



# Implication of 2019 Elections on Indian Foreign Policy

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Indian Foreign Policy making and execution, is driven by greater *continuity* and greater *change* and the coming elections in 2019 will not have a dramatic impact on the conduct of IFP. To understand the conduct of IFP we need to look at the drivers of IFP and also how it is executed. The conduct of IFP is driven by a significant normative agenda coupled with a pragmatist perspective centered around India's conflicts with Pakistan, China, and the United States. The normative agenda is seen is clearly seen in the post-Independence context when the non-violent struggle against colonialism greatly influenced India's stance to propose and pursue the non-aligned movement (NAM). The other area where the normative stance is visible is the pursuit of nuclear weapons and then declaring a 'no-first use' doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The pragmatist practices are clearly evident in the pursuit of its national interests when it comes its dealings with Pakistan, China and the United States, which capture the most interest in IFP - policy and practice.

The paper will lay out how IFP will show the above-mentioned *continuity* and greater *change* in IFP can be discerned by looking closely at the three major relationships of India, vis-à-vis Pakistan, China and the United States. Defining FP - Foreign policy must be synchronized with the national security and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Deep Datta-Ray, *The Making of Modern Indian Diplomacy: a Critique of Eurocentrism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

policies so as to form an integrated whole in the form of the national grand strategy.<sup>2</sup> Second, a sound foreign policy must reflect the relative importance or priorities of the nation's internal and external objectives that it is expected to support or achieve. If the supreme national objective is economic development, the pursuit of other national objectives must be subordinated to it. Third, foreign policy must strike the right balance between the attainment of short-term and long-term national objectives.<sup>3</sup>

If we utilize the above definition, we see that the post-independent IFP has recognized clearly the need to synthesize economic and security needs. While the initial years have been spent securing itself, a more confident India has opened up to economic globalization in 1991 and has since then shown no steps of going back. For example, in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business it has been one of the biggest 'improvers' jumping from rank 100 to 77 among 190 countries in 2019.<sup>4</sup> This is even more impressive considering the fact that India crept up from 142 to 100 between 2015 to 2018. The key fact to note is that trading across the borders has become easier from 146 to 80 between 2015 and 2019. The full credit goes to the current government, and my argument is that the success achieved on this economic front will only become the new normal and there will be greater *continuity* from this great *change*. It is also to be noted that India has been operating in a climate of global trade turmoil, but the direction of the government to strengthen existing global trade agreements and deepen economic cooperation has not been met with any significant opposition.

The two major economic decisions taken by PM Modi – demonetisation in December 2016 and introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST) have created turmoil in the domestic economy. Even if a new party comes into power, it is to be noted that demonetisation, is an economic measure that cannot be rolled back while the new tax regime is here to stay. The backlash against demonetisation, will hopefully, insert some caution in the ruling party if it comes back to power, while it will work hard to make the new GST tax regime more efficient and if the

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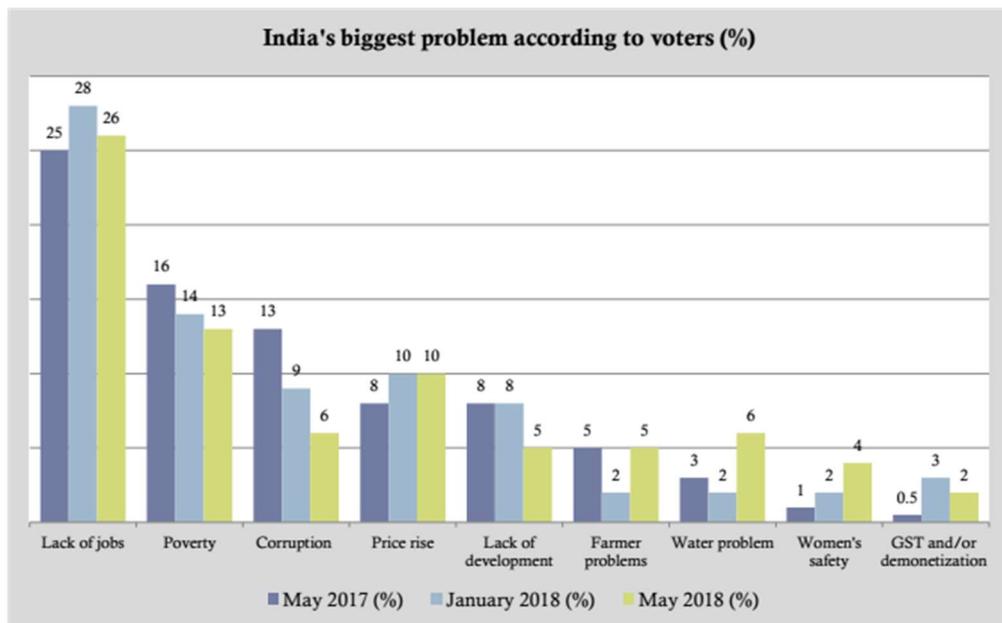
<sup>2</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954, 1967), p. 322.

