

initiative is to build physical and regulatory infrastructure that would enhance trade in the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal region, as well as in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a seven-country sub-regional cooperation institution. Again, some of these initiatives began under the UPA government, but the Modi government renewed these efforts and has sought to build on the UPA's groundwork. The Ministry of External Affairs and the prime minister's office have collectively pushed this subregional focus, highlighting its importance by holding a BIMSTEC summit alongside a BRICS summit in Goa in October 2016.

While India's approach to negotiations largely demonstrates continuity, a focus on Modi's speeches and government documents reveals a bigger debate. The first clear enunciation of the Modi government's approach to trade appeared in his 2014 Independence Day speech that launched the "Make in India" program. He urged Indians to manufacture products in India rather than import them (Modi 2014b). This mercantilist perspective is a contrast with one of former Prime Minister Singh's early speeches where he explicitly eschewed mercantilism (Singh 2004). Modi's and the BJP's nationalist, pro-business—rather than pro-market—preferences, along with the need to play to the nationalist support base, shaped this articulation.

India's 2015–2020 Foreign Trade Policy (FTP), published in April 2015, further developed the Modi government's approach to trade. While Modi's Make in India speech left analysts confused as to whether he was envisioning import substitution industrialization or export-led growth, the FTP more clearly recognizes the need for the latter and continued to emphasize the need to limit imports and to identify winners in exports. As outlined in the FTP, trade policy was to be nested within the overall framework of the Make in India program (Department of Commerce 2015, 15). By comparison, the 2004–2009 FTP emphasized both exports and imports and focused on export promotion in sectors in which India has had a comparative advantage (Department of Commerce 2004). Interviews suggest that the clearer articulation reflected in the FTP benefitted from wider consultation with New Delhi's trade policy apparatus.

Against the backdrop of this changing rhetoric, the Finance Ministry, since early 2016, has begun to challenge the mercantilist positions described above. The 2014–2015 *Economic Survey* merely suggested ways in which Make in India could be more liberal than protectionist (Department of Economic Affairs 2015, 34). The 2015–2016 *Economic Survey* set a new tone by questioning India's overall approach to trade and by suggesting that the government rethink its approach to supporting agriculture at home (Department of Economic Affairs 2016, 32–33). It further asked that the government embrace trade liberalization more fully, both at the multilateral and at the regional level. By refuting the basis of India's support for safeguards for small farmers and for subsidies to ensure food security, the document challenged the consensus on trade policy to which this essay alluded earlier. The 2016–2017 *Economic Survey* follows up along the same lines by stating that given India's need to keep markets open, it should, along with other emerging economies, "play a more proactive role in ensuring open global markets" (Department of Economic Affairs 2017, 25). Arguing that high GDP growth rate requires high export growth, the document recommends that India should further open its own markets. It goes on to recommend that India should focus on its comparative advantage in labor-intensive exports. In doing so, the survey presents a position on trade that is at sharp variance with the nationalist worldview presented in the initial years of the Modi administration. That worldview eschewed comparative advantage and sought to focus mainly on high technology sectors. It is important to highlight that the survey performs an advisory function and is not a policy document. However, the recent surveys provide evidence of ideational tension within the government. Whether the more liberal vision will be adopted depends largely on the prime minister's preferences. In late 2017, as the WTO members congregated in Buenos Aires, we observed

little change in India's negotiating position on food security, agriculture, and other issues (Siddharth 2017).

Conclusion

The Modi government's record on trade presents continuity on negotiating positions while change in both policymaking and the stated orientation of policy. First, India continues to espouse similar positions at multilateral and regional trade negotiations. That said it is also important to note the Modi government's focus on the immediate neighborhood. Second, trade policy under Modi has taken an explicitly nationalist turn. Three factors were responsible: Modi's focus on development and job creation, his and the BJP's nationalist, pro-business approach to economic policy, and pressure from Indian business interests who felt that past trade deals had not benefitted them. While there is evidence of divergent thinking within the government, thus far there is no indication that Modi will convert any of that advice into policy. Finally, policymaking has been centralized within the Prime Minister's office, allowing Modi to shape it according to his goals and preferences.

Indian Development Assistance: The Centralization and Mercantilization of Indian Foreign Policy

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Prime Minister Modi has been clocking in the frequent flyer miles since winning the 2014 elections. His more activist approach to foreign policy has influenced Indian development assistance. On the one hand, there has been significant continuity in the Indian government's approach to foreign assistance at the individual, state, and international levels. The strategic imperatives driving Indian development assistance as well as the continued use of Indian assistance as a soft power instrument to burnish India's image abroad have not changed from the previous Indian government.

On the other hand, there have been subtle but noticeable changes in three main areas of India's engagement in foreign aid. First, Modi's government has focused its foreign relations more squarely on India's neighborhood, though foreign aid to the neighborhood increasingly included Lines of Credit in addition to grants. Second, Indian foreign aid under Modi has become more mercantilist. It has been more focused on economic diplomacy, including the instrumental use of aid to serve Modi's India First and "Act East" policies, and has increasingly pursued new modes of development assistance that are more commercial in form, following in the footsteps of China and other East Asian countries. Third, under Modi decision-making on foreign aid has become centralized in the office of the prime minister, including a decision to channel less aid through the ministry of external affairs and more through the ministry of finance.

These changes in the use of Indian foreign assistance are seen at each level of analysis. India under Modi has a pragmatic approach to development assistance as a tool of India's diplomatic efforts and as something that is mutually beneficial. Couched in the language of liberalism and internationalism, Indian foreign assistance under Modi is increasingly driven by realist thinking about aid as an instrument for enhancing India's bilateral, regional, and global power, as well as perhaps that of Prime Minister Modi himself.

The Continuity in the Modi Government's Approach to Development Assistance

Under Prime Minister Modi's government, there has been a general commitment to continuing and even increasing Indian aid to developing countries. The Modi-led government came to power in 2014 at a time when the Indian economy was suffering its worst slowdown since the early 1980s, and there was speculation about whether the new government's focus on meeting its financial targets would lead to an overall decrease in foreign aid allocations (Mitra 2014).

These worries have not been borne out. If anything, the Modi-led government has surprised Indians and the international community with the intensity of his foreign policy engagements, the frequency of his foreign trips, and the range of development partnership projects announced at many of his foreign visits. Overall, Indian development assistance under the Modi government has largely continued the previous government's efforts to increase the development assistance budget and engagement, though the mix of lending instruments has changed. Since being elected into office, the Modi-led government has increased total Indian foreign aid commitments from 70.96 billion rupees under the previous government in 2013–2014 to 76.6 billion rupees budgeted for 2017–2018, as seen in Figure 1 (the US dollar figures show a slightly different trend due to exchange rate fluctuations). These totals also only capture Indian grants and loans to developing countries, not most of the lines of credit through India's Export-Import Bank, which India considers to be part of its foreign assistance and which have increased significantly during Modi's tenure. Modi's government thus continued the commitment to Indian foreign aid, through grants, loans, and particularly lines of credit.

