

discuss nuclear CBMs, on 27-28 between the countries' respective foreign secretaries, and on 21-22 July between Indian Foreign Minister Singh and Pakistan Foreign Minister K.M. Kasuri. However, the latter two have already publicly exchanged words on Kashmir, with Singh saying that the 1972 Simla Agreement effectively established the LoC as a border between India and Pakistan, while Kasuri responded that the LoC could never be made into a permanent border. Although only a minor spat at this point, any sign that the INC/UPA administration is "giving away" (all or part of) Kashmir will occasion vociferous opposition from the BJP and other right-wing opposition parties.

### Conclusion

That the new INC/UPA coalition government perceives its mandate to be the betterment of the domestic situation of its citizens will allow its foreign and national security policy team a relatively free hand to pursue those goals it deems in India's interest. Although many of its stated intentions are a continuation of policies (maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent, modernising the armed forces, regularising negotiations with Pakistan) established by previous BJP/NDA administrations, one notable difference is the new administration's intention to "seek to promote multi-polarity in world relations and oppose all attempts at unilateralism". This offers an opportunity for similarly minded governments and organisations—including the European Union—to join with the new INC/UPA administration at the head of an increasingly important global country in promoting a worldwide adherence to international law and conventions. Ironically, whether India's new multi-party coalition government will hold together long enough to achieve such laudable international goals depends almost entirely on its success at realising its domestic agenda.

### A Note on the Author

Dr Apurba Kundu is Senior Research Fellow at the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS), Brussels, and Editor of the internationally refereed journal, *Contemporary South Asia*.

### Selected References

W.J. Broad, D.E. Sanger and R. Bonner, "How Pakistan's network offered the whole kit", *International Herald Tribune*, 13.02.04. • "Commonwealth re-admits Pakistan", BBC News, 22.05.04, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> • Editorial, "India Shines", *Frontline*, 21:11, 2004. • Election Commission of India at <http://www.eci.gov.in> • M. Hiebert, J. Slater and S.V. Lawrence, "Foreign Relations: Changes to Come", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27.05.04. • "India and France sign Extradition Deal", BBC News, 24.01.03, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> • Indian Parliament Home Page at <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/> • A. Kundu, *India's National Security under the BJP: 'Strong at Home, Engaged Abroad'*, EIAS Briefing Paper 04:02, 2004. • E. Luce articles in the *Financial Times*, including "BJP hopes to consign Congress dynasty to history", 10.03.04; "Vajpayee-led coalition loses impetus as voting begins", 20.04.04; "Sikkim accord warms Delhi's ties with Beijing", 09.10.03; "India docking underlies thaw with China", 13.11.03; "India and Pakistan restart the arduous journey towards peace in Kashmir", 09.06.04. • S. Majumder, "India steers clear of nuclear row", BBC News, 09.02.04, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> • "Pakistan 'to host India FM talks'", BBC News, 09.06.04, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> • *Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers* (Government of India Ministry of Defence, 2001) at <http://mod.nic.in/newadditions/welcome.html> • D. Rhode, "Was Pakistani scientist aided in nuclear transfers? Critics think he was", *International Herald Tribune*, 03.02.04. • UPA Common Minimum Programme at [http://www.sarkaritel.com/news\\_and\\_features/may2004/common\\_minimum\\_programme.htm](http://www.sarkaritel.com/news_and_features/may2004/common_minimum_programme.htm)



# Policy Brief

European Institute for Asian Studies asbl

*EIAS Policy Brief, 04/02, Juny 2004, € 10*

*Editors: Dr Willem van der Geest and Dr Apurba Kundu*

## *What are the foreign and national security policy implications of Congress' return to power in India?*

*Dr Apurba Kundu*

The 2004 Indian general elections stunned observers when, contrary to expectations, the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Atul Behari Vajpayee was defeated by an electoral coalition led by the Indian National Congress (INC) headed by Sonia Gandhi. A further surprise came when Gandhi declined to become India's first foreign-born prime minister, opting instead to back party stalwart Dr Manmohan Singh for this office. Dr Singh, India's first Sikh prime minister, now heads a United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government headed by a cabinet containing 19 INC members and 10 members of smaller parties. Will the return to power of the INC after eight years in opposition (during three years of Left Front then five years of BJP/NDA rule) result in a shift of India's foreign and national security policies?

