

# Tone Shift: India's Dominant Foreign Policy Aims Under Modi

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## ABSTRACT

This article highlights the dominant aims of the current BJP government concerning India's foreign policy. Using a constructivist-centered and discourse-orientated approach, it distills the three prevailing strategic goals integral to the Narendra Modi-led regime, namely gaining great power recognition; realizing a multipolar world order; and enacting the "Act East" policy. The study finds that, although proof of a prevailing "Modi Doctrine" is scarce, the presence of these three aims is notably consistent and prevalent within official discourses and scholarly accounts of the foreign policy preferences of the second NDA. Their repetition and reiteration constitutes evidence of both a significant *acceleration* and a noteworthy *tone shift* concerning how Indian foreign policy has been conceptualized and conducted since 2014.

**Keywords:** Modi, great power, multipolarity, Act East, constructivism, discourse

## RESUMEN

Este artículo resalta los objetivos principales del gobierno actual de BJP en relación con la política exterior de India. Utilizando un acercamiento centrado en el constructivismo y orientado hacia el discurso, formula los tres objetivos estratégicos principales que son vitales para el régimen de Narendra Modi, es decir; obtener un gran reconocimiento del poder; crear un orden mundial multipolar; y el promulgar la política "Act East." El estudio encuentra que, a pesar de que haya pocas pruebas de que la "Doctrina Modi" esté prevaleciendo, la presencia de estos tres objetivos es notablemente consistente y prevalente dentro de los discursos oficiales y narrativas académicas de las preferencias de política exterior y la segunda National Democratic Alliance. La repetición y reiteración consti-

tuye evidencia tanto de una *aceleración* significativa, como de un cambio de tono en relación con el concepto de la política exterior india y su gestión desde 2014.

**Palabras Clave:** Modi, gran poder, multipolaridad, Act East, constructivismo, discurso

### 摘要

本文强调了印度人民党政府在印度外交政策方面的主要目标。通过应用以建构主义为中心、话语为导向的方法，本文从纳伦德拉·莫迪领导的政权中提炼了三大战略目标，即获得大国认可；实现多极化世界秩序；和制定“东向行动”（Act East）政策。文章发现，尽管“莫迪式教条”（Modi Doctrine）成为普遍概念的迹象还很稀少，但这三大目标是极其一致的，且常见于官方话语、和有关印度国家民主联盟外交政策偏好的学术记录。这三大目标的不断重复证明了印度外交政策自2014年以来在如何被概念化和实施一事上出现了显著的“加速”和值得注意的“语调转变”。

关键词：莫迪，大国，多极化，东向（行动），结构主义，话语

The overwhelming general election triumph of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in May 2014 heralded a remarkable and seismic event in India's electoral history. The party's ascent to power was the first outright majority victory since that of Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 in the aftermath of his mother's assassination, as the BJP won 282 seats and their wider National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition secured 336 of the 543 *Lok Sabha* seats. The BJP were back in power again after the 1998–2004 NDA under Atal Bi-

hari Vajpayee, which had then been the first full-term government not led by a prime minister from the Indian National Congress (INC). The result confirmed the maturation of the country's political system as having two viable, experienced and competitive parties, a trend that had begun in the 1990s. With the BJP now being led by the assertive and self-confident Narendra Modi, there was accompanying speculation of imminent shifts and changes in the way that both domestic and international politics would be conducted in

India. Swift claims of a “Modi Doctrine” abounded,<sup>1</sup> as did assertions by leading scholars of a very clear change in India’s foreign policy inclinations.<sup>2</sup> At the very least, observers noted that “the difference between Modi and his predecessors is a matter of energy and style,”<sup>3</sup> which would produce clear changes concerning how India’s ruling party would approach, perform, and delineate its governance.

The 1998–2004 BJP-led NDA had inculcated significant developments in the conduct of Indian foreign policy, most conspicuously the substantial deepening of India’s relations with the United States, as well as with China, primarily through the 1998 nuclear tests that propelled India back into the international mainstream.<sup>4</sup> Then Prime Minister Vajpayee also emboldened India’s gradual embrace of liberal economics and an appreciation of some of the virtues of globalization,<sup>5</sup> particularly as the means by which to strengthen and legitimize India’s status within the international system. More than anything else, it was greater pragmatism, self-confidence, and assertiveness, and an acceptance of the efficacy of pre-emptive engagement, that fundamentally characterized the BJP’s implementation of policy during the first NDA, as did frequently stressing India’s aspirations to be a great power.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning foreign affairs, the BJP’s 2014 election manifesto stated “the vision is to fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India’s global strategic engage-

