

Indian Interests and Evolving Policies under BJP Leadership: Projections for 2024

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Abstract

The Modi government, following its 2014 election win, pursued a set of policies outlined by the 2014 BJP election manifesto. The policies included stronger Indo-US relations, ingress in the Indo-Pacific, military equipment and nuclear material deals with various countries, aggressive regional postures, and most importantly projection of India as a lucrative market. Following the election, the newly elected government tried but failed to entice the global investors through economic incentives. The 2019 BJP manifesto likewise identified a number of interests and policies, which the Modi government followed once it was re-elected. These included hyper-nationalism and xenophobia centred on Hindutva; abrogation of Article 370; continued regional hegemonic designs in Indo-Pacific region; modernisations in conventional, nuclear, outer space and emerging technologies domains, besides increasing reliance on hybrid warfare. The resulting Indian aggression following these hard-line policies has the potential to stir domestic turmoil, and affect regional instability. Following past trends, it seems likely that 2024 BJP manifesto would be more domestic/inward looking with the foreign policy component being showcased as an augmentation of domestic agenda. Regional bellicosity would likely continue under the guise of India attaining its rightful status of a great power. The international collaborations in the military domain are likely to grow. If re-elected, an even more aggressive Modi is likely to emerge with greater focus on the RSS ideology.

Keywords

Indian Election, Election 2024, BJP Manifesto, Indian Policies, Indian Interests, Regional Stability, South Asia.

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Introduction

There has been a rise in populism around the world, with India becoming one of the first “great democracies” to fall for it. The far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in 2014 and again in 2019 on the back of populism. BJP introduced, through their two election manifestos, an ultra-nationalistic agenda revolving around the concepts of “*Akhand Bharat*”, Hindutva and restoring the former Indian glory, which they claimed was lost owing to the false pretensions of the left-wing Indian elite.¹

BJP, used the ostracism of traditional Indian values by the Indian elite as an effective political slogan. The Indian cultural isolation, owing to these elite living in a westernised bubble according to BJP, promoted a culture in which foreign agents also played a role, which undermined Indian values.

Since coming to power the BJP through their representative Narendra Modi, has been on a mission to showcase the Indian aspiration for great power status as proof of India’s might to its domestic supporters. Having won his first term on the promise of economic prosperity and then failing to achieve that objective, PM Modi shifted the focus of the Indian public towards other attractive goals for his second term. The 2019 election campaign revolved around undermining Pakistan, showing China its place, military modernisations, raising Indian status on the global stage, closer alliances with western powers and a focus on Hindu nationalism. While India under Modi has been following the policies set out in the 2019 manifesto, however, like 2014, the objectives delineated in the manifesto remain largely unaccomplished.

The larger Indian interests have, for the most part, remained consistent through the decades; however, the policies implemented to achieve these objectives changed drastically with the BJP government in power. Modi brought a more nationalistic and aggressive brand of politics with him, which resonated with Hindutva ideology peddling Indian audience.

In order to be re-elected in 2024, the BJP government is likely to pursue a new set of policies with even more aggressive vigour. Energizing the Indian public and also enticing the global power players would require concerted efforts and clear policies. The upcoming BJP manifesto would be the most prudent document to set forth post 2024 government policies if BJP is re-elected.

This paper dissects the previous two BJP election manifestos and the policies followed by the BJP government thereafter, keeping in mind recurring Indian interests and objectives. The focus will be on assessing the likely trajectory of the upcoming BJP election campaign and the contours of the 2024 BJP manifesto, drawing inferences from the previous two manifestos, as well as current trends.

Core Indian Interests

Traditionally, India has always identified itself as a secular and non-aligned state.² Soon after independence, Nehru chose non-alignment for India during the cold war bipolar era.³ Even today, Indian cooperation with any state depends solely on its own national interest, irrespective of its relations with another state.

Gandhi was a big proponent of “*Ahimsa*”, while Nehru was convinced that India was a pluralistic society, and a single religious belief could not be a strong enough cohesive force to keep it integrated.⁴ However, the secular face of India was completely shattered by BJP with its hyper-nationalistic Hindu-first ideology.

Keeping in mind the Indian policies of the past seven decades, core Indian interests can be summarised as the desire for a prominent status in global politics, regional hegemonic designs, subduing China and Pakistan, raising own economic stature, propagating India as a lucrative market and using soft power and its large diaspora for image building of India. With the BJP coming into power in 2014, the Indian policies towards attaining these core interests grew more assertive.

