

**SHIFTING BALANCES IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY:
INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC FACTORS AT STAKE**

by Marzia Casolari

1. *Howdy Modi vs Namaste Trump*

Since Narendra Modi's second electoral victory, in May 2019, the US -India bilateral relations have been marked by unprecedented cordial tones. "Howdy, Modi!" was the slogan used at the reception ceremony held by President Trump at Houston Strong Stadium on 22 September 2019, to welcome India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on his visit to the US.

On this occasion, for the first time in US -India bilateral relations a US president lavishly praised an Indian prime minister. Trump described Modi as a "most loyal friend" and celebrated his achievements, notably "the incredible number" of nearly 300 million people lifted out of poverty and 140 million Indians raised to the rank of middle class. Trump emphasized India's democratic electoral process and its common hallmarks with American democracy.

Trump declared the US and India's intention to implement bilateral investments and space cooperation as well as the Tiger Triumph joint military exercise, and pledged to jointly fight radical Islamic terrorism. According to Trump, the US and India should protect their borders and take care of their people, of their "citizens first"¹.

Modi's visit to the US was part of a six-day trip, from 21 to 27 Sep-

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¹ *Donald Trump Speech at 'Howdy, Modi' Event In Houston*, "YouTube", 22 September 2019.

tember 2019². Gone are the days when, for a decade, Modi was denied a visa over concerns about his involvement in Ahmedabad anti-Muslim violence in 2002, when he was Gujarat's chief minister.

Indian response to Modi's American warm reception was *Namaste Trump* "Honour to Trump", the repeatedly-shouted traditional Hindi salute. This was echoed by a huge crowd of more than 110,000 people at the reception ceremony in honour of President Trump and the first lady, held on 24 February 2020 at Motera stadium in Ahmedabad, the world's largest cricket stadium. During his first visit to India, Trump spent 36 hours in the country, from 24 to 26 February 2020.

Modi's welcome speech was very formal, while Trump's was a mix of rhetoric, references to cultural and religious issues, pragmatism and future plans. Besides celebrating Modi as a self-made man, with a past as a *chaiwala*, a street tea seller who became India's prime minister, the president's speech highlighted the objectives of US interest in India and drew the picture of US -India relations in the near future. Trump praised India as an economic giant with the world's largest democracy and emphasized Modi's remarkable achievements in improving quality of life, since he was able to bring electricity to every village, to supply internet connections to 320 million people and to ensure access to basic sanitation to 600 million people.

The key subjects of Trump's speech were the expansion of bilateral economic ties and "reduction of burdens on business", with a clear reference to the controversial issue of tariffs on India's exports.

Defence cooperation had economic implications as well, as proven by the announcement of a helicopters sale to India at a value of US\$ 3 billion to be signed next day.

The fight against Islamic terrorism and the development of defence cooperation were the other main key subjects of Trump's talk: India is one of the crucial elements of the international alliances the US is "revitalizing". In this system of strategic alliances, Trump included Pakistan, with whom his administration was "working in a very positive way", the president remarked, "to crack down on the terrorist organisations and militants who operate on the Pakistani border"³.

² *Highlights of PM Modi's visit to the US*, in "The Hindu", 28 September 2019.

³ *Here's the full text of Donald Trump's Speech at Motera Stadium*, in "The Economic Times", 24 February 2020.

While Trump was praising India's religious pluralism, the worst anti-Muslim violence Delhi faced since 1984 was going on in the old town.

The US -India relations have not always been friendly: the two meetings between Narendra Modi and Donald Trump are the culmination of a decades' long history of often ambivalent, if not conflictual, bilateral relations. If India's relations with the US have always been an influential factor of India's foreign policy, they have also been controversial for a long time.

2. *The gradual reversal of India's foreign policy*

The end of the Cold War brought about a transition in India's economy and foreign policy: at the end of the 1980s India shifted from planned economy to liberism, and from the close relationship with the Soviet Union to a multidirectional foreign policy; this process involved a plurality of actors, including former foes, notably China and the US.

The main consequence of the end of the Cold War was the acceleration of economic liberalizations and privatisations. The government brought about economic reforms since before the collapse of the Soviet Union when, in the late 1980s India faced a major crisis led by a foreign exchange crunch that dragged the economy close to the default of the loans⁴. In the early aftermath of the Cold War, Prime Minister V.P. Narasimha Rao and the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh introduced radical reforms, known as Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG).

As far as India's international relations were concerned, the Soviet Union had been its largest trade partner and its main supplier of sophisticated weapons; after the end of the Cold War, Russia continued to play the same role. However, with the end of the Cold War and the normalisation of China-Russia relations, the US-Soviet rivalry in Asia came to an end and Russia no longer needed to maintain a special strategic relation with India. Also the alliance with the Soviet Union, whose scope was also to counterbalance the US -Pakistan alliance, lost

⁴ V. CERRA, S. CHAMAN SAXENA, *What Caused the 1991 Currency Crisis in India?*, in "IMF Papers" n. 3, 2002, pp. 402-403.

its importance. Due to the end of its special strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, India had to reform its foreign policy in order to pursue its national security interests, and so it had to redefine its alliances and possible partnerships.

The risk of the rise of a unipolar world order led China and India to unite in a struggle against American hegemonic policy. The two countries drove forward a process of gradual rapprochement and normalisation of their bilateral relations, as proved by a number of official visits exchanged between 1991 and 2005⁵.

In these decades the two countries reinstated the negotiations regarding the borders, which had been halted since the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and, among ebbs and flows, established intense and increasingly intertwined economic relations⁶.

In the period under review India necessarily brought about a radical change in its relations with the United States, that shifted from a decade long estrangement⁷ to a tight partnership, sealed by the historic nuclear deal of 2006, which represented a watershed in US -India relations.

Since then India gradually aligned with the US and, in recent times, it tries to play a hegemonic role at the regional level, at China's expenses. The transition from estrangement from to alignment with the US entailed India's increasing estrangement from Pakistan, the shift from promising negotiations on Kashmir in 2003 and the departure from the so called Composite Dialogue⁸ with Pakistan to solve the Kashmiri issue between 2004 and 2006⁹. The Mumbai terror attacks of

⁵ W. HONGYU, *Sino-Indian Relations. Present and Future*, in "Asian Survey", n. 6, 1995.

M. CASOLARI, *Gli effetti della Guerra in Iraq sugli equilibri asiatici: il ruolo di India e Cina nella costruzione di un mondo multipolare*, in M. EMILIANI (ed.) *Iraq. Radiografia del conflitto quattro anni dopo*, Bologna, CLUEB, 2007.

