

India and Use of Force in International Politics: Before and After Modi

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Summary

India's evolving approach to the use of force in international relations reflects a significant shift towards a more assertive stance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As a rising power, India's decisions on the use of force have profound implications for both regional stability in South Asia and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. This paper examines how India's military strategy has transformed at strategic, conventional and sub-conventional levels, driven by a combination of increased state capacity, a changing international context and strong leadership commitment. Understanding this transformation is essential for assessing India's role in shaping global stability and responding to emerging security challenges.

Introduction

In a world where geopolitical flashpoints dominate headlines, the question of why and how states use force is more pertinent than ever. The resort to force in the pursuit of national interests is not just a driving feature of international politics but one of the most pressing challenges in international relations.¹ The timing, purpose and consequences of such actions hold profound material and normative implications.² Force is the ultimate tool in inter-state interactions, revealing much about the nature of the international system and individual state behaviour. Each use of force sets off a cycle of strategic moves and countermoves with real-life consequences. Understanding why and when states choose to employ force is crucial for enhancing conflict resolution, deterrence, and defence mechanisms. At all levels – strategic, conventional or sub-conventional – the actual or threatened use of force commands significant attention. Deciphering these patterns is essential for shaping effective international policies and sustaining global stability.

As a regional power in South Asia, India's approach to the use of force has always attracted significant attention from both policymakers as well as academia.³ However, its significance is far greater today than ever in India's history because of New Delhi's rise in the global order in the last two decades.⁴

¹ Robert J Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The use of force : military power and international politics* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

² Waltz, K. (2018), *Man, the state, and war* (Columbia University Press).

³ Dasgupta, S., & Cohen, S. P. (2011), 'Is India Ending its Strategic Restraint Doctrine?', *The Washington Quarterly*, 34(2), pp. 163-177.

⁴ Bommakanti, Kartik. (2012), 'The Use of Force—Stability and Instability: India, Pakistan, and China', *India Review*, 11(3), pp. 161-190.

First, when, why and how New Delhi resorts to actual use or incline towards use of force does matter significantly not only for the conflict dynamics in Southern Asia which has both a history of territorial disputes and is home to three contiguous nuclear weapons powers in the world but has significant geopolitical implications for the Indo-Pacific.⁵

Second, at a systemic level, India's behaviour on use of force directly feeds into the anxieties concerning how rising powers relate to the system of international law, norms and regimes governing the conduct of inter-state interactions.⁶ Rising powers which frequently resort to the use of force may appear to be fundamentally dissatisfied with the extant system compared to those which resort to force infrequently. All rising powers do seek some realignment of global order to suit both their interests and status concerns, but the question is to what degree and how.⁷ Use of force behaviour can be a good indicator to understand whether a rising power is primarily status quoist or significantly revisionist.

Third, in an era where nationalism and populism are driving domestic politics around the world, use of force and the toughness of national character it reflects has also become a central feature of how leaders compete for domestic legitimacy and power within the body-politik.

The Past and Present of India's Approach to the Use of Force

India's approach to the use of force has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, reflecting a shift in both strategy and execution. The right to use of force is now coming to the centre stage of India's statecraft.⁸ This evolution is particularly noticeable when comparing the current government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi to historical precedents.

At the strategic level, the transition in India's approach began well before the present government in New Delhi, as Chris Clary and Vipin Narang have shown in some of their research.⁹ However, the Modi government's official utterances on India's readiness to embrace the logic of nuclear wars and its inclination to use nuclear weapons in India's defence have seen significant uptick most vividly captured by Modi's statement that India has not developed weapons for Diwali shortly after the India-Pakistan crisis in February 2019 and in the run up to the 2019 general elections.¹⁰

⁵ Harsh V Pant, Kartik Bommakanti, 'India's national security: challenges and dilemmas', *International Affairs*, Volume 95, Issue 4, July 2019, pp. 835-857.

⁶ Rohan Mukherjee, 'A Hindu Nationalist Foreign Policy: Under Modi, India Is Becoming More Assertive', *Foreign Affairs*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/hindu-nationalist-foreign-policy>.

