

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Indian Foreign Policy Legacy

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Summary

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's success in transforming the relations between India and the United States stands as his most enduring foreign policy legacy – a testament to his vision and resolve amidst formidable domestic and international obstacles. His efforts at security regional reconciliation with Bangladesh, China and Pakistan were less successful. Ironically, Singh's diplomatic legacy perhaps could have been much stronger if there had been substantive domestic political support for his foreign policy initiatives.

When he became prime minister of a coalition government in 2004, Dr Manmohan Singh inherited a positive diplomatic legacy from his two immediate predecessors – P V Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee navigated many external crises. Singh's own contribution in laying the foundations for India's economic modernisation as finance minister under Rao was now paying diplomatic dividends as the world was eager than ever before in a productive engagement with India.

On his part, Singh sought to convert the emerging diplomatic opportunities to transform India's major bilateral relations. His intellectual recognition of India's new global possibilities, however, did not find the necessary domestic resonance. The lack of adequate political support at home, bureaucratic inertia and the opposition from the foreign policy community limited his room for external diplomatic manoeuvres.

The visit by Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, to India in April 2005, ostensibly to watch a cricket match in Delhi, provided the occasion for Singh to [explore the outlines](#) of a Kashmir settlement. Serious back-channel negotiations on Kashmir could not, however, be brought to a close. The Congress party's leadership was deeply uncomfortable making bold moves with Pakistan. The party would not even support Singh's plans to visit Pakistan. As Delhi hesitated, momentum dissipated on Pakistan's side as Musharraf's power began to ebb, and relations reverted to crisis mode after the terror attacks from Pakistan on Mumbai in November 2008.

Singh had [greater success](#) with Bangladesh in negotiating a land boundary settlement with Dhaka and an agreement to share the waters of the Teesta River in 2011. However, his party could not muster support from a key regional party, the Trinamool Congress, on water-sharing and the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on parliamentary approval for the land boundary settlement.

Singh was also successful in negotiating an [agreement on guiding principles](#) and political parameters on the resolution of the boundary dispute with China in April 2005. It was the first time such an agreement was finalised and raised hopes for the long overdue

breakthrough in the relations with China. However, boundary negotiations soon stalled as Beijing began reinterpreting the agreement's provisions. While Delhi was eager for a settlement, Beijing grew reluctant as the power gap between the two nations rapidly widened in China's favour during the 2000s.

As a rising China under Xi Jinping turned politically assertive and adopted muscular approaches to boundary disputes with its neighbours, Sino-Indian relations entered a complex phase. This manifested in a series of military crises, with the first major border flareup occurring in 2013 toward the end of the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) rule.

Singh's American story proved vastly different and consequential. In March 2005, Condoleezza Rice, President George W Bush's National Security Adviser, went to Delhi promising to resolve the longstanding nuclear dispute with India. This was part of a new United States (US) initiative to reorganise the Asian security order, with India as a strong regional partner.

Swift diplomatic action led to Delhi and Washington signing a [defence cooperation agreement](#) in June 2005 and a historic [civil nuclear initiative in July 2005](#). The scale and scope of this new diplomatic engagement with the US unsettled the Congress party amid vigorous opposition from the UPA's Left allies. Though Vajpayee had created the nuclear opening with the US, Lal Krishna Advani's BJP attacked Singh's historic deal with Bush. The Left and the BJP joined forces to try to topple Singh's government. The Singh government survived this challenge, but the Congress leadership had no political appetite for completing the nuclear initiative with the US. It took Singh's threat to resign to push the Congress party to formalise the initiative in 2008.

Though he returned as prime minister in 2009 with a stronger mandate, Singh struggled to implement the many new agreements with the US. The Congress leadership showed little political interest in that project. It took Narendra Modi's government, with its Lok Sabha majority and full control over party foreign policy, to advance the strategic partnership with the US.

However, had Singh not acted with great conviction by putting his leadership on the line in 2008, it would have been much harder for the Modi government – though bolder and more self-assured – to rapidly transform the US relationship over the last decade. Transforming the US relationship amid widespread political, intellectual and bureaucratic hostility will endure as Singh's greatest strategic legacy as prime minister. It complemented and reinforced his contribution to India's economic rise in the 1990s.

Willing partners in Washington – successive American presidents Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden – helped make the US' most valuable partner today. Singh had a supportive partner in Dhaka, but the Congress party could not get sufficient internal support. It was left to Modi to wrap up the boundary settlement with Bangladesh. Neither Singh nor Modi had such fortune with Pakistan and China, which remain major challenges for India.

One can only speculate whether greater internal coherence and stronger political will in Delhi could have helped India gain much more than it did from the strategic opportunities that came its way in the UPA years. What does stand out, however, is the importance of leaders seizing ephemeral moments and turning them into concrete strategic outcomes. Equally important is the need for strong elite consensus at home on foreign policy.

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