Guest Editor's Introduction: Domestic Change and Foreign Policy in Contemporary India

Rohan Mukherjee
London School of Economics and Political Science
r.mukherjee@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

India has experienced over a decade of rule under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This special issue examines how domestic political change during this period has impacted India's foreign policy through four pathways: worldviews, capacities, processes, and international perceptions of India. New Delhi's worldview is increasingly infused with Hindu nationalism and civilizational thinking. State capacity remains a mixed bag, with technological advancement despite suboptimal institutional development. Political processes are more centralized yet still subject to subnational constraints. Finally, although domestic change has hurt India's image abroad, this only marginally affects India's external relations. The articles in this issue collectively show that while BJP rule is undoubtedly transforming India, the impact has been more internal than external. India's foreign policy preferences remain largely unchanged from previous administrations. The difference today lies in the BJP's ability to pursue these preferences more assertively on the global stage.

Keywords: India, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, Hindu nationalism, Bharatiya Janata Party

Introducción del editor invitado: Cambio interno y política exterior en la India contemporánea

Resumen

India ha experimentado más de una década de gobierno bajo el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP), liderado por el primer ministro Narendra Modi. Este número especial examina cómo el cambio político

 doi: 10.18278/inpp.5.3.2

interno durante este período ha impactado la política exterior de la India a través de cuatro vías: cosmovisiones, capacidades, procesos y percepciones internacionales de la India. La cosmovisión de Nueva Delhi está cada vez más imbuida del nacionalismo hindú y el pensamiento civilizatorio. La capacidad del Estado sigue siendo heterogénea, con avances tecnológicos a pesar de un desarrollo institucional deficiente. Los procesos políticos están más centralizados, pero aún sujetos a restricciones subnacionales. Finalmente, si bien el cambio interno ha dañado la imagen de la India en el exterior, esto solo afecta marginalmente sus relaciones exteriores. Los artículos de este número muestran en conjunto que, si bien el gobierno del BJP está transformando indudablemente a la India, el impacto ha sido más interno que externo. Las preferencias de la India en política exterior se mantienen prácticamente sin cambios con respecto a las administraciones anteriores. La diferencia hoy radica en la capacidad del BJP para promover estas preferencias con mayor asertividad en el escenario global.

Palabras clave: India, Política interna, Política exterior, Nacionalismo hindú, Partido Bharatiya Janata

特约导论：当代印度的国内变革与外交政策

摘要

印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪领导的印度人民党**(BJP)**已统治十多年。本期特刊探讨了这一时期的国内政治变革如何通过四个途径影响印度的外交政策：世界观、能力、过程和国际对印度的看法。新德里方面的世界观越来越融入印度教民族主义和文明思想。尽管技术不断进步、但制度发展不理想，国家能力仍然参差不齐。政治过程更加集中，但仍然受到地方限制。最后，虽然国内变革损害了印度的海外形象，但这对印度的对外关系影响不大。本期文章共同表明，虽然印度人民党的统治无疑正在改变印度，但其影响更多的是内部而非外部。印度的外交政策偏好与前几届政府基本保持不变。今天的不同之处在于印度人民党有能力在全球舞台上更加坚定地追求这些偏好。

关键词：印度，国内政治，外交政策，印度教民族主义，印度人民党

Introduction

India has now experienced more than a decade of rule under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. During this time, scholars have debated the extent to which the party has altered the dynamics of India's society, economy, and politics.[1] Separately, they have debated the extent to which it has altered India's foreign policy and diplomacy.[2] Rarely have these questions been considered together to ask how domestic political change in India might be impacting its foreign policy. The seven research articles in this special issue take on this task. This introductory essay discusses the analytical framework adopted by these articles, which is based on four pathways or "transmission belts" by which domestic change can impact foreign policy: worldviews, capacities, processes, and perceptions.[3] It is assumed therefore that the impact in question is multi-causal and not dependent on a single factor such as the personality or preferences of the prime minister.

