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Modi's approach to
China and Pakistan

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Narendra Modi's government has placed India's neighbourhood as its top foreign policy priority. Modi's first official foreign trip was to neighbouring Bhutan, and in just over a year he visited all of India's immediate neighbours, with the exception of Pakistan and the Maldives (where a planned visit was suddenly cancelled due to political differences). In an unprecedented move, he invited the seven other leaders in the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), along with Mauritius, to his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014, holding his first set of meetings with them – including Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif – the following day. He is due to visit Pakistan in late 2016 for the SAARC summit, which will be the first Indian prime ministerial visit to the country in over a decade

The primacy of the neighbourhood for Modi is clear. Unlike previous leaders, he is eager to use foreign policy as a means to generate inward investment, business, and technology for domestic growth and development. As a pragmatist, he is aware that this will be facilitated by enhancing regional cooperation and stability in South Asia. But it will be a difficult and complex task, especially given India's two powerful nuclear-armed neighbours, Pakistan and China, whose relations with India are marked by tensions and political and military standoffs. Modi's policy towards both countries has undergone significant shifts during his first year in office.

A tougher position on Pakistan

Since independence nearly 70 years ago, India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir and one over Bangladesh. Once both acquired nuclear weapons in 1998, these shifted to lower-intensity military confrontations. Modi inherited difficult relations with Pakistan, after bilateral peace talks were suspended by his predecessor due to a spurt in violence and firing by Pakistan across the Line of Control (LoC) dividing the disputed Kashmir region.

For the Indian security establishment, the principal threat from Pakistan is another spectacular terror attack like the 2008 Mumbai attack, which could be carried out by Pakistan-based militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) or Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). The Indian security establishment's view is that any such attack would likely be planned and coordinated by elements of the Pakistani security establishment, in particular its powerful intelligence organisation, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which the Indian government has publicly accused of complicity in past terror attacks. Any suggestion of a "rogue" element in the ISI responsible for these incidents, or a lack of authorisation by the ISI chief, is dismissed by New Delhi.

Modi has hardened India's position towards Pakistan. He cancelled scheduled foreign-secretary level talks in August 2014 over a meeting between the Pakistani high commissioner to India and the Kashmiri separatist Hurriyat group. There was a distinct chill between Modi and Sharif at the SAARC summit in Kathmandu in November 2014. Then, in August 2015, India made it clear that it would not be acceptable for the visiting Pakistani national security advisor to meet the Hurriyat leadership or discuss anything other than terrorism, leading to the cancellation of scheduled talks between the two countries' national security advisors hours before they were to begin. India also deliberately intensified its firing across the LoC and the international border.

This hardline approach has not yielded the dividends expected by the Indian government. In a sign of defiance, the Pakistani government refused to fast-track the trial of seven alleged co-conspirators in the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, a key Indian demand. In April 2015, a Pakistani court released on bail the man accused of masterminding the attacks, LeT operations chief Zakiur-Rehman Lakhvi, after six years in prison. The following month, the Pakistani corps commanders' conference for the first time formally accused India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), of "whipping

up terrorism” in Pakistan. This accusation was believed to refer to recurring allegations of Indian involvement in terrorism in Baluchistan, Karachi, and the tribal areas, which India has denied. Later that month, the Indian defence minister stated that “terrorists have to be neutralised only through terrorists”, leading his Pakistani counterpart to assert that this confirmed India’s involvement in terrorism within Pakistan.

Pakistan has demonstrated a renewed will to counter terrorism since a brutal attack by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – the Pakistani branch of the Taliban – killed 143 school children and nine others in Peshawar in December 2014. But this has not included anti-India terror groups. For example, banned militant outfit the JeM continues to operate, and to address public rallies. There has been no attempt to ban Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), a group considered to be a front for the outlawed LeT and led by LeT chief Hafiz Saeed, on the basis that there is no evidence to link the group with terrorism or the LeT. A formal proposal to outlaw the Haqqani terror network is under consideration.

India has a dilemma: it deals with Pakistan’s civilian government but refuses to deal with the most powerful Pakistani institution in setting policy towards India – the army. No army-to-army talks between the two countries take place. There are questions over whether such talks would make sense for the Indian army, which has far less influence over policy than its counterpart, and whether the Pakistan army would even be inclined to talk to India, given that its *raison d’être* is a perceived existential threat from its neighbour.

Modi needs to think “outside the box” if he is to achieve regional cooperation with Pakistan in the build-up to the 2016 SAARC summit. Instead of simply seeking to strengthen Pakistan’s civilian government, he may need to engage with the Pakistan army, and ascertain what it wants from India. This could begin through initial exchanges between the R&AW and the ISI, both of whom – uniquely – participate in the annual International Institute for Strategic Studies’ (IISS) meetings on South Asia security in Oman and Bahrain.

A robust China policy

For the Indian security establishment, China poses a strategic challenge rather than a threat. India is primarily concerned by China’s assertiveness in the border dispute, by its growing trade and defence relationships with India’s South Asian neighbours, and by the expansion of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, the latter of which India fears as possible encirclement. All this has hardened

New Delhi's perspective towards Beijing. But, at the same time, China is India's largest trading partner.

Although Modi seeks stronger trade and investment links with China, he has also been tough on his powerful neighbour. In his electoral campaign, he criticised China's "mindset of expansion". Indeed, Tibet's Prime Minister-in-exile Lobsang Sangay found himself in the official photograph at Modi's swearing-in ceremony. When Chinese forces crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at Chumar during a September 2014 trip to India by President Xi Jinping, Modi's response was robust. He sent reinforcements to the area and ensured that Indian troops held their positions. He publicly expressed concern over the border dispute, and raised the issue of Beijing's policies in the neighbourhood with his guest.

The joint statement issued at the end of Modi's May 2015 visit to China did not reference maritime cooperation or Asia-Pacific security, unlike a similar statement eight months earlier. Nor did it refer to China's One Belt, One Road initiative or to its Maritime Silk Road, both of which India views with suspicion. In June 2015, India declared that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project was "not acceptable", as it would use infrastructure in disputed Kashmiri territory.

A combined front with the US

In a significant departure from the previous government, Modi is willing to form a combined front with the United States on Asia-Pacific security to counter an assertive China. During President Barack Obama's visit to New Delhi in January 2015, the two governments issued a document that outlined their joint strategic vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. It included a paragraph affirming "the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, *especially in the South China Sea*" (italics added for emphasis).¹ This was understood to imply that the two parties had reached a consensus on the need to counter Beijing's assertive handling of conflicting regional territorial claims. A 10-year defence framework agreement has also been signed with the US, and trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and India has been raised to foreign-secretary level. The annual India–US Malabar naval exercise has been expanded to include Japan. India is also seeking to bolster defence and naval cooperation with Vietnam.

¹ "U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region", The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 25 January 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>.

The joint India–US vision recognises the complementary nature of India’s new “Act East” policy, focusing on Japan and Australia, and the Obama administration’s “pivot”, or “rebalancing”, towards Asia. However, there are limits as to how far the combined front between India, the US, and other democracies in the region such as Australia and Japan, can go. For example, the quadrilateral naval exercise between Australia, India, Japan, and the US has not been repeated in the last seven years after a stiff Chinese *démarche* followed the first one. The bottom line is that while there is an emerging bilateral consensus between India and the US on security in the Asia-Pacific, neither wants a confrontational relationship with China.