Modi’s First Term

Following Modi’s election in 2014, a new era of Indian foreign and domestic policies emerged, which forwent even the pretence of the traditionally held Indian façade on *Ahimsa*, peaceful co-existence with minorities, regional non-intervention and non-alignment. Revival of India’s lost “Hindu” identity, dilapidated, in their view, by the Aryans, Mughals, British and other invading forces, became a top Indian agenda under BJP government.

Corporate India supported Modi in his 2014 election bid based on his economic agenda. The slogan “Sabka saath, sabka vikas”, which translates to “Together with all, development for all”, was his slogan in 2014. Modi further cemented his support by proclaiming himself as a “pradhan sewak” (prime servant) and not a “pradhan mantri” (prime minister).

2014 Election Manifesto

Out of five main agenda items of 2014 BJP manifesto, the first four focused on plans to tackle economic issues that directly affect the common people such as high prices of commodities, unemployment, corruption, and policy paralysis etc. The last agenda point focused on external security.

Another major thrusts of the 2014 election campaign was on possible revision of the Indian nuclear doctrine to cater for current challenges, especially the Indian No-First-Use (NFU) policy, as well as the pledge to invest in the Indian thorium technology program.⁵

Policies Adopted by the Government after 2014

While the agenda items in the 2014 BJP manifesto emphasized mainly on the resolution of domestic issues and economic prosperity,⁶ however, the Modi government also remained focused on international image building, attaining great power status, international isolation of Pakistan, and enhancing India’s defence and nuclear credentials.

Domestic problems however increased manifold after Modi came to power in 2014. Currency crash, religiously motivated mob lynching of minorities, reduced representation of Muslims in the parliament and strident right-wing Hindu ideology became more commonplace. Major policies formulated by the Modi government after the 2014 elections have been enumerated below.

Stronger U.S.-India Strategic Relations

US-India relations took a definitive upward trend after 2014. The two governments moved on key strategic initiatives which had dire regional implications. The two sides signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows the militaries of both countries to use each other’s bases for repair work and re-supplying.⁷ The Quadrilateral

Security Dialogue (QUAD) meetings restarted during Modi's first tenure,⁸ and India welcomed Japan in the US-India Malabar naval exercises.

These developments supported continued US power projection in Asia-Pacific against a rising China.⁹ The increasing US footprint in India to counter China led to the de-hyphenation of India and Pakistan.

Ingress in the Indo-Pacific Theatre

Indian policy towards Indo-Pacific is a key element of the Indo-US Strategic Partnership. Change in the Indian foreign policy statements from "Look East" to "Act East" coincided with a revival of the QUAD nexus.¹⁰ The 2018 address by PM Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue clarified the Indian stance on Indo-Pacific and provided a framework for Indian priorities in the region.¹¹

The Indian initiatives in this domain were geared towards countering increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under Modi, India sought to undermine Chinese ingress in the region by competing with China in infrastructure development projects.

Military Equipment Deals

The Indian defence budget has been on an upwards trajectory since 2014. In 2018, the Indian defence budget was one of the top five in the world.¹² This increase was needed to finance unprecedented increase in the Indian military and defence-related acquisitions, since Modi came into power.

During Modi's first term, India entered into deals with Russia, the US, France, and Israel, among others, for purchasing military equipment, and joint projects to advance its "Make in India" initiative. This included deals for the acquisition of various types of helicopters, F-16 Block 70 jets, Long Range Surface to Air Missiles, Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems, drones, Rafale jets, and other military equipment.¹³

Though India used the Chinese threat as the reason for making large military acquisitions, from 2014-18, India signed 182 contracts with local and international vendors for purchase of defence equipment for its tri-services,¹⁴ most of which is likely to be deployed against Pakistan.

Nuclear Deals

While nuclear deals with different countries pre-date Modi, the momentum since he came into power was unprecedented. Major deals with Australia and UK were signed during his tenure.¹⁵ India also signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Japan in 2016.¹⁶ These nuclear deals for supplying uranium for the civilian Indian nuclear program allowed India the use of its indigenous uranium reserves solely for its military program putting it in a position to breakout at unprecedented levels.

Doctrinal Changes

The BJP manifesto of 2014 had also hinted at the revision of the Indian nuclear doctrine relevant to then-current challenges.¹⁷ BJP leaders accused Congress, the party in power before it, of squandering “the strategic gains achieved by India during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime on the nuclear program.”¹⁸

Pursuant to this thinking, Indian nuclear policies took a major turn during Modi’s first tenure. Statements and posturing since 2014 have alluded to change in the NFU pledge, a move from counter-value to counter-force targeting and changes in the Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) policy.¹⁹

Membership in EC cartels

During Modi’s first term, India continued to express its aspiration for Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership, even formally applying in 2016. However, underhand it was also preparing grounds for membership of the other three export control (EC) cartels. This ultimately resulted in its membership of all export control cartels except NSG.²⁰ Membership of these export control cartels is in line with the Indian quest for mainstreaming in the international nuclear order.

