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India's External Relations: What the Modi Factor Promises

By Shyam Saran

Synopsis

The new Modi government is expected to revive the Indian economy and provide coherent and effective governance. It will also expand India's options in its external relations, especially with its neighbourhood. PM-designate Modi will be the chief asset India needs to re-establish its credibility and clout internationally.

Commentary

A REJUVENATED BJP - the Bharatiya Janata Party - under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a rare opportunity to re-invent India and re-write the India story. The 2014 general election has reversed the political trend of the past two decades and more - the inevitability of coalition governments at the federal centre and the parallel rise of regional parties in the states. Narendra Modi will not be constrained by any "coalition dharma", which the outgoing prime minister had laboured under.

While strong regional parties continue to flourish in some states, their ability to influence decisions at the centre will be more circumscribed. The centre-state equation has changed. Whether this is a one-time phenomenon or the beginning of a new trend in Indian politics is still an open question. There are enough credible arguments to support either assessment.

Impact on foreign policy

Indian foreign policy will be impacted. To begin with, there will be a positive, though largely perceptual, change in India's stock abroad. The emergence of a strong government at the centre led by a decisive and charismatic leader will inevitably be contrasted with an outgoing government, seen as preoccupied with multiple crises, unable to make any bold moves or even deliver on its own previous initiatives.

Interest in engaging India will revive in the major capitals of the world and we will witness a sense of urgency in key international leaders wanting to interact with and take measure of the man who has joined their ranks, beating all the odds. This gives the incoming government a welcome head start.

There may be a temptation to focus the energies of the new government on setting the domestic house in order and turn to the world outside only later. This must be resisted. External engagement must go hand-in-hand with domestic repair, since success in the latter may depend heavily on the former, given the reality of a globalised India. For example, reviving investment and re-energising the manufacturing sector will need capital and

technology flows from advanced industrial economies, in particular, the United States, Germany and Japan. India's relations with these countries will need immediate attention.

India's neighbourhood holds the key

It is India's neighbourhood that holds the key to its emergence as a regional and global power. If India's neighbourhood is politically unstable and economically deprived, there will be bigger challenges to India's security and its own economic prospects. India's security is inseparable from that of the Indian sub-continent. Its economic destiny is likewise enmeshed with that of its neighbours. Here is an opportunity to clear the decks in our neighbourhood, so that India is able to break out of its sub-continental confines and expand its footprint beyond its borders.

Under successive governments, India's engagement with its neighbours has at best been episodic and mostly crisis-driven. This must change. The new prime minister must not follow his predecessor's example of rarely travelling to our neighbouring capitals. In fact, the first order of business should be to connect with leaders of the sub-continent, including Pakistan.

There will be continuities in the challenges confronting India. Managing an essentially adversarial relationship with China will require a mix of expanded engagement and robust deterrence. There is greater power asymmetry between our two countries than ever before and this will require asymmetric responses. The infrastructure on India's side of the contested border requires urgent and sustained upgrading and we must build our maritime power to safeguard our ocean space.

Above all, we must reject the notion that we are condemned to live with the current asymmetry with China. If any country has the prospect of closing the gap with China, it is India and a strong and committed government will be able to pursue this goal as it must.

The challenge of Pakistan

The other continuing challenge is Pakistan. Prime Minister Mammohan Singh often said that while he had no mandate to change India's borders, he did have the people's mandate to render these borders irrelevant and allow the free flow of goods and people and the celebration of shared cultural affinities. I believe this is a sound approach, but it is an approach which has often become a casualty of continuing hostility from the Pakistani establishment, in particular, its use of cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy.

India needs to use a diverse mix of instruments to try and change the strategic calculus in Pakistan. This includes measures that will convince Pakistan that the continuing use of terrorist violence against India will entail a significant cost. There are several vulnerabilities on the Pakistani side which are potential pressure points.

India should certainly signal its readiness to settle the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, but we should not unilaterally accept the status quo. The Line of Control (LOC) as a border may well become the end point of bilateral negotiations. They cannot be the starting point. Until then the Manmohan Singh formula is a sensible posture to adopt.

Expanding India's options in external relations

The advent of a new government, which is expected to revive the economy and provide coherent and effective governance, will expand India's options in its external relations. There is no doubt that in the decade of 1996-2006, India emerged as a major and influential power on the strength of its high economic growth rate and its growing engagement with the world.

If Prime Minister-designate Modi succeeds in putting India back on the growth highway, handling foreign policy issues will become that much easier.

While he will need an accomplished team to support him, he will himself be the chief asset India needs to re-establish its credibility and clout in the councils of the world. Having proved himself successful in navigating one of the most complex, diverse and rapidly transforming polities in the world, he comes with proven credentials to help make the world a better and safer place for all its citizens.

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