

Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged

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The advent of Narendra Modi to the Indian premiership aroused considerable expectations about India's place in world politics. In the closing years of the last millennium, the spurt in India's economic growth and its 1998 nuclear tests appeared to signal that the country was poised to become a major player in Asian and eventually global politics. The India–US nuclear agreement of 2005, which allowed India to bypass the tightening rules of nuclear commerce despite its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), seemed to symbolize the restructuring of the global balance of power, bringing Washington and New Delhi together to counter the rise of China. Yet, barely a decade later, the Manmohan Singh government (2004–2014) appeared to be irresolute and reluctant to press on with the task of consolidating India's position. Modi's election in May 2014 was widely viewed as signifying a more decisive phase in the country's foreign policy, especially after he launched his tenure as prime minister with a flurry of overseas visits to large and small powers alike.

There were three reasons for the high expectations of change. First, Modi's personal style is starkly different from that of his predecessor. Singh was a low-key leader, inclined to position himself as *primus inter pares* and collegial in decision-making, while Modi is charismatic and authoritative. Singh was media-shy and bland in his public style, whereas Modi quickly displayed his media skills through orchestrated media events and the effective use of mass media such as Facebook and Twitter.¹ The 2014 election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) clearly carried his personal stamp, proclaiming a determination to 'fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India's global strategic engagement in a new paradigm'.² Second, Singh was hampered by serious political constraints. He rose to power through the bureaucracy, was never elected to the Lok Sabha (the popularly elected lower house of parliament), and had little control of his party, the Indian National Congress, which was (and is) dominated by the Nehru–Gandhi family. In contrast, Modi rose up through the maelstrom of state politics—he was chief minister of Gujarat

¹ Nalin Mehta, 'Modi and the art of political performance', *Times of India*, 28 Sept. 2015, <http://blogs.timesof-india.indiatimes.com/academic-interest/modi-and-the-art-of-political-performance/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 11 Oct. 2016.)

² Bharatiya Janata Party, *Election manifesto 2014*, p. 39, http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf.

from 2001 to 2014—before taking the helm at the national level. His political position has been much stronger than that of Singh because he is the first prime minister to command a clear majority in the Lok Sabha since 1984. Unlike Singh, who was constantly fighting battles within his own coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), Modi does not have to look constantly over his shoulder as his National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is a coalition clearly dominated by the BJP. He is also unencumbered by the older leadership of his own party, which he has successfully sidelined.

A third reason for the anticipation of a more clearly demarcated foreign policy under Modi is his identification with the ideology and politics of *Hindutva* (or Hindu-ness). For many, this makes for a stronger and tougher India, which alone can be the basis of true national security and global recognition of India's prominent place in the world, far removed from the weakness and compromises emblematic of Congress rule. For his detractors, *Hindutva* and Modi himself symbolize the aggressive face of Hindu nationalism, which displayed itself vividly in domestic politics in the 2002 massacre of Muslims in Gujarat when Modi was chief minister.

How might we view Narendra Modi's performance at the tiller of Indian foreign policy, two years after he became prime minister? There has been considerable debate as to whether his foreign policy is distinctive. For some, it embodies substantial change.³ Others see it as representing an essential continuity, though perhaps conducted in a new style.⁴ Taking a longer-term perspective, relations with its chief interlocutors—the United States, China, Pakistan and Russia—have not undergone dramatic shifts.⁵ This continuity has been explained by the alleged absence of an ideological or balance-of-power template shaping foreign policy.⁶ But these arguments overlook substantial changes that *have* occurred, for instance the post-1991 liberalization of India's economic relations with the global system. This may have been initially compelled by financial pressures, but it was also a deliberate policy undertaken by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and sustained by

³ Brahma Chellaney, 'Doctrine of graduated escalation', *Hindu*, 15 Oct. 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/doctrinr-of-graduated-escalation/article6501078.ece?homepage=true>; C. Raja Mohan, 'Modi's American engagement: discarding the defensive mindset', working paper no. 203 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 8 April 2015).

⁴ On continuity under Modi, see Verghese George, 'Modi meets the world', *Hindu*, 6 Nov. 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/modi-meets-the-world/article6568121.ece?homepage=true>; Frederic Gare, 'Lens on Modi', *Indian Express*, 29 Sept. 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/lens-on-modi/99/>; Ian Hall, 'Is a "Modi doctrine" emerging in Indian foreign policy?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69: 3, 2015, pp. 1–6. On recent continuity in general, see Kanti P. Bajpai, 'Indian strategic culture', in Kanti P. Bajpai and Harsh V. Pant, eds, *India's foreign policy: a reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013); Shubha Kamal Prasad and Happymon Jacob, 'Revisionism, ambivalence, and status quoism: India and the international system', in Amitabh Mattoo and Happymon Jacob, eds, *The contemporary international system: theory, policy and structure* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014); Kate Sullivan, 'India's ambivalent projection of self as a global power: between compliance and resistance', in Kate Sullivan, ed., *Competing visions of India in world politics: India's rise beyond the West* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For the distinctiveness of Modi's style, see Kanti Bajpai, 'Continuity—but with zeal', *Seminar*, no. 668, April 2015, pp. 23–7.

⁵ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'Foreign policy à la Modi', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 April 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2014-04-03/foreign-policy-la-modi>

⁶ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Still under Nehru's shadow? The absence of foreign policy frameworks in India', *India Review* 8: 3, 2009, pp. 209–33. The foreign policies of Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv, on the other hand, provide ample evidence of the application of a power-centric 'offensive realist' approach, as we will see below.

his successors in the attempt to propel India out of prolonged economic stagnation.⁷

This article will try to gauge the distinctiveness of Narendra Modi's signature on India's foreign policy strategy by focusing on three key aspects: the manner in which India applies material power to its adversarial relationships; the tenor of its linkages with and preferences *vis-à-vis* the major powers; and the ways in which it pursues its quest for recognition and acceptance as a major power. The first two are directly related to national security, the third to standing in the society of states—though status undoubtedly has a bearing on security. Taken together, these three facets of Indian foreign policy shape the specifics of its interactions with the rest of the world. It will be shown that, in all three respects, foreign policy under Modi picks up from where his predecessors left off and is characterized by essential continuity.

First, notwithstanding Modi's reputation as an arch-Hindu nationalist, the preferred mode of applying material power remains unchanged. Given that the *Hindutva* tag embodies for many a foreign policy approach that is 'muscular' or even aggressive, we would expect to see a greater readiness to show toughness, reluctance to compromise with strong adversaries and willingness to apply force against weaker adversaries.⁸ This is not the case. Second, Indian policy towards the major powers remains unchanged. Despite appearances, India under Modi is not shifting towards some sort of alignment with the United States and Japan, and the depiction of Indian strategy as being at bottom still driven by a refashioned non-alignment or, as some would say, 'multi-alignment',⁹ is closer to the mark, though analysts often miss its central features. Finally, what of India's aims beyond the security realm? There has been much interest in recent years in states' desire for high(er) standing in the hierarchical system they inhabit. India is no exception and has sought in various ways to attain enhanced international status. Modi, who has frequently underlined national pride, is not taking a different path, but is treading one chalked out by his predecessors.