In addition to the Modi government's sustained commitment to Indian aid, the government also continued the strategic prioritization of foreign aid in India's diplomatic relations, using largely the same institutional structure for the formulation of development assistance priorities. Moreover, domestic drivers were still most important in influencing Indian foreign assistance, and the Government continued

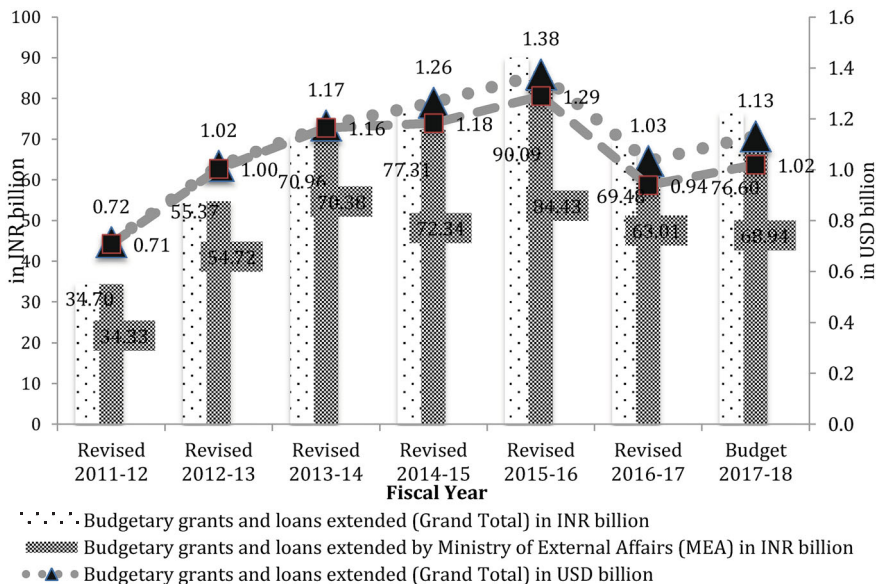


Figure 1 Indian development assistance, total and by different ministries, 2011/12–2017/18

Source: Indian Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) at the Centre for Policy Research

to use foreign aid as a soft power instrument to help build India's regional and international standing (Mullen 2015). This continuity in the approach to foreign aid is particularly noticeable at the national and systemic levels. At the national level, the process by which most Indian development assistance projects are conceptualized remained within the ambit of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Subnational governments, particularly border states, continue to play a role in the government's prioritizing of foreign relations with countries across the border, including development partnerships with these countries. For example, India has continued to increase its assistance relationship with neighboring states Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In the case of Bangladesh, the chief minister of the Indian state of West Bengal accompanied Prime Minister Modi on his official visits to Bangladesh in May 2015 and August 2016 in order to help ensure the smooth implementation of the plethora of agreements.

At the systemic level, India's regional and global power ambitions continued to grow in an increasingly multipolar world, while the drivers of Indian foreign assistance remained the same. Yet global multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank failed to adapt quickly enough to the rising ambitions and changing power reality of rising powers like India. Given such systemic factors, Indian development assistance under Modi continued its policy of expanding its partnerships with countries from the Pacific islands to francophone Africa. Increasing the ambit of India's development partnerships continued to remain a way of gaining support for India's global ambitions, for example attaining a seat on the UNSC, since in the UN General Assembly each independent country has a vote.

The Increasing Mercantilization of Indian Development Assistance under Modi

While there has been much continuity in India's approach and commitment to development assistance, there have also been significant changes. These changes in regional emphasis, modality, and the management of the Indian government are characterized by an overall mercantilization of Indian foreign assistance and the increasing role of the individual-level factor in determining Indian foreign aid.

Changing Nature of Engagement with Its Immediate Neighborhood

Under Modi, there has been a more central and proactive regional focus in Indian foreign policy, particularly focusing on the economic dividends that enhanced engagement with India's neighborhood can bring. Modi set the tone for his "Neighborhood First" policy when he came to power in 2014 and invited the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to his swearing in as prime minister. Then, he chose Bhutan as his first foreign trip and subsequently visited most other countries in the neighborhood. The Modi government's "Act East" policy—meant to convey concrete steps being undertaken to further improve relations with the high-growth countries of Southeast Asia—and the fact that over half of Prime Minister Modi's foreign trips until January 2017 have been to Asian countries, have further cemented the regional focus of Modi's foreign policy.

An integral part of India's bilateral relationships in the neighborhood has been the use of Indian foreign assistance to buttress those relationships. Indian foreign assistance in the form of grants and loans have always focused on the larger neighborhood, from Afghanistan and Bhutan to Bangladesh and Myanmar. This trend continued under Modi. However, the aid provided to India's neighbors during Modi's tenure until the end of 2017 was characterized by fewer grants and loans and more commercial lines of credit (LOCs). In 2013–2014, 95 percent of Indian grants and loans went to countries in India's neighborhood (IDCR 2017). While the vast majority of grants and loans continued to be focused on the neighborhood,

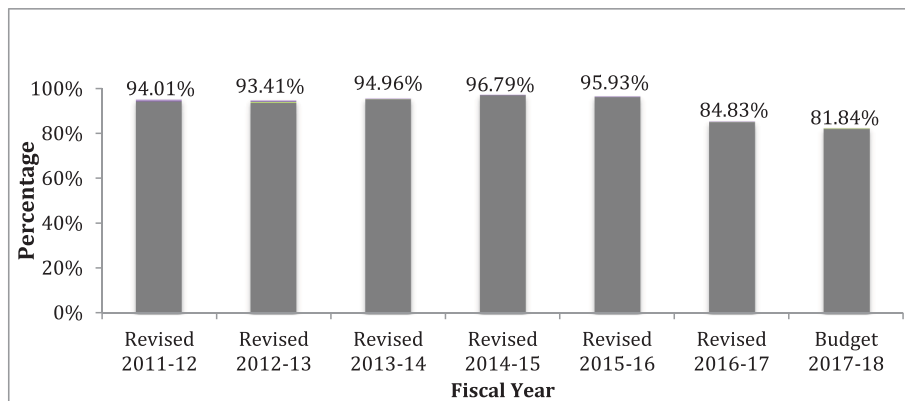


Figure 2 Proportion of Indian grants and loan commitments by the ministry of external affairs going to India's immediate neighborhood (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar & Sri Lanka)

as seen in [Figure 2](#), by 2017–2018 only 82 percent of grants and loans were going to neighboring countries. Moreover, the percentage of LOCs (which India regards as foreign aid) given to neighboring countries increased. In 2013 under the previous administration, nearly 60 percent of all operational LOCs went to African countries, while only about 25 percent went to India's neighborhood. By October 2017, the focus on LOCs had changed with the Modi government announcing several new, large credits to India's neighbors, such as a US \$4.5 billion credit line to Bangladesh (IDCR 2017). Moreover, the volume of LOCs had increased by more than 50 percent compared to the end of the previous government's tenure, from US \$10 billion in 2013–2014 to more than US \$23 billion by the end of 2017.

Increased allocations of LOCs to neighboring countries have served a dual purpose. They have backed up India's Neighborhood First and Act East policies, as well as supported the Modi government's India First policy, since all LOCs are required to source a minimum of 75 percent of their goods and services from India. If one includes all new operational and committed LOCs, Indian foreign assistance under Modi has undergone an active shift toward reprioritizing the region in India's development partnerships and in seeking bilateral partnerships in the region that are mutually beneficial.

The Modi government's focus on India's neighborhood is also seen in India's engagement with the two new international financial institutions in which India is a founding member: the New Development Bank (NDB) composed of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). While India's joining of these banks was already initiated under the previous administration, under Modi India has applied for loans from both of these banks that will be equivalent to or greater than the funds India contributes (IDCR 2017).

Moreover, in more actively engaging with countries in the region, particularly those east of India, individual-level factors have come to the fore as Modi has clocked in more foreign trips with more foreign aid agreements than any other Indian prime minister in their first two years. The increased importance of individual factors in Modi's administration was to be expected from a government that did not require coalition partners to form a government and that rules with a majority in the lower house. Yet while Modi's presidential engagement in foreign policy is reminiscent of India's first post-independence Prime Minister Nehru, his activist

pursuit of expanding development partnerships has been a noticeable shift from any previous Indian prime minister.

