India concluded its nineteenth general election in May 2019, handing a resounding victory to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had been in power for the past five years. It received a secure majority of 303 out of a possible 543 seats in the parliament. The sheer scale of the electoral exercise was such that it was held in seven phases staggered across five weeks to ensure that enough security forces were available to ensure fair polling. The level of participation in these elections was also unprecedented: out of approximately 900 million eligible voters, 67.3 percent cast their votes in the 2019 elections, the highest percentage ever in India’s electoral history. Women also turned out in droves. Approximately 294 million women cast their votes. The gender gap between male and female voters was at a historical low, with an almost equal number (66.68 percent in comparison to 66.79 percent of male voters) of eligible women voters exercising their voting rights. Their participation was also surprisingly high in poorer eastern states like Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal.

The BJP’s extraordinary victory is puzzling on multiple counts. This is the first time in India that a ruling party has come back in power with such a sweeping majority. A similar outcome occurred in 1984 when the Congress Party was voted back in power with 415 seats, but that was a clear anomaly. The Congress’ sweeping victory has largely been attributed to the massive “sympathy wave” in the wake of the October 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

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The BJP, on the other hand, faced a series of problems that could have sandbagged its fortunes, making its win all the more surprising. The party secured its impressive win despite rising unemployment, sluggish economic growth, widespread rural distress, and unpopular policy measures such as demonetization, which had put 86 percent of India’s currency out of circulation. These issues notwithstanding, the BJP’s vote share increased from 31.4 in 2014 to 37.4 percent in 2019. In striking contrast, its principal adversary, the Congress, saw its vote share plummet to 19.5 percent from the 28.55 percent it garnered in 2014 when the first Modi regime formed the government in 2009. As a consequence, the Congress has now been reduced to a mere 52 seats in parliament, a shockingly low number compared to the BJP’s 303. Given the litany of economic problems during its tenure, why did the BJP win so resoundingly?

### Possible Explanations

It is widely believed that the BJP’s success can be attributed to its use of religious rhetoric and its rank appeal to Hindu majoritarian sentiment. There is more than a little credence to this claim, based upon much of the campaign rhetoric. For example, Swami Adityanath, a Hindu priest who is the Chief Minister of India’s most populist state, suggested that the opposition parties were infected with the “green virus” — a not-so-opaque reference to Muslims. Certain policy choices in the lead-up to the campaign also underscore this argument. Specifically, the BJP passed an ordinance and introduced a citizenship bill that sought to exclude Muslims immigrating from other South Asian states from obtaining Indian citizenship. This electoral strategy may well have paid off. The number of Hindus who supported the BJP rose from 36 percent in 2014 to 44 percent in 2019. No such increase in support for the BJP could be seen in minority communities.

Yet, this strategy alone cannot explain the BJP’s unprecedented victory. Along with whipping up a religious fervor, the BJP also deftly emphasized a range of policy initiatives designed to benefit India’s poor, predominately Hindu communities. It is hard to overlook the impact of popular policy measures such as the provision of free cooking gas to poor households, the creation of bank accounts, and a nationwide campaign to build toilets.

These social policy measures probably held the BJP in good stead in the long run as they had a meaningful impact on the most disadvantaged in Indian society. Specifically, these policy initiatives helped, or at least appeared to help, the poor, marginalized communities and members of India’s vast tribal
communities. Statistical evidence bears out this claim. In areas where Dalit (India’s untouchable community) voters were above 30 percent of the population, the BJP secured 32.10 percent of the vote—a net increase of 11.1 percent since the 2014 national election. Similarly, in areas where the tribal population was more than 50 percent, the BJP received 39.2 percent of the vote—an increase of 4.1 percent since 2014.

The BJP’s victory has also challenged the dictum that “Indians don’t cast their vote but vote their caste.” For example, in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, which has 80 parliamentary seats, the BJP demolished two major caste-based regional parties: the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP). The BSP had historically counted on the Dalit votes, while the SP had an alliance with Muslim and lower caste voters. The two parties had formed a “grand alliance” for the 2019 elections to counter the BJP. Many observers predicted an immense setback for the BJP in this key state on account of this alliance. Nevertheless, the BJP managed to win 62 seats against 15 for the grand alliance, and increased its vote share from 42 percent in 2014 to 49 percent in 2019, indicating the broadening of its social base.

