



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

## Political Science

### NARENDRA MODI AND INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

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#### ABSTRACT

On May 26, 2014 Narendra Modi assumed as the prime minister of India. Soon after the new government formed, world leaders expressed their willingness to work with the Modi Government to strengthen their relations with India as it would provide them with a bigger market. he has made official visits to Bhutan, Nepal, and Japan within the first 100 days of his government, followed by visits to the United States, Myanmar, Australia and Fiji. Modi, who was parliamentary leader of the BJP, started his tenure after his swearing-in as the 16th Prime Minister of India on 30 May 2019. All five permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council sent their envoys to India within the first 100 days after inauguration, which is significant given India's long-standing bid to get a permanent membership at United Nation's Security Council.

#### INTRODUCTION

Modi's foreign policy is focused on improving relations with neighboring countries in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> engaging the extended neighbourhood of Southeast Asia and the major global powers. In pursuit of this, he has made official visits to Bhutan, Nepal and Japan within the first 100 days of his government, followed by visits to the United States, Myanmar, Australia, and Fiji. He acknowledged the fact that he was going to be the first Prime Minister of India to be born after independence and that it would be natural to expect a shift in world view from his predecessors. He also pledged to have a "strong" foreign policy, which includes trading with China. He asked the External Affairs Ministry to focus more on trade deals than other geopolitical initiatives.<sup>2</sup>

Modi's first foreign policy outlook was revealed during the run-up for the Prime Ministerial candidate in his party in 2013 when he was in a Network 18 program called Think India, dialogue forum. He mentioned the following points:

- Improving relations with immediate neighbors would be his priority as peace and tranquility in South Asia were essential in order to realize his development agenda.
- He pledged to introduce the concept of para-diplomacy in India where each state and city would have the liberty to forge special relations with countries, federal states or cities of their interest.
- Bilateral trade would dominate relations with most countries except for a few important global powers with which India shares a strategic partnership.

Modi responded to the congratulatory messages and phone calls from most world leaders that he had received in the aftermath of his victory.<sup>3</sup>

Sushma Swaraj, one of the senior leaders of BJP, was given the portfolio of External Affairs which was going to be a very important ministry with India's growing role in international affairs. She was the first woman to hold the office. Earlier on her capacity of leader of opposition in Lok Sabha from 2009 to 2014, she met a galaxy of visiting foreign leaders which apparently helped her understand foreign relations. Modi appointed Ajit Doval, a seasoned intelligence officer, as National Security Advisor.

Ajit Doval is believed to be close to the RSS, an organization from which Narendra came. On 28 January 2015, only a day

after the US President Barack Obama's successful India visit, the Modi government sacked Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh and appointed Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in her place, Jaishankar used to be as India's ambassador to the United States. Modi himself was believed to be unhappy over Singh's ability to lead the foreign office and on the other hand impressed by Jaishankar's diplomatic skills in turning the flagging relationship with the US into a flourishing partnership. His secondary aides also include Arvind Gupta (deputy NSA) and MJ Akbar (sworn in as the Minister of State for External Affairs).<sup>4</sup>

#### Policy Initiative

Former National Security Adviser & Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, an academic at Brookings, opined that the Modi Government's foreign policy is one of "strategic incoherence", executed without an "overarching conceptual framework". There have been many policy initiatives since that has been making the headlines.<sup>5</sup>

#### Act East policy

From the very beginning the Modi led government made it amply clear that India would focus more and more on improving relations with ASEAN, and other East Asian countries as per India's Look East policy which was formulated during Narasimha Rao's government in 1992 for better economic engagement with its eastern neighbours but the successive government later successfully turned it into a tool for forging strategic partnership and security cooperation with countries in that region in general and Vietnam and Japan in particular. In her recent visit to Hanoi, Vietnam Sushma Swaraj has stressed on the need for an "Act East Policy" that she said should replace India's over two-decade-old "Look East Policy" emphasizing a more proactive role for India in this region.<sup>6</sup>

#### Neighbourhood first policy

One of the major policy initiatives taken by the Modi government is to focus back on its immediate neighbors in South Asia. Gujral doctrine was an important approach where India made its relation with its neighborhood which stands on five important principles. Even before becoming the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi hinted that his foreign policy will actively focus on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours which is being termed "neighbourhood first: policy in the media" and he started well by inviting all heads of state/heads of government of South Asian countries in his

inauguration and on the second day on the office he held bilateral talks with all of them individually which was dubbed as a mini SAARC summit by the media. Later during a launch event at ISRO, he asked Indian scientists to take the endeavour to develop a dedicated SAARC satellite to share the fruits of the technology like tele-medicine, e-learning etc. with the people across South Asia to complement the currently operating Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme program in the region.<sup>7</sup>

