

# ISAS Insights

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## **Indian Elections 2009: Foreign Policy Will Hardly Matter**

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### **Preface**

India will hold its 15<sup>th</sup> general elections from 16 April to 13 May 2009. The elections will take place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues will influence the elections. The exercise will be impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

As India moves into the election mode, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) is bringing out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the forthcoming elections. These will include, among others, the key national and regional parties, and their strategies, key political personalities, and the issues that are likely to have an impact on the elections.

ISAS had earlier prepared four papers, providing an overview of India's political parties; the role of the youth in India's elections; the economic backdrop to the general elections; and the major domestic issues that are likely to dominate the elections. The fifth paper in the series examines some of India's key foreign policy concerns and their likely impact on the forthcoming elections.

### **Introduction**

Elections in a country like India are seldom driven by foreign policy. The voters, concerned generally as they are with the bread and butter, and law and order issues, do not get mobilised by foreign policy dynamics and diplomatic nuances. Even major strategic achievements with global implications do not move ordinary electorates.

In 1974, for instance, Mrs Indira Gandhi's Congress Party lost a keenly-contested provincial election in Uttar Pradesh. This was after India's decisive victory over Pakistan in 1971 that gave birth to Bangladesh as a new, sovereign nation, and India's nuclear "implosion" in 1974. Both these impressive developments had taken place under the Congress governments and Mrs Gandhi's leadership.

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This is not to say that foreign policy issues that impinge directly on some of the Indian states do not call for consideration in electoral calculations and alliances. The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and New Delhi's approach towards this conflict have been significant factors in Tamil Nadu politics since the early 1980s. They have shaped alliances among the Tamil parties as well as between the Tamil parties and the national coalitions such as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Indian National Congress-I. The Tamil issue led to the I. K. Gujral government's demise in 1998 when the Congress Party used it as a pretext to pull the rug by leaving the coalition.

Similarly in Kashmir, the nature of India-Pakistan relations acquires an important place in the state's electoral and political discourse. In Sikkim, the question of the relations with Nepal and the relevance or otherwise of the India-Nepal Treaty of 1950 has come to acquire some political currency. Other bordering states such as Bihar and West Bengal are also politically provoked by the spillover of radical and turbulent developments in the neighbouring countries. However, their political dynamics is seldom influenced by such developments in any decisive manner.

### **Foreign Policy Issues in 2009**

In the forthcoming parliamentary elections, no major foreign policy issue seems to have the potential of stirring the elections at the national level in any significant way. However, the electoral debate may not be completely free of foreign policy issues. Four such issues appear to be reasonably good candidates to figure in electoral debate. They are India's rising global status; cross-border terrorism from Pakistan; the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka; and the India-United States nuclear deal. Not many votes would perhaps be cast on the basis of any of these issues but they would find place in the election manifestos of the political parties and would be raised in the campaign discourses.

The UPA seems to have learnt lessons from the 2004 NDA campaign which projected "India Shining" as its main electoral plank. In any case, with a sliding stock market and declining growth rates, there is not much "shine" left to be projected by the UPA as its achievement. However, there would be a subtle attempt to project India's growing global recognition and credibility during the UPA regime. India's growing capacity building in space, such as its mission to the moon and the successful missile launches; India's respectful place in global counsels such as G20; and the growing desire among a number of countries to engage constructively with India may be underlined in campaign speeches.

India's declining economic performance would be blamed on the global economic decline. Thus a global cover may be used to hide the slow rate of economic reforms and administrative inefficiencies. The opposition will blame the UPA for India's growing dependence on global economic forces and its inadequate preparedness in dealing with the crisis in the financial market. The opposition may also raise the question of India's failure to secure United States Security Council (UNSC) reforms and a permanent seat for itself in the UNSC. The failure of the Indian candidate to win the United Nations Secretary-General's election may also figure in the debate. The UPA's adoption of *Jai Ho* (Be Victorious), the theme song of 'Slumdog Millionaire', may be seen as a clever and effective attempt to send a dual message of concern for the underdog and credit for global recognition (8 Oscar awards) of 'Incredible India' and its determination to rise.

