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## Growing Foreign and Security Policy Challenges Face India's Re-elected Modi Government

By Dr. Frank O'Donnell

The 2024 Indian general election—[the largest in human history, with 642 million taking part](#)—resulted in a third five-year term for incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling coalition headed by his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Unlike some of his predecessors, Modi has been keen to establish himself as a foreign and defense policy heavyweight. Reflecting the scale of Modi's stated ambition, India's External Affairs Minister has [compared him favorably](#) to India's founding Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, despite the latter's lasting international reputation as a global leader. BJP campaigning has emphasized this image, to the extent that a 2023 Pew poll [found](#) that 6 in 10 Indians believed their country had gained global influence over Modi's tenure, compared to around 3 in 10 respondents from nineteen other countries.

The successful BJP narrative of a confident Modi winning India new respect and clout on the world stage, however, is increasingly at odds with deepening tensions with China, alongside a combination of new and unresolved issues in its relationships with the United States and Pakistan respectively. Despite his [dominance over domestic politics and policymaking institutions](#), many of these challenges are the result of Modi's avoidance of difficult decisions. Whether compelled by his [new government's greater reliance on coalition parties](#), a [stronger parliamentary opposition](#), or a personal decision to secure a legacy through long-lasting reforms, the new mandate Modi has gained should be valuably deployed to address these growing challenges facing Indian foreign relations.

### Himalayan Hostilities

One of the largest foreign policy shifts that has taken place during Modi's tenure—although still [predating it](#)—has been China's displacement of Pakistan as the key organizing threat for strategic planners and India's wider policy community. There are several drivers for this development, including China's growing militarized belligerence toward India, dramatic qualitative advancements in PLA capabilities, and growing influence with neighbors—such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepa—which India has long considered part of its [natural backyard](#). Recent Sino-Indian flashpoints included the [2017 Doklam crisis](#), in which Indian forces entered Bhutan to prevent China building a strategic road. If completed, the road would have granted the PLA a commanding position to cut off the narrow Siliguri Corridor connecting India's northeast states to most of its territory. The standoff lasted for months, ending just before China's hosting of India and other states at the 2017 BRICS summit. Still, the resolution was only temporary as this episode became a forerunner to the [2020 Ladakh incursions](#), a worse crisis which persists today.

On the night of May 5-6, 2020, thousands of PLA troops along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) border area forcibly crossed over to seize territory in multiple areas of Indian-administered Ladakh. Their presence along the LAC had been reportedly tracked by Indian intelligence for [months](#), yet countervailing Indian military reinforcements were only sent after the incursions, [in late May](#). This occupation led to multiple injurious clashes between Indian and Chinese forces, leading up to a larger skirmish in the Galwan Valley area on the night of June 15-16. This latter incident [left at least twenty Indian soldiers and several PLA troops dead](#), and marked the first fatal LAC encounter between the two militaries [since 1975](#). While China continues to [control significant tracts of Ladakh today](#), Modi and his government have [consistently denied any incursion has taken place, and blocked discussion](#) of the issue in Parliament.

**Dr. Frank O'Donnell**, Adjunct Fellow with the East-West Center in Washington and Nonresident Fellow in the Stimson Center South Asia Program, asserts that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces growing challenges in his third term, including Chinese hostilities in the Himalayas, pursuing more peaceful relations with Pakistan, and navigating turbulence in US-India affairs.

This shock occupation has also not driven a meaningful expansion of India's military capacity, to either push out the Chinese forces or resist further incursions; the major military shifts which have taken place largely involve [moving existing formations](#), and at the cost of a [weaker presence facing Pakistan](#). How Modi decides to resolve this issue—and continued silence and relative stasis is a decision in itself—will be a key indicator of his true aspirations for India as a leading power.

### **Pursuing Peace with Pakistan**

India-Pakistan relations, by contrast, have in recent years been relatively benign – a condition which eluded many of Modi's predecessors. A ceasefire along their disputed Line of Control (LoC) border, first announced in February 2021, has proven [remarkably durable](#). This is partly due to a mutual interest in stabilizing other borders, namely India's China frontier, and Pakistan's struggles to curtail [growing terrorist activities emanating from its Afghanistan border areas](#). However, this still creates rare political room for a more formal India-Pakistan rapprochement, or even final agreement on their Kashmir territorial dispute. Even Pakistan's Army—which has [traditionally blocked such moves](#)—has [recently encouraged](#) them.

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Modi made overtures to Pakistan early in his tenure, including inviting then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend his initial inauguration in 2014, and [visiting Sharif at home](#) on his birthday in 2015—only to be burned by [Pakistan-hosted terrorist attacks on Indian military facilities in 2016](#). Since then, Modi has preferred to cultivate anti-Pakistan and [Islamophobic sentiments](#) for domestic political gain, most prominently in the [2019 militarized crisis](#) close to the Indian general elections that year. However, the durability of the ceasefire, even despite Pakistan's [ongoing domestic turmoil](#), still presents an uncommon opportunity for Modi to potentially be the Prime Minister who secured a permanent India-Pakistan settlement.

### **Navigating Turbulence in US-India Ties**

Finally, the India-US strategic partnership, as it has evolved under Modi, is facing growing critical scrutiny in Washington. Given their long-stated shared public rhetoric that the relationship is founded on mutual democratic values, the Modi government's [arresting](#) and [jailing](#) of political opposition figures, crackdown on [independent research institutions](#), and [weakening civil liberties record](#) has sparked rising criticism in the United States. Moreover, the alleged [involvement](#) of the Indian intelligence service in a 2022 attempt to assassinate a US citizen on American soil has led to robust demands by [senior US officials](#) for a prompt, thorough and transparent Indian investigation. Underlining the seriousness of this incident, US Secretary of State Blinken characterized it as representing "[transnational repression](#)," a term normally reserved for China. India has reportedly merely only moved one official involved in the plot to a different part of its government, which has [not allayed US concerns](#) that India views such operations on the soil of close partners as its natural right as a rising power.

Moreover, the other, less publicly stated, foundation of the relationship—partnering to counter the rise of China—is suffering from Modi's hesitancy. The Indian defense budget as a percentage of GDP has reached [record lows](#) during Modi's tenure, and the Indian Army vice chief [reported](#) in 2018 that 68% of its arsenal is obsolete. Significant defense procurement reforms and military budget increases are required to demonstrate India's commitment to regional and global security, and Modi remains strongly placed enough to push these through the bureaucracy.

As Modi contemplates what may be his last term as Prime Minister, the next five years will be crucial in how he decides to wield his still-substantial political capital. To be remembered as the Prime Minister who truly ensured India's status as a "[leading power](#)," his focused attention on the above foreign and security policy challenges will be critical.

*Dr. Frank O'Donnell—Adjunct Fellow with the East-West Center in Washington, Senior Research Adviser for the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, and a Nonresident Fellow in the Stimson Center South Asia Program—can be contacted at frank11285@gmail.com.*