The social bases of the grand alliance notwithstanding, it is apparent that the majority of citizens were skeptical about the stability of the improbable grand alliance, mostly because they perceived it as an alliance of convenience. India has seen these in the past, and they rarely, if ever, cohered. Indeed, after the elections, fissures quickly became apparent, and the alliance ultimately disintegrated.

A similar alliance between the Congress and other regional parties in the neighboring state of Bihar—such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (RLSP), Hindustani Awam Morcha (HMA), and Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP), which had all counted on winning caste strongholds—met a similar fate. It was expected that, with these alliances, the Congress would be able to garner the votes of both the lower castes and minorities. They didn’t.

The BJP, on the other hand, had formed alliances in Bihar with two other regional parties, the Janata Dal United (JDU) and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), as part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The NDA won 39 out of 40 seats, with only one going to the Congress-RJD alliance. It is widely believed that the NDA’s success can be attributed to the developmental activities that the Chief Minister of the state, Nitish Kumar, had undertaken. A popular policy measure, banning liquor in the state (as in Modi’s home state of Gujarat), might have won support from women voters, especially for the JDU. As many as 60 percent of all eligible women cast their
ballots, making it one of the highest turnouts for women in the country. For once, developmental activities, which benefited a substantial portion of the population, appear to have trumped caste affiliations.

Additionally, Modi successfully turned a February 14 Pakistan-based terror attack to his electoral advantage. The attack cost the lives of 40 security personnel in the town of Pulwama in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Modi deftly referred to the dead as martyrs and swiftly authorized a retaliatory air strike to avenge them. This strike was the first Indian use of airpower across the international border since the 1971 war with Pakistan. Although there is some question about the efficacy of these air strikes, they were nevertheless greeted with widespread support in the popular media.

A final factor also explains the BJP’s striking success. The principal opposition party, the Congress, has become a sclerotic, sycophantic entity woven primarily around the Gandhi family. The aging matriarch, Sonia Gandhi (the widow of the assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi) and her son, Rahul Gandhi, have maintained a stranglehold on the party since the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Despite a significant defeat at the hands of the BJP in 2014, neither the party’s rank and file nor its stalwarts had dared to challenge the dynastic hegemony of the Gandhi family. Even though Rahul Gandhi had demonstrated that he is a lackluster campaigner and was no match for Modi, the party had reposed its faith in him. This defeat amounted to a significant symbolic loss for the Congress Party as Rahul even lost in Amethi, which had long been a family political bastion, to Smriti Irani, an unexceptional former BJP Cabinet member.

Beyond his lack of charisma on the campaign trail, Gandhi and the Congress also failed to provide a clear-cut, compelling message. Late in the day, they did unveil a minimum guaranteed income for the poorest of the electorate. Yet, this was a gesture that proved to be simply too little and too late. There is little evidence that it swayed any voters.

**Foreign Policy Ramifications**

Given his unprecedented victory and a weak and dispirited opposition, Modi has assembled a foreign and security policy team entirely to his satisfaction, replacing the previous Minister for External Affairs (who recently passed away) and Minister of Defense, neither of whom shared a close rapport with Modi. His new team is composed of Rajnath Singh as the Minister of Defense, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as the Minister of External Affairs, Amit Shah as the Minister of Home Affairs, and Ajit Doval as the National Security Advisor (NSA). Singh, the Minister of Defense, is not only a Modi confidante but also a former BJP president. Jaishankar was the previous Foreign Secretary and the highest-ranking career diplomat in the
ministry; it is widely believed that he had enjoyed an excellent rapport with Modi in his previous position. Shah, a close Modi associate and erstwhile president of the BJP, was Modi’s Minister of Home Affairs during Modi’s time as the Chief Minister of the western state of Gujarat. Doval, who was Modi’s initial NSA and his Special Representative for talks with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has now been given a second term with the rank of a Cabinet official.

This foursome is expected to work in concert to boost Modi’s security policies, both internal and external, as well as his foreign policy agenda. At the outset, the team enjoys some clear advantages. Relations with a number of countries ranging geographically from Israel to Japan are on a secure footing, due in considerable part to Modi’s tireless diplomacy as well as sound rapport with respective prime ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Shinzo Abe. Even if either of them were to leave office, the relationships that have been forged with India are so robust that they would endure. Despite India’s closeness with Israel, Modi has also deftly cultivated good relations with the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. While these ties will need tending, they should not be sources of major concern.

The team that Modi has assembled may well prove to be cohesive, and they will need to be to face a range of challenges both near and far from home. These include handling ties with India’s smaller neighbors, managing the fractious relationship with Pakistan, coping with an overweening PRC, and dealing with a mostly friendly, but unpredictable, United States.

