Hard Years Ahead for India’s Ambitious New Prime Minister

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Narendra Modi has inherited a country in an economic mess and has limited policy options to deal with them. Clearly defined, though, are the most pressing issues.

Salil Tripathi

On the campaign trail, Modi stuck to domestic issues. As leader, he must now confront foreign policy issues, including terrorism and frictions with India’s near neighbors.
In his long, arduous campaign to become prime minister, India’s newly elected leader Narendra Modi focused almost exclusively on domestic issues, particularly the need to improve governance standards and promote economic development.

But India faces a host of foreign policy challenges, many involving countries in its immediate neighborhood. Modi’s core of hardline Hindu nationalist supporters, however, could complicate his efforts to improve relations with Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, writes Salil Tripathi.

As he barnstormed through India during his marathon election campaign this year, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and new Prime Minister Narendra Modi largely steered clear of international relations. During those months, the crisis in Syria escalated, debate about the US pull-out from Afghanistan accelerated, bombs went off in Pakistan, tensions in the South China Sea worsened, Russia annexed Crimea and India had to make a judicious call on whether to support a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka.

In his speeches Modi rarely touched upon any of these issues, nor did he indicate how India might react if he were prime minister. His campaign focused on effective domestic governance and economic development, and he made the case that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance had failed to deliver. The BJP’s election manifesto included all the platitudes of India’s past foreign policy, as though the country’s permanent bureaucracy had written those sections.

Under the BJP, India would believe in a multilateral world, remain committed to strengthening relations with its neighbors and strive towards a peaceful international order. And in one speech he said, “terrorism divides, tourism unites,” which presumably meant he supported business and people-to-people contacts over longer-standing strategic concerns.

And yet one of Modi’s biggest challenges will be terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index, India has had the most number of terrorist attacks in the world after Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. How will Modi react if India faces...
another attack from Lashkar-e-Taiba or a similar group based in Pakistan, along the lines of the spectacular simultaneous attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 in which 164 people died? Unlike the United Progressive Alliance, which halted ongoing high-level dialogue with Pakistan but did not retaliate militarily, Modi would face enormous pressure from within his core constituency of Hindu nationalists — as well as the general public — to respond with force to a major attack. There are cooler heads within the BJP who would not want to react in a rash manner, and both the bureaucracy and the defense forces would advise against any impulsive response, but how to act in such a crisis would be his biggest challenge.

Modi has projected himself as a decisive leader, and the BJP sees itself as a strong, nationalist party that understands realpolitik, preferring hard power over soft power. The BJP has long spoken of regaining pride for India internationally. Its leaders have opposed most policies of the Congress Party, including the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence laid down by founding Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the cornerstone of whose foreign policy was non-alignment. From Nehru’s era up to the end of the Cold War, India was seen as close to the Soviet bloc, as its views also often aligned with the Islamic world, and the BJP opposed most policies of the past 67 years, although foreign investors would likely view India more favorably. But given India’s federal structure of government, whether he can push recalitrant chief ministers in different states to sing from the same hymn sheet remains an open question. Besides, convincing India’s politically-minded foreign policy establishment to become effective marketers of India will not be easy.

Foreign investors would benefit under Modi, but Modi is nationalistic enough to place Indian interests first. Besides, the BJP remains ideologically opposed to certain types of foreign investment, including in the retail sector. While Modi is capable of taking decisions that don’t toe the party line, there are likely only a limited number of issues on which he would confront the party head-on. Defending foreign investors, and pleasing foreign governments, may not be one of them.

His record suggests that business and economics will drive his foreign policy, and in order to secure access to natural resources, he would encourage Indian companies — both public and private — to invest abroad. That would mean reviving and strengthening ties with resource-rich countries in Africa and Latin America, as well as meaning competition with China. Modi has visited China, and he would want closer economic ties, but he would also not want Indian industry swamped by Chinese exports into India. Nor will Modi take a soft line with China over the unresolved border dispute between the two countries. While China likes a post-ideological leader like Modi, it will watch closely how India interacts with Japan and other Southeast Asian nations because of its concerns over India’s influence in an area it considers its turf. Modi will also develop close ties with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, given that Japan was good to him during the time when the West shunned him.

Modi has a personal history with the West. He was Gujarat’s chief minister in 2002 when a train caught fire in his state and 59 Hindu activists died. Several Muslims were found guilty of having set the compartment on fire. Hindu fury erupted in retaliatory riots the day after the train incident, and over the next few weeks, more than 1,000 people died in the state, a large majority of them Muslims. A cabinet minister of Modi’s government was found guilty of inciting violence and sentenced to a long prison term. Activists have sought to hold Modi accountable for the riots, but the state did not prosecute the cases, saying the evidence was insufficient. In one such case, a special investigative team appointed by India’s Supreme Court agreed with that assessment, which is now being challenged in lower courts.