⁶ M. CASOLARI, *Gli effetti della Guerra in Iraq sugli equilibri asiatici: il ruolo di India e Cina nella costruzione di un mondo multipolare*, cit..

⁷ D. KUX, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies 1941-1991*, Washington D.C., National Defence University Press, 1993; S. GANGULY, M.S. PARDESI, *Explaining Sixty Years of India's Foreign Policy*, in "India Review", n. 1, 2009.

⁸ Launched in 1997, the Composite Dialogue is based on the principle of discussing all issues pending between the two countries, including those regarding Kashmir, at the same time.

⁹ S. PADDER, *The Composite Dialogue Between India and Pakistan: Structure, Process and Agency*, in "Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics", n. 65, 2012, pp. 1-21.

July 2006 and November 2008 undermined the relations with Pakistan permanently¹⁰.

In Indian politics internal and international factors significantly reflect and influence each other. This aspect has been underestimated by the existing literature, which tends to focus separately either on domestic issues (often limited to economic factors) or on international processes. The attempt here is to relate internal and international issues and to observe how they influenced each other.

Between the beginning of the 1990s and the present, India's politics faced major transformations, represented by two main aspects: the crisis of the Congress Party and the rise of the Hindu right-wing, which determined respectively the crisis of secularism and the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism. This shift influenced the course of the foreign policy and the construction of international political alliances. When the BJP¹¹ came to power for the first time in 1998, Prime Minister Vajpayee inherited the Congress line of foreign policy¹², but since when the party consolidated, in the last decade, it adopted much more radical, especially anti-Muslim, attitudes at the internal level, which at the international level translated into the development of ties with very conservative countries and the adoption of hegemonic attitudes at the regional level. This shift contributed to further undermine the relations with Pakistan and hampered the possibility of a negotiated, peaceful and fair solution of the pending questions between the two countries, above all Kashmir.

The existing literature on India's international relations emphasises 1991 as the crucial date for landmark changes in Indian internal and international policy, while the real crossroad was the historic US-India nuclear deal of 2006: it was a necessary act to fulfil India's entrance into the global system.

¹⁰ M. CASOLARI, *Gli effetti della Guerra in Iraq sugli equilibri asiatici: il ruolo di India e Cina nella costruzione di un mondo multipolare*, cit.; M. CORSI, *Pakistan: tra nazionalismo e terrorismo*, in "Asia Maior", 2007, pp. 121-153.

¹¹ The Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party – BJP) is the main party of India's Hindu militant right wing. Found in 1980 as Jan Sangh, throughout the decades it increased as the main competitor of the Congress.

¹² P. CHAULA, *Historic visit to China by Prime Minister Vajpayee brings Beijing and Delhi closer*, in "India Today", 7 July 2003.

3. *End of estrangement: the 2006 US-India historic nuclear deal and its effects*

During the first months in power, the Congress government carried on with its traditional policy of warily distancing the US and cultivating ties with other countries which remained aloof from the US, or openly opposed it. At the same time, India continued its multipolar policy and the *détente* with Pakistan and China¹³.

Even though India chose not to join the US -led occupation of Iraq in 2003¹⁴ and despite America's initial dislike of Manmohan Singh's government, backed by the Communist Party of India (CPI), in 2004 George W. Bush prepared the ground for the security partnership with India. The US could not fail to notice India's emergence as one of the hugest economies and most interesting markets in Asia, and its increasing geopolitical importance as a 'swing state', that could alter Asian balances according to its international position. The US became increasingly aware of the possibility that India could lean towards the China-Russian-Iran pole, at that time emerging as the main alternative to the US supremacy.

George W. Bush was not the first American president to realise the importance of getting India on the US side: at the beginning of 1998 Bill Clinton, who also sensed India's increasing strategic importance, tried to improve the until then wavering US relations with this country, but the Pokhran II crisis and the subsequent Kargil War of May-July 1999 overruled the American rapprochement to India until 2000¹⁵.

¹³ M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, in "Asia Maior", 2007, pp. 155-200.

¹⁴ M. CASOLARI, *Gli effetti della Guerra in Iraq sugli equilibri asiatici: il ruolo di India e Cina nella costruzione di un mondo multipolare*, cit..

¹⁵ Between 11 and 13 May 1998 India carried out five detonations, followed by Vajpayee's declaration of India as a full-fledged nuclear state. Pakistan reacted immediately with the Chagai I and Chagai II tests, held on 28 and 30 May 1998 respectively. The tensions between the two countries mounted in the following months until the spark of the war, the fourth between India and Pakistan. The cause of the war was an incursion of Pakistani soldiers, disguised as Kashmiri militants, beyond the Line of Control (LOC) that separates the two sides of Kashmir since 1949. Once India regained control of the territory and pushed the Pakistani forces beyond the LOC, it withdrew its troops from the Pakistan-controlled zone.

S. GANGULY, *India's Pathway to Pokhran II: The Prospects and Sources of New Delhi's Nuclear Weapons Program*, in "International Security", n. 4, 1999.

In 2004-2005 India followed two, on certain aspects conflicting, lines of foreign policy: multilateralism and friendliness with the US. India's multilateral policy was embodied by its flourishing relations with China, Iran and Russia, while the understanding with the US developed thanks to the nuclear deal.

India and China resumed negotiations in the first half of 2005, with an exchange of top level bilateral visits. Besides improving the border agreements, the two countries opted to expand the respective economies along complementary, rather than competitive lines.

Apart from enjoying a profitable 25-year contract worth US\$ 18 million for the supply of Iranian gas, in 2005 India undertook negotiations with Teheran, Beijing and Islamabad to extend to China the planned Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, known also as the Peace Pipeline¹⁶. In this way, even the reconciliation between India and Pakistan could be further strengthened, but the project got off the ground.

The historic cooperation with Russia continued, without being undermined by US competition¹⁷.

With the objective of absorbing India in its sphere of influence, in 2005 the US did its utmost to hamper India's multipolar foreign policy. The US realised that India's most crucial problem was energy, so it tried to attract India through energy cooperation. This was the ultimate goal of Condoleezza Rice's trip to Delhi in mid-March 2005: the Secretary of State criticized the Iran-India gas deal, acknowledged India's thirst for energy and laid the ground for the US -India nuclear agreement¹⁸.