The analysis below, which emphasizes continuity, will provide signposts for the future of Indian foreign policy and help other states shape their foreign policies towards India. It will permit a more informed consideration of questions about India's propensity for toughness and the use of military force, for being a stakeholder in the international system, and indeed for predictability in its strategic behaviour.

⁷ Rahul Mukherji, *Globalization and deregulation: ideas, interests and institutional change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 63–107.

⁸ Chris Ogden, *Hindu nationalism and the evolution of contemporary Indian security* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sumit Ganguly, *Hindu nationalism and the foreign policy of India's Bharatiya Janata Party* (Washington DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015).

⁹ Ian Hall, 'Multialignment and Indian foreign policy under Narendra Modi', *Round Table* 105: 3, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2016.1180760>; Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Kumar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran and Siddharth Varadarajan, *Nonalignment 2.0* (New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research, 2012); M. K. Narayanan, 'Non-alignment to multi-alignment', *Hindu*, 5 Jan. 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/indian-diplomacy-nonalignment-to-multialignment/article8065319.ece?homepage=true>.

Hindutva and power

What kind of a major power will India be? How will it exercise its growing power? Expectations about Modi are often linked to his espousal of *Hindutva*. The role of religion in international politics and foreign policy has been the subject of considerable attention elsewhere.¹⁰ However, not much effort has gone into an intensive exploration of Hinduism and its impact on Indian foreign policy. Critics and even impartial observers tend to brand the BJP a 'Hindu nationalist' party. In domestic politics, the appropriateness of the label is evident in areas such as education policy and the drive to ban beef consumption. In the realm of foreign policy, its meaning is much less clear. What exactly are the foreign policy preferences of those who espouse *Hindutva*? As noted earlier, these are often said to encompass a muscular approach to the strategic environment. A closer look reveals *Hindutva*-related thinking about India and the world to be rather more complex.

The typical world-view of *Hindutva* adherents stems from the conviction that India (equated with Hindus), having been under Muslim and Christian domination for a millennium, must be strengthened through the accumulation of power and the development of a martial spirit and societal cohesion.¹¹ Beyond this, there are several diverse strands of thinking. One is similar to what is today called 'offensive realism': the view that the world is characterized by perennial conflict and that, to be truly secure, the state (or, in former times, king) must keep expanding until universal empire is attained.¹² Thus, according to the strategic thinker Kautilya (c. 371–283 BCE), the strong sovereign in a world of incessant conflict seeks *sarva-bhauma* or world-empire and wields power to this end.¹³ The ambit of contemporary *Hindutva*'s idea of expansion is limited to the recovery of Akhand Bharat or Greater India, which includes, at a minimum, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but could extend to Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal and Sri Lanka.¹⁴ Contemporary analysts tend to focus on the Hindu nationalist predilection for applying material power (as manifested in the drive for nuclear weapons), for 'Islamophobia', and for a generally hard-line stance towards adversaries.¹⁵ However, there is an alternative

¹⁰ John Agnew, 'Religion and geopolitics', *Geopolitics* 11: 2, 2006, pp. 183–91; Jonathan Fox, 'Religion as an overlooked element of international relations', *International Studies Review* 3: 3, Autumn 2001, pp. 53–73; Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing religion into international relations* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹¹ Rahul Sagar, 'Jiski lathi uski bhains: the Hindu nationalist view of international politics', in Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit and V. Krishnappa, eds, *India's grand strategy: history, theory, cases* (New Delhi and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). The Hindi term 'jiski lathi uski bhains' is translated by the author as 'the one who owns the stick owns the buffalo' (p. 234). See also Jaswant Singh, *Defending India* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 13, 16.

¹² For a classic contemporary statement of offensive realism, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

¹³ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'Hindu theory of international relations', *American Political Science Review* 13: 2, Aug. 1919, pp. 400–14. See also Roger Boesche, 'Kautilya's "Arthashastra" on war and diplomacy in ancient India', *Journal of Military History* 67: 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 9–37.

¹⁴ Gunnar Bjornson, 'The geopolitics of *Hindutva*', *Katehon*, 12 Feb. 2012, <http://katehon.com/article/geopolitics-hindutva>.

¹⁵ Priya Chacko, *Indian foreign policy: the politics of postcolonial identity from 1947 to 2004* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004); Jeffrey Haynes, 'Religion and foreign policy making in the USA, India and Iran: towards a research agenda', *Third World Quarterly* 29: 1, 2008, p. 155; Rita Manchanda, 'Militarised Hindu nationalism and the mass media: shaping a *Hindutva* public discourse', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25: 3, 2002, pp. 301–20; Sinderpal Singh, *India in South Asia: domestic identity politics and foreign policy from Nehru to the BJP*

perspective, from which Hindu nationalism is more restrained. Kautilya himself warned that unbridled expansion could be counterproductive and that, barring the threat of decline, peace would be preferable to war.¹⁶ The emphasis on *dharma* (roughly, a combination of moral duty and observance of law) as a foundational principle embedded in virtually all classical Hindu writings also gives pause.¹⁷

Where on this spectrum might we place Narendra Modi's world-view, taking into account his expressed views and the empirical evidence of action? Modi's thinking has not been articulated at length. But such comments as he has made from time to time do not tally with the commonplace understandings of *Hindutva*. He does underline the importance of power, stressing that India's historical weakness and colonization call for the need to retain independence today; that *shanti* (peace) and *shakti* (strength) go together; and that India's responses to Chinese and Pakistani provocations ought to be assertive.¹⁸ He is also conscious of India's 'glorious heritage' and expects it to play a 'leading role' in the world.¹⁹ On the other hand, he recognizes that 'we live in an inter-dependent world',²⁰ that the world is one family²¹—*vasudaiva kutumbakam*—and that India stands for *vishva-bandhuta* (world brotherhood) and peace.²² In April 2015, the BJP's national executive, led by Modi, enunciated *panchamrit* (literally, five sacred foods), that is, the five pillars of his foreign policy: *sammān* (dignity, honour), *samvād* (engagement, dialogue), *samriddhi* (shared prosperity), *suraksha* (regional and global security) and *sanskriti evam sabhyata* (cultural and civilizational linkages).²³ Nothing in this conforms to the muscular foreign policy framework identified by many. But let us look at the proof of the pudding—India's strategic behaviour under Modi.