### **Foreign and National Security Policy under the BJP/NDA**

The BJP/NDA administrations of 1996 (for two weeks), 1998-99 and 1999-2004 pursued a foreign and national security policy decisions which I have characterised elsewhere as "strong at home, engaged abroad". Evidence for the first part of this characterisation includes the Pokhran nuclear tests of 1998 which made India the world's sixth declared nuclear weapons state, the development and testing of a variety of ballistic missiles capable of covering ever longer distances, and a steady increase in defence spending on both internal and external security organisations. Being strong at home also meant establishing a National Security Council (NSC) complete with its own secretariat and headed by a National Security Advisor who acts as the government's civilian focal point for all matters pertaining to India's overall security.

The second part of the strong at home, engaged abroad foreign and national security policy of the BJP/NDA

administrations deals with their conception of India as a major player on the world stage. One part of this policy saw the government continue the country's historical participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping duties. Engaged abroad also meant building on the close defence ties with Russia dating back to 1971 to agree the purchase of an aircraft carrier, nuclear-capable bombers and anti-submarine helicopters, as well as purchasing and/or jointly building hardware from western suppliers, including Hawk training jets from the United Kingdom and Scorpene submarines from France. In a notable new development, the BJP/NDA administration built a close defence relationship with Israel, and the latter will now supply India with the American-designed Phalcon airborne early-warning radar system and Arrow 2 anti-ballistic missile system. After Russia, Israel is now India's largest supplier of defence materials.

That the United States (US) permitted Israel to sell state-of-the-art defence hardware to India reveals the closeness of the relationship which had developed between the BJP/NDA and George W. Bush administrations, respectively. In Vajpayee's words, the "common values and common interests" of the two countries led them to conduct joint naval and anti-terrorist exercises. In early 2004, the US also agreed to export highly sensitive civil nuclear and civilian space equipment to India.

Perhaps the most surprising manifestation of the engaged abroad foreign and national security policy of the BJP/NDA was its concerted effort to reduce tensions with China, the country which humiliated India in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. This administration had earlier set back decades of slowly improving relations by publicly stating that the threat posed by China was the main reason for its 1998 nuclear tests. However, Vajpayee reversed course following a visit to Beijing

The views in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIAS and its supporting institutions.

EIAS Policy Briefs analyse current issues in Asia and recommend appropriate European Union responses in a way accessible to a wide but knowledgeable audience of policy makers, analysts, academics and journalists.

The European Institute for Asian Studies is a Brussels-based policy and research think-tank supported by the European Union. It aims to promote understanding and cooperation between the EU and Asia through intellectual exchange, including research, briefings, conferences, Track II meetings, EU-Asia networks and publications. EIAS acts as a forum for political, economic, social and security issues concerning Asia and Europe.



European Institute for Asian Studies asbl

35, Rue des Deux Eglises • 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel. (32 2)230 8122 • Fax (32 2)230 5402

E-mail: [eias@eias.org](mailto:eias@eias.org) • [www.eias.org](http://www.eias.org)



in June 2003 when it was announced that India would acknowledge the Tibet Autonomous region as Chinese while, in return, China would effectively concede India's sovereignty of Sikkim. Subsequently, the two countries conducted joint naval exercises in November of that year.

The BJP/NDA's strong at home, engaged abroad foreign and national security policy also had a great effect on India's relations with Pakistan. In 1999, the two nuclear weapons-armed countries fought the Kargil Conflict and, in the spring of 2002, came close to instigating an all-out war over the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament and continued insurgent atrocities in Kashmir. However, following this near-war situation, the BJP/NDA government came to understand that it is in India's paramount interest to seek a stable, peaceful and secure relationship with Pakistan. This would allow it to develop a mutually beneficial economic relationship with its neighbour, as well as free India for a larger global role. Hence the Indo-Pak "Composite Dialogue" announced at the 12th South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held in January 2004. This led to a planned roadmap of meetings between the two countries to address issues of concern, including Kashmir and nuclear arsenal confidence-building measures (CBMs). The warming of Indo-Pak relations also manifested itself in New Delhi's uncharacteristic reticence over revelations that Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, leader of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, had for years been selling nuclear secrets to other countries, and its decision to not oppose Pakistan's re-entry into the Commonwealth (from which it had been suspended after General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup d'état).

