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# BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Ian Hall's
*Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*
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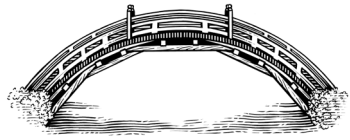

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*Paul Staniland*

*Manjari Chatterjee Miller*

*Constantino Xavier*

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# Modi Couldn't Change Indian Foreign Policy: The Question Is Why

*Rajesh Rajagopalan*

Narendra Modi's success in foreign policy is credited as one of the reasons for his victory in the May 2019 Indian general election, where he led his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to an even larger majority in the parliament. This is more than a bit unusual because foreign policy is generally thought to have low electoral salience in India. Modi's foreign policy is also thought to have moved India away from some of the shibboleths of the past, such as nonalignment, toward greater realism and pragmatism. Though still shy of an alliance, Modi has moved India even closer to the United States and tentative strategic partnerships with countries such as Australia and Japan that appear designed to counter China's rise. He also appears to have shifted India's traditional reluctance to militarily escalate when dealing with Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

Does all this signify that there is now a "Modi doctrine" in Indian foreign policy, or that Indian foreign policy is now on a different trajectory? In his excellent new book *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Ian Hall takes a close look at Modi's first term as prime minister (2014–19) and contends that his attempt to transform Indian foreign policy was deeply ideological, motivated by a vision based on Hindu nationalism rather than realism or pragmatism. But Modi's transformational effort has not been successful: Hall argues that "Modi's government did less to change the direction of Indian foreign policy, its foundational assumptions and key practices, than might be suggested by all the drama and noise it generated" (p. 17).

This fits with the traditional consensus about Indian foreign policy—that it has demonstrated great continuity despite changes in government. Changes in foreign policy direction have been gradual, and when such changes do happen, they are sustained by new governments comprising different political parties. Such stability is a cause either for comfort or, more often than not, for frustration. Scholars have suggested a couple of reasons why this is so: some have argued it is the lack of an ideational framework beyond that which India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, provided; others have suggested that India's insular

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institutional framework and foreign policy's lack of electoral salience have discouraged change.[1]

Despite such continuity, there was an expectation that Modi's BJP government would be different and that it would shift the direction of India's foreign policy in a far more consequential manner than previous changes of government. For one, though the BJP had previously ruled the country, it had never held a majority in the parliament on its own and had depended instead on a coalition of smaller parties. In 2014, by contrast, although it was still in a coalition, the BJP by itself had enough seats for an outright majority in parliament's lower house. Moreover, Modi appeared to have far greater control over the party than previous BJP leaders such as former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. And as his term progressed, it was clear that Modi was using foreign policy in a determined and unprecedented way that went beyond the unusual level of energy and attention with which previous Indian leaders had practiced international diplomacy. Indeed, Hall argues that Modi was able to successfully garner domestic political dividends by creating the impression that India was now more internationally respected, with the domestic audience a significant target of this messaging. Why then was Modi unable to transform India's foreign policy? An important reason, according to Hall, was the limitations of Hindu nationalist ideology, which is the focus of a large part of the book.

Hall traces the roots of this ideological vision of India's place in the world, discussing in some detail Hindu nationalist thought and concerns about international politics and security. This is an inconsistent and contradictory mix that included, most importantly, the conviction that Hinduism represents a superior spiritual path to solve the world's problems, with India as the *vishwaguru*—the teacher of the world. In this vision, rather than on its material power, India's global influence is based on cultural and spiritual superiority that others will come to recognize and accept. But Hindu nationalism has other tendencies that contradict this, including a deep suspicion of the outside world, a desire for material national power, and sizable insecurity about Muslims in India.

Some aspects of Modi's foreign policy make sense against the backdrop of these ideological roots of Hindu nationalism, especially his prioritization of cultural and religious diplomacy and the stress given to certain elements

[1] For the former, see Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Still Under Nehru's Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India," *India Review* 8, no. 3 (2009): 209–33; and for the latter, see Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland, "Institutions and Worldviews in Indian Foreign Security Policy," *India Review* 11, no. 2 (2012): 76–94.

like yoga. But other aspects are a problem. Why, for example, has the Modi government been so reluctant to build India's hard power? India's low defense budget is the most visible evidence of this, and there has probably been inordinate attention paid to this one matrix. But even if India's developmental needs understandably require it to be careful of budget allocations to the military, it is more difficult to understand why New Delhi has not attempted any significant reforms that would allow the country to build much more effective armed forces with the resources it does have. For example, India's pensions now account for over 40% of its budget.[2] Yet there is little indication that policymakers have given much thought to addressing this problem, which hurts India's capacity to buy badly needed equipment for the various armed services. The Indian Air Force, for example, now has only 28 fighters per squadron instead of the sanctioned 42, while the Indian Navy submarine fleet has been reduced to just 15 boats (besides the Arihant missile submarine and a leased Russian nuclear attack submarine).[3] This inattention is difficult to understand considering both that India's security situation is steadily worsening as a consequence of China's rise and that one strand of Hindu nationalist ideology emphasizes military power. Moreover, Modi has demonstrated less reluctance than previous governments to use India's military power kinetically, as both the 2017 Doklam standoff with China and the 2019 Balakot airstrike in Pakistan demonstrate. Though India is considered to have done well in both these instances, any escalation in either case could have gone badly and exposed significant weaknesses in Indian military preparation. At least for the sake of prudence, Modi should ensure that such danger is avoided in the future.