It is hard to divine a 'martial spirit' in India's external policy under Modi. First, we must recognize that associating India's transition to nuclear weapons status exclusively with the BJP is misleading. The first nuclear test was conducted in 1974 under the government of Indira Gandhi, a Congress leader, the first nuclear bomb was built (covertly) under that of her son, Rajiv Gandhi (also of the Congress), and a series of prime ministers with varying party affiliations kept the weapons programme going from the 1960s onwards. The tests of 1998 under the BJP did

(Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 85–113; Achin Vanaik, 'Making India strong: the BJP-led government's foreign policy perspectives', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25: 3, 2002, pp. 321–41.

¹⁶ George J. Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, *Chinese and Indian strategic behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 30–31.

¹⁷ Swarna Rajagopalan, "'Grand strategic thought' in the Ramayana and Mahabharata", in Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit and V. Krishnappa, eds, *India's grand strategy: history, theory, cases* (New Delhi and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 32–62.

¹⁸ 'Build foreign policy on culture, economy, security: Modi', *Yahoo! News*, 19 Oct. 2013, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/build-foreign-policy-culture-economy-security-modi-152803353.html?ref=gs>.

¹⁹ 'PM to heads of missions', Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 7 Feb. 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=115241>.

²⁰ 'Full text of Narendra Modi's interview', *Business Standard*, 28 May 2015, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/full-text-of-pm-narendra-modi-s-interview-to-pti-115052800367_1.html.

²¹ Girish Kuber, "'My Hindutva face will be an asset in foreign affairs'", *Indian Express*, 23 April 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/my-hindutva-face-will-be-an-asset-in-foreign-affairs/>; Nancy Gibbs, Zoher Abdoocarim and Nikhil Kumar, 'Exclusive interview with Narendra Modi: "We are natural allies"', *Time*, 7 May 2015, <http://time.com/3849492/narendra-modi-interview/>.

²² 'PM to heads of missions'.

²³ Ravish Tiwari, 'BJP calls for a muscular foreign policy: Panchamrit to replace Panchsheel', *India Today*, 4 April 2015, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bjp-foreign-policy-national-executive/1/428383.html>.

indeed constitute a landmark event, but to ‘Hinduize’ that event is to distort India’s nuclear-strategic history. Moreover, though engaged (like its predecessors) in the pursuit of enhanced capabilities, the Modi government continues to abide by a non-deployed posture, abjure nuclear ‘warfighting’, and espouse a policy of no first use.

Another facet of the BJP’s foreign policy is said to be ‘Islamophobia’, manifested by its ‘abrasive’ stance towards Pakistan.²⁴ This toughness is certainly manifest in Modi’s policy towards Pakistan. But the approach is hardly confined to the BJP; rather, it goes back to Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi (all Congress prime ministers). Mrs Gandhi, the toughest of them all, deliberately went to war with and bisected Pakistan in 1971. In contrast, the BJP’s Vajpayee government fought no more than a limited conflict against Pakistan (in 1999) when the latter’s forces crossed into and occupied territory under Indian jurisdiction in Kashmir. The limitation, of course, was imposed by Pakistan’s possession of nuclear weapons; but that is precisely the point: no Indian government, whether ‘Hindu nationalist’ or not, has been able to respond differently under the shadow of nuclear weapons. There is no specifically Hindu response to a nuclear threat; if there is one in the realm of conjecture, Modi and Vajpayee before him have given no inkling of it.

It is certainly true that Modi’s policies towards China and Pakistan have shown a degree of ‘muscular resolve’.²⁵ In contrast to his predecessor, Modi has chosen to ignore China’s reactions when reviving joint naval exercises with the United States and Japan, which had been discontinued by Singh in 2007 following Beijing’s protests. But the BJP cannot claim exclusive ownership of a tough stance towards India’s adversaries. India’s deepening strategic involvement in south-east Asia (especially with Singapore and Vietnam) and north-east Asia (Japan) was initiated and continued by earlier post-Cold War regimes as a response to China’s growing presence in south Asia and the Indian Ocean. Further back, India under Congress leaders fought against China (in 1962) and confronted it in significant crises in the 1960s and more prominently in 1986–7. To be sure, Modi has strengthened military linkages with the United States, Japan and others in response to China’s aggressive posture in disputed seas, but this activity has been largely limited to military exercises and is in any case an extension of what previous governments had been doing. With regard to Pakistan, previous governments have repeatedly been to war with the country (in 1947–8, 1965 and 1971) or engaged in armed confrontations with it (in 1986–7, 1990, 1999 and 2001–2002). Modi, like Singh, has shown himself ready to extend an olive branch by travelling to Pakistan (Modi visited Lahore and Raiwind in December 2015) and initiating negotiations. In response to cross-border terrorist strikes emanating from Pakistan (notably, in Pathankot in January 2016 and Uri that September), his government has publicized ‘surgical strikes’ against terrorist bases (October 2016), but even this kind of covert military action is not new—there is at least one example of a similar strike

²⁴ Haynes, ‘Religion and foreign policy making’, p. 155. See also Singh, *India in South Asia*, pp. 85–113.

²⁵ Ganguly, *Hindu nationalism*, p. 12.

against the Pakistan Army carried out by the Manmohan Singh government in 2011.²⁶

Nor has Modi shown a propensity for interventionism. Unlike Congress leaders who did so from time to time, breaking up Pakistan (Indira Gandhi) and intervening militarily in Sri Lanka (Rajiv Gandhi), he has limited himself to expressing concern in response to visits to Sri Lanka by Chinese submarines. Modi did send troops into Myanmar in June 2015 in a counterterrorist assault, but again this was not unprecedented—India had previously conducted operations in Bhutan, Myanmar and Pakistan, and Myanmar too has sent troops into India.²⁷ Further afield, like his mentor Vajpayee, who declined an American invitation to send a peacekeeping contingent to Iraq in 2003, Modi has shown no interest in dispatching a similar mission to Syria.²⁸ More generally, the prospect of Akhand Bharat has lost political mileage. In December 2015, when BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav made reference to it, the party was quick to distance itself from his remarks.²⁹

In sum, there is no evidence of a new willingness to rely on the use of force arising from Modi's identification with *Hindutva*. At the time of writing (October 2016), Prime Minister Modi has not deviated from the trend established by his predecessors.

Strategic hedging and partnerships

During the Cold War era, India categorically rejected the existing world order and, along with other post-colonial states, tried to build an alternative one centred on the dissolution of security blocs, global disarmament and equitable economic relationships among states.³⁰ This meant building new institutions: the 'third force' of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the realm of strategic politics, and the Group of 77 (G77) in the realm of economic development. The economic aspect of the grand plan ran out of steam as India failed to achieve significant growth and instead slipped into a balance of payments crisis by the early 1990s. At precisely the same time, the Cold War came to a swift end, thereby rendering NAM obsolete.

The result was a dramatic change in India's grand strategy. The central feature of this reversal was that, instead of trying to avoid engagement with the Great

²⁶ Vijaita Singh and Josy Joseph, 'Operation Ginger: tit-for-tat across the Line of Control', *Hindu*, 9 Oct. 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/operation-ginger-titfortat-across-the-line-of-control/article9202758.ece>.

