

Narendra Modi's Vision for India's Foreign Policy

EMBRACING TRADITIONAL INDIAN VALUES



Analysis

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As India holds its 2024 general elections, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) aims for a significant victory with their campaign slogan "This Time for 400." Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity spans across diverse social groups, enhancing BJP's appeal. Interestingly, Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar's book "Why Bharat Matters?" uses the Ramayana to contextualize India's foreign policy, highlighting Modi's strategic vision. It focuses on India's cultural heritage and soft power diplomacy and aims to position the world's most populous nation as a major global player while emphasizing human-centric progress.

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In April and May 2024, India's general elections contest Narendra Modi's leadership, mainly by Congress and its leader Rahul Gandhi. In 2019, the BJP and its coalition won 353 seats in the 543-seat Lok Sabha, while Congress won only 52 seats. This year's BJP slogan, "This Time for 400" (Ab ki bar 400 Par), aims for over 400 seats. Rahul Gandhi and 25 allied parties, with the slogan I.N.D.I.A., emphasize Congress's focus on the country's interests. Meanwhile, the BJP maintains regional dominance, with key states being Uttar Pradesh, Jammu-Kashmir, and North-Eastern India. The pre-election period has polarized voters.

Modi's Momentum: The Opposition's Uphill Battle in India's 2024 Elections

It will be a very difficult task for opposition parties to gain a lead in these elections, if only because Prime Minister Modi has gained great popularity both in the country and abroad.

In India itself, according to Prasant Jha, Narendra Modi has gained sympathy and real support from almost all social groups: upper castes share Modi's aspirations for stability and modernization of the country; for the middle classes, which constitute an important base of the vote bank, Prime Minister is considered the cause of their prosperity and enrichment through economic liberalism; millions of masses of the lowest, unprivileged groups look to Prime Minister as a providential man who can bring them the desired employment and a sense of justice; everyone knows the almost legendary and stunning personal success of the Prime Minister, who started his career as a "tea boy" (chaiwala), such a self-promotion also builds sympathy.

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It is from these socially lowest people, untouchable Dalits and tribes, that the BJP obtained millions of votes thanks to Modi's activity, about 40% of all votes cast for the BJP nationwide in the previous elections. This gave the Prime Minister himself the title of "leader of the poor". There is currently no political leader in South or East Asia, apart from Chinese leader Mr Xi, more recognizable than the Prime Minister of India, who has earned the recognition, respect and admiration of many other leaders from the region.

The Prime Minister presents himself as the captain of modern India. The scenario of the parade that took place in New Delhi in January this year on the occasion of the Republic Day highlighted India's technological and scientific achievements, especially in space research including the successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the moon, an immense contribution to information technology, development of defense industry and innovations in the field of energy. Broadcasting this event around the world was a promotional success for India and the Prime Minister himself, who wants to make sure the world knows what India is like now and is convinced that promoting India's civilizational achievements expands India's influence abroad in specific spheres. Prime Minister's Amrit Kaal vision of new dawn for 2047 India, which Modi introduced to the nation in 2023, will be the moment of the fulfilling the nation's aspirations. Indian leaders, intellectuals, thinkers are also convinced that cultural values in general have great potential in building the "better world" they talk about. With reference to the "better world" Prime Minister Modi emphasized during G-20 that India was offering an alternative world to status quo, a shift from a GDP-centric to human-centric progress. India aimed to remind the world of what unites us, rather than what divides us.

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This is the core of Indian soft power policy which is particularly strongly promoted by the current government. Such a soft language of Indian diplomacy opens up opportunities to expand cooperation with other countries, increases curiosity about Indian civilization, and builds a positive image of the country without resorting to violence and conflict with the world. Thus, the ruling BJP party and the activity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, like no other party so far, are making the Indian political scene very dynamic.

The Ramayana's Influence on India's Foreign Policy

Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar, in his public statements on the country's foreign policy, its goals and principles, argues that Indian leaders, if they want India to play a significant role in global politics, must expand the panorama of their visions and understanding of the world. This is exactly the direction that Prime Minister Modi and Minister dr. S. Jaishankar are leading India in, building broad international relations that go beyond close and direct proximity.

Jaishankar's book "Why Bharat Matters?", published in January this year, talks about this.

The originality of Jaishankar's book lies in the fact that its author used the Ramayana epics to explain the strategy and goals of Indian policy being currently implemented. "The legend of Hanuman could well be story of India in the last decade. – writes Jaishankar – The more we do, the more we believe we can do. It is this self-discovery that has made India so different in recent years and set in on a course that has major implications for the global order".

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Jaishankar relates the adventures of Sri Krishna, Hanuman, Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Ravana and many other mythological characters in their various relationships to contemporary global events in which India participates. The author reinforces his narration with subtitles such as “QUAD a grouping foretold - when common good requests fresh thinking” or “Dealing with China - appreciation of the importance of realism”. Commonly known characters from epics also were reacting to specific situations in which they found themselves, they were choosing either to form alliances or to initiate conflicts either to bring peace or war.

This book published in January 2024, a few months before the elections is to some extent playing the role of an election manifesto and may contribute to increasing the number of votes cast for the BJP. The fact that Jaishankar justified and compared the actions of a modern politician to the legendary heroes of popular epics is not surprising as the electoral campaigns are like quasi-religious events. The crowds look at party leaders as living characters from the epic poems. Currently, even the INC uses similar social engineering means when Rahul Gandhi and other members of his party participate in religious ceremonies and yatras - multi-week marches across India.