A changing official *worldview* based on Hindu nationalism and a concomitant effort to usher in a "new India" centered on a narrow interpretation of Indian civilization are noticeable facets of BJP rule over the last decade.[4] State *capacity* presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, new technologies of governance and control have increased the potentially coercive powers of the state over society.[5] On the other hand, the institutional capacity required to build the material foundations of great power status is growing at a glacial pace.[6] Changes in the political *process* have received the greatest attention. Under recent BJP rule, scholars argue that India has experienced a centralization of power in the executive, a weakening of democratic checks and balances, and a broader erosion of civil liberties.[7] Finally, domestic changes in India have affected the *perceptions* of other countries that prioritize democratic norms and human rights in their foreign policies or whose societies are dominated by groups that constitute ethnic minorities in India.[8]

The collective effect of these changes on India's external relations can appear sweeping. India today espouses a civilizational and nationalistic foreign policy that is broader in individual ambition and narrower in its view of international society than in the past.[9] In crises with longstanding rivals such as Pakistan and even China, the Modi government appears to have a greater tolerance for risk and the use of force compared to pre-2014 administrations.[10] Relations with smaller states in India's neighborhood have also turned tumultuous on occasion over perceived slights and the fiery rhetoric that comes with nationalist posturing.[11] At the same time, Indian leaders seek greater recognition for their nation's role as a "leading power" in international affairs and are willing to shoulder global responsibilities to this end.[12]

Yet the Modi government is not fundamentally reinventing India's relationship with the world.[13] As the articles in this special issue show, various facets of India's recent foreign policy such

as economic nationalism, civilizational thinking, territorial sovereigntism, diaspora outreach, soft power diplomacy, and technological optimism have long and deep roots in Indian political and strategic thought, in most cases going back to India's post-independence period under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and even prior. The difference today lies in the BJP's ability to pursue existing Indian preferences more assertively on the global stage. In this, it is aided by its dominance of domestic politics, leading to comfortable electoral majorities or stable coalition governments at both national and state levels. Equally, the party has turned foreign policy into a winning political issue in the eyes of an increasingly confident citizenry that seeks recognition of India's rise in the global hierarchy of power and prestige.[14]

The rest of this essay discusses the four pathways of domestic influence on foreign policy and how they intersect with broader research in international relations. The essay concludes with a discussion of the factors that constrain Indian foreign policy under Modi toward being more evolutionary than revolutionary.

Four Pathways of Domestic Impact on Foreign Policy

As argued by Daniel Markey, there are four principal pathways through which domestic change can impact foreign policy: worldviews, capacities, processes, and perceptions.[15] Each intersects with prominent strands of research in the broader international relations literature on the domestic politics of foreign policy. The authors in this special issue all explicitly or implicitly apply this framework as a heuristic device. The discussion below summarizes their findings.

Official Worldview: From Civic to Ethnic Nationalism

Scholarship from diverse theoretical paradigms in international relations generally agrees that ideas and identity can powerfully shape a state's self-conception, construction of national interest, and foreign policy itself.[16] Changes in national identity can thus alter a state's behavior, and national elites and rulers are often involved in producing and reproducing national identity in ways that align with their own worldviews. In the Indian case, the Cold War era rule of the Congress party was premised on a "secular" or "civic" nationalism that held a territorial and multicultural view of national identity.[17] There is ample evidence now that the BJP since 2014 (at least) has been devoting substantial resources to remaking Indian identity in line with the party's ideological commitment to creating a Hindu nation out of India.[18]

The BJP's turn toward ethnic nationalism manifests both in official discourse as well as policy. It appears in descriptions of India as a civilizational state with a rich and glorious history in the speeches of party leaders and the prime minister, and in the increasingly frequent official use of "Bharat," the Sanskrit word for India originating from sacred Hindu texts. The policy impact is clearest in the domains of citi-

zenship and diaspora relations. Whereas Nehruvian civic nationalism was at best ambivalent toward Indians who had chosen to live and settle abroad, the BJP seeks to build strong ties to people of Indian origin—especially Hindus—living around the world.[19] Shubha Kamala Prasad's article in this special issue demonstrates the rhetorical turn toward civilizational and Hindu nationalist themes under Modi's BJP in speeches given at the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas event held to court the Indian diaspora, which began under a previous BJP government in 2003.

Differences are also evident in India's approach to the international order. As Raphaëlle Khan notes in her article, the Nehruvian conception of sovereignty was linked to anti-colonial solidarity and an egalitarian vision of international order. Under Hindutva, sovereignty has become "the prerogative of a civilizational state entitled to exceptions, rather than a shared condition whose expansion benefits all."[20] Pradyumna Jairam, in his article on the co-optation of Buddhism as part of India's soft power projection, similarly argues that the Modi government has gone to great lengths to place India at the centre of the Buddhist civilizational imaginary and, most importantly, to present Hinduism and Buddhism as "an inseparable amalgam" (in Modi's own words).[21] As these works show, when projected onto the global stage, the civilizational exceptionalism at the heart of the BJP's national identity project appears to leave little room for other identities or for mutually emancipatory solidarity across identity groups.

