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Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by

Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile, Nicola Mocci

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INDIA 2017: NARENDRA MODI'S CONTINUING HEGEMONY AND HIS
CHALLENGE TO CHINA*

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In 2017 the situation of Indian democracy deteriorated, as shown by the continuing attacks against Muslims and Christians, and by the intimidation against the opponents of political Hinduism. This intimidation culminated in the assassination of well-known journalist and BJP critic Gauri Lankesh. Meanwhile Narendra Modi, in spite of the unsatisfactory economic trend and botched economic reforms, continued to be India's most popular politician. Also, during the period under review, Modi's party, the BJP, went from one success to another, strengthening its political hold on the country by conquering four Indian states (Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand), and by retaining its hold on two more (Goa and Gujarat). However, the latest of these elections, the one in Gujarat, although confirming the BJP in power, saw an unexpected good result on the part of a resurgent Congress. Some analysts saw this as an indication that the BJP's tightening hold on the Indian political system was not unbreakable.

India's foreign policy continued to be characterised by the increasingly closer and increasingly militarised connection with the US and by the ever more adversarial relation with China. It was in this field that the Modi government conquered a clear (although possibly temporary) success, by facing down China in the Himalayan Doklam plateau.

1. Introduction

In 2017 the situation in India was characterised by the strengthening of the hold of the BJP on the political system and the continuing popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the former being the de facto consequence of the latter. This was surprising, considering that the *achhe din* («good days») promised by Modi in the 2014 electoral campaign were nowhere to be seen and not even in the offing. In fact India's democratic situation deteriorated, its economy slowed down and the two main government-sponsored economic reforms – demonetisation and Good and Service Tax – were an evident failure in the former case and an extremely badly

*. The present chapter is the outcome of a joint research effort, every single part of it having been discussed by the two authors before being written and revised by both afterwards. However, the final draft of parts 1 and 3 has been written by Michelguglielmo Torri, whereas the final draft of part 2 has been written by Diego Maiorano.

managed measure in the latter. Only as far as foreign policy is concerned, did the Modi government achieve a clear success by facing down China in the Himalayan Doklam plateau.

In this article, India's domestic policies will first be analysed; then, India's foreign policy will be discussed, mainly by focusing on the India-China connection, but also allowing space for the India-US relationship. Here a caveat is in order: when discussing India's domestic policies, although the performance of the economy is a necessary subtext of the analysis, it is not directly addressed, as the development of the economy is analysed in another article in this same issue of *Asia Maior*.¹

2. Domestic policies

During 2017, India's political landscape did not change much. On the one hand, the erosion of democracy, particularly in terms of shrinking civil liberties and increasing communal polarisation, continued. On the other hand, the BJP strengthened its dominance over India's polity, coming close to establishing its hegemony over the political system.²

2.1. The diminishing quality of India's democracy

According to a dataset constructed by the online portal *India Spend*, 2017 was the deadliest year for cow-related hate crimes – including several instances of lynching.³ It goes without saying that the great majority of those killed or attacked were Muslims. The Prime Minister only very reluctantly and very belatedly condemned these episodes, as when he, in an unusually direct way, said that killing a human being in the name of the cow was «unacceptable».⁴ A few days later, however, Praveen Togadia, the leader of the RSS-affiliated Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), unveiled plans of his organisation to recruit and train cow protectors.⁵ Furthermore, in May, the Parliament amended the 1960 Prevention of Cruelty on Animals Act, making the sale of cattle extremely difficult, which further emboldening

1. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'The Indian Economy in 2017: Still no *achhe din* (good days) in the offing'.

2. Yogendra Yadav, 'A new India', *Seminar*, No. 699, November 2017. See also James Manor, 'Can Modi and the BJP Achieve and Sustain Hegemony?' in a forthcoming book edited by Christophe Jaffrelot.

3. Alison Saldanha, '2017 Deadliest Year For Cow-Related Hate Crime Since 2010, 86% Of Those Killed Muslim', *India Spend*, 8 December 2017.

4. 'Narendra Modi warns cow vigilantes: Killing in the name of gau bhakti is unacceptable', *Indian Express*, 29 June 2017.

5. 'VHP will «equip» gau rakshaks, says Togadia', *The Telegraph*, 18 July 2017.

self-declared «cow vigilantes».⁶ The government, however, backtracked on the promised cattle sale ban, in the wake of protests from numerous states – including BJP-ruled ones – and from representatives of the leather and buffalo meat industries.⁷

If the main victims of Hindu extremism were Muslims, Christians did not fare much better. As noticed by John Dayal, secretary general of the All-India Christian Council, «Anything that impacts the Muslims in a different way impacts the Christians».⁸ In fact, under Modi's premiership, intimidation and violence against Christians were steeply on the rise and, in a way, were even more significant than the violence against Muslims. The latter are the biggest religious minority in India,⁹ and, particularly in the anti-Islamic atmosphere prevailing world-wide, they can be presented – although preposterously – as a potential threat to the Hindu majority. But the Christians, only a tiny 2.30% of the Indian population and with a lower growth rate than the Hindus,¹⁰ cannot be represented as a threat by any stretch of imagination. This has not saved them from growing persecution since the BJP victory in the 2014 general elections. This means that persecution against religious minorities are not a response to any perceived (although unfounded) threat, but an integral expression of the violent bent which characterises political Hinduism.

According to the World Watch List 2017, kept by Open Doors, under Modi's premiership, from 2014 to 2017, India moved up from No. 31 to No. 15 among the countries where practising the Christian faith is a high-risk activity.¹¹ The exact number of the attacks recorded against Indian Christians varies according to the different organisations. However all surveys agree on showing a growing trend, which has become particularly steep in 2017, when, in the first six months, the number of reported incidents equalled that of the previous year.¹² As in the case of anti-Muslim violence, anti-Christian violence was de facto condoned by the Indian police.¹³ Ac-

6. Afroz Alam, «Cow economics» are killing India's working class', *The Conversation*, 22 June 2017.

7. 'Govt to roll back move to ban sale of cattle for slaughter', *Indian Express*, 30 November 2017; 'Modi's Push for a Hindu Revival Imperils India's Meat Industry', *The New York Times*, 5 June 2017.

8. 'Christmas violence and arrests shake Indian Christians', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2017.

9. They represent the 14.23% of the population (against the Hindu majority of 79.80%) and have a higher rate of growth than the Hindus. *All India Religious Census Data* (<https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>).

10. *Ibid.*

11. 'Christians in India increasingly under attack, study shows', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2017.

12. World Watch Monitor India, 'Indian Christians faced almost as many attacks in the first half of 2017 as all of 2016', *World Watch Monitor*, 8 August 2017; 'India witnessed at least 216 attacks against Christians', *Christian Persecution Update*, 13 December 2017.

