



Modi and India's role in the US pivot to Asia

The new prime minister seems far more interested in stabilizing India's shaky economy than playing geopolitics

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With Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington for meetings with President Barack Obama, many observers are asking how his visit — and his diplomatic priorities more generally — will bear on the simmering competition between Washington and Beijing.

Modi has been on a diplomatic tear since he was took office in May, meeting with the leaders of Japan, China and now the United States. His visit and personal leadership style almost certainly will not alter the course of U.S.-Indian relations or India's role in U.S. policy toward China. It is not the leadership or any individual but underlying factors that make India likely to play an important role in the U.S.-Chinese relationship. The longstanding belief in the U.S. foreign policy establishment that India, as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), was on the other side of the Cold War started to fade in the late 1990s. India's interest in the NAM — and to a lesser extent in the Soviet Union — was more about countering China than endorsing Soviet communism.

Still, India remains the most confounding sort of state to U.S. leaders — a country that likes the United States and seeks friendly relations with it but does not portray itself as a junior partner in Washington's various adventures around the world. Rather, India cooperates or disagrees with the U.S. where its interests overlap or diverge. For example, New Delhi has dragged its feet on sanctioning and limiting trade with Iran over its nuclear program and has sent no signal of substance on the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). However, India will likely continue to play a supporting role on another issue that is very important to Washington: the U.S.-led encirclement of China. This has little to do with Modi's ideology and much to do with India's geography and great-power politics. The disputed territory between China and India means New Delhi cannot help supporting this policy.

While Washington's primary concern is with Chinese naval modernization, India plays a supporting role by complicating Chinese defense planning. As India focuses on defending itself

against potential military threats on land, it creates trade-offs in Beijing between naval and land forces, pushing China to devote more defense planning and money to both land and sea power. During his recent meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Modi [called for settling the border dispute](#), but there has been no discernable progress toward that goal. For its part, China has created more than enough headaches for itself in the South and East China seas and seems unlikely to be spoiling for a flare-up in Arunachal Pradesh or Ladakh.

India's comparative demographic situation, another underlying factor that makes India useful to U.S. interests in East Asia, has nothing to do with Modi either. While China possesses a demographic problem — the question whether it can grow rich before it grows old — India's demographic profile is much younger, which should allow it more room to maneuver in its policy choices. It is also more balanced by gender. In 2040, roughly 68 percent of India's population will be made up of working-age men and women, an increase of over 300 million from today.

This means that the gap between India and China in terms of working-age populations will be roughly 400 million in India's favor by 2040. By 2030, there will be roughly 100 million young men with at least a high school education in India, compared with 75 million in China. The effect of these demographic realities on economic growth and national power should enable India to play a greater role in the region's security.

Beyond burnishing his nationalist credentials, Modi's priorities during his diplomatic junkets appear to be somewhat more basic: stabilizing India's shaky economic development.

These factors could conspire to push India toward becoming a reliable U.S. partner, but the fact that Modi has sought to foster fruitful relations with China as well as U.S. allies in the region, combined with his background, suggest that he is unlikely to fall into that role. Modi is a Hindu nationalist, so much so that he was the only person barred from entering the United States because of a U.S. law penalizing foreign leaders who fail to protect the rights of their religious minorities. (In 2002, during his tenure as governor of Gujarat state, he [failed to stop riots and mob violence](#) between Hindus and Muslims; more than 1,000 people were killed, most of them Muslim.)

Beyond burnishing his nationalist credentials, Modi's priorities during his diplomatic junkets appear to be somewhat more basic: stabilizing India's shaky economic development. Although he made headlines with a statement during his visit with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe referring obliquely to Chinese "[expansionism](#)," the emphasis of his travels appears to center on strengthening Indian economic growth. Wildly divergent economic policies among India's provinces have produced, unsurprisingly, markedly divergent economic results. For example, Modi's Gujarat ranked [first in a recent ranking of economic freedom in India](#). Even his recent meeting with Xi focused not on security issues but on [deals](#) to cooperate in Indian rail modernization and to set up a number of cooperative industrial parks and allow increased penetration of Indian goods and services in China.

India's "success as a powerful democracy would help to transform the greater South Asian region while serving as an objective constraint on growing Chinese power," Ashley Tellis, a

former U.S. India policy official, said [recently](#), commenting on the United States' interest in India's economic growth. Interestingly, Japan and China support India's growth as well. Despite commentators' tendency to examine what impact Modi's diplomacy might have on India's role in U.S.-China relations, it may be his economic success or failure that bears more heavily on the future of the region.

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