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Post-Election India: How the Neighbours View the Elephant

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Introduction

The Indians have spoken electorally. In what has been the largest election ever, at any time anywhere, in the world's biggest democracy, they have returned to power one of the oldest political parties in the world, the Indian National Congress, to lead their government. They have displayed their willingness to continue to be led by a wise man, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and an experienced woman, the Congress Party's President, Sonia Gandhi, till such time change and youth come, as they will inexorably, in the form of Rahul Gandhi in leadership role. In the same breath, therefore, this vast electorate has opted for continuity and change, thus displaying the maturity of the common voter and demonstrating the efficacy of democracy as the most effective form of social organisation.

India, of course, both geographically and figuratively, holds a central position in the South Asian subcontinent. It is the only country to have direct land borders with all the continental regional states – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Only a strip of the sea separates it from the two other South Asian nations, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Though foreign policy was not a key issue in the elections, except to the extent that it is related to India's domestic security, the Congress Party's election manifesto devoted a disproportionately large segment of the somewhat brief section on the subject to the countries of the region, despite the acknowledged facts of India's burgeoning international clout and growing global aspirations. Perhaps appropriately so, for the fruition of one of India's primary foreign policy goals – a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations – may be ironically linked to how it is viewed by its smaller and weaker neighbours. And over the next five years, it is reasonable to expect the government in New Delhi to make the best endeavours in the pursuit of this objective.

'Power' Defined

India, of course, beyond any shadow of doubt, is the regional 'pre-eminent' power, politically, economically and militarily (Indians eschew the term 'pre-dominant' because it tends to imply a form of 'hegemonism' which they shun). Now, 'power', as defined by

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Raymond Aron, in international relations, is ‘the capacity of a political unit to impose its will on other units.’² India finds herself in such a situation in South Asia where it is able to exercise this method of asserting influence, without seemingly appearing to do so. A prescription for such a behaviour pattern is implied in the theories of ‘soft’ or ‘smart’ power propounded by Joseph Nye.³ For India, it would entail consultations, understanding, patience, yet firmness, and a modicum of sacrifice. The overwhelming influence that India is capable of exercising, runs the risk of being perceived by the neighbouring states as threatening to erode their sovereignty. What the great political theorist, Hedley Bull, had stated some decades ago is still valid. He had written, ‘The deepest fears of the smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours’.⁴

The Congress Manifesto

Perhaps mindful of these dilemmas, the language of the foreign policy component of the election manifesto of the Congress Party was crafted with circumspection. Declaring that “we will continue to pursue an independent, pro-India foreign policy”, it goes on to say that the party “has always believed that it is India’s historic destiny to be engaged and connected with the rest of the world and, in particular, with the countries of Asia.”⁵ A special or particular focus is applied on Asia, in whose current emergence, India is expected to play a major role. The civil nuclear cooperation agreements with the United States, Russia, France and Kazakhstan is assigned the next importance in the pecking order, and then almost immediately, the emphasis shifts to the neighbours, indicating what a Congress Party-led India would offer them as well as what India would expect in return.

It claims that it was the success of ‘forceful diplomacy’ on the part of India that obliged Pakistan to admit the responsibility of its citizens for the Mumbai attacks and urged the Pakistani authorities to take ‘credible action’ against them. Then comes the assurance, “If it does so and dismantles the terrorist networks that operate from its soil, a Congress-led government will not be found wanting in response”, a reasonable one under the circumstances.⁶

Though drafted before the military victory of the Sri Lankan government over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the document is futuristic in calling upon Colombo to find “an honourable solution to the strife in that country and ensure that all communities, especially the Tamil-speaking people, are guaranteed and enjoy equal rights within a united Sri Lanka.”⁷ While, on the one hand, it negated the concept of ‘a separate homeland for the Tamils’, on the other, with an eye on the Tamil population in India, it sought an end to the inter-communal conflict on the island, stressing upon Colombo to address the root causes.

