



Vibrant India

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Modi Foreign Policy: Mix of Classical Realism and Neo-Realism

As the Modi Government completes three years in office, one of its major success stories has to be in foreign policy. An indication of the achievement was had in the first year itself, but it was then too early to discern a pattern. All that which could be gleaned from the Prime Minister's initial thrust was the glimpse of a creative and bold approach, one that was straining at the leash of conventional diplomacy, and promising to break free from clichés and chart a new course. Successive regimes in the past had rarely departed from the traditional approach in matters of international diplomacy, and the boldest of these forays was considered to be a tentative reaching out to Israel. Indeed, the mere overt recognition of its friendship with India was hailed as a Government's 'daring'! But things have dramatically changed in the last three years. Not only has the India-Israel partnership flowered like never before (and this, when the Indian Prime Minister is still to visit Israel) but that New Delhi has drastically calibrated its relations with the rest of the world — leaving neither the US nor Europe nor Africa nor the neighbourhood nor the rest of Asia, including West Asia, untouched.

There is hardly an important world leader with whom Prime Minister Modi has not interacted person to person and not developed a level of rapport. More importantly, barring very few exceptions, such personal equations have yielded result. How is it then that earlier Prime Ministers, representing the very same India with its enormous economic potential and geo-strategic significance, failed to electrify the global community or win over its direct support in matters that concern this country? It cannot be that the rest of the world has suddenly woken up to the vast market India means to their trade and business interests; the realisation had dawned after the famous economic



liberalisation in the early 1990s effected by Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. It also cannot be that the West, especially the US, has only now discovered India's importance as a 'neutraliser' to China's rise in the Asian region and spread elsewhere. India's geographic location hasn't changed since independence nor has China's ambitions sprouted overnight.

The difference is that for the first time in recent decades, the country has a Prime Minister who is his own man. By virtue of the resounding electoral mandate the people gave Modi, he and his Government are not dependent on either allies or extra-constitutional power centers and can take decisions without looking over their shoulder at partners ready to put a spoke in the wheels. The global community has understood this welcome reality and expressed its appreciation. Besides, Modi came to occupy the Prime Minister's chamber with a reputation of being a no-nonsense and yet pragmatic leader — his decade long stint as Chief Minister of Gujarat had become his calling card. Such was the force with which he assumed charge as Prime Minister that many Western countries which had struck him off their visa list for his supposed complicity in the 2002 Gujarat communal violence, lost no time in revising their opinion and laid the red carpet for New India's new leader. This must have amused Modi no end, but instead of rubbing it in, he graciously accepted the change of heart and went on to conquer the minds of world leaders who had until then viewed him with suspicion, if not hostility. As Prime Minister, Modi did not fail to remind the world that he was respected because of the mandate of a billion-plus Indians. Add to all this, his personal charisma and enviable communication skills, and you have, in film language, a fully rounded script backed by a heart-throb actor — a sure recipe for success.

But the Prime Minister's foreign policy could not have been a hit merely on the basis of his persona or on the many advantages India offers. To gain acceptance among the people, it had to be seen driving Indian interests at every step. Every bilateral or multilateral deal New Delhi inked had to leave India with something in hand — real and not chimerical. This could be in



terms of strategic gains, economic returns, deepening cultural ties, cutting edge technology, uplift of the needy, infrastructural up gradation, cooperation in counter-terrorism measures etc. The outreach to the world community was not limited or reduced to optics; tangible gains came along, which the people noticed. To give just one instance, the unqualified support India received in the wake of its surgical strikes in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir late last year, did not happen overnight. Months and years of hard diplomatic work led from the front by Prime Minister Modi (and ably complemented by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and her team) had gone, which showed up when India needed it most.

The pattern is now clear, three years down the line. There are four dimensions to the Modi Government's foreign policy. The first is to deepen relations with traditional friends — Russia, Afghanistan (barring during the Taliban rule), Israel, Palestine, Nepal, Bhutan, Mauritius and Central Asian Republics). The second is to aggressively pursue stronger ties with relatively new friends (the US, the Gulf nations and rest of the West). The third is to broaden cooperation with the neighbourhood and those in the Indian Ocean rim. The fourth is to find common ground with countries that keep coming in and going out of the Indian friendship orbit (the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey etc). There is, of course, a fifth and a sixth one too, because India's foreign policy story is incomplete without them. We have a robust, if skewed, trade relationship with China which survives and even grows despite the many causes of hostility between the two. At times, as on the issue of climate change, the two nations have spoken in one voice on international forums. And yet, managing border disputes and China's open support to Pakistan in the face of Pakistani involvement in terrorist activities in India, has remained a challenge for New Delhi. The sixth dimension is Pakistan, and no Government — certainly not a 'muscular' Modi one — is in a position to do business with it so long as Pakistan refuses to mend its ways. It would be erroneous to term India's Pakistan policy a failure, because failure has been from the other side. And yet, even here, the Modi Government has succeeded in isolating Islamabad internationally; barring China, none really trusts Pakistan, and many no longer hesitate to call a spade a spade. Bangladesh



and Afghanistan openly accuse Pakistan of fomenting terrorism, while most Western nations have censured it on more than one occasion. Islamabad's regional woes are no less; it had to call off the last South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit which it was to host last year, after India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan pulled out in protest.

