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India's Foreign Policy and the 'Modi Doctrine'

India today is far more engaged in diplomacy than ever before. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country is actively building relations with other states to harness their mutual commercial and cultural strengths. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in a landslide victory in May 2014 under the leadership of Modi. Both Indian and foreign observers of Indian foreign policy had a limited understanding of Modi and the 'BJP approach' with regard to India's external engagements in May 2014. Prime Minister Modi's outlook on global affairs retains the main thrust of India's approach to the world, yet there is a nuanced aim of linking India's foreign policy to domestic transformation under his leadership. While, his policies are designed to attract foreign capital and technology, and seek foreign markets for Indian products, they are also geared towards a closer linkage of regional stability, peace and prosperity. Although, he comes under criticism from some quarters for his frequent foreign trips, most agree that Modi has pursued India's foreign policy with exceptional dynamism. At times he seems to pursue continuity, while at other times he demonstrates a marked change in policy. This raises some general questions. Is there an emergence of a 'Modi Doctrine' in India's foreign policy? Is there an evolution of new paradigms in India's external engagements? These issues were discussed at an ISAS panel discussion in Singapore on 20 October 2016.

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“India’s Foreign Policy and the ‘Modi Doctrine’” was the overarching theme of a panel discussion organised by the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) on 20 October 2016. The objective was an in-depth examination of the foreign policy approach of the Modi government. The distinguished speakers were Dr Vijay Chauthaiwale, In-Charge, Foreign Affairs Department, Bharatiya Janata Party; Professor C Raja Mohan, Director, Carnegie India, and Mr James Crabtree, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Professor Subrata Kumar Mitra, Director and Visiting Research Professor at ISAS, chaired and moderated the discussion.

In his opening remarks, Professor Mitra gave a brief introduction of the subject and congratulated Dr Chauthaiwale, one of the editors of a recent book titled *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy*. The book has generated a lot of debate over the Modi Doctrine and its *Panchamrit* (five key elements). Professor Mitra raised several questions: what is a doctrine and how can we measure it? Is there a ‘Modi Doctrine’ or is it merely aspirational or ‘cheap talk? Is Modi’s *Panchamrit* a departure from the past, distinctive, cohesive and purposive or is it mere repackaging of *Panchsheela* (five principles of peaceful co-existence)? He added that a doctrine is a signalling device and an implicit power – a soft power. He also reflected upon Monroe Doctrine, Brezhnev Doctrine and the concept of ‘Responsibility to Protect’ while raising questions to set the tone for discussion.

The Main Arguments

Dr Vijay Chauthaiwale

- The ‘Modi Doctrine’ is an emerging concept.
- Modi Doctrine is not something that is rigid, static and cast in iron but it’s based on principle of, as PM Modi aptly said, “India First”.
- There is some continuum in our foreign policy objectives. It is based on our rich culture, values and ethos. We have a rich tradition of live and let live and we have always opposed all forms of imperialism, colonialism or discrimination on the basis of race or religion. India has always worked towards achieving these objectives in collaboration with the global community. For us, “*Vaasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (‘the entire world is our family’) is not merely a slogan but a core value. No wonder that, even at the peak

of sentiments after a terrorist attack at Uri, Prime Minister Modi appealed to the Pakistani people to jointly fight against poverty.

- Indeed, conflict-avoidance is enshrined in the Indian value system and that is evident in Modi's foreign policy approach.
- PM Modi changed the discourse from climate change to 'Climate Justice'.
- In order to dramatically expand solar-power technology and distribution in poorer countries, Modi provided the vision and leadership in spearheading a new International Solar Alliance.
- There are several salient features of the Modi Doctrine.
- Tight integration of domestic and foreign policies: Under the leadership of PM Modi, India has leveraged its relations with the international community to support an internal development agenda. For example, several foreign governments are now collaborating with India on various flagship programmes initiated by the Modi government, like Make in India, Skill India, Digital India, Smart Cities, Railway Modernization, to state a few. These efforts have also led to significant increase in foreign direct investments (FDI) in India.
- Overcoming the hesitations of history: In the past, Indian foreign policy was defensive most of the time. With notable exceptions like Bangladesh liberation in 1971, in the past, India was driven either by hesitations or by domestic politics. The Modi government has overcome these hesitations and is setting up its own agenda by establishing good relationship with competing powers. For example, India has strengthened relationship with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran (who are in conflict with each other) and at the same time, the relations with Israel have reached new heights. In fact, PM Modi received the highest civilian award of Saudi Arabia and Iran in a short span of a few weeks.
- Reaching the unreached: In the last two years, India has reached out to several countries where no important official visit or bilateral summit from the Indian side took place in last several years. Surprisingly, it also includes several important countries like Canada, United Arab Emirates, Iran, etc. that have significant commercial and business ties with India. PM Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and other cabinet ministers have collectively visited 140 countries. EAM Sushma Swaraj herself met senior dignitaries of more than 170 countries. Now it has been planned that 68 countries that have never been visited by any Indian minister will be covered by at least one cabinet

minister by the end of 2016. With this, all 192 countries on this planet will be visited by Indian dignitaries.

