

India and a Regional Rules-Based Order: Equity and Inclusion

Ian Hall

The adoption of the language of the ‘Rules-Based Order’ (RBO) is one of the most significant changes to Indian foreign policy brought about by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, headed by Narendra Modi, which first came to power in May 2014. It went hand in hand with three other important developments. The first was the deliberate effort to find a new set of concepts to inform and articulate Indian foreign policy to replace older Nehruvian ideas like ‘non-alignment’ and ‘strategic autonomy’ — an effort that eased the adoption of the language of the RBO.¹ The second was the assumption of a more assertive stance concerning China. And the third was an intensification of cooperation and dialogue with key strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, which began with a flurry of personal diplomacy by the new Prime Minister and Sushma Swaraj, his External Affairs Minister, during their first eight months in office.² During that time, Modi went to Japan, the United States and Australia, while Swaraj travelled to Singapore, Vietnam and South Korea, both making clear that New Delhi was keen to deepen bilateral ties with all.

The Modi government’s embrace of the language of the RBO was initially signalled in late January 2015, when Barack Obama became the first US President to be guest of honour at India’s annual Republic Day parade. That event was marked by the release of the ‘India-US Delhi Declaration of Friendship’, which committed both states to uphold and extend an “open, just, sustainable, and inclusive rule-based global order”.³ Thereafter, the Modi government made a series of similar pledges. Variations appear in later joint statements issued by India and a number of other partners. In the ‘Vision 2025’ document published after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met Modi in New Delhi in December 2015, for example, the two leaders declared their “unwavering commitment to realise a peaceful, open, equitable, stable and rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond”.⁴ India’s brief statement acknowledging the first meeting of the reconstituted Quadrilateral

-
- 1 Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019). On the lasting influence of concepts derived from Jawaharlal Nehru’s time in office (1947–64), see Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ‘Still Under Nehru’s Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India’, *India Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2009), pp. 209–33.
 - 2 On these two developments, see especially Kanti Bajpai, ‘Narendra Modi’s Pakistan and China Policy: Assertive Bilateral Diplomacy, Active Coalition Diplomacy’, *International Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 1 (2017), pp. 69–92.
 - 3 ‘India-US Delhi Declaration of Friendship’, 25 January 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, India: Media Centre, <www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24727/indiaus+delhi+declaration+of+friendship> [Accessed 26 July 2019].
 - 4 Joint Statement on India and Japan Vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World, 12 December 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, India: Media Centre, <www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26176/Joint_Statement_on_India_and_Japan_Vision_2025_Special_Strategic_and_Global_Partnership_Working_Together_for_Peace_and_Prospersity_of_the_IndoPacific_R> [Accessed 26 July 2019]. See also the reference to a ‘rules-based international order’ in the ‘India-Japan Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Japan’, Ministry of External Affairs, India: Media Centre, 11 November 2016, <www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27599/indiajapan+joint+statement+during+the+visit+of+prime+minister+to+japan> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

Dialogue (the Quad), in November 2017, also referred to necessity for a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific”.⁵ And similar language appeared in a series of speeches by Modi and his ministers and officials, including the Prime Minister’s keynote at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, which placed the idea of an RBO at its core, and laid out more clearly than any of his other public statements his government’s preferred order.⁶

From these statements, it was clear that though they share core elements, India’s vision of the RBO is distinct from the American, Australian and Japanese versions. The most obvious point of difference is the insistence that the order must not just be ‘free and open’, but also ‘equitable’ and ‘inclusive’.⁷ The interpolation of these principles demonstrates the flexibility — critics would say the vagueness — of the concept of the RBO. Crucially, however, they allowed New Delhi to contrive an understanding of the order that held more appeal to Southeast Asian states sceptical of American, Australian and Japanese understandings, helping to draw them towards a broad consensus on the rules and norms that should underpin international relations in the Indo-Pacific.⁸