The pattern in the Modi Government's foreign policy is not just evident but workable too. It would be interesting to contextualise it in theoretical terms. International relations experts would easily discern that the Prime Minister has adopted what has been the most influential school of thought in understanding global politics — Realism. It involves the study of the nature of the world and interaction of nation-states as they were, and not as they ought to be. The Realists believe that nation-states are at a constant tug of war over differing interests and perspectives and that a certain craving for dominance is inherent in human nature, which is reflected in ways nations respond to situations. Realism lays emphasis on 'power politics' and the pursuit of 'national interests'. By contrast the Idealist school of thought believes in an idealist interpretation of world diplomacy where morality and ethics should guide a nation's international relations drive.

Realism itself has two major strands — Classical Realism and Neo-Realism — and it appears that the Modi Government has adopted a mix of the two. Thucydides, Machiavelli, Chanakya and Hans J Morgenthau are some of the first kind's proponents, though the modern understanding of this branch came only soon after the Second World War when Classical Realists spent lifetimes dissecting the conflict. Classical Realism holds that international politics is driven by a constant struggle for power, and that this is human nature at its worst or best. It says that the mark of a true leader lies in his ability to adapt to the changing poor equations in world politics. Classical Realists do not hold optimism for a dramatic change in human nature insofar as the basic desire to dominate or at the very least, push their interests forward, is concerned.

Neo-Realism or Contemporary Realism developed during the 1980's, influenced heavily by Kenneth Waltz, an American political scientist and



*prolific author on international relations. Neo-Realists did not approve of the belief that international conflicts resulted from human nature's inclination towards dominance, but held the framework of the international system responsible. In other words, the structural aspect of an international system, with its various institutions and how they functioned, gave rise to conflicts. Neo-Realism is, thus, often referred as Structural Realism. Waltz (whose book, *Theory of International Politics*, has come to be regarded as a seminal work on the subject) and other Neo-Realists argued that there would be conflicts in the international domain even if nations and their leaders had benevolent intent, because they would have to contend with the structural issues. Therefore, the phenomenon of war or other forms of conflict of interests between nation-states can be understood better by keeping the lens on an anarchical global structure rather than on the nature of a political system (democratic or totalitarian) or its leaders' inclinations.*

There has been criticism of the Neo-Realism approach on the premise that these Realists assume that an anarchical global structure preceded human nature. They press forward with the argument that the very structure they hold responsible is the creation of human nature, and that global power politics is driven by such human nature. Whatever be the differing viewpoints, there is broad understanding on the three major concepts of Realism, and they are important to understanding how the Modi Government has made a success of its foreign policy. The first is National Interest, the second is National Power, and the third is National Security.

The Realists are unanimous on the point that the pursuit of national interest must be treated as the principal justification for all state action. Theorists have, nevertheless, faced problems in defining national interest. Is it the sum total of the interests of all citizens of a nation? Is it an expression of the interests of a governing class of people? Is it a manifestation of the elite, the financially secure, and the power-brokers? Whatever it be, every leader seeks to act in the 'national interest'. Napoleon invoked national interest when he took on rivals at Waterloo; Hitler and Stalin spoke of national interest to justify their actions; democratic leaders too have resorted to national interest



to explain their conduct. But generally speaking, there is strong argument in favour of national interest overriding all other principles. Morgenthau strongly believed that sheer national interest should drive a nation's foreign policy. He said, "The minimum requirement of nation-states is to protect their physical, political and cultural identity against possible encroachments by other nation-states." India's national interest, going by this definition and in the context of a hostile neighbour that promotes terrorism, is evident.

We must rely on Morgenthau again to understand the second element, 'National Power'. He put it pithily but accurately when he said that power is "man's control over the minds and actions of other men". According to Realists, power is both relative and relational. It is not enough to calculate a nation's power capabilities but it must be done relative to the other's power. Also, the exercise of power is not done in a vacuum but in relation to the power of other nation-states. Theoretically speaking, it's important to differentiate between power and capability. Israel does not have the power that we understand in conventional terms that its rivals put together have, yet it demonstrated its capability to take them on in the 1967 Six Day War. Vietnam does not have the military power to match that of the US, and yet it frustrated the Americans in the long-drawn out war, giving them a bloody nose. It would, therefore, be safer to understand National Power as also assimilating National Capability.

The third concept is that of National Security. In the contemporary world, national security has been a key area of conflict and concern. Nations around the world are threatened by terrorism, and this threat has brought many of them together, regardless of their differences of opinion on other issues. India too, being among the most impacted by terrorism from across the border, has made common cause with other countries — and the Modi Government has made the subject of countering terrorism an important element in his foreign policy forays. Indeed, a nation's very survival as an integrated whole is sought to be undermined by terrorism, especially when it is riven by religious fervour. Former US Secretary of State and noted diplomat and author, Henry



Kissinger, had once remarked, “A nation’s survival is the first and ultimate responsibility; it cannot be compromised or put to risk.”

Entering into their fourth year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Government have many unfinished foreign policy tasks. The goodwill is there, the intent is obvious, the world community’s trust in India is strong, and the policy direction is unambiguous. But a good bit more of exertion is required to handle counter-influences. Global diplomacy, unlike in the Cold War days and bipolar world, is complicated and lends itself to no one template. Prime Minister Modi’s foreign policy must remain rooted to Realism, because this theory alone can take the nation ahead in these turbulent times.



About VIF

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