

HINDU NATIONALISM AND THE FOREIGN POLICY OF INDIA'S BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

Sumit Ganguly

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1 INTRODUCTION

Despite India being a predominantly Hindu country, its nationalist movement was mostly secular. Indeed the principal architect of India's foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a staunch secularist.¹ More to the point, the makers of India's post-independence constitution envisaged it as a secular, democratic republic.² Consequently, religion, especially in the first several decades of India's independence, played little or no role in its foreign policy.

On the contrary, it has been argued that India's commitment to secularism actually shaped some critical foreign and security policy choices. Specifically, a desire to demonstrate its secular credentials animated its efforts to incorporate the predominantly Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir into the Republic of India.³ The quest to merge Kashmir into the Indian body politic was especially important to the first generation of India's policymakers because they were keen on demolishing the so-called "two-nation theory" that the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah,

had propagated.⁴ This concept, briefly stated, held that Hindus and Muslims constituted two distinct, primordial nations and that India's professed commitment to secularism was little more than cosmetic.⁵ Jinnah, of course, had made this argument primarily for instrumental political ends. As able Indian historians have shown, Muslims hardly constituted a monolithic entity within India. Instead they were divided on the basis of social class, sect, and region.⁶

The clearest rebuttal to Jinnah's vision, as far as India's policymakers were concerned, came in the aftermath of the East Pakistan crisis of 1971.⁷ This crisis was entirely indigenous, faced ruthless repression, and culminated in a successful movement for independence, with India winning a brief war with West Pakistan in December 1971 and confirming Bangladesh's independence.⁸ India's leadership deemed the creation of Bangladesh to be a firm repudiation of the "two-nation theory" because Islam alone had failed to serve as the basis

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¹ D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

² Admittedly, the term "secular" was not in the original draft of the constitution. It was added in 1976 through the 42nd amendment to the Constitution. On this subject, see G. Austin, *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ The successful integration of the state, which was also claimed by Pakistan, into India would demonstrate that a Muslim-majority province could thrive under the aegis of a secular state. For a discussion of the subject and the origins of the territorial dispute with Pakistan, see S. Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁴ It may be useful to underscore that Nehru was quite consistent in his opposition to the creation of states on the basis of religious nationalism. Quite apart from the role of India's significant Muslim population, he had opposed the creation of the state of Israel until it became a fait accompli. On this subject, see N. Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change and Compromise since 1922* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ For a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the origins of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland, see V. Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶ M. Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1997).

⁷ One of the best discussions of the origins of the crisis remains R.V. Jackson, *South Asian Crisis: India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh: A Political and Historical Analysis of the 1971 War* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

⁸ For a discussion of the repression of the movement, see G. J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

for keeping East and West Pakistan together.⁹ Instead, other elements of ethnic identity, most notably that of language, had proved to be deeply divisive.¹⁰

This essay will outline the pathways through which religious nationalism entered the Indian political arena, discuss the concomitant decline of secularism in India, and trace the gradual emergence of a Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It will then discuss and assess the extent to which the ideological commitments of the party and its leadership have influenced and are likely to shape the conduct of India's foreign policy, as one year ago the BJP returned to power with a strong electoral mandate under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

⁹ P.N. Chopra, *India's Second Liberation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974).

¹⁰ On this point, see P. Oldenburg, "A Place Insufficiently Imagined: Language, Belief and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 44:4, August 1985, 711-733.

2 RELIGION AND INDIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

Ironically, after the decisive victory in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, Indian domestic politics over the next two decades witnessed a steady departure from the early commitment to secularism. The reasons for this shift are complex and can only be discussed briefly here. In considerable part, the rise of religious nationalism within India can be traced to three distinct sources. First, and most importantly, it stemmed from the related forces of political mobilization and political decay.¹¹

Nehru had not only been the leading exponent of India's foreign policy, but also played an integral role in the development of the country's domestic institutions.¹² In striking contrast to her father, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi demonstrated scant regard for institutional procedures and instead contributed to their disavowal. Among other matters, she undermined the role of the once dominant Congress Party, reduced the independence of the judiciary, and, during an ill-fated period when she declared a "state of emergency," curbed press freedoms, personal rights, and civil liberties.¹³

Second, she personalized and centralized political power and resorted to a form of populist and plebiscitary politics.¹⁴ Her populism and plebiscitary gestures unleashed an unprecedented tide of political mobilization as large numbers of India's previously quiescent electorate entered the political arena. Unfortunately, India's denuded

political institutions simply could not cope with the demands for political participation that these new entrants sought. Not surprisingly, much political instability ensued across significant parts of the country.