**South Asia**

During his initial term in office, Modi announced a “neighborhood first” policy. Despite this rhetorical flourish, the implementation of the policy proved to be rather uneven. In some cases, as in the Maldives, India failed to act with dispatch when troubles loomed. In others, for example with Nepal, it acted in a ham-handed fashion after displaying initial dexterity, and it failed to follow a sustained set of policies toward Sri Lanka. Only in the case of Bangladesh, despite continuing discord over the issue of illegal immigration, did it manage to sign a major land boundary agreement and maintain counterterrorism cooperation.

The challenges that the second Modi regime are likely to confront with its smaller neighbors are twofold. One is simply structural. India’s sheer relative size makes it loom over them like a colossus. As a consequence, policy choices made in New Delhi which it deems to be mostly benign, or even beneficial, are not always construed as such...
in the capitals of the smaller South Asian countries. A particularly striking case exemplifies the issue: in April of 2019, Sri Lanka suffered its worst terrorist attack since the end of its civil war in 2009. Yet, the attack might have been thwarted, or at least mitigated, had the Sri Lankan intelligence and security services heeded the warnings from their Indian counterparts. Since the warning of the impending attack had come from India, they had ignored it, believing it was an attempt to discredit Pakistan, a country that India has long accused of fomenting terror in the region.12

The second is a legacy issue. Over the past several decades, India has had a series of contentious encounters with its smaller neighbors. It has occasionally handled trying issues with a distinct lack of finesse. Consequently, these episodes have left an institutional memory in most South Asian capitals. These recollections are either dredged up for the sake of political expediency or surface of their own accord during exigent moments. Almost invariably, they form a cognitive lens through which Indian policy choices are evaluated and responses are made.

There is little that the Modi regime can do to alter the structural features of this problem. However, it can demonstrate a degree of dexterity when it comes to handling various issues that are likely to crop up. Its first steps have seemed to point in the right direction. As early as June, Modi made his maiden foreign trip to the Maldives, a country that he had mostly neglected during his first term. This visit may prove to be a useful corrective as, in India’s absence, the PRC made significant inroads into the country.

Modi may also be able to make up lost ground in Sri Lanka. Even before he assumed office in 2014, the PRC had started to make significant inroads into Sri Lanka with the promise of vast infrastructural projects. The regime of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–15) had fallen for these blandishments as India had hesitated to step in. Some of these projects, while they came to fruition, left Sri Lanka saddled with significant, and indeed, crippling debts.13 The current regime of President Maithripala Sirisena (2015–present) does not seem to have any great appetite to seek additional Chinese infrastructural investments. Though India lacks the capacity to easily step into the breach, it may nevertheless find an aperture under these circumstances through which it can restore its past influence in Sri Lanka. To that end, it can continue to enhance counterterrorism cooperation, urge private investment in the country and provide limited support for key infrastructural projects. Such steps should enable Sri Lanka to reduce its current dependence on the PRC.

Modi may be pursuing such a course. Within days of his inauguration, he traveled to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. This was an unequivocal signal to both states that New Delhi cares about the smaller neighbors and is not indifferent to the PRC’s overtures. On both these visits he emphasized the significance of terrorism as a regional threat. In the Maldives, Modi suggested a global conference
on terrorism to tackle its menace on the same footing as global climate change. Significantly, Modi was the first foreign dignitary to have visited Sri Lanka in the wake of the terrorist attack in April this year.

Despite differences on the vexed issue of illegal immigration, Modi should be able to sustain good relations with Bangladesh. The country faces serious problems of counterterrorism, needs investment, and still seeks a water sharing agreement with India on the Teesta River. The final issue, of much significance to Bangladesh, was stymied during the first term because of differences between the Modi regime and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the state of West Bengal.

The Modi regime is likely to face a steeper climb when it comes to relations with the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. It had started on a very secure footing in its initial days in office after 2014. In the wake of a terrible earthquake in April 2015, New Delhi had acted with quick dispatch. Its prompt humanitarian assistance generated significant goodwill in the country. This bonhomie, however, was squandered later that year. Unhappy with the proposed Nepalese constitutional status of the Mahesis, a minority Nepalese community with ethnic kin in northern India, India imposed an informal blockade on goods entering Nepal. The blockade caused considerable hardship across Nepal, especially because it had disrupted vital petroleum supplies. Not surprisingly, the PRC sensed an opportunity to diminish Indian influence in Nepal and promptly stepped into the breach, offering its petroleum resources. Any attempt to regain lost ground in Nepal will require New Delhi to provide suitable reassurance to Kathmandu because of the residual distrust from the blockade.