13. 'India witnessed at least 216 attacks against Christians'.

ording to an open letter by 101 Indian Christian intellectuals: «Official machinery often seems to be working in tandem with vigilantes. Street lynching, victims charged as accused, stage-managed trials: all on the basis of religious and caste identities».¹⁴

As in the case of anti-Muslim violence, Modi has been constrained between his duty as prime minister and the necessity not to collide head-on with those Hindu zealots and Hindu extremist organisations which offer him a crucial electoral and political support. It is true that, in February 2015, in front of a Catholic gathering, Modi stated that his government would «not allow any religious group from the majority or minority to incite hatred covertly or overtly» and that religion was «a matter of personal choice». However, no concrete measure has been taken to give substance to his words. In fact, Modi's inability or unwillingness to proceed against the Hindu vigilantes has been construed by these same groups and by the police as a green light to their behaviour. Those who assault Christians, as those who assault Muslims (who, as a rule, belong to the same organisations and are often the same persons), know that the chance of being brought to justice is very low indeed.

That Modi does not have any intention of abandoning his strategy of presenting himself as both the man who can bring about «development» and the leader of the *Hindutva* was also clear from the appointment of Yogi Adityanath as Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister after the BJP's resounding victory in early 2017 (on this, more below). Adityanath is a radical Hindu cleric and has been accused of inciting violence on Muslims and Christians and who is the leader of a private army of Hindu extremists who have repeatedly attacked non-Hindus and incited communal violence.¹⁵ Furthermore, Adityanath is one of the few BJP leaders in his own right that could constitute an internal challenge to Modi's leadership, further limiting Modi's option to control fringe elements within the BJP and the RSS.

Another aspect of the diminishing quality of India's democracy was the attack on freedom of expression. This is hardly something new. Not only did Indira Gandhi impose censorship during the emergency regime (1975-77), but other Congress governments had hardly a better record at protecting freedom of speech. However, since Modi came to power in 2014, a renewed and systematic attack on the freedom of expression, also conducted through institutional channels, became evident. In June, the residence of Prannoy Roy, the founder of NDTV, one of the few national TV channels that adopted a critical stance towards the Modi government, was raided by the Central Bureau of Investigation in connection with the

14. 'Church leaders' help sought to protect India's diversity, plurality', *Matters India*, 4 August 2017.

15. 'Firebrand Hindu Cleric Ascends India's Political Ladder', *The New York Times*, 12 July 2017. See also Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2015: The uncertain record of the Modi government', p. 378 and fn. 216.

repayment of a loan that, as the lender itself admitted, had been settled years ago.¹⁶ In September, Gauri Lankesh, a prominent journalist and an outspoken critic of the government, was murdered in Bangalore, but the Prime Minister did not even mention the episode in any of his speeches or tweets.¹⁷ Just a few weeks later, Hindustan Times editor-in-chief, Bobby Ghosh, suddenly resigned for unspecified «personal reasons» and the newspaper closed Ghosh's pet project, the "Hate Tracker", which monitored the spreading of hate crimes, particularly by Hindu extremist organisations. According to *The Wire*, «the abrupt exit of Bobby Ghosh as editor was preceded by [Hindustan Times proprietor Shobhana Bharti] personal meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and objections raised by top-level government and Bharatiya Janata Party officials to editorial decisions taken during Ghosh's tenure.»¹⁸ In November, a man was arrested in Chennai after criticising Modi in a *private* Facebook post.¹⁹ In December, *Humans of Hindutva*, a popular satirical Facebook page that parodied right-wing Hindu fundamentalism, was closed by its administrator, who had «no desire to end up like Gauri Lankesh».²⁰ Again, no government spokesperson spent any word in defence of the freedom of speech.

All these episodes – and many others that we cannot report for reason of space²¹ – contributed to a growing climate of fear in the Indian media and civil society and to increasing episodes of self-censorship. Indeed, when one of the bravest media outlets of the country, *The Wire*, published an important story on the businesses of Jay Shah – the son of BJP's president (and Modi's right-hand man) Amit Shah – which showed that Jay Shah's company's turnover had increased by 16,000 times in the year following the election of Modi,²² the story was virtually ignored by most media. Overall, in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, India sank three positions to 136.

2.2. *Conquering the Indian states: the BJP on the roll*

The main political development in 2017 was the continuing popularity of the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular. This was evident

16. 'India's Battered Free Press', *The New York Times*, 7 June 2017.

17. 'Gauri Lankesh's Murder Is a Chilling Message to All Dissenters', *The Wire*, 6 September 2017.

18. 'Hindustan Times Editor's Exit Preceded by Meeting Between Modi, Newspaper Owner', *The Wire*, 25 September 2017.

19. 'Arrested man made PM Modi remark on private Facebook chat', *Indian Express*, 1 November 2017.

20. 'No, Facebook Didn't Take Down Humans of Hindutva', *The Wire*, 29 December 2017.

21. For a more comprehensive account see 'A Look Back at the Year Where Press Freedom in India Remained More Under Pressure Than Ever', *The Wire*, 29 December 2017.

22. 'The Golden Touch of Jay Amit Shah', *The Wire*, 8 October 2017.

from the results of a number of state elections. Yet, in the second part of the year, some signs became apparent that the long honeymoon of the BJP with the electorate might start to come to an end.

Table 1 – Summary of state election results

State	Ruling party 2012-17	Ruling party 2017-	Chief Minister
Goa	BJP	BJP & allies	Manohar Parrikar
Gujarat	BJP	BJP	Vijay Rupani
Himachal Pradesh	Congress	BJP	Jai Ram Thakur
Manipur	Congress	BJP & allies	Nongthombam Biren Singh
Punjab	BJP & SAD	Congress	Amarinder Singh
Uttar Pradesh	SP	BJP	Yogi Adityanath
Uttarakhand	Congress	BJP	Trivendra Singh Rawat
Source: Election Commission of India			

As Table 1 shows, in 2017 the BJP was able to win over as many as four states (Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand) and retain two (Goa and Gujarat). The Congress party, on the other hand, won over Punjab, but this was less a victory of the party than of chief ministerial candidate Captain Amarinder Singh.²³ As a sort of consolation prize, the Congress party won the relative majority of the seats in Goa (17 seats as against 13 of the BJP) and in Manipur (28 as against 21 of the BJP).²⁴ However, it was the BJP who formed the government in both states, as local parties were quick to realise that their best bet as a governing ally was the Saffron party.

Overall, the BJP came to rule (on its own or in coalition with local allies) in 19 out of 29 states. These included Bihar, where the BJP had been defeated by the Grand Coalition in 2015. In July 2017, however, the coalition broke apart and the BJP re-entered the government in alliance with Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal.²⁵ Overall, two thirds of Indians now live in a state ruled by the BJP or by the BJP and its allies.

The Congress party appeared to be relegated to the margin of the political system, controlling only two large states (Punjab and Karnataka). The latter will go to the polls in 2018. Although the party showed some signs of revival at the end of the year, on the whole the crisis that has been engulfing it in the past years continued.²⁶ Its main features were the weakness of the

23. Sanjay Kumar, 'Decoding Assembly Election Results 2017', *Livemint*, 13 March 2017.

24. In both states, however, the BJP won the relative majority of the popular vote.

25. Prashant Jha, 'Nitish's move will benefit both him and Modi but the mahagatbandhan is in tatters', *Hindustan Times*, 27 July 2017.