Shangri-La Signals

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, Modi delivered a characteristically expansive speech that provided the longest and clearest account we have of New Delhi’s concept of the RBO and India’s relationship to it. He called — significantly — for a “*democratic* and rules-based order” (my italics) to prevail. He argued that agreed rules and norms were needed now more than ever, as “we live on the edge of uncertainty, of unsettled questions and unresolved disputes; contests and claims; and clashing visions and competing models”. He warned against a “return to the age of great power rivalries” in Asia, insisting that such a situation would put peace and prosperity at risk. He observed that “our friendships are not alliances of containment”, and that India’s “engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region ... will be inclusive”. But he also insisted that it is “normal to have partnerships on the basis of shared values and interests” and that India would continue to work with partners “individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region”.⁹

5 The original title for this minilateral was the ‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ or QSD. When reconstituted it was termed simply ‘Consultations on the Indo-Pacific’. See ‘India-Australia-Japan-US Consultations on Indo-Pacific’, Ministry of External Affairs, India: Media Centre, 12 November 2017, <mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29110/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS_Consultations_on_IndoPacific_November_12_2017> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

6 Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, 1 June 2018, Ministry of External Affairs, India, <www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

7 None of the other Quad partners refer to an ‘equitable’ or ‘inclusive’ RBO in their corresponding statements. See the 2017 iterations, all dated 12 November: Heather Nauert, ‘Australia-India-Japan-U.S. Consultations on the Indo-Pacific’, Press statement, Department of State, <www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/11/275464.htm> [Accessed 26 July 2019]; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Australia-India-Japan-U.S. Consultations on the Indo-Pacific’, <www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001789.html> [Accessed 26 July 2019]; ‘Australia-India-Japan-United States consultations on the Indo-Pacific’, Media release, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, <dfat.gov.au/news/media/Pages/aus-india-japan-us-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific.aspx> . See also India’s 2018 statement: ‘India-Australia-Japan-US Consultations’, 7 June 2018, <www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29961/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS+Consultations> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

8 For their Indo-Pacific, see ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, ASEAN, 23 June 2019, <asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

9 Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.

Manifestly, the Shangri-La speech had several different aims. The most prominent was to try to reassure Southeast Asian states that India's use of terms like the RBO or the 'Indo-Pacific' — associated as they are with US approaches to the wider region — did not imply that New Delhi intended to act high-handedly towards them or blindly follow Washington's lead.¹⁰ Here, equity was paramount. Modi made a point of arguing that India would do its utmost to uphold the "sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength". Simultaneously, he sought to signal to India's Quad partners that New Delhi was committed to that initiative, and that it is also deeply concerned about China's recent behaviour in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹

At Shangri-La, however, Modi went to considerable lengths not to criticise China directly, supposedly in keeping with the 'Wuhan spirit' some argued infused Sino-Indian relations after the informal summit Modi and Xi Jinping held in that city in April 2018.¹² The Wuhan meeting had followed more than a year of tension between the two arising from various issues, including New Delhi's unusually vehement denunciation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the eve of the Xi's Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in mid-May 2017 and the standoff in Bhutan a few weeks later between the Indian army and the People's Liberation Army, which generated dire threats of punishment from Beijing should New Delhi not back down.¹³ But while the Wuhan summit seems to have produced some kind of understanding between Modi and Xi to reduce bilateral tensions, the Shangri-La speech made it plain that although New Delhi was willing to hold off on direct criticism, it was still deeply concerned about China's behaviour. Moreover, the speech made clear, New Delhi was committed to the theory and realities of the RBO as one of the means of managing the challenges China poses to India and the region.