Third, under her watch, the Congress Party underwent a dramatic deterioration. Of all these developments, the decline of the Congress Party proved to be the most significant. As the party witnessed the decline of its institutional apparatus, including the end of intra-party elections, Mrs. Gandhi was compelled to resort to communal (sectarian) appeals and to short circuit established constitutional procedures to bolster her sagging political fortunes. This led her to undermine the emergence of regional political parties that threatened the dominance of the Congress. The most dramatic case thereof was in the state of Punjab in northern India. In an attempt to challenge the growing popularity of a regional political party, Akali Dal, she subtly encouraged the rise of a violent, fundamentalist Sikh preacher, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.¹⁵ This strategy proved to be disastrous as it boosted an ethno-religious insurgency across the Punjab. Unable to control the forces that she had helped unleash, eventually Mrs. Gandhi had to call on the Indian Army to lay siege to the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple in the city of Amritsar, to flush out Bhindranwale and his followers who had turned the sacred site into a terrorist lair. In turn, this military operation, which proved quite costly in terms of civilian lives, led to her assassination at the hands of two of her disaffected Sikh bodyguards in October 1984. Following her assassination, a vicious anti-Sikh

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¹¹ For the best statement of the workings of these two forces and their consequences, see S. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹² See R. Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New Delhi: Pan Macmillan, 2011).

¹³ H. Hart, ed. *Indira Gandhi's India: A Political System Re-Appraised* (Boulder: Westview, 1977).

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion, see R.L. Hardgrave, Jr. *India Under Pressure: Prospects of Political Stability* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984).

¹⁵ H. Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," *Asian Survey*, 32:11, November 1992, pp.969-987.

When confronted with the prospect of the possible desertion of a reliable Congress voting bloc, [Rajiv Gandhi] further undermined the party's secular ethos.

pogrom swept across New Delhi, resulting in the deaths of several thousand Sikhs.¹⁶

Her death, however, did not signal the end of the social forces that had been set in motion during her final years in office. The virulence of the Sikh insurgency had actually provoked the anxieties of the majority Hindu population, especially in northern India. Sikhs, not surprisingly, were already the object of fear and suspicion. However, Hindu-Muslim relations had a far longer politically charged history and so anti-Muslim sentiment could be provoked with greater ease at a time when Hindus in northern India were already in a fearful state.¹⁷ Consequently, political sentiments were ripe for exploitation, especially because the Congress Party, which had historically enjoyed political appeal across cross-cutting social cleavages, was in a state of decline.

Indira Gandhi's son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, who won an overwhelming mandate as the consequence of a sympathy vote following her assassination, made some desultory attempts to restore the institutional machinery of the party. However, faced with a backlash from its old guard, he quickly abandoned his efforts. Furthermore, when confronted with the prospect of the possible desertion of a reliable Congress voting bloc, he further undermined the party's secular ethos.

The issue that triggered the decision was a 1985 Indian Supreme Court ruling to grant alimony to an indigent Muslim woman, Shah Bano, thereby overriding Muslim Personal Law. Faced with protest from some conservative segments of the Muslim community, especially clerics, Rajiv Gandhi chose to use his parliamentary majority

¹⁶ A. Pillalamarri, "India's Anti-Sikh Riots, 30 Years on," *The Diplomat*, October 31, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/indias-anti-sikh-riots-30-years-on/>.

¹⁷ P.R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

to pass legislation exempting Muslims from the expectations of Indian civil law.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, the then-small Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) roundly attacked this decision, arguing that the Congress was pandering to the Muslim community and indulging what they termed "pseudo secularism." Confronted with the reaction of the BJP and now fearing a loss of Hindu votes, Rajiv Gandhi and some of his closest associates, most notably Arun Nehru, embarked on a different strategy designed to strengthen his political base. It is widely believed that Arun Nehru exerted pressure on a district judge to open the Babri Masjid (mosque), a long-disputed site in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁹ The mosque, according to fundamentalist Hindus, had been erected on the ruins of a temple that had consecrated the birthplace of Lord Rama, an important member of the Hindu pantheon.²⁰

This decision, designed to reopen an old controversy and thereby appeal to conservative Hindu voters, proved to be disastrous. The BJP quickly seized upon the issue and easily outbid the Congress. It started a nationwide agitation campaign focused on the demolition of the mosque on the grounds that it had been built following the destruction of a Hindu temple.²¹ Though the archeological evidence does not support the BJP's contention, the issue quickly generated a substantial following and in December 1992 culminated in the destruction of the mosque at the hands of Hindu fanatics. As a result, a spate of Hindu-Muslim riots

¹⁸ S. Ganguly, "The Crisis of Indian Secularism," *Journal of Democracy*, October 2003, 14:4, pp.11-25.