Modi has every opportunity to reset ties with India’s smaller neighbors. It is possible that he will seize this moment and attempt to assuage their concerns. On the other hand, if his regime becomes bogged down with domestic issues, the chance will be lost.

Pakistan
The most trying issue that the new regime will confront in the foreseeable future is what political scientists refer to as an intermestic problem: a foreign policy matter that has significant domestic ramifications. This involves India’s relations with its recalcitrant neighbor, Pakistan, and the vexed question of the prevailing conditions in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. In his first term, Modi had treated the ongoing unrest in the Indian-controlled portion of the state as largely a law-and-order problem and had responded with a mailed fist. This strategy, for the most part, had produced neither law nor order in the state. Instead, it had inflamed passions among disenchanted youth and had provided Pakistan further opportunities to sow discord within the state.

Owing to internal unrest in Kashmir and a series of terrorist attacks that could be traced back to Pakistan, relations between the two states were already at a fairly
low ebb. In February 2019, in the wake of a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack leading up to the election, India used airpower and crossed the international border for the first time since the 1971 war to attack what it deemed as terrorist training camps within Pakistan. Within 24 hours, Pakistan had struck back, shooting down an Indian MiG-21 Bison that had sought to intercept the Pakistani aircraft.

Once in office, the Modi government swiftly demonstrated that it had little concern about Pakistan’s views on an extremely fraught matter: the status of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Amit Shah, the Minister of Home Affairs, announced in parliament that the government had decided to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution through a Presidential ordinance. This article, which had been in place since 1956, had granted the Indian-controlled portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir a special dispensation. Among other matters, the provision had prevented non-Kashmiris from acquiring land in Kashmir, thereby ensuring its unique, predominantly Muslim demography. With the dismantling of this constitutional provision, at least in principle, non-Kashmiris will be able to settle in Kashmir, changing its demographic composition over time. It is easy to imagine that such an influx of non-Kashmiris into the state will, almost inevitably, lead to tensions with locals leading to popular unrest. Pakistan, which has never passed up an opportunity to exploit social fissures in Kashmir, will lose no time in entering the fray.

What does this mean for relations with Pakistan? In the initial phase of his first term, Modi had attempted to woo Pakistan, inviting then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration and making a surprise visit to Pakistan on a trip back from Afghanistan. These efforts, however, failed to bring about a thaw, let alone a breakthrough, in bilateral relations. In considerable part, the subsequent failure to work with Pakistan had stemmed from two sources: internal unrest in Kashmir and Pakistan’s unrelenting dalliance with terror.

Apart from proceeding with alternating Kashmir’s special status, there were other, earlier signs that, in his second term, Modi does not deem Pakistan to be a high foreign policy priority. This could be inferred from his decision to invite the leaders of BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Economic Cooperation) countries to his second inauguration. Pakistan, it should be noted, is not a member of this group. At his initial inauguration, Modi had invited the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which includes Pakistan.
In the wake of the decision to abolish Article 370 and Pakistan’s predictably harsh reactions, including asking the Indian High Commissioner (ambassador) to leave Islamabad, it is highly unlikely that there will be any easing of India-Pakistan tensions. Worse still, if one or more terrorist attacks take place, it is most likely that New Delhi will resort to a strategy of deterrence by punishment: retaliatory conventional attacks designed to dissuade further depredations. Unlike the top brass in previous regimes, none of the four individuals who Modi has placed at the helm of affairs are averse to the use of force, especially when it involves Pakistan. Even the presence of the nuclear shadow will not self-deter them. Under the circumstances, unless Pakistan eschews its involvement with terror, it is hard to visualize how relations are likely to improve in the second term.

China

About a year before the spring 2019 Indian elections at a summit in Wuhan, India and the PRC found a way to at least temporarily set aside their differences. Most informed commentators argued that this truce was largely tactical. With the impending elections in 2019, Modi did not wish to see yet another flare up on the disputed border similar to the fracas that had ensued in the summer of 2017 in the Doklam plateau near the Bhutan-India-China tri-junction. The PRC, by the same token, probably also wanted to avoid a renewed conflict on the eve of a consequential Indian election, which would risk a nationalist surge in India.