This is a puzzle that still needs some attention. Hall suggests that unlike Vajpayee, the first BJP prime minister, Modi did not need to create an impression of strength but rather needed to soften his image as a firebrand. Though it is difficult to proffer a better explanation, this is still not entirely convincing. While this might be yet another reason for stressing India's soft-power credentials, it sits at variance with Modi's willingness to use force. Moreover, unlike Nehru, whose ideological leanings emphasized soft power as an alternative to hard power, Modi's ideological roots emphasize

2 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's New Defence Budget: Another Year, Another Disappointment," *Diplomat*, February 6, 2020.

3 Snehesh Alex Philip, "IAF, Navy Delaying Procurement Due to Funds Crunch. And Lesser Said the Better about Army," Print, January 31, 2020, https://theprint.in/opinion/brahmastra/iaf-navy-delaying-procurement-due-to-funds-crunch-and-army-too/357045.

both, which makes his greater emphasis on soft power and his inattention to hard power more difficult to explain.

It is also worth noting that there is a larger structural side to this story that is often ignored. One reason that it has been so difficult to change foreign policy is because India's structural condition has remained fairly steady for decades. The most important aspect is that the geopolitical environment is fairly secure, surrounded as the country is by many relatively small and weak states. India is, by most indices, at least seven times as strong as Pakistan, the largest and strongest of India's South Asian neighbors. China's rise considerably changes India's circumstances, of course, and introduces challenges that have broadly uniform effects. These conditions do not determine in great detail how New Delhi should respond, but they do set constraints, which in turn introduce a level of uniformity in policy. In other words, it is difficult to imagine that we can expect large variations in policy.

Hall's book is a necessary corrective to the early expectations that Modi represented significant change in Indian foreign policy. But the continuity needs greater explanation, especially considering how different Modi's ideological moorings are from previous Indian leaders, as Hall illustrates so well. It might be possible to address this question once again now that Hall has effectively demolished the argument that Modi has changed Indian foreign policy. ◈

# The BJP and Indian Foreign Policy

*Paul Staniland*

In *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Ian Hall offers a thoughtful and valuable assessment of Narendra Modi's foreign policy from his election in 2014 through his resounding re-election in 2019. As India rises, if unevenly, to the world stage, understanding the motivations and constraints of its key policymakers is essential. Hall argues that Modi has sought to reinvent Indian foreign policy in two ways. First, there have been actual foreign policy changes such as a renewed emphasis on Indian soft power and a more ambitious set of relationships across Asia and with the United States. Second, Modi has pursued an important set of discursive shifts, deploying rhetoric, symbols, and framings that link him, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the government to international respect, power, and prestige.

The book is oriented around a pair of core questions: first, why did Modi focus so much on this foreign policy project during his first term, and second, what drove the attempted reinvention of India's place in the world? Hall answers these by examining specific policy domains: cultural and soft power, economic, and security policy. His argument places ideology front and center: "Modi sought to reinvent Indian foreign policy by replacing an older vision with a new approach grounded not in pragmatism or even realism, but in Hindu nationalist ideology" (p. 10). Rather than Indian policy and narratives straightforwardly reflecting a set of cold-eyed power politics, they have been infused with a set of beliefs drawn from Modi's roots in the Hindu nationalist movement. Though there is no doubt that "objective" factors (especially the rise of China) have influenced India's behavior, Hall suggests that much of the action cannot be easily explained solely through this lens.

Instead, he draws on the Hindu nationalist movement's rich history and Modi's background therein to formulate a set of key themes.[1] Hall offers

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[1] See also Chris Ogden, *Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar, "The BJP and Indian Grand Strategy," in "The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism," ed. Milan Vaishnav, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019 ⇝ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/bjp-in-power-indian-democracy-and-religious-nationalism-pub-78677.

a synoptic overview of "a worldview that includes within it an account of India's place in the world and how it ought to interact with others" (p. 59). Importantly, he argues that it

> conceives of a kind of continuum between these internal and external threats, with Indian Muslims connected to Pakistan, in particular, and the wider Islamic World, Indian Christians to the West, and Indian "secularists"—Nehru especially—also to the Western world. These groups need therefore to be held in check within India if it is to develop as it should and regain the wealth and power it once had. (p. 59)

This orientation has stronger predictions for internal security than classical international relations (pp. 127, 131), providing a key insight for making sense of Modi's policies since his May 2019 re-election.