¹⁹ S. Ganguly, "Ethno-religious Conflict in South Asia," *Survival*, Summer 1993, 35:2, p.104.

²⁰ For a discussion of the politics, see P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²¹ S. Gopal ed. *The Anatomy of a Confrontation* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991).

swept across the country, but the BJP's popularity did not wane. In fact, after some halting attempts, it successfully assumed power in 1998 as the principal party in a coalition government.

During its first term in office, from 1998 to 2004, the BJP did not fundamentally depart from India's past foreign policy orientation, apart from promptly testing nuclear weapons in May 1998. There is a great deal of polemical analysis of the BJP's decision to conduct the nuclear tests. Many of these accounts highlight the party's hawkish orientation toward issues of foreign and security policy. Specifically, they argue that the decision to cross the nuclear Rubicon can be attributed to the party's desire to enhance India's status and prestige in the global order.²²

Though superficially attractive, this argument is fundamentally flawed. The quest for status and prestige in the international arena has been a constant in India's foreign policy since independence. Consequently, a constant feature

²² See for example, G. Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

could hardly explain a discrete event. The answer, instead, must be sought elsewhere and can be traced to long-term threats from India's two principal adversaries, Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. A host of previous Indian governments, regardless of ideological coloration, had long nurtured and supported the nuclear weapons program. A particular conjunction of circumstances, at the global and regional levels, especially the indefinite and unconditional extension of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and ramifications for India of the passage of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, led the BJP-dominated regime to carry out the nuclear tests. A Congress government would have likely done the same.²³

²³ S. Ganguly, "India's Pathway to Pokhran II: The Prospects and Sources of India's Nuclear Weapons Program," *International Security*, 23:4, Spring 1999, pp.148-177.

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3 THE IDEOLOGICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

In the BJP's vision, the presence of various religious and cultural minorities in India can contribute to social fissures. More to the point, such minorities may not be suitably loyal to the Indian state.

Even though its ideological predilections cannot be connected with the decision to test nuclear weapons, there is little or no question that the BJP (like its forerunner, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh) has a distinctive set of ideological proclivities. It is beyond the scope of this brief discussion to outline in any detail the ideological corpus of this right-wing party. These have been quite ably discussed elsewhere.²⁴

However, some of its key beliefs, convictions, and ideas do need to be spelled out, especially as they relate to foreign policy. A central proposition that has undergirded the philosophy of both the Jana Sangh and its successor is that Hinduism is coterminous with the territory of India. The roots of this idea can be traced to the writings of one of the principal exponents of Hindu nationalism, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. As Christophe Jaffrelot has written:

*The Hindutva of Savarkar was conceived primarily as an ethnic community possessing a territory and sharing the same racial and cultural characteristics, three attributes which stemmed from the mythical reconstruction of the Vedic Golden Age.*²⁵

In effect, those who reside in the territory of India (visualized as extending naturally from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean) must be deemed to be Hindus. In addition to this fundamental precept that underlies the BJP's vision of religious nationalism, another key element can be traced to the writings of Savarkar and his ideological compatriot Madhav Golwalkar. As the political theorist Rahul Sagar has written:

*Savarkar and Golwalkar see conflict and war as undesirable but inevitable as long as the world comprises selfish individuals and parochially minded communities. Hence, they recommend that India cultivate the willingness and ability to engage in war and power politics to be able to fend off external aggression.*²⁶

Yet Sagar quite astutely cautions against any facile attempt to equate this belief with one of the central premises of classical realism, namely the emphasis on the acquisition of material capabilities. Instead, he argues that that in their vision, national power relies upon the fostering of an "assertive and exclusionary nationalism."²⁷ In the BJP's vision, the presence of various religious and cultural minorities in India can contribute to social fissures. More to the point, such minorities may not be suitably loyal to the Indian state. This point is far from trivial. Instead it must be deemed as being inextricably intertwined with the BJP's domestic political agenda.