Kashmir Issue

Following his election in 2014, Modi took an aggressive stance on Jammu and Kashmir as well. The BJP promoted the historical RSS *Sangh Parivar* ideology, which calls for complete integration of the state in the Indian Union.²¹ Since 2014, India has continued to take a hard line on Kashmir,

remaining opposed to any discussion on the Kashmir issue at regional or in bilateral meetings.

Projection of India as a Lucrative Market

During Modi's first tenure, India also very successfully presented itself as a lucrative market to the international community aiming to increase its economic growth. India was not only actively using its growing economy to purchase commodities from other countries, it was also working towards indigenisation and showcasing itself as a seller state.

MODI 2.0 – RE-ELECTION IN 2019

Modi's re-election campaign in 2019 revolved around projecting himself as India's "chowkidar", and bashing Pakistan. Unlike the 2014 elections, when Modi came into power based on his economic agenda, the second time around, he garnered support on issues of national security.

The election turnout in 2019 was the largest democratic exercise in Indian history, with more than 600 million Indians casting their vote. Driving the turnout to 67%, the highest in Indian history.²² This landslide victory led Modi to the conclusion that pursuing an aggressive nationalist and regionally hegemonic agenda is likely to garner further national support in his favour.

2019 Election Manifesto

The 2019 BJP manifesto was titled "*Sankalp Patra*", which means, "a commitment to fulfil promises, not just an announcement."²³ While the major thrust of the 2019 BJP manifesto remained on domestic issues; but unlike in 2014, national security and terrorism were the first two agenda points this time. The foreign policy section focused on regional and international multi-lateral regimes such as BRICS, SCO, and UN.²⁴

Permanent membership of the UNSC has been an Indian foreign policy objective for decades however, in 2019, BJP added it as an agenda point in the manifesto, thus codifying it as a prime Indian interest in the coming years.²⁵

The manifesto also highlighted Indian commitment to the annulment of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, calling it an obstacle in Kashmir's

development.²⁶ The manifesto also promised to continue to give Indian soldiers a free hand to take actions in service of national security.²⁷

Policies Adopted after 2019

While the Indian interests have remained more or less unchanged, the methodology adopted by the government to achieve these objectives underwent another transformation following Modi's re-election.

On the domestic front, Modi continued to promote a nationalist agenda centring on Hindu supremacy and "Saffron Terrorism" against Muslims and other minorities under the Hindutva strategy.

On the regional level, India increased its muscle flexing against neighbours. Though traditionally, the country's focus had been on military power, it has now started relying more on hybrid warfare. Abrogation of Article 370, increase in clashes across Line of Control (LOC), problems at Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China including the standoff in Galwan district, further ingress in the Indo-Pacific region, border row with Nepal and downward trend in relations with Bangladesh are all indicative of regional Indian belligerence.

On the military front, increase in military spending; emphasis on enhancing its outer space program including its militarization, statements and policies alluding to changes in the nuclear and military doctrines and acquisition of newer technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics became the hallmark of Modi's second term.

Hyper-nationalism and Atrocities against Muslims

While the BJP manifesto mentions inclusivity, and respect for common heritage as policy priority, the ground realities following the election were in stark contrast to this visage. "*Ghar Wapsi*" programs (re-conversion to Hinduism), mob lynching, the resolve to construct a Ram Mandir at the site of Babri Mosque and the promise to revoke Article 370 became the defining aspects of Modi's second term. Modi is using the slogan of "Greater India" as an asset, in a world of high impact visuals, to peddle RSS's agenda of Hindu supremacy. RSS influence is clearly visible in national policies influencing every aspect of an average Indian's life. It shapes the Indian

education curriculum presenting Hindu mythology as historical facts, and stemming any legislation contrary to it.²⁸

Having stated its resolve to introduce the Citizenship Amendment Bill in the 2019 manifesto,²⁹ the Modi government introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019.³⁰ The bill makes it easier to attain Indian citizenship for illegal migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian origins.³¹ However, the exclusion of Muslims specifically from the bill's language is glaringly discriminatory and violates the stated principles of secularism in the Indian constitution.³² The introduction of CAA reinforces the Indian Muslim's stance that BJP would not allow them religious liberties.