<sup>3</sup> Javed Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder: A Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Aarati Krishnan, "Behind India's Leap in Ease of Doing Business," *The Hindu*, November 11, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/behind-indias-leap-in-ease-of-doing-business/article25469900.ece>.

opposition party (or a coalition) comes to it will have to continue to implement GST as they are in principle supportive of this tax regime, but have opposed on certain features that caused burden to the common man so far.

The importance of economic development cannot be emphasized enough as it is bread and butter issues that define the Indian voters' choices. As in other countries, foreign policy matters rank quite low in the preferences of the voters. A look at the responses of voters' in the *Mood of the Nation Survey* conducted by India's leading think-tank clearly shows that foreign policy matters' figure almost nowhere.<sup>5</sup> The loss of the ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three provincial elections in the just concluded elections (November- December 2018) have been clearly attributed to the bread and butter issues, apart from anti-incumbency.



Note: The rest of the respondents reported other problems or did not give an opinion. Question was asked in an open ended way; no choices were offered to the respondent  
 Source: MOTN surveys by Lokniti-CSDS  
 Question asked: In your opinion, what is the biggest problem in India today?

Source: Mood of the Nation Survey, May 2018.

Simply put, domestic economic developments will dominate the crafting and execution of IFP.

<sup>5</sup> "Mood of the Nation Survey," *Centre for Study of Developing Studies*, May 2018, <http://lokniti.org/content/Lokniti-ABP-News-Mood-of-the-Nation-Survey-Round-May>.

Turning now to the how India achieves its goals of economic development by linking with the conduct of foreign policy, what we see is that as with any other country, IFP is deeply tied to great power relations, regional relations, participation in multilateral for a where there has been greater continuity. In a conversation with a former diplomat it was clarified that while India actively sought a great power status in 2015 when PM Modi made a significant number of foreign visits, India has come back to a more *normal* position of *hedging* in its multilateral strategy by seeking multi-alignment. What is new that the former diplomat pointed is that India is now seeking pursuing two *tri-lateral relationships* - India + US, Japan; and India + China, Russia. While this might look like a nod to NAM, it is to be noted that this is significantly different as India is actively seeking engagement, with different power groupings.

The India + US, Japan trilateral engagement is actively seen in the measures that India is taking to address the significant changes in the Indo-Pacific, but this is a measured response. India has moved very cautiously to the “Quad” and will continue to pursue a slow and steady response.<sup>6</sup> One major change seen in the context of this trilateral relationship is the admission of Japan into the joint naval exercises conducted with the US, with one of the exercises being conducted off the coast of Japan in 2014 and the more recent one in 2018 conducted in Guam, clearly signifying the importance of the Indo-Pacific shift.<sup>7</sup> While there has been a talk of strategic partnership between India and the US, which could be moved forward in five key ways: by expanding bilateral trade, strengthening military cooperation, collaborating to combat threats to homeland security, stabilizing a post-American Afghanistan, and, especially, finding greater common ground on transnational challenges such as climate change,<sup>8</sup> there is only a measured movement in each of these dimensions. This will continue as India, like other countries, is apprehensive of the temperamental decisions of President Donald Trump and will seek gradual cooperation.

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<sup>6</sup> Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’,” *The War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rajdeep Pakanati, “India’s Domestic Debate over China’s Activities in the Indian Ocean,” *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*, Vol 5, (Dec 2016): 60-75.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Burns, “Passage to India: What Washington Can Do to Revive Relations with New Delhi,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, Issue 5, (Sep/Oct 2014): 132-141.

It has also been argued that IFP can be understood through the prism of five interpretive lenses: an original and unresolved quarrel around sovereignty, alliance dynamics, power asymmetry, political values, and domestic politics.<sup>9</sup> This perspective is useful when looking at the two major relationships with Pakistan and China. Where India-Pakistan conflict has been portrayed as arising from differences over the role of religion and of the military in politics, India-China conflict has been ascribed to differences over pluralist democracy and authoritarian one-party rule as the basis for statehood and development in Asia.

