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By Col R. Hariharan

[This article includes points made by Col Hariharan at a panel discussion on the Door Darshan TV on May 16, 2014.]

Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, has been given massive mandate by the people in the just concluded general elections to the parliament. The BJP is poised to get a majority on its own steam, even without the support of coalition partners. So Modi enjoys a lot of freedom to shape and execute his policies without depending upon the support of coalition partners. But he has clearly indicated that he would like to carry all parties along with him in furthering his national development agenda.

Despite Modi's huge public presence, New Delhi's so called liberal left-leaning "intellectual" class which had rallied against him had never been able to carry out a dispassionate analysis of Modi and his style of governance. His success has made a mockery of the traditional yardsticks of class, caste and communal equations used by analysts to study Indian political operations. He had planned and fleshed out the entire BJP election campaign using the best available human resources and technology to achieve his campaign goals.

His assertive style of leadership has a few characteristics: leading from the front, clear articulation of objectives, single minded pursuit of goals, ability to motivate his team, and thinking out of the box, assisted by indefatigable energy and oratorical skills. This had helped him make Gujarat a frontline state in development. So we can expect him to largely use his experiential learning as chief minister while serving as prime minister. As a man with abundant commonsense we can also expect him to adapt his style to suit the complexities of his new job at the national level.

Foreign policy

There is a lot of convergence in the overall foreign policy vision of the Congress party and the BJP. However, Narendra Modi's grammar and articulation of policies will make a difference to the policy dispensation. His assertive leadership style and expression will bring the much needed clarity in foreign policy pronouncements. His developmental model will offer greater opportunities for foreign countries to expand their economic relations with India, beyond the limitations of real politick.

As Modi is an assertive leader; foreign countries like the U.S. and China who have been routinely trashing Indian sentiments as a part of their policy would be more cautious in handling sensitive issues.

The U.S

George W Bush had laid a strong foundation for revamping the U.S. India relationship on a firm footing. And Dr Manmohan Singh had reciprocated it by pushing through the Indo-U.S civil nuclear agreement in the teeth of opposition. However, President Obama failed to carry it forward and both sides seem to have lost their energy or interest to keep up the momentum for reasons of national policy over the last six years.

Strangely, in a convoluted policy decision Narendra Modi was singled out for a U.S boycott after the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002. The State department withdrew his visa to visit the U.S. The American foreign office spokesman reminded Indians a few days back that the visa ban was still in force and Modi will have to apply to get it revoked. This comment came even as Indian exit polls were predicting a victory for Modi. So much for American diplomacy!

So the importance of President Obama's warm message congratulating Narendra Modi on his success, inviting him to the U.S has to be viewed in this murky environment already muddied by some of the U.S. policy dispensations affecting India. A good example is the U.S' vindictive application of IPR norms to haul up Indian pharmaceutical companies competing successfully in global markets against U.S. pharmaceutical companies.

However, we can expect Modi, being a pragmatist, ready to improve trade and economic links with the U.S. However, improvements in strategic security relations would require improvement in personal equation between the leadership of the two countries. But one thing is clear, Modi will ensure India is no pushover and the U.S cannot take India for granted any more. The U.S. to overcome the initial mess of its own making, will probably have to walk an extra mile as Modi starts implementing his economic agenda.

Pakistan

After dealing with Dr Manmohan Singh who was pliable enough to accept Pakistan as a victim of terrorism (of its own making no doubt!), Modi is likely to be more assertive without being aggressive.

There is likely to be enough scope for improving India-Pakistan trade relations (provided Pakistan Army sheds its India-phobia). However, Modi is likely to insist upon Pakistan dismantling its terrorist infrastructure across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir and hand over or prosecute terrorist masterminds involved in 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai before reopening substantive high level dialogue between the two countries.

Nawaz Sharif is struggling to talk peace with Pakistan Taliban terrorists even as they continue to carry out bomb attacks. He is also facing an increasingly restive Pak army which finds rapid marginalisation of its extra constitutional authority. While he walks the tightrope between these two forces, we may not expect any dramatic moves to bring immediate cheers in India-Pakistan relations in the near future.

