The Thatcherization of India's Foreign Policy

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The convergence between Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher – tested female leaders who turned into national heroes with exemplary war victories – remains a muse for tea-table wonderers. The sheer boldness in their respective foreign policies arguably brings them closest. Albeit comparative politics faces its challenges today, juxtaposing the external conducts of leaders – or states – still reveals their policy priorities efficiently. The usual contrasting of China against Wilhelmine Germany, for instance, stems from the weighing up of international trends (Taylor, 2012). The similarity between Britain's first female Prime Minister and India's first Prime Minister born post-independence is as fascinating. Unsurprisingly, the BBC adjudged Narendra Modi as 'India's answer to Margaret Thatcher' (Rowlatt, 2015).

Drawing the domestic parallel between Thatcher and Modi is undemanding. After polishing and propaganda, both thwarted all underestimation to spearhead conservative fronts, ending up as unchallenged alternatives for masses tired of politico-economic indecisiveness. The engines of their pre-poll campaigns were the vilification of rivals, the assurance to act, and the humming of liberal-developmental overtures, which combined to fetch them patronage and a lion's share of the votes. Both commenced their office-work by upholding harmony and launching bold free-market and fiscal revamps. Yet, their decisional audacities, cosmopolitanism, and monetarism soon proved distasteful for their ideologically firmer colleagues. Meanwhile, socialist detractors slammed them as capitalist cronies wielding anti-proletarian diktats. The policy baskets of both Thatcher and Modi – foreign affairs included – indeed seem in the same hands.

India's obsession with Modi has had prominent foundations: conservative speech acts, *laissez faire* liberal-economic promises, and hawkish nationalism. Precedents to all three can be traced to Thatcher's Britain. To be expressed as ideology, 'Thatcherism' may hardly find authoritative definitions to draw from. Also, Thatcherism is more than the crude sum of Thatcher's policies during her eleven-year rule. In his book, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, Eric J. Evans bravely boils down Thatcherite thought to a confluence of Smith's free-trade, Gladstone's liberalism, and Disraeli's nationalism (Evans, 2004, pp. 3-4). Quite like 'the Lady' – as Thatcher's admirers called her – Modi, too, has been the capitalist's choice through his career, with his pronounced knack for liberal-economic assertiveness preceding his politics. His histrionic orations and much thumped loyalism have also made him the fervent patriot's poster-boy.

The Three Pillars

Thatcher proposed three 'things [that she] want[ed] for Britain' globally: 'increased respect […] as a leading power; a close alliance with the United States; and pretentions to closer European unity' (Evans, 2004, p. 81). That she coveted autonomy in her management of Britain's external affairs was evident in her prompt sidelining of the Foreign Office and domineering of diplomacy. In fact, her obduracy was hinted at by her early overseas visits as leader of opposition, when she straightforwardly 'broke […] convention [to] criticize the government […] on foreign soil' (Evans, 2004, pp. 81-82). Markedly, in spite of outshining all rivals for his mandate, Modi, too, has 'repeatedly brought in domestic politics on foreign soil […] to score brownie points over the opposition during his foreign trips' (Sharma, 2015). Thatcher's march towards her foreign policy ambitions was expectedly stiff.

The Cold War's last decade encapsulated watershed moments of history, which Thatcher tackled perspicuously. Her links with Apartheid South Africa and Khmer Cambodia were as impenitent as her will to lead the West's intervention

in the Gulf War, an episode she dubbed as 'no time to go wobbly' (Thatcher, 1990). Her vital bond with Ronald Reagan allowed not just the cementing of Anglo-US ties, but also the injection of Gorbachev's reform into the Soviet sphere as the Cold War's antidote (AP, 1988). Likewise, as the Iron Curtain enmity renewed post-Détente with the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan in 1979-80, Thatcher scored a swift victory at the Falklands War of 1982, restoring wide respect for Britain's military merit.

