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Three years of Modi's foreign policy

The Modi government has been unabashed in changing India's foreign policy trajectory

As the Narendra Modi government completes its three years in office, there is a big rush to provide a report card on its performance. The government itself has been highlighting its achievements and the Prime Minister has welcomed evaluations of his government's performance, suggesting that "constructive criticism strengthens our democracy". But three years is a rather short time to evaluate any government's performance, especially one which came to office with the kind of transformative agenda the Modi government has. This is a government which wants to reshape the fundamentals of Indian polity, society and economy, so it is not surprising that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) talks of a two- to three-term Modi government.

Yet the political strategists in the BJP also know that democracy is a fickle beast and when the trough comes, it comes all of a sudden and stays for a long time, as the Congress Party is experiencing at the moment. So the need for regular tom-tomming of the government's achievements even as the party prepares for a long haul in government.

Foreign policy is one area where the Modi government has performed reasonably well. This verdict will not be widely accepted by the government's critics at home but travel anywhere in the world and you will find that New Delhi is now viewed very differently compared to just three years back. Modi has asserted Indian interests in a way that few had anticipated when he had assumed office given his lack of experience on the foreign policy front. He has upped India's profile in global affairs, something even his critics will have to give him credit for.

For the initial few months, an argument was being made that while Modi was pursuing foreign policy with great vigour and enthusiasm, the change was largely of style, not substance. It is indeed true that the foreign policies of major powers do not change dramatically with a change in leadership. Structural factors matter more in shaping their contours. But if we look closely, we will find that something substantive has changed in Indian foreign policy. Where in the past Indian diplomacy was responding to the tectonic shifts in global politics by stealth, the Modi government has been unabashed in changing India's foreign policy trajectory. Gone is the diffidence of the past in articulating the need for robust Indo-US ties. India's relations with Israel have finally come out of the closet. And for a change, rather than Beijing challenging New Delhi, India is standing up to China and challenging its profile.

Non-alignment has been given a decent burial and major power diplomacy is being conducted on the basis of strict reciprocity. In the name of non-alignment, New Delhi had been pandering to Chinese sensitivities, imaginary or otherwise, for far

too long. Now India is building pressure points around the Chinese periphery and is not hesitant in using powers like the US, Japan and Australia to stabilize the Indo-Pacific. While sections of the Indian intellectual establishment still retain reflexive anti-Americanism, Modi has used his decisive mandate to carve a new partnership with the US to harness its capital and technology for his domestic development agenda. He is not ambivalent about positioning India as a challenger to China's growing regional might and assertiveness.

This has also meant that India's adversaries are now facing an unpredictable Indian foreign policy. Where in the past there was a certain predictability in New Delhi's responses to Chinese and Pakistani shenanigans, the Modi government has introduced some uncertainty into the relationship. This has given India greater strategic space for manoeuvring. It has climbed the escalation ladder, which many in the country had been scared of climbing for a long time, and all that Islamabad has been left with is to deny the Indian military's response. For long, it was Pakistan that was testing Indian boundaries by needling India.

Now the shoe is on the other foot. The same goes for China, where India's response to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was a reminder to Beijing that New Delhi too can keep its cards close to its chest till the last minute, and has many ways to respond to the challenge being posed by the Beijing-Islamabad collusion on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec).

There are challenges, for sure. The Modi government is willing to take risks and there are no cost-free risks. There are also some fundamental changes shaping the

domestic political milieu in the West and the great power relationships are undergoing a shift which India will have to navigate with utmost seriousness. The Sino-Russian relationship is acquiring connotations which can have long-term consequences for Indian interests and Sino-US ties can also become transactional under Donald Trump.

But these are the challenges that a confident India should be able to manage if its economic fundamentals remain strong and if it can start getting its defence policy in shape. For a Prime Minister who was being criticized for being provincial when he assumed office, the last three years have underlined that Modi has the potential to gradually but decisively shift Indian foreign policy in directions which few would have dared to try before. His critics will continue to disagree but Indian foreign policy will look very different with Modi at the helm for another few years. For Indian polity's decisive shift to the "right" is also a structural change which will have global reverberations.

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adversaries
are now
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unpredictable
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policy