- **Leadership role:** overcoming our historical hesitations, India is playing a leadership role on various issues of interest to the international community and humanity at large. India has convened the largest India-Africa summit in Delhi. India proposed “International Solar Alliance” in Paris which received instant response globally. India’s proposal of Yoga Day was accepted instantly by almost all the countries. India’s unambiguous stand against terrorism is now accepted worldwide. When PM Modi raised Baluchistan issue on 15 August 2016, lot of people were sceptical about its utility. But it has brought Pakistan’s atrocities and human rights violations in Baluchistan to the forefront on the global stage.
- **Civilizational Connect:** While trade and business are important aspects of foreign policy, India’s ancient civilizational connections across the globe showcase our unique strength. PM Modi’s visits to sites in Japan, China, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc., where ancient civilizational connections between India and these countries are still visible is indeed noteworthy. He has also talked extensively on shared values, traditions and heritage and therefore strengthened these ancient ties.
- **Engagement with the Indian Diaspora:** Globally-dispersed Indian Diaspora, which was considered as a “brain drain” is actually turning out to be one of biggest assets to us (India). It is not only because of their financial strength that brings valuable foreign currency back home, but also their commercial, intellectual and technological value in various parts of the world. Since the BJP government came to power, both PM Modi and Sushama Swaraj are continuously engaging with the Indian Diaspora, trying to simplify rules, quickly responding to their grievances, and engaging them in the overall development agenda of the government. Indian government’s pro-active approach towards the diaspora community has re-energized Non Residential Indians (NRI) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) community, strengthening their ties with their country of origin and enhancing their stature in their country of residence. At the same time, it is important that these people of Indian origin should receive immediate help at the hour of crisis. Indian government has helped in the return of more than 1000 Indian students from Ukraine; evacuated more than 7000 Indian workers from Iraq including 46 nurses; ensured the return of more than 3000 Indian citizens from Libya and the safe homecoming of nearly 4000 Indians from Yemen.

- Overcoming Strategic Restraints: Pakistan has presented a major challenge for Modi's leadership, and this, despite his having reached out to Islamabad on more than one occasion. Balancing restraint with proper response to Pakistan has been a remarkable feature – acting, as in the post-Uri terrorist attacks, with decisiveness and an unprecedented political, diplomatic and military coordination. Remarkably, the prime minister continues to reshape the public discourse on the India-Pakistan relations and redefine the terms of engagement. At the BJP national council meeting in Kozhikode in Kerala in May 2016, while addressing a public rally, Modi challenged Pakistan to compete with it in a “war on illiteracy, poverty and unemployment”.

Professor C Raja Mohan

- In India, there was a long tradition and culture of “*Strotram*” or praise of the king/ruler. By bringing eminent global scholars and experts to evaluate two years of the Modi government's foreign policy, Dr Chauthaiwale and co-editors of *The Modi Doctrine* have done a great job. Despite two of the editors of this book representing the BJP, *the Modi Doctrine* is an excellent assessment of the evolving Modi Doctrine. This is an impressive achievement. However, a more comprehensive assessment at the end of five years of the Modi government will bring greater clarity to Modi's foreign policy directions and achievements.
- While assessing the direction and achievements of PM Modi's foreign policy, we need to recognise the context in which the current government came to power. We are witnessing the third phase of India's global engagements.
- In the first phase of India's global engagement (1947-91), we saw dramatic shifts in India's economic orientation. We saw the partition of the sub-continent, new borders, new conflicts and residual bitter legacies. India ruptured its relations with the West in the name of self-reliance.
- In the second phase, India liberalised its economy, and its economic borders changed. It extended its hand of friendship towards the West. While we saw a clear intent to improve India's relations with the world, its direction was not decisive, and hence, achievement was limited. Coalition compulsions and domestic politics were the pre-occupations, and the leadership was also less active.