26. Praveen Rai & Sanjay Kumar, 'The Decline of the Congress Party in Indian Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 March 2017.

leadership (which, however, somewhat managed to at least partly reassert itself in the concluding months of the year) and the absence of a working organisation on the ground – all the more damaging in comparison with the impressive machine of the RSS-BJP combine, micromanaged by Amit Shah.²⁷ The Congress was also weakened by the non-existence of an appealing ideological platform, up to challenging the formidable combination of Hindutva-cum-development, characterising the BJP political programme.²⁸ However, as hinted above and as shown in greater detail below, at the close of the year the Congress appeared to have at least arrested the slide – which had formerly appeared unstoppable – towards a «Congress-Mukt Bharat» (Congress-free India).²⁹

2.2.1. Defying expectations: the case of Uttar Pradesh

The two biggest electoral prizes of 2017 were UP and Gujarat, on whose elections we must now dwell. In both cases the results defied expectations, although for opposite reasons. In the case of UP, a BJP victory, particularly such a huge victory, was unexpected. Equally unexpected was the narrow margin of the BJP victory in Gujarat, which resulted in a revival of the political fortunes of the Congress.

In UP, the BJP won the largest majority a single party has ever won in the state (see Table 2).³⁰

Table 2 – UP election results

Alliance	Party	Seats won	Seat change	Vote share	Vote Swing
NDA	BJP	312	+265	40%	+24.7%
	Apna Dal	9	+9	1%	NA
	Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party	4	+4	0.7%	NA
SP-Congress alliance	SP	47	-177	22%	-7.7%
	Congress	7	-21	6.2%	-5.43%
-	BSP	19	-61	22.2%	-3.71%
-	Others	5	NA	4.4%	NA
Total		403			
Source: Election Commission of India					

27. Prashant Jha, *How the BJP Wins - Inside India's Greatest Election Machine*, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017.

28. Suhas Palshikar, 'India's Second Dominant Party System', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 March 2017.

29. This was first promised by Modi, when he became the BJP campaign committee chief in 2013, and then continuously repeated by the BJP and the RSS. Sanjay Kumar, 'Decoding Assembly Election'; Darpan Singh, 'The Congress-mukt Bharat that BJP wants', *The Times of India*, 22 May 2016.

30. Assuming we do not consider the 1977 elections, when the Janata Party, a de facto coalition of parties, won 352 seats.

At first sight, the performance of the BJP, although spectacular, does not look particularly surprising if one thinks that the party had obtained 42.6% of the votes and 71 out of 80 Lok Sabha seats in 2014. However, the opposing camp was significantly different and much stronger in 2017 than in 2014.

In 2014 the BJP had decimated its adversaries by retaining its traditional support base while making substantial inroads in every community previously attached to the main UP parties. In the former case this had meant retaining the support of the upper castes; in the latter case it had meant conquering the support of sections of the scheduled castes (previously solidly behind the Bahujan Samaj Party), plus sections of the other backward classes (previously the backbone of the Samajwadi Party), plus sections of the Muslims (hitherto split between the Congress and the Samajwadi Party).³¹

The other parties knew that their only hope to defeat the BJP was to form a «grand coalition».³² However, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), despite some timid attempts, could not bury the hatchet and overcome the rivalry between their leaders.³³ The SP and the Congress did come to an agreement, though this suffered from a series of deficiencies. First, the seat-sharing was highly skewed in favour of the Congress, which contested in numerous constituencies where it was not competitive.³⁴ Second, the SP was deeply divided. The incumbent Chief Minister, Akhilesh Yadav, successfully reclaimed the leadership of the party. In so doing, he antagonised the old leadership, including his father Mulayam and his uncle Shivpal Yadav. The latter was sacked from the Cabinet in October 2016, just a few months before the elections.³⁵ It comes as no surprise that the old guard actively campaigned against their own party in at least three districts.³⁶ At the same time, many SP workers and leaders (especially from the old guard) felt that the price of the alliance with the Congress in terms of seat allocation was way too high, considering the marginal vote share that the Congress was expected to mobilise.³⁷ Finally, the SP and the Congress could not find a seat-sharing agreement in 25 constituencies. There, the two parties contested against each other,

31. A. K. Verma, 'Development and Governance Trump Caste Identities in Uttar Pradesh', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, No. 39, 2014, pp. 89-94.

32. Adnan Farooqui & E. Sridharan, 'Uttar Pradesh Elections 2017', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, No. 15, pp. 16-20.

33. Dharendra K. Jha, 'The «humiliation» that stops Mayawati from accepting Samajwadi Party's offer', *Scroll.in*, 22 January 2017.

34. Adnan Farooqui & E. Sridharan, 'Uttar Pradesh Elections 2017', p. 17.

35. 'Akhilesh Yadav sacks Shivpal, appoints Naresh Uttam as Samajwadi Party's UP president', *Indian Express*, 2 January 2017.

36. Dharendra K. Jha, 'Ahead of Sunday's vote, Shivpal Yadav backers keep the family feud alive in UP's Yadav bastion', *Scroll.in*, 16 February 2017.

37. 'More than symbolic', *The Hindu*, 19 January 2017.

splitting the anti-BJP vote, and losing to the Saffron party 21 out of these 25 constituencies.³⁸

Even under these conditions, on election eve the SP-Congress alliance was thought to be a competitive combination, especially in light of the popularity of Akhilesh Yadav, who, after the split in his party, was able to present himself not as the incumbent chief minister, but as the only «local» political novelty.³⁹

Yet, the BJP managed to secure the largest majority a single party ever got in the state. This was remarkable, especially if one thinks that the elections were held shortly after the decision to demonetise 86% of the country's currency. Demonetisation caused major disruptions in the economy and did not reach its avowed goals of combating corruption and eliminating «black money», but, strangely enough, continued to remain, up to the closing of the year under review, very popular.⁴⁰

In the end, two factors proved to be crucial in determining the electoral results. First, Modi's popularity was still very high.⁴¹ This is shown by surveys conducted by a variety of organisations and by reporters that followed the elections closely on the ground.⁴² As Pratap Bhanu Mehta – certainly not a fan of the prime minister – put it: «Modi still manages to make other parties look like tired, corrupt, negative emblems of the past; people still repose faith in him as the energetic, clean, dynamic, hopeful repository of the future. No matter where you stand on the political spectrum, it will be churlish not to acknowledge this political fact».⁴³

Second, the BJP machine, with the crucial support of the RSS, conducted a very effective campaign, micromanaging every single electoral booth. The BJP, under Amit Shah's direction, «mixed a well-crafted cocktail of caste calculations, majoritarian sentiment, aspirational rhetoric, muscu-

38. Adnan Farooqui & E. Sridharan, 'Uttar Pradesh Elections 2017', p. 19.

39. 'How family feud ended anti-incumbency for UP CM Akhilesh Yadav', *Hindustan Times*, 8 January 2017. Indeed, a pre-poll survey conducted by the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) showed that Akhilesh was only slightly less popular than Modi and that the SP-Congress combine had an advantage of 6% over the BJP. See 'Uttar Pradesh Pre-Election Tracker Survey, Round-3', *Lokniti*, January 2017 (<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Uttar-Pradesh-Pre-Election-Tracker-Survey-Round-3.pdf>).

40. 'ABP News-CSDS Lokniti-Uttar Pradesh Postpoll 2017 Survey Findings', *Lokniti*, (<http://www.lokniti.org/pol-pdf/ABP-News-CSDS-Lokniti-Uttar-Pradesh-Postpoll-2017-Survey-Findings-Final.pdf>). See also 'Modi tightens grip on power with Uttar Pradesh poll win', *Financial Times*, 12 March 2017.

