

# CHINA BRIEF

## Chinese Analysts Interpret Modi's New India

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing a rally in Arunachal Pradesh, near the Chinese border. (Source: Pakistan Today)

The landslide victory by Narendra Modi in India's national elections has raised questions throughout Asia about India's role in the region. Chinese experts have watched the transition with great interest, many seeking historical analogies to explain the new leader. One of the most optimistic is the idea that Modi could be "India's Nixon," a concept which originated in The Shanghai Institute for International Practices, and which forecasts an "opening to China akin to the U.S. President's. This optimistic analysis also suggests that, given his focus on the Indian economy, Modi could choose to emulate the PRC's model for economic growth, and thus draw inspiration from Deng Xiaoping. Others have expressed the fear that he might prove to be an "Indian Shinzo Abe," playing to nationalism and intensifying a border dispute with China.

While the China-India border has been stable and largely quiet in the decades since the Sino-Indian Border War in 1962, last year's standoff at Daulet Beg Oldi fed suspicion in New Delhi, especially as it came just ahead of Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India and the PRC claimed not to have made any wrongful incursion. Chinese analysts fear a Japanese effort to build a democratic coalition in Asia. A contest between two security visions, one implicit in the United States "pivot" and alliance system, and the other set out by Chinese President Xi Jinping during Shanghai's CICA Summit, could shape the larger environment in which the BJP makes its foreign policy. Echoing Xi's ideas, Chinese experts suggest that Beijing may be able to leverage Modi's development ambitions to enmesh Delhi in a Chinese version of regional order.

### **Strategic Competition and the Status Quo: Chinese Concerns About India**

India's relationship with China has been fraught with distrust since the collapse of the historic friendship attempted under Nehru and Mao, and the Sino-Indian Border War which followed in 1962. Just this past year, despite a goodwill visit by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, the Indian government announced its approval of the Himalayan "mountain strike force" which would allow India to move troops into Chinese territory for the first time. Approval of the long-debated "strike force" was likely influenced by the Himalayan standoff that preceded the visit of "the smiling Chinese Premier," as Li was described by an Indian newspaper (*Indian Express*, May 22, 2013).

The government of Manmohan Singh ushered in new levels of India-American cooperation. This concerns Chinese foreign policy thinkers who believe that India could become part of an American "containment" policy. In April 2012 India tested the Agni-5 ICBM, expanding the scope of India's nuclear deterrent, and bringing the whole of China in range for the first time. "India's border patrol policy is only one small part of its military readiness against China," wrote Palash Ghosh in the *International Business Times*, also quoting Kapil Patil, from the Pugwash Society, a New Delhi-based military research group: "India's overall land warfare strategy vis-à-vis China is determined by its deterrence posture, layered at both conventional and nuclear levels. Maintaining credible nuclear and conventional capabilities is therefore essential, not only for deterring the Chinese military threat but also for improving India's overall bargaining position in border settlement talks with China" (*International Business Times*, April 9).

Narendra Modi was vocal about the territorial dispute during his campaign, famously stating this year at a campaign rally in Arunachal Pradesh, a *de facto* province of India which China claims as its own territory, that “The world does not welcome the mindset of expansion in today’s times. China will also have to leave behind its mindset of expansion” (South China Morning Post, February 22). His words at an Ex-Servicemen’s Rally in Rewari in September 2013 were even more direct: “Everyday, we are surrounded by dangers...China keeps threatening us often, it intrudes our land [sic]. Not only this, it is trying to bar down the waters of Brahmaputra, to capture Arunachal Pradesh from us” (www.narendramodi.in).

Chinese foreign policy experts have suggested that this is merely campaign trail rhetoric. The Sino-Indian border has remained largely stable in decades since the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962. However, the intensification of China’s territorial disputes with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines could offer an Indian prime minister an opportunity to work with other regional powers against China in pursuit of its territorial claims.

Chinese analysts have closely watched India’s, and Modi’s, interest in strong relations with Japan, which would likely complicate China-India relations on any level that is not purely economic. Though a scholar of China-India relations, Professor Wang Dehua, President of the Special Commission for South-Asian Studies, Shanghai Association for International Studies, and Vice President of Shanghai Institute for International Strategic Studies, is thinking about Japan. “They are trying to establish an Asian NATO; they call it the Democratic League. Japan, Korea, India, Taiwan, Australia, Philippines and Singapore, under the United States. Do you think that the Democratic League in Asia could be formed?” he asked with concern (Author’s Interview, Shanghai, May 23).

The United States is expected to remain in the background of China-India relations, both as an active player in Asia, and also as a power which China can use as a foil to promote its own approaches to India and the world. Chinese popular media has spoken of the notion of India as a major player in a world in which “the small clique of America, Old Europe and Japan is the competitive opponent of the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa],” “the American people have started to become sick of taking on the burdens of global responsibility,” and “China’s defense budget continues to grow by double digits while actual American military budgets ceaselessly slide” (*Youth Reference*, in *Xin Chuanqi*, No. 17).

Some Chinese experts are hopeful that the Modi government, due in part to the new Prime Minister’s past personal troubles with the United States—he was denied a U.S. visa for years due to his alleged involvement in the Gujarat riots of 2002—will lead India to move away from the pro-U.S. policies of Congress and Manmohan Singh.