### Indian Ocean outreach

The Indian Ocean region (IOR), which has long been considered as India's nautical backyard, is steadily turning into a hotspot thanks to growing Chinese strategic presence over the region's numerous strategically located archipelagos. To counter the recent moves made by China in the name of President Xi's pet Maritime Silk Road project, India started to reach out its maritime neighbors in the IOR with proposals of enhanced economic and security cooperation. The policy towards IOR started to unfold during Sri Lankan president's visit to New Delhi in February 2015. Following that Modi embarked on a three nations Yatra to Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka, although Maldives was also initially part of this outreach, the recent political turmoil in that country led to the last-minute cancellation of the scheduled visit.<sup>8</sup> Ahead of Modi's scheduled visit to Beijing in May 2015, India wanted to project that it commanded a strategic supremacy over the IOR and that its relations with its maritime neighbors were far more cordial than that of China's with particular reference to South China sea.<sup>9</sup>

### Project Mausam

On the back of growing Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean region, which India considers its area of responsibility, the Modi administration has introduced 'Project Mausam', which is believed to rival the Chinese Maritime Silk Road initiative. Mausam which means weather or season in many South and Southeast Asian languages is highlighted because of its profound role in cultural exchanges in the region as in ancient time maritime trade used to depend on seasonal monsoon winds. The project, which is still in the evolving phase, is being planned with the Cultural Ministry, that will focus on the ancient trade and cultural linkages with emphasize on future maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region stretching from Southeast Asia to East Africa with the central location of India, from where the ocean derived its name.<sup>10</sup>

### Cooperation with Pacific Islands

Modi chose to visit Fiji soon after democracy was re-established in the island country after 8 years. There apart from the bilateral meeting, he also met heads of government from 14 Pacific island states to enhance India's engagement in the region and proposed a "Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation" be held on a regular basis. He conveyed there India's keenness to work closely with Pacific Island nations to advance their development priorities. In this regard a number of measures to strengthen India's partnership in the region were proposed that includes setting up of a 'special fund of \$1 billion' for adapting climate change vis-a-vis clean energy, establishing a 'trade office' in India, 'Pan Pacific Islands e-network' to close the physical distance between the islands by improving digital connectivity, extending visa on arrival at Indian airports for all the fourteen Pacific Island countries, 'space cooperation' in space technology applications for improving the quality of life on the islands, 'training to diplomats' from Pacific Island countries to increase mutual understanding. He also expressed his willingness to host the leaders in any of India's coastal town for the next summit in 2015. It was quite significant to see Chinese President Xi following Modi's trail visited Fiji on 21 November 2015 to meet a similar gathering of leaders indicating a struggle for influence between the two Asian giants in the island countries of south Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

### Fast-track Diplomacy

On completion of the first 100 days of Modi government, the External Affairs Ministry published a booklet called "Fast Track Diplomacy" show-casing the achievement made in the foreign policy arena. In her first media interaction, the minister Sushma Swaraj said the catchphrase for her tenure was 'fast-track diplomacy' and said it had three faces – proactive, strong and sensitive. Since taking office the External Affairs Minister held a round-table meeting with all Indian heads of missions to the SAARC region, ASEAN region and the Middle East separately as a follow-up measure to carry forward the leads gained by high-profile visits and exchanges.<sup>12</sup>

### Para Diplomacy

One of the innovative ideas of Modi government is the introduction of elements of para-diplomacy in India's foreign policy where each state and cities would be encouraged to forge special relation with countries or federal states of another country or even cities of their interest. During the next visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Town twinning agreement between Mumbai and Shanghai, Ahmadabad and Guangzhou and a similar "sister states" agreement between Gujarat and Guangdong of China will likely to be signed. Earlier Varanasi signed a partnership agreement with Kyoto and Japan.<sup>13</sup>

### Analysis

From the very beginning, the Modi led government made it amply clear that India would focus more and more on improving relation with ASEAN and other East Asian countries as per India's Look East policy which was formulated during Narasimha Rao's government in 1992 for better economic engagement with its eastern neighbors, but the successive government later successfully turned it into a tool for forging strategic partnership and security cooperation with countries in that region. East Asia being the major focus area of his foreign policy, Modi and his foreign minister chose several Asian countries for their initial bilateral visits. He has made state visits to Bhutan and Nepal, Myanmar and Japan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hinted that his foreign policy will actively focus on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours which is being termed as "neighbourhood first" policy in the media.

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