41. Milan Vaishnav, 'Modi's Victory and the BJP's Future', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 March 2017.

42. For example, Prashant Jha, 'Assembly Elections 2017: How Narendra Modi won Uttar Pradesh', *Hindustan Times*, 12 March 2017.

43. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Victor and the vanquished', *Indian Express*, 13 March 2017.

lar nationalism, and charismatic leadership».⁴⁴ In particular, the BJP strategy, in line with elections held in other states, relied on the «60% formula»,⁴⁵ which assumed that Jatavs (a scheduled caste which is the main constituency of the BSP), Yadavs (an Other Backward Caste, which is the main constituency of the SP) and Muslims – three groups that, among them, made up roughly 40% of the population of UP – would not vote for the BJP anyway. This was clearly reflected in the distribution of tickets, 86% of which went to non-Jatav Dalits, non-Yadav OBCs and the upper castes, while not including a single Muslim candidate.⁴⁶ The end result of this strategy was that the new Legislative Assembly had the highest share of upper caste since 1980, with almost half of the BJP's MLAs belonging to this group. At the other extreme, Yadavs' representation in the assembly fell to an all-time low at 5% of the seats (against a share of the population of nearly 20%), just slightly below the share of seats conquered by Muslims (6%).⁴⁷

2.2.2. *Defying expectations: the case of Gujarat*

The Gujarat election results defied expectations too, but for exactly the opposite reason. Only a few months before the elections, very few would not have predicted a BJP's landslide in Modi's home state. However, when the votes were counted on 18 December 2017, the BJP ended with a much-reduced majority (99 seats), and its worst performance (in terms of seat share) since it first took control of the state in 1995. The performance of the Saffron party looked all the more disappointing if one considers that Amit Shah had set the party's target at 150 seats (out of 182). Conversely, the Congress party's performance was the best since 1985 (see Table 3).

Table 3 – Gujarat election results

Party	Seats won	Seat change	Vote share	Vote Swing
BJP	99	-16	49.1	+1.2
Congress	77	+16	41.4	+2.5
Others	6	NA	5.6	NA
Total	182			
Source: Election Commission of India				

A series of pre-election surveys conducted by the CSDS had shown that the gap between the BJP and the Congress had narrowed significantly

44. Milan Vaishnav, 'Modi's Victory'.

45. Prashant Jha, 'Assembly Elections 2017'.

46. Gilles Verniers, 'Upper hand for upper castes in House', *Indian Express*, 20 March 2017.

47. *Ibid.*

in the months before the elections.⁴⁸ Not insignificantly, the prime minister's popularity seemed to follow the same trend, declining from 67% in August to 47% in November.

Five factors were particularly important in determining the outcome. First, the BJP had controlled the state since 1995 and anti-incumbency certainly played a role. In fact, ground reports signalled a rather widespread intention of «teaching the BJP a lesson».⁴⁹

Second, as documented elsewhere by these same authors,⁵⁰ Gujarat, as well as other states, witnessed a series of caste-based agitations in the last two years. The Patidars (or Patels), a landowning, dominant caste, which traditionally supported the BJP, demanded reservations for their community both in government jobs and higher education institutions. The remarkable success of 24-year old Hardik Patel at mobilising his community against the BJP signalled the deep alienation of one of the party's most solid voting blocs.

The resentment of the community largely stemmed from the fact that Gujarat's model of development resulted in the accentuation of the class differences within the community. As data in the India Human Development Survey show, the Patels have become the wealthiest community in the state, but this wealth is highly unevenly distributed. The richest 20% of the Patels cornered 61.4% of the total income of the community, whereas the bottom 20% was left with a meagre 2.8%. Furthermore, data showed that the poorest section of the community lagged behind the richest sections of the OBCs and even of the Dalits.⁵¹

This internal differentiation of the Patidars – which can be found in most other communities as well – is a reflection of the growing urban-rural divide, especially in a state like Gujarat, where the development model has been particularly skewed in favour of the urban sector of the economy. During 2017, Gujarat's farming community was badly hit by demonetisation

48. In August, the distance between the two parties was 30%, with 59% of the respondents saying that they would vote for the BJP. In October, the gap had been reduced to 6% (47% for the BJP, 41% for the Congress) and in the final survey conducted a few weeks before the elections, both parties stood at 43% of the voting intentions. 'Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker 2017 – Round 1', *Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News*, 31 August 2017 (<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Lokniti-CSDS-ABP-News-Gujarat-Tracker-Survey-Findings.pdf>); 'Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker Round 2', *Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News*, 9 November 2017 (<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Gujarat-Tracker-Round-2-Report.pdf>); *Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker, Round 3*, 4 December 2017 (<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Gujarat-Tracker-3-Report.pdf>).

49. 'What's different about the Gujarat poll campaign?', *Indian Express*, 27 November 2017.

50. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2016: Reforming the economy and tightening the connection with the US', *Asia Maior 2016*, pp. 315-67.

51. These data are reported in Christophe Jaffrelot & A. Kalaiyaran, 'Alienation of the Patels', *Indian Express*, 25 October 2017.

and by the crush of the price of groundnut and cotton.⁵² The attempt by the state government to procure larger quantities of groundnut at a higher price, just a few months before the polls,⁵³ did not bring much relief for Gujarat's farmers, engulfed – like most of India's farmers – in a decades-long agricultural crisis, worsened by changing climate conditions.⁵⁴

In fact, electoral analyses show how the rural-urban divide was reflected in the voting patterns. First, the Congress won the majority of rural seats, whereas the BJP dominated the urban vote.⁵⁵ While this is a longer-term trend which was also visible in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections,⁵⁶ in 2017 the gap had widened because the BJP lost ground in areas that were the hearth of the Patidar agitation.⁵⁷ In fact, the Patels moved away from the BJP in an unprecedented manner. This, again, reflected the growing class-divide within the community: the BJP was able to retain the vote of the (more affluent) urban Patels, whereas the Congress cashed in on the resentment of the rural (and poorer) section of the community.⁵⁸

A third factor that was important in determining the result of the election – and one that might have important repercussions in other states and possibly at the all-India level in connection with the 2019 general elections – is that the Congress in general and the newly-appointed party president, Rahul Gandhi, in particular, were able to challenge the BJP in one of its bastions.

The Congress was able to construct a credible narrative around rural distress, which put the BJP on the defensive for the first time since 2014. This anti-BJP narrative was strengthened by building upon the Modi government's failure to fulfil the enormous expectations of the electorate in terms of bringing *achhe din* («good days»)⁵⁹. Also, Rahul Gandhi emerged as a credible leader.⁶⁰ He campaigned hard, holding numerous public rallies and showing himself to be in charge of the party, as when he suspended a

52. 'Farm distress: Gujarat's groundnut growers take a hit as prices plunge below MSP', *Indian Express*, 3 November 2016.

53. 'Ahead of polls, Gujarat's Diwali gift to groundnut farmers', *The Hindu Business Line*, 24 September 2017.

54. During the year under review, journalist enquiries on the agrarian crisis were numerous, particularly on the part of *Scroll.in* and *The Wire*.

55. Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 'How Gujarat was won (and lost): 28 charts that explain the election results', *Scroll.in*, 20 December 2017.

56. Srinivasan Ramani & Vignesh Radhakrishnan, 'Voting trends show a clear rural-urban divide for Cong., BJP in Gujarat', *The Hindu*, 7 December 2017.

57. Christophe Jaffrelot & Gilles Verniers, 'Reading Gujarat verdict: Rural-urban divide underlined, Congress gains for future', *Indian Express*, 19 December 2017.

58. *Ibid.*

59. C. Rammanohar Reddy, 'The Economy: an Annus Horribilis', *Seminar*, No. 701, January 2018.

60. Prashant Jha, 'Gujarat results deliver gains that the Congress and Rahul Gandhi can build on', *Hindustan Times*, 18 December 2017.

senior party leader, Mani Shankar Aiyar, after his comments on Narendra Modi were widely – although incorrectly – interpreted as an insult to the premier’s (low) caste background. While Aiyar’s comments still probably damaged the Congress in the last few days of campaigning,⁶¹ Gandhi demonstrated that he was able to act resolutely against the old guard of the party. It should be noted, however, that Gandhi’s resoluteness was more apparent than real: Aiyar, while certainly one of the most senior and best-known Congress leaders, lacks an independent base of support. In fact, suspending him was not a particularly difficult thing to do and was indeed a sign that Gandhi was playing on the defensive. At the end of the day, it could be argued that, by suspending Aiyar from the Congress, Gandhi might even have damaged the party in the long run.⁶² However, it is a fact that, by doing that, Rahul Gandhi *appeared* to be in charge of his party and with the capacity to act resolutely against senior party leaders.

Moreover, Rahul Gandhi was able to broker deals with three important emerging Gujarati leaders with highly incompatible agendas: Hardik Patel, the leader of the Patidar agitation; Alpesh Thakor, leader of the OBC, SC, ST Ekta Manch (OBC, SC, ST Equality Forum), which mobilised against Hardik’s movement; and Jignesh Mevani, a Dalit leader who had been at the forefront of the agitation sparked off in the wake of the Una incident in 2016.⁶³ This was not by any means an easy task, also considering the Congress’s traditional «allergy» to form alliances.

On a less positive note, Rahul Gandhi de facto abandoned secularism as one of the party’s main ideological platforms.⁶⁴ This was evident in both the numerous visits to temples by Gandhi himself, but also in the low number of tickets given to Muslim candidates (six). This was a worrying sign for India’s democracy, especially in light of the good performance of the Congress, which might indicate that, in order to pose a challenge to the BJP in the current political scenario, the secular card must be shelved.

The fourth factor that shaped the elections was the emergence of the first signs that the long honeymoon of the BJP with the electorate might be coming to an end.⁶⁵ The release of data on (sluggish) economic growth, the failure of demonetisation to achieve its stated objective of eradicating black money, the messy implementation of the Good and Service Tax, and the persistent inability of the Indian economy to generate jobs – according

61. Sanjay Kumar & Shreyas Sardesai, ‘How Gujarat was won’, *The Hindu*, 19 December 2017.

62. Prem Shankar Jha, ‘Rahul Gandhi Is Narendra Modi’s Strongest Ally’, *The Wire*, 11 December 2017.

63. On the Una incident see Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, ‘India 2016’, p. 338.

64. Sanjay Kumar & Shreyas Sardesai, ‘How Gujarat was won’.

65. Sanjay Kumar, ‘Growing discontent against Modi govt’, *Deccan Chronicle*, 2 October 2017.

to some official figures, the number of jobs had actually contracted since 2014⁶⁶ – dented the image of the prime minister as the man who could bring *achhe din*.⁶⁷

In fact, the Gujarat elections demonstrate that, in the near future, the BJP will be unable to campaign on the basis of its economic performance, ultimately because the promised *achhe din* are nowhere in sight.⁶⁸ Voters are well aware of this, as shown by a number of surveys conducted during the last three years. Significantly, concerns about unemployment have increased threefold since 2014 and the percentage of respondents that, in 2017, believed that their economic condition had improved in the last three years was actually lower than during the last phase of the UPA government.⁶⁹ Furthermore, surveys showed that 53.5% of the voters in UP,⁷⁰ 62.4% in Punjab,⁷¹ 59.9 in Goa,⁷² 55.1% in Uttarakhand⁷³ and 60% in Gujarat⁷⁴ believed that Modi had failed to bring the promised *achhe din*.

However, and this is the final important factor, it is undeniable that Modi continued to be the most popular leader in the country, by far. Post-

66. Vinoj Abraham, 'Stagnant Employment Growth', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 September 2017.

67. For a detailed analysis of the demonetisation fiasco and the GST botched implementation, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Indian 2017: Still no *achhe din* (good days) in the offing for the economy', in this same issue.

68. Milan Vaishnav, 'Modi's going to have a much tougher 2018 than anyone's expecting', *The Print*, 19 December 2017.

69. Sanjay Kumar, Jyoti Mishra & Vibha Attri, 'Issues, performance and personality', *Seminar*, No. 699, November 2017.

70. 'ABP News-CSDS Lokniti-Uttar Pradesh Postpoll 2017 Survey Findings', *Lokniti* (<http://www.lokniti.org/pol-pdf/ABP-News-CSDS-Lokniti-Uttar-Pradesh-Postpoll-2017-Survey-Findings-Final.pdf>). The figure refers to those who 'fully agree' or 'somewhat agree' with the statement: 'Narendra Modi has not lived up to his promise of bringing *achhe* [sic] *din*'.

71. 'ABP News-CSDS Lokniti-Punjab Postpoll 2017 Survey Findings', *Lokniti*, (<http://www.lokniti.org/pol-pdf/ABP-News-CSDS-Lokniti-Punjab-Postpoll-2017-Survey-Findings-Final.pdf>). The figure refers to those who «fully agree» or «somewhat agree» with the statement: 'Narendra Modi has not lived up to his promise of bringing *achhe* [sic] *din*'.

72. 'ABP News-CSDS Lokniti-Goa Postpoll 2017 Survey Findings', *Lokniti*, (<http://www.lokniti.org/pol-pdf/ABP-News-CSDS-Lokniti-Goa-Postpoll-2017-Survey-Findings.pdf>). The figure refers to those who 'fully agree' or 'somewhat agree' with the statement: 'Narendra Modi has not lived up to his promise of bringing *achhe* [sic] *din*'.

73. 'ABP News-CSDS Lokniti-Uttarakhand Postpoll 2017 Survey Findings', *Lokniti*, (<http://www.lokniti.org/pol-pdf/ABP-News-CSDS-Lokniti-Uttarakhand-Postpoll-2017-Survey-Findings.pdf>). The figure refers to those who 'fully agree' or 'somewhat agree' with the statement: 'Narendra Modi has failed to bring *achhe* [sic] *din*'.

