

Overhaul for the long haul

The resounding victory of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party in India's general elections has skyrocketed expectations about a 'can do' government in every sphere, including foreign policy. Modi's savvy political skills and the untrammelled executive authority that he wields as Prime Minister herald a new era in our interactions with the world. At the pinnacle, he stands second to none since Mrs. Indira Gandhi strode like a colossus and scored India's greatest successes in external affairs.

Among Modi's personality traits that augur well for a revolution in Indian foreign policy is his ability to smash impossible systemic hurdles and inertia to implement what he envisions. Where ordinary politicians see limits and try to work within inherited boundaries, Modi has dared to break the logjams and used his personal might to ram through modernisation projects during his long tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat. He wilfully remakes the entrenched 'system' instead of succumbing to it.

As the Modi wave was swamping India on May 16th, I spoke to the Ambassador of Turkey to India, Burat Akcapar. Like most diplomatic corps in Delhi, he was upbeat about the new government not only because Modi will be good for bilateral relations between India and his country, but also because he packs in a badly needed "push factor" to shake up a red tape-ridden and somnolent Indian state architecture.

Vested interests and intermediaries who resist and block every reform or shift have held back India not only in the domestic arena but also in foreign policy. Complacency, smugness and an attitude of 'satisficing' (aiming low to obtain an adequate outcome rather than the optimal or maximum one) have been the markers of Indian foreign policy, which is not known for boldness or unconventional planning in a dynamic global environment.

Under a democratically elected Prime Minister with phenomenal power and a broad vision of refashioning the world order, Modi's India can do better and emerge stronger in the eyes of the international community. Predictions by some retired Indian civil servants that Modi will simply continue what the Manmohan Singh era had done in foreign policy because the bureaucracy stays on while political rulers come and go are attempts to undermine Modi's promise and potential in foreign affairs.

Writing in the early years of the new millennium, the former American National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, argued that "satisfaction with the status quo causes policy to be viewed as a projection of the familiar into the future". He presciently warned the then US ruling elite against "the temptation of acting as if the United States needed no long-range foreign policy at all and could confine itself to a case-by-case response to challenges as they arise."

The title of Kissinger's provocative book in 2002, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, is worth emulating for the Indian context in 2014. Nothing short of a well-defined 'Modi Doctrine' of foreign policy will suffice. The central tenet of this new Doctrine must be the overarching goal that India must become an acknowledged great power in world politics. Too often, our foreign policy targets have been defined in a fashion where we miss the forest for the trees. Restoring and maintaining high GDP growth, countering terrorism, or securing the territorial integrity of the country are not ultimate objectives in themselves, but crucial ingredients and means in a march to great power status that accrues privileges and influence to the Indian state and Indian people across the world.

When we envisage India as a major power and strive towards it, we consciously situate it within a larger universe of nation states and a global structure. By orienting foreign policy solely towards producing economic benefits for our people or preventing transnational terrorist attacks on our soil, we are not operating in a zone that appeals to the wider world. The Modi Doctrine must rewrite the fuzzy concept of 'national interests' in a

way that the international community will find a buy-in and enable our interests to be realised instead of resisting and stymieing them.

Under Modi, who is an experienced innovator open to fresh ideas, India needs an imaginative and creative foreign policy that not only doggedly pursues materialistic interests but also enhances our soft power and increases our desirability in global problem-solving institutions. When the ruthless Boko Haram terrorists in northern Nigeria kidnapped over 300 schoolgirls and triggered a worldwide solidarity movement for the children, all major world powers pledged some form of material or technical support to the rescue effort. China stepped forward with satellite and intelligence assistance and dispatched experts on the ground to make its presence felt. India was, as usual, off the radar and not visible in this multinational collective effort

Why did we miss the bus of a good cause to demonstrate that India is acting as a responsible emerging power, thereby winning plaudits as an indispensable actor for supplying global public goods? The same no-show happened earlier this year when many countries came together for the removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. China sent warships, ambulances and surveillance equipment to support the delicate task of destroying the dreaded weapons. India was nowhere to be seen because we have had no grand strategy or drive to be big and important in the world.

Some career bureaucrats in Delhi's corridors of power deliberately underplay India's rise and even castigate this notion as a "Western construct". But Modi's landslide election win reflects a massive aspiration for upward mobility of Indians of all hues. The people have spoken through the ballots that they are not happy being at subsistence level or with incremental improvements. Transposed to the foreign policy arena, the mandate for Modi is to imbue his team with a turbocharged mission of aiming for the top in the global power configuration.

Modi's stances towards individual countries like Pakistan, China, Russia or the US will evolve with the flow of time and events in the next five years, but they must comport with a grand strategy. Systemic foreign policy overhaul is necessary for India to leap forward in the international order. The people have given Modi a blank cheque to redirect the ship of our international odyssey and surge ahead. He must heed the call.

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