

# Modi Doctrine: Old Wine in a New Bottle

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## Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Ambassador (Retd) Suresh K Goel for his invaluable guidance and mentorship throughout my work. His review and constructive criticism have helped me to keep my work on track and refine my paper. His professional expertise and knowledge on the subject have taught me more than I could give him credit for.

I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Global Counter Terrorism Council (GCTC) for their constant feedback and enthusiasm. I couldn't be more grateful to them for guiding me in accessing different research papers and documents for my work. Their constant advice and patient instructions have helped me to pursue my academic goals. Thereafter, I am also indebted to Derin Joy, Advocate for proofreading my paper. However, if any omissions and errors remain, they are my own. Similarly, I take full responsibility for the opinions and views expressed in the paper.

I would also like to acknowledge the moral support provided by my family and friends who have always pushed me to achieve excellence in my endeavours.

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## Abstract

Indian Foreign policy is credited to have taken a unique realist turn since 2014 under the present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, which is regarded as the Modi Doctrine. It encompasses the vigour and decisiveness showcased by New Delhi in dealing with geopolitical and geostrategic concerns, which are often alleged to be absent in the previous governments. This study aims to refute this popular notion and thereby establish that even the decisions of past governments were as realistic and state-centric as they could be.

Since India has emerged as one of the principal actors in the existing global anarchical structure, it is imperative to analyse the present realist shift of the incumbent government. For this purpose, the author will begin by analysing the South Asian dynamics of the India-China-Pakistan triangle, followed by the 'change' that the Modi doctrine has brought in India's position *vis-à-vis* dealing with these two key players of the region. The author will then showcase how these policy directives rather reflect 'continuity' with the decisions of the previous governments and aren't unique to the present regime. The paper will finally conclude by elaborating on the reasons why the foreign policy couldn't be completely moulded by the NDA government. The above analysis has been done *under the theoretical perspective of realism to illustrate its timeless nature.*

**Keywords:** India, Modi Doctrine, Pakistan, China, South Asia, Realism

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Date of Submission: 11-02-2023

Date of Acceptance: 22-02-2023

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## I. INTRODUCTION

For contemporary democracies like India, it is the Prime Minister (PM), who as the head of the government directs the foreign policy in whichever direction he chooses to steer. Post-2014, a new phase commenced, led by the incumbent PM Modi who is credited with bringing a unique and unprecedented mould to the policy directives.

This new chapter in foreign policy was called the 'Modi doctrine', characterised by a newfound realist and pragmatic shift from which the previous governments shied away<sup>1</sup>. It was associated with an emphasis on national interest, being less doctrinaire about alliances, expanding influences via international regimes and treaties, and adopting a self-help attitude<sup>2</sup>. The Prime Minister is believed to have changed India's self-positioning at the global and regional level, where his ambitions are not only to make India a leader in South Asia but to place it as a world power and make the twenty-first century to be the 'century of India'<sup>3</sup>. The general notion in the public thereby prevails that none of India's earlier PMs has been as active and decisive as the incumbent one<sup>4</sup>.

To analyse the above claims, this paper is divided into four parts. The first section will give a brief of the power politics that is being played in South Asia between India, China and Pakistan and also throw light on the policy of offshore balancing by the USA in the region. The second section will address: How has the Indian Foreign Policy 'changed' under PM Modi in comparison to the past governments, while dealing with the duo of "all-weather" partners, Pakistan and China? In this section, at the outset the present dynamics of relations between the countries will be analysed under a realist lens, followed by tracing what approach did past governments adopt while dealing with these neighbouring countries. Finally, the course of action taken by the

present regime post-Pathankot and Uri attacks, and Galwan clashes will be deconstructed to comprehend how this response was considered unique and unprecedented to label them as Modi Doctrine.

The third section will elucidate that these pragmatic policies of statecraft were also found in the footprints of past governments. For this purpose, this section will examine the decisions of former PMs, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi among others to establish that Modi Doctrine rather reflects a sense of 'continuity' in foreign policy making. The fourth and final section will conclude by analysing the reasons: why the present government couldn't change the foreign policy?