²⁷ Sushant Singh, 'Myanmar strike: not the first time army conducted cross-border operations', *Indian Express*, 10 June 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/army-crossed-border-to-target-militants-in-the-past-too/>; 'Is Myanmar raid Indian counter-insurgency shift?', BBC News, 10 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33074776>.

²⁸ Suhasini Haidar and Kallol Bhattacharjee, 'India may not send troops to Syria', *Hindu*, 11 Jan. 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-may-not-send-troops-to-syria/article8089739.ece>.

²⁹ Nistula Hebbar, 'Party, govt. don't share Madhav's view, says BJP', *Hindu*, 27 Dec. 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bjp-plays-down-ram-madhavs-akhand-bharat-remarks/article8034226.ece>.

³⁰ Kate Sullivan, 'Indian strategies of status-seeking in world politics: resistance, collective action, and the renunciation of power', paper presented at workshop on 'Rising India: status and power', University of Oxford, 4 March 2015.

Power system, India now began to seek a prominent place in it. On the economic side, it gave up all notions of building a ‘new international economic order’ and began to encourage foreign investment and trade. One fundamental similarity between the old and the new approaches remained: the preference for strategic autonomy. But even here there was an important difference. In the old days, India had sought autonomy to minimize the costs and risks associated with being a weak power; now it began to think of autonomy as undergirding its quest for security and status as an emerging major power. In essence, what India wants today is to maximize its strategic autonomy as well as security by means of a hedging approach—that is, by spreading its bets and developing strong relationships with as many major powers as possible. In short, it is naturally inclined to favour building multiple strategic partnerships.

This preference for a kind of *tous azimuts* approach to relationships and reluctance to draw too close to any one or group of them looks suspiciously like non-alignment in new attire, but it is not.³¹ We might more profitably view the approach as optimal in the increasingly complex world inhabited by states today. This is a world best characterized as a ‘mixed system’ in which traditional *realpolitik* coexists with the *necessity* of cooperation as interdependence grows. Historically, to be sure, both forms of strategic behaviour existed, and we are told from time to time that unprecedented economic engagement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not prevent two world wars. But we can scarcely doubt that, in the twenty-first century, the unprecedented level of economic interdependence produced by globalization and the high degree of strategic interdependence produced by nuclear weapons have together sharply circumscribed the choices available to national leaderships. The space for realist structural politics has been diminishing steadily, if slowly, in inverse proportion to the growth of the two types of interdependence identified above.³² It is hardly an accident that there has been no major-power war since the end of the Second World War.

Today, we inhabit a kind of ‘shadow realist’ world, where states often think in terms of *realpolitik* but cannot risk behaving accordingly beyond a certain point because of the high costs of conflict imposed by strategic and economic interdependence. This is a world in which ‘strategic partnerships’ have proliferated.³³ In so far as they are security-driven (which is not always the case), they reflect the

³¹ The term itself retains some appeal, though not much of its earlier content. See Khilnani et al., *Nonalignment 2.0*.

³² For a fuller discussion of the relationship between structure and interdependence, defined as ‘intensity of interaction’, see Rajesh M. Basrur, ‘Structure and interaction in the global system’, *International Studies* 31: 4, 1994, pp. 377–97.

³³ Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, ‘China’s strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world’, working paper no. 8 (Brussels: European Strategic Partnerships Observatory, June 2014), <http://strategic-partnerships.eu/publications/chinas-strategic-partnership-diplomacy-engaging-with-a-changing-world/>; Natalie M. Hess, ‘EU relations with “emerging” strategic partners: Brazil, India and South Africa’, *GIGA Focus*, no. 4, Dec. 2012, <http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publication/eu-relations-with-emerging-strategic-partners-brazil-india-and-south-africa>; Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic partnerships in Asia: balancing without alliances* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010); Prashant Parameswaran, ‘Explaining US strategic partnerships in the Asia–Pacific region: origins, development and prospects’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36: 2, 2014, pp. 262–89; Thomas S. Wilkins, “Alignment”, not “alliance”—the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment’, *Review of International Studies* 38: 1, 2012, pp. 53–76.

ambiguity of the strategic landscape. Their prominent features may be identified as follows.

- Unlike alliances, they are not expressly aimed at an enemy, which makes for deniability.³⁴ This leaves space for building bridges with strategic adversaries with whom conflict is not a viable option.
- Also unlike alliances, they are flexible and do not involve deep and specific commitments to the security of partners.
- They involve high-level interactions, including regular discussions, between heads of government (perhaps to shore up weak commitments).
- They often involve security cooperation by means of arms transfers, joint drills and regular dialogues.
- Beyond security, strategic partnerships usually extend to other mutually beneficial interactions, especially economic exchanges.

Most states are involved in multiple strategic partnerships, frequently numbering in the dozens, with varying content. What exactly is their strategic meaning? In the conflict-avoiding domain of major power relations, the chief motivations of states involved in multiple security-driven strategic partnerships can be summarized under five headings.

- *Building capability*: States seek to enhance their military strength just in case force might be required, not so much for full-scale war against a major adversary, but more likely for marginal conflict. The accoutrements of old-fashioned usable power, of course, do retain a certain symbolic appeal.
- *Networking*: States also forge partnerships in order to apply psychological pressure on adversaries by creating a strategic environment conducive to negotiation, and to promote image-building. For example, the thrust of the US 'pivot' or 'rebalance' is not so much to balance China as to create an environment to persuade it to be more restrained in its strategic behaviour.
- *Obtaining political support*: National leaders try to elicit support for a variety of objectives, such as obtaining leverage against adversaries with whom they have political disputes, gaining access to international institutions, or mitigating international pressures, for instance in situations where sanctions might be applied against them.
- *Avoiding dependence*: States try to spread their strategic bets, thereby precluding the imposition of excessive influence by—and constraining the bargaining power of—strong partners.
- *Avoiding entanglement*: Unlike alliances, partnerships do not require commitments to joint or collective defence and therefore avoid the risk of being dragged into someone else's conflicts.

Such partnerships are inherently loose and hard to define. All major powers today are involved in multiple strategic partnerships, the specific content of each of which varies.

³⁴ Some analysts simply assume that they are not threat-driven or aimed at a specific adversary: Parameswaran, 'Explaining US strategic partnerships'; Wilkins, "Alignment", not "alliance".

India's national security strategy has involved a number of strategic partnerships with major and minor powers, most notably with the United States, Russia and Japan.³⁵ Not all are similar and even the precise nomenclatures attached to them vary. The India–US partnership tops the list, raising fears among some Indians about undue American influence. To underline that it will not be a camp follower, India has cultivated a 'special and privileged partnership' with Russia and a 'strategic and global partnership' with Japan. It even has a nominal 'strategic partnership' with China, though the chief purpose of that arrangement is reducing tensions between the two countries by encouraging a modicum of strategic communication and keeping the door open for future cooperation. Multilateral strategic relationships, such as the India–Japan–US triangle, provide additional leverage, strengthening links with friends and further circumscribing an adversary's options.