⁷ Schweller, Randall L., 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In', *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, pp. 72-107.

⁸ S. P. Pradhan, 'A national security strategy for India: Documenting strategic vision prudently', *The Times of India*, 7 November 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/ChanakyaCode/a-national-security-strategy-for-india-documenting-strategic-vision-prudently/>.

⁹ Clary, Christopher and Vipin Narang, 'India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities', *International Security*, vol. 43 no. 3, 2018, pp. 7-52.

¹⁰ Joshi, Y. (2023), 'Who Is Getting Nuked? Nuclear Taboo, Adversary Types, and Atomic Dispositions', *Security Studies*, 32(1), pp. 180-187.

At the level of conventional military operations, beginning with special operations against militants operating from Myanmar in 2015, the Modi government has employed India's land and air vectors against Pakistan as a punishment to the latter's proxy wars in Kashmir.¹¹ Even on the China border, during the Galwan crisis of 2020, New Delhi resorted to the proactive use of military forces to dissuade further territorial aggrandisement by the People's Liberation Army.¹² Such proactive use of military forces does not only concern India's national defence but also its emerging role as a net security provider and order preserver in the Indo-Pacific, evident in the largest and currently ongoing deployment of the Indian Navy in the North-western Arabian Sea against threats to international shipping from the Houthi rebels and Somalian pirates.¹³

At the sub-conventional level, the Modi government has significantly ratcheted intelligence operations against what it deems to be national security threats operating in foreign countries.¹⁴ For instance, intelligence-based operations against terrorists in Pakistan, by their own admission, are considered to be a significant achievement in national security policy of the Modi government. Allegedly, these intelligence operations have also been in play much beyond India's immediate neighbourhood.

The moral framework guiding India's use of force has also shifted. Historically, India's hesitance to use force was partly rooted in moral considerations and the quest for international legitimacy.¹⁵ This conservative approach has diminished under Modi, who has framed the use of force within a narrative of national strength and security. The celebration of India's emergence as a 'hard state' contrast sharply with the past emphasis on restraint and moralism.¹⁶ Even at international forums, India has now started championing the use of force as a legitimate tool to secure India's vital interests.¹⁷

Additionally, the use of force has become an important tool for domestic political legitimacy. Opinion polls consistently show that military actions have bolstered Modi's image as a decisive leader.¹⁸ This strategic use of force for electoral gains is a departure from the past, where military actions were less explicitly tied to political popularity. While it

¹¹ Joshi, Yogesh, 'Five Years of Balakot: A New Nuclear South Asia', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/five-years-of-balakot-a-new-nuclear-south-asia/>.

¹² 'A Stare and a Wink: How India Achieved a Chinese Rollback in the Himalayas', *Asia Global Online*, 2021, <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/stare-and-wink-how-india-achieved-chinese-rollback-himalayas>; and Ahmed, Ali, 'India's Strategic Shift: From Restraint to Proactivism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 48, 2016, pp. 10-12.

¹³ Kalyan Ray, 'Navy Deploys 11 Subs and 35 Warships Amidst Growing Military Activities in Indian Ocean', *Deccan Herald*, 23 March 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/navy-deploys-11-subs-and-35-warships-amidst-growing-military-activities-in-indian-ocean-2950181>.

¹⁴ Praveen Swami, 'As India's external intelligence operations expand globally, a growing army of spies left out in the cold', *The Print*, 3 October 2023, <https://theprint.in/india/as-indias-external-intelligence-operations-expand-globally-a-growing-army-of-spies-left-out-in-the-cold/1784764/>.

¹⁵ Sullivan, K., 'Exceptionalism in Indian Diplomacy: The Origins of India's Moral Leadership Aspirations', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37(4), 2014, pp. 640-655.

¹⁶ Hall, I., 'India's foreign policy: nationalist aspirations and enduring constraints', *The Round Table*, 2022, 111(3), pp. 321-332.

¹⁷ Srinivas Burra, 'India's Decisive Turn on the Right of Self-Defence', *OpinioJuris*, 22 March 2021, <https://opiniojuris.org/2021/03/22/indias-decisive-turn-on-the-right-of-self-defence/>.