- In the third phase, we are witnessing a remarkable shift in India's foreign policy. PM Modi is very energetic and active. He is giving a huge push to engagement, and very effectively he holds ten or more meetings every day.
- After a long period, India has a single-party majority-government. So, the Modi government is not working under coalition compulsions. Pro-active leadership of Modi has transformed India's engagement with the world.
- The Modi government has become more decisive in overcoming the question of historic hesitation. Countries, which were kept at distance deliberately in the past, have become more important.
- The attitude to foreign capitals has changed, and the government is lifting restrictions on foreign capital and investments.
- Relationship with China is another important change. The government seems ready to play hard ball and balance with them. Visa liberalisation and increasing economic and business engagements are indicators that the Indian government is actively engaging China. Getting the balance right with China is a priority for the current government.
- A change in approach towards India's neighbourhood is also visible. PM Modi is trying to find a solution to India's difficult problems with Pakistan, and he is trying a different way of engaging Islamabad. He is showing a commitment to overcome the damage done by partition through innovative approaches to regional/sub-regional integration. While the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh was a 'done deal', it was Modi who invested enough political capital to get it through the Parliament which was ratified unanimously. He is trying to revitalise SAARC through sub-regional and trans-regional cooperation like BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) initiative, BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) initiative, and BIMSTECH (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) initiative.

Mr James Crabtree

- There is no 'Modi Doctrine' as such because he has not outlined any clear and coherent approach.
- Certainly, there is a more-visible, assertive and more-active diplomacy.
- India's value as a partner has grown significantly.

- India's relations with the region remains problematic. India has not used its financial muscle to increase its influence in a decisive way.
- India is talking about a liberal global order and multilateralism, but what kind of multilateralism India wants is unclear. There is no clear articulation of the character of multilateralism.
- We need to ask – is Modi's approach distinct? Is it cohesive?

The discussion that followed highlighted the following issues and comments –

- What kind of role India wants to play in conflict zones – Syria, Afghanistan?
- On the issue of economic globalisation, how has China managed to engage countries in transboundary projects? Is India also going in for transboundary projects?
- On the issue of overcoming strategic restraint, is there any possibility of India redefining its Tibet policy?
- Issue of generating jobs and countering terrorism are two very big problems. How do you see India-US counter-terrorism cooperation? What are India's priorities?
- How does one see India-Russia relations?
- Relations between principle and power
- We cannot use academic tyranny to make sense of the real world. When you deal with a dynamic system, a set of theories cannot help. Leaders don't decide by theories. The 'Doctrine' word is an American coinage, mainly religious doctrine. But religious doctrines also keep changing through interpretations. Doctrine is not a definitive statement. It is a way of seeing a departure from the past. The world is dynamic. In Modi's foreign policy approach, we see a sense of a broader shift in ideas.
- In the Middle East, we are witnessing pragmatism. Engaging simultaneously opposite ends is consequential.
- Similarly, military assistance to Afghanistan or India-Iran-Afghanistan cooperation are clear examples of overcoming hesitations of history.
- The Modi government is doing more reviews of projects and their implementation. Also, we see increasing roles for India's states, which is very important for cooperative federalism.
- There is a significant increase in cooperation on counter-terrorism and in other areas with the US, but India is not going to be a part of any American grand design.

- Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bangladesh and Iran have become important partners of India, while its relations with Israel has strengthen significantly.
- We are not going to let-go Russia. India is not going to abandon Russia. The major problem is on the economic side. How to strengthen India’s economic relations with Russia is a big challenge.
- Most countries talk about principles and go by power, but India talks about the high moral ground. However, there is a decisive break from the past.
- Investment and job-creation are two most important priorities of the Modi government. The government has focussed on SMEs and taken initiatives like – Start-up India. Energy, defence and security are very important, and the government has taken several initiatives in this direction. Further, the government has also focussed on soft power – Yoga, Buddhists connections, civilizational links.
- On the UNSC seat – is it still a goal, and to what extent India is working to achieve that goal?
- Indian Diaspora is very fragmented. For example, there are 650 Indian communities in London alone. Modi is a unifying force among the diaspora communities.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Subrata Kumar Mitra said that concepts have a life of their own. As such, any set of ideas that goes under the name of a doctrine will need to be scrutinised in terms of its cohesion, distinctiveness and effective character. Leaders provide direction and take decisions. Researchers’ job is to connect thoughts to actions and see if these are distinctive, cohesive and purposive. He thanked all speakers and participants.

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