New, Mercantilist Modes of Indian Development Assistance

The second major change in India's approach to foreign assistance under Modi has been a greater focus on a more mercantilist mode of engagement. Indian development assistance has been an important part of Indian foreign policy particularly since the 1964 inauguration of its official Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. The ITEC has traditionally focused on cementing bilateral and multilateral political relationships. Under Modi, the economic aspect of diplomacy has increasingly become the focus on Indian development assistance. Development partnerships are as tools through which India can realize its larger economic policy objectives and overall foreign policy goals.

In addition to a larger focus on economic diplomacy in India's development partnership relationships, Modi's development assistance has engaged in more mercantilist modes of foreign assistance. Indian LOCs, which through their tied aid component provide a government boost to Indian exporters, have grown substantially under Modi, as discussed above. Prime Minister Modi's office personally designed two new lending instruments, the Concessional Financing Scheme and the SAARC Special Purpose Facility, and channeled them through the ministry of finance in the 2016/2017 budget.¹² The first new scheme is intended to support Indian private companies that are bidding to construct infrastructure projects in countries in Africa and in India's neighborhood, which are deemed strategically important to India. This new budget item provides interest rate equalization support directly to Indian companies engaged in building infrastructure in countries of strategic importance to India. The SAARC Special Purpose Facility scheme will be managed by India's EXIM Bank; its purpose is to finance Indian companies engaged in infrastructure projects aimed at increasing trade and connectivity in the South Asian Region.

Both these new schemes follow the Chinese or East Asian model of the state subsidizing the expansion of commercial enterprises abroad and considering it foreign assistance. The two new schemes along with the rapidly increasing credit lines are the products of a government that is focused on reigning in India's budget deficit while continuing to increase India's development partnerships. Moreover, since the goods and services imported from India under these credit lines are usually free from import taxes and other forms of levies, they provide Indian companies with a competitive advantage in recipient countries. They also signal the Modi administration's mercantilist approach to Indian development partnerships, where foreign assistance is increasingly being used to open up markets for Indian exporters of goods and services.

Centralization of Foreign Aid and Foreign Policy

The biggest change in India's approach to foreign aid and foreign policy more generally, however, has undoubtedly been at the individual level where the powerful office of the prime minister has increasingly centralized decision-making. Disbursement of development assistance is a way of furthering the foreign policy agenda of the executive, and in a government where a single party holds the majority and where the campaign was conducted as much by Modi as the party he represented, one would expect this greater control in decision-making by the office of the prime minister. Modi's 2014 brought an end to 25 years of coalition governments. The new government was the first single-party majority government ever formed by the

¹² Interview with senior foreign policy official, New Delhi, July 22, 2016.

BJP. The historic win was widely attributed to Modi, who was named the BJP's prime ministerial candidate nine months before the election, a first for the BJP.

Since becoming prime minister, Modi has centralized foreign policy decision-making, including foreign assistance decisions, by increasing the power of the office of the prime minister and leading it in a quasi-presidential style. Modi has marginalized the minister of external affairs and increasingly has channeled development assistance resources through the ministry of finance, where Modi is able to be more directly involved in decision-making. Taken together this increasing centralization has made India's foreign assistance policy appear more coherent. Yet it also begs the question of checks and balances in foreign policy decision-making in a consolidated democracy like India.

An example of this centralization of foreign policy decision-making in the office of the prime minister has been Modi's approach to the exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. India has traditionally prided itself on being welcoming to refugees, from Tibetans to East Pakistanis and Afghans, and on not interfering in the domestic politics of other countries. Yet despite this history of openness, during his September 2017 visit to Myanmar, Modi played to his Hindutva base by characterizing the genocide against the ethnic Rohingyas—who are coincidentally also a Muslim minority in Myanmar—as a response to terrorism conducted by the Rohingyas. While Myanmar is crucial to India's Act East foreign policy, siding with Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi was a decision that went against the broad contours of Indian foreign policy engagement.

In contrast to most prime ministers since Nehru who empowered cabinet ministers with decision-making powers, Modi's first press statement in which he allocated the portfolios within his cabinet clearly stated that the prime minister is in charge of "all important policy issues" as well as "all other portfolios not allocated to any minister" (Dhoot 2014). Managing the prime ministerial post much as he did the post of chief minister of Gujarat, Modi leaves no important foreign policy decisions to his ministers or administrators. For example, during his June 2015 historic visit to Bangladesh, the joint press briefing with Bangladesh's leader was also used as a forum for announcing India's largest line of credit ever offered at that time. Moreover, many of Modi's foreign policy press statements refer to his foreign relations and foreign policy accomplishments (Chandra 2016), rather than those of his party. Under Modi, the office of the prime minister has increasingly become fused with that of the individual Modi.

Modi's centralization of foreign assistance decision-making is also increasingly visible in the marginalization of the traditional ministry in charge of foreign assistance decision-making, the ministry of external affairs. Not only has the actual amount of foreign assistance channeled through MEA decreased under Modi's tenure, but increasingly directors in MEA are hesitant to make larger decisions without consulting the prime minister's office. Under previous administrations, MEA directors had free reign in deciding India's foreign aid lending portfolios in conjunction with the ambassadors posted in the respective countries. Major foreign assistance decisions are made in the office of the prime minister, if not made by Modi himself.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the increasing role of individual-level factors, the centralization of foreign aid decision-making and the increasing mercantilization of Indian aid under Modi, is the growing role played by the ministry of finance in managing and disbursing foreign assistance. Between 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 the amount of development assistance channeled through the finance ministry doubled. Moreover, the rupee amount disbursed through the MOF also undervalued the large credit line increases, since budget reporting only necessitates indicating the interest rate subsidy rather than the amount of the credit line. Furthermore, the two new foreign-aid lending instruments created in 2015/2016 and discussed above are ostensibly managed by the ministry of finance, but the ministry administrators have been required to report initial functioning of these programs directly to the

prime minister.¹³ Furthermore, while the overt purpose of these new lending instruments and the existing credit lines is to provide large credits to borrowing countries at concessional rates, they also provide significant subsidies to Indian exporters who provide the supplies and services through these new lending instruments and credit lines.

Prime Minister Modi's more activist and centralized approach to foreign policy making is visible in his approach to Indian development assistance. While continuing the previous administration's commitment to increasing Indian foreign assistance commitments and maintaining the strategic imperatives underlying Indian assistance, systemic- and national-level factors in determining foreign aid remained largely unaffected. Yet in contrast to the administrations of the last three decades, individual-level factors have played a significant role in determining Indian foreign aid, as Prime Minister Modi has personally overseen the increasing mercantilization of Indian foreign assistance.

Looking West? Evaluating Change and Continuity in Modi's Middle East Policy

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In the three years since Narendra Modi became prime minister of India, various journalistic and policy accounts have emphasized a reorientation of India's Middle East policy. These studies have generally emphasized Modi's public overtures toward Israel, including the unprecedented 2017 visit to Tel Aviv, as public signs of a break with India's traditional pro-Arab and pro-Palestine approach (Madan 2016; Roy 2016a; Desai 2017). Others have interpreted Modi's successive visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar as indicators of a novel outreach to all relevant actors in the region (Pant 2016; Mohan 2016b). But have these overtures and visits clearly signaled a substantial foreign policy change? Can this seeming policy shift be attributable to the personal influence of Modi or to a wider number of international, regional, and/or domestic factors? In order to answer these questions, this essay first briefly looks at the history of India's relations with the Middle East. Second, building on foreign policy scholarship, the essay looks at theoretical expectations about Modi's role in (re)shaping India's approach toward the Middle East. Third, the essay assesses the degree of continuity and change in India's approach toward the region for the last three years. Finally, the essay concludes with a discussion of whether this case study can give us some indications of whether the Indian Prime Minister has been willing and/or able to redirect India's foreign policy since his election.