Hall argues that Modi's foreign policy has included a much more ambitious deployment of soft power (such as yoga), dialogue with and mobilization of the Indian diaspora, and use of the BJP as a tool in addition to the Ministry of External Affairs, as well as "expanding horizons" in India's role as a security provider, leading power, and linchpin of interlocking networks with the United States, Japan, Australia, the European Union, and Southeast Asia. Yet he also argues that Modi's foreign policy itself "did less to change the direction of Indian foreign policy, its foundational assumptions and key practices, than might be suggested by all the drama and noise it generated"; indeed, "core elements…remained largely the same" from past foreign policy patterns (p. 17). Hall notes that economic reform has not progressed as many hoped it would in 2014 and links this to the protectionist impulses of the BJP and its affiliate organizations as well as domestic political compulsions (pp. 105–6). Moreover, the efforts to build hard power have run into enduring resource constraints (pp. 135–36) that may limit India's ability to match its aspirations.

This creates a puzzle: the reinvention "did not succeed in bringing about the transformation that it promised" (p. 148), but "the fact that Modi devoted scarce resources to trying to reinvent Indian foreign policy demands some explanation" (p. 147). The book contends that there is a genuine ideological impulse when it comes to issues of culture, nationalism, and internal security, as well as resistance to aggressive liberalization. This answers the second question: Hindu nationalism plays an important role in shaping specific policies in certain domains.

What about those areas in which the reinvention has not affected actual policy change? Rather than a change in policy, what we have seen, Hall argues, are new forms of narrative and framing tied to domestic politics and

aimed to "boost and sustain Modi's position as leader" (p. 17). Indeed, "the principal target of this messaging was domestic, not international," showing an "appreciation of the potential value of foreign policy for domestic electoral politics. Self-consciously and deliberately, it politicized foreign policy" (p. 150). Even when policies did not radically change, Modi presented them as a brave, bold new stance that reflected strength and leadership.

*Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* offers many important insights, and below are some of the ways it helps us understand developments since its writing was finished in May 2019. But before moving to the last year, questions remain about Hall's account of Modi's first term. First, it can be hard to determine precisely how Hall sees Hindu nationalist ideology operating: sometimes it is a motivator, sometimes it provides a set of discursive tools for selling a policy that itself is not driven by that ideology, and sometimes it does not seem to matter. Nuance is of course reasonable, but it can make for an uneven read, with multiple factors interacting in very complicated ways. At times, the ideological strand gets lost entirely.

Second, while Hall's account of India's policies toward China and the United States explicitly notes that ideology matters less, it is unclear what his alternative is. It is not a pure realpolitik or hard power–balancing story, for instance, so we are left with an underdeveloped picture of these policies. These sections can feel like an entirely different book from those closer to the core themes linking Hindu nationalism, domestic politics, and other foreign policy issues.

Third, given the nature of the 2019 general election, it is not obvious that Hall is correct to argue that "the narrative it spun around its management of security was less novel and less clearly ideological than those it spun in other areas" (p. 128). The BJP has portrayed national security issues in a very clear—often highly inflammatory—way on the campaign trail: the general theme of national security has been linked, explicitly and implicitly, to Muslims, Pakistan, illegal migration, and alleged fifth columns.

Finally, Hall could do more to unpack exactly how and when Modi's rhetoric of strength, Hindu nationalist assertion, and international status is deployed in elections, and whether it seems to work. This matters if we want to understand this fusion as a phenomenon likely to endure regardless of electoral outcomes, or whether it is a carefully chosen strategy to be adopted in some times and places but not others. For instance, we have seen a heavy deployment of nationalism and Pakistan rhetoric in state elections, but it is unclear whether this has worked at the

state level as well as at the national level. Is the BJP simply making rational calculations that are not paying off, or is it locked into a highly ideological approach to campaigning that links the domestic and international in a counterproductive and irrational way?

Hall's book has particular value in understanding developments in India after the May 2019 election, showing its lasting insight and relevance even beyond Modi's first term. Several continuities persist: while there have been some important reforms in the defense sector (such as establishing the post of chief of defense staff), the underlying financial shape of India's armed forces is uninspiring and its decision to forgo the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is in line with the themes outlined in chapter 6. Ironically, it may be that the book's account is most useful for making sense of internal security and government initiatives around citizenship and religion, which are linked to foreign policy issues (especially Pakistan and Kashmir) but ultimately grounded in domestic politics. The mundane specifics of foreign policy are something of a sideshow compared to the abrogation of Article 370 or the Citizenship Amendment Bill: the Indian public does not vote on or protest over New Delhi's position on ASEAN centrality.

The real reinvention may be aimed at the home front. Such transformation could lay the basis for a stronger foreign policy (e.g., settling the borders and ending perceived internal subversion), but this seems like a bonus rather than the primary motivation. Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar has been at the vanguard of an ideologically charged defense of India's policies abroad (belying an older view of him as a technocrat par excellence), Home Minister Amit Shah has been central to the second Modi administration, and the BJP as a party has pressed its security advantages on all fronts, both successfully and counterproductively.