If the US was eager to enforce its economic and strategic cooperation with India, India's liberalisation and its entry into the global economic system could not avoid complying with the US. India's requirement of US economic and technological cooperation determined

¹⁶ Plans to develop the Peace Pipeline started in 1995 but, because of several delays, shortcomings, political instability either in Iran or Pakistan, technical problems and US pressure to thwart the project, the pipeline is still under construction.

M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, cit..

¹⁷ The subject of India-Russia relations is so broad, that it deserves a specific treatise. Moreover, unlike relations with other countries, that throughout the years were subject to remarkable changes, they remained almost unaltered, therefore they do not greatly reflect the changing character of India's foreign relations, which is the topic of this essay.

¹⁸ M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, cit..

the realignment of the until then troubled relations between the two countries¹⁹.

India's gradual inclusion into the American international network was a consequence. The age of US -India estrangement was over.

In order for the US to cooperate with India, it was necessary to remove the main hindrance which obstructed fair and friendly bilateral relations, namely India's refusal to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)²⁰. However, due to India's firm opposition to the treaty, the US had no other choice but to bypass the NPT. The only solution was to seal a separate agreement.

The prelude to the nuclear deal was the Framework Defence Agreement (FDA), which included transfer of technology from the US to India, joint research and production.

President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed the deal in Delhi on 2 March 2006²¹. Without going into the technical details of the agreement²², India obtained to be treated as a nuclear state, without being a NPT member and to temporarily exclude its breeder reactors from international safeguards. Moreover, the deal allowed India to accede advanced fast reactors technology and to receive American technological assistance, equipment and supply of uranium: in this way India could increase exponentially its capacity to produce nuclear weapons²³.

The deal was approved by the US government in June 2006, enacted in December and finally enforced by the end of 2008: the US recognised India as a civil and a *de facto* military nuclear power²⁴.

The nuclear agreement represented a watershed in India- US rela-

¹⁹ D. KUX, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies 1941-1991*, cit.; S. GANGULY, M.S. PARDESI, *Explaining Sixty Years of India's Foreign Policy*, cit..

²⁰ It is well known that since the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) defines nuclear-weapons states as being only those who have tested nuclear devices before 1 January 1967, India is not included, as it conducted its first nuclear test in 1974. India has always refused to sign the NPT, because it considered the treaty as discriminatory.

²¹ L. WEISS, *U.S.-India Nuclear Cooperation. Better Later Than Sooner*, in "Non Proliferation Review", n. 3, 2006.

²² D. MISTRY, *Diplomacy. Domestic Policy, and the US-India Nuclear Agreement*, in "Asian Survey", n. 5, 2006; M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, cit..

²³ M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, cit..

²⁴ R.E. VICKERY Jr., *Looking Back: The 1998 Nuclear Wake Up Call for US-India Ties*, in "The Diplomat", 31 May 2018.

tions that marked a reversal in India's previous international policy. Thereafter the discord between India and US turned into an increasingly tight and durable alliance. As the US alliance with India became closer, the more it deteriorated with Pakistan. From George W. Bush second term the alliance with Pakistan became embarrassing and this was one of the main reasons for the US shift to democratic, more stable and economically-sound India.

Following the nuclear agreement, relations with China fell apart and India's multipolar foreign policy, as opposed to American supremacy, petered out. What made this transformation possible was the departure from the scene of the two main supporters of India's multipolarism, Natwar Singh and Mani Shankar Aiyar, respectively minister of External Affairs and of Petroleum and Natural Gas. Both were marginalised by the prime minister. Aiyar was removed, after heavy pressure by the US administration²⁵.

4. *The changing nature of India's foreign relations*

India's military cooperation with the US dates back to 1992, when the first US -India military exercises took place: they were the code-named Teak Iroquois exercise, held in February 1992 (and in October 1993), and the Malabar exercise, started in May 1992, which continued regularly up to the present, though suspended from 1998 to 2002, after India's nuclear tests²⁶. The number and frequency of these exercises has increased significantly since 1992. Four naval exercises are carried out annually: Malabar, Habu Naag, Spitting Cobra, and Salvex. Army Exercises Yudh Abhyas (since 2004), Shatrujeet and Vajra Prahar are conducted annually, whereas air exercise Cope India is conducted bi-annually. From 2008 India has occasionally been invited to participate in the Red Flag aerial exercise held in the US and from 2014 as an observer to RIMPAC (Rim of Pacific), the world's largest multilateral naval exercise, held in the US. Since January 2004

²⁵ M. TORRI, *Le ambizioni di grande Potenza dell'India*, cit..

²⁶ S. BISHOY, *Defence Diplomacy in us-India Strategic Relationship*, in "Journal of Defence Studies", n. 1, 2011, pp. 64-86; R.P. RAJAGOPALAN, *Tiger Triumph: us-India Military Relations Get More Complex*, in "The Diplomat", 15 November 2019.

US -India strategic cooperation includes nuclear safety and space technology²⁷.

This intense US -India military cooperation has very strong geopolitical implications. With Japan's entrance into the Malabar exercise in 2007, the bilateral military cooperation between India and the US became multilateral, with the clear purpose of containing China.

Again in 2007, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo initiated the Quadrilateral Security Agreement (QSD), better known as QUAD, a huge and ambitious military cooperation programme, an extension of the Malabar exercise involving the US, Japan, India and Australia. It is an instrument to contain China's sustained economic expansion and military presence in Southeast Asia²⁸.

US-China relations have always been ambivalent, with several ebbs and flows²⁹, but as Foot and King pointed out³⁰, they have deteriorated in the last ten years (a deterioration accelerated by Trump administration), ever since the Chinese market ceased to represent an opportunity for the US economy and instead began to be a threat. Japan has always shared with its historic ally, the US, the perception of China as a threat³¹.

For all these actors, the US, Japan, India and Australia, the common problem is the access to the attractive ASEAN market, now obstructed by China's overwhelming presence and invasive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³².

In order to tackle China's expansion to Southeast Asia and, in general, to challenge its increasing economic weight at the international

²⁷ S.L. BAJWA, *U.S. security cooperation with India and Pakistan: a comparative study*. Master Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2013; *After Yudh Abhyas, Indian, US Army Begin Exercise 'Vajra Prahar' In Seattle, USA*, in "The Eurasian Times", 17 October 2020.

²⁸ Y. WANG, *Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China's new grand strategy*, in "The Pacific Review", n. 3, 2016.

²⁹ W.J. COHEN, *America's response to China. A History of Sino-American Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

³⁰ R. FOOT, A. KING, *Assessing the deterioration in China-U.S. relations: U.S. governmental perspectives on the economic-security nexus*, in "China International Strategy Review", n. 1, 2019.

³¹ E. ATANASSOVA-CORNELIS, Y. SATO, *The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma in the Asia-Pacific: Changing Rationale and Scope*, "The International Spectator", n. 4, 2019.

³² Y. WANG, *Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China's new grand strategy*, cit..

level, Barak Obama chose the Pivot to Asia, an apparently paradoxical economic program designed to compete with China's investments with even greater American investments. Rather than trying to undermine China's economic growth, that would have affected America's increasingly interdependence on the Chinese economy, the Obama administration preferred to engage China by strengthening the international norms with which China had to comply, as a condition to economically interact with the West³³. If Obama clearly perceived the economic importance of Southeast Asia, his ambitious Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement aiming to connect the US West coast to the Asia-Pacific, was a failure: signed on 4 February 2016, it never came into effect³⁴.

India "discovered" the ASEAN area in 1991, when the then-prime minister Narasimha Rao launched India's 'Look East policy'. At that time India had tried to cooperate with Southeast Asian countries. However, it has never had the economic strength of China, embroiled as it was by huge internal economic problems, that hindered its capacity to compete. The result was that India's 'Look East Policy' did not go much beyond official meetings. Although it produced economic exchanges, it was not systematic.

Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014 and Trump's appearance on the scene in 2017 completely changed the picture. Narendra Modi's East Asian policy shifted from 'Look East' to 'Act East'. Apart from the extraordinary similarity between the two leaders, actually three if we consider Abe, each one assertive and authoritarian, a change of leader and shift of power is not enough to explain the significant transformation of the strategies adopted by the three allies to contain China. The real problem is China's development in technologies which have a high commercial and military value. The challenges that China poses today are much different from the past, because they involve the economic and the security levels as well³⁵.

In keeping with his habit of dismissing his predecessor's policies,

³³ F. CONGIU, *China in 2014: China and the Pivot to Asia*, in "Asia Maior", 2015.

³⁴ The TPP included US, Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Vietnam.

³⁵ R. FOOT, A. KING, *Assessing the deterioration in China-U.S. relations: U.S. governmental perspectives on the economic-security nexus*, cit..

Trump abandoned the TPP and launched the Indo-Pacific Strategy, a combination of economic cooperation and military alliance over “a region that spans from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian subcontinent”, where India and Japan represent the two opposite pillars. The focus of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, laid out by Mike Pompeo in 2018, is ASEAN as “a region home to a third of the world’s population and fourth of its six largest economies”, where in 2018 the US “outlined more than \$ 110 million in US support for digital, energy and infrastructure projects”³⁶. The official communication does not mention China as the target of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, but it refers to “a free and open” region, with US business “at the center of it”. The US “never and will never seek domination in the Indo-Pacific” and it “will oppose any country that does”³⁷. The reference to China is clear and sounds like a challenge, considering that a full section of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is devoted to the international water issue, reflecting without openly mentioning the Senkaku/Diayou³⁸.

Since New Zealand and Australia are geographically close to Indonesia but distanced from the core of the Indo-Pacific area, as represented by the Indian subcontinent and the Indo-Chinese peninsula, and while Japan cannot be entrusted with an active military role, India becomes the most important defence player³⁹, as evidenced by the Tiger Triumph tri-services amphibious US -India military exercise, inaugurated in September 2019. Previously India had carried out tri-services exercises only with Russia⁴⁰.

The US is eager to actively involve the ASEAN countries as additional military partners, but is reluctant to engage in a possible confrontation with China, while India opposes the involvement of Australia in the Malabar exercise, in order to avoid any friction with China⁴¹. This attitude

³⁶ L. HARTMANN, *What is the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy?* in “ShareAmerica”, 23 September 2019.

³⁷ C. CONNELL, *Pompeo outlines U.S. vision for free, open Indo-Pacific*, in “ShareAmerica”, 31 July 2018

³⁸ M. BUCHANAN, *Who is in charge here?* in “ShareAmerica”, 26 June 2018.

³⁹ United States of America Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*, 4 November 2019.

⁴⁰ *What is India-US Tri-Services ‘Exercise Tiger Triumph’: All you need to know*, “India Today”, 24 September 2019.

⁴¹ M. TORRI, *India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi’s Foreign Policy?*, in “Asia Maior”, 2019.

reflects India's historic ambivalent approach to China: the two countries are often in conflict at the regional level, as shown by persistent territorial issues, but adopt similar positions and resolutions at the international level. India-China economic interdependence is too strong to be challenged by a military confrontation: in 2019 bilateral trade stood at US \$ 92.68 billion⁴². This can explain the cordial character of the informal Wuhan meeting between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping between 16 and 27 April 2018, where global common interests were restated and the two Asian giants pledged to accelerate the construction of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor, an infrastructural project directed towards the economic integration and development of the region. Less than a year earlier, in Summer 2017, the two countries faced the Doklan standoff, when Indian troops stopped Chinese soldiers who were constructing a road in the territory of Bhutan, an Indian ally. In Wuhan the leaders of the two powers reiterated their intention to implement the guiding principles adopted in 2005 to resolve the borders issue. Apart from the soundness of these intentions, the détente between India and China became evident in Modi's keynote speech at the Shangri La Dialogue on 31 May-2 June 2018. Talking about the future of the Indo-Pacific region, the Indian prime minister used extraordinarily soft words to emphasize the importance of inclusiveness and equality of all nations within the area, and the necessity of rules and norms accepted by all and not imposed by "*the power of the few*". Modi's speech underlined India's disinterest in transforming the QUAD in a real military alliance along the NATO lines, aiming to militarily contain China⁴³.

Not even the Galwan Valley clashes between armies along the border between India and China occupied Aksai Chin that took place between May and June 2020 did affect the flourishing bilateral economic exchanges and China remains New Delhi's second economic partner after the US, in spite of Indian persisting trade-deficit⁴⁴.

⁴² K.J.M. VARMA, *India-China trade dips by nearly \$3 billion in 2019*, in "Livemint", 14 January 2020.

⁴³ M. TORRI, *India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's Foreign Policy?*, cit..

⁴⁴ R. PANDA, *A Skirmish in Galwan Valley: India and China's Deadliest Clash in More Than 50 Year*; in "The Diplomat", 17 June 2020; J. YUAN, *Sino-Indian Economic Ties after the Galwan Valley Clash*, in ispionline.it, 13 November 2020; *India-China dispute: The border row explained in 400 words*, in "BBC News", 25 January 2021.

However, due to China's growing expansion at the international level and to the Indian subcontinent, New Delhi resolved to choose the Indo-Pacific security system. In the Trump/Modi era India can be defined a full-fledged partner of the US who, after shifting its alliance from Pakistan to India ultimately delegated to the latter, and to a lesser extent to Japan, the task of defending American economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific area.

The shift from Nonalignment and Soviet-friendly foreign policy to the strategic connection with the US, and the entrance into the US system of alliances, included another substantial change in India's foreign policy, as represented by the rapprochement with Israel and America's Middle Eastern allies.

India officially recognized Israel in 1950 only informally, but it established diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv in 1992, with the opening of the Indian Embassy.

India's "Look West" policy was parallel to the "Look East policy", since the Middle East became increasingly important for India's economic growth, as a source of fuel, besides the 7.6 million Indian employees living in the Gulf and their remittances.

The normalisation of the relations with Israel in 1992 did not affect the friendly ties with Arab countries. India had a tradition of positive relations with Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Iran, in spite of recurrent sanctions raised against the latter. Since the 2003 Gulf war and subsequent turmoil in Iraq and even more so after the Arab Spring, India has had to choose other sources of fuel supply and opted to develop economic ties with the more stable Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia. Conversely, the Manmohan Singh government remained silent about the Arab uprisings, and as a temporary member of the UN Security Council, India abstained from voting to impose a no-fly zone over Libya and voted in favour of sanctions against Syria, but opposed any regime change in this country: this approach reflected India's traditional attitude to facilitate democratisation processes, without exporting democracy. However, if compared to previous Indian policies in the Middle East, between the 1960s and 1990s, when India was openly in favour of Palestine and secular and socialistic Arab states, the present Indian policy appears rather lukewarm and half-hearted.

In addition, India had to tackle increasing criticism from several Arab states and from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) for

its conduct and inhumane rule in Kashmir. In contrast, Israel demonstrated sympathy for India over the Kashmir issue and when the US threatened an arms embargo after the Kargil crisis in 1999, Israel came forward and became one of India's main suppliers of weapons: between 2000 and 2015 the worth of Israel-India arms trade was about US\$ 2.2⁴⁵.

When Narendra Modi was elected in 2014, the direction of India's Middle East policy took a totally new path. In spite of India's huge economic interests in the Gulf, which had been cultivated by the previous Congress government, political ties with the Arab monarchies were virtually non-existent. Narendra Modi's visit to the UAE in August 2015 was a surprise to many: it was India's first state visit after 34 years, since Indira Gandhi's in 1981⁴⁶. It represented a shift in India's Middle Eastern policy, as New Delhi started to regard the Gulf more as a source of investments and consensus than of energy and revenues. In 2017 the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and New Delhi's National Infrastructure Investment Fund (NIIF), a national body newly created to collect foreign capital, drew up a framework for UAE's investments of about US \$ 5-10 billion⁴⁷. In 2018-19 the UAE became India's third largest trading partner after the US and China, with a total US \$ 30.2 billion imports from India and US \$ 29.8 billion exports to India. The total bilateral trade reached US \$ 57 billion in late 2018⁴⁸. In 2019 the UAE snatched the third spot as India's oil supplier from Iran, after Iraq and Saudi Arabia⁴⁹.

In three years Narendra Modi visited Saudi Arabia twice. On his

⁴⁵ P.R. KUMARASWAMY, 2012. *Reading the Silence: India and the Arab Spring*. Jerusalem, The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 2012; Id., *India's New Israel Policy*, in "Stiftung Wissenschaft and Politick Comment" 11 March 2019; P.P. CHAUDHURI, *Think West to Go West: Origins and Implications of India's West Asia Policy Under Modi*, in "Middle East Institute Publications", Part I 26 September 2017 Part II 24 October 2017; G. BURTON, *India's "Look West" Policy in the Middle East under Modi*, in "Middle East Institute Publications", 6 August 2019.

⁴⁶ F. RAHMAN, *India P.M. Narendra Modi begins historic visit to UAE*, in "GulfNews", 16 August 2015.

⁴⁷ P.P. CHAUDHURI, *Think West to Go West: Origins and Implications of India's West Asia Policy Under Modi*, Part II, cit..

⁴⁸ W. ABBAS, *UAE-India bilateral trade reaches \$60b in 2018-19*, in "Khaleej Times", 4 July 2019.

⁴⁹ *India Crude Imports: Iraq Still Top Supplier Despite Saudi Surge*, in "Middle East Economic Survey" (MEES), 7 February 2020.

second journey to Riyadh in November 2019, the newly re-elected prime minister signed two important deals: a preliminary agreement between Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserve and Saudi Aramco for fuel reserve facilities in Karnataka, and an agreement between Indian Oil's West Asia and Saudi Al Jeri for downstream sector cooperation. Modi's visit took place after his controversial decision to abrogate article 370 of India's Constitution, almost as if he looked for Saudi's approval. The sale of Indian Reliance Industries' 20% stake in oil-to-chemical business to Aramco for US \$ 75 billion was seen as a way to appease possible Saudi disappointment for India's conduct in Jammu and Kashmir⁵⁰ and for Modi's anti-Muslim policy. It should be noted that, as distinct from the past, Modi's India selected its Middle Eastern partners from among the most conservative countries in the region, if not the world.

In the overall redefinition of India's international relations, Israel has a central place. In spite of formal cold relations between New Delhi and Tel Aviv in previous decades, according to a famous article published by *Rediff* in 2003, the cooperation between the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's foreign intelligence agency, and Mossad, dates back to 1968, when RAW was founded and Indira Gandhi wanted it to be connected to Mossad⁵¹. At that time and until the US -India normalisation, Israel was more sympathetic to India than the Arab countries or the US. Conversely, as one of the technologically most advanced states in the world, since the early 1990s Israel was very appealing for India, not only as an arms supplier, but also for intelligence, agricultural and aerospace cooperation. When Israel and India established diplomatic relations in 1992, the respective foreign ministers established a joint commission to combat terrorism, which would meet every six months⁵².

Since its first electoral term, the Modi government has strengthened India's relations with Israel, as signalled by the visit of the then-Defence minister Lal Krishna Advani with Indian National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra in 2000, and by a number of top level bilateral meetings that have taken place regularly ever since. In 2000, the two

⁵⁰ H.V. PANT, *The reality between India-Saudi Arabia's growing ties*, in "The Economic Times, 3 November 2019.

⁵¹ RAW & Mossad: *The Secret Link*, in "Rediff", 8 September 2003.

⁵² E. BLANCHE, *An Israeli-Indian intelligence-sharing affair unfolds in Kashmir*, in "Daily Star Lebanon", 11 September 2001.

countries established a joint working group on cross-border terrorism that operated beyond India's borders, in several Muslim countries, including Iran and Lybia, while Israel's support in cracking down on the Kashmiri insurgency goes back at least to 2001⁵³.

The pinnacle of the relations between New Delhi and Tel Aviv was Modi's visit in 2017, the first by an Indian prime minister⁵⁴.

Arms supply is the main business between India and Israel: India is Israel's main purchaser of arms and military technology, whereas India's main supplier of arms remains Russia⁵⁵. Just to give an example of the size of Israel's arms sales to India, in 2018, the Committee on Security headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a project worth US \$ 2.5 billion for procuring 37 Medium Range Surface-to-Air Missiles (MRSAM) for the Indian army. These missiles will be jointly developed by Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) and India's Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO)⁵⁶.

None of India's new Middle Eastern partners, Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and certainly not Israel, question the Indian government for its conduct in Kashmir or towards the Muslim minority. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia expressed its understanding of India's concern on Kashmir⁵⁷, while, as already pointed out, Israel actively collaborates with India's military rule over Kashmir. India's expansion to the Gulf erodes

⁵³ Q. AZIZ, *The Dangerous Nexus Between Israel and India*, in "islamicity.org", 16 May 2001. Died in 2015 at 86, Qutubuddin Aziz was a Pakistani writer, journalist and broadcaster. From 1953 to 1958 and from 1962 to 1977 he was a commentator on national and international issues at Radio Pakistan and from 1965 to 1977 he was also a correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor. In the same period Aziz served as managing director of the United Press of the Pakistan News Service. Between 1979 and 1979 he was appointed as public relations minister and from 1980 to 1986 as information minister at the Pakistan Embassy in London. Since 1986 he was the chairman of the National Press Trust of Pakistan. A stalwart of the Pakistan movement, Aziz wrote a number of books on Pakistani history and politics.

M. KAZI, *Transition: Ex-diplomat Qutubuddin Aziz passes away*, in "The Express Tribune", 7 December 2015.

⁵⁴ G. BURTON, *India's "Look West" Policy in the Middle East under Modi*, cit.; P.R. KUMARASWAMY, *India's New Israel Policy*, cit..

⁵⁵ M. TORRI, D. MAIORANO, *India 2014: The annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi era*, in "Asia Maior", 2015, pp. 305-306.

⁵⁶ H.V. PANT, A. SAHU, *Israel's Arms Sales to India: Bedrock of a Strategic Partnership*, in "Observers Research Foundation" (ORF), n. 311, September 2019.

⁵⁷ H.V. PANT, *The reality between India-Saudi Arabia's growing ties*, cit..

Pakistan's space and leverage in the region, whereas compared with Pakistan, India is a much more attractive economic partner for the UAE⁵⁸, This can explain the silence of the Arab monarchies over Pakistan's claims against India's policy in Kashmir.

Among these fluctuating and often conflicting balances, the new course of India's foreign policy is intertwined with domestic issues.

5. *International and domestic factors at stake*

At the 2014 general election the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) obtained a landslide victory. With the absolute majority in the Lok Sabha and its main contender, the Congress, annihilated, the BJP was in a position of absolute strength. The catalyst of the BJP's victory was its charismatic leader, former Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, and now India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He was supported by sundry players: a limited group of extremely wealthy and powerful families, the middle class and the Sangh Parivar⁵⁹ network, and above all the Rashtriya Swayam Sangh (RSS). This is a paramilitary Hindu political organisation, well embedded in Indian society and very influential on the BJP⁶⁰, which pointedly relies upon the RSS for its organisational skills and ideological bedrock. The BJP electoral manifesto has always been shaped by the RSS. In 2014, among other intentions and a very ambitious programme, it contained generic references to equality for all Indians, the empowerment of Muslim institutions, the preservation of Muslim heritage and the promotion of Urdu, and its intention to lift the Muslim minority from poverty and discrimination. Conversely, the 2014 manifesto pledged to abrogate article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which recognized a special status to Kashmir and provided for a separate Constitution for the Himalayan state. In addition, the electoral manifesto established the return of Kashmiri pundits

⁵⁸ P.P. CHAUDHURI, *Think West to Go West: Origins and Implications of India's West Asia Policy Under Modi*, Part II, cit..

⁵⁹ The meaning of this term is 'family organisation' to design the vast family of the Hindu militant organisations.

⁶⁰ M. TORRI, D. MAIORANO, *India 2014: The annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi era*, cit., pp. 253-255.

(Brahmin priests), who were forcefully made to leave the state, and refugees from POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir)⁶¹. Furthermore, the manifesto declared the party's intention to continue the construction of the Ram Temple on the ruins of the Babri Masjid, the old and historically important Babur's mosque demolished in 1992 by RSS and other Hindu fanatics⁶². Finally, the document pledged to introduce the Uniform Civil Code which, in the BJP/RSS interpretation, meant the imposition of Hindu civil law to all minorities. This programme was clearly conceived to build up the Hindu Rashtra, the Hindu State and to 'Hinduize' the Indian society, that meant imposing the Hindu way of life and Hindu values, culture, laws.

In its first mandate the Modi government did not succeed in implementing any of his plans regarding the Muslim issue, but from 2014 to Modi's second landslide victory in May 2019, India was shaken by continuous, unprecedented anti-Muslim violence: lynching, outrageous killing (included children), destruction of Muslim properties was the order of the day. Mr. Modi remained silent while anti-Muslim violence continued unabated. This proves not only that the prime minister was conniving⁶³, but also that the communal violence was part of a specific plan.

During Modi's first term, the repression and the harassment of Indian Muslims, the clampdown in Kashmir and the abandonment of the policy of good neighbourliness with Pakistan, all in order to impose India's hegemony⁶⁴, ran parallel and served two purposes: strengthening BJP's and Modi's power in order to win the next election, and imposing on Kashmir and Pakistan the acceptance of the *status quo*, postponing, and ultimately preventing forever any chance of a negotiated solution for the Himalayan state.

⁶¹ Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Election Manifesto 2014.

⁶² T. BASU, P. DATTA, S. SARKAR, T. SARKAR, S. SEN, *Khaki Short and Saffron Flags. A Critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi, Longman Orient, 1993.

⁶³ M. TORRI, D. MAIORANO, *India 2015: The uncertain record of the Modi government*, in "Asia Maior", 2016, pp. 376-382; Id. *India 2016: Reforming the economy and tightening the connection with the US*, in "Asia Maior", 2017, pp. 337-340; Id., *India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China*, in "Asia Maior", 2018, pp. 268-271.

⁶⁴ M. TORRI, D. MAIORANO, *India 2014: The annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi era*, cit., pp. 307-308.

The Balakot crisis of February 2019, when the Indian air force made a strike over Pakistan, in response to a suicide attack on an Indian military convoy in Pulwama, where 40 soldiers were killed, took place less than two months before the election.⁶⁵ Without denying the gravity of the attack, the Indian reaction was disproportionate, considering that India had not carried out an air strike over Pakistan since 1971, at the time of the third Indo-Pakistani war. A major military crisis was narrowly avoided, but strong-arming Pakistan was perhaps an attempt to compensate the loss of three key states, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan at the 2018 states elections⁶⁶ and to appease the most radical wings of the Hindutva⁶⁷ electorate. Moreover, the BJP was facing a deep crisis, because of its failure in tackling unemployment and in improving the conditions of the farmers: in order to overcome the general dissatisfaction, the party had to reunite its electorate. This policy, combined with Modi's extraordinary promises of a 'shining' India, was successful.

After the second electoral success in May 2019, the BJP and its leader were bolstered and the anti-Muslim agenda became particularly harsh. Apart from the usual killings and crimes against individuals and properties, two crucial developments took place in 2019: the elimination of article 370 of the Indian Constitution and the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

At the end of July 2019 all tourists and non-residents were evacuated from Jammu and Kashmir. On 5 August, parliament approved the elimination of article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which established a separate Constitution for Kashmir. Concurrently the State was occupied by the Indian army and locked down for five months: cities were

⁶⁵ *Balakot air strike: Pakistan shows off disputed site on eve of India election*, in "BBC News", 10 April 2019; *19 minutes, 12 jets, a big target: This was what the IAF did in Pakistan while you were asleep*, in "Economic Times", 26 February 2019; *IAF Refutes US Report on Pakistan's F-16s Jets, Says Radio Signature Confirms Downed Aircraft*, in "The Wire", 5 April 2019; G. TYAGI, *The Truth behind Pulwama & Balakot – The road ahead*, in "South Asia Journal", 20 April 2019; *How Pakistan failed to do a Balakot-type strike on India on February 27*, in "Business Standard", 27 March 2019.

⁶⁶ A. WITHNALL, *Kashmir tension: How will Indian voters respond to Pakistan airstrikes ahead of manifest?*, in "Independent", 26 February 2019.

⁶⁷ This term defines the whole of the Hindu right-wing political organisations and the ideology of the Hindu right.

cordoned off with barbed wire and telephones and internet connections were interrupted. About 3,000 people were detained, and torture and violations of human rights were reported, in a situation which reminded many observers Israel's occupied territories in Palestine⁶⁸. In Kashmir, the Indian army uses weapons and people-control technology imported from Israel, while Indian special corps are trained in Israel or by Israeli experts⁶⁹.

Pakistan was very vocal in advocating the rights of Indian Kashmiris, but New Delhi's persistent reply was that Kashmir is an Indian issue and not an international one⁷⁰, ignoring that, unless a UN established LOC divides the two countries, the issue of Kashmir's divide is international. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan made an appeal to the Gulf countries, who remained silent over Pakistan's claims. India's expansion to the Gulf eroded Pakistan's space and leverage in the region: whereas compared with Pakistan, India is a much more attractive economic partner for the UAE⁷¹ and became politically more influent than its Muslim neighbour. This can explain the silence of the Arab monarchies over Pakistan's claims against India's policy in Kashmir.

On 11 December 2019 the government passed the CAA, that amended the Citizenship Act of 1955, by establishing that migrants belonging to Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Sikh minorities who suffered persecutions in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh could apply for Indian citizenship. The clearly discriminatory, anti-Muslim hallmark of the amendment raised an uproar of criticism both

⁶⁸ A. BISHT, *Kashmir lockdown: Stories of torture and arbitrary arrests*, in "Al-jazeera", 4 September 2019; J. GETTLEMAN, K. SCHULTZ, S. YASIR, S. RAJ, *India's Move in Kashmir: More Than 2,000 Rounded Up With No Recourse*, in "The New York Times", 23 August 2019; G. OSURI, *Kashmir and Palestine: itineraries of (anti) colonial solidarity*, in "Global studies in Culture and Power", 18 October 2019; N. REGHUKUMAR, *Govt Trying to Convert Jammu and Kashmir into India's Palestine, Says CPM's Sitaram Yechury*, in "News18", 20 August 2019.

⁶⁹ R. FISK, *Israel is playing a big role in India's escalating conflict with Pakistan*, in "Independent", 28 February 2019

⁷⁰ *Kashmir dispute: Pakistan downgrades ties with India*, in "BBC News", 7 August 2019; *Article 370 revoked: Pakistan condemns Modi gov't Kashmir decision, calls it 'illegal'*, in "Business Today", 5 August 2019; E. ROCHE, *Pakistan says will challenge revoking of article 370*, in "Livemint", 5 August 2019.

⁷¹ P.P. CHAUDHURI, *Think West to Go West: Origins and Implications of India's West Asia Policy Under Modi*, Part II, cit..

in India and abroad and a wave of protests all over the country, that continued in the first months of 2020⁷². The reply of the Interior minister Amit Shah was that there was no need to protect Muslim migrants because, coming from Muslim countries, they could not have suffered persecution. Apparently the minister ignored that shia minorities are seriously harassed in Afghanistan, in Pakistan⁷³ and, in recent times, occasionally also in Bangladesh. Moreover, the amendment does not take into consideration Muslims persecuted in non-Muslim countries, such as the Rohingya in Myanmar.

The mindset behind this measure inevitably recalls Trump's "our citizens first" pronounced at Modi's reception ceremony in September 2019. The Sangh Parivar does not consider Muslims as Indian citizens, but as aliens, who have to give up their habits and identities to be accepted and included.

The most dangerous issue emerging from this situation is that India and Israel created an unofficial anti-Muslim 'front' that, with the pretext of fighting Islamic terrorism, may interfere in India's neighbouring countries, thus escalating tensions at the regional level⁷⁴.

The confidence Modi obtained from the Arab countries granted India a free hand in dealing with the Muslim issue, whether it is the Muslim minority in India, Kashmir's issue or relations with Pakistan. India's special ties with Israel make it feel even more confident.

At the end of February 2020, in the old town of Delhi and in the surrounding area, took place the worst communal riots in the capital city since the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination. The violence, which lasted for four days, was sparked by Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader, who had just lost the local elections. He incited a Hindu mob to forcefully remove a group of Muslims who were blocking a road while peacefully protesting against the CAA. In the ensuing clashes, 51 people were killed (three quarters of them Muslims), several

⁷² *Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law explained*, "BBC News", 11 December 2019; *Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019: What is it and why is it seen as a problem*, "Economic Times", 31 December 2019; H. REGAN, S. GUPTA, O. KHAN, *India passes controversial citizenship bill that excludes Muslims*, in "CNN", 17 December 2019

⁷³ K.K. SANDHU, M. Singh, *Citizenship Amendment Bill has public endorsement, was part of manifesto: Amit Shah*, in "India Today", 9 December 2019.

⁷⁴ R. FISK, *Israel is playing a big role in India's escalating conflict with Pakistan*, cit.

were burnt alive. Thousands of the protesters were injured during a savage lynching carried out under the eyes of the police, who remained idle or helped the assailants. Mosques and Muslim properties and businesses were torched⁷⁵.

All this happened while the *Namaste* Trump show was going on in Gujarat and the American president was praising Modi for his respect for minorities. No mention to the bloodshed that was taking place in the capital.

Since then, intimidation and political violence against political opponents, journalists, uncomfortable intellectuals. The list of arrested and unlawfully detained people is ever-growing, while the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) of 1967 is now widely used in India to target especially Muslim activists and Dalits⁷⁶.

6. *The uncertain future of India's foreign policy*

In order to assess the consistency of the new trend of India's foreign policy under the BJP rule and to figure out its possible developments, we should ask ourselves if India's alliance with the US is really the best option.

On 15 November 2020 China was finally able to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with the ASEAN countries, New Zealand, Australia, South Korea and Japan⁷⁷. It was a historic achievement for China, who prepared the ground for this momentous agreement since 2012, but met the reluctance of ASEAN countries to solidly line-up with China.

⁷⁵ H. ELLIS-PETERSEN, S.A. RAHMAN, *Delhi's Muslims despair of justice after police implicated in riots*, in "The Guardian", 16 March 2020; L. GETTLEMAN, S. RAJ, S. YASIR, *The Roots of the Delhi riots: A Fiery Speech and an Ultimatum*, in "The New York Times", 26 February 2020; S.A. RAHMAN, *Inside Delhi: beaten, lynched and burnt alive*, in "The Guardian", 1 March 2020.

⁷⁶ I. ARA, S. SHANTA, *A List of Activists, Scholars and Scribes Whose Personal Liberty Remains at Judiciary's Mercy*, in "The Wire", 13 November 2020; *India: Activists Detained for peaceful Dissent*, Human Rights Watch, 15 April 2020; N. NANDINI, *UAPA Is Draconian Law Used To Imprison Innocent Muslims, Dalits & Dissenters: Owaisi*, in "Republic-world.com", 21 November 2020.

⁷⁷ *ASEAN hits historic milestone with signing of RCEP*, rcepsec.org, 15 November 2020.

Covering a market of 2.2 billion people, with a value of US\$ 26.2 trillion, equivalent to 30% of the world's GDP, the RCEP represents the world's largest trading block. As ASEAN's Secretary General Dato Lim Jock Hoi pointed out, the signing of the RCEP agreement, "*underpins ASEAN's role in leading a multilateral trade of this magnitude, despite global and regional challenges and eight years of negotiations*"⁷⁸.

South Korea's and Japan's accession to the RCEP was striking, since both countries are the US's strongest allies in the Pacific area and Japan is the cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Two factors may have facilitated South Korea's, Japan's and ASEAN's acceptance to ratify the agreement: the uncertainty about America's electoral result and the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, against which RCEP is expected to give a boost for a fast and robust economic recovery of the South-East Asian and Pacific region. Moreover, China who is emboldened by its quick defeat of the pandemic is perceived as a more reliable economic partner⁷⁹.

India and the US were expected to be members of the RCEP and the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), signed in 2018, but they withdrew from both groups, in order to strengthen the Indo-Pacific security system. The decision of two key members of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Japan and New Zealand, to choose the Chinese field may require a reflection on the possible future purpose of this alliance. Meanwhile, India's refusal to join the RCEP will increase its isolation at the regional and, ultimately, at the international level.

The never-ending India-China territorial dispute and the ambivalent character of the relations between these two countries, besides the premature phase of President Biden's administration that does not allow an evaluation of US's commitment in the Indo-Pacific area, adds uncertainty to the Asian fluctuating geopolitical scenario.

In the moment of writing this essay, India is facing its worst humanitarian crisis since the early post-independence times, when it was struggling with poverty and hunger. Due to the prime minister's carelessness

⁷⁸ *ASEAN hits historic milestone with signing of RCEP*, cit.

⁷⁹ Regarding China's increasing prominence at the international level, I do not take into consideration the EU-China agreement signed in January 2021, since it seems aimed at containing China's expansion in Europe, rather than fostering the already existing economic ties.

in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of people have been affected and thousands die. This severe crisis will certainly challenge the BJP government and India's position at the international level.

Riassunto - La politica estera dell'India ha attraversato notevoli cambiamenti dalla fine della Guerra Fredda. Se i legami con la Russia non sono mutati significativamente rispetto a quelli con l'Unione Sovietica, l'India ha attuato una continua ridefinizione della sua politica estera. Sempre fortemente influenzata da fattori interni, fossero i passaggi di potere o le riforme e i mutamenti economici, la politica estera indiana è passata dal Non-Allineamento, alla ricerca di un ordine mondiale multipolare, all'alleanza con gli Stati Uniti, finalizzata al perseguimento di un ruolo egemonico in Asia, in competizione con la Cina. Le

relazioni con questa nazione sono ambivalenti: questi due paesi hanno obiettivi contrastanti, ma anche enormi legami economici.

L'ascesa della destra indù e la sua solida permanenza al potere ha esacerbato la questione musulmana a livello interno, regionale e internazionale, portando anche a una ridefinizione delle alleanze strategiche dell'India.

Dall'accordo nucleare con gli Stati Uniti del 2005, lo storico reciproco distacco tra India e Stati Uniti si è gradualmente trasformato in un avvicinamento, che ha coinvolto anche gli alleati americani nella regione asiatica, aprendo potenziali nuove prospettive.