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Interests before Ideas.

Does Hindu Nationalism influence India's Foreign Policy?

Abstract

This article seeks to determine whether the ideology of Hindu nationalism has influenced the course of Republic of India's foreign policy since 2014 (when Hindu nationalists took over power). The conclusion is that while Hindu nationalism might have been and probably was important in certain regards, the broad direction of the policy generally remained the same as during the previous governments. Despite the anti-Muslim stance of Hindu nationalists, India has not changed its stance towards certain Arabic Muslim countries, while building warmer ties with Israel. New Delhi has also not employed any new tactics or solutions – whether bold or conciliatory – towards Islamabad. India's China policy has not become more aggressive while the 'Act East Policy' that focuses on ties in East and Southeast Asia did not employ more references to common heritage than previously. New Delhi also tried to retain its similar cooperation with Russia and the US, though the one with Washington is visible growing (as ideological overtones are not visible in Indian policy on Russia, US and China, sections on relations with these powers were not included in the final version of this article). These conclusions lead the author to believe that India's foreign policy will largely remain the same even if the Hindu nationalists retain power after the 2019 elections.

Keywords: Act East Policy, Hindu Nationalism, India, India-Pakistan relations.

Introduction

In 2014, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) stormed into power in India, ending the 10-year rule of its rivals. The NDA is a constellation of regional parties led by one major national

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party – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, “The Party of the Indian People”). A party of Hindu nationalists, the BJP had long remained on the fringes of India’s mainstream politics and while it ruled in a coalition from 1998 to 2004, it was in 2014 that it won the majority of seats in India’s lower house of parliament¹ on its own for the first time.

As the BJP was formed by a radical organisation of Hindu nationalists (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, “The Union of National Volunteers”, hence: RSS) and there is a vast cadre overlap between the two, it could have been expected that since 2014 nationalist ideology would have had a chance to substantially remould the Indian state and society. Here I will limit these considerations to only aspect: has the ideology of Hindu nationalism influenced India’s foreign policy since 2014? The answer, in my opinion, is “No”. The majority of the aspects of India’s relations with other states remain largely uninfluenced by the ideology of Hindu nationalism.

While claiming this, I do not assume that ideology has no place in foreign relations, nor do I assume that the Realist school of thinking can explain everything in international relations. I also do not believe in a reverse view: that ideologies must always remain primary powers that shape the foreign policies of nations. The reality, as always, is much more complicated and ideologies remain one of the many factors. The same is true for Hindu nationalism in India’s foreign policy.

Hindu nationalism – a brief introduction

A longer description of the ideology of Hindu nationalism is beyond the scope and limits of this paper. Here the ideology will be introduced in an extremely brief manner. Hindu nationalism may be defined as a political ideology that claims the existence of a Hindu nation and which utilises Hindu religious and traditions to construct the identity of the nation. The ideology and the first organisations of Hindu nationalism was born in the period of 1910s-1930s. One of the most influential theorists of Hindu nationalism was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966). Savarkar claimed the existence of a “Hindu nation” to which – in contrast to the Indian nation – only Hindus by birth could belong. For Savarkar, in order to be a Hindu, one should

¹ In the political system of the Republic of India the lower house of the Parliament holds much more power than the upper one. The lower house is called Lok Sabha in Hindi (“The People’s Council”).

share three elements: the element of “race” (jati) which meant sharing common biological ancestry, the element of “culture” (sanskriti) which meant sharing common traditions and the element of ‘nation’ (rashtra, which literally means “state”). Moreover, a member of such a nation should regard India as both one’s fatherland as well as sacred land. Savarkar claimed that Indian Christians and Indian Muslims are descendants of Hindu Indians but lost their “Hinduness” because they changed their religion – and hence do not recognise common Hindu traditions or consider India a sacred land – and because they are radical in their religious attitudes. The ideology of Hindu nationalism is in fact focused on uniting Hindus. For Indian religious minorities (Christians and Muslims) it pretended to offer terms of assimilation into the fold of the nation, but these terms were rather unacceptable.² The rules of this assimilation assumed that Hindu culture should be acceptable to all Indians but they showed no clear distinction between culture and religion. Savarkar also popularised the term hindutva (‘Hinduness’, hence: Hindutva) as an essence of being a Hindu, but gradually this term has also become synonymous with ‘Hindu nationalism.’