ment in a new paradigm.”<sup>7</sup> This article seeks to interrogate whether or not such a profound shift is currently taking place, by identifying and analyzing the key aims orienting Indian foreign policy under Modi. Realizing this goal is achieved through the application of a constructivist-centered and discourse-oriented approach in order to evidence the preponderance of these key aims in both official documents and existing scholarly perspectives, and hence their established normative presence within the policy proclivities of the present NDA government. Such an analysis is developed through four main sections. The first section introduces the article’s theoretical foundations, primarily the efficacy of the constructivist approach which is able to provide a focused means of analysis that highlights policy preferences specific to the Indian context. This approach is coupled with an emphasis on discourse as the vehicle with which to identify these dominant aims. The subsequent sections then utilize this largely norms-based approach to examine the three key aims of Indian foreign policy under Modi, which are specifically; gaining great power recognition; realizing a multipolar world order; and enacting the “Act East” policy.

## **Theoretical Lens and the Use of Discourse**

Mainstream International Relations (IR) theory offers several approaches with which to analyze the foreign policy of states. Of these, realism stands out at the most pervasive method through its emphasis upon how

states project power via the accumulation of material power. For structural or neo-realists, anarchy is the prevailing condition in the international system, whereby having a balance of power and gaining some form of hegemony are the only guarantees of stability. Objective in their stance, such realists view states as “undifferentiated and unitary actors,”<sup>8</sup> and disregard any consideration of state identities and their construction. Because structural realists “ignore human nature,”<sup>9</sup> they assume a blanket definition of identity that makes it irrelevant to inter-state relations. Hence, realists claim that—due to the structural pressures placed upon them by the international system—states should act in the same manner in order to survive and thrive. The interests of states thus appear as exogenous to state practice, which emanate from the system to the state, while “culture and identity are, at best, derivative of the distribution of capabilities and have no independent explanatory power.”<sup>10</sup> Such an intellectual basis gives scant recognition to the potential role played by different types of government, varying internal decision-making processes or indeed the beliefs of a particular state’s political parties or leaders. This typically culture-neutral structural realist account downplays the impact of these factors because of its assertion that the international structure dominates how states conceptualize their foreign policies.

Other strands of realism provide some more useful openings concerning how to analyze the particular foreign policy aims of states, or specific parties/individuals within them. Importantly in

this regard, classical realist approaches acknowledge how “identities and values (a)re more important determinants of policy than the constraints and opportunities of the external environment.”<sup>11</sup> Building upon these ideas, neo-classical realism refines structural realism by being more attentive to domestic variables,<sup>12</sup> and rests upon seeking to understand how “systemic forces can only influence foreign policy through the medium of leader’s perceptions and calculations of relative power and prestige.”<sup>13</sup> These elements are then seen as intervening variables between the external pressures of the international system and the foreign policy behavior of different states. Within this milieu, “ideas and material capabilities are always bound together, mutually reinforcing one another, and not reducible one to the other,”<sup>14</sup> highlighting how aims and aspirations (and their identification) have an important role to play within how different states conceive of their particular foreign policies.

While neo-classical realism appears somewhat applicable to our study, other IR theories provide more focused means of analysis. Most notably, and in contrast to most realist theory, constructivism is explicitly concerned with ideational factors (such as identities and norms) rather than with more objective or material conditions. As such, it centers upon “a cognitive, intersubjective conception of process in which identities and interests are endogenous to interaction.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, constructivists declare that states are social constructions whereby, “we *make* the world what it is ... by doing what we do with each oth-

er and saying what we say to each other.”<sup>16</sup> In order to trace and structure its ideational account of international relations, constructivism largely focuses upon norms—“a particular set of interests and preferences”<sup>17</sup>—that are socially constructed and constantly contested through elite narratives. Such a basis is especially useful for explaining how foreign policy evolves across different political parties and leaders, which is our analytical goal concerning whether the Modi regime has impacted—or not—upon India’s core foreign policy aims. As our study largely relates to ideational aspirations, rather than material measures, it is therefore a suitable analytical vehicle.