¹⁸ Rajdeep Sardesai, 'How Balakot won Modi 2019 election', *Rediff*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/how-balakot-won-modi-2019-election/20200206.htm>.

would be simplistic to attribute Modi's electoral success solely to his aggressive policies, the correlation between assertive military actions and voter support is evident.

Under Modi's leadership, India has transitioned from a traditionally reactive and morally restrained use of force to a more proactive and assertive stance. This shift is evident across strategic, conventional, and sub-conventional levels of conflict, marking a significant departure from historical practices. Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have redefined India's image, moving away from Bernard Nossiter's characterisation of India as a "soft state" to one that is unapologetically willing to use force to secure its national interests.

Explanations

There are three factors in play at three different levels of analysis.

These are India's international context, its state capacity and, finally, the present regime's commitment. The first derives from the uniqueness of India's international position in the current global geopolitics and therefore is much more systemic. The second derives from capabilities the Indian state has accumulated during its rise, which again is a much more secular trend over the last two decades and an attribute of the Indian state as it currently poised. The last however is far more idiosyncratic to the present dispensation. It has an ideological and leadership element but is also derived from the executive power the Modi government has accumulated through India's electoral politics.

International Context

The Modi government's approach to the use of force significantly diverges from its predecessors, influenced by a distinct international context and India's evolving position on the global stage. During the Cold War's bipolarity and the subsequent unipolar era, the international environment often discouraged the use of force in pursuing India's interests. Limited capacity necessitated that New Delhi maintained favourable relations with great powers and international public opinion.¹⁹

Historically, India relied on deterrence and defence rather than proactive or pre-emptive use of force, except when possessing an overwhelming balance of power. For example, Jawaharlal Nehru's cautious stance on Kashmir contrasted with his decisive action in liberating Goa. The need for great power support in conflicts, such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, compelled India to exercise significant restraint.²⁰ Both the United States (US) and the Soviet Union conditioned their support on India's moderation.

When facing overwhelming military superiority, as seen during the insurgencies in the Northeast in the 1950s and 1960s and limited operations in the Indian Ocean during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, India was less hesitant to employ force. However, post-Cold War

¹⁹ Bernard Nossiter, *Soft state; a newspaperman's chronicle of India* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

²⁰ Joshi, Y., 'India's Radical Reimagination: No More Bandwagoning, for Real', *The Washington Quarterly*, 45(4), 2022, pp. 133-156.

unipolarity, global attitudes towards sovereignty and interventions, and India's nuclear environment contributed to strategic restraint. The Kargil War exemplified this restraint, as India prioritised creating a favourable strategic context over immediate military gains. The last decade, however, has seen a significant shift in these conditions. First the de-hyphenation of India and Pakistan, along with the US strategy of balancing power in the Indo-Pacific against China, has granted India greater leeway for military actions in its neighbourhood. Unlike previous crises, recent American policy has consistently supported India's punitive measures against Pakistan's terrorism in Kashmir. Second, the intensifying US-China rivalry provides New Delhi with substantial room to manoeuvre. India perceives this competition as an assurance that the US will support its actions against China, reinforcing its confidence in pursuing strategic interests, even amid regional escalation threats. This perception also underpins India's stance on resisting American pressure regarding Ukraine. Lastly, the recent trend towards normalisation of force in international relations further emboldens India. The post-9/11 US actions, along with Russia and China's increasing military assertiveness, signal to Indian elites that as India ascends in the global hierarchy, the use of force should be integrated into its statecraft.

Under Modi, India's approach to force is marked by a strategic shift, influenced by supportive international dynamics and a reinterpretation of national interests. This new paradigm reflects a departure from historical restraint towards a more assertive and normalised use of military power in India's foreign policy.

State Capacity

India's rise has significantly bolstered its ability to use force and manage its consequences. By all metrics, India's latent capacity and active military capability are greater today than at any point in its history.²¹ This growth has been supported by both Western nations and countries like Russia. India's economic and military ascent provides it with the resources to pursue national interests and absorb potential repercussions. Strategic partnerships have further enhanced specific capabilities. For example, collaboration with Israeli intelligence has significantly improved India's intelligence operations, while the Middle Eastern countries have offered safe havens for such activities. Additionally, India's technological prowess, exemplified by its expanding space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, benefits from both indigenous development and inputs from strategic partners. US intelligence, in particular, has been crucial in India's proactive defence along the India-China border.