Savarkar was also for a long time the leader of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (“All-India Great Hindu Council”), the first party of Hindu nationalists, founded in 1915 out of earlier, regional “Hindu councils”. In terms of foreign policy, Savarkar and his party claimed that India should be on guard in relations with neighbouring Muslim states, should be more assertive towards China and should forge closer ties with the only Hindu monarchy of that time – Nepal. The party never succeeded in becoming a major power in Indian politics. Yet, the leaders of the party also founded its organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (“The Union of National Volunteers”, created in 1925), hence RSS. The RSS gradually disassociated itself from the party and outgrew it. In 1951, the RSS members formed their own party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (hence: BJS) and later re-established it under a new name, the Bharatiya Janata Party (hence: BJP). The RSS and BJP share most of their ideology and members. Hence the RSS, while being more radical than the party, exercises a profound influence on the BJP. Both the BJS and BJP shared most of earlier Hindu nationalists’ views on foreign policy so one may speak of continuity in this respect.

² Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva. Who is a Hindu?*, New Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 1968, passim.

The parties of the Hindu nationalists had long remained on the margins of Indian politics but have joined the mainstream in the last few decades and, as mentioned above, the BJP is in power at the time of writing these words. The BJP's current high level of popularity is generated, among other things, by the charisma and PR methods of the prime minister, Narendra Modi, while its electoral successes were partially the work of the BJP's master strategist and current party president, Amit Shah. But to achieve its present and past electoral successes, the BJP has had to convince the electorate that it is more liberal and also independent from the RSS. Thus, there were and are certain differences between the BJP and the RSS. The BJP has to win elections and stay in power and thus has to have a wider support than the more rigid RSS and also has to be more pragmatic and flexible, including in the field of foreign policy. Some aspects mentioned in this text serve as examples of discrepancies between the BJP and the RSS.

Domestic issues versus foreign policy. Political economy

Before moving into aspects of foreign policy, I need to briefly address the issue of the relations between domestic issues versus the foreign affairs of the state. It should be regarded as obvious that the two should not be considered as completely separate. Thus, the conclusion that Hindu nationalism plays a marginal role in India's current foreign policy, while being a very important factor on the domestic stage, may run into trouble at the very start, because of the somewhat blurry divide between the areas of foreign and domestic affairs. For instance, one of the sections below mentions the government's plan to resettle the Kashmiri Pandits, a solution which is supported by Hindu nationalists. Such resettlement would happen within Indian territory and would affect Indian citizens but might also in some way be important for India-Pakistan relations. Similarly, an issue which I will not address here due to paucity of space is the case of international Christian organisations. Briefly speaking, since Hindu nationalists do not consider Indian Christians as members of the Hindu nation, they believe that the proselyting activities of the foreign Christian missionaries in India fuel "anti-national" tendencies. The current government of Narendra Modi has reportedly restricted the activities and cancelled the licenses of many foreign NGOs in India, including Christians ones (such as Compassion

International, which the New Delhi government accuses of attempting conversions³).

Yet, the cases such as those of the Kashmiri Pandits or Christian NGOs differ from the core foreign policy issues in at least three respects: (1) they are limited to issues concerning Indian citizens, (2) they are issues in which other countries are not a party, at least from the perspective of New Delhi and hence (3) such affairs affect relations with other states in an indirect manner. On a foreign-domestic affairs spectrum, such issues would be closer to the domestic end, though there is no denying they have international implications as well. There is also no denying that the ideology of Hindu nationalism may become more important the more a given issue is of domestic character.

This does not mean, however, that the overall ideological considerations are not part of the India's strategy, especially in the realm of soft power. The best example – if the only one of such scale – is the Modi government's particular focus on promoting yoga through the International Yoga Day.⁴ Even if exceptional, this is a good instance of how ideology can be balanced with foreign policy needs. Yoga is often understood mostly as a set of physical exercises and meditation techniques in the Western world and thus its image is "secularised", but more historically – and in a broader sense – yoga is one of India's classic philosophies and its thought forms a part of Indian spirituality. Thus, promoting yoga by the current government is probably both acceptable to a large part of the international community but also important for Hindu nationalists, who may understand its gravity in a more religious way. Yet, this article will focus on issues of a more international character, that is those that concern India's direct relations with other states and in which the interests stemming from these relations (such as trade, investment or security) are of primary importance.

This is not to say that the domestic issues have no role to play. For example, during the earlier tenure (1999-2004) of the BJP-led government, Christian missionaries were targeted by Hindu nationalist

³ Ellen Bary, Suhasini Raj, 'Major Christian Charity is Closing India Operations Amid a Crackdown', *Reuters*, 7 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/world/asia/compassion-international-christian-charity-closing-india.html> (accessed 10.06.2016).

⁴ For a good and brief overview of this strategy cf. Sebastian Domżański, *Indie w gospodarce światowej. Słoń, który pragnął latać*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Asian Century, 2017, p. 290.

activists particularly in tribal areas of the state of Orissa, and the confrontations often resulted in violence.⁵ Similarly, some of the RSS leaders, such as Ashok Singhal, criticised pope John Paul II during his visit to India in 1999 for his words on spreading Christianity.⁶ There is no denying that such ideologically-driven events do have some international repercussions (there were, for instance, protests in some Christian-majority countries) but there is no evidence to suggest that they influence the major aspects or directions of India's foreign policy in any meaningful ways.