In order to show “how discourse ... (provides) empirical evidence for the operation of norms,”<sup>18</sup> the analysis of various speeches, policy documents, and scholarly works acts as a core examination tool for constructivists. From their theoretical standpoint, language creates and describes reality, as “social facts depend, by way of collective understanding and discourse, on the attachment of collective knowledge to physical reality.”<sup>19</sup> It is from this basis that the reason “language is so important to constructivist analysis is that speech binds together *is* and *ought*,”<sup>20</sup> which is especially important concerning the unveiling the aims of Modi’s foreign policy. As such, it is how often certain ideas and phrases occur and re-occur in the discourse surrounding a particular issue that determines the dominant narratives pertinent to that issue, whereby “political rhetoric—or persuasive discourse—is a mechanism

for generating collective understandings”<sup>21</sup> concerning what is said, reported on, written about, and analyzed. Processes of repetition, frequency, and reiteration all serve to operationalize and unveil these dominant discursive and language practices, which for this study will result in deriving the prevailing aims (here also described as norms and preferences) underpinning India’s foreign policy under the current NDA.

Using a constructivist-oriented approach and an emphasis on discourse will identify the major narratives constructing, underpinning, and delineating the dominant aims of the Modi-led NDA concerning Indian foreign policy. The value of this approach and emphasis is apparent concerning the three targeted key aspects of India’s foreign policy behaviour under Modi—great power recognition, a multipolar world order, and the Act East policy—all of which are innately ideational in that they concern particular visions of how India *ought* to be perceived and *ought* to behave within the international sphere. Reviewing the discourses present in the literature evaluating—and primary documents depicting—the Modi-led BJP, it is this triumvirate that has been the most frequent and evident so far. It is also for this reason that our analysis is inherently focused away from analyzing New Delhi’s South Asian relations (especially with Pakistan), myriad linkages with West Asia, or India’s connectivity initiatives in Africa. An emphasis away from these areas is because none of them directly fall within the three key aims of the Modi regime regarding India’s global position (to be a great

power) or the nature of the international system (to be multipolar), and are further geographically estranged from the Act East policy's core focus upon the wider Indo-Pacific.

## **Identifying Modi's Core Strategic Aims**

**W**ith the BJP's ascendancy to office, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) proclaimed a "renewed energy, vigor, and planning in India's engagement with the rest of the world,"<sup>22</sup> as the tone of their annual reports became consistently more self-assured, visionary, and global in scope. Resolutely reflecting the pro-activeness associated with BJP diplomacy, India was presented as "a confident, articulate, (and) rising power ... no longer content to merely react to international developments."<sup>23</sup> Officials similarly noted how "an India that aspires to a greater global role must necessarily have a larger diplomatic footprint,"<sup>24</sup> a proclamation backed up by the significant upswing in diplomatic missions, visits, and summits under Modi that has exceeded those of Manmohan Singh during the previous UPA. This use of personal diplomacy led scholars to declare that the new NDA was "a much more decisive and confident government, which has injected a new sense of dynamism in Indian foreign policy."<sup>25</sup> The NDA was also less ambivalent in promoting India internationally, and more explicit in achieving greater status, recognition, and power on the global stage. Central to these arguments was an upswing of

the BJP's characteristic pragmatism,<sup>26</sup> whereby hard-nosed and nationalist diplomacy meant that "pragmatism, not principle, and delivery, not doctrine ... (are) the marks of Modi's approach."<sup>27</sup> The discourse of Indian foreign policy has become permeated by such a style/approach under Modi. Strong personal drive and focus underpins such an style, whereby—in Modi's own words—"whichever assignment is given to me ... I am totally involved in it. I never think about my past, I never think about my future."<sup>28</sup>

## **Gaining Great Power Recognition**

Positioning India within the upper most tiers of the global hierarchy as one of a handful of the world's great powers has been the first major strategic aim of the new NDA. Continuing the approach of his predecessors, Modi is "unabashed about India's great power aspiration"<sup>29</sup> in his speeches and exchanges. As he declared to his supporters in 2014—"I assure you that this country [India] has a destiny,"<sup>30</sup> which would play a significant role in international politics. Nationalist sentiments have underpinned such assertions, in combination with a "self-perception of national and cultural greatness,"<sup>31</sup> which has become increasingly prevalent across most major political groupings in India. Further encapsulating these narratives, upon gaining office Modi furthermore decried that the twenty-first century was to be "India's century"<sup>32</sup> during which the state's status ambitions would be fulfilled.