In all of the above manifestations of the BJP/NDA administrations' strong at home, engaged abroad foreign and national security policy, the leading role was played by Prime Minister Vajpayee, assisted by a small group of individuals. These include Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, External Affairs Ministers Jaswant Singh and (subsequently) Yashwant Singh, Defence Minister George Fernandes and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. It was always the intention of the BJP leadership that an India revitalised by the ideology of hindutva would be able to take its rightful place at the top tier of international relations. Becoming the sixth nuclear weapons state, refusing to cross the line-of-control (LoC) during the Kargil Conflict, supporting the Bush administration in its "War Against Terrorism", and improving relations with China and Pakistan have complimented India's increasing economic clout, and the country has been increasingly perceived as a major international player. Will the new INC/UPA government continue this process?

### **Foreign and National Security Policy under the INC/UPA**

#### *The Common Minimum Programme*

The outgoing BJP/NDA government called early elections in the belief that India's record rise in economic growth, peace process with Pakistan and the personal standing of Vajpayee would lead voters to return them to power with an increased majority. Yet their "India shining" campaign left rural, minority and lower status voters feeling dissatisfied and/or left out of the process of economic development.

Thus, the new INC/UPA administration perceives its victory in the 2004 general elections to be primarily a mandate for bettering the socio-economic status of the common Indian. Therefore, the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) just agreed upon by all members of the INC/UPA coalition focuses on domestic goals, rather than foreign and national security policy matters (of the 5,631 words contained in the CMP, just 730 deal with "J&K, North-East", "Defence, internal security" and "Foreign policy").

In these three foreign and national security sections of the CMP, the INC/UPA administration describes a number of policy positions similar to those pursued by the outgoing BJP/NDA government. In terms of internal security, the new coalition administration will pursue "dialogue with all groups and with different shades of opinion in J&K [Jammu & Kashmir]...on a sustained basis" while continuing to "tackle terrorism, militancy and insurgency" in the northeast. Regarding defence, the INC/UPA promises to continue the modernisation of the armed forces, further institutionalise the NSC, and retain India's nuclear weapons programme while, at the same time, pursuing nuclear CBMs with Pakistan and universal nuclear disarmament. As for foreign policy, like the BJP/NDA government, the new coalition administration is "committed to deepening ties with Russia and Europe", expanding trade and investment with China simultaneous with pursuing border negotiations, and intensifying relations with Southeast Asia. As for Pakistan, the INC/UPA will continue to negotiate "all issues...systematically and on a sustained basis".

Although the nature of foreign and national security policy mean that government objectives are traditionally slow to change, the CMP outlines a number of significant differences between the BJP/NDA and INC/UPA administrations. The new government intends to rescind the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) which has been blamed for any number of excesses in the fight against domestic disorder. In a related measure, the new coalition also will "take the strictest possible action without fear or favour, against all those individuals and organisations that spread social discord, disturb social amity and propagate religious bigotry and communal hatred". In terms of foreign policy, the INC/UPA administration intends to pursue "an independent foreign policy, keeping in mind its past traditions...even as it pursues closer engagements and relations with the USA". It will also give a "fresh thrust" to relations with West Asia. Closer to home, the CMP states that the new government will give the "highest priority to building closer...ties with its neighbours in South Asia and to strengthen[ing] SAARC". How realistic are these goals? Much of the answer will depend on the team assembled to pursue them.

#### *The New Team*

The new INC/UPA government's foreign and national security policy leadership team has a long record of public service. Now 72, Prime Minister Singh earned a doctorate in Economics from the University of Oxford before embarking on a career in the civil service which saw him hold a series of important posts including Chief Economic Advisor in the Ministry of Finance, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, and Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. Most famously, as Finance

Minister in the INC administration of Narasimha Rao, Singh began India's heralded economic liberalisation process in 1991. Now 73, External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh studied history at Cambridge before entering the Indian Foreign Service where he eventually served as ambassador to Pakistan in the early 1980s. Known as a Gandhi family loyalist with excellent number-crunching skills and a prodigious memory, Singh served as a junior minister in the INC government of Rajiv Gandhi, and was head of the party's foreign policy cell before being appointed to his current post. Now 69, Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee has enjoyed a long and distinguished political career, having held portfolios in the respective ministries of External Affairs, Finance, Commerce, Shipping and Transport, Industrial Development, Revenue and Banking, and Steel and Mines. At 68, National Security Advisor J.N. Dixit is the youngest member of the new INC/UPA foreign and national security policy decision-making team. He has served as ambassador to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, respectively, as well as Foreign Secretary and on the NCS Advisory Board. A well-known author, Dixit has long been a key figure in formulating INC policy on defence, security and foreign policy matters.