When it was first in office between 1998 and 2004, the BJP governed within the context of a coalition. Many of its coalition partners had not necessarily shared the party's ideological agenda and especially its vision of exclusionary nationalism. Consequently, some of its most cherished goals, such as the abolition of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution (which grants a special status to the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir) and the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code (thereby doing away with Muslim Personal Law), had to be set aside. It did, however, try to alter the writing of history and civics textbooks. Specifically,

²⁴ B. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The origins and development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (London: Hurst, 1993).

²⁵ Jaffrelot, 1993 p.27.

²⁶ R. Sagar, "Jiski Lathi, Uski Bhains," *The Hindu Nationalist View of International Politics*, in K. Bajpai, S. Basit, and V. Krishnappa, eds. *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.237.

²⁷ Ibid.

these alterations were designed to denigrate the periods of Muslim rule in India.²⁸

²⁸ On this subject, see S. Ganguly, "The Crisis of Indian Secularism," *Journal of Democracy*, 14:4, October 2003, pp.11-25.

4 TRANSFORMING INDIA?

There is little question that Modi, now that he is in office, can afford to alienate the significant segment of his organizational and political base that remains committed to an agenda of Hindu cultural and political dominance.

In 2014, the BJP returned to office with a clear-cut majority in parliament. Even though it has a set of allies, it does not depend on them for its survival in office. Most importantly, the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, a former chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat, has roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization that is closely allied to the BJP and known for its fervent commitment to a pro-Hindu political agenda.²⁹ Furthermore, it needs to be underscored that in 2002, during Modi's tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat, one of India's worst pogroms against Muslims in recent memory took place in the state.³⁰ Not surprisingly, the new regime has, and without much fanfare, embarked upon a strategy of undermining India's already denuded secular edifice. Several moves it has made since assuming office demonstrate that it remains committed to a vision of India that is markedly different from what the principal nationalist leaders of the country's independence struggle had envisaged.

The BJP did not come to office with an unambiguous majority in parliament because of its ideological proclivities. Instead, as a number of scholars have shown, its victory can be attributed to the widespread disenchantment of the electorate with the previous ruling coalition, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The ruling coalition was perceived to be corrupt and inept, unable to sustain economic growth and provide competent governance.³¹

That said, there is little question that Modi, now that he is in office, can afford to alienate the significant segment of his organizational and political base that remains committed to an agenda of Hindu cultural and political dominance. He appears to have embarked on a deft political strategy. On one level, he has, without a doubt, sought to revive the country's sagging economic fortunes, with mixed results.³² However, at another level, despite public pronouncements to the contrary, he has made several important gestures to the more ideologically charged members of his constituency and has given loose rein to party members and members of parliament pursuing a sectarian agenda. In late 2014, for example, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti, a junior minister in Modi's government, publically stated that Indians should "decide whether you want a government of those born of Ram, or those born illegitimately."³³ Faced with a firestorm of controversy in parliament, Modi distanced his party from her remarks but also sought to exculpate her on the basis of her rural origins.³⁴

A number of other salient examples support this argument. Shortly after assuming office, Modi appointed Yellapragada Sudershan Rao, a historian of limited professional standing, as the new director of the prestigious and influential Indian Council of Historical Research. This government-funded body is responsible for granting awards and fellowships to both Indian and foreign scholars. Thereby it has the capacity to influence the course and direction of much historical scholarship. Quite apart from

²⁹ For a discussion of the origins, organization, and evolution of the RSS, see W. Andersen and S. Damle, *The Brotherhood Of Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

³⁰ S. Varadarajan, *Gujarat, The Making of a Tragedy* (New Delhi, Penguin, 2002).

³¹ E. Sridharan, "India's Watershed Vote: Behind Modi's Victory," *Journal of Democracy*, October 2014, 25:4, pp.20-33.

³² R. Zhang, N. Mandhana, and S. Anand, "India's Modi at One Year: 'Euphoria Phase' Is Over, Challenges Loom," *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2015.

³³ Quoted in E. Barry, "Indian Official's Firing Sought Over Remarks," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2014.

