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Modi Doctrine 2.0: Get set, go; sky is the limit!



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Photo: PTI)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his second term with a foreign policy bang. He was sworn into office in the presence of the heads of state and government of not only some Saarc countries but also those of Bimstec (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the current chair of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. To top it all, he named career diplomat Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as the new external affairs minister, a rarity in Indian Cabinets where veteran politicians have almost always been in charge of the foreign ministry.

The early signal Mr Modi conveyed through the broader list of foreign attendees at his oath-taking and the masterstroke of Mr Jaishankar's choice is that India has set its sights on a more ambitious and expanded foreign policy that will seek to better his first-term achievements. The intent is to aim bigger and rise faster to a level that India deserves in world affairs.

That Mr Modi opted for Mr Jaishankar instead of picking one of the 303 BJP MPs shows his supreme confidence in a technocrat armed with vast experience of skilfully navigating India's foreign relations with major world powers. The PM correctly realises how delicately poised India's relations are with the United States and China at present. Handling these two big powers is a key priority which requires specialised expertise and knowledge. By placing Mr Jaishankar at the helm, Mr Modi has recognised that foreign affairs is a specialised field best left to be led by specialists.

Mr Jaishankar has the advantage of being an insider within the ranks of the Indian Foreign Service, but also an outsider in the sense of a Cabinet minister holding high political office with the authority to reform the ministry. The drive toward the lateral entry of experts into the external affairs ministry, which hardly took off during Mr Modi's first term, could speed up under Mr Jaishankar.

The MEA can do wonders with an influx of regional and thematic specialists from outside the bureaucracy. Its public diplomacy division has just seven staffers in an information age where 24/7 social media and global news coverage about India needs to be influenced and shaped. The slew of extremely jaundiced and inaccurate news stories, opinion articles and online invective in the Western media against Mr Modi and the direction India is taking under him before, during and even after the recent general election begged for aggressive counters by an organised "Bharat Army". A systematic response campaign to alter the flawed perceptions about India can only be mounted by hiring more personnel and implementing new ideas to spread our soft power, brand our image abroad and win foreign hearts and minds.

Likewise, the MEA's policy planning and research division is direly understaffed with just four officials. For India to become a leading power, we need to emulate superior powers like China and the US, which have dozens of personnel dedicated to doing medium and long-term geopolitical and geo-economic scenarios and plans within their foreign ministries, and in their extended arms like think tanks and universities.

Mr Modi's resounding re-election and commanding position as India's unrivalled leader offers a unique opportunity to think strategically and plan ahead for where we should be by 2030 and beyond in the emerging multipolar world order, and what grand strategy we should adopt for the future. Modi 1.0 had started developing a robust foreign policy doctrine, but far more attention and manpower are needed within the MEA to advance it.

Among the long-term challenges Mr Modi and Mr Jaishankar face, two are worth underlining. China's Belt and Road Initiative is galloping at a breathtaking pace. Barring India, almost the entire Indo-Pacific and Saarc region are formally a part of BRI. Our old fear of strategic encirclement by China is occurring in front of our eyes and an alternative "Sino-centric world order", as the Portuguese writer Bruno Maçães puts it, is being erected in Eurasia and Africa.

As an independent power centre, India cannot abjectly cave in and endorse China's hegemonic expansionism. Mr Modi did the right thing by refusing to join as a subordinate BRI partner. But beyond boycotting BRI, India has to construct and concretise alternative inter-regional connectivity and commercial networks of its own. Under Modi 2.0, the Asia-Africa Growth

Corridor (AAGC) and fresh mechanisms for integrating India closer to Central Asia and Latin America should be pursued relentlessly and raised to a higher profile. Mr Modi has the vision to build an “Indic order” parallel to the Sinic one. What remains to be done is allocating adequate resources in personnel and bigger foreign development assistance budgets to reinforce his vision.

The onus is on Mr Jaishankar and his team to tackle the transactional and protectionist Donald Trump administration in the United States. Old comforting assumptions that the US will help India counterbalance China must be reconsidered in light of the decline of liberal internationalists in the American polity, the lack of any grand strategy in Mr Trump’s foreign policy, and the likelihood of Mr Trump getting re-elected in November 2020.

As a master of pragmatic bilateralism, Mr Jaishankar will be expected to hammer out a deal with the US that protects the trade and security gains of the India-US relationship from further damage. But since no deal is a done deal in the case of Mr Trump — a totally domestically preoccupied politician who simply doesn’t care about the interests of other nations — the MEA should study the tactics adopted by other countries which are facing the music from Mr Trump and analyse comparatively how each of them is approaching the isolationist and unilateralist US. If there are issue-based convergences where India can make common cause with other targets of America’s unreasonable demands, such as pressure to forsake trade and defence ties with Iran and Russia, we must collaborate and assert our strategic autonomy.

The Modi-Jaishankar duo is the best possible one to steer India’s march to great power status. The PM remains our biggest asset on the world stage. His charisma and energy have elevated India in the international realm. With eminently able hands on the deck, the sky is the limit in his second term. Mr Jaishankar can be a catalyst of Mr Modi’s Indian renaissance. More power to this duo, coupled with a commitment to innovative reforms, will translate into more power for India in the world.

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