But because of those massacres, the United States declined to issue Modi a visa in 2005 and did not guarantee that he would get one if he applied subsequently. To avoid embarrassment, Modi did not apply for a visa again and in effect turned down some private invitations to visit the US. European nations also boycotted Modi, but lifted their objections last year. In contrast, Asian nations did not place such travel hurdles on Modi. While it is unlikely that he would let that personal humiliation affect India’s relations with the US or Europe, Modi would certainly feel indebted to Asian leaders who did not ostracize him.

The question of his US visa is now moot. As prime minister, Modi will be able to travel to the West, and US President Barack Obama has said he looks forward to meeting him. His visits to Western capitals may lead to protests from human rights groups, and Western democracies would not be in a position to clamp down on such protests provided they are peaceful. Modi has said philosophically that one should look forward, not back, in line with his campaign slogan, ‘Achhe din aane wale hain’ (better days are about to come).

But it may not be smooth sailing. Political challenges, particularly in South Asia, will be immense. Two of India’s immediate neighbors — Pakistan and Bangladesh — are Muslim countries, and he represents a Hindu nationalist party distrusted by many Muslims. He will have to figure out a way to work with India’s neighbors. While Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif
has championed closer economic ties with India, vested interests in Pakistan — businesses who fear Indian competition and the army itself — will work to scupper any rapid improvement in bilateral relations.

It is different with Bangladesh. During the campaign, he spoke out against Bangladeshi “infiltration,” a reference to Muslim immigrants — legal or not — and his rhetoric found favor in the northeast, where the BJP made impressive electoral gains. There are two cryptic references in the party’s 2014 manifesto that apply to India’s neighbors. There is a surprising but ambiguous statement that India needs a debate about its no-first-use policy regarding nuclear weapons, without explaining why such a debate is necessary. The other is an innocuous-sounding proposal that India’s doors would always be open for Hindus seeking asylum. Under international refugee law, states are expected to offer refuge to any people who have a well-founded fear of persecution. While India is not a party to the UN’s 1951 refugee convention, it has historically been open to refugees — Tibetans, Burmese, and Tamils from Sri Lanka, and most famously, 10 million refugees from what was East Pakistan in 1971, most of whom returned to what became Bangladesh soon after the civil war was over.

The BJP manifesto’s reference to Hindu refugees is for a specific reason: to appease its domestic constituency, which includes hardliners who are upset that India hasn’t done enough in the past to protect Hindus abroad. Like other religious minorities in Pakistan, including Christians and Ahmadiyyas, Hindus have suffered. Similarly, in the first half of the last decade, many Hindu women were raped in Bangladesh. Fundamentalist Muslims attacked Hindus and their temples, and created a climate of fear so that Hindus would flee and they could seize Hindu-owned property. Many BJP supporters want India to do more to protect persecuted Hindus. They also want India to stop illegal immigration from Bangladesh. India’s northeast periodically erupts in violence over that issue, pitting ethnic groups in states like Assam against settlers described as Bangladeshis. Often they are, but often they are not. Many Indians consider Bangladeshi “infiltration” into India to be a major problem, ignoring the economic imperatives that have created demand in India for cheap labor, and the abundant supply of such workers from Bangladesh. Modi has said that he is against “infiltration” and his manifesto supports “refugees,” both of which are code words, for the refugees are Hindus and the infiltrators are Muslim.

Modi told Reuters that he is a Hindu nationalist, and he has been a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Voluntary Organisation), the ideological fountainhead of the BJP. That ideology believes in asserting Hindu pride, and sees a diminished role for minorities. It also sees a grand role for India in international affairs. During his campaign, he lost no opportunity to demonstrate how devout he was in his faith. He also chided the previous government for not doing enough to protect India’s borders. Now he has to deal with those problems himself. His admirers claim he will act calmly, not recklessly. His critics expect him to show India’s muscle in dealing with threats of external terror.

Modi comes from the mercantile state of Gujarat, where acquisition of wealth is respected, and such respect is earned, not commanded. If he is to remain true to both his campaign rhetoric and his Gujarati character, he will have to focus on making the economy attractive and spurring growth so that India can get the seat it covets at the head table. And it would do so based on its economic strength, not by bullying its neighbors. He will also have to swallow his pride over how he was treated by Western governments because of the 2002 riots. All that may disappoint many of his core supporters. But it would be closer to making real the party’s campaign promise of a foreign policy that respects all countries as equal — if he can pull it off, perhaps better days will come.

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