State Capacity: Strengthening Yet Suboptimal

Nationalism and ideology only give us partial answers to the role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy. The literature in international relations also highlights the importance of state capacity, or the ability to extract and mobilize societal resources for grand strategic purposes.[22] States that develop the right mix of institutions to cope with their external challenges and opportunities are best able to design policies that propel them toward greater wealth and security in the international system.[23] States that fail to develop the institutional capacity to cope with their challenges are likely to fall behind.[24] In the Indian case, there is general agreement—especially among scholars of India's domestic political economy—that modern India's institutional development has been uneven and often suboptimal due to resource constraints and social cleavages,[25] with significant implications for India's grand strategy and great power ambitions.[26]

Two articles in this special issue address state capacity directly, with conclusions that mirror the consensus in the literature. Anuradha Sajjanhar examines the expansion of India's digital infrastructure in the Modi era, finding that platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI (Unified Payments Interface), and India Stack have strengthened executive power across a range of state functions including social welfare, policing, and education. Over the last decade, the Indian state has enthusiastically rolled out digital governance initia-

tives, leading Sajjanhar to observe, "[U]nlike previous phases where technology supplemented governance, the current moment positions digital systems as governance itself."[27] This process has weakened democratic checks and balances in ways that undermine accountability and voice in India's domestic politics and society. Nonetheless, these technologies are central to the narrative of India becoming a modern and efficient state under Modi's leadership, and New Delhi is exporting India's digital technology to countries of the Global South in a bid to earn global influence and recognition.

While India's technological evolution demonstrates strengthening state power relative to society, Rohit Lamba's broad sweep of India's political economy suggests a weaker state that is stuck in a "politically stable but developmentally suboptimal equilibrium."[28] According to Lamba, India faces a governance trilemma between developmental needs, democratic pressures, and civilizational assertions. At any given moment, India can only address two of these three "imperatives" and never all three together. Unlike past Indian governments that combined development and democracy or the East Asian miracle economies that combined development and civilizationism (the basis for nationalist mobilization), India since 2014 has combined democracy and civilizationism to the exclusion of development. Democratic pressures prevent India's institutional machinery from delivering at the level of its East Asian comparators, while the state deploys nationalism born from civilizational assertion to compensate for its inability to deliver economic reforms and growth to the extent required for India to become a great power. Taken together, Lamba's and Sajjanhar's pieces suggest that successive governments ruled by the BJP have built a state that is slowly centralizing the infrastructural power required for India's material rise without the ability to fully exercise that power.

Political Process: Centralizing Yet Constrained

Various bodies of scholarship in international relations suggest that political systems and political change can have significant impact on foreign policy. Three are relevant here. First, research on audience costs shows that domestic audiences—especially in democracies—often punish leaders for making threats and then backing down from them, thus incentivizing leaders to only make threats when they intend to follow through on them.[29] Second, in a similar vein, selectorate theory demonstrates that leaders with larger winning coalitions—which are typically found in democracies—tend to be more risk-averse and will typically only initiate conflicts that they are confident of winning.[30] Third, and finally, research on coalition governments and foreign policy finds, among other things, that coalition governments are less likely to engage in resource-intensive foreign policies and more cautious about making future commitments than single-party governments.[31]

If the claims of democratic decline in the Indian context are correct,

then we should expect to see contemporary Indian leaders less concerned about audience costs and needing a smaller winning coalition from which to buy political support. These mechanisms in turn should produce riskier foreign policy behavior as domestic constraints on such behavior are weaker in less democratic settings. In terms of coalition politics, the dominance of the BJP as a single ruling party until 2024 and as a powerful senior coalition member since then would also suggest that the government would be more likely to engage in resource-intensive policies and more willing to make future commitments (all else equal).[32] While it is beyond the ability of this essay to evaluate causal mechanisms, it is worth noting that since 2014, India under the BJP has in fact engaged in riskier crisis behavior as evidenced by precision strikes in response to an alleged Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack in 2016, the crossing of an international boundary to deter Chinese roadbuilding in contested territory at Doklam in 2017, airstrikes on Pakistani soil in response to a terrorist attack in 2019, the ongoing standoff with the Chinese military in Ladakh since 2020, and the militarized response to Pakistan after a terrorist attack in May 2025.