³⁴ M.N. Parth, "India's Narendra Modi apologizes for Official's Remarks on non-Hindus," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2014.

his lack of professional stature, Rao, among other controversial views, holds that the two Hindu religious epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, should be considered accurate accounts of India's past. Worse still, nationalist ideologues with little patience for alternative accounts of these epics have sought to eliminate their critical examination in university syllabi, with some success.³⁵

Other entities, too, are apparently taking their cues from the government's attempt to pass off mythological accounts as established historical facts. In January 2015, at the annual meeting of the Indian Science Congress held in Mumbai, a number of presenters asserted similar bizarre claims. These included statements that Indian physicians pioneered plastic surgery well over a thousand years ago, that helicopters had flown in ancient India, and that an Indian flier had piloted a heavier-than-air flying machine a decade before the Wright brothers.

All these developments, though outlandish, are not nearly as disturbing as some other events that more directly threaten India's fragile secular order and portend the rise of an exclusionary, primordial nationalism. One of these movements, the "ghar wapsi" (literally "return home"), is especially disquieting. Sponsored by the RSS, this movement attempts to convert members of other faiths to Hinduism and has been targeted at poor and

³⁵ S.N. Vijetha, "Historians Protest as Delhi University Purges Ramayana Essay from Syllabus," *The Hindu*, January 19, 2012.

working-class minorities. According to reliable Indian sources, as many as 8,000 individuals in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have been converted to Hinduism since the onset of the program. There is, of course, a supreme irony to this endeavor: Hinduism does not accept proselytization. Nevertheless, the project is well under way and has caused much anxiety amongst minority communities across India. Simultaneously, there has been a spate of attacks on Christian churches. Only in the aftermath of vigorous protests from the clergy did Modi publicly condemn these attacks.³⁶

The flurry of statements from those in influential positions and the growing climate of intolerance against minorities cannot be dismissed as mere aberrant incidents. Instead they must necessarily be construed as an important component of a political strategy — one that seeks to transform India's domestic political and indeed constitutional order. Indeed, it is entirely in keeping with what the early ideologues of Hindu supremacy long argued: India's success on the global stage is dependent upon the forging of a monolithic Hindu nation.

³⁶ Much of this analysis has been drawn from S. Ganguly, "Modi's Balancing Act: India's Conservative Social Agenda Threatens Its Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2015-03-26/modis-balancing-act>.

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5 A REQUIEM FOR NON-ALIGNMENT?

Unlike every other government since India's independence, the new regime has not felt compelled to publicly affirm its fealty to non-alignment.

Modi's domestic agenda seems clear: despite some inevitable setbacks, his government is keen to promote rapid economic development, while it has little use for India's long-held (if imperfect) commitment to a secular polity. What are some of the initial portents of his preferred foreign policy goals and outcomes? At the outset, it is important to mention that unlike every other government since India's independence, the new regime has not felt compelled to publicly affirm its fealty to non-alignment.

Obviously, the doctrine's utility was limited, if not utterly bereft, after the end of the Cold War. Despite the concept's obvious lack of meaning, various Indian commentators and analysts had sought to infuse it with new purpose.³⁷ To them, this moribund idea remained robust. They had contended that pared to the bone, it signified India's ability to make decisions and choices on the basis of their intrinsic merits and free from external interference.³⁸ Modi's lack of reference to this important lodestar in India's foreign policy constitutes a dramatic departure from the past.³⁹ His silence on the matter is significant because the doctrine was closely identified with the politics of the once-dominant Congress Party and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

While Modi has little use for either the Nehruvian commitment to secularism or a mixed economy at home, his unwillingness to invoke the principle of non-alignment in the conduct of India's foreign

relations also signifies a departure from the Nehruvian foreign policy consensus with a number of stated commitments. Amongst these were solidarity with the global South, a stated pledge to universal nuclear disarmament, and a reluctance to resort to the use of force. In practice, many of these professed goals were honored in the breach. Nevertheless, they did constitute a set of ideals that India's policymakers alluded to as desirable ends.

Since assuming office, Modi has evinced scant interest in and has expressed even less enthusiasm for these values and postures. Instead, his extremely vigorous ventures abroad and changes at global, regional, and bilateral levels seem to herald a markedly new era in India's foreign policy. Three key imperatives in his foreign policy can already be discerned. The first involves engaging with a number of advanced industrialized states to boost India's economic interests. The second involves designing a strategy to cope with a resurgent China. The third involves attempts to improve relations with India's neighbors as well as states in the Indian Ocean littoral also with a firm eye toward limiting China's influence. The one exception to this effort may well be India's bilateral relations with Pakistan.