The scope and ambition of this political project, which centers on Modi but is far from limited to just him, raise a broader question for Hall's argument: despite the focus on Modi's personality and background, should we now focus primarily on the BJP? Modi may have sought to reinvent—if not always in reality, at least symbolically—Indian foreign policy, but that effort and its consequences may long outlast him. ◈

# Do Leader Ideologies Influence Foreign Policy? Nehruvianism vs. Moditva

*Manjari Chatterjee Miller*

Jawaharlal Nehru, the globetrotting, anti-colonial nationalist leader and first prime minister of independent India, was irrevocably associated with an ideology, Nehruvianism, that would set the dimensions of Indian foreign policy for nearly five decades. Since Nehru, no other Indian prime minister has been so closely or personally associated with a strong and distinct ideological leaning, until, that is, the advent of Narendra Modi, a right-wing Hindu nationalist who assumed the post in 2014. Although Modi did not originate an ideology like Nehru—Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, predates him by over a century—his rise to political power as an ardent Hindu nationalist and subsequent election as prime minister made him the face of it, both domestically and internationally. Ian Hall's *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* takes this close association of Modi with Hindutva as its starting point in a detailed exploration of how he has sought to emerge as a transformational leader and ideologically affect Indian foreign policy.

Hall, the author of numerous articles on Indian foreign policy and thought, builds on a previous argument he made in the journal *International Affairs* in 2017. In that article, he posited that India has always sought to be a normative power in the world, and Modi's election generated a debate on both whether Modi would draw on Hindu nationalism to create a new normative agenda and, if he did, what elements of Hindutva would subsequently be important.[1] In this book, Hall advances that argument and makes two main points. First, he agrees with other scholars, such as Rajesh Basrur,[2] that despite the initial hullaballoo about whether Modi would actually be a transformational leader, there has been, in fact, little change to the direction of India's foreign policy (p. 17). But, second, he

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1 Ian Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power," in "India's Rise at 70," ed. Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, special issue, *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 113–31.

2 Rajesh Basrur, "Modi's Foreign Policy Fundamentals: A Trajectory Unchanged," in Miller and Sullivan de Estrada, eds.,"India's Rise at 70," 7–26.

argues that, despite this lack of change, the "intent and substance" (p. 18) of Modi's attempts to transform the very foundation of Indian foreign policy by altering some of its key ideological elements warrant a close examination of what the prime minister and his allies purport to believe.

To develop this argument, Hall first explains how the ideological foundation of Indian foreign policy was for many decades dominated by Nehruvian thought, which emphasized nonalignment and self-reliance. As the geopolitical situation shifted with the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War, Indian leaders offered new iterations of Nehruvianism, even while right-wing Hindu nationalist leaders such as Atal Behari Vajpayee came to power. Modi, however, was different in that he brought a new urgency to developing a Hindutva agenda for foreign policy (p. 39). Although Hindu nationalist thought predates Modi, dating back in its current form to the late nineteenth century, he attempted to transform it in two ways. First, in his years as chief minister of Gujarat, he built a "formidable political machine" to "craft a distinct style of governing" and create a "philosophy of governance" (pp. 72–73). Second, as prime minister, he has pushed to fulfill India's "soft-power potential" in foreign policy (p. 84). Consequently, Modi began reframing India's role in the world as the conveyor of Hindu culture, a *vishwaguru* (world guru) as it were (p. 82).

Hall's point that regardless of whether Indian foreign policy has actually shifted, Modi's determined intent to transform foreign policy is significant and needs to be studied is very important for three reasons. One, as mentioned earlier, Modi is the first Indian leader since Nehru to be so closely associated with a distinct ideology. That in itself makes his beliefs, how they were derived, and how they are being repackaged worthy of study. Two, Indian foreign policy is not static; it does in fact shift, albeit slowly.[3] Given Modi's formidable political organization that can push for ideological change, it is crucial to consider how he can affect the important elements that underpin India's current foreign policy. And three, as has been shown, leader beliefs matter tremendously in great-power politics.[4] As India rises, to what extent will a popular and populist leader like Modi shape the country's perceptions of threat, security, and domestic power? Thus, with this book, Hall has taken the lead in framing the origins, both ideational and structural, of Modi's beliefs, and cataloging the different ways in which

[3] Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "Foreign Policy à la Modi," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2014.

[4] Mark Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

Modi has attempted to deploy these beliefs in foreign policy. That is a significant service to the field of Indian foreign policy scholarship.

It is interesting, however, to consider that in some important ways Nehruvianism and Hindutva overlap—in the idea of India as a leader and world teacher of superior culture, for example, or the distrust of superpower (U.S.) influence and politics (p. 139). And it is not clear that Modi, despite his intent, has been stupendously successful in pushing those elements of his ideology that are in tension with Nehruvianism. Given Hall's previous work, one assumes he would not disagree, and, in fact, in the book's conclusion he acknowledges that Modi's project "[fell] short of its objectives" (p. 147). Here, I would have liked to see a more detailed explanation not only of why Modi's Hindutva has had less impact on foreign policy than one would have supposed (given both his determination and organization), but also of why Nehruvianism succeeded. By examining the latter, we could begin to draw some conclusions about the elements of ideology and politics that matter in Indian foreign policy.

