

Associate Paper

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The Modi Method: Words and Action

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Key Points

- Prime Minister Modi's success in state elections, and his speeches that encompass his foreign policy and domestic Brand India commitments, obscure what have been described as 'directionless policies'.
- Modi's rhetorical skills build a landscape around his government's vision and intentions for India in its international relations.
- His Make in India promise impinges on defence production with a resultant lack of progress that draws criticism of his overall security policy.
- Modi's overseas travels, together with his 'rule of law' and 'freedom of navigation' speeches, clearly demarcate a difference between India and China.

Summary

Discussion about the Indian Prime Minister's words and actions inevitably draws in China in terms of differentiation. Prominent in the Prime Minister's overseas speeches are India's commitment to open, transparent rule based on international norms and respect for sovereignty. His national security aims and defence intentions are reiterated verbally at bilateral and multinational meetings, even as crucial policy documents remain in draft form, while his Make in India election promise, a natural fit for defence procurement, continues to cause delays, attracting criticisms.

Analysis

Modi's Method

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's global recognition is badged by unmissable slogans including Make in India, Digital India, Smart Cities and Skill India. Such themes resonate in his speeches, as do India's important foreign policy commitment to a rules-based order in concert with international partners, clarifying shared values, and sharply defining the disjunction between India and China.

Domestically, Modi's persuasive powers have seen an electoral surge in the north-eastern states, with his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning outright in Tripura and, in Nagaland and Meghalaya, in alliance with other parties from February 2018. Added to those is the BJP's control of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur, the latter of which is important strategically. That the former three states are shoehorned between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Burma underlines their importance, recognised by the BJP in its recent electorally-managed power shift. While perhaps not significant in helping Modi to attain his next government, it has been [argued](#) that political instability in a region vulnerable to Chinese exploitation is a security issue that must be controlled by the central government. How effective those electoral victories will be, until backed up by an adequate border force as a means of managing future Chinese incursions, is yet to be seen.

Prominent in the Prime Minister's overseas speeches and in his celebratory domestic speeches also aimed at international audiences, are India's national security aims and defence intentions. Although Individual policies arguably remain stranded in draft papers, their broad sweeps are important inclusions in Modi's speeches. For example:

India's security is our priority. Be it our coast line or our borders, the space or the cyberspace, India is capable of ensuring its own security and strong enough to ward off any threats against the country. (Independence Day Speech, Delhi, 15 August 2017).

Observations that Modi's defence policies are 'directionless' and that India's national security policies have not kept pace with its growing ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, allowing ongoing threats of Chinese pre-eminence, are frequently heard. On the other hand, aspects of Modi's multilateral and bilateral agenda (discussed below), the prospects of a renewed but perhaps transient quadrilateral agreement (that might sit among India's other multilateral relationships), and frequent 'rules-based order' statements, expose the intention to resist China's Indian Ocean strategy.

Modi's Rhetorical Style

Modi emerged as a powerful public speaker following a period of managerial-style political speeches, substantiating policy messages with reason and fact, seldom exciting and seldom promulgated by more than television, radio or the print media of the day.

Modi's rhetorical skills, his ability to harness social media and his fascination with the power of the Internet, was illustrated in an account of his election campaign by Rajdeep Sardesai,

who described the release of Modi's 2014 Election Manifesto as more than 'on a television screen near you'. 'The Manifesto release was not only live on television, it was also playing out on the party websites, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, mobile dial-ins...'¹ As Adam Roberts has so aptly said, 'understatement gets you nowhere in crowded, noisy India'² and maximum exposure certainly has kept Modi in the global spotlight.

The Prime Minister has a flair for words that are politically acute. He sets a Brand India landscape, and builds a persuasive picture of his government's intentions, however delayed or circumscribed the eventual outcomes may be. The breadth of Modi's maritime and strategic landscape, for instance, was made clear at the Delhi [Raisina Dialogue](#) of January 2017 and can be read in full. The extract below draws on what may be described as the main elements of India's foreign and security policy under Modi:

India has a long history of being a maritime nation.... Our maritime interests are strategic and significant.... Our initiative of SAGAR – "Security And Growth for All in the Region" – is not just limited to safe-guarding our mainland and islands. It defines our efforts to deepen economic and security co-operation ... convergence, co-operation, and collective action will advance economic activity and peace in our maritime region ... we aim to bring countries together ... respecting Freedom of Navigation and adhering to international norms is essential ... in the inter-linked marine geography of the Indo-Pacific ... the security architecture in the region must be open, transparent, balanced and inclusive ... rooted in international norms and respect for sovereignty.

Modi's Independence Day speech in 2015, together with his Raisina speech, and a [statement](#) made with Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, also in 2017, affirmed commitment to 'their values-based partnership in achieving a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected ...', leave no doubt about Modi's desired strategic landscape. In practical terms, however, India needs to maintain a tri-service response capability.

Make In India: India's Defence Production

Big picture policies for international and domestic audiences do not, however, address the frequent criticism of India's security and defence policy shortcomings. There is a lack of a broad strategy to guide overall policy so as to deal effectively with internal, external and non-traditional threats.

As noted above, India, with its regional power aspirations, needs to maintain a tri-service capability with an effective intelligence and security apparatus. While criticism is warranted, it should be noted, however, that the Indian Navy has succeeded in eradicating piracy threats in important sea lines of communication, has sent patrols into the South China Sea, conducted naval exercises with bilateral partners and, with the Air Force, has evacuated Indian nationals from situations in which they were under threat.