Nicolas Blarel's article in this special issue addresses the foreign policy implications of centralized political power under single-party BJP rule in the 2014–2024 period. It is notable that whereas states in India's federal system were known to independently conduct economic diplomacy with foreign governments, early in Modi's first term India's foreign ministry created the States Division to directly coordinate with states on external relations. Blarel explains foreign policy behavior based on three factors: regional issue salience, the formal or informal bargaining power of states, and the national government's own politicization of specific issues. Using the case study of Tamil Nadu politics and India's policy toward Sri Lanka, he finds that subnational influences can still constrain India's foreign policy on sensitive regional issues despite the overall political centralization of power in the Modi era. This finding accords with existing research on domestic "accountability environments" in India, which suggests that as foreign policy gains salience among the Indian public and as responsibility for foreign policy is clearly identified in a single-party setting, we should expect to see a political leadership that is highly invested in foreign policy and that pays careful attention to domestic constraints (assuming that democracy itself does not dramatically decline over time).[33]

Foreign Perceptions: Tangible Yet Manageable Costs

Canonical models of domestic politics and foreign policy assume that domestic groups pursue narrow interests that are only tangentially related, if at all, to the national interest.[34] Under certain conditions, domestic preferences can coalesce into expansionist state preferences and policies that trigger counter-balancing coalitions among other states.[35] Audience cost theory also suggests that other states will infer the cred-

ibility of a state's threats from the degree of its domestic audience costs—lower audience costs imply lower credibility because a leader in this setting is incentivized to make empty threats given the higher probability of getting away with it. The leader may then be compelled to send costly signals to truly demonstrate capability or resolve, and these signals in turn can create security dilemmas and competitive dynamics leading to military conflict.[36] The perceptions of other states and societies, therefore, are integral in going from domestic political change to explaining behavior and outcomes in international relations. Perceptions can also matter when the global distribution of power is shifting. Democratic great powers are more likely to be suspicious of an undemocratic rising power because they cannot "see into" its political system to discern its true preferences.[37]

Christopher Clary's contribution to this special issue focuses squarely on how domestic political change in contemporary India may be impacting the perceptions of other states, especially those that value democracy and human rights in their foreign relations and those whose dominant social groups share ethnic ties with minorities internationally perceived to be at risk in India. The BJP's commitment to officially reinventing India as a Hindu nation in which other religious groups possess secondary status makes for frequently rocky relations with populist pan-Islamist governments in countries such as Malaysia and Turkey. Politically charged moments such as the changing of Kashmir's constitutional status in August 2019 and the India-Pakistan military crisis of May 2025 can be particularly tense in this regard. Similarly, India's neighboring countries may be concerned by the territorially revisionist overtones of the BJP's public initiatives to propagate a narrative of past civilizational greatness in the form of "Akhand Bharat" (Undivided India). Clary concludes that while the BJP's domestic agenda is generating some costs in its external relations, these costs are manageable for now.

Other articles in the special issue hint at how state mediation can alter the valence of specific ideological initiatives. Sajjanhar argues that the export of digital governance technologies is an integral part of India's South–South cooperation strategy, which is premised on a narrative of India as a modern, efficient state. This narrative is likely welcomed in many Global South contexts where competing technologies from alternative providers might carry a higher financial or political price tag. Jairam discusses the extensive soft power diplomacy around India's role in the birth and spread of Buddhism, which has succeeded in bringing tourism and investment to certain parts of India. In both cases, the state propagates a benign narrative that can be sustained so long as foreign audiences do not look too carefully at the other side of the coin—the democratic costs of technology or the ideological hostility toward Buddhism—as it were.

Conclusion: An Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary, Foreign Policy

The articles in this special issue collectively suggest that a changing domestic political landscape in India over the last decade has *not* produced a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. While there is no doubt that the BJP under Prime Minister Modi is in the process of altering India's national identity, state institutions, and political process, the impact of these changes is more internal than external. This finding accords with recent research on Modi as practicing a type of populist politics based on "anti-elitism and antipluralism" that affects the procedure and communication of foreign policy but not its goals or substance.[38]

The authors in this special issue find substantial continuity in the goals and substance of Indian foreign policy. Khan, for example, argues that while India's worldmaking project under Modi has narrowed to a self-regarding one, the older territorial conception of sovereignty remains alive and well in India's foreign policy (albeit "amplified" under Modi). Prasad finds that while the BJP invokes a great deal more Hindu symbolism and Hindutva ideology in its rhetorical approach to the diaspora, the core goal of promoting economic engagement remains unchanged from previous administrations under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Jairam traces the long history of national governments in India instrumentalizing Buddhism for soft power gains, arguing that the BJP's primary imprint on this tradition has been to "Hinduise" Buddhism. Blarel notes that the BJP's political dominance has done little to alter the formal and informal channels of influence by which state-level preferences influence foreign policy on regionally salient issues. Sajjanhar observes that core digital initiatives such as Aadhaar and UPI predate the BJP's ascendance and that the ruling party has built on longstanding technocratic traditions to conduct digital diplomacy and centralize power in the executive. Finally, Lamba traces the long arc of India's governance trilemma whereby successive governments have tried and failed to achieve an economic growth trajectory that jointly satisfies the imperatives of democracy, development, and civilizationalism, with the Modi government's approach being the latest and potentially hardest to change due to self-reinforcing dynamics.

