RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Ponder the Improbable since 1996

IDSS Paper
Ponder. Analyse. Prepare. Engage. Refresh.

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 033 – 30 March 2023

No. 033/2023 dated 30 March 2023

Hindutva and India's Foreign Policy

Rajesh Basrur

SYNOPSIS

The ideational foundations of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), embedded in Hindutva ideology, are often said to reflect a new, distinctive, and cohesive foreign policy strategy. However, a closer inspection reveals that this framework is in fact contiguous with past approaches and carries fundamental structural inconsistencies. ***RAJESH BASRUR*** *analyses these contradictions and examines the elements that the BJP has yet to contend with in order to assemble a clear foreign policy strategy.*

COMMENTARY

With well over a decade at the helm of Indian governance, India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) should have established a firm intellectual foundation for its foreign policy. But this remains ambiguous at best, which perhaps explains the absence of a formal statement of national security thus far. The BJP's lack of a clear and distinct foreign policy might be traced to its foundational ideology of *Hindutva* (i.e., Hindu-ness), which underpins its approach to the world. A deeper examination reveals some of the difficulties *Hindutva* ideology presents in influencing the BJP's stance on foreign policy.

Déja Vu

Contrary to popular belief, the predominant facets of the BJP's external strategy bear a remarkable similarity to older modes of Indian foreign policy thinking and is not as distinctive as it appears. First, a foundational element of *Hindutva* thought – which has been professed from early exponents like V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar to the current crop of leaders – is the vital importance of the defence of the nation from spoliation by foreign powers. This worldview resembles the post-colonial perspective of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi (though protagonists of *Hindutva* are inclined to club Muslim invaders and rulers from the early 11th century with later European colonisers).

A second layer to this *weltanschauung* is the priority given to "strategic autonomy" as the central plank of foreign policy strategy. Again, the similarity to past foreign policy strategies is striking. Under Nehru and his successors, the focus of India's foreign policy had been on nonalignment; Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as Foreign Minister from 1977 to 1979, spoke of "genuine nonalignment"; and BJP governments under him and Narendra Modi have tweaked the nomenclature to "multialignment." The latter – while novel in its willingness to enter into multiple strategic partnerships with major powers – is in substance aimed at the strategic autonomy sought by India's early leaders.

Third, like Nehru and his successors, *Hindutva* leaders espouse an exceptionalism that views India as a natural leader and a major power because of a civilisational strength drawn from its history and culture. Hence, the current notion that India is a "leading power" is drawn from a consensus that has long been part of the Indian outlook.

Fourth, leaders from Nehru to Modi have been driven by the belief that India has something to teach the world. As a *vishwaguru* (or world teacher, to use the BJP's appellation), it has the capacity to engineer a more harmonious global society by eliminating the distinction between East and West (e.g., the Cold War in the 20th century, and the US-Russia and US-China rifts today), and between North and South (via the G77 then and the G20 now).

Fifth, like Nehru and his post-Cold War successors, Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, Vajpayee and Modi are inclined to restrict the use of military force. All leaders have focused on defending against threats to national territory and have not attempted to project national power through overseas military intervention within a wider radius.

Sixth, a strain of hyper-pragmatism has always been present in ideationally proclaimed foreign policies and remains so under Modi. The purchase of Russian oil amidst the Ukraine crisis is hardly a novel instance of India's hard-headed expediency. India had similarly imported substantial quantities of South African diamond roughs during the apartheid era even as it castigated Pretoria's racist regime.

Finally, with respect to economic policy, just as the Nehruvian focus on autarky gave way to liberalisation under later Congress leaders Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, the BJP shifted from "swadeshi" (national self-sufficiency) to integration with the global economy, though Modi has retained elements of the former.

Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) cheer at one of Narendra Modi's election rallies in Utter Pradesh, 2014. The BJP is foundationally rooted in Hindutva ideology, which appears to have hindered it from assembling a clear foreign policy strategy. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

A New Paradigm?

