



May 2019

Produced by The National Bureau of Asian Research for the Senate India Caucus

MODI’S VICTORY IN THE INDIAN ELECTIONS *What This Means for Asia and Beyond*

The Narendra Modi–led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won a second consecutive majority in the 17th Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). The 16th Lok Sabha in 2014 was the first since 1984 in which a single party won enough seats to govern without needing to form a coalition. Despite facing criticisms that some believed would correspond to a dip in support for Modi, according to Thursday’s election results, Modi and the BJP are set to come back with a majority greater than the party had in 2014. A second consecutive BJP victory raises important questions. What will the continued rise of nationalism on the Indian subcontinent mean for India’s relations with neighboring countries, including Pakistan, and the Indo-Pacific more broadly? What will it mean for relations with China and the United States? NBR intern Aimée Tat interviewed **Abhijnan Rej**, a New Delhi–based security analyst and political-risk consultant, for answers to these and other questions.

What were the key issues that decided the outcome of the recent general election?

The Indian voting public typically care about issues such as jobs and inflation that directly affect their daily lives—when they are not voting along expected caste or religious lines. This is to be expected in a relatively poor country like India. National security or foreign policy issues have rarely formed key parts of any political party’s campaign or decided electoral outcomes. In fact, academics have long theorized that foreign policy—being part of “elite politics”—will rarely affect mass politics that shape the way elections are fought and won.

These theories were turned upside down this year in what was termed as India’s first “national security election.” Modi’s decision to retaliate against a terrorist attack in Kashmir by launching air strikes in Pakistan in February 2019 earned him a reputation of being a decisive leader among the electorate. Both Modi and his party incessantly remind the Indian public of the air strikes and the risk India faces from Pakistan-based terrorists. The BJP campaign also suggested that should the Congress-led opposition come to power, it would be soft on terrorism and national security. Together, this helped cover Modi’s spotty track record on economics, including reports of decades-high unemployment.

2019 will be remembered as the year when national security became part of mass politics in India; it marks a shift in how election campaigns will be framed—and elections fought—in the years ahead.

How did the BJP's victory in 2014 affect India's relations with its neighbors and its traditional foreign policy stance? Are these effects likely to continue in Modi's next term?

Traditionally, India has aspired to be South Asia's hegemon. As such, independent of the ideological persuasion of the government in power, India has attempted to assert its political will on its smaller neighbors whenever it saw them acting in ways contrary to Indian interests. For example, the Congress government in the 1980s vigorously intervened in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka, driven by a complex mix of domestic and international factors.

When Modi was elected to office in 2014, he made outreach to India's immediate neighbors a foreign policy priority, starting with inviting the leaders of these countries to his swearing-in ceremony in May. This approach extended to soft-power efforts such as promoting Buddhist religious diplomacy as well as substantive measures to reorient India's gaze eastward toward the Bay of Bengal littorals. Notably, Modi made a significant (and ultimately unsuccessful) bid to resolve a long-festering water dispute with Bangladesh, despite his own party's inflammatory domestic political rhetoric toward Muslim migrants from that country.

That is not to say, however, that Modi's foreign policy efforts have been entirely benign in character. Responding to what it perceived as unfair treatment of Nepalese of Indian ancestry in Nepal's new constitution, New Delhi imposed an unofficial blockade of the landlocked country in 2015, angering Kathmandu. Elsewhere in the region, there have been lingering suspicions that Indian intelligence services marshaled opposition parties against



Abhijnan Rej is a New Delhi-based security analyst and political-risk consultant. He was previously Senior Fellow for Strategic Studies at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi. His work has appeared in the *Washington Quarterly*, *War on the Rocks*, and the U.S. Army War College's online journal *War Room*, among other outlets.

the incumbent Rajapaksa government in Sri Lanka in 2015 and possibly the Yameen regime in Maldives in 2018.