Background: India's Middle East Policies

In order to assess the nature and magnitude of any policy change, it is important to look at the history of India's engagement of the Middle East and to identify some long-term determinants. India's approach to the region has mainly evolved based on three dimensions: the perception of its interests, the perception of its national capacities to effectively meet those interests, and the perception of actors in the Middle East of India's regional role and influence.

From its independence in 1947 to the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, India initially pursued what could be called a policy of open engagement of all actors in the

¹³ Interview with an official of the Indian Ministry of Finance in New Delhi, March 31, 2017.

region, including Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, believed India should be direct party to the resolution of regional disputes to preserve its influence and interests. As a consequence, India was directly involved in the international negotiations leading to the settlement of crises in Palestine, Lebanon, and Suez in the late 1940s and 1950s (Mudiam 1994). However, India's approach changed after the Suez crisis when it opted for a less interventionist strategy toward the region (Blarel 2015, 124–132). Because of its limited projection capabilities, India decided to defer to regional allies, such as Egypt, to have an influence on regional events. This alignment strategy was also a reaction to the emergence of US-sponsored Baghdad pact, an alliance system that directly favored India's rival, Pakistan (McGarr 2013, 16–25).

A series of structural shocks in the early 1990s allowed India to decisively reorient its Middle East policy. First, both the Gulf War and the Oslo Peace process revealed important divisions within the Arab-Muslim world that left India with unprecedented diplomatic leeway, notably to engage actors it had previously neglected without any concern of diplomatic repercussions. One major indicator of this policy shift was the establishment, under a Congress-led government, of diplomatic relations, in January 1992, with Israel, a country that Indian political leaders had long neglected for fear of estranging its Arab partners or its domestic Muslim population (Kumaraswamy 2010).

In addition, India's economic growth, rising international influence, and new status as a nuclear weapons state in the 1990s gradually made it a major destination for exports, and a venue for investments for most Middle Eastern states. India's imports from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) increased from \$2 billion to \$108 billion from 2000 to 2013 (Department of Commerce 2016–2017). The UAE is also now India's largest source of investment from the Arab world (80 percent of GCC investments in India), its 11th largest foreign investor, and the UAE is negotiating to devote an additional \$75 billion commitment to India's infrastructure sector (Calabrese 2017). As an indirect result of sustained economic growth and technological breakthroughs rather than driven by an explicit outreach policy, the Gulf states' perceptions of India dramatically changed from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s.

Conditions Ripe for Foreign Policy Change?

Based on the existing scholarship that emphasizes the role of leadership on foreign policy outcomes, why would we expect Modi to reshape India's Middle East policy? The literature generally distinguishes various causal mechanisms. Some scholars insist on the importance of exogenous shocks (whether of an international or domestic nature) as key enablers for those espousing alternative foreign policy agendas to prevail (Legro 2005). Using this literature as a benchmark, it is important to assess whether Modi acts as a *policy entrepreneur* who perceives opportunity structures to implement his own policy ideas or whether it is his *cognitive predispositions* as a decision-maker that enable or limit his capacities to initiate foreign policy reforms (Welch 2005; Ziv 2013). While studies emphasizing predispositions would not argue that an individual is capable of independently pushing for foreign policy change, they give greater importance to leaders' cognitive filters as key intervening variables to account for the timing and degree of policy change. Finally, some scholarship highlights the impact of ideational variables, when international and institutional conditions are propitious, to explain the process of foreign policy change (Checkel 1997). Following this logic, the ideological preferences of leaders like Modi are the key variables to understanding any policy shift toward the Middle East.

There are two main explanations given to understand Modi's Middle East policy. The first one is ideological, as argued by Basrur and Hall. Given Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) membership, some scholars emphasized the role of Hindu

nationalism in favoring the rapprochement with Israel and in reorienting India's policy toward the Middle East (Jaffrelot 2003). It is possible to trace some continuity in the BJP's approach to Israel as campaign manifestos have consistently promoted a reassessment of India's policy toward Israel (Blarel 2015). The BJP (and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh) has long highlighted that India's long-standing and unconditional backing of the Arab states was never reciprocated in international institutions when India needed support in its disputes with Pakistan. In a complete break with past policies, the previous BJP government (1998–2004) had also welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in New Delhi in September 2003.

The other explanation for a possible policy change can be linked to Modi's more favorable disposition toward Israel, which can be traced back to his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat when he directly negotiated with Tel Aviv on agricultural cooperation. Modi visited Israel in 2006 and promised that he would come back to Tel Aviv when he became prime minister (Moskowitz 2014). The assumption here is that Modi was personally conscious of the benefits of openly cooperating with Israel and that he would assertively push for stronger bilateral relations once in power. Furthermore, by contrast with the previous BJP cabinet that had to govern in the context of a large political coalition, the National Democratic Alliance, the BJP now has more political and institutional leverage to impose Modi's own policy preferences.

Obstacles to Policy Change and Course Correction

In accordance with the suggested theoretical expectations, Modi made some overtures to Israel during his first year in office. Breaking with past Indian governments, he publicly acknowledged what had until then been a discreet, albeit burgeoning, commercial and defense relationship with Israel. Modi publicly met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2014 and again during the Paris Climate Change Conference in November 2015. Finally, Modi became the first sitting Indian Prime Minister to visit Tel Aviv in July 2017 (Kershner and Barry 2017).

This publicized and increased political interaction stands in sharp contrast with the approach adopted by the preceding Indian National Congress government. The previous Prime Minister Manmohan Singh never met with any Israeli ministers during his ten years in office (2004–2014). In parallel with this heightened public dialogue with Israel, India abstained in July 2015 and in March 2016 from supporting a Palestine-sponsored resolution at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to launch a probe by the International Criminal Court against Israel for war crimes during the 2014 Gaza crisis (Mitra 2016). Breaking with an informal pattern established through previous ministerial visits, Modi also deliberately decided not to make a stop by Ramallah when visiting Israel (Stacey and Reed 2017). These recent diplomatic initiatives have led to speculation about a possible shift in India's traditional support of Palestine.

However, the narrative of a paradigmatic shift in India's position is complicated by other empirical realities. After initial signaling in the direction of a pro-Israel tilt, Modi quickly embarked on a course correction and effectively resumed the policy of multi-engagement of all relevant regional actors in the Middle East—the policy that most Indian governments have followed since 1991.

Ideological and individual preferences were trumped by domestic politics, international developments, and institutional constraints. While the BJP has been more public in its engagement with Israel since 2014, it has also regularly reasserted its support for the Palestinian Authority and developed parallel relations with Iran. There were concerns that a too apparent alignment with Israel could lead to adverse electoral consequences, both at the national and regional levels, because both the Muslim minority in India and the communist parties are critical of an explicit

tilt toward Israel in the Middle East. Furthermore, the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of defense relations with Israel have been supported by a bipartisan consensus over the last 25 years. Since 2014, Modi primarily has continued defense deals that had been signed under the previous Congress party government. Consequently, there is in fact great continuity in India's Israel policy.