74. 'Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker, Round 3', *Lokniti*, 4 December 2017 (<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Gujarat-Tracker-3-Report.pdf>). The figure refers to those who «agree» with the statement: «Narendra Modi has failed in bringing *Achhe Din*».

poll survey conducted by the CSDS showed⁷⁵ that 43% of the voters decided whom to vote for during the last two weeks before the elections, which is when the prime minister started campaigning aggressively in the state. More than half of them (53%), voted for the BJP. This largely explains the swing in favour of the BJP between the last pre-poll survey and the actual results. The personal popularity of Modi followed a similar upward trend in the last two weeks of campaigning.

Modi «delivered» Gujarat without changing much of his strategy, based on the fusion of *Hindutva* and *Vikas* (development). However, in the last decisive weeks of campaigning, *Hindutva* was more prominent.⁷⁶ From warning that voting for Rahul Gandhi would mean establishing an «Aurangzeb Raj» (namely the rule of the Muslims),⁷⁷ to attacking the Congress's opposition to building a temple in Ayodhya,⁷⁸ to the «Trumpian»⁷⁹ allegation that the Congress was conspiring with Pakistan to kick the BJP out of power in the state,⁸⁰ Modi's campaign was particularly divisive and clearly aimed at consolidating the Hindu vote.

The CSDS post-poll survey showed that the strategy worked: not only did the BJP vote increase among all Hindu communities in the last two weeks of the campaign; data also show that the higher the percentage of Muslims in a given constituency, the wider the advantage of the BJP over the Congress became.⁸¹ In other words, between the soft majoritarianism of Rahul Gandhi and Modi's hard-line *Hindutva*, Gujarat voters seemed to prefer the latter.

2.3. Alarm bells for the BJP?

The results of the elections in Gujarat showed that the BJP was not invulnerable. Even in UP, where the BJP secured the greatest majority a party has ever achieved, there were signs that it was indeed vulnerable: while winning 14 out of 16 mayoral posts in the civic poll held in November, the BJP could win only a small minority of the seats for the urban local bodies.⁸²

75. Sanjay Kumar & Shreyas Sardesai, 'How Gujarat was won'.

76. Prashant Jha, 'Gujarat election result: PM Modi comes to BJP's rescue, yet again', *Hindustan Times*, 18 December 2017.

77. 'PM Narendra Modi's «Aurangzeb Raj» Dig As Rahul Gandhi Set To Become Congress Chief', *NDTV*, 4 December 2017.

78. 'PM Narendra Modi brings Ayodhya to Gujarat polls, here is what he said', *Financial Express*, 6 December 2017.

79. Milan Vaishnav, 'Modi's going to have'.

80. 'Islamabad is trying to fix Gujarat polls, says Modi', *The Hindu*, 10 December 2017.

81. Sanjay Kumar & Shreyas Sardesai, 'How Gujarat was won'.

82. 'The real numbers in UP civic poll results bring worrying news for BJP', *The Print*, 3 December 2017.

Two things should particularly worry the prime minister. First, the lack of jobs will not magically disappear during 2018, as this is due to structural rather than contingent factors. Second, the discontent in rural areas stemming from a seemingly never-ending agricultural crisis is not going to disappear either.⁸³

3. Foreign policy

Foreign policy has very rarely been a topic of political confrontation for the Indian parties. This means that, with a couple of exceptions,⁸⁴ the main features of India's foreign policy have been endorsed by all political forces represented in the Indian parliament. Accordingly, the changes in the political composition of the Indian governments have had marginal consequences on the evolution of India's foreign policy. This, in spite of the attempt to show the opposite by many pro-Modi Indian analysts, applies to the transition from the Congress-led governments to the Modi-headed administration. Modi's hyper activism in the field of foreign policy, whose main feature has been his continuous tours abroad, quite superior in number to those of any other Indian premier, badly conceals the substantial continuity of his foreign policy with the policies implemented by the Mohan Singh's governments. However, while this is true at the factual level, at the rhetorical level the situation is different. Whether it is India's China policy, or US policy, or south Asia policy, each has been key to Modi trying to demonstrate his superior diplomatic and foreign policy skills as compared to Congress since independence. This hype has figured in each election since 2014 and it is only to be expected that it will be a key component in Modi's electoral strategy in 2019. Differently put, Modi's foreign policy has a dual purpose, as it aims to reach well defined results both at the domestic and international levels. At the domestic level, Modi's foreign policy aims at reaching what can be termed a «demonstration effect» designed to impress the Indian voter.⁸⁵ At the international level, two objectives are key to the implementation of Modi's foreign policy: these are the projection of India as a major world power, and the obtainment of all possible foreign help in promoting its economic development.

It is on the examination of the pursuit of these objectives that the remaining part of this article is based.

As a premise to this examination, two aspects of Modi's foreign policy must be noted. The first is that the above objectives have been pursued by:

83. Anirudh Krishna, 'At the Heart of Rural Discontent Is the Creeping Crisis in Household Agriculture', *The Wire*, 31 July 2017.

84. They occurred in concomitance with the 1962 India-China war and with the 2008 approval by the Indian Parliament of the India-US civil nuclear deal.

85. We are indebted to one of the referees both for this insight and for the quotation.

(a) strengthening the political, economic and military connection with the US, while attempting, with some success, not to damage the traditional ties of friendship with Russia; and (b) pursuing a binary approach to China, based on the concomitant attempt at both engaging and containing it.⁸⁶ The second aspect of Modi's foreign policy that must be noted is that, in 2016, Modi's strategies aimed at reaching these objectives altered to such an extent that even the objectives that they were supposed to pursue appeared to change. The pursuit of a closer relationship with Washington appeared to progressively become related less to the promotion of India's economic development, than finalised at an increase *per se* of the military ties with the US. This was accompanied by the metamorphosing of India's China policy from one of engagement cum containment into one where the adversarial containment aspect was prevalent.⁸⁷

According to some analysts, India's desire to align with the US – or, rather, the US effort at bringing India inside its own anti-China arc of containment – was at the root of the deterioration in India-China relations. However, the contention of the authors of the present article is that India's increasingly adversarial position towards China under Modi's prime-ministership was less the consequence of an alleged subordination of New Delhi to Washington, than the consequence of India's own pursuit of an autonomously conceived policy of containment of China.

As, in the year under review, the adversarial relation with China became paramount in orienting India's foreign policy, much of the remainder of this article is focussed on it. Before, however, a brief appraisal of the state of India-US relations is in order.

3.1. An increasingly militarised US connection

In 2017, the main objective of newly-elected US President Donald Trump's policies appeared to be the unmaking of any policy implemented by his predecessor. However the US relationship with India was a conspicuous exception to this rule. This is all the more relevant if one thinks that the economic connection between the two countries, whose boosting had been presented by Modi as one of his key policy targets, had remained stagnant.⁸⁸ However, the India-US connection continued to flourish propelled less by shared economic interests than by an increasingly closer military cooperation, characterised by a distinctive anti-China bent.

86. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2014: The Annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi Era', *Asia Maior 2014*, pp. 304-22; Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, *India 2015*, pp. 382-406.

87. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, *India 2016*, pp. 339-54.

88. United States Census Bureau, *Trade in Goods with India* (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330.html>).

