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Is China Driving PM Modi's "Good Neighborly" Foreign Policy?

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After three decades of successive hung-parliaments and unstable coalition governments in India, the Narendra Modi-led Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) swept into power in May 2014 with a massive majority that has since raised hope and anticipation of transformation under his leadership. This change was partially the national response to a series of scandals and complete policy paralysis during the last five years. But Modi also worked hard to ensure that his "right-wing" Hindu image was adjusted to meet the demand of the times. He pushed his development agenda hard by personally addressing 5,827 political rallies and events during his eight-month-long election campaign, involving travelling across India's 31 provinces, and clocking over 300,000 kilometers.

Amongst the surprises of Modi's first year in office has been his hyperactive focus on foreign affairs, especially his attempt to reclaim India's "lost prestige" among its neighbors. As a Chief Minister of Gujrat for over a decade, haunted by his role in the 2002 Gujarat communal riots and denied visas by most countries in Europe and the United States, Modi was never expected to prioritize foreign policy. But his trips to nearly twenty nations in twelve months, and his hosting of several world leaders—including President Obama as chief guest for India's Republic Day celebrations—has certainly added to Modi's visibility as a rock star on the global political scene.

Beyond his use of holograms and Twitter to connect with his followers, this social media savvy, selfie-obsessed Modi clearly seems to enjoy his newfound international stature and has transformed the image of India's prime minister. Unlike his predecessors who focused on projecting statesmanlike elegance and a sense of history, his businesslike style has successfully sustained the high-octane hype. This excitement has also resulted in the BJP now claiming a membership of over 100 million, making it the largest political party on the planet, dwarfing China's Communist Party by over 15 million.

Indeed, China seems to have been Modi's other major preoccupation, since even before he took office. It was clearly visible in his campaign speeches. But his rhetoric soon turned to reality when he invited leaders of all neighboring countries for his swearing in ceremony, where he not just omitted China but invited Lobsang Sangay—head of Tibetan government-in-exile—resulting in strong demarches from Beijing. Talk of China's expansionism continued during his follow-up visits to the US and Japan, and saw Modi and Obama this January launching their *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region*, which deeply upset the Chinese.

But this anti-China rhetoric seemed to have disappeared before his recent China visit. In his interview to *Time* magazine he talked of both countries having "matured" and

Swaran Singh, Professor & Chair of the Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, explains that "China seems to have been Modi's other major preoccupation, since even before he took office."

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“learnt from history” and how not a single shot has been fired on their contested boundaries. Even the Rastriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) mouthpiece *Organizer* compared him to Buddha and Tagore and pinned hope on the Modi-Xi summit marking a new beginning. His China visit may not have obtained anything with regards to historical bilateral irritants—border issues, Pakistan, Tibet, the trade deficit—yet Modi managed to sign 45 agreements and MOUs and add \$30 billion more to the \$20 billion of slated (but as yet not implemented) investments that were promised during President Xi's visit to India last year.

China has surely been the trigger to Modi's engagements with other neighboring countries. His debut foreign visit to Bhutan, two visits to Nepal, followed up by visits to the island states of Sri Lanka, Seychelles, and Mauritius, as well as his impending visit to Bangladesh followed by visits to five Central Asian republics, all share the common factor of countering China's increasing influence in India's periphery. Indeed, Modi's recent visits to South Korea and Mongolia, especially his unusual gesture of extending a \$1 billion credit line to the rapidly growing Mongolian economy, were clearly signals to the Chinese leadership. Conversely, Modi has been silent on President Xi's favorite dream project of “One Belt One Road” and has expressed reservations on the Maritime Silk Road. Modi also did not respond to China's proposal to partner with India in deep sea mining in the Indian Ocean.

The greatest achievement of Modi's neighborhood policy has been his success in getting the Indian Parliament to finally approve the historic India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement of 1974. This is expected to prove a historic milestone for South Asian politics and history. Similarly, back-to-back visits by leaders have created a visible turn-around in India-Sri Lanka ties. Modi took personal interest in providing relief to earthquake victims in Nepal last month, when he also hosted new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani followed by a visit by former President Karzai. His “Act East” policy towards India's extended neighborhood took Modi to Myanmar, Australia, and Fiji, and saw him successfully engaging bilaterally and multilaterally with the ASEAN and G-20 leadership.

Several foreign policy challenges still exist for Modi. Pakistan remains the Achilles heel of Indian leadership, and Modi's Pakistan policy has been a roller-coaster ride confounding any logic. Also, Afghanistan has been cozying up to China and Pakistan, which could complicate things for New Delhi, which has invested over \$2 billion in Afghanistan for building access and goodwill. Modi has also been shy of taking sides in turmoil ridden domestic politics in the Maldives.

It is perhaps fair to compare Modi's first year foreign policy activity to what the BJP promised in its 2014 manifesto: to “fundamentally reboot and reorient foreign policy goals, content and process” and build ‘Brand India’ by foregrounding India's tradition, talent, tourism, trade, and technology.” Success in such a grand “reset” is neither possible nor expected, especially in the first year in office. Also, Modi's foreign policy so far remains nothing but a broad continuation of the old Nehruvian paradigm, though with an accelerated pace of visits, initiatives and promises, the outcomes of which will depend on how they are implemented.

No doubt, a certain Modi imprint is already visible in his diplomacy—where he brings in enormous personal agility and energy, uses technology, and aims to revive inter-societal cultural and religious links, and seeks a broad base for partnerships and decision making. His outreach to the Indian diaspora seems especially exciting. But PM Modi will have to follow this high-octane visibility with calm consensus building at home to ensure that foreign policy remains a grounded extension of domestic politics, not an escape from it.

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