Regional Bellicosity

Abrogation of Article 370

Article 370 of the Indian constitution adopted in 1949, was a special provision that afforded autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.³³ The BJP manifesto of 2014 termed Jammu and Kashmir an integral part of India; however, in the 2019 manifesto, the BJP committed itself to the annulment of this article.³⁴

The Modi government made good on its promise on 5 August, 2019 by abolishing the article as part of a long-awaited *Hindutva* dream. Following the decision, India adopted certain policies which further eroded the autonomy of the state and suppressed the Muslim population including side-lining moderate Kashmiri political parties. It created a new political narrative deflecting attention towards areas on Pakistani side of Kashmir and Pakistani Northern Areas.³⁵

The 5 August move by India was a clear 'Lawfare Offensive'³⁶ as it not only revoked Article 370 from the Indian constitution but also laid claim to Pakistani territories. At present, there is very little appetite in India for any engagement with true Kashmiri leaders.

The Indian vision on Kashmir is tactical and short term, clearly tied to the current ruling party for its own political power projection. Such a policy will have negative consequences for regional stability in future as this

policy not only impinges on the sovereignty of Kashmiris but also that of Pakistan and China.

While India has implemented a communication blackout in Kashmir, some voices are still managing to reach international ears, which show frustration and discontent within Kashmir. There is a need to pay attention to these voices to gauge the extent of frustration due to lack of opportunities and curtailment of freedom of movement or speech for people of the valley.³⁷

BJP has linked Kashmir to its own political agenda. It seems that India will continue to follow containment strategy in Jammu and Kashmir for the foreseeable future. It may take decades for the anger and frustration among the people to simmer down, if at all, while regional stability, already in a perilous balance, is likely to erode further.

Continued Hostility towards Pakistan

As has been the Indian practice during election times, Modi drew heavily on anti-Pakistan rhetoric to secure the hyper-nationalist public support for the 2019 elections. He declared that India was not afraid of Pakistan and that India's nuclear weapons are not fireworks for *Dewali*.³⁸

While there was no mention of Pakistan by name in the BJP manifesto of 2019, however, it did state that only national security objectives would guide India's policy, as exemplified by the airstrike carried out in Feb 2019.³⁹

Ceasefire violations across the LOC have continued at an unprecedented rate. Since the abrogation of Article 370 of Indian constitution, India has also started to lay claim on Pakistani territories, including those in Gilgit-Baltistan.⁴⁰ While Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has rejected Indian claims calling them baseless,⁴¹ however, the Indian hard-line stance is likely to continue.

Declarations by Indian officials claiming India needs no more than ten days to bring Pakistan to its knees have also become more commonplace.⁴²

A more recent example of Indian belligerence is the March 2022 'accidental' Indian missile launch which resulted in an Indian flying projectile (matching Brahmos specs) landing inside Pakistan.⁴³ India neither informed Pakistan of this accident nor came up with any

satisfactory reason for a missile in ready-to-launch position in peacetime. Keeping the text of the 2019 BJP manifesto in mind, this raises the question whether the missile launch was an accident or it was BJP “giving a free hand to its soldiers to take actions in service of national security objectives”⁴⁴.

George Tanhum rightly identified that India considers South Asia as a single strategic and political entity and is unlikely to let Pakistan challenge this assertion.⁴⁵ This is especially important since it is a commonly held Indian belief that Pakistan remains the main hurdle in any Indian attempt towards becoming a South Asian regional hegemon.

In the current environment, the Modi government is not likely to be interested in substantive dialogue with Pakistan to resolve outstanding issues. While there is a slight possibility of Modi offering a dialogue exclusively on terrorism, which suits his purpose, but it is unlikely to offer or accept talks on any issue that is of concern to Pakistan, such as Kashmir.

Muscle Flexing against China

The BJP Manifesto of 2019 was silent on India’s territorial dispute with China and focused instead on cooperation.⁴⁶ However, for the past fifty years, India and China have not been able to reach a consensus on the terms of the agreement regarding their territorial claims across the LAC. The focus, until now, has been on freezing the current claims and managing the dispute with periodic agreements on illegal arms and livestock smuggling.⁴⁷

The first instance of hostility between the two sides, in decades, was during Modi’s first term in Doklam district in June 2017.⁴⁸ The issue remained unresolved for two months until, eventually, both countries agreed to an expeditious disengagement.⁴⁹

The clashes of June 2020 in Galwan valley were the first violent confrontation between India and China after 1962, and relations deteriorated between China and India in its aftermath.⁵⁰ This confrontation, taking place during Modi’s second term, highlights the manner in which the current Indian government plans to engage with its neighbours.

Some of the significant geopolitical reasons behind Indian aggressive stance include the US-India nexus to contain China; Indo-Pacific security arrangement, more specifically the QUAD group; Ladakh becoming a union territory; the Indian claims on Aksai Chen; abrogation of Article 370; and the Indian hostility towards CPEC and BRI.⁵¹

Although the clashes in Galwan valley remained restricted to the border area, however the risk of escalation cannot be overlooked, as both countries are nuclear powers.⁵² The border tension is also reflected in the economic sphere, with India banning more than a hundred Chinese operated computer and cellphone applications. The current Indian pattern of disengaging economically with China may hurt both countries and can lead to greater instability in South Asia, especially for the smaller nations.