At the institutional level, there has been opposition within the MEA to a change in India's traditional position of support for the Palestinian position in the Israel-Palestine dispute. The MEA for instance encouraged the inclusion of a paragraph critical of Israel in the 2014 BRICS summit declaration, as well as encouraged the government to condemn Israel during the Gaza War of July–August 2014. These two positions are at odds with Modi's apparent willingness to improve strategic ties with Israel. These repeated divergences between his desires and the MEA reportedly led Modi to replace Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh in January 2015 (Bagchi 2015).

Anticipating international and domestic criticisms linked to a stand-alone visit to Israel, Modi also invited Palestinian President Mahmood Abbas to New Delhi in May 2017 and reasserted India's traditional position in support for an independent Palestinian nation "at peace with Israel" (Bhattacharjee 2017). In addition, it took Modi three years to visit Israel, preferring to let President Pranab Mukherjee make the historic first trip to Israel and Palestine in October 2015. Instead, the Indian Prime Minister made his first highly publicized Middle East visit to the UAE in August 2015. Along with the spring 2016 visits to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, this tilt toward the Gulf demonstrated that there were other short- and long-term factors that prevailed in shaping Modi's approach to the Middle East.

First, Modi's Middle East policy has been driven by structural conditions that justify increased public exchanges with the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are India's fourth and third largest trade partners (Department of Commerce 2016–2017), respectively, as well as its first and sixth largest sources of oil (OEC 2013). Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also home to important Indian diaspora communities, with 2 million expatriates in Saudi Arabia and 2.3 million in the UAE. These expats respectively send \$11.0 and \$13.2 billion in remittances back to India (World Bank 2016). Modi's visits to these Gulf countries can therefore be seen as an effort to consolidate those economic ties. The interest has also been reciprocal as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other GCC members increasingly see India as an important emerging market for their energy exports, foreign investments, and joint venture opportunities.

Second, more immediate regional developments can also help explain Modi's (re)focus on the Gulf States. By refusing to contribute troops to the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in Yemen or to quell dissent in Bahrain, Pakistan has sent mixed signals about its unconditional military support for Saudi Arabia. Modi and his government have perceived a potential deterioration in Pakistan's ties with the Gulf states as a window of opportunity to reinforce India's security cooperation with partners in the region, including in the area of counter-terrorism. Discussions during the visits to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have focused on finalizing agreements ensuring the extradition of Pakistan and Indian terrorists as well as limiting money laundering activities from these same groups in the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Government of India 2016; Ministry of External Affairs 2016).

This increased counter-terrorism cooperation with the Gulf States is a continuation of policies initiated by previous governments instead of a radical policy departure. The strategic partnership signed with Saudi Arabia in 2010 included robust anti-terror cooperation measures. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's 2012 deportation of Indian terrorist Sayed Zabiuddin Ansari, who was involved in the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, had already signaled a willingness from Saudi Arabia to cooperate on these issues, even though such coordination has been to the detriment of Pakistan's interests (Lakshmi 2012).

Finally, in parallel to the overtures made to Israel and the Gulf States, the Modi government also began a reengagement of Iran. The 2015 nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—signed by Iran and the P5 + 1 was perceived by the Modi government as a window of opportunity for further economic engagement after years of international embargo. During his May 2016 visit to Tehran, Modi concluded a tripartite contract (along with Afghanistan) for the expansion of the strategically located Chabahar Port (Iyengar 2016). For the energy-starved and rapidly growing India, the Chabahar Port provides a vital link to the resource- and mineral-rich Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Yet here again, Modi’s foreign policy toward Iran can be viewed as capitalizing on efforts initiated by previous Indian governments as the Chabahar deal was 13 years in the making.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on foreign policy change argues that it is difficult to identify and weigh the causal influence of single personalities. It is equally challenging to distinguish rhetorical innovation from substantial and long-term changes in Modi’s Middle East policy. Finally, the contours of the Modi government’s policy toward the Middle East are still in flux since this analysis was undertaken midway through Modi’s (first) term in office. That being said it seems that Modi’s cognitive and ideological predispositions have indeed encouraged him to make public overtures to Israel and to suggest the elevation of a transactional relationship to a more mature political relationship during his first year in office. However, Modi also acted as a more rational policy entrepreneur, taking advantage of regional developments in 2015 such as the deterioration of links between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and the Iran nuclear deal to push for increased cooperation with regional actors other than Israel.

Modi, from “Look East” to “Act East”: Semantic or Substantive Change?

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In 2014, India’s newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP announced that India was turning its “Look East” policy into an “Act East” policy given the “great sense of priority” that India attached to its engagement with East Asia (Hindu 2014). The aim of this essay is to assess whether there has been any change in India’s approach toward East Asia over the 2014–2017 period since Modi became prime minister. Despite a seeming policy upgrade through a name change, India’s approach toward East Asia under Modi is in fact a continuation of the approach of his predecessor, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the Congress Party. This continuity is a result of the interplay between structural and ideational factors. At the structural level, India is responding to America’s emerging approach toward a larger strategic Asia that combines the Indian and Pacific Oceans, China’s rise, Japan’s re-emergence, and Southeast Asia’s economic dynamism. At the ideational level, Indian elites across the ideological spectrum are committed to the vision of India as a great power in Asia.

This continuity is demonstrated with an analysis of India’s approach toward Southeast Asia, the United States (in Asia), China, and Japan under Singh and Modi. While Modi’s diplomacy has been more robust than his predecessor’s, there has been no radical departure in India’s policy toward East Asia; it has all the

hallmarks of incremental advances on the policies of the previous government(s) (Singh 2017). I demonstrate four strands in India's approach toward East Asia that support elements of continuity: seeking congruence with America's approach toward Asia; upgrading of India's military capabilities vis-à-vis China while continuing with economic/political engagement; assuming a strategic approach toward Japan; and continuing to emphasize Southeast Asia and ASEAN-centrality. At the core of India's strategy in Asia is the quest to create a multipolar regional order with India as one of the poles.

The Significance of Southeast Asia and ASEAN-Centrality

Given the Chinese military presence in Tibet and the Sino-Pakistani quasi-alliance, Indian strategists have always feared that Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia would be tantamount to an encirclement of India. India's Look East policy was partially a response to such thinking. Prime Minister Singh who was one of the architects of India's Look East policy in 1991 (when he was finance minister) noted that this policy "was not merely an external economic policy, it was also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. . . . India's destiny . . . [is] linked with that of Asia and more so [sic] South East Asia" (Singh 2005). At the same time, Singh also ensured that India became a founding member of the East Asia Summit in 2005. He also endorsed ASEAN-centrality in the emerging institutional architecture in Asia after noting that ASEAN's institutional leadership should set the agenda for regional cooperation (Singh 2012).

In addition to this, New Delhi is also keen to partake in ASEAN's economic dynamism by cultivating closer economic links and by promoting physical connectivity. The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (FTA) in goods came into effect in 2010 while the FTA in services and investment came into force in 2015. Both Singh and Modi have invested political capital to develop physical infrastructure connecting India and Southeast Asia. In the pipeline are an India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway (work for which began in 2002) and a project for an industrial corridor linking Chennai in southern India with Dawei in Myanmar that was launched in 2012–2013 (with the aim of eventually connecting it to Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam). In 2015, Modi proposed a \$1 billion line of credit to foster physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN (Balasubrahmanian 2015). However, despite successive Indian governments' commitment to these projects, the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway's completion has been pushed back from 2016 to 2020 (*Firstpost* 2017).