¹ Sardesai, R., 2014: *The Election that Changed India*, Penguin: Gurgaon, 2014, p. 242.

² Roberts, A., *India: Superfast Primetime Ultimate Nation*, London: Profile Books Ltd, 2017, p. xiii.

When Modi's government came to power in 2014, his commitment to Make in India seemed a natural fit for defence projects. At public rallies, the Prime Minister [forecast](#) that (an unrealistic) 70 per cent of weapons could be produced onshore, with an equitable amount of that output coming from India's private sector, to include jet fighters, helicopters, submarines and armoured vehicles. The Strategic Partnership designed to enhance the private sector role was developed with guidelines for the selection of Indian companies based on technical capability and capacity, rather than on a "lowest bidder" principle. The taskforce headed by V.K. Aatre, set up in 2015 to frame the criteria for their selection has since reported, taking into account the limited experience of the Indian private sectors in the defence arena, and [proposing](#) a model to manage the initial years.

The government [announced](#) a Defence Production Policy in the 2018-19 budget to promote production by the public and private sectors, and including MSMEs – micro, small and medium enterprises – recognising the role that they could play in the defence manufacturing chain. The policy is centred on 'fostering a competitive, innovative and robust defence industry ... of which R&D and innovation are important determinants of defence production ...' and listing initiatives across a range of fields to facilitate India's defence industry. Such cross-domain activities, paving the way for contacts, will take time.

Major projects now await, including "[Project-75 India](#)" for the construction of French-origin advanced stealth submarines by the Indian private sector. Meanwhile, India remains the world's largest weapons importer. Russia continues to be India's [largest supplier of defence materiel](#) and the United States, unhappy about the increase in India's arms imports, must consider the effect on its broader Indo-Pacific interests if it decides to put India on its sanctions list.

A start has been made on meeting the challenges in producing an overall national security strategy with the establishment of a [Defence Planning Committee](#), tasked with preparing draft documents for a strategic defence review, an international defence engagement strategy, and roadmaps to build other essential capabilities. With a general election now a year away, some visible action in the defence arena may reassure voters and international partners with an interest in Make in India projects.

Modi's Actions

In the foreign policy and diplomacy realm, where action is visible, and again taking China as illustration, Modi's actions may be read both as conciliatory and opportunistic. Their different forms of government and incompatible value systems pose a [pertinent question](#): "Can Xi-ism and Modi-ism happily coexist ...?" There are now two new elements in play: the limit on the term of a Chinese presidency has been removed by that country's "rubber-stamp" parliament, allowing President Xi to continue to govern China for as long as he chooses. His consolidation of power thus clears the way for him to lead his country in new directions. Modi, leading a vast democracy, faces an election in 2019 and, although highly popular and enjoying increasing success at state-level elections, recent contentious domestic issues have not gone unnoticed by voters. China's ability to intervene – e.g. Xi's influence over members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group in recent years to deny India full membership of the NSG – suggest that Modi would have sought to avoid any potentially difficult outcome

from his two-day meetings with Xi in late April 2018. Putting the issue of NSG membership aside, the mutual distrust of 2017 has been repaired and their next meeting will be at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) in China in June.

Perhaps opportunistically, on the eve of Modi's April meeting with Xi in Wuhan Province, Australia announced that its navy had not been invited by India to join its annual *Malabar* naval exercise, to be held near Guam in early June. While it may be argued that China does not see India as a rival strategically or economically, Xi almost certainly has been provoked by India's joining, however tentatively, the latest iteration of the non-binding Quadrilateral Dialogue. Australia's apparent exclusion from *Malabar* appears politically opportune.

While Modi benefits from a stable relationship with Beijing at this time, he has pushed boundaries with China both literally and figuratively, showing muscle at home. He boycotted the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Summit in May 2017, ratified the UN *Transports Internationaux Routiers* (TIR) Convention, forced some level of back down by China during the armed confrontation at Doklam in 2017 and, most recently, enthusiastically embraced the Commonwealth. India had not attended Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings for almost a decade.

China was the seventieth nation to ratify the TIR Convention in 2016, while India became the seventy-first in June 2017, a month after it boycotted Xi's OBOR Summit. Ostensibly denying the advantages offered by OBOR, India pursued connectivity in other ways. The TIR Convention facilitates India's (and China's) overland trade movements by allowing signatory states to have fast access to international transport systems by road or multi-modal means across other member states. The objective for India is to integrate its products into global and regional transport networks, thereby reducing costs and providing guarantees around duties and taxes. Interestingly, the movement of Indian products to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma or Nepal may be via OBOR road or rail systems.

Modi, however, is also pursuing connectivity in other ways, while following different rules to China. At the India-EU Summit, held in Delhi in October 2017, for example, the leaders [agreed](#) that India and the EU:

... as the world's largest democracies, share a desire to work closely together and with all relevant players to support a rules-based international order that upholds agreed international norms, global peace and stability, and encourages inclusive growth and sustainable development in all parts of the inter-connected and multipolar world.

India has other broad multilateral links, not all open to China, that include the G-20, the Asia Co-operation Dialogue, BRICS, BIMSTEC, the East Asia Summit, the Mekong-Ganga Co-operation, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), but the biggest prize may be its place in the Commonwealth, covering as it does 20 per cent of the world's land area with an estimated population of close to 2.5 billion people.

In addition to this vast backyard, India's continuing links with long-term friends, and an independent foreign policy not encumbered by alliances, suggest that, for the duration of his government, Modi's words and actions are a workable method of achieving his vision for India.

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