

India's New Prime Minister Moves To Fulfill His Mandate

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 29—Following his second meeting with his Cabinet members, India's new Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a ten-point agenda as the priority of his government. He has also asked his ministers to put on his desk their timetables on the priorities of each ministry for the first 100 days.

Elected on a mandate, particularly from the large youth population of India, to move the country forward at a rapid pace, Modi reportedly gave the go-ahead to develop the 545-km Mumbai-Ahmedabad railroad as a showpiece high-speed rail project, at a recent meeting with the chairman of India's High Speed Rail Corporation (HSRC) Satish Agnihotri. Indian Railways (IR) and French National Railways (SNCF) are understood to have developed a detailed business plan for the corridor, the prefeasibility study of which has been completed by a consortium of Systra, Italferr, and Rites.¹

Within 72 hours following the historic inauguration,

1. Raghav Thakur, "New Indian government to push ahead with high-speed projects," *International Railway Journal*, May 28, 2014.



PIB of India

Much hope is invested in the new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as he proceeds to carry out his mandate to move this vast nation forward. Modi is shown here speaking at his swearing-in ceremony May 25.

Modi has made clear that he realizes what India needs, and why the Indians chose him to be lead the nation. In his ten-point agenda, the most striking features are:

- prioritizing education, health, water, energy, and roads;
- infrastructural and investment reforms;
- Implementation of policies in a time-bound manner;
- establishing a people-oriented system, and gearing up the government machinery to fulfill the mandate; and,
- instilling transparency in government.

What Modi is addressing in his priority-agenda, are the very items which the previous Manmohan Singh-led UPA government had ignored and which brought about its downfall, jeopardizing India's economy and future. In addition, the lack of transparency of the UPA government had led to wide-

spread corruption and nepotism that came under protest from one and all Indians. This dissatisfaction became evident when 530 million people (a record 66.4% of the electorate) voted to give the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) an absolute majority in the Indian Parliament.



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Modi's inauguration was attended by all the heads of state of South Asian Association of Regional Countries, India's immediate neighbors. Especially notable, was the presence of Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif (third from left), and Sri Lankan President Rajapakse (far left). Modi is third from right, between Indian President Rajapaksa and Afghan President Karzai.

The Inauguration

The inauguration of Narendra Modi and his Cabinet by President Pranab Mukherjee was almost as historic as the mandate the Prime Minister had received from the Indian electorate. The ceremony was attended by all the heads of state of the South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SSARC), which includes India's immediate neighbors (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) plus Afghanistan. Of particular importance in this august gathering was the presence of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse.

This is the first time ever that Pakistan's Prime Minister has attended the inauguration of an Indian Prime Minister, or vice versa. The presence of Sharif in Delhi rattled the world's geopoliticians, particularly those from the West. For decades, Britain, in particular, had succeeded in fueling India-Pakistan hostilities (dating from the British-orchestrated partition), thereby sabotaging any efforts to ease bilateral relations.

Following the inauguration, Modi and Sharif had a one-to-one meeting. Although details of the talk have not been fully disclosed, Sharif, speaking at a press conference, told Indian correspondents that the meeting was "good and constructive" and "held in a warm and cordial atmosphere." He said both countries should work to overcome their mutual mistrust, and that regional peace and stability were keys to achieving their common goals of development. Sharif said he intended to "pick up the threads" of the Lahore Declaration, referring to a pledge both countries made in 1999 to cooperate more closely to ease tensions. Rejecting accusations and counter-accusations as unproductive, he said on this occasion: "We agreed that our meeting should be a historic opportunity for both our countries."

The Sri Lankan President's presence at the inauguration also made some in the West unhappy. Rajapakse is under the gun of Britain and the Obama Administration for his military operation against the terrorist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in

2009. The LTTE was headquartered in Britain and had virtually captured northern Sri Lanka by imposing a reign of terror, funded and armed from outside. Under pressure from Britain and the United States, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, recommended in a Feb. 24, 2014 report, that an independent, international inquiry be made into alleged human rights violations in 2009, during the final phase of Sri Lanka's long and bloody civil war against ethnic Tamil separatists. On Feb. 28, British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire released a statement welcoming Pillay's report.

The UN report emerged a few months after Colombo had hosted the biennial meeting of Commonwealth nations, an event that Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper boycotted and that then-Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declined to attend. U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron did attend the summit, but used the occasion to visit the island's war-ravaged north in what many considered a rebuke to his host.

