

## FPC Briefing: Carpe Diem- India's 2014 General Elections and the BJP-led NDA<sup>1</sup>

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The first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) from 1998 to 2004 marked a significant milestone in Indian politics, as a non-Congress-led government completed a full term in office for the first time. Through their domination of the coalition, the BJP had a significant impact upon the conduct and nature of India's domestic and foreign policies, often resulting in a substantial reorientation of their guiding principles. As the current United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition led by the Indian National Congress (Congress) remains significantly weakened by myriad cases of large-scale corruption, the return to power (in some form) of the Hindu nationalist BJP in the forthcoming general election appears assured. With Narendra Modi as their prime ministerial candidate, such a return presages a potentially significant re-orientation of Indian politics, with potential reverberations being felt inside and outside of South Asia's largest state.

### Legacies from the 1998-2004 NDA:

The first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government from 1998-2004, led by the BJP, witnessed profound changes concerning the development and evolution of Indian politics. Significantly, while many of these policies were nascent prior to 1998, it was the BJP who acted as a catalyst and "enabler" that *proactively forced* important shifts in India's domestic / foreign policy and subsequent behaviour. They thus took what had been embryonic trends before their entry into government and mainstreamed them into India's political and diplomatic practice. These changes continued to be reflected in India's foreign and domestic policies after the NDA left office in 2004, and were largely maintained by successive Congress-led UPA governments (from 2004 to 2009, and 2009 to 2014).

On the **internal domestic level**, the impact of the 1998-2004 NDA government resulted in a notable reordering of the political landscape concerning - i) the democratic basis of the Indian state, ii) communalism, and iii) foreign policy becoming a domestic political issue;

- the 1998-2004 BJP-led NDA importantly demonstrated the political legitimacy of a non-Congress-dominated coalition, which validated the future political prospects for other Indian political groupings. By doing so, the BJP thus redefined the nature of Indian democracy away from its largely socialist basis present until the 1990s, to a much more multi-faceted entity, whereby Indian democracy matured into an entity consisting of multiple parties;
- with a communal party (the BJP) entering India's political mainstream and serving a full term in government, India's dominant anti-communal sentiments were undercut. The BJP's active discrimination against Muslims, Christians and the lower castes, further entrenched such a shift, via a process that 'infected India's state and civil society with illiberalism'<sup>2</sup>. Attempts to rewrite history textbooks with a pro-Hindu bias reinforced this activity;
- foreign policy was bought into India's domestic politics, primarily through a focus on making India strong through economic growth, conducting the 1998 nuclear tests and linking outside forces (primarily Pakistan) to India's domestic terrorism. India's enhanced global (especially US) relations also transformed India's foreign and domestic policy debates, and were analogous with her more assertive behaviour to aid India's materialization as a global player.

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<sup>1</sup> This briefing is informed by key findings from the author's recent study of the 1998-2004 BJP-led NDA entitled *Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian National Security: Portents of Power* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Mishra, Pankaj (2008) 'India: A Massacre Justified by Philanthropy?' *Outlook*, October 6.

Concerning her **immediate neighbourhood**, the 1998-2004 NDA affirmed India's regional position, in particular through greater pragmatism towards - i) Pakistan and ii) China, and iii) a self-perception as South Asia's natural hegemon (including tacit dominance of the Indian Ocean Region - IOR);

- with Pakistan, the BJP-led NDA sought to push relations towards some sense of normalcy, in order to encourage greater regional stability and a less Islamabad-myopic policy. Prohibited by the NDA coalition from pursuing a core manifesto promise to forcefully regain Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), the BJP broadly accepted the status quo on the disputed border. BJP Prime Minister Vajpayee tried to inculcate peace agreements with Pakistan, an approach informed by a need to present India as a responsible power (especially during the 1999 Kargil conflict), and an acceptance of the efficacy of proactive and pragmatic engagement;
- towards China, observers noted an "Indo-Chinese rapprochement" under the NDA, via a concentration on economic linkages, maintaining parity in South Asia and de-emphasising their border issues (especially concerning the disputed status of Arunachal Pradesh). The benefits of interdependence were seen to outweigh continued enmity as both sides deepened their interaction, which included high profile visits, joint naval exercises, counter-terrorism exchanges and cross-border army base visits. Negatively, some analysts noted that the 1998 nuclear tests made India and China explicit strategic rivals for the first time;
- regarding lesser South Asia, good relations with her neighbours were seen as central to internal security - particularly in helping these states resist supporting terrorism in India, especially northeast separatists. Relations remained premised on Indian centrality and New Delhi's efforts to prevent outside (especially Chinese) involvement with her neighbours. With Myanmar (Burma), the BJP-led NDA introduced new priorities, especially concerning military ties, economic aid and arms sales – efforts extended to South East Asia, whereby security precepts were injected into relations and extended India's security horizons.