## **II. THE SOUTH ASIAN DYNAMICS: INDIA-PAKISTAN-CHINA TRIANGLE**

South Asia has become a battleground of a 'hegemonic war' for India and China where the former envisions being a regional hegemon and the latter hustles to gain more ground in its backyard<sup>5</sup>. Due to this classic case of balance of power being played out between the two Asian giants the role of the 'satellite states', especially Pakistan assumes all the more importance.

The roots of this 'iron-clad friendship' between China and Pakistan can be traced to the Bandung Conference in 1955 when both reached an understanding regarding their 'convergent interest' with respect to India and the need to contain its rise<sup>6</sup>. The relation is thus a symbiotic one where, "For China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India, and for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India"<sup>7</sup>.

This 'China factor' in South Asian dynamics can also be regarded as one of the reasons behind the ongoing arms race between India and Pakistan. As Subrata K. Mitra (2010) explains, even if India and Pakistan do come to a ratio of weapons for 'minimum deterrence', India would still have to continue to build up its armoury to match the Chinese threat<sup>8</sup>. Ensuing this, the attained balance of power between India and Pakistan would be disturbed and now the latter would push above its weight to match the former's 'capability'. The trust deficit between the two will thereby continue to widen.

Further, the policies of outside players like 'offshore balancing' by the US often lands India between rock and a hard place. Due to an 'asymmetrical power division' between China-Pakistan and India, the latter often has to resort to seek western support in terms of strategic knowledge and the latest weaponry. However, India walks the tightrope to keep such outside powers at bay and ensure that South Asia does not become a chessboard for great power politics.

## **III. MODI DOCTRINE: A DICTUM OF CHANGE**

### ***India and Pakistan: The Game of Chicken***

India's relations with its 'separate-at-birth brother' have been precarious ever since independence, witnessing a never-seen-in-history refugee crisis (1947), two wars of 1962 and 1971 and a proxy war in 1999. Both sides have suffered relentless hostility, which as the 'structural realists' explain is due to the presence of a 'security dilemma': on one hand where Pakistan is afraid to witness a repeat of the 1971 war (due to an asymmetrical power division between the two), India too, is reluctant to lower its guard and be vulnerable to a surprise attack by its neighbour<sup>9</sup>. And hence, a conventional and nuclear arms race continues in an already fragile neighbourhood.

Since independence except for a few instances, India has adopted an attitude of accommodation towards Pakistan by reaching out to its government and the people<sup>10</sup>. It has taken the baton to be the promoter of regional peace and stability for which Pakistan holds the key. This can be found in former PM Lal Bahadur Shastri's decision to unconditionally withdraw from Pakistan's territory post-1965 war, the Gujral doctrine of 'non-reciprocity' and former PM Manmohan Singh's vision of 'breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, and dinner in Kabul'<sup>11</sup>.

When the incumbent PM assumed office in 2014, a similar outreach policy was followed by the south block by inviting members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in ceremony, the 'neighbourhood first' policy, "shawl-sari" diplomacy and a stopover by the PM on the way to New Delhi from Kabul to Lahore to wish the Pakistani PM on his birthday<sup>12</sup>. However, Pathankot (2 January 2016) and Uri attacks (18 September 2016) were an eyewash for India.

The policy decisions that followed the attacks were hailed as a new era in foreign policy where India unapologetically followed more muscular policies unlike before. The PM's address during the 2016 Independence Day set the precedence for this new India. For the first time, an Indian PM had publicly mentioned the people of Baluchistan and Gilgit to thank them for their support<sup>13</sup>. The government also weighed the option of providing asylum to Balochistan leader Brahamdagh Bugti who has been protesting against human rights violations of the Baloch community<sup>14</sup>. India also did not shy away from pulling Pakistan at the 33<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the same<sup>15</sup>.