Modi's intent to leave his imprints on India's largely Nehruvian foreign policy is evident in his intense personalization of overseas visits and summit attendance. Observers like Harsh V. Pant already envision the replacement of Nehru's Non-Alignment with a certain 'Modi Doctrine' that seeks to align 'with anyone and everyone to secure [India's] rapid economic growth', turning foreign policy into just 'another instrument to serve domestic priorities' (Pant, 2014). For others, the 'doctrine' – like Thatcherism – is yet to attain a formal definition and 'pursue coherent goals' (Jaffrelot, 2014). Nonetheless, even under Modi, the Indian PM's office parentally towers over the External Affairs' Ministry. The brow-raising shunting of former Indian Foreign Secretary, Sujatha Singh, mirrored the unceremonious sacking of Reginald Maudling – Thatcher's Shadow Foreign Secretary during her days as the opposition's lead – over policy disagreements.

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was, discernably, handpicked as Modi's new Foreign Secretary for his laudable diplomatic resume vis-à-vis the US. The entrustment quickly paid dividends, too, as Jaishankar secured Barack Obama's nod on becoming the first US President to grace India's Republic Day parade, months after Modi's trumpeted US visit in 2014 (Staff, 2015). Shades of the Reagan-Thatcher bond were visible in the Obama-Modi rapport, which Obama affirmed by eulogizing Modi for *Time* as 'India's reformer-in-chief' (Obama, 2015). Echoing Thatcher's military bullishness, Modi is seen drawing 'red lines [against] India's adversaries' (Pant, 2014), with escalatory retaliation against border ceasefires by Pakistan in the northwest and a trans-border surgical strike against Naga insurgents in the northeast. In fact, should Modi uphold such sternness for internal security, he might manage to touch the Lady's disciplinarian benchmark against the Irish Republican militants.

Two of the three pivots of Thatcher's foreign policy conform to Modi's doctrinal preferences: military-diplomatic muscle-flexing to assert power and overt Americophilia. Moreover, for both leaders, the former aspect balanced the latter. Just as Thatcher openly opposed Jimmy Carter's embargoes against the Soviet Union in 1979-80 (Lahey, 2013, p. 21), Modi managed to repel US pressure on India's food stockpiling policy. However, the third pillar of the Lady's foreign policy vision – regional cohesiveness – proved unsteady. For Thatcher, continental fraternity was meant to be a pretense, given her conformist suspicion of fellow Europeans as 'foreigners' (Evans, 2004, p. 81).

Though she helped pave Europe's maturity into a full-fledged Union (EU) by signing the Single European Act, Thatcher infamously loathed European integration. She disapproved the premise of 'a European super-State exercising a new dominance from Brussels' (Kirkup, 2013), and, moreover, suspected the reunion of Germany – Britain's hereditary rival – as a hazard to NATO, despite being pro-Perestroika (Görtemaker, 2006, p. 198). In South Asia, Modi revived India's old emphasis on regional amity by swearing in affront the political heads of all nations belonging to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Since, he has already pocketed notable gains within the subcontinent, such as a Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh and a Civil Nuclear Agreement with Sri Lanka. Yet, for Pakistan, Modi's top brass reserves clenched fists, clamorous rhetoric, and the effeminizing of dialogues. With Nepal, the Modi machinery's poorly publicized relief campaign during the 2015 quakes, coupled with its meddling in the Nepalese constitution, has not gone down well. Consequently, South Asian regionalization remains a pipedream.

Money Talks

In Evans' understanding, the backbone of Thatcherite foreign policy was economic gains. The monetary stimuli behind Thatcher's decisions were so glaring, that she was jibed as 'the grocer's daughter' (Evans, 2004, p. 82). Her evasion of Carter's call for sanctions on the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan was motivated by the adversity such an action posed to the then reeling global economy (Lahey, 2013, pp. 21-42). In 1986, Thatcher became the first British PM to visit Israel, repairing a bilateral equation dislodged since 1982 over clashing national interests amidst the Lebanon War. However, bearing in mind her country's economic stakes in the Arab world, she

not just shied away from selling heavy weaponry and North Sea oil to the Israelis, but also appeared a cautious 'supporter of Palestinian self-determination' (Pfeffer, 2013).

