

Challenges of coalition govt for Modi 3.0 and how will it impact India's foreign policy?

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The key challenge in coalitions is ensuring that New Delhi and the regional parties manage their differences pertaining to ties with neighbouring countries



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As the Narendra Modi led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government gets ready to take oath on June 9, 2024, several commentators have commented on how a coalition government may result in slowing down of economic reforms, and also impact the

country's foreign policy. NDA secured 293 seats. Notably, BJP was 32 short of a majority as it secured 240 seats.

This scepticism regarding coalition governments is exaggerated. Enough has been written on the landmark economic reforms of 1991 being introduced by a minority government led by the late PV Narasimha Rao. Coalition governments, including two National Democratic Alliance governments -- (1998-1999, 1999-2004) led by late Atal Bihari Vajpayee and then two Congress led United Progressive Alliance UPA governments (2004-2009, 2009-2014) led by Dr Manmohan Singh essentially maintained a continuity in economic policies – until policy paralysis got the better of UPA 2, some of which was genuine and the rest perceived. Even statistically, coalition governments have delivered in terms of economic growth – a strong reiteration being the UPA decade where GDP growth was estimated at 7%.

In terms of foreign policy, especially ties with the US, China, Russia, Japan, South East Asia and Gulf countries, there has been a broad consensus between successive governments over the past three decades, and no regional party is likely to interfere in important decisions. When the Indo-US nuclear deal-- one of the important achievements during Dr Manmohan Singh's Prime Ministership -- was opposed by the CPM, and the latter withdrew support, the Samajwadi Party came to the UPA's rescue.

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The key challenge in coalitions is ensuring that New Delhi and the regional parties manage their differences pertaining to ties with neighbouring countries. During UPA 2, the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee who leads the Trinamool Congress (TMC), opposed the Teesta River water agreement and then the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) had a disproportionate influence on New Delhi's ties with Sri Lanka. These were cited as two clear instances of why a coalition heavily dependent upon regional parties may impact the national interest.

A few points need to be borne in mind here. In the coalition to be sworn in, BJP has 240 seats, which is 30 shy of a majority and if run with deftness is unlikely to face challenges on key foreign policy issues or economic issues. INC had only 209 seats in UPA 2 and was far more dependent upon the DMK. Neither DMK nor TMC are part of this current alliance. Here it would be important to mention that seeking the views of border states – whether led by a regional party or any other party – is beneficial and it is incorrect to draw a binary between the national interest and the interests of states.

A left government, led by Manik Sarkar played a positive role in strengthening India's ties with Bangladesh both under the Dr Manmohan Singh government as well as Narendra Modi. The BJP government has been seeking the views of North-Eastern states in the

context of India's Act East Policy (specifically India's ties with South East Asia), so there is no harm in seeking the views of border states governed by other parties; this will only give a push to cooperative federalism.

One of the key allies of the NDA – the TDP is led by Chandrababu Naidu. Naidu is not only a strong proponent of economic reforms, but has also been one of the most proactive CM's in terms of 'economic diplomacy'. His current emphasis is likely to be on putting the state's economy back on the rail – with an emphasis on drawing FDI for his state and pushing infrastructural development.

Apart from seeking inputs of state governments on ties with neighbouring countries, the new government in New Delhi would also do well to work closely on Free Trade Agreement and ensure that all states can benefit equitably from these FTA's. Several Non-BJP states have held the grouse that projects they deserve were diverted to other states. This perception needs to be addressed.

The central government's consultations with state governments on the G20 Summit and holding events in several states was a successful example of 'cooperative federalism' in the realm of foreign policy and there needs to be more of that. PM Modi had also tried to build a consensus by having an all party meet before the beginning of the event.

Coalition partners are unlikely to stymie key economic reforms or impact foreign policy. Their interventions and inputs, in a constructive manner, may not be a bad thing. The occasional red flags and differences on other important issues by coalition partners – especially those which may have an adverse impact on the political and social fabric – also should be paid heed to. It is thus important to be less dismissive of coalitions and take a more nuanced approach.

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(Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own and do not reflect those of DNA)

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