## **Will Terrorism Influence Elections?**

The question of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and India's inability to deal with it, as the Mumbai attack demonstrated, would be on the forefront of the NDA's campaign. The UPA's weakness in this respect would be blamed on its "politics of vote banks (Muslims)". The UPA's defence would be to highlight its diplomatic success in forcing Pakistan to accept its involvement in the Mumbai attacks. This will be contrasted with the NDA's failure to make any headway against Pakistan, even after the use of military muscle (Operation Parakram), following the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001.

In the course of the debate on terrorism, India's relations with Pakistan, the five-year old India-Pakistan peace process and the internal political instability in Pakistan will come under close scrutiny in the election campaign at the national level. This scrutiny will be all the more focused and sharper in the north Indian states, particularly Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Delhi and Rajasthan. The anti-NDA parties will not spare the issue of growing Hindu extremism which has raised its ugly head in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Orissa. The acts of terrorism by these extremists will be recalled before the electorates in specific constituencies.

The Sri Lankan government's military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may be brought to its logical conclusion by the time India's election campaign picks up its momentum. This is particularly so if the reported attempts by the United States and other members of the international community succeed in rescuing the trapped civilians by the sea route. No matter how the last phase of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka unfolds, this issue will acquire a central place in the Tamil Nadu campaign. The Sri Lankan question is a potentially powerful vote mobiliser in Tamil Nadu and it will swing votes one way or the other, though on a small scale.

The UPA's policy has tried to differentiate between the LTTE terrorism and the interests of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. However, this distinction will be blurred by pro-LTTE groups in Tamil politics such as the Pattali Makkal Katchi. They will attack the UPA for siding with the Sri Lankan government. They may also criticise the Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam for being constrained by its alliance with the UPA and not doing enough to save the Sri Lankan Tamils from "genocide". The possibility of the extremist Tamil groups encouraging acts of self-immolation and organising aggressive agitations to emotively charge the election atmosphere on the Sri Lankan issue cannot be ruled out. In the mercurial and emotive Tamil politics, the possibility of change in the existing alliances also cannot be ruled out. However, if any major shift takes place in the alliance structure, the Sri Lankan issue will surely be referred while explaining and justifying the shift.

## **What about the India-United States Nuclear Deal?**

The UPA government could have lost power in July 2008 on the issue of India-United States civil nuclear deal. However, the fact that the government, especially Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, braved the challenge and survived the threat could make this issue one of the party's main planks in the elections.

However, the issue has lost much of its sheen and punch in the past six months. After the conclusion of the deal, India has signed civilian nuclear cooperation agreements with Russia and France, and not just with the United States. This has blunted the political thrust of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) of blaming the deal as an act of subservience to the

United States. The UPA's position on the civil nuclear deal has been further emboldened by the United States National Intelligence's assessment of India's foreign policy presented in the United States' Senate in February 2009. Presenting this assessment, the Director of the National Intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, said, "On the global stage, Indian leaders will continue to follow an independent course characterised by economic and political pragmatism. New Delhi will not automatically support or oppose positions favoured by the United States or any other major power". This is a fitting reply to the UPA's domestic criticism of compromising national interests in the course of concluding the nuclear deal.

The Congress Party will project its success in finalising the deal and retaining its foreign policy independence in the coming elections, particularly in the campaign in Left-dominated states such as West Bengal and Kerala. The Left, particularly the CPM, may bring in the issues of Iran and New Delhi's reliance on the United States with regard to Pakistan but that may not bring in electoral gains to it. The BJP may not have much to gain by raising the India-United States civil nuclear deal issue in its electoral campaign.

### **Marginal Impact of Foreign Policy**

It is, therefore, clear that foreign policy will take a backseat in India's parliamentary elections of 2009. Issues of economic development and poverty as well as those related to security and terrorism are likely to dominate the campaign. While the UPA can draw some comfort on the basis of its recently-offered economic sops and the declining inflation, the staggering levels of poverty and dampening growth prospects will fuel the opposition fires.

Terrorism is a continuing concern in India's governance and there is not much that either the UPA or NDA can claim as success in this respect. The UPA's post-Mumbai new Home Minister has created the impression of a hands-on minister but his initiatives will bear fruits, if at all, only after the elections are long over. The UPA will naturally have to project and defend its performance in the areas of economic development and governance, and in fighting terrorism.

It should not ultimately come as a surprise to election observers and analysts if the electoral outcome is more decisively shaped by regional alliances, factors of caste, religious and regional identities, and the role of personalities, than by the issues and agendas put forth by the political parties.

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