First, when we look at the bilateral relationship with Pakistan we can say that apart from loud rhetoric on India-Pakistan relations, the opposition parties are generally, in agreement, on the conduct of IFP towards Pakistan. Currently, India is clearly hobbled in its choices of engaging with Pakistan as the dominance of the military in the government of Pakistan creates difficulties to reach any agreement with Pakistan. India has cautiously welcomed the new civilian government of Pakistan under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan, and the recent step to open up a corridor for Sikh pilgrims to visit Kartarpur, the final resting place of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, in Pakistan has been met with a cautious jubilation.<sup>10</sup> India can only hope for a strengthening of civilian governments to find any solution.<sup>11</sup>

The domestic security situation in Kashmir has significantly deteriorated under the present government with 587 incidents of violence in 2018 which have claimed lives of 47 civilians, 245 militants and 90 security personnel.<sup>12</sup> This is an area where the current government has significantly failed to normalise the situation in Kashmir and here there could be a greater change if the opposition parties come to power. The BJP has taken hasty and politically motivated steps

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<sup>9</sup> Kanti Bajpai, "Five Approaches to the Study of Indian Foreign Policy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, eds. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Asit Jolly, "Kartarpur: A Corridor of Hope?" *India Today*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20181217-a-corridor-of-hope-1403610-2018-12-08>; Khaled Ahmed, "Corridor of Comfort," *The Indian Express*, December 8, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/kartarpur-corridor-gurdwara-darbar-sahib-of-comfort-guru-nanak-darbar-sikh-shrine-5483784/>.

<sup>11</sup> Aqil Shah, "Getting the Military Out of Pakistani Politics: How Aiding the Army Undermines Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, Issue 3, (May/June 2011): 69-82.

<sup>12</sup> Rahul Tripathi, "Jammu and Kashmir: 587 Incidents of Violence in 2018, Informs Home Ministry," *The Indian Express*, December 16, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jammu-and-kashmir-587-incidents-of-violence-in-2018-informs-home-ministry-5495637/>.

which have been driven by its ideological needs. In general though, the country's growing prosperity has only enabled it to more easily bear the costs of maintaining a substantial military presence in the region even while also improving its military's training and equipment.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of India-China relationship, there has been some positive movement after the 2-day direct talks between President Xi Jinping and PM Modi in Wuhan, in May 2018 and at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Qingdao in June 2018. What we see is some more dynamism in the bilateral trade, but the significant concerns of trade deficit between India and China continue to remain. India-China bilateral merchandise trade reached US\$ 84.69 billion during the calendar year 2017 an increase of over 21.6% over the calendar year 2016. This has also contributed a trade deficit of over US\$ 40 billion. The increase in trade can also be attributed to the growing ease of doing business. It has been suggested that India might find an opportunity in the trade war between China and the US, through export of soyabeans<sup>14</sup> and pharmaceuticals<sup>15</sup> but there has been no progress in these sectors where India has some market advantage. The non-tariff barriers that China imposes are still a major hurdle for Indian businesses, and slow progress will continue irrespective of change in government.

The border crises between India and China which have flared periodically since 2009 and the Doklam standoff caught the attention of the world in summer 2017.<sup>16</sup> Since then India and China have stepped up interactions to avoid any major conflagration. It is to be noted that there have been no bullets fired across the Line of Actual Control for the last four decades shows that both these countries have no incentive to start a conflict but border standoffs will continue to be a

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<sup>13</sup> Sumit Ganguly, "Will Kashmir Stop India's Rise?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, Issue 4, (July/August 2006): 45.

<sup>14</sup> R. Satyamurthy, "US Tiff Clears China Plate for Soyabean," *The Telegraph*, November 11, 2018, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/business/us-tiff-clears-china-plate-for-soybean/cid/1675788>.

<sup>15</sup> G. Naga Sridhar, "Indian Drug Companies Eye Opportunities in China," *Business Line*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/china-eyes-indian-pharma-as-us-trade-turns-cloudy/article24400874.ece> ; Tian Guangqiang, "It's time for Indian Pharmaceutical Companies to Embrace the Chinese Market," *Global Times*, June 10, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1106384.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed assessment, read the 22<sup>nd</sup> Report prepared by the Standing Committee on Ministry of External Affairs, titled "Sino-Indian Relations Including Doklam, Border Situation and Cooperation in International Organizations," Lok Sabha Secretariat, September 4, 2018.

feature until they arrive at some clear understanding about the *Line of Actual Control*.<sup>17</sup>

The significant change is that India is yet to develop concrete measures to respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative, apart from, of course not joining it. It has seen a growth in Chinese interests in the neighbourhood in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Afghanistan and most importantly Pakistan. India, along with the US and the EU finds that the BRI projects fail on the criteria of economic viability, financial responsibility and environmental standards and of course sovereign and territorial integrity of countries participating in BRI projects.<sup>18</sup> The fly in the ointment for India is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which actually runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and poses severe challenges to India's territorial sovereignty. Despite the progress made in bilateral relations, the recent visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan to meet President Xi Jinping in early November 2018, shows that there is "close alignment between both countries on several issues that are particularly [thorny irritants](#) in the India-China relationship, from India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to dealing with cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and ironing out the differences over CPEC."<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, it should be noted that IFP while clearly laid out by the Prime Minister of India, its actual execution is carried out by the professional Indian Foreign Service (IFS). Here two things stand out - one, the significantly small size of the cadre in the IFS which is being demanded to meet increasing demands; and two, despite the small professional size, the excellent coordination and skill shown by the IFS in meeting the goals of India. For example, the IFS was able to manage to get an exemption from the NSG for nuclear imports which helped India to overcome the sanctions and also get a complete waiver from the most stringent requirements put under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "India, China not 'Firing A Single Bullet' over Border Dispute Shows Maturity: PM Modi," *The Hindustan Times*, August 12, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-china-not-firing-a-single-bullet-over-border-dispute-shows-maturity-pm-modi/story-zlZWG7tqcLseGfcJQIEq9I.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Seema Sirohi, "India-US-EU Combine Halts China's Belt and Road Initiative at the UN," *The Wire*, December 12, 2018, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-belt-and-road-united-nations>.