India is also bilaterally engaging its Southeast Asian partners such as Vietnam and Singapore. For example, India has been involved in oil exploration along with Vietnam in the South China Sea (under Singh as well as Modi) despite Chinese misgivings. Likewise, the Singapore air force and army obtained long-term access to military facilities in India for training purposes under Singh, and Singapore continues to use these facilities today.¹⁴ Beginning in 2011, India started conducting coordinated patrols in the Malacca Strait with Indonesia (*Antara* 2011). While India is willing to extend its naval assistance to Southeast Asia, the signal that New Delhi is trying to send to its Southeast Asian neighbors as recently articulated by Modi is that "India's Look East Policy is shaped around ASEAN, and its centrality in the regional security architecture" (*PTI* 2017). In other words, India is not seeking leadership in the region; instead India wants recognition as a major power by contributing positively to Asian security.

¹⁴ Singapore is the only foreign country given such facilities in India on a long-term basis.

The United States in India's Eastern Neighborhood

As early as 2007, Singh's ambassador to the United States, Ronen Sen, noted that the "Pacific facet of the United States should . . . be factored into India's Look East policy" (Sen 2007). Modi has continued with Singh's policies to forge a close partnership with America, especially in East Asia. During Obama's 2015 visit as the chief guest during India's Republic Day celebrations, Obama and Modi signed a "joint vision" document for Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. This document demonstrated their overlapping strategic interests, as they called for "safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation" in this vast region, "especially in the South China Sea" (The White House 2015). Both Singh and Modi have understood the implications of closer ties with the United States to maintain a favorable balance of power in Asia in the context of China's phenomenal rise.

It is noteworthy that the Trump administration has begun to refer to the wider Asian region as "the Indo-Pacific" to emphasize America's maritime approach to the region while highlighting the gradual emergence of India as a major power (Sevastopulo, 2017). However, this vision of the region is not new; Singh used this terminology in the past. Modi's Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar has specifically noted "the transformation of the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific" in this regard (Jaishankar 2017). There is an obvious military-strategic dimension to this conceptualization, and the Pentagon even sees "a strategic convergence between India's 'Act East' policy and the US Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region" and that America is "seeking to reinforce India's maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean region and beyond" (United States Department of Defense 2015, 28). At the same time, the State Department is also promoting Indo-Pacific Regional Connectivity—stretching from Central Asia to Southeast Asia via India—as an economic corridor (United States Department of State 2016).

Engaging and Competing with China

While India certainly values its growing partnership with the United States, India is unlikely to forge an alliance with the United States aimed at China (nor is it clear that America desires such a confrontational approach toward China) as strategic autonomy remains at the core of the Indian worldview (Khilnani et al. 2012; Hall 2016). Nevertheless, it is not lost on Indian policymakers that China's economy is five times the size of the Indian economy, while China's defense expenditure is four times larger than India's. While India is expected to grow faster than China over the coming decade, China's relatively high growth rate will ensure that India will be able to narrow the power differential with China only in the medium to long term.

This power asymmetry coupled with China's growing military capabilities, including advanced infrastructure in Tibet (like high-speed rail links and high-altitude landing strips for aircraft/helicopters), has major security implications for India. Indeed, China has begun to refer India's Arunachal Pradesh (claimed more or less in its entirety by China) as "South Tibet" since 2006. Given this political dynamic and the large asymmetry in material power between China and India, New Delhi has two military options: lowering the nuclear threshold vis-à-vis China or upgrading its conventional military posture from defense to deterrence by denial. Given the implications of the former for India's relations with Pakistan, the United States, and its image as a responsible rising power, Singh's government chose to upgrade of India's military posture to create the capabilities to implement a deterrence by denial strategy. In 2013, Singh sanctioned the largest peacetime modernization of the Indian military by allocating \$15 billion over five years (2013–2017) in response to the Chinese challenge. In addition to building roads and activating/upgrading airfields along the Sino-Indian border, the government also planned to raise two new mountain divisions (60,000 troops) for defensive operations and one new mountain strike

corps (30,000 troops) for offensive operations (Pandit 2014). While India has been faced with its usual problems related to time delays and cost overruns in this regard, these plans seem to be continuing under Modi (The Tribune 2016). Whether India is able to raise a large mountain strike corps (as planned) or several small rapid reaction forces in its absence, India's current military strategy revolves around developing the capability to implement offensive military operations against China (at the operational/theater level) in order to deny China its battlefield objectives in any future war between the two countries.

In addition to upgrading India's military and diplomatic posture vis-à-vis China, both Singh and Modi have sought to engage China politically and economically since a high-intensity rivalry with China would detract from India's urgent developmental needs. In 2013, India signed a Border Defense Cooperation Agreement with China to manage any misunderstandings that might arise from China and India's military interaction along their unmarked frontier. Likewise, the Modi government is in the process of establishing a military hotline between the Chinese and Indian military headquarters as a part of bilateral Confidence Building Measures. On the economic front, China is now India's single-largest trading partner with bilateral trade valued at \$72.3 billion in 2014–2015, but with a trade surplus of \$48.5 billion in China's favor (Department of Commerce 2016). This is a major dilemma for New Delhi that only may be resolved in the medium to long term if India develops a stronger industrial base.

In the meanwhile, India has joined three China-led international institutions—the New Development Bank (NDB or the BRICS Development Bank, formed in July 2014), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, formed in 2016), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, joined in 2017). India seeks to improve its international status by joining important international institutions and by enhancing its own role within the decision-making processes within these institutions. Notably, the discussions related to the formation of the NDB and the AIIB as well as India's impending membership in the SCO were begun under Singh, thereby further demonstrating continuity under Modi. However, this is not an endorsement by India of a China-led Asian regional order as demonstrated by India's refusal to participate in China's inaugural Belt and Road Initiative in 2017. India's overall strategy is to ameliorate sources of tension with China (while safeguarding its core interests), thereby facilitating India's own rise as a great power. Nevertheless, China remains uncomfortable with India's emergence as a major power in Asia, and given the power differential between China and India as well as Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative—that has the potential to radically transform Asian geopolitics—India has also been reaching out to Japan.

Partnership with Japan

Singh had a special affinity toward Japan and sought a closer partnership with Tokyo. In 2010, India and Japan organized their first “2 + 2” dialogue (with top bureaucrats from the foreign and defense ministries) to engage in high-level policy consultations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). When launched, it was India's first such dialogue with an external partner. Japan has also been involved with high-profile projects, under Singh and Modi alike, such as the Delhi Metro and the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridors. Japan has the technology and the political will (at least under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe) to help bring about India's economic and technological transformation while contributing to a stable balance of power in Asia (Mukherjee and Yazaki 2016).

Notably, Abe and Modi especially emphasized their commitment to “align Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy with India's Act East Policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). The India-Japan Vision 2025 statement signed by Modi and Abe called for a “peaceful, open, equitable, stable, and rules-based order in the

Indo-Pacific region and beyond” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015](#)). While China was not officially mentioned, the implication was clear—the India-Japan partnership was essential to maintain a stable and equitable balance of power in Asia. It is noteworthy that under Modi, India, Japan, and the United States launched a trilateral dialogue at the level of their foreign ministers for mutual consultations ([United States Department of State 2015](#)). Furthermore, Japan has also joined the India-United States Malabar Exercises on a permanent basis starting in 2015.

