

India's Foreign Policy Strategy Under Modi

Chen Mu-Min

On January 25, 2015, American President Barack Obama arrived in New Delhi on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to conduct a three-day state visit. Though the two leaders had met several times before, this marked the first time a sitting U.S. president was the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations. During the three-day visit, the two leaders signed an agreement on civilian nuclear technology, reopened bilateral defense cooperation, and expressed their joint strategic interests in the U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. In areas such as climate change, however, the two leaders were unable to reach meaningful consensus. This led to the widely-shared observation that the summit was more symbolic than substantive.

Since taking office as prime minister in May 2014, Narendra Modi has broken with tradition and already begun to leave his mark. In his first precedent-setting move, Modi invited the leaders of neighboring South Asian states, including Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to attend his inauguration. In the following months, Modi visited Japan, the United States, and Australia among other countries, and received a visit by China's President Xi Jinping. Since taking office, Modi has visited India's neighbors, Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma, and plans to travel to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 2015—essentially touring every neighboring country with the exception of Pakistan. Modi's diplomatic travels, like Obama's visit to India, have greatly enhanced India's (and Modi's) prestige.

However captivating Modi's diplomatic endeavors, we must look beneath the surface and ask what it is that Modi is really after. In only half a year's time, Modi and Obama have met four times—including at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit and the Group of Twenty (G20) summit—leading many to speculate that India is working to win over the United States as a formal ally in an implicitly anti-China coalition. This interpretation, however, fails to fully consider India's true objectives.

First, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) owe their May 2014 victory in parliamentary elections primarily to the inability of the Indian National Congress government to successfully address economic difficulties after ten years of ruling. India has suffered from considerable setback in economic growth, which fell from 8% before 2008 to 4.9% in 2013; serious inflation; and the continued depreciation of the Indian Rupee. The Indian people voted in a new government, hoping it would pull India out of its economic mire. Modi understands perfectly that his party's term in power depends entirely upon the economy. Modi considers attracting foreign investment and transforming India into a manufacturing-dominated base of production indispensable to boosting the economy. This is the linchpin of the Modi government's economic development strategy.

Second, since India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, spearheaded the Non-Aligned Movement, India has consistently

proven unwilling to show preference for any major power. Although India did maintain friendly relations with the Soviet Union under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and proactively adopted a pro-American stance after the Indian National Congress came back to power in 2004, its tradition of strategic autonomy has remained essentially unchanged. The current level of enthusiasm for the United States among Indians is rare in India's history, and the Modi government is genuine in its desire to cooperate with the United States, but however good the bilateral relationship, India is unlikely to join the United States in a quasi-military alliance.

India has always regarded itself as the great power of South Asia and the Indian Ocean, but in recent years, China has posed a great challenge to this status. As a rising power, China has turned its gaze toward the region. China has used a combination of investment, construction projects, and aid to bind South Asian states to itself. China has also proactively expanded its "Belt and Road" initiative in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean regions, putting significant pressure on India. China's accomplishments have generated envy in India and left India concerned that China will ultimately exercise control over Asia. In response, India has been pulling closer to the United States, Japan, and other Western countries, while also improving relations with its neighbors, in an effort to create an international environment conducive to India's growth. Modi's development strategy is rapidly increasing India's national power, and the United States is, in fact, a stepping stone to India's renewed rise.

Taiwan should not interpret U.S.-Indian cooperation as a definite anti-China coalition. Modi's genius lies in his ability to use

Western hopes of an Indian rise to aid Indian development. As one of the Asia-Pacific's most dynamic economies, Taiwan should be able to find some room to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation with India. **BT**

Chen Mu-Min is Associate Professor at the Graduate Institute of International Politics, and Director of the Center for Strategic Studies on South Asia and the Middle East, National Chung-Hsing University, Taiwan.