Indian dynamism in the Indo-Pacific region: new alliances and strengthening ties with the Indian diaspora

Jaishankar underlines several fields where the Prime Minister's activity was of special importance, such as organizing the G20 summit in New Delhi and participating in the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, getting involved in QUAD, and other regional initiatives, like

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SAGAR, continuing relations with ASEAN. It is clearly visible that India has abandoned for good the Congress policy of keeping India in a stalemate of non-engagement and has joined global activities. All these initiatives are aimed at increasing the security of the huge Indian subcontinent.

India's minister of external affairs emphasizes that Modi uses a wide range of means to strengthen the country's image. For example, he recognized that activating the state's relations with the Indian diaspora (NRIs), especially in the USA, Canada, Great Britain and many other countries, would strengthen the economic and political position of compatriots living there. During the current election campaign Mr. Ram Madhav, even reached out to small communities of Indians on the Pacific islands.

Modi always stresses that Indians living even in the most remote places contribute to promoting India's good image and its achievements in the countries of residence, and to building economic and cultural ties. They are a practical and emotional extension of their home country, which, in Modi's words, is obliged to provide them with all help and facilitate communication with their home country. The Indian media recalled the Prime Minister's involvement in crisis situations when thousands of Indian students had to be suddenly evacuated from countries affected by war conflicts.

Jaishankar also emphasizes Modi's ability to win friends and strengthen cooperation with neighbors; Modi called it a policy of "Neighborhood First". He noted the successful establishment of the border line with Bangladesh and the signing of an appropriate agreement in 2023.

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The Neighborhood First policy has a much broader meaning, because it is a continuation and spatial extension of the previously formulated the Act East Policy. It draws attention to the region conventionally called the Indo-Pacific as India has influenced the nations of this vast region for centuries. The Indian cultural heritage still visible in many countries is part of India's soft power diplomacy.

The role of values in Indian politics

Minister of external affairs dr S. Jaishankar and BJP chief Amit Shah who actually serves as a Minister of Home Affairs are active co-creators of the political line pursued by the Prime Minister. The ideological basis for governing the state is based on Hindu values, even though the Indian Union is a secularized state. Indian politicians treat normatively the Hindu values that Indian people have been living for centuries. These ancient Hindu values are fundamental for expressing the national interest and necessary to build sense of community to the multicultural social fabric of the country. The ruling circles agree on the general goals of foreign relations, which emphasize India's civilizational greatness and the role India could play in today's conflicted world.

It is with the slogan of Hinduism printed on saffron banners that the BJP won subsequent elections in 2014 and 2019 eliminating the Congress to an extent that no other political grouping in India can boast of so far.

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The policy emanating the ideas of Hindu cultural nationalism, due to its clarity, unambiguity and determination, arouses much controversy in India and in the world too due to the legislation introduced in recent years that stigmatized those groups of people who, despite living on the Indian subcontinent for centuries, did not identify with the dominant Hinduism. This causes many dramatic tensions and acts of violence directed to religious and ethnic minorities.

That is why the consecrating of the newly erected temple of the God Rama in Ayodhya, one of the key elements of Modi's campaign was not without protests, but solemnity and enthusiasm of the crowds prevailed.

The construction of Rama Mandir in the birthplace of the god Rama was possible after the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992, which was built during the Muslim invasion about 400 years ago. For years, the BJP had been campaigning for the revival of Hindu temples destroyed by the invaders. In the current election campaign BJP leaders referred to a similar event that took place in Warsaw, the capital of Poland in 1923 where the inhabitants of Warsaw demolished an Orthodox church built by the Russians in the very center of the city as a sign of their domination over Poland. In the current campaign, the Polish example was also quoted by Amit Shah and K. Annamalai, BJP president in Tamil Nadu. But it was Advani who first used this comparison when speaking to his compatriots in Los Angeles in 1990s. That event was widely commented by the Polish NRIs living in the USA. The BJP leaders were explaining that both events had one thing in common: getting rid of the symbols of foreign invasion and retreating from the humiliating past.

But one can ask if this exceptionally strong reliance on traditional Hindu values is not too excessively promoted leading the BJP leaders to idealization detached from realities in which

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the world lives? Especially since today's world is a field of influence of great powers that use military force to impose their will, ideas and political systems on others.

Jaishankar is convincing us that Prime Minister Modi has an important feature because he is able to transform these idealizations contained in "Hindutwa" into strategic thinking in the name of the national interest, especially towards potentially important powers.

What idea does India want to convey to the world?

Jaishankar's book offers practical tips for politicians and diplomats, emphasizing the role of values in international relations. He argues that India rejects new dependencies from globalist visions and values Hindutva as a platform for equal exchange of ideas. Jaishankar refutes Western criticism of India's neutral stance in global conflicts, emphasizing India's priority on its interests. Notably, it was already Nehru's 1949 speech that highlighted that today's problems extend beyond Europe, and Asia's global significance is rising. Modi's policy seeks decision-making autonomy, rejecting external interference. Echoing also Vivekananda, Jaishankar emphasizes India's cultural potential for humanity's benefit, not imposing values but inspiring the world. It highlights India's important voice today, ensuring its success.

Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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