Modi's lack of interest in historical baggage was exemplified in his decision to invite U.S. President Barack Obama as the chief guest at India's annual Republic Day parade in January 2015. This gesture was fraught with considerable meaning: no U.S. president had ever been asked to grace this occasion. In many ways, this move could be construed as a signal that his government is ready to forge a normal working relationship with the United States. Given the fraught history of Indo-U.S. relations, the significance of the invitation cannot be underplayed.⁴⁰

³⁷ S. Khilnani, R. Kumar, P.B. Mehta, P. Menon, N. Nilekani, S. Raghavan, S. Saran, and S. Varadarajan, *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: Center for Policy Research, 2012).

³⁸ S. Ganguly, "South Asia After the Cold War," *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 1992, 15:4, pp.173-84.

³⁹ For a discussion, see H.V. Pant, "Out with Non-Alignment, In With A 'Modi Doctrine'" *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/out-with-non-alignment-in-with-a-modi-doctrine/>.

⁴⁰ R. Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Modi has also displayed a keen interest in bolstering existing relationships and expanding India's presence in the emergent global order. These initiatives deserve some comment. Without cataloguing every one of Modi's foreign trips, it is possible to highlight the most salient. Even before traveling to the United States, Modi visited Japan. The Indo-Japanese relationship is of particular significance to this regime for a number of compelling reasons. At the outset, both Modi and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, are unabashed nationalists. They are also acutely concerned about the rise and assertiveness of China. Consequently, Modi's visit to Japan in late August 2014 was multi-faceted, and not surprisingly highlighted the security dimensions of the relationship.⁴¹

At a regional level, Modi also seems more prone to taking new initiatives as well as risks in his dealings with India's neighbors. Some choices seem entirely consistent with his ideologically charged worldview, while others appear to demonstrate a streak of pragmatism. Two key issues seem to animate his regional agenda. First, it is evident that he deems that good relations with India's neighbors are essential to the country's security and well-being. While previous prime ministers in the recent past had expressed similar sentiments, their willingness and ability to follow through on their rhetoric had fallen short. The other, unstated concern, of course, is the looming presence of China in South Asia. Not surprisingly, almost immediately upon assuming office, Modi visited the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. This trip was significant because it was an obvious attempt to ward off the attempts of China to woo Thimphu.⁴²

⁴¹ BS Reporter, "Modi's Japan visit: Top 10 initiatives," *Business Standard*, September 3, 2014.

⁴² TNN, "10 key points of PM Narendra Modi's Bhutan visit," *The Times of India*, June 16, 2014.

This pragmatic attitude has been most evident in Modi's willingness and ability to resolve a nagging border dispute with Bangladesh even though it required a constitutional amendment.⁴³ The resolution of this land border dispute effectively removed a significant and long-standing irritant in Indo-Bangladeshi relations.

Modi's foreign policy has also not neglected India's other neighbors. To that end he has visited Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. In all three countries, apart from specific bilateral issues, he has not lost sight of a central concern: the growing presence and influence of China. In Nepal, which he visited in August 2014, he deftly emphasized India's regard for Nepal sovereignty, saying that Nepal's water resources were its own and that it was for Nepal to decide whether or not it would provide India with hydro-electric power. These statements were deliberately designed to assuage long-standing Nepalese misgivings about India.⁴⁴

Later in November 2014, Modi also visited Myanmar. Despite the inauguration of India's "Look East" policy as early as 1992, subsequent Indian governments had failed to engage the states of Southeast Asia to any substantial degree. This was especially the case with Myanmar. In the meantime, China has made very substantial inroads in the country.⁴⁵ As a noted Indian foreign affairs commentator argued in the wake of his visit, India had long used the rhetoric of cooperation but had fallen short in implementing its stated goals, including expanding trade, improving

⁴³ S. Gupta, "Parliament puts seal of approval on LBA," *The Hindu*, May 8, 2015.

⁴⁴ P. Jha, "After Modi's Nepal visit, what changed and what did not," *The Hindustan Times*, August 13, 2014.

⁴⁵ For a particularly useful discussion, see B. Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

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A curious amalgam of ideology and pragmatism has also been manifest in [Modi's] dealings with India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan.

security cooperation, and promoting investment.⁴⁶ Having recognized the significance of Myanmar in India's foreign policy calculus, Modi will have to demonstrate that his government will not simply emulate its predecessors.