India's main strategic partnerships with the United States, Russia and Japan reflect the hedging strategy it has adopted, the chief features of which conform to the generic description of strategic partnerships outlined above.

Building capability

India's GDP has grown rapidly since the turn to liberalization—rising from \$274.84 billion in 1991 to \$2.07 trillion in 2015.³⁶ Consequently, it has been able to raise its aggregate military spending sharply without undue stress on its resources. Indian military spending, which in 1998 stood at US\$13.95 billion, rose thereafter to a hefty US\$42.95 billion in 2015, with India topping the list of global arms importers for the period 2010–2014.³⁷ During the Cold War, it had been heavily dependent on the Soviet Union for weapons; more recently, it has attempted to balance its purchases so as to avoid dependence. Contrary to popular belief, Russia still accounts for the largest proportion of Indian arms imports, accounting for 69.8 per cent during 2010–2014.³⁸ However, the balance is shifting: the United States is now a major source of contracted orders, though Russia is by no means out of the running. In August 2014, Defence Minister Arun Jaitley told the Lok Sabha that over the preceding three years, the United States had overtaken Russia as the largest supplier of weapon systems to India, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of contracted imports, with Russia trailing at 30 per cent, followed by France at 14 per cent.³⁹ But late December 2015 saw a Russian comeback, with agree-

³⁵ Satish Kumar, S. D. Pradhan, Kanwal Sibal, Rahul Bedi and Bidisha Ganguly, *India's strategic partners: a comparative assessment* (New Delhi: Foundation for National Security Research, Nov. 2011), http://fnr.org/files/Indias_Strategic.pdf.

³⁶ World Bank, National Accounts Data, and OECD national accounts data files, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

³⁷ For 1998 spending, see International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The military balance, 2000–01* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 299 (constant 1999 prices); for 2015 spending, see IISS, *The military balance, 2016* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 486 (current prices); for import ranking, see Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2015* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁸ *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, p. 420.

³⁹ Ramananda Sengupta, 'How America replaced Russia as India's largest arms supplier', *Swarajya*, 27 Sept. 2015, <http://swarajyamag.com/politics/how-america-replaced-russia-as-indias-largest-arms-supplier/>. This appears to refer to commitments rather than actual transfers.

ments to launch joint production of military helicopters and joint development of fighter and transport aircraft.⁴⁰ In any case, a large proportion of the Indian armed forces' equipment—from small arms to tanks, combat ships and aircraft—continues to be of Russian origin. The size of the arms imports pie and its division into multiple sources has enabled India to push for and obtain unprecedented technology transfer agreements. Modi's government has continued the trend and obtained considerable benefit from it, embarking on collaboration on numerous advanced technologies with the United States, including preliminary work on joint production of an aircraft carrier. Talks have also taken place with Japan for the supply of amphibian aircraft and possibly diesel–electric submarines.

Networking

India has built close security relationships between itself and all its major strategic partners, while also engaging with China. Bilaterally, it has signed security cooperation agreements, established security dialogues and engaged in joint military exercises with the United States, Russia and Japan. The relationships with the US and Japan are clearly a response to the rise of China, though policy-makers are predictably chary of saying as much. In August 2016, India and the US signed a path-breaking Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that enables the two countries to provide logistics support, including berthing and refuelling, to each other's warships and military aircraft.⁴¹ In September 2015, the strategic dialogue between India, Japan and the United States was raised to the ministerial level.⁴² After blowing hot and cold on the issue during the Singh regime, India under Modi revived the trilateral Malabar naval exercise with the US and Japan in October 2015. Does this mark the beginnings of a new 'triple alliance'?⁴³ That is an overstatement. But there appears to be an objective of creating an environment in which, to quote an Indian expert on Japan, major democracies try to 'shape China's rise in a peaceful way'.⁴⁴ This is one area in which Modi's policy has been somewhat different: he appears less inclined to worry about China's reaction to the emerging entente than was Manmohan Singh.

India's relations with Russia might seem to be cooling, especially given the shift in India's arms purchasing pattern and Russia's decision to sell arms to Pakistan. But India has been careful not to support sanctions against Moscow or even to

⁴⁰ 'Indian and Russian leaders praise partnership', BBC News, 20 Dec. 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35178225>.

⁴¹ Rajat Pandit, 'Indian bases to open doors to US warships, planes', *Times of India*, 13 April 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indian-bases-to-open-doors-to-US-warships-planes/articleshow/51802543.cms>.

⁴² 'India–US–Japan trilateral talks raised to foreign min-level', *Times of India*, 24 Sept. 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-US-Japan-trilateral-talks-raised-to-foreign-min-level/articleshow/49071236.cms>.

⁴³ Daniel Twining, 'Asia's new Triple Alliance', *Foreign Policy*, 24 Feb. 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/24/asias-emerging-triple-alliance-india-china-japan-modi-obama/>. A strong case for a balancing linkage between the three states *vis-à-vis* China is made in Satoru Nagao, 'Japan, the United States, and India as key balancers in Asia' (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d. [2015]), <https://www.csis.org/programs/japan-chair/strategic-japan-working-papers>.

⁴⁴ Dinakar Peri, "'India, Japan and US can shape China's peaceful rise'", *Hindu*, 22 July 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-japan-and-us-can-shape-chinas-peaceful-rise/article7449033.ece>.

criticize it openly following its intervention in Ukraine. New Delhi continues to buy substantial quantities of weapons from Moscow and is mindful of its long history of steady relations with Russia. In May 2015, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee pointedly observed that, notwithstanding Russia's 'difficult moments', the relationship 'will not be affected by the winds of transient global political trends'.⁴⁵

More broadly, India has spread its bets by engaging with the major powers and others through a series of regional organizations such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (with the US, Japan, Russia and others), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (with Russia, China and others) and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) grouping. This policy direction, particularly with respect to south-east Asia, has been continued under Modi, who has rechristened the 'Look East' policy of Narasimha Rao as the 'Act East' policy. An effort is under way to build a separate trilateral linkage connecting Russia, India and China (RIC).⁴⁶ India is also knocking at the doors of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation grouping (APEC), in which the US, China, Japan and Russia are all members. The web of multiple bilateral and multilateral arrangements that India has woven before and during Modi's assumption of the premiership thus demonstrates a high degree of continuity.