Soon, India cancelled its delegation to the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit post-Uri attacks, which ultimately led to the collapse of the summit turning out to be a humiliation for Pakistan on the international stage<sup>16</sup>. In an obvious turn of events, no summit-level meeting of SAARC has been held since then and it lies defunct. The

PM further took the observers by surprise when he declared that “blood and water can’t flow together” during the Indus Water Treaty meeting, hinting that India might reconsider its generous stand with the treaty<sup>17</sup>. Analysing in retrospect, this hue and cry might be manufactured to conceal the big showdown against Pakistan. The climax reached on 28 September 2016, when India carried out a covert surgical strike against terrorist launch pads inside Pakistan, killing 38 terrorists and two Pakistani soldiers<sup>18</sup>.

The response evidently displayed a self-help attitude by India, where the country was no more shying away from flexing its muscle and was ready to ‘speak to Pakistan in the language it understands’. By shedding the compulsive need to appease Pakistan, the government understood that hard power is the real currency and India needs to possess both, defensive and offensive hard power tactics<sup>19</sup>. India thus took a position of power and flexed its authority at regional and global forums unlike before when it often preferred to accommodate the interest of its neighbour to preserve an otherwise fragile peace in the region. Although political stability still evades its neighbour, India realises that its national interest lies in a three-pronged approach: open diplomatic channels with the elected government, being mindful of the Pakistani deep state and cracking down on the terrorist in this asymmetric warfare.

### ***India and China: Balancing the Threat***

India and China are both forces to reckon with in terms of their strategic clout, economic diplomacy, military strength and other aspects of hard power. They envision altering the status quo from a US-dominated hegemonic world order to a multipolar one, by denting the knowledge domination that the West possesses. However, despite being revisionist powers, strategic coherence still eludes the two due to persistent border clashes and an ensuing ‘zero-sum game’.

Both countries commenced their relations on a harmonious note, where India was the first non-communist nation to recognise China. However, the relations took a downward turn when Nehru under his idealistic policy acknowledged China’s claim over Tibet and ignored its importance as a buffer state, putting India in a tough position during the 1962 conflict<sup>20</sup>. Post the war, India adopted defensive realism and a ‘policy of appeasement’ to not irritate the Chinese dragon<sup>21</sup>.

Finally, with the change of leadership in 2014 India endorsed some fundamental policy changes. This shift was found to be ‘more assertive and less sensitive to their needs’ by the Chinese strategic community<sup>22</sup>. To comprehend this claim, the Indian response post-Galwan clash can be analysed here.

During the Galwan clash (5 June 2020) the troops of both sides were involved in a skirmish in the eastern part of Ladakh where the Chinese had set up camp in the buffer zone, created after a disengagement process. The clash ended with 20 Indian soldiers being killed in action, the highest since the 1962 war<sup>23</sup>. The Indian response was assertive and brutal. It did not shy away from using its Tibetan card to rattle the Chinese by calling in the support of its secret guerrilla force, the Special Frontier Force (SFF) (a paratrooper force which supposedly comprises of exiled Tibetan youths)<sup>24</sup>. Post the skirmish, the government banned 59 Chinese apps in the first wave including popular ones like TikTok and reviewed trade and other cooperation agreements with China to reduce India’s economic dependence<sup>25</sup>.

To balance the Chinese military threat, India aligned itself with the Quad members, expanded the Malabar exercise to include Australia and increased cooperation with European nations like France who share similar interests in the Indo-Pacific<sup>26</sup>. Further, unlike the previous governments wherein despite the border tensions other domestic cooperation would continue, this time, India consistently maintained its position that normal relations cannot be possible under any circumstances with a ‘dangerous situation’ prevailing at the border<sup>27</sup>.

Although the government claims that there will be no business as usual with China until the status quo ante is restored, New Delhi still chooses to align with its neighbour depending on its own interests, like that of climate change and fair global trade, among others. This ‘interest-based balancing’ as per one’s own national interest is seemingly the most practical way ahead devised by the south block to deal with China<sup>28</sup>.

