

How Modi government is using aggressive diplomacy to its advantage

Synopsis

Modi govt is raising the costs for those nations whose leaders spoke against revocation of Article 370.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

By Sreeram Chaulia

In the mean streets of international politics, if someone harms you and you take it lying down, the chances are that you will be pushed around as a patsy whom no one respects or fears. Knowing when to retaliate, in what proportion, and against whom is an essential aspect of growing up and holding one's own in the competitive dog-eat-dog world of realpolitik.

The nationalistic 'New India' of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has made some tough decisions. Be it surgical military strikes across borders, isolation campaigns against state sponsors of terrorism or international legal cases to secure justice for its citizens, the [Modi](#) government has vigorously defended India's national interests.

Another element of this assertive diplomacy trend is emerging. India is leveraging its economic power and global standing to rap countries that are crossing it on core interests.

The forceful measures New Delhi adopted to convey its displeasure to [Turkey](#) and Malaysia after their leaders criticised India's revocation of [Article 370](#) in Jammu & Kashmir and assisted Pakistan to avoid being blacklisted at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) indicate that a Rubicon has been crossed. India will no longer meekly grumble and move on.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's propaganda at the United Nations that Kashmiris were "virtually under blockade with 8 million people, unfortunately, unable to step outside", and the fake news spread by Turkish and allied Islamist news outlets about massive protests in the Kashmir Valley, did not deserve to be forgiven by India.

Modi went into action through a variety of calibrated counterattacks. His proposed visit to Turkey was called off as a symbolic snub. A \$2.3-billion contract to a Turkish company, Anadolu Shipyard, to build support vessels for the Indian Navy was put on the chopping block. And in light of Turkey's controversial invasion of northern Syria, which violated international law and breathed new life into Islamic State terrorists, India came out swinging with uncharacteristically blunt condemnation of Turkey's illegal conduct.

To leave no one in doubt that this was payback for Kashmir, New Delhi expressed concern about Turkey "causing humanitarian and civilian distress" in occupied Kurdish areas.

A similar tit-for-tat unfolded with Malaysia, whose Prime Minister [Mahathir Mohamad](#) raised India's hackles by accusing it at the UN of "invading and occupying the country" called Jammu and Kashmir. While there was no official ban of Malaysian palm oil imports to India, patriotic Indian traders drastically slashed them and purchased more from the substitute supplier, Indonesia — a Muslim-majority country neighbouring Malaysia which is secular and not hostile to India. The stakes are not minor here because India is Malaysia's biggest customer of palm oil, buying up to \$1.63 billion of it in 2018. A fall in Malaysia's palm oil futures market and Mahathir's remark that "it is bad to have what amounts to a trade war" with India suggest that India's anger is registering.

Malaysia has also been trying to persuade India to join a mega-regional Asian trade agreement known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Modi's 'three Ds' (Democracy, Demography and Demand) are cards to bring Malaysia around to a balanced position or at least calm down its rhetoric on Kashmir.

Given the decadeslong history of Mahathir's usage of Islam for vote-bank politics in Malaysia, he will not apologise to India or abandon Pakistan. But since he is now in his early nineties and Malaysia runs a healthy trade surplus of \$4.4 billion with India, Kuala Lumpur has more to lose than gain by annoying India in the medium to long terms.

The same cannot be said for Turkey, which has a trade deficit with India, and where Erdogan's Islamist ideology has crossed all limits. Erdogan's grandiose image as a leader of the entire Muslim world and his championing of causes worldwide where he believes Muslims are being victimised are obstacles for India to sway Turkey.

Still, given the severe deterioration of the Turkish economy and the weakening of its currency in recent quarters, the loss of shipbuilding contracts from India worth billions and India's refusal to sell sensitive dual-use explosives and detonators on which Turkey's military manufacturers depend are strings which New Delhi can pull. India's ultimate goal should be 'compellence', i.e. changing the behaviour of inimical countries through coercion. For the moment, the Modi government has at least made a start by raising the costs for Turkey and Malaysia's intemperate actions.

In an earlier era, India did a lot of handwringing when members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), including Turkey and Malaysia, sided with Pakistan on grounds of religious solidarity. Then, the familiar lament in New Delhi used to be that we cannot make bigoted Islamist horses drink the water of reason. Now, Modi is challenging the diehard Pakistan-backers with material disincentives and daring them to back off.

The toughest nut to crack in this quest is China, which canvassed for 'all-weather-ally' Pakistan at the UN and chided India for "unilateral changes" in Kashmir.

Unlike relatively weak Turkey or Malaysia, China is a superior power with whom India has a direct disputed border and multiple vulnerabilities. India cannot risk arm-twisting China and hence Modi is trying a different route of managing bilateral differences with President Xi Jinping.

Great powers have historically flexed muscle to pressurise countries which irk them to fall in line.

Today, China and the United States have far bigger markets and militaries than India to succeed in 'compellence' games. But the fact that India has embarked on the path of carrying a big stick and wielding it is a welcome development.

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