



## Indian Election: A Limited Thriller

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Back In September 2014, when Narendra Modi was in Washington for his first visit as prime minister, I remember standing outside near the White House and doing a live interview with an Indian television reporter—one of many that had converged on the city to provide wall-to-wall coverage of a major event for US-India relations.

The first question I received was perfectly predictable: “What does America think about the prime minister’s visit?”

I paused and considered how to respond. I could have spoken about the significance of Washington welcoming a man who just months earlier, before he took office as premier, couldn’t get a US visa. Or I could have offered some anodyne comments about the importance of the bilateral relationship and how Modi’s visit amplified the strength of the partnership.

But instead of being banal, I chose to be blunt.

“Actually, I doubt most Americans even know that Modi is here,” I said.

This clearly wasn’t the response that the reporter was expecting. But I thought it important to make the simple point that the visit of an Indian prime minister isn’t going to register on the radars of Americans in a big way.

And neither, nearly five years later, is India’s election.

Of course, there’s a much bigger story at play here—one that gets to the matter of how Americans think about international affairs. Thanks in part to America’s long geographic distance from much of the world’s hot spots, my countrymen and countrywomen have long had the luxury of not having to pay much attention to the world around them. This is especially the case outside the Washington DC area, and away from the east and west coasts and major urban spaces (excluding university campuses and other institutions that are international in their focus), where fewer jobs revolve around global affairs.

Certainly, there are always cases—from US foreign wars to Donald Trump’s recent summitry with Kim Jong Un—when Americans focus laser-like on their country’s engagements abroad. And there are other cases—from the 9/11 attacks to the current debates about immigration—when international affairs become utterly domestic and therefore impossible for Americans to overlook or ignore.

And yet, on the whole, Americans remain relatively uninterested in foreign affairs—and particularly in the Trump era, when the domestic news cycle is seemingly on overdrive every single day. In an enlightening 2018 essay, A Trevor Thrall, a Cato Institute senior fellow who studies US attitudes toward foreign policy, used Pew polling data and Google Trends to highlight

just how disconnected Americans are from the world around them. In 2017, he noted, less than 40 per cent of them knew who was the president of France—and less than 45 per cent knew the name of their own secretary of state. Thrall also concluded that Americans do relatively few Google searches on international affairs—with Americans inside the Beltway (that is, within the Washington DC area) conducting on average twice as many as those outside the Beltway.

Perhaps the starkest example of US inattention to the world is the war in Afghanistan. US troops have been fighting there for nearly two decades, and they continue to die there. And yet, a Rasmussen Reports survey from July 2018 found that 20 per cent of ‘likely US voters’ did not think that America was still at war in Afghanistan. And another 20 per cent were not sure. In effect, 40 per cent of likely American voters—there are about 235 million eligible American voters on the whole—didn’t know that America’s longest-ever war is still being fought.

ELSEWHERE IN THE West, and across the globe on the whole, the story is more complicated. For those in remote regions lacking access to information and communications technology, interest in the world is understandably limited. But in more developed and built-up areas, people pay a whole lot of attention to what’s happening across their borders.

Still, such deeper levels of engagement don’t mean they’re paying a tremendous amount of attention to the Indian election. In an era when the foreign news cycle is always frenetic—and social media ensures a non-stop flow of information—there are plenty of big international stories to which consumers of international news pay little mind.

To be sure, since polling began on April 11th, and also in the days leading up to April 11th, the election has attracted ample attention from major media outlets. But this coverage has been fairly narrowly focused. The size and complexity of India’s elections, for instance, have been a recurrent theme. Media organisations in countries with their own upcoming elections have used this size factor as a hook for their own coverage. ‘You think Australian elections are big?’ stated a headline in the Sydney Morning Herald. ‘In India, an eighth of the world’s population is in line to vote.’

The very features of this election—size and length—that helped attract global attention to it in its initial days later drove attention away from it. We live in an era when attention spans are shredded by social media, ‘smart brevity’, and rapidly changing news cycles. Expecting the world’s sustained attention on a weeks-long electoral process is expecting too much.

There has also been emphasis on the BJP’s use of jingoistic rhetoric on the campaign trail, and on the potential electoral impact of the recent India-Pakistan crisis—something that generated plenty of international attention once the two sides launched air strikes on each other’s soil. Indeed, had there been no Pulwama, no Balakot, and no aerial dogfight, then there would likely be less global news coverage of the Indian election than there is now.

Global media coverage of the election has also featured profiles of key political personalities, primers on ‘what to expect’, and predictable coverage of stories with shock value (such as a distraught young man from UP who chopped off his finger after voting for the wrong candidate).

However, with some notable exceptions from major outlets, the world hasn’t produced continuous journalistic deep dives on the Indian election. And aside from meaty reports issued by think tanks and research organisations in Washington and beyond, there really haven’t been that many detailed products put out in the public domain.

India may be the world's biggest democracy, and it may boast one of its biggest populations and economies. But it's not one of the biggest draws for a global citizenry that simply has so much else on its mind. That 'so much else' includes some very big and ongoing stories that have gotten even bigger in the days since Indians started heading to the polls. These include the release of the Mueller Report and the latest vote to delay Brexit. And then there were tragedies like the Notre Dame fire in Paris and above all the horrific Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, along with the lingering effects of the Christchurch shootings in New Zealand.

Additionally, and ironically, the very features of the election—size and length—that helped attract global attention to it in its initial days later drove attention away from it. We live in an era when attention spans are shredded by social media, 'smart brevity', and rapidly changing news cycles. Expecting the world's sustained attention on a weeks-long electoral process is expecting too much.