The China-India dispute reflects poorly on the Indian government affecting domestic support for Modi. In order to save face, Modi has been taking a more aggressive line on Pakistan, pursuing policies like cross-border incursions, threatening hot pursuit operations, and maligning Pakistan at international forums.

Hybrid Warfare against Adversaries

India is increasingly engaging in more varied arenas of warfare and is now exhibiting a greater reliance on hybrid means which was also codified in the 2019 manifesto. Some of the policies identified in the manifesto indicate an increased Indian inclination towards hybrid warfare. These include abrogation of Article 370, implementation of CAA, promotion and protection of *Bharatiya* faith and culture, stance on terrorism and focus on acquisition of new technologies such as supercomputers, AI and quantum missions.⁵³

The focus of the Indian hybrid warfare strategy remains on Pakistan aimed at undermining its internal and external security. External forces, with Indian support, have been involved in exploiting Pakistan's weaker areas along five major identity indicators: historical, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and geographic vectors.

Indian attempts to sow seeds of hatred against the Pakistan Army, and on ethnic, sectarian, and religious grounds, especially in remote areas of

Balochistan are one manifestation of Modi's use of information and social media, as means of hybrid warfare, against Pakistan.⁵⁴

Additionally, India has amplified its smear campaign against Pakistan at international forums in the past few years. The Indian involvement in pushing Pakistan on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Grey List and subsequent statements⁵⁵ maligning Pakistan's efforts in this domain are indicative of continued Indian reliance on hybrid means.

An increase in such pressure tactics at other international forums, especially keeping in mind the renewed Indian efforts for UNSC permanent seat is to be expected and Pakistan will have to contend with during future international engagements.

Designs for Regional Hegemony

In the regional context, the second term of Modi government has been projecting a posture that it believes would justify its use of force across borders. India has been presenting it as within the Indian right of "self-defence". On the other hand, such a stance by a neighbour in Indian Territory is vehemently objected to. Prime examples include Indian claims over the Pakistani state of Gilgit-Baltistan and the current India-Nepal border dispute.

The Indian border dispute with Nepal is over a 338 square km strip of land located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal and China. While India and Nepal have been in dispute over this region for decades, the May 2020 Indian inauguration of a Himalayan link road built in the disputed region aggravated the issue.⁵⁶ The strong Nepalese reaction of a constitutional amendment bill seeking to replace the old map of the border region, angered India as it curtailed India's regional hegemonic aspirations.⁵⁷

Additionally, the India National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the CAA have affected the traditionally friendly ties between India and Bangladesh. This issue raised concerns in Bangladesh, as prominent BJP leaders gave statements and spoke about sending undocumented citizens of Bengali origin back to Bangladesh.⁵⁸

In addition to the border clashes with China and Pakistan, these developments show a belligerent Indian posture in the neighbourhood. On the economic front, the Chinese BRI is attracting smaller South Asian states

with economic gains, thus reducing their reliance on India. As the scope and reach of BRI increases, the Modi government may take more aggressive action in the region to regain its regional standing. This may have grave consequences for regional stability.

Policies in the Indo-Pacific

The 2019 BJP manifesto emphasized on vigorously pursuing the “Act East Policy”, increasing cooperation with ASEAN and guaranteeing an open and secure Indo-Pacific.⁵⁹ In March 2020, India’s Indo-Pacific vision emerged as a policy framework focusing on opportunities and tangible developments. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) stated that an Indian Ocean centric Indo-Pacific policy⁶⁰ is at the heart of Modi’s plan for the region in his second term. The main contours of this strategy include the following:

- a. Greater alignment with the US and Quad members based on common interests, including economic and military partnerships.
- b. Increased cooperation with the regional middle powers to maintain a regional order beneficial to Indian interests.
- c. Continued investment in the Indian Ocean Region, as a priority area, to achieve strategic advantages for India.⁶¹
- d. Curtailing the growing Chinese economic influence in the region due to BRI as it complicates the role of India as a net security provider.

India envisages itself as a regional guard and is culpable of adopting aggressive policies centred on the offensive use of its naval capability in the Indian Ocean Region. Such Indian aggression coupled with joint military exercises with other QUAD members is likely to keep the region in a state of turmoil as long as Modi remains in power.