While Modi's tenure is shorter than Nehru's thus far, Hindutva itself has longer antecedents than Nehruvianism. Yet the latter has endured for decades. Even Modi's determination to "reinvent" has not yet lead to a distinct "Moditva." Hall's valuable work nonetheless sets the framework for a new agenda in examining Indian foreign policy—understanding how the push for specific ideologies by particular contemporary leaders matters, as well as the sources of such ideologies, and crucially that these ideologies matter even when they fail to make the impact that their purveyors intended. ◈

# Individual and Ideological Immunity? The Resilience of Indian Foreign Policy

*Constantino Xavier*

Following his victory in the 2014 Indian general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was quick to promise revisions to foreign policy. His government proclaimed the arrival of a new India that would be a "leading power," suggesting that the country's past policies had been too passive and defensive. Within South Asia, Modi spoke of a "neighborhood first" approach, alluding to regional neglect by his predecessors. In Southeast Asia, the Look East policy was renamed Act East, with a new focus on the wider Indo-Pacific and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Meanwhile, internally, members of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his Indian National Congress (INC) party of having sacrificed national security to appease Pakistan and China since the 1950s.

Going beyond this noise, Ian Hall's *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* offers a deep and dispassionate assessment of these many promises and accusations to conclude that, in practice, Modi's foreign policy has been mostly marked by continuity with the past. Except for "some deviations" (p. 39), Hall observes that the individual role of the popular prime minister and the ideological role of Hindu nationalism promoted by the BJP have failed to reinvent India's external engagements: the "continuities in policy and implementation from earlier governments were clearer than the changes" (p. 125).

Hall's conclusion departs from an important assumption, especially for international observers who had expected Modi's charismatic populism and his party's cultural conservativism to break with nonalignment and other cardinal principles. Did Modi not order unprecedented surgical strikes in Kashmir to punish Pakistan beyond the disputed Line of Control? Did he not welcome U.S. president Barack Obama and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe while playing tough with China during Beijing's military incursion into neighboring Bhutan? Did he not deepen Indo-Pacific partnerships and revive the quadrilateral dialogue with Japan, Australia,

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and the United States? Did he not announce the first ever chief of defense staff to increase India's military preparedness and interservice coordination?

On all these and many other accounts, however, a closer look reveals that nothing was truly novel: many of these actions had been either initiated or promised before Modi's premiership, with some dating back to the turn of the new century. Some observers may flesh out nuances to argue that there have been occasional departures and changes in emphasis—such as in reaching out to the Indian diaspora, normalizing relations with the European Union, or building new power-projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean—but one or two adjustments do not a revolution make, Hall argues. In fact, the book suggests that a radical reinvention of Indian foreign policy was never really even attempted in the first place, but rather was a rhetorical and tactical move focused on consolidating Modi's domestic support base.

Many may disagree with this cynical reading, but Hall touches a deeper nerve in Indian foreign policy analysis. The scholarly debate about how domestic factors such as individual leaders or party ideologies shape foreign policy in democratic India goes back several decades and is impossible to settle.[1] In recent years, given new archival sources and a closer examination of specific cases, however, the pendulum has swung in favor of continuity and reduced the agency attributed to specific leaders, including even Nehru.[2] This line of research has also deflated the alleged foreign policy differences between political parties, especially the INC and the BJP.[3] For those interested in deeper debates about India's external engagements since 1947, Hall's book thus confirms that individuals and ideology are overrated. Mostly immune to Modi and the BJP, India's grand quest for strategic autonomy, coupled with institutional deficiencies in foreign policymaking, has once again prevailed to dictate continuity. Hall's book departs from the popular narratives about the new Modi doctrine and BJP ideology that allegedly transformed India's external relations, whether with the diaspora, the United States, or

1 See Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *The Making of Indian's Foreign Policy: Determinants, Institutions, Processes and Personalities* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2003); and Nalini Kant Jha, *Domestic Imperatives in India's Foreign Policy* (Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers, 2002).