On Bangladesh and Nepal, the document welcomed the “return of multi-party democracy” and promised to “work with both countries to deepen bilateral ties across a wide spectrum of

² R. Aron, ‘Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations’ (Trans.), Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox, London: Wiedenfield and Nicolson, 1966, p.711.

³ Joseph S. Nye Jr has pioneered the concept of ‘soft power’, and his notion of ‘smart power’ is very popular with the new Barack Obama Administration in Washington. Of his many writings on the subject, a recent relevant one is ‘The US can reclaim ‘smart power’, Los Angeles Times, 21 January 2009.

⁴ H. Bull, ‘The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics’, London: Macmillan, 1977.

⁵ <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/in-full-congress-manifesto-for-general-elections-2009>, 18 May 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

areas for demonstrable mutual benefit”, with the caveat, though, that these countries “must take note of India’s security concerns in a meaningful manner.”⁸

The Neighbour’s Perceptions

How would the neighbours see a Congress Party-led India? For all of them, perhaps a Congress Party-led coalition in India was the preferred option. This is for several reasons. First, the Congress Party and its leadership are ‘known quantities’ with whom these countries have worked over a period of time, and this despite the fact that, in all the neighbours named Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, the governments had changed during the tenure of the coalition. Secondly, the alternative, a coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, would have produced, in the eyes of the neighbours, a more ‘inward-looking’ nationalist government in New Delhi that could have had negative ramifications for a region struggling against ‘extremism’ in all its forms. Thirdly and finally, the current preoccupations of all these governments are to steer themselves out of the global economic recession, in which the intellectual leadership of Prime Minister Singh and the paradigms offered by his government are seen as key.

‘Pilot-Fish’ Behaviour

For the smaller neighbours, there are at least three discernible ways of behaving vis-à-vis the larger and the more powerful one. One is what Erling Bjol, a Scandinavian analyst, described as ‘pilot-fish’ behaviour,⁹ that is, keeping close to the shark to avoid being eaten. Early Finnish relations with then Soviet Union were an example, based on the Finnish perception that her national interests ‘did not permit ties nor the pursuit of alignment with an anti-Russian (Soviet) policy’.¹⁰ A comparable relationship in South Asia would be one between Bhutan and India. Just as Finland’s relationship with the Soviet Union was given a structural basis by the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’ between the two countries in 1948, Bhutan’s relationship with India in the past was also mostly defined by the Treaty of Friendship signed on 8 August 1949, by which Bhutan’s foreign policy was to be “guided” by India.

Though the relations has remained good, Bhutan has always wanted to renegotiate parts of the treaty and displayed some independent action in foreign policy by joining the United Nations (UN) as a sovereign member in 1971 and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1986. In 2003 and 2004, the Bhutanese army conducted operations against anti-Indian insurgents of the United Liberation Front of Assam that were operating from bases in Bhutan for attacks on India.¹¹ That is exactly the model behaviour India would like to see in a friendly neighbour. In what appeared like an immediate reward to Bhutan, India signed a new treaty in 2007 whereby Bhutan no longer needed to take India’s guidance on foreign policy nor obtain India’s permission to import arms. Another regional country that would fit the ‘pilot-fish’ behaviour pattern is probably Maldives. Like Bhutan, Maldives is a member of the UN and the SAARC, and in both fora, its positions are similar to India’s on most issues. In 1988, India, through ‘Operation Cactus’, put down a coup attempt against

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Erling Bjol, ‘The Small States in International Politics’, in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds.), ‘Small States In International Relations, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971, p. 33.

¹⁰ Then Finnish President, Urno Kekkonen’s speech in Thomas Vilku (ed), *Neutrality: The Finnish Position* (Trans.), P. Ojansu and L. E. Keyworth, London: Heineman, 1970), p. 30.