Within the **international sphere**, the first NDA helped to propel India onto the international stage, validating her new status as an emergent great power via - i) nuclear transparency, ii) a pronounced tilt towards the United States (US), and iii) the entrenched use of *realpolitik* in her global affairs;

- through the induction of the 1998 nuclear tests (also known as Pokhran II) in the first months of their government, the BJP-led NDA explicitly replaced a long standing position of nuclear ambiguity within India with one of being pro-nuclear weapons. The tests countered what was seen as an international 'nuclear apartheid' that sought to preserve the position of those countries that had tested prior to the 1967 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Pokhran II asserted core Hindu nationalist values central to the BJP's worldview to restore India's international status, and fulfilled a long-established election manifesto promise;
- the tests aided India's mainstream reintegration and led to a strategic convergence with the US, courtesy of her rising international profile and the BJP's greater pro-Western orientation. Pro-capitalist sentiments underpinned this realignment, as did the rediscovery of shared democratic values as 'natural allies', and overlapping strategic interests chiefly concerning counter-terrorism in the post-9/11 era. Greater Indian domestic stability compared with her neighbours also made India the US's preferred regional partner, as did her large middle class markets – factors that largely overshadowed any pessimism from the 1998 nuclear tests;
- core BJP policy characteristics of assertiveness, pragmatic engagement, and making India a global power led to the assertion of greater *realpolitik* /realism in India's wider global relations. In West Asia, India's relations with Israel and the Arab states became much more balanced, empathically replacing the pro-Muslim policy orientation that typified policy

before the 1990s. This focus on practical calculus expanded India's strategic neighbourhood in all directions, as her leaders sought to improve relations with Central Asia and Iran, find new partnerships with Australia and the EU, and maintain old partners, most notably Russia.

### **Portents of a Second NDA:**

The BJP enter the 2014 general elections led by Narendra Modi - a divisive and controversial figure within Indian politics. Four times chief minister of Gujarat, he has made the state one of India's wealthiest via a pro-capitalist, pro-market and populist embrace – a success buoyed by an impressive use of 3-D, mobile and social media technology. However, Modi was also in charge of Gujarat during the 2002 pogrom that saw BJP officials complicit in Hindu–Muslim violence that left thousands dead – an event seen as a negative omen of the BJP's right-wing, communal and authoritarian agenda, which directly challenges India's core secular and liberal values. The legacy of 2002 still has a polarizing effect on Indian politics, not only with many (Muslim) voters but also potential coalition partners in any perspective NDA, some of whom have stated that they cannot be in government with Modi at the helm. This situation can certainly pose major issues for the BJP (including its much vaunted 'Mission 272+' that aims to achieve an outright parliamentary majority) and was largely absent during the 1998-2004 NDA, when the more conciliatory-minded Atal Vajpayee led the party. Crucially, the BJP has deflected some criticism concerning 2002 by highlighting the collusion of Congress officials in the widespread anti-Sikh riots that followed Indira Gandhi's 1984 assassination.

Internationally, several countries have also boycotted Modi for his association with the events of 2002 - most prominently, the UK (until 2012) and still, to date, the US. If he were ever to ascend to India's highest office, such an embargo would pose a significant dilemma for Washington, and would potentially undermine the mounting rhetoric since 1998 about purportedly shared Indo-US values. Importantly though, while some BJP officials have been found guilty vis-à-vis the 2002 violence in Gujarat (and some jailed), so far, Modi has been absolved of any direct responsibility. If such a situation persists, doubts over Modi's past may be simply glossed over by US officials keen to focus upon the two states' myriad-shared strategic aims and Washington's longer-term global interests. Notably, political leaders in China and Japan have already met with Modi, setting aside any concerns regarding human rights in order to have foundational talks with India's prospective new leader. With India now thoroughly situated in the global mainstream, any new BJP-led regime appears likely be less radical than the first NDA, but will potentially act within the following four broad parameters.

### **Asserting Hindu Nationalism**

Internally, the BJP stays fully subscribed to core policy norms of abrogating Article 370 regarding the status of Kashmir, introducing a Uniform Civil Code, building the *Ram Janmabhoomi* at Ayodhya (on the site that BJP supporters, among others, destroyed a mosque in 1992) and promoting positive secularism (which enables the non-discrimination of Hindus). Moreover, the party remains primarily focused upon building 'a prosperous, powerful nation, (that) recall(s) India's past'<sup>3</sup>. Concurrently, the softening in tone concerning cultural nationalism, which occurred during the 1998 and 1999 elections, has remained in place and the term has been almost absent from more recent BJP manifestoes. This stance variously recognises the BJP's difficulty in gaining an absolute majority solely from India's higher caste Hindu population, the constricting nature of coalitional politics in India, and the need to inculcate support from smaller parties to re-gain power via a new NDA. Such a positioning rests on the BJP's ideological stance, whereby potential support from Muslim or Leftist voters is extremely limited. As occurred during their first regime, with a new NDA we can expect to see the wholesale promotion of their political supporters, attempts to influence the legal and education system, and the rewriting of history textbooks. Such measures may however be restrained by the makeup of the broader NDA coalition, which may embargo some policies.

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<sup>3</sup> 'BJP 2009 Manifesto' (2011) *Bharatiya Janata Party* (New Delhi: BJP HQ). Accessible at <http://www.bjp.org/> [viewed on December 14 2011].

### **Ensuring Economic Success**

With many of their primary foreign policy goals being achieved during the 1998-2004 NDA and sustained after it by Congress-led UPA regimes, the BJP has become largely focused upon increasing and utilising India's economic growth. It also reflects most voters' chief electoral concerns being the economy, corruption and inflation. This focus not only co-joins with anti-corruption campaigns but also the BJP's emphasis on reasserting India's standing in the international system, and its advantageous electoral positioning within a modernising, globalising, and media-dominated middle class. As this latter group grows, courtesy of India's own recent (rapid) economic development, they remain a core constituency for the BJP to harness. Protecting this group plays into other continued BJP foreign policy norms of calibrated globalisation, although this approach will be tempered against clear pro-capitalist and pro-liberalisation (and largely pro-western) tendencies. Modi's oft-asserted leadership of Gujarat towards high economic growth underscores this emphasis but also makes achieving higher levels of economic growth a political necessity for any new NDA. Ensuring continued regional stability (including avoiding conflict with Pakistan) would bolster such aims, as would efforts to improve infrastructure and reduce insurgency, chiefly in India's unstable north-east.

### **Heightening International Autonomy**

These sentiments on a strong, independent India have blended with the BJP's continued focus on policy perspectives concerning assertive autonomy, either in terms of strengthening India's Armed Forces or the use of indigenous thorium reserves, rather than importing uranium, for India's new nuclear reactors<sup>4</sup>. However, as India places more emphasis on economics as a way to achieve greater development and modernisation (and prestige), its interconnectedness and susceptibility to international events will only increase. Again, this susceptibility can embolden the reassertion of core Hindu nationalist values versus external threats – be they from minorities, Pakistan or China, or the global financial system. In this regard, a suspicion of India's larger neighbours remains crucially present in BJP rhetoric, especially concerning 'an emerging Pakistan-China military axis'<sup>5</sup>. It is worthwhile noting however that such rhetoric was in place prior to the 1998-2004 NDA, yet that government helped develop much improved relations with its two largest neighbours. Whilst a full-blown normalisation / rapprochement appears infeasible (although not impossible) with Pakistan, a continued policy of astute engagement with China – and an enhancement of all the benefits that dealing with a (now) top-tier power has bought over the last decade – appears highly probable.

### **Enhancing India's Global Stature**

Given the party's heritage, as well as the personality of Narendra Modi, any BJP-led government can be expected to be strong, assertive, vocal, proactive and highly pragmatic in its wider international dealings, with the restoration of India to her natural global status as a great power being its overarching aim. Of note here, is that just as in the 1998-2004 NDA, BJP leaders will dominate the conception and delivery of foreign policy by taking the quartet of roles critical to national security (Prime Minister, External Affairs Minister, Home Minister and Finance Minister). Prominent calls for India to be given a permanent veto seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will be part of this approach. A multi-directional diplomatic strategy will also be in evidence, designed to provide India with increased strength from as many (if contradictory) partners as possible. As such, across West Asia [the Middle East] (including Iran) and Africa, India will continue to seek to improve energy security relations (even with despotic regimes), and with Central Asia try to enhance her market access and influence a post-NATO Afghanistan. Elsewhere, efforts to augment relations with all the great powers will persist, provided that they allow India to act in an autonomous / flexible manner that eschews direct alliances, and do not try to position India as an explicit balancer against China. These outlooks mainly apply to Indo-US relations, as well as Indian attempts to lead the global South.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> 'Brief of Speech: Shri Arun Jaitley on Demand for Grants of the Ministry of Defence' (2012) *Bharatiya Janata Party*, 8 May. Accessible at <http://www.bjp.org/> [viewed on November 20 2012].

### ***Carpe Diem***

There is little doubt that the BJP would try to quickly pursue its ideological agenda if they were to gain power again, either as a single entity or in a new NDA. As was shown by the first NDA, when not restricted by their coalition partners or the realities of government, they were quick to act upon longstanding manifesto promises. Furthermore, if the BJP were ever able to gain their own majority, the implementation of their Hindu nationalist agenda would be rapid, comprehensive and extensive – indelibly altering India’s social and political landscape. Equally, in the foreign policy sphere, under the 1998-2004 NDA, the BJP were unafraid to advance their own policy norms, and resolutely pushed Indian security beyond its traditional trajectories and expectations. According to a member of India’s security community, this was the BJP-led NDA’s ‘tectonic shift’<sup>6</sup>, whereby foreign policy was no longer regarded as a continuum because of previous consensus but as something that could be fruitfully altered and changed. Given the foreign and domestic policy legacies evident from the first NDA, a repeat of such a *carpe diem* approach to power can be reasonably expected from any NDA II.

Importantly, although leading most polls and facing a Congress significantly weakened by its involvement in epic cases of corruption, and seemingly led by an enigmatic and laconic Rahul Gandhi, the ascent to power of a second NDA is far from guaranteed. The Third Front of primarily communist parties still persists, and proved to be an effective force in the 2009 elections when they gained 79 out of the 543 seats in India’s lower house (the Lok Sabha) - compared with 262 for the Congress-led UPA and 159 for the BJP-led NDA. In turn, the recent emergence of the anti-graft *Aam Admi* (Common Man) *Party*, led by Arvind Kejriwal, also has the potential to draw voters away from both Congress and the BJP – especially if they can maximise the latter’s association with corruption scandals during the 1998-2004 NDA. Kejriwal may also emphasise the \$5 billion India’s parties are expected to spend during campaigning<sup>7</sup>. Although neither grouping can be expected to gain enough seats to be asked to form a government (nor would either realistically join the two main coalitions), they do have the potential to make the formation of a new NDA more difficult. Ultimately, it will be up to India’s vast electorate of over 814 million voters to decide which party wins the next election, and then from the subsequent skirmish, which ruling coalition and mandate eventually emerges.

India's nine-phase general election runs from April 7 to May 12, with results declared on May 16.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with a senior journalist and newspaper editor, Delhi, October 17 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Some of which is in bribes – see Gottipati, Sruthi & Singh, Rajesh Kumar (2014) ‘India Set to Challenge US for Election-Spending Record’, *Reuters*, March 9. Accessible at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/09/us-india-election-spending-idUSBREA280AR20140309> [viewed on March 24 2014]