There are a number of concerns about the personalities involved at the top of the foreign and national security policy decision-making hierarchy of the new coalition government. Although his economic credentials are impeccable, Prime Minister Singh has hitherto shown little interest in foreign and national security policy. Much of the credit for the previous government's improvement in relations with Pakistan goes to Prime Minister Vajpayee for repeatedly initiating efforts to kick-start negotiations. Will Singh be so personally involved? Also, as a long-time member of the Indian parliament's upper house (where members are elected by state assemblies or appointed), the new prime minister has no experience of winning a popular vote (Singh must win a seat to the lower house within 6 months), much less of leading a coalition government. Additionally, no one predicted an INC/UPA victory in the recent general elections. Even when it became apparent that a new government was to be formed, Singh was tipped for the office of Finance Minister. Does he have the political appetite for the top job? A further, and potentially major complication, will be Prime Minister Singh's relationship with INC leader Sonia Gandhi. Will he be used as a foil, or be allowed full freedom of action? Will the opposition view the relationship between prime minister and party leader as one of equals, or one of puppet and puppeteer?

Similar concerns apply to External Affairs Minister Singh, Defence Minister Mukherjee and National Security Advisor Dixit. The first concerns their advanced years. This is less a reflection of their individual chronological age than a worry that their world views were formed during the heyday of the non-aligned movement (NAM) first championed by Jawaharlal Nehru and then clung on to by successive INC administrations for decades afterwards. After eight years out of power—and with no real expectations of returning to power until the results of the elections were announced—how will the new foreign policy and national security team react to a unipolar world where the current US administration disdains international co-operation, treaties and law? Also,

like the prime minister, External Affairs Minister Singh and Defence Minister Mukherjee are relatively inexperienced popular politicians. The former remains a member of the Indian parliament's upper house while the latter, also formerly in the upper house, won his first election to the lower house only this year. Lacking a popular base, how will these two manage the inevitable ministerial turf wars? Finally, as with the prime minister, Mukherjee's expertise had him tipped to run a ministry (Home) other than the one he finally agreed to take. How dedicated will he be to the defence portfolio?

#### *Challenges*

The new INC/UPA government depends on the support of a Left Bloc of four radical leftwing and/or communist parties for its majority in parliament. The Bloc has divergent views on a number of foreign and national security matters. For Prakash Karat, a member of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM),

a course correction is required. The Vajpayee government had tied India's foreign policy to America's strategic goals...We want to revert to an independent foreign policy...we should not be seen to be acting as the chief agent of the US. The new government has to make its policy clear on Iraq. Bottomline: End of American occupation there...We are not for NMD [national missile defence] nor for talks about it.

Similarly, argues Karat, the "tilt towards Israel should end. We don't want any strategic tie-up with Israel. We want active sympathy for the Palestinian movement". Despite the CMP's stated commitment to "traditional ties" with West Asia, Defence Minister Mukherjee has announced that Indo-Israeli defence cooperation will continue. It remains to be seen how much room for manoeuvre this dependency on outside support will allow the new INC/UPA government.

Even within the new 13-party coalition government, potential tensions are obvious. Immediately upon taking office, Foreign Minister Singh stated that "India will pursue a foreign policy not tied to any dogma". Nonetheless, he added, "We are for the closest relations with the US". How does this tie in with the CMP's declaration that the new government "will maintain the independence of India's foreign policy...on all regional and global issues", as well as the INC's historical championing of NAM? Also, as with any coalition government, attention must be paid to the interests of the minor partners. In this case, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagan, the second-largest party in the INC/UPA coalition, has got the CMP to state that new government will "support peace talks in Sri Lanka...that fulfil the legitimate aspirations of Tamils and religions [sic] minorities". How does this fit in with the new government's commitment to respect its regional neighbours? (Remember that it was the INC administration of Rajiv Gandhi which sent the ill-fated Indian Peace-keeping Force to Sri Lanka in the 1980s.)

The right-wing, nationalist nature of its domestic opposition means the new INC/UPA government will have to tread carefully when it comes to Pakistan. While the recent change of government postponed the Indo-Pak talks that were due to take place in May, it has since been announced that meetings will take place on 19-20 June to