¹¹ Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies ([http://www.ipcs.org/print South Asia Article](http://www.ipcs.org/print_South_Asia_Article)).

then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, for which the latter remained most grateful to New Delhi. The new President, Mohammed Nasheed's government, elected last October, is not likely to behave much differently.

Minimum Credible Deterrence

Pakistan is a category by itself. It is the only other 'nuclearweapon' country in South Asia, eschews a 'no-first-use' principle vis-à-vis India, is rapidly adding to its nuclear arsenal and says it follows a policy of 'minimum deterrent capability' towards India.¹² In other words, Pakistan, at least since the Indo-Pak War of 1971, has sought to make it as difficult as possible for any potential rival to overcome it. All Pakistani governments have been locked into a bitter dispute with all Indian governments over Kashmir since 1947 and, though it appears to ease from time to time, no government on either side has been or will be in a position in the foreseeable future to fundamentally alter its stance on the issue. However, state-to-state relations between India and Pakistan is only half the issue, or as it seems at times, less than half. It is the non-state actors from Pakistan who perhaps constitute a more serious source of worry for New Delhi.

These are the Pakistan-based Taliban, the Islamist extremists, and the *Jihadists* participating in insurgencies in Kashmir and carrying out attacks on Indian soil, as evidenced in Mumbai and on the assault some years ago on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. They are also targetting the state in Pakistan, conducting suicide bombings throughout the length and breadth of the country and occupying swathes of its territory as in Waziristan, Baluchistan, and Swat in the Malakand. Undeniably, these groups have rendered the state fragile but Pakistan still remains a key international player, with a strong army, a gifted intelligentsia and a fine corps of diplomats, albeit with weak and corrupt governance which is part of the problem. It appears at this time that the Pakistani authorities have decided to take on these non-state actors in full force.

Besides the situation in Afghanistan, the presence of foreign troops in that country, a less-than-friendly government in Kabul, United States' 'drone' attacks on its own soil and a culture of behaviour of the border tribes inherited from the British Raj have produced unbearable pressure on the Asif Ali Zardari government. Despite all this, Stephen Philip Cohen, an expert on the country, believes that "Pakistan does well in many areas and arguably can still emerge as a successful state and cohesive nation."¹³ However, of course, "Pakistan needs to act now otherwise irreparable damage to its security and existence will take place."¹⁴ All these elements will need to be factored into their relationship by both India and Pakistan.

Living 'In Concord With But Distinct From'

The third pattern of behaviour by India's neighbours is the aspiration 'to live in concord with but distinct from' it. This is largely pursued by Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. In Bangladesh, the current Awami League-led government of Sheikh Hasina enjoys the friendship and support of the Congress Party-led coalition, as did the preceding 'care-taker'

¹² For India-Pakistan nuclear balance, see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'The South Asian Nuclear Genie: Out of the Bottle; It can be Useful', ISAS Brief No. 102, 13 April 2009.

¹³ S. P. Cohen, 'The Idea of Pakistan', New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ishtiaq Ahmed, 'Pakistan's India Fixation can bring the Taliban into Power', ISAS Brief No. 104, 28 April 2009.

government of Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed which had worked out an excellent working relationship with New Delhi. The government as well as the very vibrant civil society in Bangladesh tend to be secularistic which sits in very nicely with the Congress Party. Both India and Bangladesh share common economic values and pursue similar policies that have given both societies a modicum of macro-economic stability. Though poorer in absolute terms, Bangladesh has outperformed India in certain social sectors. Homegrown development concepts in Bangladesh such as micro-credit and non-formal education for girls have empowered women and helped marginalise extremist thoughts and actions in this overwhelmingly Muslim country. All this should augur well for a close and structured relationship between Bangladesh and India.