Perhaps the most successful effort to get the word out about India's election to the world—delivered in a succinct, yet substantive 30-minute package—came from an Indian-American comedian. Hasan Minhaj dedicated an episode of his popular Netflix show Patriot Act to the Indian polls. And yet, much of the positive and negative buzz about by the show—including a #BoycottNetflix campaign on Twitter in reaction to Minhaj's comparison of Modi to Trump—came from Indians and Indian-Americans. Indeed, there are more than 26,000 comments posted about the show on its YouTube page, and most of them appear to be written by Indians and Indian-Americans.

This isn't to overstate the interest of the Indian diaspora in the election. To be sure, to some extent it is quite strong—especially for those non-resident Indians who choose to exercise their franchise and vote. Modi's own direct outreach to the diaspora helps spur and sustain its interest in Indian politics as well. And yet, like all large diasporas, the Indian one is complex and no monolith. There are those who are deeply invested in Indian politics, and then there are those who pay less attention.

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IN THIS DAY AND age, with the news cycle saturated with so many bad news stories, it's not necessarily a bad thing to be overlooked. If your election isn't generating that much attention globally, then that must mean that the world doesn't think there are enough problematic electoral happenings to attract scrutiny.

The recent electoral experiences of India's neighbors are illustrative. Pakistan's July 2018 election, and the lead up to it, generated ample international media attention because of concerns about pre-election rigging by the military. Bangladesh's poll late last year was in the news—even though the country itself rarely makes global headlines except for terrorist attacks and natural disasters—because of allegations that the ruling party stole the election.

Wait, detractors of Indian politics might say. During India's election campaign, and in the days after polling began, top political leaders have resorted to ugly and Islamophobic rhetoric. They have maligned countrymen killed in terrorist attacks. And Prime Minister Modi himself, in an

apparent effort to exploit nationalist sentiment in his electoral favor, even used a campaign speech to boast of India's nuclear threat to Pakistan—a highly unusual move for a nation that takes its reputation as a responsible nuclear power very seriously.

So shouldn't this all be worthy of the world's attention, given that it's playing out in a nation that prides itself on its secular and pluralistic traditions and projects itself as a rising power and responsible player on the world stage?

That's a fair point—but keep in mind that India has a relatively positive global image. This insulates it from the intense global criticism and other negative attention from the world that frequently rains down on other countries—such as Pakistan—that don't enjoy as stellar of a reputation overseas.

To understand this dynamic, recall the aftermath of the recent India- Pakistan crisis.

The crisis featured several key elements that worked against New Delhi. The Pulwama attack—carried out by a local Kashmiri man radicalised, according to his parents, after getting beaten up by Indian police officers—brought global attention to India's heavy-handed security policies in Kashmir. New Delhi struggled to provide strong evidence to convince the world that its retaliatory strike in Balakot had killed dozens of terrorists and that it had shot down a Pakistani F-16. And Imran Khan, by releasing a detained Indian pilot, was able to claim the title of conciliator and peacemaker.

And yet, despite these public relations achievements for Pakistan during the spat, India had the last laugh. And that's because world capital after world capital issued statements demanding that Pakistan do more about its terrorism problem. Meanwhile, few capitals or international forums (with the exception of a resolution released by the Organization of Islamic Countries, or OIC) called on India to reassess its Kashmir policies. Even Islamabad's close allies in Beijing and Riyadh were silent.

When your image abroad is strong, you often get the benefit of the doubt from global observers. And so that means you get a pass, with the result of relatively muted (but by no means nonexistent) press coverage and criticism, when your election campaign falls prey to ugliness.

None of this is to suggest that the world isn't watching India's election. On the contrary. Policymakers are keen to know who will be leading the government of one of the West's most important partners in Asia. For Washington, which has seen its relationship with Beijing take a major tumble, and views New Delhi as a critical player to help push back against China—particularly after the release of its new Indo-Pacific strategy—India has never been more important.

In this tale of the world's tendency to overlook the Indian election, there's something to be said about India's global status. A key attribute of a world power— whether a longstanding superpower like the United States or a major force like China or Russia—is that the world pays attention

Meanwhile, foreign investors will want to know if India's next government can find a way to push through much-needed economic reforms, reverse the troubling rise in unemployment, and make India a more investment-friendly place. Overseas financiers are keen to take advantage of

Indian markets but frustrated by continued obstacles in the investment environment that they believe the Modi Government did not sufficiently address.

Finally, human rights and religious freedom activists will want to see whether the new political leadership eases up on, or intensifies, the communal and nationalistic agenda pursued by the outgoing administration that has made many members of religious minority communities feel increasingly vulnerable—if not downright endangered.

STILL, EVEN AS these small but strategic global constituencies are quietly observing the election and its outcome, the event is a relative sideshow on the world stage. It is a topic that draws some interest and media coverage, but not one that attracts sustained and substantive attention.

In this tale of the world's tendency to overlook the Indian election, there's something to be said about India's global status. A key attribute of a world power—whether a longstanding superpower like the United States or a major force like China or Russia—is that the world pays attention. When Donald Trump sneezes, the world takes notice—as it did with his predecessors. Likewise, it doesn't take much for China or Russia to do something that prompts the world to take notice.

India, to this point, doesn't attract as much notice. That will change if and when its economic and military clout and other rising-power credentials continue to grow, and it graduates to the status of a global power. Once it achieves that milestone, Indian elections will get a lot more attention.

And more Americans will take note when India's prime minister comes to Washington.