### **Modi’s Choice: Two Visions of an Asian Order?**

Chinese scholars see international summits as a place for promoting China-India “strategic partnership,” including forums such as the CICA Summit held in Shanghai, during which President Xi Jinping and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin signed a \$400 billion natural gas deal and kicked off

a week of Russia-China naval exercises in the East China Sea. Professor Wang said that China “will promote India’s participation in the G20, CICA, SCO and BRICS. In these formations we can promote China-India cooperation.”

“When Xi Jinping came to power, he emphasized neighborly diplomacy,” says a Chinese scholar at a prestigious institute of Indian studies, set up by Zhou Enlai following the Sino-Indian Border War in 1962, and who wishes to remain anonymous (Author’s Interview, May). “India now plays a very important role in our external framework. From an official level, India will be as important as the United States, EU and Russia—on a first-tier level. China wants to establish a peaceful and stable environment for development. For this, we need India. You see how many India centers have been established in China. For us, India is a rising power.”

At CICA, delivering the keynote address before leaders of Middle Eastern, East, South and Central Asian nations, including high-ranking Indian Foreign Ministry official Dinkar Khullar, Chinese President Xi Jinping set out his vision of an Asia in which the principles of “respect for sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and mutual non-interference in internal affairs” would govern international relations, noting also that “strengthening military alliances aimed at third parties does not benefit the preservation of a common security region” (China News Online, May 24).

Xi noted that “For Asian countries, development is the greatest form of security,” summing up a Chinese vision of “soft power” for use not only in Asia but around the world. Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong echoed this vision at this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in what became a notorious verbal standoff between Wang and delegates of the United States.

“The strategic aspect cannot change too much. For India, first there are India-U.S. relations, and second, there are India-China relations,” said an expert who wishes to remain anonymous. “We think there will be some argument in the new government about the two bilateral relations. Some people think Modi will go closer to the U.S. Others think that Modi won’t be held back by the historic burden [of China-India relations, including the Border War]. So we are very eager to see what will happen” (Author’s Interview, May 2014).

“He won’t be soft on some disputed issues like the border issues, water issues and maritime issues. [But] my personal view is that there will be some contradictions between the U.S. and India. India doesn’t want to take some burdens from the U.S. because it doesn’t have the ability, and doesn’t want to be a pioneer of U.S. strategy in this region. India wants to develop, wants to solve domestic problems—doesn’t want to become a part of U.S. strategy.”

### **China’s Hope: Modi the Economic Reformer**

Chinese experts and policy makers see a way out of any “India-driven” strategic emphasis—rather than confronting China, some believe that Modi will seek to learn from Chinese growth and will focus on integrating the two economies. “Modi will have a major impact on China-India relations,” says Wang Dehua. “For China, it will be good news—because he will put the focus on economic relations.”

Modi's economic stewardship of Gujarat, which grew rapidly during his tenure, was widely cited in Chinese coverage of the Indian election, and the concept of Gujarat as India's "Guangdong" province—referring to the southern province in which economic reforms were tested under Deng Xiaoping—has been circulated alongside the idea that Modi's India will chose the "Chinese Model" for growth. Comparisons with China are frequent in India, and the Modi election has revealed a deep thirst for India to act upon what many see as its untapped economic potential.

New Delhi was the first visit that Premier Li Keqiang made overseas, in a symbolic gesture to open a new era of "strategic partnership" and it is said that Xi Jinping will visit New Delhi for the first time this year. In 2013, Li offered a "handshake across the Himalayas" in the editorial pages of *The Hindu* ahead of his visit and the two countries have set a goal of increasing bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2015, up from \$66.5 billion in 2012 (*The Indian Express*, October 23, 2013).

China's key economic and energy security initiative, the "New Silk Road," is another initiative in which China sees the opportunity to engage with India. The "New Silk Road" follows, as in its ancient and medieval history, two routes west from China—the first is through Central Asia, and the second, "The Southern Silk Road" passes from Yunnan, through Burma and into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. "When Premier Li visited India last year, his ambition was to connect with India's "Look East" policy," says Professor Wang. "We are looking west. We can connect. When Modi visited China [in 2011], he was eager to attract investment form China, and to learn from Shanghai, Guangdong and China's experience of opening to the outside world. Some ask whether the cabinet will have to be reshuffled, because they have been focused on politics and security—and now [they will be] focused on economics."

## **Conclusion**

While Xi and Li may do their best to shift the focus of the relationship, fundamental challenges will endure. To give an example: "There is a very strong fear in India about China's intentions in the Indian Ocean," says Professor Zhang Li, who directs security and diplomatic studies at Sichuan University's Institute of South Asian Studies. However, good relations with India will remain a key feature of Chinese strategic vision. Professor Li believes that the Indian Ocean will be the most important conduit in Chinese geopolitics—the place through which the majority of China's energy supplies transit for "the next forty years" (Author's Interview, May 2014). Whether economic-driven relations or a CICA-like security framework will appeal to the Modi government remains to be seen.

*UPDATED 7/7/2014: A former version of this article incorrectly described India's representative at May's CICA summit as the country's foreign minister. In fact, India was represented by Dinkar Khullar, Secretary (West) at the Ministry of External Affairs.*



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