On 25-26 June, when Modi made his first official visit to the United States since the beginning of the Trump presidency, the Indian premier received the «red carpet» treatment. The contentious issues which could have made the interaction between Trump and Modi difficult were conveniently side-lined,⁸⁹ while the two parts stressed the «strategic convergence» between the two countries. India espoused Donald Trump's stand on North Korea, and accepted to work with the US both in Afghanistan and in the Indo-Pacific region; the US espoused India's position on Pakistan and criticised it for allegedly giving cover to anti-India terrorist groups operating against India.⁹⁰

The reality of the increasing strategic closeness between India and the US became evident later in the year, during US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's October tour to the Middle East and South Asia. While in India, Tillerson, by declaring that it was not the US «objective to interfere with legitimate business activity», de facto gave the green light to India's going ahead with the development of Iran's strategically located port of Chabahar.⁹¹ Chabahar – which is quite near to the Pakistani port of Gwadar, namely the Chinese-developed future terminus of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – is developed by India to become the starting point of a transport corridor connecting the Gulf of Oman to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Of course, the Chabahar corridor is in direct competition with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Which explains why Tillerson, while warning «European companies and other companies around the globe» that conducting business with Iran would be done «at great risk», took a completely different stand in relation to India's activities in Iran.⁹²

3.2. *The adversarial relationship with China*

3.2.1. *India's opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative*

Modi's meeting with Trump occurred the same day when the Doklam standoff, namely the gravest and most dangerous border incident between China and India in 30 years, became public.⁹³ The standoff in the Doklam

89. These included the question of the Trump-imposed limits on H1-B visas for Indian citizens, widely used by US IT firms to make use of Indian IT experts, and the US request to India to do more to open its economy to US exports and investment.

90. Deepal Jayasekera, 'Trump and Modi trumpet Indo-US «strategic convergence», *World Socialist Web Site*, 28 June 2017. See also Seema Sirohi, 'White House to Roll Out Red Carpet for Modi With «Concrete Examples» of Defence Partnership', *The Wire*, 25 June 2017, and M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'Modi has a plan to engage Trump', *Indian Punchline*, 26 June 2017.

91. Deepal Jayasekera, 'Tillerson touts US-India partnership on South Asia tour', *World Socialist Web Site*, 2 November 2017.

92. *Ibid.*

93. In 1987 India and China came close to an all-out war.

Himalayan plateau, which went on for more than two months, signed the lowest point in a relationship that had been steadily deteriorating since Modi's advent to power.

Even before Doklam, the increasing deterioration of India-China relations that characterised the year under review had been highlighted by India's decision not to join the two-day Belt and Road Forum (Beijing 14-15 May). In doing so, India turned down China's official invitation, which was only the latest one among Beijing's numerous attempts to improve relations with India and to encourage it to engage with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly OBOR: «One Belt, One Road» initiative).⁹⁴

India justified its position by claiming that the BRI, by intruding on parts of the former princely state of Kashmir, claimed by India, ignored India's core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Also, according to India, the BRI would create unsustainable debt burdens for the countries involved.⁹⁵

India's boycott of the BRI Forum was closely followed by the announcement, made by India and Japan at the 52nd annual meeting of the African Development Bank in Gandhinagar (22-26 May 2017), that the two nations were launching an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). This initiative, which had been in the making since 2015, had the overriding goal of enhancing «growth and interconnectedness between and within Asia and Africa» and represented «an amalgamation of both Japan's and India's growing strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific region».⁹⁶

The AAGC was technically similar to the China-sponsored BRI and focused on a geographical area overlapping with the BRI intended sphere of influence. Differently put, the AAGC was in direct and explicit competition with the BRI.

3.2.2. *The Doklam standoff*

Soon after the launching of the AAGC came the Doklam incident. The Doklam plateau – also spelled Dokalam in India and called Dong Lang by the Chinese – is at the tri-junction of the borders of India, China and Bhutan, and is located beyond the Indian border, on land which was under the de facto control of China, although claimed by Bhutan. According to the official reconstructions by the Indian and Chinese ministries of

94. China's openings to India since the end of the UPA era have been explored in numerous articles published in *The Wire* by senior journalist Prem Shankar Jha.

95. E.g. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Official Spokesperson's response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum*, 13 May 2017.

96. Jagannath Panda, 'The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor: An India-Japan Arch in the Making?', *Focus Asia. Perspectives & Analysis*, No. 21, August 2017. The quotations are from pp. 2 and 8.

foreign affairs respectively,⁹⁷ on 16 June «a PLA [People Liberation Army] construction party entered the Doklam area and attempted to construct a road».⁹⁸ This happened in spite of a Royal Bhutan army patrol's effort to dissuade the Chinese. Accordingly, «in consultation with the RGOB [Royal Government of Bhutan]», Indian troops crossed the border and entered the Doklam plateau on 18 June, preventing the PLA from continuing its work.⁹⁹ This triggered a standoff between the Chinese and Indian militaries that, as soon as it became public knowledge, caused a veritable storm of jingoist threats, including that of an all-out war, hurled by the Indian media to China and by Chinese media to India. This, together with the apparently unyielding public positions of the two governments, conveyed the impression of a progressively deteriorating situation, slowly but steadily sliding towards war. However, confidential diplomatic contacts between the two governments continued, as they had since the beginning of the crisis.¹⁰⁰ Unnoticed by most observers, the situation on the ground had begun to improve by the end of July, with a steady diminution of the troops involved.¹⁰¹ Finally, after more than two months, the confrontation came to an (apparently abrupt) end on 28 August. On that date the Indian troops vacated the Doklam plateau, and, on the same day, the Chinese troops followed suit. The disputed road was left unfinished, but the Chinese reiterated that they would continue to patrol from time to time the Doklam plateau and that they reserved the right to restart the road work in the future.¹⁰²

Even if border incidents between China and India are a frequent occurrence, the Doklam one had important peculiarities. It occurred in the Sikkim sector, namely the only part of the long and mainly undefined India-China border that is mutually accepted and clearly demarcated on the ground. This means that the Indian troops crossed what they recognised as the international border and entered a territory which they knew to be disputed between two other countries.

97. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Recent Developments in Doklam Area', 30 June 2017; 'Full text of facts and China's position concerning Indian border troops' crossing of China-India boundary', *Xinhua*, 2 August 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Remarks*, 2 August 2017.

98. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Recent Developments in Doklam Area', 30 June 2017.

99. The date of the Indian crossing is given in the Chinese statement.

100. E.g., Brig (retd) Anil Gupta, 'Post Doklam: India cannot afford to let her guard down', *South Asia Monitor*, 8 September 2017.

101. Elizabeth Roche, 'Ajit Doval's China visit may have cooled off border tension, say analysts', *Livemint*, 30 July 2017; Ajai Shukla, 'Doklam crisis begins winding down: Both sides reduce troops, China proposes new Sikkim border agreement', *Broadsword*, 2 August 2017 (reprinted from the *Business Standard*, same date).

102. Ankit Panda, 'Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End', *The Diplomat*, 29 August 2017.

India justified this step with two claims. The first was that its decision had been taken either on behalf of Bhutan or following its request, to protect the interests of a small country that was India's closest ally in south Asia. India's second claim was that the Chinese construction of a road on the Doklam plateau represented a clear and present danger for India, as it opened the possibility for the Chinese Army to easily and quickly move against the Siliguri corridor, cutting it across in the event of a new India-China war. The Siliguri corridor, also called Chicken Neck, is the strategically crucial strip of land – at its narrowest point only 17 kilometres wide – connecting the north-eastern Indian states to the remainder of India.