Central to being a great power has been the Indian elites' augmentation

of the state's self-sufficiency in international affairs. Within this thinking, the concept of India's "strategic autonomy" has gained greater prominence in official discourses whereby it "undergird(s) its quest for security and status."<sup>33</sup> Realizing such autonomy rests upon accumulating sufficient amounts of power for India "to articulate its own interests in foreign policy and in the shaping of the world order,"<sup>34</sup> which marks continuity from a long-held preference for self-reliance. Underpinning these global ambitions is a sense that India is a state that "cannot be ignored ... (and) one whose relative weight and influence in material terms have been increasing over the past decade."<sup>35</sup> Predominant to such narratives is increasing India's position as a large developing economy that can be of potential benefit to the current global economic order, and strengthening "Brand India" as a means to enhance her domestic modernization programme. Integral to such linkages, and in conjunction with ensuring energy and trade security, is cultivating defense and multilateral capabilities that embolden the self-realization of its strategic autonomy. An ever-greater appreciation of India as a "swing state" of value to a host of major states—such as the United States and Japan—has also helped to boost this tactical aim.

Harking back to the clear pro-capitalist tendencies typifying the BJP's economic approach, "Modi's government has adopted a more pro-business stance than its predecessor."<sup>36</sup> Reflecting how many voters' concerns in the 2014 election related to the economy, India's modernizing, globalizing,

and media-dominated middle class remains a core constituency for the BJP. Modi has henceforth "repeatedly emphasized the goal of promoting growth and employment generation as the fundamental criterion for a successful foreign policy."<sup>37</sup> This focus has led to a slew of innovations such as "Make in India," "Skill India," "Digital India," and "Start Up India," all of which are intended to boost foreign direct investment, create jobs, enhance workforce skills, and increase production standards. Broadening the bandwidth of India's international diplomacy, via an ever-widening multi-directional diplomatic strategy, illustrates this aim as New Delhi seeks new trade and energy partners across Asia, Africa, and South America. These ties have included enhanced Saudi Arabia relations, as well as major investment pledges worth \$35 billion and \$22 billion from Japan and China, respectively.<sup>38</sup> Modi's creation of "a web of allies to mutually further our [India's] interests"<sup>39</sup> has galvanized these interests, and has further entrenched the norm of gaining great power recognition.

Apart from displaying clear—and accelerating—continuities from the first NDA and the 2004–14 UPA regimes concerning enhancing India's great power status through expanding self-sufficiency and greater economic capabilities, NDA II has maintained, reinvigorated, and deepened relations with the United States. As an established great power, Washington crucially acts as a gatekeeper, sponsor, and endorser of emergent great powers,<sup>40</sup> and is thus central to the attainment of India's status aspirations in the current

global system. In line with the new dynamism noted by observers concerning the general tenor of Indian diplomacy, “the Modi government has been able to pursue a new and decisive course, ... allow(ing) bilateral relations to achieve positive momentum compared to the drift observed in the final years of the second UPA administration.”<sup>41</sup> As per the first NDA, the BJP has furthermore sought an unequivocal and un-ambivalent embrace of the United States, which displays none of the ideological baggage or hang-ups associated with previous INC leaders. In these ways, “Modi has tossed away not only the hesitations but also the hypocrisies of history”<sup>42</sup> by shifting the tone underpinning India-US relations, which underpins how his particular leadership values/style (as central to constructivist accounts) have influenced the nature of these diplomatic ties.

Underscoring these sentiments, when Narendra Modi and President Obama met in 2014, they issued a statement proclaiming that “we will have a transformative relationship as trusted partners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ... our partnership will be a model for the rest of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Since then, relations have centered upon deepening cooperation in the fields of defence, trade, civil nuclear affairs, and Asian security. In 2015, Obama also became the first US President to be the chief guest at India’s Republic Day parade. During that visit, the “US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region” was signed outlining a shared understanding to promote “peace, prosperity, stability and security, ... and

not(ed) that India’s ‘Act East Policy’ and the United States’ rebalance to Asia provide (mutual) opportunities.”<sup>44</sup> In June 2015, the “New Framework for Defence Cooperation” was formally renewed for 10 years during the visit of US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. This agreement then led to the signing of a “Master Information Exchange Agreement” between the Pentagon and India’s Ministry of Defense to share aircraft-carrier technology heavily desired by New Delhi. The frequency of these diplomatic agreements and their accompanying scholarly analysis reiterated the importance of India-US relations within the wider foreign policy aim of great power recognition, and confirmed its normative presence under the Modi government.