After the 2018 Wuhan summit and much diplomatic cajolery on India’s part, pressure from the United States, and probably a degree of self-interest given its own restive Muslim population in Xinjiang, the PRC finally lifted its “technical hold” on Maulana Masood Azhar, a terrorist with sanctuary in Pakistan wanted for a series of attacks in India as the head of the Jaish-e-Mohammed. India viewed this shift by the PRC with particular interest because it signaled a willingness on the part of the PRC to finally act against the preferences of its all-weather ally, Pakistan.

Despite this gesture, which pleased New Delhi, at least four core problems continue to dog the Sino-Indian relationship: the unresolved border dispute, the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that passes through disputed territory in Kashmir, the PRC’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean, and India’s closeness with the United States. All four of them will serve as enduring challenges for Modi’s foreign policy team.

At least four core problems continue to dog the Sino-Indian relationship.
confidence-building measures, little discernible progress has been made toward an actual settlement of the territorial dispute.\textsuperscript{19} The PRC is in a more advantageous position as it controls territory that it seized in the 1962 war and furthermore has significant other territorial claims, especially on the Indian northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. The best that can be hoped for is to avoid further clashes along the disputed border, especially as both sides continue to build up their forces. If any skirmishes do occur, as they did during the previous crisis, New Delhi would probably take a tough stance and not back down.

The BRI is also a source of much misgiving in New Delhi. The concerns stem primarily from two sources. One of the principal arteries of the proposed project runs squarely through what Pakistan refers to as “Azad Kashmir” (“free Kashmir”)—territory that it seized during the first Kashmir war in 1947–48, an area India still formally claims as its own. Consequently, during his first term, Modi categorically rebuffed any Indian participation in this massive infrastructural project.\textsuperscript{20} New Delhi’s other objection, while not publicly articulated, is that this massive developmental scheme will enable the PRC to expand its material footprint and thereby its political influence in all of India’s smaller neighbors. Since the PRC is unlikely to shrink, let alone abandon, this endeavor, this issue is likely to remain contentious in Sino-Indian relations.

Simultaneously, the foreign policy team will also have to decide how best to counter the growing presence of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean. Obviously, to effectively meet the challenge that the PLAN poses, India will have to boost its naval capabilities. This, however, cannot be accomplished swiftly, as shipbuilding is a costly and time-intensive enterprise. While the country has taken steps to enhance its naval capabilities, it will, for the foreseeable future, need to rely on partners ranging from the United States to Australia to Vietnam.

Finally, India will have to carefully negotiate the broadening of its strategic partnership with the United States. The PRC has long looked askance on this relationship and will keep a close watch on all attempts at closer policy coordination. That said, it is unlikely that the Modi foreign and security policy team will allow the PRC’s misgivings to stand in the way of closer cooperation with the United States.\textsuperscript{21}

It is possible that the new Modi foreign and security policy team may produce a more effective foreign policy. It has certainly demonstrated a capacity for boldness with its dramatic (and possible feckless) decision on Kashmir. The task before them, however, is whether or not they will also have the necessary imagination, verve, and capacity for dealing with the unanticipated consequences of such audacious and fraught choices. Of course, dealing with the PRC will probably prove to be their most taxing issue. India’s behemoth neighbor, which is closely aligned with Pakistan, has already made clear its unhappiness about the Modi
government’s decision to further integrate Kashmir. Consequently, it is more than likely to challenge the Modi regime in the months ahead on unresolved issues such as the long-standing border dispute.

**The United States**

In this context, New Delhi will have to turn to the United States even though it is acutely cognizant that Beijing remains hostile toward the US-India strategic partnership. Fortunately, during his first term in office, Modi deepened this partnership, albeit with a degree of caution. The relationship expanded over the past five years in both symbolic and substantive terms. At a symbolic level, Modi invited President Obama during his last year in office as the Chief Guest at India’s Republic Day parade, an honor that was granted to an American president for the first time. Substantively, the two sides expanded the scope of military-to-military cooperation, signed an important communications agreement, and moved forward with weapons sales. Yet, Modi proved to be quite circumspect when it came to India’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which involves informal naval cooperation among India, the United States, Australia, and Japan. His reticence largely stemmed from fears of offending the PRC. It remains to be seen if, in his second term, he can overcome the hesitation that characterized his first.