Modi's decision to invite Nawaz Sharif and Mahinda Rajapakse, and to hold private meetings with both following the inauguration ceremony, sent a clear message to the troublemakers and geopoliticians, indicating that his administration's prime objective is to strengthen relations with India's neighbor and not to kow-tow to outside forces angling to create trouble in the region.

Chinese Response

Another important factor for Modi will be China. At this juncture, for both India and China, it is of utmost importance to develop a strong understanding that will translate into joint efforts to develop the Eurasian landmass and ensure Asian security, besides utilizing each other's overall strength to enrich each other. Countering this effort is Obama's Asia Pivot policy, which is still trying, albeit lamely, to enlist India as a transactional ally, or the West's proxy power, to confront China in the region. Although the Singh government had not entertained this effort, it did not succeed either to broaden India's relationship with China.

But China responded very positively to Modi's election success. As the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had visited China on four occasions, and ostensibly developed a rapport with Beijing. As a result, Bei-

jing announced today that Foreign Minister Wang Yi will visit India on June 8 to meet with Modi. In line with this announcement, it was also noted that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang today called his Indian counterpart and conveyed his government's desire to establish a robust partnership with the new government of India, according to Press Trust of India. Li, who is the first foreign head of government to call up Modi since he took over as Prime Minister, congratulated him on his victory.

To the chagrin of the promoters of Obama's Asia Pivot, the possibility of stronger India-China relations is surely emerging. On May 27, the day after Modi's inauguration, the official *China Daily* gave unprecedented coverage to an Indian political event, and projected Modi's election as the harbinger of a "big boost" to bilateral ties. "Modi to boost ties with China," *China Daily* said. The article pointed out that when Modi had visited China, "he presented a business card with one side in Chinese and in red color that symbolizes wealth and good fortune in China." "With Modi taking the oath of office as India's new Prime Minister on Monday," it said, "such attention to China is expected to be repeated."

The Chinese daily *Global Times* also devoted a page to the inauguration, with pictures of Modi's swearing-in ceremony, featuring the Indian Prime Minister greeting his Pakistani counterpart during the event, which was also widely shown on state-run CCTV with commentaries by analysts.

Good Governance

Modi's prime objective is seemingly to set the stage for good governance, which would include maximum utilization of goodwill of, and interaction with, immediate and regional neighbors. It is evident that he is now exploring likely participation of regional powers to move the economy forward. He developed strong relations with Japan, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in particular, and South Korea, while he was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat.

According to *International Railway Journal*, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is currently preparing a detailed study of the proposed 700 billion rupee (US\$12.1 billion) corridor, which is scheduled to be submitted in May 2015. JICA is believed to have agreed in principle to partially finance the project by way of a soft loan. In addition, a pre-

feasibility report by the Mott MacDonald Group on the 1,044-km New Delhi-Patna high-speed rail line has also been submitted, and is under the ministry's consideration, sources said. Project cost is estimated at Rs 1,300 billion (US \$24 billion).

At the same time, Modi is aware that the Indian electorate will be carefully watching the measures he undertakes to eliminate the rot that accumulated under the previous administration of the weak and indecisive Singh. One of the primary virtues that Modi needs to exhibit to the Indian people is that he is decisive and will get things done.

That he recognizes this, became evident with his laying down his ten-point agenda within 72 hours following his inauguration. In elaborating Modi's prioritization of water and health, an Indian analyst pointed out that education and health for all are deep-felt needs of the masses, particularly in rural areas. His program will include construction of schools, colleges, primary health centers, district hospitals, and a large hospital with research facilities in every Indian state. The promise of water will include provision of adequate supplies for drinking water and sanitation, and agriculture—

again, major issues on which the Prime Minister made pledges to the people throughout the country as he encountered these problems in state after state. This too, will give a stimulus to infrastructure development, energize local industry, and generate immediate employment in all states.

Also of note, is his addressing the corruption and nepotism of the ministers, and their cohorts, which over the years has weakened the functional ability of government officials. While some of these officials had joined the rackets that were created and nurtured by the UPA politicians, other officials felt handcuffed and chose to become non-functional.

Modi has told his ministers to resist the temptation to handpick their personal staffs, but rather to work with officers allocated to them, and not to employ relatives as personal staff. He also urged the ministers to welcome innovative ideas. This involves inviting members of the public to interact directly with officials through social media, a move that could vastly improve efficiency and responsiveness, besides resolving administrative bottlenecks and bureaucratic red tape in real time.

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