## **IV. MODI DOCTRINE: REFLECTING CONTINUITY**

When PM Modi came to power, the foreign policy decisions generated a lot of drama and noise among the general public as well as analysts, hailing the decisions as unprecedented. Right from his swearing-in ceremony to multiple foreign visits, engaging with the diaspora and giving provocative remarks, the Modi doctrine claims to have commenced a new era in foreign policy. However, when one dives deeper into these trends and claims, we realise that the decisions taken by the present government are rather built upon the wisdom and experiences of the leaders before and even the past governments have upheld the principle of ‘raison d’état’.

At the outset, it can be traced to an otherwise idealist leader former PM Jawaharlal Nehru. Although allegedly criticised for turning a blind eye to the Chinese aggression, Nehru showcased a confrontationist approach in November 1961, when India adopted a ‘forward policy’ at the disputed North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region and Aksai Chin<sup>29</sup>. He took advantage of a ‘weak China’ which was reeling under the pressure of

the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1960s) and threats from Taiwan, to push the Indian territorial interest<sup>30</sup>. Similarly, his policies towards South Asian neighbours like Bhutan and Nepal and subsequent treaties with them, asserted India's position as a regional hegemon<sup>31</sup>.

Former PM Indira Gandhi carried forward this trend and emerged as a cold and pragmatic leader on the international stage. She recognized the skewed balance of power ratio between India and China (when the latter carried out a nuclear test) and thus retaliated with India's smiling buddha test<sup>32</sup>. She subsequently refused to bow down to the Western pressure to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1967. On similar lines, despite India being the founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), she gave priority to the country's territorial integrity and signed the Treaty of Friendship (1971) with the Soviet Union, which is undeniably a military pact<sup>33</sup>. Her approach has often been compared with the 'Monroe doctrine' of the USA, encompassing the policy of 'foreign hands-off' in South Asia while also convincing the neighbouring states that the Indian policies are in their good<sup>34</sup>.

The next in line PM Rajiv Gandhi continued with similar policy initiatives of brute realpolitik which was reflected in his political-economy approach. However, post-Cold War, the subsequent governments were accused of tip-toeing the US line in the unipolar world order. But what often goes unnoticed is that the 1990s saw the emergence of coalition politics in India, where since the subsequent governments were hanging by a thread in Parliament, they couldn't afford a controversial decision which could lead to them losing the majority in the lower house<sup>35</sup>. Thus, the foreign policy was mandated to continue on the past footprints to avoid much hue and cry. Although, India still continued to keep a watchful eye on the developments in its neighbourhood. The Pokhran test of 1998 in response to Chinese assistance to Pakistan to develop its nuclear arsenal reveals how India has always chosen 'realpolitik over moral-politik'<sup>36</sup>.

However, such past decisions often do not become a part of the public discourse. A primary reason for this can be traced to how the image and importance that a common man in India attaches to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has evolved post-2014. Since the gamut of responsibilities of the MEA is associated with relations outside India it was assumed to not have a direct impact on the life of '*aam aadmi*'<sup>37</sup>. However, it was PM Modi and the former External Affairs Minister (EAM) Sushma Swaraj at the helm, who showcased the relevance of MEA for a common man, especially for the diaspora, and made the otherwise not-so-known ministry to be publicly recognised. Soon, the decisions of the ministry and India's bilateral and multilateral relations became the talk of the household. A classic case is that of the surgical strikes (against Pakistan) which were extensively covered by the media and hotly debated by the public. Even though surgical strikes were done prior to 2014 as well, the government chose to keep them confidential to avoid flaring up the bilateral tensions, and thus they never came under public recognition<sup>38</sup>.