In late 2016, Modi and Abe signed a landmark civil nuclear deal (the negotiations for which had begun under Singh in 2010), which makes India the first non-member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty to have such an agreement with Japan. In 2017, the United States, Japan, and India resurrected the “quad” along with Australia that had first met in 2007 ([Madan 2017](#)). The region’s leading democracies see this as a platform to share information and promote consultations in order to better manage the rise of China. The quad also represents a measure of competition vis-à-vis China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, Modi’s foreign secretary has noted that India prefers “having Japanese or the Americans in the room” in New Delhi’s discussions related to physical connectivity and commerce in the region as it raises the “comfort levels” of all parties ([The Hindu 2017](#)). This is tacit acknowledgement by India that New Delhi needs support from Japan and the United States in its own approach toward Asia.

Conclusion

India’s foreign policy toward East Asia has not witnessed any radical changes under PM Modi despite his rhetoric. Modi’s policies represent a continuation of the policy momentum of his predecessor. Under Singh, India discovered America as a partner in East Asia, as the worldviews of the two countries overlapped with respect to the region to India’s east. Modi has continued with these policies as India realizes that a strong partnership with the United States promotes India’s strategic interests in East Asia while facilitating India’s rise in the international order. Similarly, Modi has continued with Singh’s pragmatic approach toward China—a healthy mix of competition and cooperation—which arguably began after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s landmark trip to China in 1988. Finally, both Singh and Modi believe that a strong India-Japan partnership contributes to creating a stable balance of power in Asia and that closer ties with Southeast Asia promote India as a major power in Asia’s emerging strategic architecture. There has been an elite consensus in India (since independence) that the country is (or should emerge as) a great power in Asia. In 2006, Singh noted that “the emergence of India as a major global power is an idea whose time has come” ([Council on Foreign Relations 2006](#)). More recently, Modi clearly believes India to be one of the rising poles in the world when he observed that “the multi-polarity of the world, and an increasingly multi-polar Asia, is a dominant fact today. And, we [Indians] welcome it” ([Modi 2017](#)).

A New Era in India’s Foreign Policy?

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When Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi assumed office in May 2014 after a stunning electoral victory for the BJP, few, if any, Indian or foreign analysts had predicted that he would pursue an activist foreign policy. There were sound reasons for assuming otherwise. Apart from a handful of foreign trips that he had undertaken during his tenure as the chief minister of the western state of Gujarat, he

had evinced little or no interest in foreign affairs. Furthermore, during the election campaign he had, quite unsurprisingly, focused on issues of governance, corruption, and economic growth—three issues much on the minds of Indian voters.

Consequently, his extraordinary focus on foreign policy issues since assuming office has come as a near complete surprise to both domestic and foreign observers. In his first two years in office, he had visited 44 countries. It is worth mentioning that including his visits to the UN General Assembly meetings, he visited the United States four times. The number of his visits to the United States is ironic because, as is made clear in the Introduction to this forum, during his stint as the chief minister of Gujarat, the United States had actually denied him a visa because of his possible role in an anti-Muslim pogrom that had swept across much of the state in February 2002 ([Varadarajan 2002](#)). Even more striking was his decision to invite and host President Barack Obama as the chief guest to the annual Republic Day parade in New Delhi in January 2015. This was the first time since 1950 when India had formally become a republic that an American president was asked to grace the occasion.

Modi's frenetic foreign trips and the symbolic significance of inviting the president of the United States aside, we should ask whether any of his foreign policy choices really reflected a significant shift from past practices? Are the policy changes mostly cosmetic or do they reflect more substantive departures? Finally, has he brought about any noticeable changes in the country's foreign policy decision-making apparatus during his brief span in office?

The essays in this forum have attempted to answer several of these questions through a careful examination of policies in particular issue areas as well as toward two important geographic regions. There is no reason to recapitulate the arguments and evidence adduced in the essays as that task has been addressed quite ably in the Introduction. Instead, it might be useful to summarize the more prominent foreign policy initiatives that have been launched under the Modi administration. To that end, it is possible to discuss its foreign policy choices in three distinct arenas: India's immediate neighborhood, its ties to several of the major powers, and in regions that lie athwart to the east and west of India.

A Turn to the Neighborhood

At the outset, it is evident that Modi has attached considerable priority to India's immediate neighborhood. To that end he has sought, albeit not always successfully, to mend fences with all of India's smaller neighbors. Most significantly he has settled a long-standing set of border disputes with Bangladesh ([Associated Press 2015](#)). He has also sought to improve relations with Sri Lanka and with the two Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan and Nepal. The efforts to tackle India's ties to Nepal are especially significant as relations had frayed quite dramatically during Modi's first year in office over India's displeasure with the Nepalese regime's treatment of its minorities. His moves toward all India's smaller neighbors, barring Pakistan, have proven successful.

However, despite his conciliatory gestures toward Pakistan, including a surprise visit to the country on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's birthday, he has failed to make much headway. Three factors explain this failure: first, India has faced internal disturbances in its portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir that Pakistan has sought to exploit, and second, the Pakistani military establishment, which wields disproportionate power in the country, has prevented Sharif from reciprocating Modi's overtures. Third, at least two significant terrorist attacks on Indian military bases, both of which were traced back to Pakistan-based terrorist organizations, have also vitiated the atmosphere between the two long-standing rivals. Faced with inflamed public opinion in the wake of the second attack at Uri in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, it is believed that Modi authorized military retaliation

against terrorist encampments across the Line of Control—the de facto international border in the state (Ganguly 2016a).

Modi's emphasis on improving ties with India's immediate neighbors stems from two very compelling imperatives that undergird his regime: without a stable neighborhood India cannot pursue economic growth and nor can it emerge as a major actor in Asia and beyond. Modi has also demonstrated a clear interest in bolstering ties with the major powers. To that end, he has made relations with the United States, Japan, and even India's principal adversary, China, major priorities. He has particularly made India's connections with the United States and Japan quite robust.

Dealing with the Great Powers

The Obama administration, for its part, set aside whatever qualms it may have had about associating itself with Modi. Instead, concerned with the uncertain trajectory of the rise of China, it has sought to enlist India as a potential strategic partner in Asia. Modi has also managed to place the Indo-Japanese relationship on a secure footing. In this endeavor three factors have come to his assistance. Japan, like the United States, shares misgivings about the increasing assertiveness of China in Asia. Its prime minister, Shinzo Abe, like his Indian counterpart, is also a nationalist. Consequently, the two individuals seem to share a common worldview (Chaudhuri 2015). More to the point, Abe sees India as a significant investment destination, and Modi has welcomed Japan's willingness to invest in India's infrastructure.

Modi's effort to place relations with China on a more even keel, however, has run up against some unexpected shoals. For example, during Xi Jinping's elaborately staged state visit to India, the People's Liberation Army made a series of incursions along the Sino-Indian border in the region of Ladakh (TNN 2014). Not surprisingly, these incidents not only cast a pall on the visit but also vitiated the climate of Sino-Indian relations. Since then the government in New Delhi has adopted a more defiant deportment toward China. Among other matters, it has allowed both the US Ambassador to India, Richard Verma, as well as the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal head of the vast Tibetan diaspora community in India, to visit Arunachal Pradesh, a state in northeast India, which China has claimed in its entirety in recent years (PTI 2016a).