Despite the caution that India has displayed, there is every reason to believe that it will continue to boost its ties with the United States. It is apparent that Modi is an advocate for better relations.Jaishankar, who served as India’s ambassador to the United States and was one of the principal interlocutors of the monumental 2008 US-India nuclear agreement, is likely to bolster Modi’s preferences.

That said, Jaishankar will have some difficulty negotiating mostly because of the mercurial behavior of the Trump administration. The United States already imposed restrictions on H1-B visas, which enable Indian professionals, especially from the information technology sector, to work in the United States for specified periods of time. In early June 2019, after considerable wrangling at trade negotiations, it also withdrew India’s preferential access to the US market for certain goods. Under the threat of sanctions, it has induced India to stop purchasing Iranian oil. However, it will not abandon the investment it has made in developing a port at Chabahar in Iran. Thus far, the Trump administration has exempted India from sanctions related to this project. To ensure that it does not provoke the wrath of the administration, New Delhi
may have to remind Washington about the port’s significance to India-Afghanistan relations and thereby its prospects for stabilizing Afghanistan. Finally, despite an initial willingness to grant India a waiver, the Trump administration has threatened to impose sanctions on India should it purchase the S-400 missile batteries from Russia. Unlike previous regimes that would have caused much adverse fanfare about these issues, the Modi government has not engaged in any grandstanding.

India has also avoided a resort to any inflammatory language in the wake of Prime Minister Imran Khan’s July visit to the United States, when President Trump offered to mediate the Kashmir dispute. Instead, the Ministry of External Affairs merely reaffirmed its position that any discussion of the Kashmir issue would remain strictly a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan.

For its part, the United States has also displayed a remarkable reticence to criticize India for its decision to abrogate Article 370. It has also not expressed any public umbrage about the questionable claim that appeared in a number of prominent Indian newspapers that New Delhi had briefed Washington prior to ending Article 370. Consequently, under Jaishankar’s watch, every effort will be made to avoid making provocative statements or undertaking significant retaliatory actions that could lead to an escalation of existing US-India differences. In all likelihood, steps will be undertaken to sequester them. New Delhi will probably also focus on areas where greater cooperation may be possible ranging from counterterrorism, weapons acquisitions, greater market access to India for American goods, and possibly even coordination of policies to stabilize Afghanistan as the United States seeks to shed, or at least substantially reduce, its commitments there.

**Conclusions**

With an anemic opposition, a comfortable majority in parliament, and an able foreign policy team in place, the second Modi regime is sitting in the catbird seat. Consequently, it is likely to face few domestic constraints on the conduct of its foreign policy. At worst, it may have to contend with an embedded bureaucratic culture that has long had a predilection for incrementalism. However, with a team in place that is ready to do his bidding, Modi should have some leeway in dealing with bureaucratic recalcitrance.

The principal constraints that he is likely to face will be structural and external. India’s behemoth size in relation to its neighbors places some routine burdens on any regime in office, invariably presenting hurdles when dealing with its smaller neighbors. The other significant constraint that it will confront is the growing capability gap with the PRC. Here, New Delhi will have more limited options. If it is to tackle the PRC’s growing assertiveness, it will have to turn to other
partners and devise collaborative partnerships across Asia and beyond. This will entail working more closely with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Though India’s government began this process with the previous United Progressive Alliance regime, it will need to find ways to boost them. In this context, cementing the relationship with the United States will prove to be crucial.

On the basis of his initial moves in office, it is possible to assert that Modi plans to improve relations with India’s smaller neighbors, manage the fraught relationship with the PRC, keep improving ties with the United States despite an on-going trade dispute, and follow a muscular foreign policy toward Pakistan. The last issue is laden with much significance of India’s domestic politics. Modi is aware that the Pulwama/Balakot episode put at least some wind in his sails during the election campaign. More to the point, it played well with a significant segment of his core constituency which holds no candle for Pakistan. Consequently, pursuing a hardline posture toward Pakistan has no downside risk.

The challenges that the new regime faces in the arena of foreign policy are manageable, but not daunting. The many domestic advantages that it enjoys should enable it to make headway on a number of fronts if it can set some key priorities, carefully deploy the resources at hand and vigorously pursue some vital partnerships. If it fails at these tasks, it will have frittered away a mandate that has long escaped most governing parties in India for over a decade.

Notes

1. Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Voter Turnout across Years in Lok Sabha (Sonipat, India: Ashoka University, 2019), http://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/LokDhaba-Shiny/_state_id_=985f30b766451a6d.
3. Trivedi Centre for Political Data.
7. Kumar.