Given these similarities, the question arises: what precisely is new in the *Hindutva* approach to foreign policy? One major difference is the Vajpayee government's shift from reluctant and covert nuclearization to a public and affirmative posture. But even this is not new against the long history of nuclear weapons development marked by Indira Gandhi's 1974 test, and Rajiv Gandhi's building of a rudimentary arsenal from circa 1989.

Ideology has certainly shaped several of the BJP's religion-related foreign policy initiatives. One of them includes the facilitation of citizenship for certain non-Muslim foreign refugees only. Another is the suspension of the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project, which would have dredged a portion of the Palk Strait connecting India and Sri Lanka and thus disturbed what is believed to be a sacred (Hindu) undersea pathway. These issues are not insignificant, but do not constitute fundamental planks of foreign policy strategy. In short, *Hindutva* ideology is not a foundation on which the superstructure of foreign policy is built.

At the same time, *Hindutva* implicitly carries critical difficulties for grounding foreign policies that it has yet to recognise and cope with. Any distinctive foreign policy strategy needs to be undergirded by a paradigm of thought, be it realist (centred on conflicts of interest and power), liberal (focused on the peace dividend arising from economic cooperation and democracy), or constructivist (the ideational potential for reconstructing the foundations of inter-state politics). It is not clear where *Hindutva* stands.

There are three foundational components of any coherent strategy that reflect underlying analytical paradigms. The first is the *problematique* or the central issue of concern, for instance the sources of war and the conditions of peace (as in the realist approach), or the causes of exploitation and the means to end them (as in the view of

thought about neo-colonial economic structures). A second conceptual pillar of any cohesive strategy is an understanding of the chief "actors" that shape the *problematique*. These may be largely autonomous states (realism), a multitude of interacting units from states to firms to non-government actors (liberalism), or ideational structures (strategic cultures, thought styles, and the like). The third constituent of strategy is the essential image of the world, i.e., whether it is immutably conflictive (realism) or open to change (liberalism, constructivism). This determines the prospects for shaping foreign policy.

While foreign policy strategies may not be entirely consistent and may sometimes cross paradigmatic boundaries, it is nevertheless reasonable to expect them not to be internally contradictory. This is where *Hindutva* runs into a critical conceptual inconsistency. Arguably, its *problematique* is not terribly clear beyond a focus on the causes of India's national weakness, which are attributed mainly to the depredations of external powers. In its approach to countering this, *Hindutva* ideology proposes the acquisition of material power, but it does not extend this realist logic in answering the question of how the world itself can be fundamentally altered. Realists say the world cannot be transformed; others say it can, by way of material change (liberals) or ideational change (constructivists). *Hindutva*'s aim is to transform the world through ideational efforts, which involves an odd shift from realist to constructivist foundations. Thus, *Hindutva* proposes that, on one hand, national *material* power is essential for the defence of Indian/Hindu society (the distinction is never clear); on the other, *ideational* power is the main instrument for projecting influence: the *vishwaguru* teaches by example and by its commitment to the welfare of humanity. But how is it logically consistent to conceive of changing a world defined by the distribution of material power through the use of ideational power? The contradiction is obvious.

Conclusion

Despite its efforts to clothe itself in a new vocabulary, *Hindutva* thinking does not appear to be very different from older modes of thought developed under Nehru and his successors. But its more fundamental problem is its lack of clarity on the foundational elements of foreign policy strategy. It needs to ask and answer important questions. How can its view of India's place in the world fit into the dynamics of world politics, especially in an age of increasing interdependence? How can *Hindutva* conceive of the sources of change in international politics *pragmatically*? What is the linkage between a state-centric and a civilization-centric worldview? *Hindutva* needs to provide a coherent strategic framework that eliminates its profound internal contradictions and responds to the complexity of current realities. Whether it will do so, for better or worse, remains a moot point.

Rajesh BASRUR *is Senior Fellow in the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). He is also Adjunct Professor with the Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University.*