Modi's willingness to engage the United States on the other hand has proven to be quite successful. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that Modi's government has benefited from the legacy of the previous regime. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's two terms, despite some differences on global issues such as trade and climate change, significant improvements had taken place in Indo-US relations. Modi has been able to build on these foundations for three compelling reasons. First, the Obama administration, after having initially courted China, shifted its focus. Second, once the United States overcame its earlier misgivings about Modi, he was willing to engage it in a wholly pragmatic fashion. His matter-of-factness in working with the United States also stems from his recognition of the need to balance the growing power of China. Third, Modi and his foreign policy team has also concluded that it was their interests to seize upon the willingness of the Obama administration to work with India on a range of issues. This, in their view, stemmed from the uncertainty associated with the outcome of the US presidential electoral cycle.¹⁵

One of the more significant developments that took place under the Modi regime was the signing of the logistics exchange memorandum of agreement (LEMOA) with the United States in August 2016 (Raj 2016). This agreement, which had been long under discussion, enables the two sides to use their respective

¹⁵ Interview with senior foreign policy official, New Delhi, July 2016.

military bases for the purposes of refueling and supplying their respective military forces. Previous Indian governments had engaged in endless discussions about this foundational agreement but had ultimately shied away from it because of their ideological unease with the United States and also fear of domestic political opposition.

It needs to be underscored that Modi, while an ardent Indian nationalist, does not carry the ideological baggage of the once-dominant Congress Party. For example, not once has he paid the ritualistic obeisance to the doctrine of nonalignment in his public speeches. More to the point, he chose to skip the seventeenth meeting of the nonalignment summit in Venezuela, making him the second Indian prime minister in history ever to do so (Ganguly 2016b).

Aside from pursuing good relations with the United States and Japan and dealing with China, Modi has enjoyed excellent relations with most European states. However, he has evinced a particular interest in France owing to a defense deal for 126 Medium Multi Role Combat Aircraft that had been initiated under the previous government. Though unable to fully consummate it owing to the labyrinthine procedures of India's weapons acquisitions process, Modi has moved forward on his own with the purchase of 36 Rafale Dassault aircraft (Clark 2015). Since the Indian air force remains in dire need of multiple squadrons to replace an aging fleet of MiG-21s, it is highly likely that this defense relationship with France will be sustained.

Even while consummating this defense deal with France, Modi, intriguingly enough, has not allowed the substantial Indo-Russian arms transfer relationship to wither. In considerable part, Modi's continued reliance on Russia for defense supplies stems from two compelling reasons. First, despite the turn to the United States and France to meet India's defense needs, India's policymakers and defense bureaucrats have always wanted to diversify their sources of supply to the extent possible. Second, it is difficult to terminate the relationship with Russia because of path dependence. For several decades during the Cold War, when for either ideological or fiscal reasons India was unable to obtain weaponry from the Western world, it had come to rely on Russia. As a consequence, a substantial portion of its arsenal remains of Russian origin. Furthermore, even today Russia does not place end-user limits on the weaponry it sells to India and is often willing to pursue co-production arrangements (Farchy and Kazmin 2015).

Heading East

Beyond India's dealings with the major powers, Modi has pursued an assertive set of policies toward the states that lie immediately to the east and west of India. In the East he has sought to work with a range of countries stretching from Japan to Vietnam. In some measure, as argued in the Introduction, his policies have built upon an earlier initiative, India's Look East policy that had been inaugurated as early as the 1990s under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. This policy shift had been undertaken in the wake of the end of the Cold War upon the recognition that India had long neglected the vibrant economies of Southeast Asia to its own detriment. The policy, though initiated under a Congress government, was nevertheless continued under BJP-led regimes and beyond.

Under Modi the policy has been rebranded as the Act East policy and with this rebranding has come greater attention to the region (PTI 2014). Modi's policy, however, is not only designed to improve trade relations with the states of East and Southeast Asia but to also to address India's concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the region. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that much of India's efforts have been focused on bolstering ties with Japan and Vietnam, the two states that are probably most concerned about the growing Chinese boldness.

The relationship with Japan deserves particular comment. Even before assuming his present office, Modi had evinced a keen interest in the country. At the time, his principal concern had been to attract investment to the state of Gujarat from Japan. Once in his present position he found a kindred spirit in the current Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. Both individuals are staunch nationalists, they are keen on developing their respective country's military capabilities, and they share common misgivings about the role of the PRC in Asia. Consequently, individual, national, and regional interests neatly converge in this burgeoning bilateral relationship (PTI 2016b).

India, of course, had long enjoyed cordial ties with Vietnam harking back to the Cold War era. Both Nehru and Ho Chi Minh were anti-colonial nationalists, and so they had shared a common bond. Subsequently, with India's unyielding opposition to the US war in Vietnam, Indo-Vietnamese ties had prospered. These links, in turn, were bolstered by their common strategic nexus with the Soviet Union (Thakur and Thayer 1992). India was one of the few states of any consequence in Asia that had supported the Vietnamese overthrow of the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Ties with Vietnam under Modi may now go beyond their historical and economic dimensions and include a strategic component. In June 2016, the Indian cabinet cleared the way for the sale to Vietnam of a short-range missile, the *Brahmos*, a missile developed in a joint venture with Russia (Negi 2016).

Indo-Vietnamese ties were further strengthened in recent years as India's Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) sought to develop gas fields off the coast of Vietnam. These attempts at joint exploration ran aground of China's expansive maritime claims. Initially, India, wary of offending China, had chosen to withdraw from its investments. However, under Modi's regime, India has returned to the contested areas despite Chinese objections (Khanh and Thu 2014).

Bridging the Gulf

Modi has also built upon India's past record of tightrope diplomacy in the Persian Gulf. Its overtures toward the region for over a decade have involved a very delicate balancing act between the antagonistic regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Modi has not only continued the policies of his predecessors but has sought to build upon them. To that end, he has continued to court Saudi Arabia. His courtship of the country is hardly surprising. It supplies the largest amount of crude oil to India, and it hosts three million Indian expatriate workers (Johny 2016). Furthermore, a cordial relationship with Saudi Arabia is also important from another standpoint—keeping Pakistan off balance since the Saudis have historically enjoyed close ties with the country.

Unlike his predecessor, Singh, who had expressed an interest in visiting the UAE but never did, Modi has made it a point to travel to the country. His visit was part and parcel of an overall strategy to enhance India's footprint in a region from which it derives 70 percent of its hydrocarbon needs.

Yet, Modi has not neglected India's critical relationship with Iran. This relationship is of vital importance for a number of compelling reasons. Iran, like Saudi Arabia, is another major source of hydrocarbons for India. Also, given India's very substantial Shia population, maintaining good terms with Iran is an important domestic imperative. However, perhaps most importantly, Iran matters for reasons of regional security. In the absence of a close relationship with Iran, India has no viable access to Afghanistan—a country that is critical to India's security. Finally, with China investing in a vast port facility at Gwadar in southern Pakistan, Indian policymakers have sought to obtain a similar foothold in Iran. Modi has successfully negotiated an Indian role in building a port at Chabahar in Iran (Roy 2016b).

Conclusion

Does Modi's foreign policy then reflect a fundamental departure from past practices? Such a shift, in a democratic state with a well-developed foreign policy bureaucracy, is difficult to bring about. Furthermore, domestic political constituencies who care about particular foreign policy issues cannot be easily set aside, nor, for that matter, can the views of the powerful, permanent Indian foreign service be entirely disregarded.

Despite these sources of political and institutional ballast that make radical departures in foreign policy orientation difficult at best, Modi has, in fact, broken new ground in some areas. In this context, it is important to underscore that he has benefited from a very weak parliamentary opposition, a point that has been underscored in the Introduction. As a consequence, he has been able to successfully move India closer to the United States. The scope of security cooperation with the United States, for example, has dramatically increased during his brief tenure in office. However, as argued in the Introduction, in a number of other realms, his changes have involved repackaging and rebranding of past initiatives, rather than dramatic departures from previous policies.

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