2 Tanvi Madan, *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations during the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

3 See Arjun Appadorai, *Domestic Roots of India's Foreign Policy, 1947–72* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1982); Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the U.S. Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

India's neighbors.[4] His close examination of economic liberalization, regional security, and relations with China and Pakistan (chaps. 6–7) indicates that, beyond grand speeches, Modi's ambition of reinvention has clashed with the constraints of reality. India's recent outreach to Russia and China, even while developing a diversification strategy with other middle powers, represents only a new iteration of the country's old balancing game.[5]

But does this mean we are only seeing more of the same under Modi's India? Resilience does not mean immunity: individuals and ideology may shape policy in the long term, and Hall's book addresses a few such instances that deserve further study. First, he suggests that Modi's reinvention failed because of "ideological limitations" or an alleged "weakness" in *Hindutva* foreign policy thought (p. 148). Hobbled by a "lack of clear ideological guidance," the prime minister "fell back on established concepts and approaches, some inherited from Singh's government" (p. 127). This focus on limitations and weaknesses, however, is bound to distract readers from Hall's more important point that Hindu nationalists have customarily been foreign policy introverts focused on domestic security and thus relatively disinterested in issues of grand strategy. This deserves further scrutiny. For example, have domestic and regional security issues overridden, or maybe even complicated, India's global reputation and balancing game between the United States and China? Has Ajit Doval's appointment as national security adviser shifted the emphasis toward counterterrorism, intelligence, defense, and security cooperation to the detriment of other diplomatic, economic, and strategic issues beyond South Asia? And finally, as Hall seems to suggest, has this securitized regional approach clashed and eventually prevailed over Modi's more expansive global outreach?

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4 See Chris Ogden, *Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian Security: Portents of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Sreeram Chaulia, "Diaspora Factor in Modi's Diplomacy," in *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy*, ed. Anirban Ganguly, Vijay Chauthaiwale, and Uttam K. Sinha (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2016), 21–30.

5 Hall's book can, therefore, be read well alongside two other publications putting the individual and ideological factors in proper context. A recent essay by Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar shows how the Indian state's structural deficiencies have overridden any attempted ideological disruption. In their account, Modi is politically astute but far from being a transformative leader in terms of grand strategy. Walter Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle's study of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the civil society organization influencing the BJP's agenda of Hindutva, presents the organization's internal policy differences, dilemmas between conservatism and modernization, and limited public policy expertise. See Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar, "The BJP and Indian Grand Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/bjp-and-indian-grand-strategy-pub-78686; and Walter K. Anderson and Shridhar D. Damle, *The RSS: A View to the Inside* (New York: Penguin Viking, 2018).

Second, while Hall's focus on continuity is certainly cogent, it would be interesting to complement his analysis with a few exceptional case studies of where Modi and the BJP's ideology have influenced foreign policy in new ways. For this, an in-depth and evidence-based approach is needed, one based on interviews with decision-makers at the political and bureaucratic levels. For example, have the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and other BJP-supporting organizations stalled free trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership? What role did the BJP play in shaping policy toward Nepal and demands for a Hindu constitution there? How has the Ministry of External Affairs' cultural diplomacy, especially the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, changed to promote new icons abroad like Deendayal Upadhyaya? It may be too early for a deep analysis of these cases, but they are necessary to understand how recent ideological positions have shaped foreign policy.

Finally, Hall's book invites us to understand how India's foreign policymaking processes are changing. He argues that Modi's new approach is "more in keeping with Hindu nationalist ideology, but which diminished or even sidelined the agencies of the state," thus leading to a "parallel, quasi-diplomatic effort" by the BJP (pp. 88–89). He offers a detailed analysis of how the prime minster, key party figures, and new think tanks have played an influential role beyond the standard bureaucratic processes like those seen in the Ministry of External Affairs. One could argue, however, that none of these parallel tracks are new. Has the rise of the party, together with new influence from intelligence agencies and military officers, weakened or complemented India's diplomatic apparatus?

For a fact, we know that Modi has, at best, stressed the decision-making system, which is not necessarily bad. In less than six years, between 2014 and early 2020, he made close to 80 official visits abroad, twice as many as his predecessor Manmohan Singh had in ten years. Optimists will contend that Modi's diplomatic hyperactivity proved to be a good shock to the bureaucracy, pushing it to do more around the world. But realists will recognize that his ambition further increased the implementation gap and reduced India's reliability. Can one really expect a reinvention of foreign policy when the country's 1.3 billion citizens are represented by less than one thousand diplomats (about the same as Singapore or Portugal)? Can one expect reinvention when foreign policy is often treated as a succession of political summits without tangible realizations, leaving many countries disappointed?

In sum, Modi's foreign policy originally sounded like a bold reinvention but now looks like more of the same with new individual and

ideological accents. Hall's conclusion is accordingly spot on: the prime minister "struggled with the sheer scale of the challenge of overhauling the institutions that needed reform…and lacked the resources necessary to bring about the change required" (pp. 145–46). The major impediment to reinvention remains the "lack of capacity in the institutions of foreign and security policy making" (p. 148).

*Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* thus deserves credit for being able to disillusion both supporters and critics of Modi. For those who support Modi, his foreign policy shows that he has been either unwilling or unable to embrace structural reforms—both administrative and economic—to enhance India's capabilities abroad. For those who are critical of his personality and the BJP's ideology, by contrast, the book proves that such influences have been overrated: the structural and institutional deficiencies of India's foreign policy have proved resilient even to Modi's formidable charisma and his party's powerful ideology. ◈

# Author's Response: Foreign Policy, Ideology, and Domestic Politics in Modi's India

*Ian Hall*

One of the most obvious things that sets Narendra Modi's government apart from its predecessors is its much-publicized attempt to uproot Jawaharlal Nehru's ideological legacies in both domestic and foreign policy. Practically every administration since Nehru has tinkered with his "idea of India" and departed from one or another of his policies. But none—including the governments led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) between 1998 and 2004—have tried wholly to demolish the ideological edifice India's first prime minister left behind nor sought to put in its place something completely different.[1] Quite deliberately, however, that is what Modi and his allies have aimed to do since May 2014, seeking to sweep aside Nehru's construction and build a "Naya Bharat" (New India) informed by Hindu nationalism.[2]

*Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* deals with one aspect of this project: the high-profile effort to craft a "Modi doctrine" and a new philosophy of foreign policy. It also explores—as far as possible—how this new thinking has shaped the Modi government's handling of India's international relations so far. To do this, the book delves into Hindu nationalist political thought on India's place in the world and its proper role. It looks at what can be established about Modi's own thinking, shaped by years in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (loosely translated as the National Volunteer Organization) and the backrooms of the BJP, as well as more than a decade in office as chief minister of Gujarat. The second half of the book then turns to three dimensions that the Modi government has pursued in Indian foreign policy: the push for soft power, the effort to

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1 It should be noted that Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government did try to make some significant changes in domestic policy. See Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

2 See especially Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds., *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2019).

boost growth and investment, and the management of the various security challenges facing the country.

The book argues that despite efforts to construct new thinking on international relations intended to displace Nehruvianism with an alternative purportedly more appropriate to India, in Modi's first term (2014–19) many of the basic foreign policy settings stayed the same. His administration did succeed in modifying the country's foreign investment regime, for example, but failed to conclude any new free trade deals with other states or regional groupings. Similarly, it unveiled the ambitious Neighbourhood First policy to improve ties with other South Asian states but made little progress, given that relations with Pakistan deteriorated and China's growing economic power continued to be felt throughout the region. Where shifts did occur, movement was often incremental rather than sweeping, such as in the efforts to augment and extend preexisting defense and security ties with the United States and other like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific. The exceptions to this rule lay mainly in the domain of soft power, where Modi's first government invested heavily in a variety of initiatives, including the global promotion of yoga and solar power and a series of interreligious and intercultural dialogues with various Buddhist and Muslim groups. But when it came to the acquisition or use of hard power, Modi's record is mixed. The defense budget increased after 2014, but not in line with economic growth and without marked improvements to military capabilities. Punitive strikes on targets in Pakistan took place after terrorist attacks, and India attempted to push back when China pressed on various areas, including in Bhutan in mid-2017. Whether these acts will be repeated is unclear, as is their deterrent effect on Islamabad and Beijing.[3]

The question—as Rajesh Rajagopalan rightly asks—is why did we not see bigger changes, given all the hype about making India a "leading power"?[4] If the Modi government has indeed brought about a "paradigm shift," as a sympathetic study puts it, in the ways India thinks about international relations and the country's role in the world, why have the basic settings not altered?[5] Rajagopalan's answer is seductive: it is difficult,

[3] For useful discussions, see Ashley J. Tellis, "A Smoldering Volcano: Pakistan and Terrorism after Balakot," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 14, 2019 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/smoldering-volcano-pakistan-and-terrorism-after-balakot-pub-78593; and Sumit Ganguly, "India and China: On a Collision Course?" *Pacific Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2018): 231–44.

[4] See Ashley J. Tellis, "India as a Leading Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2016 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_268_Tellis_India_final1.pdf.

[5] Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay and Ashok Kapur, *Modi's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Sage, 2017), 21–60.

he argues, to change India's foreign policy "because India's structural condition has remained fairly steady for decades." Relatively speaking, India is a strong state surrounded by weak ones; it can dominate its region but cannot get everything it wants because the smaller states can act as spoilers with a degree of impunity and call on external help *in extremis*. Manjari Chatterjee Miller hints at a different but not incommensurate response: Nehruvianism has continued to prove remarkably "sticky" as an ideational framework for foreign policy.[6] And Constantino Xavier points to one more set of factors: "India's grand quest for strategic autonomy, coupled with institutional deficiencies in foreign policymaking, has once again prevailed to dictate continuity."

