

**4 YEARS OF MODI** PM's foreign policy forays aren't about 'resets' but a defining of India's priorities

# Modi Meets Multipolarity



**Sanjaya Baru**

**A** powwow in Wuhan. A tête-à-tête in Sochi. In between, a dash to Berlin, a meeting with Emmanuel Macron, and telephone chats with Donald Trump. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been on a diplomatic overdrive. Journalists, analysts and retired diplomats have been busy trying to make sense of it all. Cutting out the style and show part of it — and with Modi, there is lots of that — it would seem the substance has been about making sense of a new world order, an emerging new balance of global power.

Those stuck within Cold War paradigms are unable to see the new and emerging reality for what it is. India is beginning to deal with a world it has long sought. Its strategists debated whether to call it 'multipolar' or 'polycentric'. But, in the end, they all agreed that it would be a world in which there would be multiple centres of power dealing with each other in ever-changing kaleidoscope patterns of interest and power.

The last time an Indian prime minister had to deal with a rapidly chang-

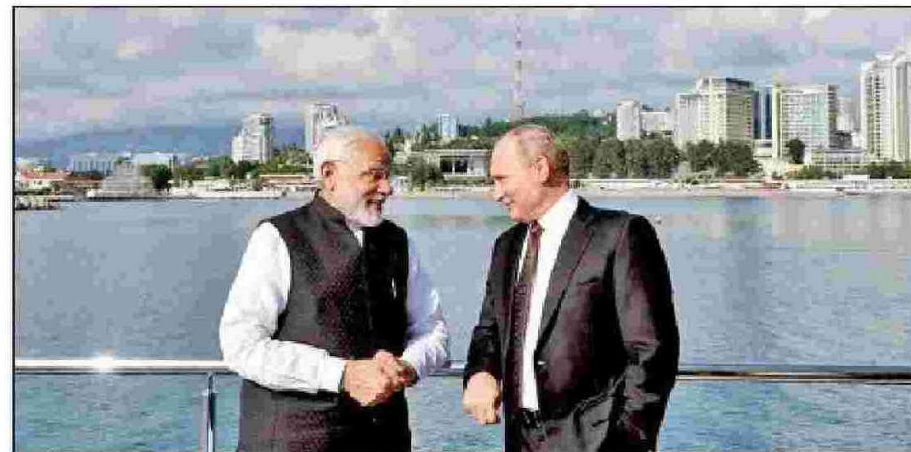
ing and uncertain world was in 1991-92. The implosion of the Soviet Union created a new global balance of power that India had to deal with. It was left to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to devise ways in which India would now relate to a new world order.

He crafted a new equation with the US, hoping it would enable India to declare itself a nuclear power. Rao built on Rajiv Gandhi's outreach to Deng Xiaoping and began a new dialogue with China, while launching a new 'Look East Policy' reaching out to old friends, like the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), and making new ones, like South Korea. He launched a new neighbourhood policy that I K Gujral hijacked and dubbed as the so-called 'Gujral Doctrine'. He crafted a new West Asia policy based on the recognition of Israel.

## Picking Up Speed

In short, Rao defined the new post-Nehruvian, post-Cold War foreign policy that stood India well for over two decades. His successors, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, built on Rao's foundations, building a new partnership with the US, arriving at a *modus vivendi* with China and strengthening India's links with its wider Asian neighbourhood, from the Mediterranean to the Pacific.

This post-Cold War world, with its own balance of power system, has since disappeared. Modi took some time to understand and come to terms with the new world order. His foreign policy in the first two years of his tenure



**A new, new world order, really?**

appeared to be nothing more than a continuation of what the Rao-Vajpayee-Singh paradigm crafted for the post-Cold War world, albeit one re-defined by the new phenomenon of China's rise after the turn of the century.

The financial crisis of 2008-09, the weakening of the trans-Atlantic alliance between Europe and the US, the accelerated rise of China under a new strongman, and its impact on India's neighbourhood, the uncertainties generated by Trump's whimsical foreign policy, and the return of Russia on to the world stage, have all combined to redefine the global balance of power system. For India, this new world order offered new opportunities and posed new challenges. In the last two years, Modi has been coming to grips with this new reality. His global travels must be viewed from this perspective.

What is interesting about much of the commentary on Modi's foreign policy and travels is how they continue to remain one step behind the government in anticipating change. This is not new. Rao was ahead of the commentariat of his times, just as Singh was when he launched his dialogues with US President George W Bush, on

the one hand, and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, on the other.

## A Whole New World

Those who thought they knew the world better than Singh continue to think they know the world better than Modi. Indeed, many critics of successive PMs even within the ministry of foreign affairs have been consistently proved wrong. In the realm of foreign policy, India's political leadership at the very top has remained a step ahead of most of the bureaucratic-academic-media commentariat.

Rather than view Modi's meetings with China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin as 'resets', and a return to old ways of dealing with the world, one must view them as part of an ongoing exercise of defining India's foreign policy priorities given its enduring economic and strategic interests. India's foreign policy must serve its primary twin goals of pursuing economic development at home and ensuring peace and stability in its neighbourhood. Rest follows.

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