A curious amalgam of ideology and pragmatism has also been manifest in his dealings with India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan. In a remarkable departure from the past, he invited the political leadership of all South Asian states to his inauguration as prime minister and chose not to exclude Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. Indeed, at the time, a number of commentators suggested that this decision to include Sharif indicated a willingness on Modi's part to renew a stalled dialogue with Pakistan. These hopes, however, were soon dashed.

India had agreed in the wake of the Sharif's visit to resume foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan. However, on the eve of the first meeting, the Pakistani High Commissioner Abdul Basit chose to meet with members of a Kashmiri separatist group, the All Party Hurriyat Conference, despite a clear injunction of the Modi government to refrain from doing so. Previous regimes had grudgingly tolerated such meetings. However, in a departure from such precedent, the new government promptly called off the talks.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ C.R. Mohan, "PM Narendra Modi in Myanmar: Rebuilding the Historic Connections," *The Indian Express*, May 5, 2015.

⁴⁷ I. Bagchi, "Modi Govt Show Pakistan Its Tough Side, Calls off Foreign Secretary-Level Talks," *The Times of India*, August 19, 2014.

Modi has displayed similar resolve in his dealings with India's other and more formidable adversary, the People's Republic of China. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India in September 2014, the People's Liberation Army made incursions in a disputed region along the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh. Modi forthrightly told Xi that such incidents were unacceptable.⁴⁸ Similarly, even as he undertook efforts to resolve the border dispute with China and attract investment, it is reported that he did not shy away from highlighting India's security concerns during his visit to Beijing in May 2015.⁴⁹

From both the cases discussed above, it can be inferred that Modi has brought a new, more muscular resolve to India's foreign policy. This demonstration of firmness is entirely in keeping with the ideological roots of his party as well as his own persona. Indeed Modi has made no secret of his unabashed admiration for India's first Minister for Home Affairs, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, who was known for his unwavering stances on questions pertaining to India's national security.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ TNN, "Chinese incursion in Ladakh: A little toothache can paralyze entire body, Modi tells Xi Jinping," *The Times of India*, September 20, 2014.

⁴⁹ S. Roy/Press Trust of India, "Trade, terror and border: PM Modi and Xi Jinping talk to deepen trust," *The Indian Express*, May 15, 2015.

⁵⁰ ANI, "Modi stirs controversy, says Patel should have been India's first PM," *Business Standard*, October 29, 2013.

6

A NEW FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA?

Even though Modi has been in office a little more than a year, a few observations can nevertheless be made on the basis of his initial foreign policy choices. At the outset, it is evident that his ideological worldview requires him to bring about a steady transformation of India's domestic political arrangements. Such an alteration is in keeping with a desire to forge a nation that is bound together on the basis of a common cultural heritage and one that privileges Hinduism.

Modi also recognizes the vital significance of economic development, and not simply for the purposes of promoting domestic prosperity. Once again, the emphasis on economic prowess is consistent with a nationalist ideology that recognizes and emphasizes the significance of material power. Not surprisingly, despite pockets of opposition, he has pressed ahead with a series of initiatives in this arena.⁵¹ He has, for example, pressed for the creation of a nationwide goods and services tax, reached an agreement with the United States on highly contentious food subsidies, and restored economic growth to well over 5 percent.

It is also apparent that Modi seems far less hamstrung than his predecessors by the weight of the past. This explains his ability and willingness to engage the United States, a country with which India has long had a complex and tortured relationship. In visiting the United States within six months of assuming office, he seemed to indicate that he would not allow the slight of having a visa denied to him in March 2005 to affect the improvement of bilateral ties.⁵²

A similar pragmatism will, no doubt, characterize his ties to Europe. Cognizant of India's acute need to address the dwindling assets of the Indian Air Force, while on a visit to France in April 2015, and disregarding normal defense acquisition procedures, Modi decided to directly purchase 36 Rafale fighter jets while simultaneously negotiating a series of other economic agreements.⁵³ His visit to Germany shortly thereafter also focused on trade promotion, environmental protection, and investment issues.

Whether Modi intends to depart from India's diplomacy in the Middle East remains an open question. As one analyst has argued, India has not played a significant role in addressing major developments in the Middle East for a variety of complex reasons, including its dependence on oil and remittances.⁵⁴ Matters may well change after Modi's planned visit to Israel later in 2015.⁵⁵ Modi's visit would be of enormous symbolic significance as it would be the first visit of an Indian prime minister to that country.⁵⁶ Such a trip is fraught with potential consequences for India's relations with the Arab world and obviously would be watched closely at home given India's historic commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Finally, his emphasis on regional diplomacy, as well as his visits to Australia and Japan, demonstrates that he is quite focused on coping with China's

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⁵¹ V. Mallet, "Narendra Modi accelerates economic reform drive," *The Financial Times*, October 16, 2014.