Yet, there seems to persist in Bangladesh a deep suspicion of India, justifiably or otherwise, as a result of several issues. These involve the sharing of the water of common rivers; the questions of transit and connectivity, in which each side suspects the other of wishing to secure undue advantages; the complaints of non-trade barriers in India by Bangladeshis impeding their exports; and the allegations by India that Indian insurgents secure safe haven in Bangladesh even if unaided, which Dhaka forcefully refutes. Then there is the question of maritime boundaries yet to be settled which is important, as the Bay of Bengal is said to be rich in energy. There are no easy solutions to the issues and many are very complex by nature. However, the good news is that, for almost each of these, there are mechanisms to negotiate and both governments must ensure these continue to function regularly. Both countries are members of the two regional fora, the SAARC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and these provide their leaderships scope for additional interactions.

Sri Lanka has just emerged from a bloody three-decade long war, in which the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse succeeded in crushing the rebellion of the Tamil Tigers. The costs were enormous. The UN estimates that 80,000 to 100,000 people (including the rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran) were killed and over 300,000 rendered homeless. Despite the fact that millions of Tamils live in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lankan politics is a factor there, the past Congress Party-led government had turned a Nelson's blind eye to the Sri Lankan army's onslaught, partly because Prabhakaran had ordered the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, husband of the Congress Party's President, Sonia Gandhi, and partly because of intense diplomatic activity focused on India by President Rajapakse and his Foreign Minister, Rohitha Bogollogama. They have not only been extremely mindful of India's positions on bilateral issues but have also very supportive of India in international fora. For instance, Colombo was instrumental in projecting the Indian diplomat, Kamallesh Sharma, as the 'agreed SAARC candidate' for the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat (Sharma was eventually elected).

Now here lies the rub. With the conflict over, it is now time for reconciliation and India will be expected to play the role the Congress Party manifesto cited earlier said it would. The Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, wants quick progress on the humanitarian relief, reconstruction and a political solution between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil. He said, "All three of these fronts must move forward in parallel, and it must begin now."¹⁵ How to deal with this situation will be a challenge for the government in New Delhi. Darini Rajasingham Senanayake has argued that a "post-conflict political solution in Sri Lanka will require India's involvement" and "that the resounding victory of the Congress

¹⁵ Quoted in Ravi Velloor, 'Sri Lanka rejects Red Cross help', The Straits Times, 21 May 2009.

Party in India may mark a new chapter in relations between the two countries and a new beginning that puts the past behind.”¹⁶ However, the Indian government may often find itself between the rock and a hard place. For instance, how should India deal with the call of the Human Rights Council in Geneva to deal with ‘war crimes’ in Sri Lanka. A victorious Colombo may be less easy to handle for New Delhi. Colombo has close relations with Beijing as well and New Delhi may not want it to get any closer. All this will test the deftness of Indian diplomacy.

Nepal, especially with its own evolving politics, will pose a challenge and dilemma to the Indian government. It always has. Just as with Bhutan, India’s relationship with the Himalayan state was rooted in an agreement, the 1950 Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. According to it, neither government was to allow any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor and, as a mark of the “special relationship”, India would grant Nepal preferential treatment in trade and provide the Nepalese in India the same economic and educational opportunities as Indian citizens. The evolution of Nepal’s foreign policy is interesting in that it has always endeavoured and managed to steer itself carefully between India and China. This was always a source of tension. For instance, when King Birendra of Nepal declared in 1973 that his country, situated between two most populous nations in the world, wanted to be declared ‘a zone of peace’, it was supported by China and Pakistan but opposed by India which felt its traditional military cooperation would be hurt by such a policy.¹⁷

The current situation is not too dissimilar. Following the establishment of the Republic, when the Maoists, led by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (also called Prachanda) came to power, New Delhi was wary. When his dispute with the President connected to his dismissal of the Chief of the Army (which was nullified by the President) led to his resignation, Prachanda reportedly failed to secure India’s (or at least the Indian Ambassador’s) support. Sukh Deo Muni writes, “India’s unhappiness with the Maoists is believed to (have arisen) out of the growing proximity between China and the Maoists, and the rather assertive stance of the Maoist rule.”¹⁸ No matter how the politics of Nepal is played out, New Delhi will have to ensure that it has not burnt its boats completely vis-à-vis Prachanda, as the Maoists will continue to remain a key factor in Nepalese politics, and they cannot be blamed if they view New Delhi with great suspicion.