Obtaining political support

Despite the limitations of strategic partnerships, there is much to be gained from them by way of political support, and here too Modi has continued a trend set by his predecessors. Russia is particularly valued for its consistent support of India during the Cold War on Kashmir and on the Chinese threat, as an arms supplier, and as a backer of heavy industries in India's formative years. It continues to be viewed by the Modi government as 'a pillar of strength at difficult moments in India's history' which India will always support.⁴⁷ Russian backing was also valuable when the United States, Japan and others imposed sanctions on India following its 1998 nuclear tests. For its part, the United States has taken the lead in assisting India to bypass the rules of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and participate in trade in nuclear materials. Japan has joined hands with India (as well as Brazil and South Africa) in a coordinated bid to obtain permanent membership of the UN Security Council, with indications of support from the US and Russia. China has declined to offer such support, but is unwilling to oppose India's claim openly when it has the backing of all the remaining major powers as well as that of many smaller ones. Partly because of its links with the major powers, India has a high degree of confidence that no major power will be ranged against it on either of its territorial disputes (with China and Pakistan).

⁴⁵ Suhasini Haidar, "India will always support Russia", *Hindu*, 9 May 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-will-always-support-russia-pranab/article7186333.ece>.

⁴⁶ 'America's new nightmare: India, China plus Russia', *Russia and India Report*, 15 May 2015, http://in.rbth.com/world/2015/05/15/americas_new_nightmare_india_china_plus_russia_43123.

⁴⁷ Haidar, "India will always support Russia".

Avoiding dependence

The diversification of arms imports is one dimension of India's preference for optimizing its strategic autonomy. Another is visible in the nature of military cooperation. Despite the rapid growth in defence cooperation with the United States, India has been careful about signing 'foundational agreements' which would strengthen military cooperation with America. Like Singh before him, Modi has been cautious about inking the Communications and Information Security Agreement and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) on geospatial intelligence, both of which are still pending at the time of writing (October 2016). With regard to logistics, the finalization of LEMOA in August 2016, noted earlier, took place after prolonged negotiations. Reasons for this hesitancy include lingering suspicions that the United States might somehow gain undue advantage over India (for instance, by means of intrusive intelligence operations).⁴⁸ More broadly, Indian policy-makers are acutely aware that dependence on the United States has had unwelcome effects on some critical policies. India's once close relationship with Iran has been eroded by American pressure: India has had to reduce its purchases of oil and gas from Iran, and has for all practical purposes dropped out of the Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline project. From India's standpoint, the situation has changed for the better with the signing of a nuclear deal between the US and Iran, but New Delhi remains conscious of its vulnerability to American pressure. Concerns about the possible undesirable effects of American dominance remain.⁴⁹ These anxieties underlie India's periodically expressed preference for a 'polycentric' global order, within which its relationship with Russia is—and is likely to remain—an important component.⁵⁰ France, too, plays a significant role. As noted above, it is a major arms supplier. The invitation extended to François Hollande to be the chief guest at India's January 2016 Republic Day parade, an important symbolic event, was the fifth such occasion on which this honour had been extended to a French president, the highest for any country. A French troop contingent was also invited to participate in the parade; this again was unprecedented.

Avoiding entanglement

Like virtually all parties to strategic partnerships, India is careful to avoid being dragged into the security disputes of its partners. On Taiwan, which has long been a major issue for the United States, India continues to keep a diplomatic distance and does not take an anti-Chinese stance. Similarly, while occasionally critical of North Korea, India does not involve itself in that country's tensions

⁴⁸ Narayan Lakshman, 'Foundational agreements won't compromise India's security: US', *Hindu*, 16 May 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/foundational-agreements-wontcompromise-indias-security-us/article7213305.ece>.

⁴⁹ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'The American hug', *Indian Express*, 2 April 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-american-hug-indo-us-relations-narendra-modi-barack-obama-indias-foreign-policy/>; M. K. Narayanan, 'All about the Obama Doctrine', *Hindu*, 16 April 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/indias-foreign-policy-all-about-the-obama-doctrine/article8480472.ece>.

⁵⁰ Priya Chacko, 'Ukraine crisis: why India backs Russia', East Asia Forum, Gateway House, Mumbai, 7 May 2014, <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/ukraine-crisis-why-india-backs-russia/>.

with the United States. Notwithstanding its engagement with Japan and the United States in joint naval exercises in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, India has not taken a position on the specific disputes there. But its calls for unfettered freedom of navigation in the seas have become more strident, notably through a joint declaration with the United States in January 2015,⁵¹ and talks with Washington have covered possible joint patrols in the region.⁵² Similarly, India takes no position on territorial issues between Russia and Japan. It may be noted that the same applies in the reverse direction: the United States, Japan and Russia do not directly support India in its border disputes with China and Pakistan. There is therefore no question of any commitment on the part of India or its strategic partners to support each other even politically, let alone militarily, on their respective disputes. Any alliance arrangement would make such a positioning difficult.

Engaging China

India's relationship with China is often viewed as a 'protracted rivalry' perpetuated by longstanding differences over the border and a history of balance-of-power politics during and after the Cold War.⁵³ It is, however, a complicated relationship, marked by a simultaneous and extraordinary rise in economic engagement, trade between the two countries having risen from US\$791 million in 1991 to US\$72.22 billion in 2015.⁵⁴ Whether one characterizes the relationship as predominantly one of rivalry or as one of increasing cooperation depends on whether one takes the perspective of a strategic analyst or an economist. For India, even a very limited 'strategic partnership' with China which includes small-scale military exercises is a useful device to try to ease the tensions that bedevil the relationship. Indeed, Modi was optimistic about setting 'a new milestone' on his trip to China in May 2015;⁵⁵ but the visit did not meet expectations and mutual wrangling persists. Overall, the pattern of Indian–Chinese relations bears a remarkable resemblance to that observed in previous decades.

Status-seeking for upward mobility

As noted earlier, India's foreign policy strategy after independence sought to distance itself from the political and economic structures established by the major powers, essentially the Cold War and the capitalist world economy. Simultane-

⁵¹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'US–India joint strategic vision for the Asia–Pacific and Indian Ocean region', Washington DC, 25 Jan. 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>.

⁵² Sanjeev Miglani, 'US and India consider joint patrols in South China Sea—US official', Reuters, 10 Feb. 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-india-usa-idUSKCN0VJoAA>.

⁵³ See e.g. Mohan Malik, *China and India: Great Power rivals* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011); David Scott, 'Sino-Indian predicaments for the twenty-first century', *Asian Security* 4: 3, 2008, pp. 244–70.

⁵⁴ I include Hong Kong, which acts as an entrepot for China. For the 1991 figure, see IMF, *Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1995* (Washington DC, 1995), p. 242; and for 2014, see IMF, *Direction of Trade Statistics* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund) <http://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>.

⁵⁵ 'My visit to China will set "new milestone" for Asia: PM', *Hindu*, 13 May 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modis-visit-to-china/article7201072.ece>.

ously, India began to pursue a strategy that aimed at raising its social standing among the member states of the international system. This latter project remains a key feature of Modi's foreign policy.