In Modi's second term, Indian foreign policy to neighboring states will likely follow this approach of utilizing a mix of carrots and sticks. One would expect him to put a premium on maintaining strong relations with the Bay of Bengal littorals, keeping China's inroads into the region in mind. The relationship between Maldives and China will continue to be of concern to New Delhi, even though the current president, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, is widely considered to be far more amenable to New Delhi's position than his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen. Nepal, however, will perhaps pose the biggest challenge to Modi in his second term and in many ways serve as a test of India's regional role in the face of China's growing influence.

Despite a brief warming period in the wake of Modi's impromptu visit to Pakistan in late 2015, conflict between the two neighbors has intensified. What options exist to de-escalate current tensions?

The Modi government's approach to Pakistan can be divided into two periods: May 2014–August 2016 and September 2016–May 2019. The first period was marked by bonhomie, including an invitation for then prime minister Nawaz Sharif to attend Modi's swearing-in ceremony. Modi not only became the first Indian prime minister to visit Pakistan in over a decade (in December 2015) but also notably invited a Pakistani intelligence team to visit India to investigate an attack on an Indian Air Force base (in Pathankot, Punjab, in January 2016). These moves were striking for a hard-line Hindu-nationalist government. During this period, the national security advisers of both countries were also reportedly in touch through backchannels.

The second period began in 2016. In September 2016, in response to a terrorist attack at a military base in Kashmir, India ordered a special-forces raid inside Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The nadir of relations during Modi's first term, of course, came in late February of this year with the limited aerial combat between the countries. The backdrop of the second period thus has been incessant violence and an alarming increase in the frequency of ceasefire violations, which now involve heavy-artillery fire exchange as well.

Yet, the Modi government has not completely ruled out talks with Pakistan in its second term. A senior BJP leader has recently hinted at the possibility for talks between Modi and Imran Khan at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in June. India and Pakistan also continue to engage diplomatically over the construction of a land corridor that would connect the two countries, enabling Indian Sikhs to visit a holy shrine in Pakistan. Talks over the Kartarpur Corridor have continued despite the February clashes, and the initiative could provide

diplomatic cover to initiate wider talks. Finally, reports suggest that the Indian national security adviser and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence chief continue to stay in touch.

These developments indicate a degree of flexibility on the part of Modi when it comes to engaging Pakistan, which runs counter to his hardline public rhetoric. To what extent these mechanisms are leveraged as constructive de-escalation tools during his second term remains to be seen. This is a crucial unknown, especially in light of the fact that being tough on Pakistan (when it came to terrorism emanating from that country) was one of his major re-election campaign planks; there is a real risk that the prime minister may very well have set a commitment trap for himself during his re-election bid.

Since 2014, the Modi administration has worked to strengthen ties between India and East and Southeast Asia. In what ways is the Act East policy complementary or adversarial to Chinese initiatives in India's neighborhood? How do you see this policy shaping Sino-Indian relations from 2019 onward?

Perhaps the most serious foreign policy challenge that Modi faced in his first term was coping with the very visible Chinese outreach to India's neighbors through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While renaming "Look East" as "Act East" did signal that India was serious about concretely expanding its ties to Southeast Asia, capacity constraints mean that most of the initiatives supporting this policy have yet to materialize. The same goes for India's response to BRI in its immediate neighborhood. Take, as a case in point, what is billed, variously, by New Delhi as its answer to that initiative—the "spice" or "cotton" route. It is still unclear how India intends to finance this or other ambitious connectivity projects that it regularly floats. Meanwhile, the fate of major projects with other actors, such as the ambitious Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with Japan, remains unclear as well.

During his first visit to China in May 2015, Modi had endorsed the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor. The project of course became a muted subject during the downturn phase in India-China relations from summer 2016 to the so-called reset with the informal Wuhan summit between Modi and Xi Jinping in April 2018. Since then, Modi has explicitly pointed out that India's vision of the Indo-Pacific is "inclusive" and that it does not see the construct as "a club of limited members." This statement, along with emphasizing ASEAN centrality, indicates a more accommodative tone toward Beijing in New Delhi's regional policies. Significantly, India did not protest the Second Belt and Road Forum held in April, whereas its trenchant criticism of the first edition in 2016 had irked Beijing considerably.