Yet, one very important area where ideology is both visible on the domestic field and has implications for international relations is the political economy. A large part of the RSS stands for the idea of *swadeshi* (lit. 'of one's own country') which, briefly speaking, concentrates on promoting Indian companies and Indian products and protecting them from international competition. At the same time, a section of BJP members – Modi included – is more supportive of the idea of the free market. The RSS is particularly suspicious of international companies while the Modi government is striving to obtain foreign direct investment. This divide has often caused frictions within the Hindu nationalist milieu.

At times of Hindu nationalist rule – both during the 1999-2004 as well as since 2014 – this discrepancy has even caused parts of the RSS (such as the *Swadeshi Jagran Manch*, the goal of which is to popularise the idea of *swadeshi*) to protest against its own government.⁷ In 2002, the RSS opposition towards the BJP's pro-market policy – coupled with the weakening of government's position – probably blocked further free market-oriented reforms. Such domestic issues could be important for India-US relations, since Washington is trying to help American companies in entering the Indian market (for instance, the RSS is against using genetically modified crops – and American companies could sell these to India). The 'swadeshi faction' of the RSS

⁵ Krzysztof Iwanek, Adam Burakowski, *Indie. Od kolonii do mocarstwa. 1857-2013*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2013, p. 398.

⁶ Mahesh Bhagchandka, *Ashok Singhal. Staunch & Perserverant Exponent of Hindutva*, New Delhi: Ashok Singhal Foundation, 2017, p. 156.

⁷ Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004. Gradual Revolution*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2010, p. 724.

has also criticised some of Modi's economic policies since 2014.⁸ For example, the current RSS leader, Mohan Bhagwat, spoke out against the government's alleged plan of privatising the national air company, Air India, and suggested that foreign companies should not be given majority shares in it⁹ and a foreigner should not be allowed to manage it.¹⁰

Yet, at the time of writing it seems that the position of Modi is so strong that the opponents of his pro-market will not be able to block his actions.

Relations with Pakistan

Since the ideology of Hindu nationalism crystallised around the call to organise Hindus against Muslims, Islam and its followers remain the primary enemies in the Hindutva narrative (even though the BJP is trying to deny and hide to remain attractive to its more liberal electorate and to build political alliances). Thus, the issue of India's relations with Muslim states should be the first one to come to our attention.

Pakistan remains the most hostile country to India and a one particularly hated by Hindu nationalists, as in 1947 it was separated from India as a country for Indian Muslims. Yet, it is for this very reason that Hindu nationalism's stance towards Pakistan has changed since the 1950s. On one hand, the Hindu nationalists point out that the territories of Pakistan had been a part of the Indian civilisation (which is true with regard to most of them) and regard the Partition of 1947 as a catastrophe for India. On the other hand, the Hindu nationalists do believe that Hindus and Muslims stand socially apart and that Muslims are a threat to Indian society, and thus they should also agree that the creation of Pakistan reduced the percentage of Muslims in the Indian

⁸ E.g. Krzysztof Iwanek, 'The Political Economy of Hindu Nationalism: From V.D. Savarkar to Narendra Modi', *International Journal of Knowledge and Innovation in Business*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2014, p. 29-33.

⁹ Abhiram Ghadyalpatil, *Mohan Bhagwat cautions Modi govt against Air India sale*, LiveMint, 17 April 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Companies/hC6m5sTtJHJLepJTA45N/Mohan-Bhagwat-cautions-Modi-govt-against-Air-India-sale.html>, (accessed 19.09.2018).

¹⁰ No author, *Divest Air India, but let it be with an Indian: Mohan Bhagwat*, *Economic Times*, 17 April 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/divest-air-india-but-let-it-be-with-an-indian-mohan-bhagwat/articleshow/63789014.cms> (accessed 19.09.2018).

population. Savarkar agreed with M.A. Jinnah, the “founding father” of Pakistan, that Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations.¹¹

Thus, while criticising Partition and Pakistan is an obvious choice for Hindu nationalists, calling for a reintegration of Pakistan with India was a troubling idea, as it would mean welcoming millions of Muslims into the Republic of India. In the immediate years after Partition, however, the Hindu nationalists did call for the recreation of united India (akhand Bharat in Hindi).¹² The idea had apparently become marginal by the 1960s. In 1963 one of the most important leaders and policy makers of the party of the Hindu nationalists at that time, Deendayal Upadhyaya, had already started to talk about the possibility of an Indo-Pakistani federation, rather than a single state.¹³ Over years of conflicts between the two states, it became obvious that reintegration was neither possible nor desired. In 1962 the BJS claimed that having a dialogue in Pakistan on the Kashmir issue was impossible and in 1966 the party criticised the solutions of the 1966 Tashkent Declaration that ended the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965.¹⁴ When in power, however, the Hindu nationalists emerged to be much more open to parleys with Pakistan and the times of their rule did not introduce any important changes in this regard.