Two additional facts must be noted. First, Bhutan gave the distinct impression of being unenthusiastic about India's intervention. Significantly, Thimphu took a public – and anti-Chinese – position on the issue only on 29 June, eleven days after the Indian crossing of the border. Also Bhutan's official statement was quite brief and without any reference to a supposed request to India to intervene.¹⁰³ Second, while at first sight, India's claim that the road construction in the Doklam area threatened the Chicken Neck makes sense, a closer look at the situation on the ground tells a different story. To access the Doklam plateau, the PLA must go through the Chumbi Valley, which is closed by mountain ridges controlled in the east by the Indian army and in the west by Bhutan, where Indian troops are already deployed.¹⁰⁴ This means that, strategically speaking, the whole Chumbi-Doklam sector, more than a dagger aimed at India's Chicken Neck, looks like the ideal place for India to ambush an advancing Chinese army.

Thus said, the question of which party was responsible for triggering the Doklam incident can be (tentatively) addressed. According to many analysts, the Chinese acted to willingly bully India and Bhutan (the latter being the other country which had turned down China's invitation to take part in the BRI Forum). However, to the authors of this article, this thesis looks less convincing than the alternative one that India, taking advantage of a situation of weakness on the part of China, coldly engaged its northern neighbour in a dangerous chess game, eventually scoring victory (although a likely temporary one). That the Chinese did not intend to spark an international incident by starting the road construction work in Doklam also

103. Royal Government of Bhutan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release*, 29 June 2017. Also, according to some reports, China claimed that «Bhutan informed Beijing that it did not know about Indian troop movements in the [Doklam] region, nor had it asked India to intervene on its behalf». Jeremy Luedi, 'Doklam Standoff Highlights India and China's «Great Game» over Bhutan', *Foreign Policy Association*, 11 September 2017.

104. Praveen Swami, 'Behind the ongoing stand-off in Doklam, century-old manoeuvres of geostrategy', *The Indian Express*, 24 July 2017.

squares with the claim that the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi had informed India about the road building in advance.¹⁰⁵

In the Sikkim sector – basically the only place along the Sino-Indian border where such a situation existed – the Indian armed forces enjoyed a position of superiority vis-à-vis their Chinese counterpart.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the standoff occurred while two important political events were in the offing: the BRICS annual summit (3-5 September in Xiamen) and the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (18-24 October). China had an overriding interest in making the BRICS summit a success, which rendered it necessary to have India taking part in the summit. Also, China President Xi Jinping, who aimed to greatly strengthen his power by the Communist Party Congress, could ill afford either a flop of the BRICS summit or an armed military confrontation which could easily get out of hand and escalate in an all-out war.

These factors suggest which party took the initiative in triggering the Doklam incident and explain how it ended. If the above explanation is correct, the goal of the Modi government's action was less the blocking of the construction of a (largely irrelevant) road in the Doklam plateau than projecting India and its prime minister as capable of successfully facing down a powerful, arrogant and aggressive China.

3.2.2. *An unexpected (and probably short-lived) silver lining at the end of the year*

After the closing of the Doklam incident, India, although attentive not to take too provocative an anti-China stand, steadily continued to march along the containment path taken since Modi's ascent to power. India's anti-China bent was present both in the further strengthening of the bilateral relationship with Japan (whose highest point was the 12th India-Japan Annual Summit held on 13-14 September at Gandhinagar) and in the active part taken by New Delhi in the resurrection of the basically anti-China quadri-lateral entente between Australia, India, Japan and the US, or «Quad», at Manila on 11 November.

However, in spite of the India-China tensions that had characterised most of 2017, the year closed on a positive note. A few days after the Manila Quad meeting, on 18 November, the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi, Luo Zhaohui, while interacting with Indian China experts, intervened on

105. 'Full text of facts and China's position concerning Indian border troops' crossing of China-India boundary', section III. This assertion was left unanswered by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Also worth noticing is that, according to some analysts, the PLA construction work in Doklam aimed at enlarging a pre-existing road, rather than building a new one. Jeremy Luedi, 'Doklam Standoff Highlights India and China's «Great Game» over Bhutan'.

106. E.g. Brig. (ret'd) Anil Gupta, 'Post Doklam: India cannot afford to let her guard down'.

the question of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC, at the time the most important part of the BRI, was viewed by India as unacceptable, formally because it crossed lands claimed by New Delhi, in reality because it was bound to hugely strengthen Pakistan. This being the situation, Ambassador Luo announced that China could «change the name of CPEC» and «create an alternative corridor through Jammu and Kashmir, Nathu La pass or Nepal to deal with India's concerns».¹⁰⁷

This was followed by the official visits to New Delhi first by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (11 December) and then by Chinese State Councillor and high ranking member of China's Communist Party Yang Jiechi (20-22 December). Wang went to New Delhi to take part in the China-India-Russia foreign ministers meeting. Yang went there to meet National Security Advisor Ajit Doval in the context of the 20th round of talks on the boundary question. Wang was also received by the President of India and Yang by both Narendra Modi and India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj. These meetings – which, according to official accounts, were characterised by an atmosphere of cordiality¹⁰⁸ – had a common subtext, articulated by the Chinese but fully reciprocated by the Indian counterpart. This was the idea that China and India had far greater shared strategic interests in common than differences, and far greater needs for cooperation than for friction. Accordingly, to prevent the repeat of unpleasantness such as Doklam, the two countries were to enhance «strategic communications» and «practical cooperation in various fields». The parts agreed on the fact that a sine qua non to the promotion of the fundamental interests of both countries was an early settlement of the boundary question, and that, pending it, it was imperative to maintain «peace and tranquillity» in the border areas. In order to reach this goal, several confidence-building measures were discussed between the two parts.¹⁰⁹

This undoubtedly represented a sudden, unexpected, positive development in the troubled India-China relationship. But it would be rash to conclude that that was going to translate into a lasting change in the re-

107. 'China proposes alternative routes for CPEC via J&K, Nepal', *The Hindu*, 18 November 2017.

108. However some Indian newspapers questioned the official accounts reporting the alleged cordiality of the meetings, particularly in the case of the Yang-Swaraj summit. E.g. 'India, China differ over Sushma Swaraj-Wang Yi meet in New Delhi', *The Tribune*, 14 December 2017.

109. 'Handling of Doklam shows importance of India-China ties', *Livemint*, 11 December 2017; 'India says willing to further promote mutual understanding, trust with China', *Xinhua*, 12 December 2017; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Official Spokeperson's response to articles appearing in some sections of the media regarding EAM's Meeting with Chinese FM*, 13 December 2017; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *20th Meeting of Special Representatives of India and China*, 22 December 2017; 'China, India agree to properly handle border issues', *Xinhua*, 23 December 2017.

lationship between the two Asian giants. The engagement to try to rectify the glitches in the bilateral relationship, even if sincere, cannot wish away, ipso facto, the strategic contradictions that exist between the two countries. These strategic contradictions appear to be ultimately tied to the overriding goals of the two countries: becoming the undisputed dominant power in Asia in the case of China, and emerging as the other dominant Asian power, on equal terms with China, in the case of India.