Modi further extolled these virtues when addressing the US Congress in June 2016, asserting that “there is a new symphony in play”<sup>45</sup> as Indian officials further emboldened relations by noting mutual ties “rooted in shared values of freedom, democracy, universal human rights, tolerance and pluralism, equal opportunities for all citizens, and rule of law”<sup>46</sup>—elements that further celebrated and reiterated the political commonalities between them. Later in that year, India and the United States also signed a long-awaited defense agreement—the “Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement,” which had been negotiated since 2004. Overcoming the deep-seated hesitations of previous Indian governments, who were wary of entering into such a close defense partnership with the United States, the Agreement allowed “both

sides to access supplies, spare parts and services from land facilities, air bases and ports.”<sup>47</sup> Pragmatism underpinned this deal, with New Delhi critically diversifying its defense supplies away from Russia.<sup>48</sup> With the new Trump administration, and in a 2017 visit to the United States, the two sides declared themselves “democratic stalwarts in the Indo-Pacific region ... resolved to increase cooperation, enhance diplomatic consultations, and increase tangible collaboration.”<sup>49</sup> In unison with the drive toward strategic autonomy, and continued economic growth, heightening United States ties served to encapsulate India's sought-after status aims in the new NDA.

### ***Realizing a Multipolar World Order***

At the core of the BJP's wider vision of global politics in the twenty-first century is the concept of multipolarity. This understanding pronounces that there are multiple powers (or poles) competing for influence in the international system rather than it being dominated by a single unipolar power through hegemony. Within this worldview, the multiple poles are argued—in addition to the United States—to be China and Russia, and potentially the EU, as well as India once the country has fully reached great power status. It is underpinned by collective cooperation concerning mutual development, equality, and non-intervention—all of which are core, longstanding principles within Indian foreign policy, and which are highly evident in relations with China and Russia but currently less so with the United States. Cooperation in multilat-

eral regimes bolsters these interactions, whereby “an important trajectory ... has been (the) simultaneous deepening of India's ties with all the major powers of the world by focusing on ... mutual synergies and gains.”<sup>50</sup> The greater frequency and bandwidth with which these relations have been pursued has been central to Indian foreign policy under Modi, as reflected by their preponderance in official and analytical discourses. In 2014, when the BJP came to power, leading members further argued that India was a *vishwaguru* (“world guru”); “a ‘leading power’ ... equipped with a clear vision of how international affairs ought to be organized, not merely a power that accepts the system as it is”<sup>51</sup>—a sentiment that underscores the presence of this foreign policy aim to re-craft the international order.

With this proactive image in mind—both of the world and India's status in it—Modi's diplomacy has encompassed “a strategy of building social capital for upward mobility by networking bilaterally and multilaterally to gain prominent standing for India.”<sup>52</sup> Observers have noted that this approach rejects long-standing norms relating to non-alignment,<sup>53</sup> which has been met with “deafening silence,”<sup>54</sup> and has instead been substantiated by “multi-alignment”—an approach characterized by “engagement in regional multilateral institutions, the use of strategic partnerships, and ... ‘normative hedging.’”<sup>55</sup> The desired preference for multipolarity, in conjunction with multi-alignment, represents “an ability to adopt a paradigm of confident engagement with the simultaneous pursuit of

different interests with various partners while maintaining a cohesive unity in our [India's] overall strategic vision."<sup>56</sup> As part of this process, in 2015 for instance, India entered into new strategic partnerships with Canada, Mongolia, Oman, Seychelles, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. Realizing "an economically stronger India ... (whose) voice is heard in international fora"<sup>57</sup> heightens these abilities, as will be discussed later on in this section. Furthermore, and again sustaining the state's continued quest for great power status, "as a government committed to economic growth ... this is translating into a growing ability (by the Modi regime) to take on a more constructive role in global governance";<sup>58</sup> an ability that is commensurate with, and emblematic of, fulfilling the aim of being one of the international system's major poles.

The first prong of the multipolar approach has been to ensure better ties with the other great powers. The most longstanding of these are with Russia, which has been a steadfast strategic partner of India since 1947, providing it with economic, military, and political support.<sup>59</sup> Under Modi, and bolstered by his frequent diplomatic missions to Moscow in 2015 and 2017, and a visit by President Putin to New Delhi in 2016, the relationship remains "rooted in longstanding mutual trust, characterized by unmatched reciprocal support to each other's core interests."<sup>60</sup> In 2015, the two sides carried out joint Russian-Indian naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal, as well as the IN-DRA-2015 joint exercises conducted in

Rajasthan involving their ground forces. In turn, their ties have been progressively reiterated and upgraded whereby "the Indian-Russian special and privileged strategic partnership is a unique relationship of mutual trust between two great powers."<sup>61</sup> Importantly, both sides subscribe to a similar vision for the world order that seeks "a multi-polar international system based on the central role of the United Nations and international law, common interests, equality, mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of countries."<sup>62</sup> The commonality of this shared normative aim thus furthermore intertwines and characterizes their relations together.