Status or rank in international society is something of which many states are deeply conscious.⁵⁶ In the present context, I use Larson, Paul and Wohlforth's definition of status as 'collective beliefs about a given state's ranking' based on attributes such as power, wealth and diplomatic influence.⁵⁷

Attaining status involves being treated with respect and deference by others.⁵⁸ To merit this esteem, a state, it is said, must exhibit 'status markers' such as membership of elite clubs, positions of leadership in international organizations, and frequent interactions with other high-status states.⁵⁹ An important question is: from *whom* does one seek respect? In the years after independence in 1947, Indian leaders, we have seen, resisted the global order, which centred on the liberal capitalist system and the Cold War.⁶⁰ India sought instead to develop an independent position in the international system and attain leadership status *vis-à-vis* other post-colonial states. India's national leaders pursued a strategy that was crafted to achieve international leadership in three ways. First, under Jawaharlal Nehru's stewardship, India championed an international agenda emphasizing post-colonial issues such as decolonization, the ending of apartheid and the democratization of the state system. Second, Nehru attempted to create a 'third force' (the Non-Aligned Movement) outside Cold War politics, to bridge the divide between the eastern and western blocs and to press for universal nuclear disarmament. And third, subsequent leaders, notably Indira Gandhi, tried to add another dimension to this thrust by playing an active leadership role among developing countries, calling for a 'New International Economic Order' and urging 'South-South' cooperation.

But status is hard to attain independent of material power. Although for a time India did gain some prestige, the whole effort lost momentum owing to its economic stagnation and its inadequate military performance in two wars against Pakistan (1947–8 and 1965) and, especially, a disastrous one against China (1962). In the post-Cold War era, India's switch to a more open economy quickly brought results in the form of an accelerated growth rate and with this the label of an 'emerging' economy. Its 'coming out' as a declared nuclear weapons power in 1998 withstood a short period of sanctions and gave it the image of a 'rising power'. It is unlikely that either the economic or the military transformation alone would have given it the kind of status that accrued to it by the turn of the millennium.

⁵⁶ T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson and William C. Wohlforth, eds, *Status in world politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas J. Volgy, Renato Corbetta, Keith A. Grant and Ryan G. Baird, eds, *Major powers and the quest for international status in international politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Reinhard Wolf, 'Respect and disrespect in international politics: the significance of status recognition', *International Theory* 3: 1, 2011, pp. 105–42; Yong Deng, *China's struggle for status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁷ Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul and William C. Wohlforth, 'Status and world order', in Paul et al., eds, *Status in world politics*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Larson et al., 'Status and world order', pp. 8–10.

⁵⁹ Larson et al., 'Status and world order', pp. 10–11.

⁶⁰ Sullivan, 'Indian strategies of status-seeking in world politics'.

Modi, carrying India's post-Cold War status-seeking strategy further, now wants India 'to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power'.⁶¹ The sustained quest for status since the early 2000s has encompassed the following markers.

Rising military capability

Major powers must possess substantial military capabilities. India has been able to pursue this end without much difficulty: faster economic growth has enabled New Delhi to expand military capabilities without resorting to high levels of per capita military expenditure. As we have seen, India's military spending has risen rapidly, assisted by a massive import programme which has made it the world's leading importer of conventional weapons. This huge expansion of the armed forces has been criticized as 'arming without aiming'.⁶² The large-scale accumulation of weapons without an integrated structure of strategic policy formulation suggests that there is more than security driving the process. This is particularly evident with respect to nuclear weapons. India has been described as a 'reluctant' nuclear power.⁶³ Yet it has been continuously developing a wide array of nuclear weapons capabilities—varying ranges of ballistic missiles, multiple warhead missiles and the like—which exceed the requirements of its proclaimed adherence to a doctrine of minimum deterrence.⁶⁴ One benefit is the prestige derived from such capabilities. It can hardly have escaped the attention of policy-makers in New Delhi that a consequence of its 1998 tests was unprecedented US interest in building a strategic partnership with India. The trend, therefore, continues unabated.

Strategic restraint

Even as it has enhanced its military capabilities, India has gained respectability because it has been *less* inclined than before to use its power for intervention overseas. Since the end of the Cold War there has been no major instance of India wielding its armed forces abroad for political ends, even at the height of periodic tensions with Pakistan, when 'limited war' was declared to be a viable strategy. This is in contrast to the preceding period, when India projected its military power abroad from time to time, for example by breaking up Pakistan in 1971, by intervening forcefully in Sri Lanka in 1987, and by acting to prevent coups in the Seychelles in 1986 and the Maldives in 1988.⁶⁵ The combination of rising

⁶¹ Modi's ambition, noted earlier, is echoed by Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar. See 'India, the United States and China', IISS-Fullerton Lecture, 20 July 2015, IISS, Singapore, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/events/archive/2015-f463/july-636f/fullerton-lecture-jaishankar-f64e>.

⁶² Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without aiming* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

⁶³ Happymon Jacob, 'The role of nuclear weapons in contemporary Indian strategic thinking', in Happymon Jacob, ed., *Does India think strategically? Institutions, strategic culture and security policies* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014), p. 315.

⁶⁴ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, 'Indian nuclear forces, 2015', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71: 5, 2015, pp. 77–83.

⁶⁵ Sandeep Dikshit, 'When India drew top secret "red line" in Mauritius', *Hindu*, 10 March 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/when-india-drew-top-secret-red-line-in-mauritius/article4492148.ece>. A similar episode in Mauritius in 1983 ended without actual military intervention.

Modi's foreign policy fundamentals

capability and restraint has gained it considerable esteem. In contrast with the negative reactions from a number of countries to China's rising military spending, India's considerable military expenditure has evoked little concern from states that are not its immediate adversaries. A strategy of consistent restraint also carries the potential benefit of assuaging the concerns of small neighbours and thus building a stronger leadership image. The Modi government has not as yet had occasion to make a difficult choice between action and restraint, but there is no indication that it will not opt for the latter. Like the Singh government, it has focused on the soft use of hard power. There is a distinct continuity in India's efforts to generate an image of being a 'net security provider'⁶⁶ by protecting the commons—escorting American and other ships across the Indian Ocean, combating piracy—and assisting in humanitarian crises, as in the post-tsunami operations in south and south-east Asia of 2004–2005, and in the evacuation of civilians from war-hit Yemen in March and April 2015.