China

Even before the general election, China had said it was looking forward to deal with the new government in New Delhi to carry forward the its relationship building process with New Delhi. China's readiness to invest in India would be welcomed by Narendra Modi as it could help his development agenda particularly in infrastructure building, particularly in power and railway sectors.

However, Modi has a warm personal equation with Japan which has appreciated his development model; as a result Gujarat has benefitted from Japanese investment. And China-Japan relationship is perhaps going through its worst phase now. In spite of such constraints, the entrepreneurial spirit of Modi is likely to nuance India's relationship with both Japan and China.

He is likely to overcome Chinese resistance to enlarging Indian role in ASEAN and in SAARC nations by making the economic bonding more attractive with these countries.

At the same time, New Delhi is more likely to reciprocate visibly to China's mindless pinpricks against India in the name of buttressing territorial claims like stapled visas or denial of visas, though the border talks going on are likely to continue at its own slow pace.

Sri Lanka

Narendra Modi's success has probably put Colombo in a tizzy. There are good reasons for this.

Unlike the earlier Indian Prime Minister, Modi is a strong, assertive leader. So Sri Lanka will find it cannot take him for granted. He can be more demanding from a relationship. And Sri Lanka probably fears his Hindu nationalist ideology would make him prefer dealing with Tamil

Hindus favourably than with Sinhala Buddhists.

BJP's two major allies in Tamil Nadu i.e., the MDMK led by Vaiko and the PMK led by Dr Ramadoss have been strongly espousing the Eelam Cause. They have been demanding New Delhi to take strong action against Sri Lanka for alleged war crimes. This is compounded by the resounding electoral success of the Tamil Nadu chief minister Ms Jayalalithaa, who had taken a strong anti-Rajapaksa stance. This could push BJP's Tamil Nadu allies to adopt an even more strident posture. Though the allies' electoral performance had been poor in the parliamentary poll, the BJP would probably like to build upon it to strengthen its precarious perch in Tamil Nadu. So their pressure could impact BJP's Sri Lanka policy.

On the other hand, BJP leaders have clarified that despite the electoral alliance with Vaiko and other fringe elements in Tamil Nadu, they would stick to the basics of India - Sri Lanka relations: 'No' to Tamil separatism, 'Yes' to building upon the country-to-country relationship forward regardless of leadership, and 'No' to extremism of any kind - Tamil, Jihadi or Maoist species.

Modi in spite of his dogmatism about Hindutva, is a pragmatist. He probably counts Buddha (who is one of the Dasavatars of Vishnu) as a part of Hindutva. So it will be simplistic to say that Modi or the BJP would be closer to the Tamil Hindu than the Sinhala Buddhist.

However, Modia will probably be more demanding than Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, particularly as President Rajapaksa has gone back on his promises to India to implement the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lanka constitution to fully empower the provincial councils. So Sri Lanka should be prepared to rework its lop sided political strategy tilted in favour of status quo to resume the political dialog process with Tamil political parties. Implementing the 13th Amendment in full will be its first step. We can expect the Modi government to emphasize this aspect. The same applies to implementing the UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka.

To summarise, despite his life-long association with Hindutva, Narendra Modi is a man of his own mind. He sets his own goals and makes others help him to achieve them. Modi has an uncanny ability to see the big picture and then strategise his action. His agenda is likely to be more inclusive than exclusive. The election campaign he had masterminded and successfully executed is a testimony to his way of functioning. So what BJP leaders say may not be automatically translated by him into action in the way they want. We will have to wait and see his choice of cabinet members and the way he functions in handling entirely new challenges before we can judge him.

(Col. R Hariharan, a retired Military Intelligence specialist on South Asia, is associated with the South Asia Analysis Group and the Chennai Centre for China Studies. E- mail:colhari@yahoo.com [1] Blog: www.colhariharan.org [2])

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