The one domain in which there appears to be a clear difference of policy under successive Modi governments has been crisis behavior toward Pakistan and China. However, even here, the change has been more evolutionary than revolutionary. Modi is certainly more willing to move up the escalation ladder—and is increasingly locked into escalatory postures by his own nationalist rhetoric—but much of the crisis behavior between India and Pakistan or China today can be explained by longer-term technological and material changes on both sides.[39] The path dependence of policy choices thus partly explains the substantial degree of continuity between the pre-Modi and Modi eras in various domains.

Domestic and external constraints also explain some portion of this continuity. Sajjanhar points to the various points of resistance that remain active in Indian institutions and civil society despite the weakening of democratic institutions over the last decade. Indeed, on issues of national consequence that do not only impact smaller segments of the population, one can expect robust societal and institutional restraints to continue operating on the Indian state. Beyond the domestic environment, several authors point to the disciplining effects of the international system on Indian foreign policy, especially the considerable and growing gap in capabilities between China and India. China is a major competitor not just in broad geopolitical terms but also in specific domains such as soft power (including Buddhist-inflected soft power) and digital diplomacy. More recently, the souring of US-India relations points to further potential constraints on India's official ambition of becoming a leading power in global affairs. These constraints are not insurmountable, but their persistence certainly affects New Delhi's risk calculus when weighing the possibility of radical departures from longstanding foreign policy positions.

The deeper long-term preferences of India's state and society are also relevant in this context. The BJP did not invent the idea of India as a civilizational state. The latter has deep historical antecedents going back to the 19th century and later in Jawaharlal Nehru's own writings on India and its place in the world.[40] Similarly, as noted by Jairam in this special issue, the idea of Buddhism (along with Sikhism and Jainism) as a subsidiary of Hinduism was expressed in the Constitution of India long before the BJP ever came close to political power. Even supremacist notions of Indian culture predate the BJP's rise and dominance. For example, a 2020 Pew survey found 72 percent of Indians agreeing completely that "Indian culture is superior to others," a figure that is indistinguishable from the 74 percent who gave the same answer to a Pew survey in 2002.[41] Rather than entirely altering India's national identity, the BJP has in fact radically amplified one aspect of it—Hinduism—and overlaid this onto virtually every aspect of public life and policymaking. In practical terms, this effort has entailed a strong narrative push to reframe foundational political concepts such as civilization, sovereignty, diaspora, development, governance, and democracy. In terms of India's relations with the world, these changes manifest largely in discourse and rhetoric rather than actual policy.

Nationalist discourse, however, is not costless and in India's case is accompanied by majoritarian politics and policies at home. Other societies and states have responded in ways that have created diplomatic challenges for India, be it via Western assessments of India's democratic health or the occasional diplomatic spat with the populist Islamist leader of a regional power such as Malaysia or Turkey. India's domestic politics and policies are now scrutinized in capitals around the world more than they were in the past. Although this level of scrutiny appears not to have materially impacted India's international

relations, we may be early in the arc of both the BJP's ideological project and the reactions of other states. So long as India's economy continues registering impressive growth and India remains an attractive strategic partner to various countries that are more concerned about China's foreign policy than India's, there will remain a buffer between the domestic and the international. If international structural conditions were to worsen for India or the BJP's Hindu nationalism were to intensify, the gap would be harder to sustain over time.

The Indian case suggests at least three implications for the broader international relations literature. First, when a state is growing in relative capabilities and international prestige, it is possible for its domestic politics to change dramatically without causing significant departures in its foreign relations. Second, and relatedly, the rise of populism and nationalism can decisively impact *how* a country goes about achieving its goals without altering *what* goals it pursues at the core of its longer-term grand strategy. Third, and finally, an ideological drive toward global leadership and recognition can only go so far without the state capacity to extract and administer the resources required to build global influence. India's experience thus far under the leadership of the BJP led by Narendra Modi affirms some prior intuitions from the international relations literature while illuminating new avenues for future research into the impact of domestic change on foreign policy.

Notes

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