
India under Modi — Foreign Policy

(ASPI, New York, 16 June 2015)

Speaking Notes

S. Menon

The first thing that strikes one about the Modi government's foreign policy so far is its **remarkable consistency with that of its predecessor**. Even on issues where the BJP in opposition had prevented their implementation, like the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh and the 123 Agreement with the USA, the Modi government has carried through the policies of the last government. In this the Modi government is **not very different from previous Indian governments**, all of whom carried on the policies of their predecessors while putting their own gloss on them. I find this reassuring in that it reflects the fact that it is India's foreign policy, not one party or individual's policy (which would suggest a certain flightiness), and that the policy is mature.

At the same time there are **clear differences in emphasis and some departures in substance** from previous Indian governments. The most obvious difference is in style, in the manner in which foreign policy is presented, the effort that is put into its projection, and its **strong identification with the persona of the Prime Minister**.

There are also differences in substance. While the enhanced strategic partnership with the USA is a legacy of the NDA and UPA, the Modi government has adopted a **distinct pro-Western tilt, a doubling down on the USA relationship**. Of a piece with this are: the announcement that PM Modi will visit Israel (the first Indian PM to do so), upgrading the trilateral dialogue with Japan and Australia, and the Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region announced with US President Obama in January. There is also a new emphasis on the 30 million strong Indian **diaspora**. PM Modi has engaged with the **great powers in a round of "speed dating"**, as one scholar puts it.

It is less easy to take stock of the results of all this activity. By way of **comparison, in 2004-5 the first UPA government** launched the **Civil Nuclear Initiative** with the USA, signed the Guiding **Principles** and Political Parameters for a **boundary settlement with China**, and carried forward the most successful peace process with Pakistan so far and started the **cross-LOC bus** from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad in Kashmir.

It is in the **relationships with China and Pakistan** that the balance sheet for the Modi government is **less positive**. If anything these critical relationships are more uncertain now than when the government took over last May. There are **warning signs** suggesting that they could worsen.

Besides, it is hard to assess the foreign policy activity of the Modi government because it **has not made public or articulated a vision or framework for its foreign and national security policy**. This invites two dangers. One is that policy will be **reactive, not strategic**, and at the mercy of events. The other is that **adversaries will set the agenda** and be able to choose the times, places and manner in which they deal with India.

But there **may also be discernible** in faint outline another **possible shift** in Indian foreign policy under this government — **away from a single minded focus on the transformation of India** as the goal of all policy, that all previous Indian governments followed, **to a stress on obtaining recognition of India's great power status**, and the use of foreign policy for domestic legitimacy. This could be the **Indian equivalent of China's shift since 2008** from "hiding its light" in the Deng years to "showing its capabilities, playing its role" and realising the China dream. China did so after thirty years of double digit GDP growth; Modi is doing so after thirty years of 6% plus growth, in an international environment that is much less supportive. Every patriotic Indian will want the government, whatever its hue, to succeed in transforming India and is convinced that India is a great power. Whether we need to be prickly and constantly proclaim it is another matter.

Fortunately, at India's present stage of development there should be no immediate contradiction between the goals of transforming India and seeking great power status. The **latter would be impossible without first transforming India**. But there are situations when the demands of improving the lives of Indians are **different** from those of pursuing enhanced status. When this is combined with a heightened appeal to a **more strident nationalism the risks are heightened**.

That is why I think it **important that the Modi government lay out its strategic vision** for India's external and national security policies. The world will not wait, and is getting more, not less, complex and demanding. The real foreign policy challenges lie ahead in the second year of the government when we will see whether it can continue the momentum of successful past policies while adjusting to changes in the situation, and better manage relations with China and Pakistan.

Ultimately, whether the Modi government's foreign policy activism and energetic projection leads to tangible **benefits** in terms of the transformation of India **will be determined** not by the vigour or skill of Indian foreign policy practice, (which Indians have long taken for granted), but **by the Indian government's success inside India** — in creating jobs, and sustaining high long term growth rates and social harmony. Until Indian business invests in the Indian economy foreigners are unlikely to. Nor can India look to the world to solve its infrastructure deficit, fiscal constraints, or successfully realise the Make in India project. The test for Modi's government is to **manage these short term economic challenges so that the Indian economy's basically sound and positive economic fundamentals can prevail in the longer term, creating a basis for a successful foreign policy.**

So the answer to the issues in our panel are to be found in the other panel!

[Score: 8/10 for effort; 5/10 for execution; 2/10 for conception]