The Elephant in the Neighbourhood

There is an Indian folklore of an elephant and some blind men who describe the animal by the body part they touch and feel. India is the regional elephant and the neighbours are the men, with the difference being that they are not blind and are in a position to view the elephant in its entirety and extrapolate for themselves how they should relate to the creature. Naturally, contemporary India wants to play a global role in consonance with its power, ‘soft’ and ‘hard’, and wants a permanent seat in the UN Security Council of the world forum, which is the most powerful international body in terms of security issues.

¹⁶ Darini Rajasingham Senanayake, ‘Two Victories and a Defeat: India, Sri Lanka and the Minority Question’, ISAS Brief No. 108, 19 May 2009.

¹⁷ See Rishikesh Shaha, ‘Nepal as a Zone of Peace’, ‘Pacific Community’, Vol. 8, No. 1, 9 October 1976, p. 171.

¹⁸ S. D. Muni, ‘Nepal in Crisis’, ISAS Insights No.67, 20 May 2009.

The regional South Asian countries are important actors in the UN, for as Amry Vandenbosch had said of small powers, that the UN enables them ‘to play a part in world politics out of proportion to their population, economic or military strength’.¹⁹ There is a group opposing the expansion of the UN Security Council known as “Uniting for Consensus” (which argue that important decisions on the UN reforms such as the expansion of the UN Security Council requires a consensus), of which Pakistan is a key member. The Congress Party-led government will need to try and wean away the regional South Asian countries from such a role that would be negative to its interests.

Conclusion

The new government in India has its work cut out for it. However, the Congress Party-led government can be capable of inspiring the confidence of its neighbours. There is a burgeoning pride in South Asian-ness and the new government can and should take advantage of it, giving the process the requisite kind of leadership. Then, as the Bangladesh Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister), I expressed these sentiments at a lunch in honour of visiting Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee in Dhaka in February 2007 which still holds good, “So let these (some commonalities) be the bedrock values of our South Asian home. Let us coexist and cooperate among ourselves. Let us optimise our potentials. Let us assist one another to progress and prosper. And let us deepen and strengthen the bonds that tie us all. India among us is the most blessed in terms of size, population and resources. A special responsibility, therefore, devolves on her. We know she will not shy away from it. As India grows, we would like to grow with her.”²⁰

In the famous ‘Bhagavad Gita’ which is a small section of the mighty Indian epic ‘Mahabharata’, Krishna, a divine incarnation in human form debates with the hero Arjuna, urging him to fight no matter what the consequences because the cause is just but Arjuna dithers pondering about the possible resultant misery and slaughter. Amartya Sen says these arguments remain valid in our times. He writes, “As we reflect on the manifest problems of our global world (from terrorism, wars and violence to epidemics, insecurity and grueling poverty) or on India’s special concerns (such as economic development, nuclear confrontation and regional peace), it is important to take on board Arjuna’s consequential analysis, in addition to considering Krishna’s arguments for doing one’s duty.”²¹ Indeed, it is this philosophical capacity of the Indian ethos to be able to weigh the considerations on both sides from which India’s policies in the neighbourhood must derive its nourishment. India must be the elder, not the big brother. It must not only be the largest country in the heart of South Asia but also the country with the largest heart. It is as simple or as difficult as that.

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¹⁹ A. Vandenbosch, ‘The Small States in International Politics and Organizations’, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 26, p. 312.

²⁰ Luncheon Speech, Dhaka, 19 February 2007.

²¹ Amartya Sen, ‘The Argumentative Indian’, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, pp. 5-6.