Membership of elite clubs

Historically, India's approach to major power institutions was generally one of resistance and criticism. Indeed, as noted above, it sought to build alternative movements such as the NAM and the G77 to project its leadership. But it was not one to look askance at opportunities when they arose. For instance, after years of criticizing the Antarctic Treaty as a closed-door club, New Delhi established a station on the continent and was happy to sign up to membership in 1983. Since the end of the Cold War, India has made concerted efforts to position itself as a major player in the institutions established by the big powers. One measure of recognition it has already achieved is membership of the Group of 20 major economies (G20). More ambitiously, it has staked a claim (along with others) to permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Modi himself has continued to pursue this goal with considerable vigour, asserting that 'those days are gone when India had to beg. Now we want our right.'⁶⁷ In a series of meetings with major powers, he set out—with considerable success—to obtain support for India's bid.⁶⁸ In September 2015, he called for major reform of the UN and spearheaded a move with the leaders of Brazil, Germany and Japan (the so-called G4) for the appointment of new permanent members. The prospect of such major changes appears distant at present, but India's claim has been backed by a large number of UN member states, including major, middle and small powers. Eliciting approval from so many itself represents a battle half won in respect of attaining higher status. An additional campaign launched by Modi's predecessors and sustained by

⁶⁶ Anit Mukherjee, *India as a net security provider: concept and impediments* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Aug. 2014).

⁶⁷ 'It is India's right to get a permanent seat in UNSC: PM Modi', *Hindustan Times*, 12 April 2015, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/it-is-india-s-right-to-get-a-permanent-seat-in-uns-c-pm-modi/story-Ynt5HnseN5glUzG6PEiLxH.html>.

⁶⁸ 'Narendra Modi drums up support for permanent seat in UN Security Council', *Mint*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/55TQivqJ9GpZO6NVFqhzpK/Narendra-Modi-drums-up-support-for-permanent-seat-in-UN-Secu.html>.

him seeks to position India, long a nuclear outsider, as an integral member of the non-proliferation regime. Few appreciate the enormous significance of this effort in status terms. For India, being kept out of the regime is akin to the exclusion of a low-status group from the upper echelons of the state system.⁶⁹ A critical step was Manmohan Singh's 2008 nuclear deal with the United States and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which ensured that India was no longer regarded as a pariah; but it has been an uphill struggle and, notwithstanding Modi's continuing efforts, India has yet to obtain entry to the NSG, though it has gained entry into the Missile Technology Control Regime (June 2016).

Networking for status

Modi has also continued to pursue a strategy of building social capital for upward mobility by networking bilaterally and multilaterally to gain prominent standing for India in keeping with its self-image as a major player in international politics. Among the major powers, the United States has been (and will for the foreseeable future remain) a key pillar of support without which India would be hard put to ascend the ranking scale of international society. While India has used its relationship with the US for a limited form of balancing against China, in the present context New Delhi has bandwagoned with Washington to raise its status in the international system. India's approach to security via strategic partnerships has also enabled it to seek support on a bilateral basis from Britain, France, Japan and Russia. Since coming to office, Modi has been able to secure commitments for India's UNSC claims from all of these as well as smaller states. Like his predecessors, he has networked with other major states to build India's image as a major actor on the global stage through such institutions as the BRICS and IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), exploring the scope for building coalitions focused on global order in what is conceivably becoming a post-unipolar world. At the regional level, India is a member of the family of institutions created by ASEAN to sustain regional order. This gives it a stake and a role in the complex of relationships involving ASEAN members, plus Australia, China, Japan, Russia and the United States. Among other regional interstate institutions where India is represented are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. In the latter, India, as the most powerful state, is well positioned for leadership since major powers such as China, France, Japan, the UK and the US are mere 'dialogue partners'. Finally, India has already played a significant leadership role in initiating the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which was launched in New Delhi in 2008. Here too it is relatively influential since France and the UK are the only major powers present.

⁶⁹ No Indian leader has represented this in social hierarchy terms. The perception that has come closest is the view expressed by BJP leader Jaswant Singh that the nuclear order centred on the NPT is a form of 'apartheid'. See Jaswant Singh, 'Against nuclear apartheid', *Foreign Affairs* 77: 5, 1998, pp. 41–52.

The broad picture that emerges is one of a sustained pursuit of status in a world that is unquestionably hierarchical and in which India's self-image is well above its actual position. To be sure, India is not in the same economic or military league as the United States or China. Its GDP in 2014 was just US\$2.04 trillion compared to China's US\$10.4 trillion and the United States' US\$16.8 trillion. Likewise, India's defence expenditure in 2015 was US\$47.9 billion, against China's US\$145.8 billion and America's US\$597.5 billion.⁷⁰ There is clearly a long way to go. But the point is that India's leadership over the past two decades has envisaged the country on a steep upward trajectory towards the top rung and has been determined to act accordingly.

Conclusion

This portrait of Narendra Modi's strategic approach to foreign policy shows essential continuity with respect to three basic elements: the use of power, diversity of security relationships and the pursuit of status. Its key findings are as follows. First, while it is commonplace to associate a predilection for muscular policy with 'Hindu nationalism', the notion of a Hindu element in Modi's foreign policy is not very useful. The evidence shows no particular pattern of foreign policy thought or action undertaken by Modi (or indeed his BJP predecessor Vajpayee) that reflects a Hindu nationalist bias, so evident in the domestic arena, in Indian foreign policy under the BJP. This is a divergence that clearly needs explanation, but limitations of space prevent that from being attempted here. On the contrary, and this too needs separate explanation, considerably more aggressive policies were the hallmarks of Congress prime ministers—Indira and Rajiv Gandhi—who were prepared to use military force when they felt India's security was threatened.

Second, Modi has not altered the framework of India's relations with the major powers. The most substantial change came much earlier, in the 1990s, when India began to shift from a policy orientation that was fearful of the power of the big players to one of growing confidence about its capacity to deal with the power structures of the system.⁷¹ Narendra Modi did not initiate the change, but is continuing on the same path. His post-Cold War predecessors crafted an approach to security suited to an era in which a high degree of cooperation in conditions of global economic integration coexist with rising tensions generated by changes in the global distribution of capabilities. This took the form of multiple strategic partnerships. Modi has not deviated significantly from the path set by them. Finally, like Vajpayee and Singh before him, Modi has continued to press India's claims for higher status in the society of states through the acquisition of symbols of power, restrained strategic behaviour and networking for seats at multiple tables.

⁷⁰ GDP comparisons are taken from the World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP>. CD. Military expenditure comparisons are from IISS, *Military balance 2016* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷¹ For a detailed study of this change, see Rajesh Basrur, 'Paradigm shift: India during and after the Cold War', in Ian Hall, ed., *The engagement of India: strategies and responses* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

The thrust of this article is that India's foreign policy framework under Modi is not and is in the future unlikely to be significantly different from what it has been in the past quarter of a century. Except under duress, India will be reluctant to initiate significant military action beyond its borders. Nor will it commit itself beyond a point in the tussle between China and the United States. It will avoid being interventionist overseas and will continue promoting the image of a democratic and responsible stakeholder and a net security provider prioritizing peaceful means. It will simultaneously continue to try to enhance its status through these same actions and through a strategy of networking. This does not necessarily mean Modi's India will do all these things very well; but the general thrust will tend towards continuity along a path that is by now well worn.