India's growing strategic reliance on Israel was given a fillip – at the cost of breaking convention – in July 2015 by the former's abstention on a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution to condemn the latter's alleged war crimes in Gaza. The relationship stands inextricable, as Israel is India's second-biggest arms supplier, just as India is Israel's largest arms buyer. By 2016, Modi is, thus, slated to become the first Indian PM to set foot on Israeli soil. Notably, as a clever counterbalance, he shall also visit Palestine and Jordan (Haidar, 2015). Well aware of the Gulf's vitality for the Indian economy, he has toured the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to obtain partnerships for infrastructure and defence equipment. Also, prior to landing in Israel, he shall stop over at Saudi Arabia: India's biggest crude oil supplier (Jacob, 2015). While in Japan, Modi indeed meant business when he asserted, 'money is in my blood' (Jaffrelot, 2014).

That the foreign affairs vehicles of Thatcher and Modi have economic drivers surfaces clearer when their China policies are paralleled. Despite the West's 'ping-pong' rapprochement with the Chinese in 1972, the Sino-British relationship remained fraught with discord over Hong Kong. A thaw only came in 1984, after Thatcher conceded the former British colony to Communist China in arguably the 'most controversial chapter of Britain's postwar colonial history' (Goslett, 2007). However, it was not to be a zero-sum loss. Thatcher's rise to Downing Street corresponded to Deng Xiaoping's liberalizing of China, a stake in which was worth a bargain. As documents declassified by London's National Archives reveal, Thatcher eyed 'greater export and investment opportunities for British industry' with her policy shift towards China. To mask the impression of 'having sold out Hong Kong to the Chinese', a business contingent was deliberately barred from accompanying her during her rendezvous with Deng (Haddon, 2014).

When Modi hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2014, the brimming warmth did not go down well with India's hardliners, who contrasted their tranquil riverside chats with the PLA's military incursions into Kashmir (Correspondent, 2014). Thus, before Modi's hyped 2015 trip to China, there came strong prescriptions for 'focus […] on the strategic aspects of the [Sino-Indian] relationship, and less on trade and economic ties' (Narayanan, 2015). In his pre-poll rallies, after all, Modi had maintained a tough stance on China. Notwithstanding, the '24 agreements worth over $10 billion [reached bilaterally] in Beijing' included trade, infrastructure, mining, space, education, railways, broadcast, tourism, geo-science, and even yoga, while leaving no room for any deliberations on the disputed border between the two countries along the McMahon Line (Sheet, 2015).

Conclusion

The leadership likeness between Britain's 'Iron Lady' and India's modern-day '*Loh Purush* (Iron Man)' is well exhibited by the congruence in their foreign policy pursuits (Kalbag, 2014). With a monetarist heart and a realist mind, both Thatcher and Modi value global power projections, a West-wards tilt and regional prominence, while balancing free-market fruits with nationalist roots. Although their doctrines lack formality, they have visible capitalist cores, which allow political volte-faces to seem as passable as trade bargains. From the Middle East to the Far East, their decisional blueprints are shrewdly tied to domestic agendas – at the cost of diplomatic traditions, if need be – warranted by their personal foreign policy grip and wide legitimacy.

With that said, however, if internal dynamics are any indication, then a Thatcherite climax is not quite romantic. As D. L. Holm observes, Thatcher's governance had its share of consequences: capped inflation caused burning unemployment; arrested public expenditure led to malnourished social aid; wealth creation came with wealth concentration; and entrepreneurship bred cronyism (Holm, 1989, p. 370). Her downfall in 1990 was instigated by her own partymen due to growing internal discontent over her unheeding ways. Most distinctly, the pricey Falklands War of 1982 – surely one of postwar Britain's shakiest foreign policy moments – was an ironic by-product of Thatcher's venturous spending cuts. The Argentine junta could never have invaded the British islands in the South Atlantic had she not relaxed the region's naval rings for defence parsimony. Modi, like Thatcher, is an advocate of 'bitter medicine' for the ailing (TNN, 2014). Modi, unlike Thatcher, has Thatcherism's history to warn him of its side-effects.

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