Policies in the Military and Nuclear Domain

Military Modernization

There has been an increase in the acquisition of defence-related equipment and weapons by India to fortify its strike capability. In the second term, the

Modi government is concentrating on both buying and selling. Modi's second victory at the polls was positively received in the US and other western states, as they view India as an ally against China.⁶² Thus, the cooperation in the strategic and conventional domains, between the US, other western states, and India expanded during this period.

Some of the major military deals, which second term Modi has already concluded, include deal for AH-60 Romeo helicopters, sales worth \$670 million to support Indian C-17 aircraft, 14 MoUs between India and Russia for military and defence equipment, deal for Strum Ataka anti-tank missile, Spike anti-tank missile, more SPICE bombs, Naval MRSAM's and air defence systems.⁶³ Additionally, India also formally inducted the first five Rafale jets in September, 2020.⁶⁴

Military Dimension of the Indian Space Program

Space was an important arena for the Modi government in its first term and remains a priority in the second term. However, while the 2019 manifesto focused on the civilian uses of space technology, the Indian push has been towards the militarisation of space since 2014. The 2019 manifesto also highlighted the Indian intent towards increasing its footprint in space, highlighting project "Gaganyaan" and the Indian plans for manned space missions.⁶⁵ A 7.5% increase in the 2020 budget for the Indian space program signified a deeper focus on outer space during Modi's second term.

India's demonstration of an Anti-satellite (ASAT) capability in 2019⁶⁶ indicated a more aggressive Indian approach in the space domain. While these developments are in the civilian domain, they cannot be ignored, given the Indian history of diverting civilian technology acquired from other states, to its military program.⁶⁷ Such a possibility remains plausible in the space domain as well, especially since India is already engaged in space militarization.

Policies in the Nuclear Domain

Although the 2019 BJP manifesto did not mention developments in the nuclear domain, however, that does not mean that the Indian interest in modifying its nuclear doctrine is no longer a priority.

Modi's re-election meant that the nuclear capability remains in the hands of the Hindutva peddling Hindu extremists. India had already started making significant changes in its nuclear policies during Modi's first tenure. Thus, the absence of any nuclear-related policy in the 2019 manifesto could have been a deliberate political ploy to divert attention from this issue. Such a diversion would allow India freedom to take bellicose measures in nuclear domain without drawing excessive attention from the international community.

Delivery vehicles at high states of readiness, development of more surveillance platforms, ballistic missile defence system, and public statements by Indian officials arguing for pre-emptive counter-force options all indicate a conscious Indian pursuit of more flexible response options.⁶⁸

The credibility of Indian stance on NFU is also eroding. This is clear from statements by Indian leadership, such as the Indian defence minister stating, "while India has strictly adhered to [the NFU] doctrine, however, what happens in future depends on the circumstances."⁶⁹

Such pugnacity by the Indian leadership will affect the regional strategic stability at a time when India is militarily engaging in border conflicts with not just Pakistan but also China.

Next-Generation Technologies

The 2019 manifesto mentioned the launching of a new Science Mission focused primarily on AI and Robotic research,⁷⁰ both having implications if they are also utilised for military purposes. The setting up of a New, Emerging and Strategic Technologies (NEST) Division by MEA⁷¹ indicates India's resolve to move towards utilisation of these technologies in future. These new technologies do not have the same characteristics as the traditional means of war. They are fully automated and covert in all aspects, hard to detect, hard to respond to, and harder to attribute. The possibility of plausible deniability is significant in this domain.

The probability of plausible deniability by states in the domain of such technologies has increased introduction of newer technologies in the region which will have grave consequences for regional strategic stability.

Keeping up with its history, India continues to be the one introducing dangerous new technologies in the regional matrix.

Projections for 2024 – BJP Election Campaign and Manifesto

With the next general elections just two years away, all political parties in India, including the BJP have started soft campaigning in order to secure the necessary domestic support. The BJP being in power has more opportunities to amass people's support through actual policy changes.

The Modi government has had a penchant for presenting futuristic goals focused on five, ten and twenty five year plans. During the 2014 election campaign he focused on the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi which was falling in 2019. Subsequently in 2019, he pointed towards 2022 being the 75th independence year for India. Keeping to this theme, in 2022 he is mentioning 2047 which will be the 100th year of Indian independence.⁷² The BJP government seems to keep the focus of domestic populace towards the future, and not on the present. Such manoeuvring is typical in the last two years of any government, as the country gears up for the next elections.

Identification of the current priorities of Modi government, as highlighted in the previous section, is important as it would clarify the trajectory of the next election campaign, once it begins in earnest. Analysis of the 2014 and 2019 BJP election manifestos as well as the subsequent policies adopted by the BJP government, provide a clear roadmap to the likely priorities of the BJP government in the run up to 2024 elections.