In the book, I argue that there were two other things going on that might explain why the Modi government's attempted reinvention of foreign policy has not brought about significant change. The first is that—beyond suggesting that India acquire more power (hard, soft, or both)—more than a century's worth of Hindu nationalist political thought does not explain, in sufficient detail, how India might conduct its international relations. This means that Modi and his allies do not have much to work with in terms of novel ideas when it comes to developing a new grand strategy. For the most part, Hindu nationalist thinkers and practitioners have been what Xavier aptly termed "foreign policy introverts." There are snippets here and there that suggest alternatives to the Nehruvian approach, as Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar among others have shown, but nothing like the huge corpus of letters, memoranda, speeches, scholarship, and advocacy built up by Nehru and his supporters.[7] While Hindu nationalist ideologues think that India has a destiny to fulfill and that it will one day act as a guru to the world (a *vishwaguru*) dispensing wisdom to all, they rarely provide detailed accounts of how this status will be achieved.[8]

I am not sure, however, that these intrinsic weaknesses in Hindu nationalist thought are the main reason that the Modi government's reinvention of foreign policy has failed to have the promised effect. The second reason for the lack of change, and the more important one I think,

6 In addition to her review in this roundtable, see also Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "Pragmatism in Indian Foreign Policy: How Ideas Constrain Modi," *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 27–49.

7 Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar, "The BJP and Indian Grand Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/bjp-and-indian-grand-strategy-pub-78686. See also Rahul Sagar, "A Malnourished Bismarck astride the Indo-Pacific," LiveMint, April 5, 2018 ~ https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/1f5LedQUsZ4NM8Vs8xyBVO/A-malnourished-Bismarck-astride-the-IndoPacific.html.

8 Ian Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power," *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 113–31.

is the pronounced tendency of the administration to treat foreign policy as wholly subordinate to domestic politics—indeed, even as a domain to be exploited for electoral gain. As Paul Staniland puts it, the reinvention may well "be aimed at the home front," where a "stronger foreign policy" is a "bonus," or at best a means to an end rather than an end in itself. In part, this might be explained by the introversion of Hindu nationalists to which Xavier refers: a disinterest in the world outside India among not just past ideologues but also present policymakers. But this too may be partly a function of the kind of politician Modi is and aspires to be: a populist strongman making India great again in a crudely conceived zero-sum world. In this worldview, foreign policy is about assertion, advantage, tactical alignments, and image management, and is directed inward as much as out.[9] Such leaders can cause considerable damage in international relations, as we can presently see, but they seem unable to forge anything new.[10]

If this is right, it helps answer some of Staniland's queries about the book's arguments. It is apparent that ideology is indeed operating in different ways in different areas. In the soft-power push, there seems to be evidence of genuine conviction on the part of some involved—among the organizers of interreligious dialogues, for example. At the same time, whether Modi himself believes it, the government uses Hindu nationalist notions like India as a vishwaguru as a convenient, appealing way to market its actions to the electorate.

I do not think, however, that ideology drops out altogether, even in the government's management of the United States or China, and perhaps I should have discussed this in more detail in my book. Traditionally, Hindu nationalists have conceived both these states as representing significant challenges to India, not just in terms of power politics but as alternative civilizations arising from different principles.[11] One might expect, then, a government infused with Hindu nationalist ideology to distance India from both. Instead, we have seen New Delhi strengthen the strategic partnership with Washington and adopt a more robust stance toward Beijing that aims in part at creating the impression, not least for a domestic audience,

[9] On Modi, populism, and foreign policy, see especially Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 2 (2019): 283–301.

[10] Daniel W. Drezner, "The Angry Populist as Foreign Policy Leader: Real Change or Just Hot Air?" *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2017): 23–43.

[11] See especially M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 3rd ed. (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 1996).

of mutual respect.[12] A number of factors have shaped these contrasting strategies, with ideology playing a role in each. With Washington, for example, it seems clear that long-standing concerns about the effects of Western materialism and the unreliability of American promises have been set aside in part because of a belief among at least some Hindu nationalists that the United States is in decline.[13] Therefore, to these minds closer alignment holds less risk than it might have heretofore.

Of course, as Xavier rightly points out, more work needs to be done to determine exactly what has shaped the key decisions of recent years, such as India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations. This will require interviews with politicians and officials, when they are able to speak more freely, and archival research when that becomes possible. But sufficient evidence exists, I think, to support the view that domestic politics, including ideological arguments, has recently played a bigger role in Indian foreign policymaking than in the past. And at the same time, as the Modi government demonstrates so well, international relations can and do feature in India's elections even at the state level with varied effects, as Staniland observes.

Whether any of these linkages between foreign policy and domestic politics will outlast Modi or the current BJP-led government is difficult to assess. There are grounds to think that ideological contestation is now more salient in Indian politics than it once was.[14] It also seems that the BJP has succeeded in bringing about a new party system in India in which its hegemonic position allows the party to set the terms of debate.[15] If this is the case, then India's foreign policy may not remain immune to Hindu nationalist ideology during and after Modi's second term even if he departs the scene, despite the ideology's manifest shortcomings. ◈

12 The carefully choreographed "informal summits" between Modi and Xi Jinping, held in Wuhan in April 2018 and in Chennai in October 2019, were clearly aimed at generating that perception.

13 See, for example, Sreeram S. Chaulia, *Trumped: Emerging Powers in a Post-American World* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2019).

14 Pradeep K. Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

15 Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hintson, "The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 5, 2019 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/05/dawn-of-india-s-fourth-party-system-pub-79759.