<sup>19</sup> Ananth Krishnan, "Imran Khan's China Visit Shows Narendra Modi Government Oversold Wuhan Summit," *The Print*, November 6, 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/imran-khans-china-visit-shows-narendra-modi-government-oversold-wuhan-summit/145975/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Nuclear Deal with US Finest Example of India's Foreign Policy Success," *The Economic Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nuclear-deal-with-us>.

The importance of the IFS can be felt from this assessment. “No government in New Delhi can turn on a dime in regard to a policy followed for decades or suddenly commit India to a broad set of actions that support U.S. interests; only a profound and probably slow evolution in the views of India's elites could produce such changes. India's diplomats and civil servants are notorious for adhering to independent positions regarding the world order, economic development, and nuclear security.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, there is a clear recognition that there should be more intake into the IFS to meet the needs of the IFP and there were 39 recruits in 2017, which is a significant increase from the single-digit recruitment until 2016.<sup>22</sup> It is expected that this gradual shift will continue going forward.

Finally, turning to the context of India–Taiwan relationship, India has recognized the “One China” policy and makes significant efforts to uphold this commitment. While this is the case, India does seek a functional relationship with Taiwan so that it can seek cooperation and engage in collaboration, to pursue human welfare and development. This relationship has its root in the *Look East Policy* which was initiated in 1991 and has grown slowly to evolve into the *Act East Policy* as highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. In a surprising recommendation the Standing Committee on Ministry of External Affairs, made the following observations, regarding Taiwan.

*“The Committee have noted that India does not accord any diplomatic recognition to Taiwan despite the flourishing nature of exchanges between the countries, such as in the fields of people to people contacts, trade and personal exchanges. The Ministry has argued that it does not want to upend this policy of the Government of India in deference to China’s sensitivity on the matter. Nonetheless, it treats the relationship with Taiwan as a trade relationship rather than a diplomatic one, and has recently acquiesced in China’s demand to refer to Taiwan as “Chinese Taipei”. It comes as a matter of concern to the Committee that even when India is overtly cautious about*

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[finest-example-of-indias-foreign-policy-success/articleshow/65353081.cms](https://www.ias.ac.in/jsp/article.jsp?path=/articleshow/65353081.cms).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this, see 16<sup>th</sup> Report prepared by the Standing Committee on Ministry of External Affairs, titled “Recruitment, Structure and Capacity-building of IFS Cadre, Including Need for a Separate UPSC Examination for Cadre, Mid-career Entry and in-service Training and Orientation,” Lok Sabha Secretariat, August 2, 2018.

*China's sensitivities while dealing with Taiwan and Tibet, China does not exhibit the same deference while dealing with India's sovereignty concerns, be it in the case of Arunachal Pradesh or that of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Given the fact of China's muscular approach of late while dealing with some of the issues pertaining to India, it is difficult for the Committee to be content with India's continuing with its conventionally deferential foreign policy towards China. Dealing with a country like China essentially requires a flexible approach. The Committee strongly feel that the Government should contemplate using all options including its relations with Taiwan, as part of such an approach.*"<sup>23</sup>

My assessment is that this will not be really taken forward as India's normative instincts will prevent it from invoking Taiwan in its bilateral relations with China. Rather, the focus from the Taiwanese side should be deepen economic engagement under its New Southbound Policy to meet the economic development goals of India.

To sum up, the *continuity* and *change* in IFP can be seen in India's new willingness to match the rhetoric with concrete actions. During the bilateral engagements with the leaders of countries in South East Asia, PM Modi has laid the foundation for maritime cooperation with key littoral states that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.<sup>24</sup> This has met with a silent approval from the opposition parties, who will not acknowledge for political reasons, but see such steps as one of the important near-term Indian contributions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>23</sup> The 22<sup>nd</sup> Report prepared by the Standing Committee on Ministry of External Affairs, titled "Sino-Indian Relations Including Doklam, Border Situation and Cooperation in International Organizations". Lok Sabha Secretariat, September 4, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2016).

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