India's military capability, coupled with its economic and diplomatic strength, provides a buffer against the significant costs of using force. New Delhi's perception is that India is too vital to be penalised like Russia or China for its actions beyond the region.

²¹ Sriram Gutta and Suchi Kedia, 'India Could Become the World's 3rd Largest Economy in the Next 5 Years. Here's How', *World Economic Forum*, 20 January 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/how-india-can-seize-its-moment-to-become-the-world-s-third-largest-economy/>; and 'Narendra Modi Is Remaking India's 1.4m Strong Military', *The Economist*, 29 November 2023, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/11/29/narendra-modi-is-remaking-indias-14m-strong-military>.

The costs India might incur are manageable, and it has the capacity to absorb them and navigate the fallout, either by ignoring the adversary or through side payments. Moreover, India can impose prohibitive costs through economic or diplomatic means. This confidence drives India's approach to alleged intelligence operations in North America.

This state capacity has empowered the Modi government to challenge the established order when necessary for India's interests. As External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar notes, "Serial violators are given little credit even when they comply, while an occasional disrupter can always justify a deviation."²² India's capacity allows it to pursue such deviations, including the occasional use of force against allies and established norms.

Leadership Commitment

In steering India's international relations, Modi sits only next to Nehru. While their distinct backgrounds mark clear differences, India's contemporary context and capacity provide Modi with significantly greater flexibility.

Structurally, Modi and Nehru share two vital attributes for foreign policymaking: absolute command in the Indian parliament and substantial popular support. This control over the executive branch, also seen with Indira Gandhi and Rajiv, coupled with mass popularity, has enabled Modi to make decisions of serious consequence.

Modi's self-confidence stems from his ideological roots in cultural nationalism, contrasting with Nehru's liberal internationalism.²³ This commitment to Hindu nationalism has imbued India's foreign policy establishment with a greater sense of purpose, confidence, and resolve. Modi's nationalistic foreign policy, culturally indigenous in origin, embraces the universal ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. He has reframed Nehru's foreign policy approach, not competing on the same turf of internationalism but addressing what the BJP views as Nehru's primary failing: a robust defence of India's national interests, particularly through the use of force.

Additionally, Modi has assembled a team of like-minded individuals, including National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, the late CDS Bipin Rawat and Jaishankar. This alignment in Raisina Hill reinforces the leadership's perceptions regarding India's approach to the use of force.

Modi's command and ideological stance have thus allowed for a more assertive and confident Indian foreign policy, marking a significant departure from the traditional Nehruvian framework.

²² Rishi Iyengar, 'S Jaishankar, India's Foreign Minister, Executes Modi's Strong-Willed Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/05/india-foreign-policy-jaishankar-modi-hindu-nationalism/>.

²³ Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpwhf20>.

Conclusion

Understanding Modi's approach to India's use of force in statecraft involves examining the trio of context, capacity, and commitment. However, there are three inherent dangers that New Delhi increasing reliance on use of force.

First, the favourable context of today may radically change tomorrow. A strong Sino-Russian alignment, a grand understanding between the US and China, or a successful Chinese invasion of Taiwan resulting in US retrenchment and Chinese hegemony would significantly alter the present context, posing serious challenges to India's interests. Second, India's state capacity has been significantly supported by the liberal international order, especially the strategic altruism pursued by the US post-Cold War. New Delhi must sincerely assess whether its continued growth and prosperity are now predominantly indigenous or still heavily reliant on Western support. If the latter, challenging the system beyond repair or causing considerable damage may not be a sustainable strategy. Third, while reaping domestic political benefits from the frequent use of force may be astute, it has attendant costs. This strategy can create reputational predicaments in future crises and increase commitment costs. The more decision makers resort to force, the higher the demand for repeated actions. Effective statecraft necessitates both restraint and coercion, and the current administration must ensure that politics does not hinder statecraft.

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