

How confident are Indians in Modi's India?

Our research dives into Indians' attitudes on the state of the nation and how PM and BJP fare

On February 14, 2019, a suicide bomber killed 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in the Pulwama district of Kashmir.

A few days later, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi told a rally in Maharashtra that "each tear" shed for those killed in the attack would be "avenged". He proclaimed, "Ours is a new India with new methods and policies, and the world will experience this now. Those who spray bullets or those who provide guns and bombs to target our soldiers, will not be spared. We will not allow them to sleep in peace." Later that month, Modi authorised the Indian Air Force to strike a suspected terrorist training facility in Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — in what would become the first airstrike by one nuclear power onto the undisputed territory of another.

For many analysts, the ensuing surge of nationalist sentiment and support for PM Modi — the so-called Balakot Bump — was a key element of the landslide victory by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 national election. If true, this would mean that Indians have evolved from a politics fully focused on *roti, kapda, aur makaan* (food, clothing, and shelter) to a politics in which foreign policy can affect domestic political outcomes. Yet, we know very little about the foreign policy attitudes and beliefs of ordinary Indian citizens.

To understand these attitudes better, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 7,052 Indians in April-May of this year. The survey, carried out by the Centre for Voting

Opinion and Trends in Election Research (CVoter), was administered in 12 different languages across 28 states and 6 Union Territories.

We found that India is a highly nationalistic society, with 90% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreeing with the following statement: India is a better country than most other countries. When comparing India on the same question across countries (replacing India with the respondent's own country), such as those conducted in the 2010s by the International Social Survey Programme, Indian respondents in our poll were somewhat more nationalistic than those Indians sampled in earlier years and comparable to the most nationalist societies surveyed in prior polls. Furthermore, 71% of respondents somewhat or strongly support PM Modi, suggesting that he continues to be among the most popular national leaders in the world. Such a high degree of nationalism and support for the PM plausibly grants the ruling BJP greater flexibility in crafting its foreign policy.

We also observed widespread anti-Muslim sentiment. Less than 60% of our non-Muslim respondents said that they would be willing to have a Muslim neighbour. And the overwhelming majority — 78% — of our non-Muslim respondents said they thought the Muslim population in India was growing too rapidly. Our survey results suggest that popular attitudes toward Muslims may encourage, rather than halt, any anti-Muslim impulses within the BJP-led government. Such sentiment could stoke friction between New Delhi and its diplomatic partners in its near vicinity, such as Bangladesh, as well as the broader Indian Ocean Region, including West Asia.

Yet, despite anti-Muslim sentiment and very different histories, Indians show similar levels of distrust for Pakistan and China: 67% of respon-



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dents expressed their dislike of Pakistan "to a great extent", with a nearly equivalent 65% of our respondents disliking China to "a great extent". When we asked how India might fare in a conflict with either of its regional adversaries, 90% of respondents said that India would probably or definitely defeat Pakistan in case of a war. A smaller, but still sizeable, percentage (72%) believed that India would probably or definitely defeat China in the event of a war.

There is a long-running conversation among policymakers and academics about Indian views on United States (US) reliability. We found that a majority of Indians expected the US to help India defend itself if India fought wars with China or Pakistan. Even if our respondents felt India would have outside help in the event of conflict, an overwhelming majority — 68% — assessed India needed more nuclear capability than its adversaries. Just 13% said India should have about as many nuclear weapons as its enemies, and only a handful assessed that India should only have "a few" or "not any" nuclear weapons.

Several of these views are widely shared by Indian elites and outside observers, but many

of the beliefs espoused by our respondents might come as a surprise to even informed analysts. Sometimes stated preferences are contrary to current Indian policy — as with nuclear weapons, where India may not have as many nuclear weapons as Pakistan and almost certainly has fewer than China. This in turn may create pressure on Indian policymakers to respond to popular wishes.

For too long, political scientists have trained their sights on European and US attitudes at the expense of studying political behaviour and attitudes in the developing world. As professors Paul Staniland and Vipin Narang have argued, "we need much more evidence about how voters think about foreign policy outside the United States and Europe." As a major power and a democracy, India deserves to be at the forefront of such research in the years to come.

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