

THE NEW WORRY OF DEPLETING DIPLOMATIC CAPITAL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

In the initial year of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first tenure (2014-19), his foreign policy moves were given priority. Putting the past with the United States behind him — it had cancelled his visa for nearly a decade and criticised his actions in Gujarat — Mr. Modi's government forged an extra close bond with the Barack Obama administration, opening a new chapter in Indo-Pacific policy. With China, he also cast domestic sentiments aside to welcome its President, Xi Jinping to India, following it up with a visit to China. Finally, with India's neighbours, he signalled a new start from his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party's traditionally hard-line policies on Pakistan, Bangladesh, even Sri Lanka, putting bilateral ties over domestic concerns.

The contrast between that period and the first year in his second tenure (2019-2020) could not be more pronounced; rather than dealing with bilateral ties, the Ministry of External Affairs and its missions abroad are now fully devoted to dealing with India's domestic concerns and their fallout. Among them, the decision to amend Article 370 of the Constitution on Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, or the CAA, 2019, and the proposal for the National Register of Citizens (NRC) have been called into question by several countries and international organisations.

The impact of these policies has been most keenly felt in ties with the U.S., where bipartisan support for India has been the norm for at least two decades. The whittling away of Democrat support was evident early on during the "Howdy Modi" event in September 2019, where only three out of the two dozen lawmakers at the event were from the Democratic Party; the party, especially under Mr. Obama, had been very supportive of the Modi government. While the ostensible reason was that they did not wish to share a stage with U.S. President Donald Trump, it was significant that even among the five Indian-American lawmakers, only one was present. Nor has the discomfort in Washington been limited to the Opposition party alone. In the weeks that followed "Howdy Modi", the State Department and several bipartisan committees have issued statements of concern over continued detentions in Kashmir and the CAA, held hearings in the U.S. Congress, and even inserted language on Kashmir into the annual Foreign Appropriations Act for 2020. A resolution urging India to lift restrictions in Kashmir, sponsored by Indian-American lawmaker Pramila Jayapal, now has 29 co-sponsors, including two Republicans, and a lawmaker who had earlier attended "Howdy Modi".

The same issues found voice in the U.K. Parliament. In the European Parliament, last September, there were also discussions on Kashmir. It also led to heated battles within their polities, as Kashmir became a campaign talking point between Labour and Conservative candidates in the U.K. elections. The Modi government's invitation to far-right Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to visit Kashmir (last October) has riled European diplomats from various countries — they have been denied similar access.

In the neighbourhood, the government has upset both friend and foe with its wording of the CAA. Pakistan is predictably angry, while Afghanistan is more muted. But the real damage has been done to ties with Bangladesh. In the past decade, and especially after completing the Land Boundary Agreement, Dhaka and New Delhi had worked hard on building connectivity, opening energy routes, trade and developing travel links. The relationship was seen as a "win-win" in contrast to the preceding years when terror safe-havens and border killings dominated the India-Bangladesh narrative. By clubbing Bangladesh with Pakistan and Afghanistan on treatment of

minorities, India has introduced a note of bitterness that is hard to mistake in the bilateral engagement. Some in Sheikh Hasina's government have pointed out that the Modi government's desire to naturalise only one group of immigrants from Bangladesh but castigate the others as "illegal immigrants" and "termites" cannot but be seen in a communal light. If India's motivation was compassion for the religiously persecuted, they ask, then why was the Modi government so impervious to Ms. Hasina's repeated requests for help in the Rohingya refugee issue?

Regardless of the reasoning, India's diplomats, including new Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, who had earlier served in Dhaka, will have their work cut out in repairing the damage. If close friend Bangladesh that defends India at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation feels that India's actions are religiously discriminatory, it is only a matter of time before others in the Islamic world, most notably the Arab countries, who have been muted so far, will become more vocal. The OIC's plans for a special meet on Kashmir and the CAA in April 2020, possibly in Islamabad, is one such indicator.

It would be easy to dismiss all of the above with the simple line that they constitute interference in India's internal affairs. Even if countries issue statements and world bodies pass resolutions on the detentions and the Internet ban in Kashmir, the crackdown in Uttar Pradesh and protests across the country, does New Delhi really need to worry? There are, in fact, a number of reasons why the government must weigh its diplomatic posture on these issues carefully, as all of them are likely to dominate its time in 2020.

First, not all statements and resolutions are empty rhetoric, and could lead to worrisome measures against India. The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has already recommended sanctions be considered for Home Minister Amit Shah and other officials. While this may be considered an extreme step, even laughable, it must be remembered that it was the USCIRF that first recommended a visa ban against Mr. Modi, as Gujarat Chief Minister, in 2005. To date, he remains the only individual worldwide sanctioned thus under the U.S.'s International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. In the U.S. Congress too, lawmakers can effectively block defence sales to India, or pursue sanctions on the S-400 missile system purchase from Russia, for example, regardless of support in the Trump administration for India.

On the international stage, the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, which often seem toothless, could provide a platform for India to be targeted. In December 2019, a suit by a relatively remote player, the Gambia, ensured that Myanmar's top leadership was made to appear for a public hearing at the International Court of Justice at The Hague in connection with the Rohingya issue. New Delhi's break in ties with Turkey and Malaysia for their comments at the UN on Kashmir could also lead to them vetoing India's legitimate position at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), where it hopes to blacklist Pakistan for terror financing this year.

At the very least, the unrest that has emerged from the policies will lead to a lower number of foreign visitors, and visit cancellations/postponements by leaders, recent examples being Japan's Prime Minister Shinz Abe, or Bangladesh's Foreign and Home Ministers.

The government must also evaluate the toll on its diplomatic resources that have been diverted for much of the year in firefighting negative international opinion. The skills of the Minister of External Affairs, himself a trained diplomat, for example, could be better used than they have been; he has had to give a barrage of interviews to the European and U.S. media and the "think-tank blitz" in Washington and New York to deal with questions about Kashmir and the NRC. Missions everywhere, including in friendly countries, have been overworked, disseminating FAQs and lobbying with lawmakers on Article 370, the Ayodhya verdict and the CAA. Many are occupied martialling their strengths to prevent resolutions with objectionable wording from being

drafted, and UN Security Council meetings from being held.

Finally, the government must consider the impact of its domestic actions on India's diplomatic capital. This capital is a complex combination of the goodwill the country has banked on over decades as a democratic, secular, stable power, bilateral transactions it can conduct in the present, and the potential it holds for future ties, particularly in terms of its economic and geopolitical strengths. At a time when the western world is in flux, the economy under stress and the rules-based order in recess, India's diplomatic capital is being depleted at a rate unseen in the last few decades. And to paraphrase Cassius in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar", the fault may not lie in our diplomatic stars, but in ourselves, and the problematic message the government is now trying to convey.

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