identity.

Political Power at the top

In India, Modi holds unprecedented power as Prime Minister especially when compared to his less vocal predecessor. Further, the fact that he superseded some of his party seniors to become the prime ministerial candidate also attests to his power. Modi has also been able to consolidate his influence within the BJP in the wake of the election of his right hand man, Amit Shah, as party president. In addition, the number of seats won by the BJP in the last general elections give Modi unprecedented power; the opposition's numbers in the Lok Sabha stand much reduced and the largest opposition party does not even have the numbers to claim the position of Leader of Opposition. In addition, Modi has abolished various cabinet committees and has empowered the bureaucracy, which is seen as symbolic of the centralisation of power in his hands. In contrast, the Manmohan Singh

government was seen as being crippled due to the dual power centre arrangement, wherein the party president was seen to be more influential than the prime minister himself. At the same time, it must be noted that in India's democratic structure, the two-house system at the centre limits the power of the government of the day. In the case of Modi's BJP-led government, its lack of numbers in the upper house limits its ability to push through its legislative agenda as seen from recent developments.

Like Modi, there is a perception that Xi also enjoys unprecedented power. In China, Xi heads the government, party and the Army. While Hu Jintao had to wait for two years after becoming President to become the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi became CMC chairman within two months of assuming the presidency. In addition, he heads the economic reforms commission, previously headed by the Premier, as well as the national security committee that he himself was instrumental in establishing. Xi has also been able to undertake a massive and unprecedented anti-corruption campaign that has already led to the fall of senior party and army leaders like Zhou Yongkang who once commanded the Interior Ministry, General Gu Junshan who was in charge of the logistics department of the PLA, and the late General Xu Caihou who was the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission.⁴ However, despite the fact that more than 12 top PLA officials and nearly 300 top government officials are under arrest or investigation, there is a widespread perception that corruption is more systemic and that Xi's campaign is aimed at removing one by one members of the Jiang Zemin faction. In fact, it has become a subject of whispers whether Jiang himself would become the next target of the anti-corruption drive. The fact that Xi is able to weed out the people seen to be belonging to the powerful Jiang faction within such a short span after assuming power attests to his power. It is noteworthy that two former Presidents, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, appealed to Xi Jinping to halt his anti-corruption campaign.⁵

⁴ Charges pressed against Zhou include "serious violations of party discipline, accepting large sums of bribes, disclosing party and state secrets and committing adultery with several women, as part of corrupt transactions." So far, about \$90 billion have been recovered from Zhou's family and friends. General Gu Junshan managed property development for the PLA and is alleged to have taken kickbacks in the form of property across China and Hong Kong in the name of friends and family. General Xu Caihou was being investigated for a promotion scandal within the PLA. For a comprehensive coverage on China's anti-corruption campaign see, <http://www.scmp.com/topics/xi-jinpings-anti-graft-campaign>.

⁵ Zachary Keck (2015), "China's Former Leaders tell Xi to halt Anti-Corruption Campaign", 4 April 2015, Accessed 1 May 2015, URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/chinas-former-leaders-tell-xi-to-halt-anti-corruption-campaign/>.

Similar Domestic Agendas

China has enjoyed high rates of economic growth since the beginning of the reforms and opening up. However, various cases of corruption and misuse of power by those in positions of authority as well as resistance to reforms at various levels have meant that the gains of economic growth are not spread evenly. In the next stage of development, China is seeking consumption- and innovation-led growth backed by investments. China in the recent past has also sought to take its growth across borders and aims to use initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)⁶ and the “One belt, One Road plan” to boost its western development strategy.⁷ China is seeking to do all this during an era of what it calls “the new normal”, that is an economic growth rate of about seven per cent. This is what will test the leadership of Xi Jinping as an efficient, no-nonsense man.

In India, Modi’s campaign was organised around the slogan of development with his own role as the Chief Minister of Gujarat serving as the example. At the same time, his campaign also highlighted India’s recent history of corruption at high levels coupled with the image of the government being an inefficient instrument for facilitating growth. Thus, Modi also carries the burden of fulfilling his multiple electoral promises of economic growth, efficient government and clean governance.

Thus, it is apparent that as leaders of large developing countries, both Xi and Modi have similar agendas of growth and both have anchored it in the historical context of their respective country’s rise and popular nationalism. Generating jobs and diversifying economic growth is a challenge that both India and China face today. While China faces the danger of the middle-income trap, India for its part could lose its demographic dividend if adequate empowerment opportunities are not made available within the next decade or so.