⁵² The United States had chosen to deny Modi the visa on the grounds of his alleged involvement in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. TNN, "No Entry for Modi into U.S.: Visa denied," *The Times of India*, March 18, 2005.

⁵³ P. Sonwalkar, "Modi in France: India to buy 36 Rafale jets in 'fly away' condition," *The Hindustan Times*, April 24, 2015.

⁵⁴ S. Joshi, "India's Isolationism: Why New Delhi Refuses to Engage the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2014-10-14/indias-isolationism>.

⁵⁵ TNN, "Narendra Modi to visit Israel, first by an Indian PM," *The Times of India*, May 31, 2015.

⁵⁶ For a careful discussion of the genesis and evolution of India's Israel policy, see N. Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change and Compromise since 1922* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[Modi's] quest for a more homogeneous society at home...could have significant repercussions for his foreign policy. If the principal minority community, Muslims, come to see themselves as significantly disadvantaged, some of its members may turn to the siren call of radical Islam.

rise and its growing influence in South Asia and beyond. During his tenure in office, it will bear watching to see how he continues to nurture these relationships to advance India's strategic interests, especially in the context of the evolution of Sino-Indian relations. In his dealings with India's other adversary, Pakistan, given his ideological proclivities and Islamabad's seeming inability or unwillingness to eschew its ties to terror, it is highly unlikely that he will evince much interest in or expend much political capital in seeking a rapprochement.

Obviously, Modi's ability to usher in a new orientation to India's foreign policy could well encounter significant obstacles. First, many within India's powerful foreign policy bureaucracy may not be convinced of the wisdom of jettisoning India's historic public stances on a number of issues. Second, India's attentive public, long used to and comfortable with past positions, may not enthusiastically embrace his attempts to break with past practices. Third, though in much disarray, his principal parliamentary opposition, the Congress Party, will not readily accept Modi's approach to India's foreign relations. Fourth, his quest for a more homogeneous society at home, which involves favoring the majority community, could have significant repercussions for his foreign policy. If the principal minority community,

Muslims,⁵⁷ come to see themselves as significantly disadvantaged, some of its members may turn to the siren call of radical Islam. Such a development could invite external involvement and contribute to further sectarian tensions and indeed violence within the country. In turn, the growth of such social fissures within India could also adversely affect its delicate ties to a number of Middle Eastern regimes upon whom the country remains acutely dependent for oil supplies.

There is little question that Modi's foreign policy constitutes a departure from India's stances of the past. It is laden with both promise and peril. The promise lies in its focus on enhancing India's material capabilities and shedding many of the shibboleths that had previously hamstrung its policies. The perils are equally apparent: the shredding of what remains of India's secular fabric at home could well unravel the gains that might accrue from the more hard-headed features of a new foreign policy.

⁵⁷ India is projected to have the largest Muslim population of any country in the world by 2050, surpassing Indonesia, while retaining a Hindu majority. Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," April 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

7 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Given the size of India's economy, its strategic significance in South Asia and beyond, and its role in many multilateral arenas, it is hardly surprising that Modi has been hosted both in the United States and a number of European capitals. Furthermore, substantial segments of the Indian diaspora in a number of these countries have greeted Modi with much enthusiasm. The stated justification for dealing with Modi is two-fold.

First, he is the popularly elected prime minister of a democratic state, and indeed the world's largest democracy. Second, the Indian Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team, in a verdict delivered in April 2012, failed to produce evidence linking him to the Gujarat riots of 2002. There is obviously no gainsaying either observation.

However, if India's minorities find themselves to be increasingly beleaguered as a consequence of the various choices of the present regime, both U.S. and EU officials may feel compelled to address their plight in discussions with their Indian counterparts. While the United States and its European allies are hardly immune to charges of the selective regard for cultural pluralism and human rights on a global basis, their leaders would be pressured by various domestic constituencies to address these matters even if they would rather not. Such conversations will necessarily prove to be quite fraught, especially because India's political leadership is exceedingly sensitive to any criticism of its domestic political arrangements. Modi's Hindu nationalist domestic policies could thus undercut the building of stronger ties with the West and India's strategic interests.

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