Thus, the matter of fact isn't that the present regime is more realistic and masculine in its foreign policy, but, that the foreign policy decision-making is now more visible and open for the masses to adjudge. Since different news channels invite experts, retired bureaucrats and army officials to discuss the nitty-gritty of these directives, the discourses which were earlier restricted to academic conferences and accessible to only a few sections of society, can now be conveniently seen from the comfort of living rooms. The general public thus often presumes that the present policies are more pragmatic and there is a dawn of a 'New India'. However, what these discussions often lack is in-depth knowledge about the past leaders and their assertive stand to protect Indian sovereignty whenever a crisis required to do so. Hence, during the discussions of the past 9 years of foreign policy (2014-2023), what is often swept under the carpet is the past 67 years (1947-2014) of a tumultuous yet triumphant journey that foreign policy has undergone.

## V. CONCLUSION

A foreign policy like any other government decision evolves over years with a 'hit-and-trial method'. Although the present government has undeniably brought in a few instrumental shifts, it cannot be denied that no government can bring in a completely unprecedented overturn to such sensitive policy issues. A country must operate within a few limitations that restrict a complete overhaul of foreign policy.

Kautilya's '*mandala theory*' elaborates how competition for natural resources and priority to preserve their territorial integrity inhibits any two neighbouring states from being '*mitra*'<sup>39</sup>. Thus, competition for survival can hinder the prospects of an ever-lasting peace between India and China-Pakistan.

Secondly, in the case of Pakistan, it is the role of the 'deep state' that often inhibits a truce to sustain with India. Tracing this impediment, similar to PM Modi's outreach in the beginning, the (former PM) Vajpayee government too opened arms for Pakistan through his bus visit to Lahore (February 1999) and former PM Manmohan Singh presented the possibility of a potential breakthrough on Kashmir<sup>40</sup>. However, every time the Indian side has held out a hand in peace, the Pakistani deep state has reacted brutally through the Uri attack, the Kargil war and the 2008 Mumbai attack, respectively. Thus, unlike what is often projected, India's relations with Pakistan cannot be resolved by PM Modi alone or any other Indian political leader. Rather, it depends on the Pakistani deep state and its civil-military relation<sup>41</sup>.

A low budget allocation to defence is another impediment as to why the foreign policy wouldn't see a radical shift in the near future<sup>42</sup>. China's single-minded focus is on modernising its defence forces and thereby spends three times more than India, at US\$261 billion, while India stagnates at US\$71.1 billion<sup>43</sup>. With Pakistan being an all-weather partner of China, India realises that in case of a 'two-front war', the balance of hard power can be against it. Thus, it prefers to take the high road when it comes to dealing with the two.

Modi doctrine has even faced the ire of being a populist policy to surf over the election wave. For instance, the Uri surgical strike was supposedly carried out to woo the voters for the 2017 Uttar Pradesh elections, a state with a stronghold of the NDA government<sup>44</sup>. Foreign policy decisions are also accused of being motivated by 'Hindu nationalism' and not realism, which can be evident in the case of increase in hostilities between India and Pakistan<sup>45</sup>.

Therefore, no foreign policy can start from a clean state. The static factors of domestic demography and social structure, culture, history and geography ensure that foreign policy fundamentals throughout the years, across parties and leaders, remain constant. Leaders have and will continue to draw upon the precedents from past policies and the south block will continue to showcase a blend of 'change' to suit the ideology of new leaders, while the core security assumptions will reflect the 'continuity' from the past.

The foreign policy of the present government is thus a series of well-thought-off diplomatic ambitions that India has nurtured over the last 75 years of its independence. Foreign policy in all its pragmatism will always be a blend of realism and idealism, where the international setting determines where and when should India balance the forces.

### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

Manvi Sherawat is currently working as a research coordinator with an international New Delhi-based think tank, Global Counter Terrorism Council (GCTC). In her capacity as a researcher, she has worked on various conferences including 'India's Defence Security Architecture', where she steered the conference as the lead anchor. She has also assisted in preparing a white paper for the same. Currently, she is also working as a researcher for the conference on 'Energy Security and Climate Change, 2023', to be organized along with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India. She has also co-authored an article titled 'Pursuit of Climate Change Under India's G20 Presidency', which was published online by 'The Geopolitics'.

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