



Modi has consolidated India's relationships in West Asia

FEW, IF ANY REGIMES OF CONSEQUENCE IN THE WORLD CAN BOAST HAVING SIMULTANEOUSLY CORDIAL TIES WITH ALL THREE WARRING STATES — ISRAEL, SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN — SAYS SUMIT GANGULY.

Despite enjoying a clear-cut majority in parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party government has been able to make only limited progress with its domestic political agenda. The reasons for its failures are fairly straightforward. The Congress, the principal Opposition party, though a minority in the lower house still enjoys a plurality in the upper house.

Unable to proffer viable alternatives it has nevertheless proven to be a successful force for obstruction. Apart from the Congress' intransigence, the ruling party has also not displayed much legislative dexterity. These two factors in tandem have prevented the government from implementing a substantial, domestic agenda.

On the foreign policy front, however, it is not similarly hamstrung. Consequently, the government has been able to pursue a far more expansive agenda and has had its share of successes. That said, it has also displayed a surprising degree of naivete on a host of fronts, has stumbled in its efforts on others and remains to follow up on some promising initiatives.

What are its principal successes? There is little question that the prime minister displayed the right instincts immediately upon assuming office. In a hitherto unprecedented move, he invited every principal elected representative of the states of South Asia to his inauguration. This was obviously a grand, symbolic gesture. However, it nevertheless signaled his apparent desire to seek good relations with India's immediate neighbors including Pakistan. Not long after, he successfully managed to settle a long-standing territorial dispute with Bangladesh even though it required a constitutional amendment.

His government also displayed remarkable alacrity as well as organization in responding to an earthquake in Nepal in May of last year. Indeed at the time, his government's timely and generous assistance generated considerable goodwill in Kathmandu. Such bonhomie, however, proved to be short-lived. In late 2015, unhappy with certain constitutional arrangements in Nepal, his government imposed an informal blockade on the land-locked country imposing severe costs. Eventually, it was terminated but not before virtually all the amity toward India had evaporated.

Unlike the previous regime, which had dithered in its ties with Sri Lanka, Modi has displayed a keen interest in working with the new government. Of course, his willingness to engage the regime stems from two distinct sources. At one level, the government of Maithripala Sirisena has displayed some willingness to address the legitimate grievances of the country's Tamil population.

This conciliatory approach toward the Tamil minority makes a more friendly attitude toward the country far more domestically palatable in India. At another, Modi and his for-

eign policy team recognize that they can ill-afford to overlook China's increasing presence in various sectors of that country.

Modi's symbolic and substantive forthrightness in taking swift and decisive steps were not limited to India's neighbors. In a remarkable departure from past tradition where no government would have even entertained the idea, he invited and hosted President Barack Obama, as the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade.

Given the long history of reflexive anti-Americanism that had been part of the warp and woof of India's political culture, especially under several, if not all, Congress govern-



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Tehran, May 23. India will invest \$500 million to develop Iran's Chahbahar port.

ments, Modi's decision to host Obama was little short of dramatic. Since then, however, apart from small measures of no particular significance, little of consequence has happened in Indo-US relations.

The security arena is the only venue which has witnessed substantive progress. However, even a relatively simple and anodyne matter that of a logistics agreement has yet to be consummated.

Accordingly, as his visit to the United States now looms it remains to be seen if he can jump-start an otherwise viable but not quite vibrant relationship.

He has also displayed similar verve in other important bilateral ties. For example, on a visit to France last year, much to the surprise of many in the Indian security policymaking establishment, he made a surprising commitment to purchase 36 Rafale medium-multi-role combat aircraft in fly-away condition. Despite this straightforward decision his government remains bogged down in protracted negotiations over the ultimate pricing of these aircraft.

His skill in handling India's two most trying adversaries, however, has been less than entirely adroit. Even as he was feting Chinese leader Xi Jinping at a lavish banquet in his home state of Gujarat, the People's Liberation Army made a series of incursions in September 2014. After these incursions Indian forces were beefed up in Ladakh as well as along other parts of the border. However, despite this obvious provocation Modi has not adopted a particularly firm stance toward China.

This can be inferred from President Pranab Mukherjee's recent visit to China even as its leaders were taking critical steps to block India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

While in the country, Mukherjee reminded his hosts that India had been a staunch supporter of China in various international fora in the early years of the republic. However, it is most unlikely that this gentle nudge will have any effect on his intended audience.

Nor has he shown much diplomatic shrewdness in handling Pakistan. Early in his term he had terminated the foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan. This had transpired in the wake of Islamabad's disregard for New Delhi's explicit warning to not invite the members of a Kashmiri secessionist organization, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference to the Pakistan high commission on the eve of the talks.

Despite this display of firmness Modi nevertheless made an abrupt visit to Lahore while returning from a State visit to Afghanistan on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's birthday in late December last year. While in Lahore the two agreed to a resumption of talks. Yet, hard on the heels of this seeming *rapprochement*, a group of Pakistan-based terrorists attacked an Indian Air Force station in Pathankot in January.

To the amazement of many observers, his government even agreed to a joint investigation with Pakistan to ascertain the antecedents of this terrorist incident. The abrupt shifts in his attitude and policy toward Pakistan do not betoken a coherent approach to dealing with the country's most nettlesome neighbor.

This seeming disarray in policies toward Pakistan and China is obviously perplexing and ill serves India's long-term strategic interests. It is intriguing to note, however, that his government has been far more sure footed in dealing with a complex set of relationships in West Asia. His government has maintained and deepened a multi-faceted relationship with Israel, has nevertheless managed to reach out to Saudi Arabia and most recently has concluded a \$500 million deal to build a port at Chahbahar in Iran. Few, if

any regimes of consequence in the world can boast having simultaneously cordial ties with all three warring States.

As Modi concludes two years in office a fair assessment of his foreign policy record must be deemed to be one that is decidedly mixed. He has, on occasion, obviously displayed much skill, has shed past shibboleths and has sought to forge new ties.

However, he and his foreign policy team still need to find ways to pursue firm and consistent policies toward India's principal adversaries, to continue to build upon the goodwill that he has generated in his dealings with other neighbors and above all boost the multi-dimensional relationship with the United States.

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