While the next BJP manifesto is not likely to be released until 2024, the potential contents of the manifesto can be ascertained from current policies, actions and statements by BJP leadership. This can help establish what is likely to be the focus of the BJP government if it were to be re-elected.

Keeping in mind the statements and policies, it seems likely that the agenda for the upcoming elections and the manifesto would be more domestic and inward looking with the foreign policy component being showcased as an augmentation.

Amrit Kaal – 25 Year Roadmap

During an address in October 2021, Modi used the term ‘*Amrit Kaal*’ as the title for a new roadmap for India for the next twenty five years. The same was repeated by Modi during the 75th Independence Day address on 15 August 2022.⁷³ The Indian Union Minister had also highlighted this roadmap during the annual budget speech in Feb 2022.⁷⁴ The term *Amrit Kaal* comes from Indian Vedas and alludes to the critical time of greater happiness for all. It is considered to be the most auspicious time to start any new work.⁷⁵

The purpose of the *Amrit Kaal* roadmap will be to focus on the policy of ‘*Atmanirbhar Bharat*’ which is one of Modi’s initiatives to make India a self-reliant country. Under this roadmap, the government aims to improve the lives of Indian citizens by lessening the divide between villages and cities through economic development of the former, reducing government’s interference in day to day lives of people and introducing the latest technologies for development.⁷⁶

By providing a futuristic roadmap, the Modi government has effectively moved the attention away from the current problems towards a distant future which promises to be brighter.

Given that the Indian leadership is placing so much importance to this roadmap, it is likely to feature prominently in the upcoming BJP election manifesto as a long-term endeavour aimed at prosperity for all, which incidentally was also the slogan used in the 2019 BJP manifesto. This would tie in with the continued BJP policy of portraying India as a forward looking, innovative thinking power not only for domestic gains but also to showcase itself as a greater power in regional context.

Hindu Nationalism and Minorities

The atrocities against religious minorities, especially Muslims and the peddling of Hindutva ideology, as seen during the second Modi tenure, are likely to continue as India moves towards the next elections.

While Modi would want the support of all citizens in the run up to the election, however, the RSS may have a different agenda in mind. It is important to understand that RSS is to Modi, what CCP is to Xi Jinping, that is, the backbone of ideological thoughts.⁷⁷ According to Rama Lakshmi,

editor at 'The Print,' while RSS has the numbers however, they do not have grip over the narrative. The opinion makers in India are still dominated by liberals who are able to steer the government towards more lenient policies. The Hindutva group feels that despite being in power since 2014, they have not been able to penetrate into the opinion-creating spaces to propagate, the Hindu first and foremost, thinking.⁷⁸

Thus, in the run up to the 2024 elections, the push by the Modi government, with the backing of the RSS, will be on propagating this narrative. The election manifesto may also feature elements of this thinking without showing an outright bias. If re-elected, the atrocities against Muslims and other religious minorities is likely to increase as the RSS will push for a more aggressive stance against minorities, especially the Muslims.

Empowerment of Lower Castes and Tribals

Since coming into power in 2014, the BJP has successfully used the politics of representation to its advantage. Over the years, the BJP government appointed candidates from lower castes and tribal groups at high constitutional posts. In 2017, the Other Backwards Class (OBC) leader M.Venkaiah Naidu was appointed as the Vice-President at a time when the government needed the support of the OBC communities across India.

Likewise it has now nominated Rajasthani leader Jagdeep Dhankhar for vice-president, a year ahead of the upcoming Rajasthan state polls.⁷⁹ The election of the current Indian president Droupadi Murmu, an *Adivasi (tribal) non-Jatav Dalit*, is also significant since elections are due soon in many Indian states with tribal dominance.

The election of Murmu as head of the state, is symbolically significant. There has never been a President from the tribal community and also because there are not many prominent national leaders from this marginalized group.

Regional and Foreign Policy Imperatives

Analysis of the last two BJP election manifestos shows that the next manifesto may not feature foreign policy prominently. However, the election campaign is likely to portray India as a major regional and global power.

The 2019 election campaign clearly demonstrated that a belligerent stance on Pakistan is sure to garner voters support. However, keeping contemporary geopolitical realities in mind, the next BJP election campaign may also feature increasing assertiveness of China, as well as the need for India to incentivize smaller regional states to contain growing Chinese influence.

Traditionally subdued smaller Indian neighbour states have shunned the Indian influence in favour of China, perhaps owing to economic incentives of BRI but also due to Indian aggressive policies. All these are challenges that the Modi government is aware of and will have to contend with before the next elections in order to maintain domestic support.