While Indo-Russia ties have continued to be strengthened under Modi, elsewhere the BJP's diplomatic approach centered upon assertive pragmatism has been highly visible toward China. At the core of the NDA's attitude to Beijing is the conviction that "the two sides believe that the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be marked by peace, security, development and cooperation."<sup>63</sup> The two states also share an affinity in terms of their vision of the global order, and their status/roles within it. As such, during Modi's 2015 visit to China, both sides agreed to "step up their consultations on developments affecting international peace, security and development, ... (and) coordinate their positions and work together to shape the regional and global agenda,"<sup>64</sup> which included cooperation in a variety of multilateral settings. Furthermore, both sides have publicly stated that their "simultaneous re-emergence ... as two ma-

major powers in the region and the world, offers a momentous opportunity for (the) realisation of the Asian Century.”<sup>65</sup> These common aims have thus further enhanced the normative presence and importance of the strategic preference for a multipolar world order.

Although this rhetoric in many ways mimics that of previous UPA governments, at the core of Modi's approach is the new belief that positive gains can only be achieved through a “dogged and open style of assertive diplomacy.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, while major trade and investment gains were realized during the visit of Xi Jinping to India in 2014, Prime Minister Modi emphasized that “there should be peace in our relations and in the borders. If this happens, we can realise (the) true potential of our relations.”<sup>67</sup> As such, the new NDA has been more forceful in its use of India's military capabilities, especially along the Himalayan border<sup>68</sup> and also enacting stronger responses concerning any incursions by Chinese troops (which have occurred on several occasions). Indian officials have also publically vowed that Arunachal Pradesh (which the two sides dispute) is an inalienable part of India, and to which the Indian Home Minister openly visited in 2015. As part of this strategy, and as already evidenced above concerning Indo-US ties, “to an unprecedented degree, India is openly embarking on coalition-building ... as a way of strengthening its bargaining position”<sup>69</sup> versus Beijing, and which has so far involved Vietnam, Japan, and Australia. In turn, New Delhi refused to be part of China “One Belt, One Road” initiative, arguing that it had not been

sufficiently consulted but also because the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) runs through the disputed Kashmir region. Collectively, these developments represent “a qualitative shift in relations with the PRC,”<sup>70</sup> and show a marked change from the previous 10 years of India-China interactions under the UPA whereby the tone of Indian diplomacy has now changed.

The final strand of the strategy to achieve multipolarity is institutional, whereby India “has discovered ‘exclusive multilateralism’”<sup>71</sup> as a fruitful diplomatic endeavor. So enhanced are New Delhi's efforts in this domain that scholars have argued that “Modi's leadership may be just as important in enhancing India's willingness to take on the role of an international leader as it seems to be in improving India's ability to do so”<sup>72</sup>—again underlining the veracity of the BJP's assertive and pragmatic public diplomacy, and the evidence of their specific political values and identity (as per constructivism) influencing the conduct of Indian foreign policy. India's involvement in helping set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in October 2014, as well as the New Development Bank in July 2014, points to this new-found self-confidence. Overarching these efforts, in 2017 India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which Modi deemed to be “a logical extension India's age old ties with the region; ... India's engagement ... will help us build a region which is an engine of economic growth for the world; (and) is more stable.”<sup>73</sup> These efforts point to an international system that is in flux and how India is

“exploring the scope for building coalitions focused on global order in what is conceivably becoming a post-unipolar world,”<sup>74</sup> and which simultaneously enhances New Delhi’s aim/preference for evoking a multipolar world order.