Foreign Affairs Priorities

Another important area where Modi and Xi’s actions and agendas overlap is in the field of foreign affairs, with both leaders assigning priority to neighbouring countries. India’s foreign relations under Modi have become more vocal and interactive, even if the larger policy framework remains the same. Modi’s first ever foreign visit as prime minister was

⁶ Jim Zarroli (2015), “New Asian Development Bank seen as Sign of China’s Growing Influence”, *NPR Research*, 16 April, Accessed 1 May 2015, URL: <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/16/400178364/finance-officials-to-discuss-asian-development-bank-at-spring-meetings>.

⁷ SCMP (2015), “‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative will define China’s role as World Leader”, 2 April 2015, Accessed 1 May 2015, URL: <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1753773/one-belt-one-road-initiative-will-define-chinas-role-world>.

to Bhutan; he has visited three of India's neighbouring states so far. Many firsts were achieved when he visited Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka – the first foreign leader to address Nepal's parliament, the first Indian leader to address the Sri Lankan parliament, and the first foreign leader to visit Jaffna since the beginning of insurgency there. During the SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014, Modi made a strong pitch for increasing regional integration – similar to Xi's foreign policy discussed below. Noting that “the future I dream for India is the future I wish for our entire region”, Modi made the case for shared prosperity through improved connectivity, trade, investments, assistance, and accessibility.⁸

Many of Modi's foreign visits have been perceived to have a China element: Bhutan's impending boundary settlement with China, Nepal's growing proximity to China, and Sri Lanka, which had only recently hosted the first visit by a Chinese President. Similarly, his visits to Seychelles and Mauritius had to do with protecting and extending India's national interests in the Indian Ocean region. Further, Modi's bonhomie with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was seen to be an indication of the emergent Asian order. In this context, Modi's speech in Japan where he contrasted contemporary *Vistaarvad* (expansionism) versus *Vikasvaad* (Developmentalism) in Asia raised many eyebrows.⁹ There is a perception that India under Modi is willing to lead in countering Chinese unilateralism in Asia.

Both President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang have also visited several national capitals in the Chinese neighbourhood, and they have recast China's foreign affairs to prioritise relations with neighbours.¹⁰ While relations with great powers was China's primary focus in the past, relations with neighbours have been put ahead in the new discourse. At the same time, China has also begun to use the discourse of shared prosperity and “promoting neighbourhood diplomacy and turning the neighbourhood areas into a community of common destiny” since November 2014.¹¹ China is acutely aware that the next stage of its economic growth will be propelled by greater economic engagement with the neighbourhood as Asia becomes the driver of the world economy. Xi has also shown a

⁸ Narendra Modi (2014), “Speech at the Kathmandu SAARC Summit”, 26 November 2014, Accessed 11 May 2015, URL: http://pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-speech-at-the-saarc-summit/

⁹ Bruce Einhorn (2014), “Visiting Japan, India's Modi pokes at China”, Bloomberg, 2 September 2014, Accessed 4 May 2015, URL: <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-09-02/visiting-japan-indias-modi-pokes-at-china>

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China (2014), “The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs was held in Beijing”, Full Report, 29 November 2014, Accessed 5 January 2015, URL:

¹¹ For a detailed discussion on this see, Avinash Godbole (2015), “China's Asia Strategy under President Xi Jinping”, *Strategic Analysis*, 39 (3): 298-302.

willingness to lead the emerging Asian order through revitalisation of near dormant regional organisations like the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).¹²

What all the above indicates is the ongoing transformation of Asian geopolitics as well as the emergence of an Asia-centric international order. There is a perception that a Sino-centric Asian order is already on the rise with the unveiling of the AIIB and the Maritime Silk Route. At the same time, there is also the perception that India is the other emerging pillar of the new Asian order. And it appears that Modi and Xi are likely to play a key role in shaping the emerging Asian architecture.

Conclusion

Xi and Modi are likely to remain at the helm for eight and nine years, respectively. One important domestic similarity that both enjoy is the optimism of the masses in both countries. There is a perception in both countries that the highest leadership has taken a course to guide the country in the right direction, which is what makes the burden of delivery even more important. This is also something that makes their meetings interesting; while they meet in Beijing in May 2015, the domestic demands of growth, investment, engagement should drive their mutual pragmatism.

The last time both India and China had ambitious and outspoken leaders was when Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Zedong ruled India and China, respectively. The clash of their understandings and perceptions led to the war of 1962, which has left a deep structural scar on India-China relations. In the present era marked by the centrality of the forces of globalisation, it needs to be seen whether Modi and Xi can evolve a common understanding on the challenges facing their respective countries as well as the Asian and international order at large.

¹² Xi Jinping (2014), "New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation", Speech at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, 21 May 2014, Accessed on 14 September 2014, URL: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml