In India, the Modi Juggernaut Rolls On

By Rupakjyoti Borah

When Narendra Modi was elected prime minister of India three years ago, expectations were high regarding his domestic agenda, given his much lauded tenure managing the economy of the state of Gujarat as chief minister for more than a decade.

Since then, some of the greatest surprises have come from his numerous foreign policy moves, which have marked out Modi as a force to be reckoned with.

Rupakjyoti Borah looks at India’s foreign policy at this key juncture in his premiership.

MUCH WATER has flowed down the Ganges since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office on May 26, 2014, riding on the back of a huge groundswell of public support for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which captured a majority of 282 seats in the lower house of parliament following 10 years of unwieldy coalition governments.

Not many people gave Modi an outside chance of success in the foreign-policy domain, although he had been chief minister of the state of Gujarat for close to 13 years. However, he soon began to prove the naysayers wrong, pushing the boundaries of Indian foreign policy with bold moves and indefatigable energy. At the three-year mark of his tenure in office, it is an opportune time to review the Modi government’s major foreign policy successes and decipher the challenges that it still faces.

NEIGHBORHOOD FIRST

Modi started off with a bang by inviting the heads of state of all the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) to his inauguration, which initially put Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the backfoot. Although Modi began with a flourish in India’s immediate neighborhood — his first two visits were to Bhutan and Nepal, respectively — things haven’t quite worked out in the manner he would have liked. For one, his Pakistani policy seems stuck in a quagmire. On the other hand, India has concluded the landmark Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with Bangladesh, which has resolved the border dispute with
Under Modi, many new foreign-policy areas have emerged. For example, energy diplomacy has become an important hallmark. Very early in Modi’s term, India signed a civilian nuclear deal with Australia. Modi is also tapping into Central Asia in order to shore up energy imports, which are important if India is to grow at its present pace.

Dhaka once and for all, India was also quick off the blocks in responding to the massive earthquake that struck Nepal in April 2015.

Unlike in the past, Modi has also devoted attention to the neighboring maritime domain by outlining the concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) during his visit to Mauritius in March 2015.1 China’s increasing forays into the Indian Ocean region, however, have worried New Delhi, particularly in light of Beijing’s so-called “string of pearls” strategy of helping to build up ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Chittagong (Bangladesh). A recent Pentagon report on China’s military capabilities mentions that “China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan.”2 The same report also notes that China began construction of a base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa in February 2016.

FURTHER AFIELD

Modi has visited a host of countries during his three years in office. However, some of these bilateral relationships and initiatives stand out.

First, the biggest improvement in India’s foreign relations seems to be with Japan, which was the first country outside the immediate neighborhood that Modi visited after he took office. New Delhi and Tokyo concluded a landmark civilian nuclear deal in November 2016, which is indeed a big development for Japan, the only country to have suffered from atomic weapons. The two countries are also collaborating in the development of the Trincomalee port in Sri Lanka, while Tokyo has expressed an interest in the Chabahar port in Iran, which is being developed by India. Under Modi, the former “Look East Policy” has been renamed the “Act East Policy.”

Second, while New Delhi’s ties with Washington faltered toward the end of the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, Modi successfully repaired them, especially with former US President Barack Obama becoming the Chief Guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations in January 2015. In the US-India joint statement issued during the visit, the two sides affirmed “the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.”3 This was a big change for New Delhi, which previously avoided any direct mention of the South China Sea.

Thereafter, in his speech before the US Congress in June 2016, Modi noted that “there is a new symphony in play,” clearly attesting to the improvement in ties between the two countries. Under Modi, India also concluded a landmark deal with the US known as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016, which will allow troops from the two countries to use designated military facilities on a reciprocal basis for refueling and replenishment, which is another leap of faith for India. This clearly shows that New Delhi may well have jettisoned non-alignment, because in addition to signing the LEMOA, Modi did not attend the latest summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in November.4

Third, under Modi, many new foreign-policy areas have emerged. For example, energy diplomacy has become an important hallmark. Very early in Modi’s term, India signed a civilian nuclear deal with Australia, which is significant because Australia holds nearly 40 percent of the world’s identified uranium deposits. Modi is also tapping into Central Asia in order to shore up energy imports, which are important if India is to grow at its present pace. Elsewhere, New Delhi has also succeeded in rescuing Indians stranded across the world, especially in conflict zones such as Yemen and Iraq. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has been credited for going the extra mile to help Indians in distress.

Modi has also connected with the huge Indian diaspora and has been a part of many events involving Indian residents in various countries. He has also visited many countries that were ignored by previous governments. He became the first Indian prime minister to visit Mongolia, where he announced a US$1 billion line of credit. He became the first Indian prime minister to visit the UAE in 34 years and the first to visit Spain since 1998.5 Modi also launched his ambitious “Make in India” initiative. After the government came to power, foreign direct investment (FDI) in the defense sector was allowed to increase to 100 percent, a quantum leap from previous times.

Fourth, India has tried to reach out to Africa in a big way. It is worth noting that the third India-Africa Summit held in New Delhi in 2015 had representation from all 54 African countries that have diplomatic relations with India, including heads of state from 41 African nations.6 New Delhi has extended 152 lines of credit to 44 African nations worth close to US$8 billion.7 In addition, India is collaborating with Japan in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which some observers see as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road initiative.

Fifth, another important achievement has been India’s membership in the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). New Delhi has also been using “space diplomacy” to further its interests. In February this year, India successfully launched 104 satellites on a single mission, thereby notch- ing up a world record.8 In May this year, India launched a SAARC satellite that will provide communications services to its neighboring countries, except Pakistan, which backed out of the project.

HURDLES REMAIN

Despite these successes, quite a few challenges remain on the foreign policy front for Modi.

First, relations with China are the biggest one, especially in light of the growing bonhomie between Pakistan and China and the con- struction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a part of the Belt and Road initia- tive. New Delhi was the only major economy in the region to boycott the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing held in May this year. New Delhi has also not been happy with Beijing blocking India’s membership in the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group (NSG). China has also blocked India’s bid at the United Nations to designate Jaish-e-Mohammed Chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist. Then, there is India’s desire to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. However, by boycotting the Belt and Road forum, it is clear that Modi has laid down red lines in India’s ties with China.

Second, relations with Pakistan have run into...
a logjam in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the Pathankot Air Force base in India in early January 2016 and the Uri Army base in September 2016 by terrorists operating out of Pakistan. In response, India conducted surgical strikes on terrorist camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The situation in Afghanistan is also likely to remain a worry for Modi.

Third, relations with the US under the maverick President Donald Trump will be a challenge. Trump has chided India for “trying to extract billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid from the developed world to sign up for the climate accord.” In addition, Trump’s stance on the H1B visa issue has not been very helpful either. New Delhi also faces challenges on the climate change front because Indian cities are some of the most polluted in the world — although during his meeting with newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron, Modi said that India would go “above and beyond” the landmark 2015 Paris Accord.

Fourth, while the Indian economy has been doing well during Modi’s term, which also saw the shock of demonetization (the withdrawal from circulation of high-denomination notes), New Delhi seems not to be in too much of a hurry with regard to regional arrangements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), now that the US has pulled out of the rival Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade accord. New Delhi will have to learn to seize the advantage when it comes to regional trading arrangements so as not to be seen as a kind of spoiler.

In addition, infrastructure development will be key for India. Although there has been progress, things need to be scaled up if India is to catch Beijing. The government has pushed infrastructure development, especially in India’s border regions. To mark his three years in office, Modi inaugurated India’s longest bridge over the Lohit River in the Northeastern state of Assam. At the same time, work is going on at full pace on the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway, which will give India unfettered access to Southeast Asia.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Modi’s visit to Israel in July could be a game changer, because no Indian prime minister has ever visited Israel. It is worth mentioning that Modi has not been hobbled by the demands of India’s regional politics to the extent of the previous UPA government. For example, during the prior government, local politics in the southern state of Tamil Nadu had resulted in New Delhi not being able to reach out to Colombo, because Sri Lanka’s minority Tamil population enjoys support from political parties in Tamil Nadu.

The most notable success of the Modi government has been the new energy injected into the foreign-policy front. He has relied heavily on personal chemistry in this domain, especially with leaders such as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and former US President Barack Obama.

Certainly Modi has had many foreign-policy breakthroughs in his first three years in office, but in the next two years of his term — which ends in 2019, when India will have fresh elections — it remains to be seen how much of this will be translated into concrete results. As they say, well begun is half-done.