

Modi's high-risk gambit

Lin Minwang says over the past few years, the Indian prime minister's diplomatic endeavours have prioritised quick gains over longer-term strategic advantages, but in doing so could make the country a victim of its own cleverness

As India conducts the world's biggest election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) appear poised for victory. Modi's popularity has been attributed to myriad factors, including the BJP's adept mythologisation of the leader, India's robust economic trajectory and Modi's appeal to Hindu nationalism.

The performance of diplomacy is another factor. A flurry of visits from leaders of the United States, European countries, Japan and Australia, coupled with Modi's attendance of G7 summits, have elevated India's visibility, notably as the G20 summit host last year.

The Modi administration's diplomatic performance can be largely credited to the acumen of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who has lavished praise on Modi's strategic vision and been forthright in defending Indian policies, even while strategically aligning with the US-led bloc.

This tactical alliance has afforded India greater diplomatic agility amid the complex dynamics of its relationships with China, Russia and even the US, enabling it to capitalise on the competitive fractures among these powers.



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New Delhi's diplomatic manoeuvres seem shrewd and efficacious but are they really? India's camaraderie with China and Russia has been strained, while the strategic trust of the US and its allies remains tenuous.

After the 2017 Doklam stand-off, India and China swiftly restarted diplomatic relations at an informal summit in Wuhan.

In stark contrast, relations after the 2020 Galwan Valley clash have yet to see a similar thaw.

The events leading to the Galwan Valley clash were mainly a result of Indian missteps. As Modi said soon after the incident, China has not "intruded into our border, nor has any post been taken over by them". China's reaction was restrained, only revealing its casualty numbers many months later.

But China's goodwill has not been reciprocated. India has since leveraged the border dispute to foster a controlled tension with China, using this to gravitate closer to the US-led alliance.

There were many chances for Modi and President Xi Jinping to repair relations face to face, including at the September 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand, the G20 summit in Bali two months later and the Brics summit in South Africa last August. But Delhi opted for a different path, signalling a strategic bet on China's failure in its rivalry with the US.

The long-standing India-Russia relationship has also been tested by the Ukraine conflict. Despite India's refusal to condemn Russia, Modi has suspended his annual summit with



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears poised for another term in office.
Photo: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin and adopted a stern bargaining stance when buying Russian oil.

Last October, India's Chief of Defence Staff Anil Chauhan said: "The geopolitical importance of Russia will go down in times to come. It is in spite of being a nuclear power." This reflects India's risk assessment and suggests it is wagering on Russia's defeat in Ukraine.

Compared to India's official response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its approach this time has disappointed Russia. In Russia's view, the friendship between the two countries has been damaged.

In the meantime, Modi has been invited to several forums

dominated by the US and its allies, and has become an important defence partner of the US.

But India's harsh response to Canada's allegation of an assassination plot against a Canadian Sikh activist has been criticised by the US and Britain, among others. The US says it has foiled an alleged plot to assassinate a Sikh man in New York, and tensions have been felt in Britain and Australia.

With Japan, relations with India saw a marked improvement during Shinzo Abe's tenure. But with his departure, Japanese enthusiasm for deepening ties with India has waned.

The Japan-backed high-speed rail project to connect Mumbai to Ahmedabad, launched in 2017, has faced delays and is now expected to be operational by 2026. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a Japan-India collaboration announced in 2017 with hopes of rivalling China's Belt and Road Initiative, has gone nowhere.

Japan had also vigorously encouraged India's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as a means of diversifying economic alliances and counterbalancing China's influence – only for India to back out at the last minute.

The hoped-for surge in Japanese business investment in

India has also failed to materialise. At the Raisina Roundtable in Tokyo in March, Jaishankar said the Indian market has attracted many business delegations from Europe and the US "but I don't see that many from Japan".

The Modi administration, it seems, is overlooking any strategic anxieties that Japanese – and indeed, US and European – business communities may have over India's rise. This may stem from an assumption that the West, intent on curbing China's rise, will support India's progress instead. But given that China's rise was made possible by conditions in the international environment provided by the US, what are the chances Washington would make the same "mistake" with India?

Over the past few years, Modi's diplomatic endeavours have prioritised quick gains over longer-term strategic advantages. India must beware of becoming a victim of its own cleverness. Modi's diplomacy shows India's strategic cunning – but also risks the making of a strategic misfortune for the country.

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