Rules and Restraints

The Shangri-La speech demonstrated that under Modi, India had determined that the language and the concept of the RBO were powerful instruments for pushing back against a range of problems generated by China's recent foreign policy. These include the danger of Southeast Asia falling under Beijing's sway; the handling of territorial disputes, including its own contested border with China; and geostrategic dilemmas for India arising from the BRI and Beijing's economic statecraft.¹⁴

10 Ian Hall, 'Modi Plays by the "Rules" at Shangri-La', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 4 June 2018, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-plays-by-the-rules-at-shangri-la> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

11 Dhruva Jaishankar, 'India and the Indo-Pacific Balance at Shangri-La', *Hindustan Times*, 5 June 2018, <www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/india-and-the-indo-pacific-balance-at-shangri-la/story-VrHEb6pndYMNk2YpKDcfvM.html> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

12 On the Wuhan summit, see especially Tanvi Madan, 'Dancing with the Dragon? Deciphering India's China Reset', *War on the Rocks*, 26 April 2018, <warontherocks.com/2018/04/dancing-with-the-dragon-deciphering-indias-china-reset/> [Accessed 26 July 2019].

13 For India's official view of BRI, see especially 'Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum', Ministry of External Affairs, India: Media Centre, 13 May 2017, <mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+query+on+participation+of+India+in+OBOR+BRI+Forum> [Accessed 26 July 2019]. On the standoff, see Sumit Ganguly and Andrew Scobell, 'The Himalayan Impasse: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Wake of Doklam', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2018), pp. 177-90.

14 On the latter topic, see especially William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

For these reasons, Modi's speech was contrived in large part as an appeal to Southeast Asia to take the idea of the RBO seriously.¹⁵ Its message was thinly veiled: there is value to the rules and India will abide by them. Unlike China, Modi implied, India will play by the rules, and not interfere in your internal affairs, treat you disrespectfully or bully you, despite your relative wealth or power, or encroach upon your territory. New Delhi stands for the principles that disputes should be settled peacefully and not by the use of force, subterfuge, or creeping incremental changes to the ground-level status quo of the kind we have seen recently in the South China Sea. India, after all, has witnessed similar acts on its disputed northern border and at Doklam, in Bhutan, in mid-2017. Finally, the speech displayed the value of the notion of an RBO as the basis of a critique of BRI and Chinese geoeconomics more broadly. "Connectivity is vital", Modi observed, echoing New Delhi's earlier statement on the BRF, but "must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability", "must empower nations, not place them under impossible debt burden", and "must promote trade, not strategic competition".¹⁶

Conclusion

India's RBO does diverge from the understandings of its strategic partners, but the concept and associated language are now embedded in its avowed vision of how the Indo-Pacific ought to operate and manage security challenges. Consistent with long-standing and well-known preferences, New Delhi's version of the RBO emphasises sovereign equality. Just as importantly, it insists on inclusion — on embracing, as Modi put it (a little clumsily) at the Shangri La Dialogue, "all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it".¹⁷ But here New Delhi does not simply mean China, as I have argued — it also means that its concept of the RBO involves giving equal voice not just to the Quad states or to Beijing, but also to smaller players in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

It should be noted, of course, that the RBO is not the only concept that has underpinned Modi's foreign policy, and that India itself has a contested record in playing by the rules, especially in its own neighbourhood. Older ideas and newer Hindu nationalist understandings have been drawn upon since 2014 to frame and inform New Delhi's conduct of international relations, and they may play a bigger role during Modi's second term in office, following his decisive victory in the May 2019 election. But, as I have tried to show, the notion of an RBO runs through many major statements laying out the Modi government's approach, and there is no reason to think that it will be dropped in the near future. For India, at least, the RBO has proved a useful instrument for critiquing Chinese assertion and appealing to smaller states across the Indo-Pacific, and it will likely remain so for some time to come.

¹⁵ It might even be understood as an attempt to 'socialise' ASEAN into the RBO — which would be, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, somewhat ironic, after years of ASEAN attempting to socialise the major powers into following *its* rules and norms in Southeast Asia.

¹⁶ Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Ian Hall is a Professor of International Relations at Griffith University and the Deputy Director (Research) of the Griffith Asia Institute. He is also an Academic Fellow of the Australia India Institute at the University of Melbourne and the co-editor (with Sara E. Davies) of the Australian Journal of International Affairs