### ***Enacting the “Act East” Policy***

Bolstering both strategic aims of becoming a great power and visualizing a multipolar world order, ordaining the “Act East” policy has been the third aim of the Modi government. This policy is an extension of the “Look East” policy first introduced under P.V. Narasimha Rao to create deeper common military, economic, and diplomatic ties with South East Asia. It also builds upon the NDA I’s assertion of India’s “extended strategic neighbourhood,” which sought to stretch India’s perceived influence beyond South Asia to find new international trade, commodity, and energy markets to enhance India’s economic growth and great power ambitions. Injecting a proactive vein to these existing policies, Act East seeks to realize the core assumption of the twenty-first century being the Asian Century, as well as inter-connecting India to the Asia-Pacific region via a recently coined self-conception centered upon the “nationalist-pragmatist hybrid formulation of the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>75</sup> From this basis, New Delhi has “put the whole Indo-Pacific region at the very top of its diplomatic priorities ... (whereby) India step(ped) up its effort to contribute to regional peace and stability.”<sup>76</sup> Via this strategy, NDA II not only desires “to promote Indo-Pacific regionalism to decisively boost the Indian econo-

my”<sup>77</sup> but also to establish “a security component.”<sup>78</sup> In his latter regard, and as noted in the previous section, Modi “has moved unprecedentedly close to the United States and to Vietnam, Japan and Australia, ... (through a) coalition strategy (that) is moving India away from its traditional aversion to alliance-like relationships.”<sup>79</sup>

Owing to the entrenched narratives concerning the “Indo-Pacific,” India’s continued domination of the Indian Ocean Region became a major feature of the Act East policy, whereby “India considers itself as a resident power in the Indian Ocean”<sup>80</sup> as per its cultural and civilizational pedigree. Seeing the region as central to ensuring its economic, military, and territorial self-sufficiency, as well as India’s modernization of its naval capabilities toward a blue-water capacity, underpins this desire and whose virtues embolden the ability to Act East. Within these parameters, and as a means to counter the presence of competitors in the region, India believes in “fostering exclusive security relationships with the regional states so as to promote a favourable environment.”<sup>81</sup> As such, and reiterating this strategic aim, the Modi government has carried out sustained and frequent diplomacy “with a view to developing a ‘blue economy’ based on ocean resources and to promoting dynamics of collective action in the maritime security field,”<sup>82</sup> which in 2015 included the formation of strategic partnerships with Singapore and Vietnam. Concerning the latter, New Delhi has provided a US\$100 million line of credit, discussed the transfer of

BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, and signed agreements on coast guard cooperation. Underpinned by continued and deepening economic exchanges, these are all significant and now entrenched upgrades to India's foreign policy. In turn, the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area entered into force in July 2015, which provided further foundation for the proactive diplomacy that hallmarked the Act East policy.

Augmenting other particular bilateral relations has also been crucial to the Act East policy, in much the same way as amplifying US relations has underpinned gaining great power status, and intensified Russia and China ties have typified the realization of a multipolar world order. Thus, within the Indo-Pacific region, "Modi has sought to significantly boost ties with Japan ... (which) is a break from his predecessors."<sup>83</sup> Modi's 2014 visit to Japan was his first outside South Asia and witnessed bilateral relations being immediately elevated to that of a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership." Confirming these linkages, and Modi and Shinzo Abe's ardent nationalism, the leaders "decided to create a relationship that will shape the course of their countries and the character of this region and the world in this century."<sup>84</sup> Abe's 2015 visit to India saw the announcement of the "Vision 2025" statement "which reflects a broad convergence of their long-term political, economic, and strategic goals"<sup>85</sup> and centered upon purported political congruence concerning pluralism, tolerance, the rule of law, and democracy. Such a convergence of domestic values

and identities—both mainstays of constructivism—reiterated the closeness of their relations and their importance concerning enacting the Act East policy. Further exemplifying these narratives, India invited Japan to become a permanent participant in the India-US Malabar naval exercises, which Tokyo took up in 2016, and pointed to a deepening triadic relationship between these states. The addition of an explicit security dimension to India-Japan relations also epitomized a noteworthy step change in relations that stressed mutual "stability and prosperity, ... (and) reiterated the need to further consolidate their security and defence cooperation."<sup>86</sup> Adherence to "working jointly for strengthening (a) rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond"<sup>87</sup> further confirmed such shared aims, and additionally formed part of New Delhi's emergent coalition-building strategy. This heightening political and strategic convergence continued to be underpinned by deeper economic ties, for example the signing of a deal for Japan to build a bullet train from Mumbai to Ahmedabad, and which further emphasized the frequency and repetition of closer India-Japan ties within Indian foreign policy discourses.