While India has traditionally maintained a non-aligned approach in its foreign policy, the previous two Modi terms have clearly demonstrated that India is steadily moving towards smart alliances rather than non-alliance. Keeping in mind the challenges mentioned before, it is likely that Modi would continue with the current Indian Act-East Policy, and further deepen relations with the US. A diversified foreign policy approach could also be a theme in the upcoming election campaign, and as part of the BJP manifesto.

The Indian push for a permanent seat at the UNSC was part of the 2019 election campaign and is likely to remain so in the 2024 manifesto as well. India already has the support of four out of five UNSC permanent members.⁸⁰ Next step may be to convince China for support on quid-pro-quo basis. Thus, relations with China are likely to be an important aspect of BJP manifesto in 2024.

Policy towards Pakistan

To garner domestic support, the policy of Pakistan-bashing as underscored earlier, is likely to be a refrain in the election campaign of BJP in 2024.

The current state of relations between the two neighbours is at an all-time low. There appears to be no inclination in India for resumption of any dialogue on improving relations and finding solutions to the disputes between the two states. India only appears to want to discuss terrorism. From a Pakistani perspective, any dialogue process which does not have

resolution of Kashmir dispute on the agenda is a non-starter. Therefore the two sides are unlikely to agree to resumption of dialogue in the near future.

While the India-China conflict is the bigger threat to the India's security presently, but anti-Pakistan rhetoric is better at attracting domestic support. Thus despite tension between India and China at the moment, anti-Pakistan vitriolic statements, upsurge in cross-border incursions, and occasional false-flag operations may be seen in the run up to the 2024 elections.

While the BJP manifestos have avoided mentioning Pakistan by name in the past, the insinuation that Pakistan is a greater threat to India's security has and is likely to be mentioned in the next BJP manifesto.

Augmenting of Military and Defence

Since Modi's election in 2014, there has been focus on self-reliance in all domains but especially in defence production sector. India has been increasingly embarking on joint productions, rather than only imports to give a boost to its Make-in-India initiative.

Despite having one of the largest defence budgets and boasting a large defence industry, India also remains one of the biggest defence importers in the world.⁸¹

Modi is and will continue to strive towards making India a major power. In order to achieve this, India will require lucrative defence and military exports to regional and extra-regional powers and reduced reliance on defence imports. In an attempt to increase its indigenous defence production, for self-reliance as well as for export, BJP is likely to keep defence productions as a top agenda point in the upcoming election campaign as well as in the 2024 BJP manifesto.

Conclusion

Modi' re-election on the basis of a *Hindutva* philosophy, *Akhand Bharat* ideology and Pakistan-bashing coupled with increasing regional bellicosity have engendered intolerance among Indians. The BJP manifestos of 2014 and 2019 are reflective of these trends in domestic and foreign policy. The upcoming 2024 BJP manifesto is unlikely to be any different.

Following his re-election, Modi brought about a paradigm shift to India internally and externally. Internally, he reinforced the concept of *Hindutva*, RSS ideology, and declared his intentions of creating a Hindu *Rashtra*. Under Modi, India is continuously moving away from its Nehruvian secular state credentials, with instances of state-approved atrocities against minorities becoming the norm.

On the economic front, corporate India has been severely disappointed by the Modi government as it failed to bring about the promised economic reforms in the country.

On the regional front, Modi, during his second term, became more assertive in pursuing aggressive policies against its traditional adversaries, China and Pakistan. Besides, India under Modi is also becoming more aggressive towards other smaller neighbours resulting in a more volatile regional environment.

The core Indian interests, whether domestic or regional, remain largely unchanged. However, the policies adopted by the Modi government to attain these goals have become more hawkish in his second term.

With the 2024 general elections only two years away, the political parties in India have already started soft campaigning. The emphasis for campaigns, especially by the BJP, will be on futuristic economic plans. Promises will also be made for additional representation of tribals and lower caste Hindus in public offices; continued hostility against China, increasing indigenous defence productions and enhanced defence exports. All these issues are likely to feature prominently in the 2024 BJP manifesto as well.

Therefore, an increasingly belligerent India is likely to be seen in the regional context in order to garner domestic support. The Indian strong arm tactics in Kashmir are also likely to remain a part of the Indian policy if BJP comes back to power in 2024. At the national level, greater intolerance towards Muslim and other minorities under a *Hindutva* peddling RSS ideology is also likely under the pretext of restoring the *Hindu Rashta* to its former glory.

The Modi government, under a misplaced sense of righteousness, justifies all its actions on moralistic grounds. This approach is likely to continue in the run-up to 2024 elections. If re-elected, an even more aggressive BJP

leadership is likely to emerge with greater focus on the RSS ideology resulting in grave repercussions for the region, in Kashmir, and for religious minorities in India.

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