During the 2014 elections, Modi heavily criticized China's "mindset of expansion." What strategy will India take to counter expanding Chinese influence in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific? Might India soften its stance toward China in 2019 in order to meet lofty development and economic goals?

At the heart of India's China policy lies a dilemma that arises out of its quest to simultaneously achieve domestic development goals and emerge as a great power. In order to accomplish the first—especially in areas where significant foreign investment is needed, such as infrastructure development—New Delhi simply cannot ignore Beijing if the United States and its allies do not up their game. At the same time, India can hardly challenge every single perceived Chinese impingement on its strategic space if it looks toward Chinese-led institutions (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) to meet its development goals. This dilemma is especially pronounced because India's own capacity constraints prevent it from becoming a significant alternative to Chinese initiatives in its own neighborhood.

Going forward, India will likely seek a clever *modus vivendi* when it comes to BRI in general and the

subcontinent in particular. This could involve New Delhi and Beijing launching a set of connectivity projects together that would be, at least on paper, distinct from the BRI but complementary to it. That way, India can sidestep the thorny issue of sovereignty related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (and which serves as the principal obstacle to its participation in BRI). Beijing, for its part, would be more than happy to see India partner in a Chinese-funded connectivity project. True to the multiaxial nature of Indian foreign policy, Modi will also continue to use the U.S.-Australia-Japan-India quadrilateral format and other mechanisms to explore infrastructure development and connectivity alternatives for smaller Indo-Pacific states, especially in its neighborhood.

Could China's geopolitical strategy in the Indo-Pacific cause India to rethink its tradition of nonalignment and possibly even move toward an alliance with the United States?


Under Modi, India's grand strategy has been driven by what his top diplomats call "issue-based alignment"—which, in practice, is another name for strategic opportunism. This multiaxial foreign policy has been gospel for India since the end of the Cold War in 1991. Modi has merely tinkered on the margins, strengthening the India-U.S. axis and de-emphasizing the India-Russia one in relative terms. That said, as his foreign secretary recently stated, India will continue to pursue "strategic autonomy," which is New Delhi's code for the ability to switch sides at will depending on the issue at hand.

A formal alliance with the United States is out of the question due to structural as well as domestic political reasons. At a structural level, the relative decline of the United States—ironically amplified by President Donald Trump's "America first" policy—could very well raise questions in New Delhi about Washington's long-term commitment (in terms of capacity as well as will) to staying the course in Asia. In terms of domestic politics, within the

larger Hindu-nationalist polity (of which the BJP is a part) there is considerable anti-Americanism and suspicion of Western modernity. Modi, as well as his successors, may find these forces to be the real insurmountable obstacle in aligning India any closer to the United States strategically.

India's relationship with Russia is, as one can imagine, complicated. At one level, it is purely transactional, revolving around high-end arms sales. The Indian military has become "mode locked" to Russian hardware and the ecosystem around it, having trained on these platforms for generations. But beyond this issue, which will take a generation to overcome, the fact of the matter

remains that Russia is willing to sell India equipment that no other country in the world is, such as nuclear-propelled submarines.

Beyond the issue of military sales, Russia's emergence as a major actor in Afghanistan is also something that will continue to shape India's outlook toward that country. As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, New Delhi will need a friend with heft in the region, and Moscow could be that friend. 

This interview was conducted by Aimée Tat, a Political and Security Affairs Intern at NBR.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF ASIAN RESEARCH

Founded in the legacy of Senator Henry M. Jackson, NBR provides Members of Congress and their staff with the highest-quality Asia expertise through policy-relevant research and private and public briefings with our network of experts. NBR is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution headquartered in Seattle, Washington, with a second office in Washington, D.C. More information on NBR can be found at www.nbr.org.

For information on NBR's programs on Capitol Hill, please contact Dan Aum at NBRdc@nbr.org or (202) 347-9767.