Further afield, such tendencies within Modi's foreign policy have been confirmed in relations with Australia, ties which ameliorated the desired enactment of the Act East policy and wider strategic linkages with the United States and Japan. The first Indian prime minister to visit Australia since 1987, Modi's 2014 mission recognized

a bilateral relationship “anchored in shared values, expanding economic engagement, converging strategic interests and a growing shared agenda in regional and multilateral institutions.”<sup>88</sup> Signing agreements on security, defense, and counter-terrorism cooperation, annual dialogues between respective prime ministers, foreign ministers, and defense ministers, and the sale of uranium to India, Modi decreed that “we see Australia as one of our foremost partners in the region ... Australia will not be at the periphery of our vision, but at the center of our thought.”<sup>89</sup> India and Australia’s first ever bilateral naval exercise in 2015—AUSINDEX-15—boosted and regularized these interactions, as did the trilateral India-Japan-Australia security dialogue held since 2015, and as will their first bilateral Army-to-Army exercises in 2018. From this basis, through “their commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific, based on mutual respect and cooperation, ... Australia and India share a commitment to democratic values, rule of law, international peace and security, and shared prosperity.”<sup>90</sup> All these elements represent the breaking of new ground in India–Australia relations, primarily via the dynamism central to Modi’s diplomatic style but also their focus upon shared values and interests that allow a diplomatic convergence with each other. Enhanced relations with New Zealand<sup>91</sup> have further complemented these substantial developments as per the pre-emptive strategic aim to enact the Act East policy.

## Conclusions: An Acceleration and Tone Shift

As has been displayed across a range of areas, we have been able to discern well-defined ways concerning how Indian foreign policy have been conceived, achieved, and delivered under the Modi-led government. These developments have centered upon three key strategic aims—gaining great power recognition, realizing a multipolar world order, and enacting the “Act East” policy—that have been the most frequent, repeated, and reiterated policy preferences within official and scholarly narratives. In conjunction with our constructivist-centered analysis, which stressed the need for an India-specific emphasis, the deployment of a discourse-orientated approach enabled the identification and analysis of these prevailing elements. Of particular note was the wider convergence of shared domestic values across many of India’s deepening array of bilateral relations, especially with the great powers such as the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and Australia, which served to not only embolden these ties but to also further validate and vindicate our favored theoretical and analytical approach. The underlying nature of the three strategic aims as being how the Modi-led NDA II conceives of how India *ought* to be positioned/behave globally, underscored this strength.

While it remains questionable to declare that there is a clear “Modi Doctrine,” as Sridharan pertinently notes “recent foreign policy changes have

been slow and incremental, building on past policies without dramatic breaks; ... the Modi government's initiatives since 2014 seem to represent a more energized version of earlier foreign policy changes."<sup>92</sup> In these ways, the primary impact of the current prime minister has been that of *acceleration*, whereby existing policies and behaviors have been significantly augmented, enhanced, and fast-tracked. In the bilateral sphere, such trends are most evident in India's relations with the United States, Japan, and Australia, while ties with Russia continue to be strengthened. Even with China, notwithstanding ongoing border tensions, relations have deepened—at least economically. Multilaterally, India has also been more assertive by both creating and joining institutions—efforts that are improving her diplomatic, and accompanying economic and political, capabilities. Finally, the Act East policy is a clear example of proactive dynamism and verve being injected into the predecessor Look East approach. In these ways, "Modi's strategic approach to foreign policy shows essential continuity ... (concerning) the use of power, diversity of security relationships and the pursuit of status."<sup>93</sup> The three key policy aims of gaining great power prestige, realizing multipolar ambitions, and becoming a critical Indo-Pacific actor all confirm these ongoing facets.

Our utilization of the constructivism-based and discourse-focused approach sought to unveil the dominant narratives inherent to Modi's diplomacy and its scholastic analysis thus far, which have confirmed the presence of

the three key foreign policy aims. Apart from the acceleration noted above, what interconnects these three aims is a significant *tone shift* concerning the conduct of Indian foreign policy. The style, character, and attitude of the current prime minister are critical in this regard, whereby "his conviction ... provides (the) firm bedrock for Modi's foreign policy."<sup>94</sup> Like Vajpayee before him, Modi's foreign policy approach rests upon clear pragmatism but is delivered in an unambiguous, unashamed, and unforgiving manner that consistently places India's interests front and center, and is not beholden to the past or previous policy benchmarks. Many of these characteristics are also firmly embedded within the BJP's outlook on the world, through which "projecting cultural identity and national branding are integral elements of enhancing global standing."<sup>95</sup> Whether or not this tone shift contributes to an enduring re-orientation of Indian foreign policy remains to be seen. However, if Modi wins the next general election in 2019, this will be a reinforcing mechanism that will necessarily legitimize his approach, and perhaps confirm the lasting normative impact of the "Modian" style upon Indian foreign policy for generations to come.

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