The first full National Democratic Alliance government (1999-2004) was dominated by the BJP led and by Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, a BJP leader and a Hindu nationalist. Regarding Pakistan policy, Vajpayee’s government is remembered, among other things, for India’s nuclear tests and the Kargil war in Kashmir in 1999 (which Pakistan started) and the 2001 tensions, when after terrorists’ attacks on the Indian soil New Delhi amassed an army on the border with Pakistan and the situation seemed to be on the verge of war. Thus, it may be argued that Vajpayee was very bold in his approach to Pakistan. What it is equally true, however, is that in between those two conflicts the Vajpayee’s government tried in earnest to start a meaningful dialogue with Pakistan by organising the Agra summit (in July 2001).

¹¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Postmodernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 247.

¹² Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 461, and Craig Baxter, *Jana Sangh. A Biography of an Indian Political Party*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1971 p. 40.

¹³ Baxter, *Jana Sangh...* p. 250.

¹⁴ Baxter, *Jana Sangh...* p. 246, 252-253

While the nationalists again sat in the opposition benches in 2004-2014 they returned to sabre rattling towards Pakistan. For example, in one TV interview in 2014 Modi said that “Pakistan should be given a reply to in a language that Pakistan will understand”.¹⁵ At this point the idea of a united India suddenly reemerged, even if only on the rhetorical level. Ram Madhav, the BJP secretary, was reported to say just before Modi’s visit to Lahore that “The RSS still believes that one day these parts [India, Pakistan and Bangladesh]... will again, through popular goodwill, come together and Akhand Bharat [united India] will be created.”¹⁶ This was a single remark and thus one should not read too much into it. It should most probably be understood as a way of supporting Modi’s visit to Pakistan. Yet, it is noteworthy that Madhav, being both a BJP and an RSS member, chose to claim that it was the organisation (the RSS) and not the party (the BJP) that stood for a united India. Thus, the “united India” remark could have been aimed at the most radical factions within the Hindu nationalist camp (which may still dream of a united India). The RSS and other radical Hindu organisations do observe occasional “United India Festivals” and “United India Weeks”¹⁷ but such events seem to remain marginal to their main activities. Thus, there seems no proof that the nationalist idea of a “united India” has had any influence on India-Pakistan relations post 2014.

As it turned out, the confidence-building measures of 2014-2015 also had little or no impact on further Indo-Pakistani relations but also strongly contrasted Modi’s earlier (and later) sabre rattling towards Islamabad. In 2016, a chain of border skirmishes and terrorist attacks (the perpetrators of which came from the Pakistani side) again greatly

¹⁵ Gujarat CM Narendra Modi in Aap Ki Adalat (Full Episode), *India TV*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDzbReWkwI8> (accessed 10.06.2017).

¹⁶ No author, ‘India, Pakistan, Bangladesh will reunite to form Akhand Bharat: Ram Madhav’, *The Hindu*, 26 December 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/akhand-bharat-india-pakistan-bangladesh-will-reunite-one-day-says-ram-madhav/article8031920.ece>, (accessed 10.06.2016).

¹⁷ E.g. Ravindra Saini, ‘Akhand Bharat Sankalp by Hindu Jagran Manch’, *Organiser*, 5 September 2014, <http://organiser.org/Encyc/2004/9/5/Sangh-Samachar--br--Akhand-Bharat-Sankalp-Saptah--by-Hindu-Jagaran-Manch.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=> (accessed 10.06.2016) or: no author, ‘RSS observes Akhand Bharat Divas in Kolkata’, *Organiser*, 31 August 2012, <http://organiser.org/Encyc/2012/8/31/-b-RSS-observes-Akhand-Bharat-Divas-in-Kolkata-b-.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=>, (accessed 10.06.2016). *Organiser* is a weekly brought out by the RSS.

increased the level of bilateral tensions. These culminated in September 2016 with an Indian response in the form of “surgical strikes” of Indian soldiers on terrorist camps within the territory controlled by Pakistan. While this may have looked like nationalist boldness, the surgical strikes at Pakistan were not a novelty: they also happened in 2008, 2010 and 2011, when Hindu nationalists were in opposition.

The one element in the India-Pakistan dialogue in which Hindu nationalist sentiments are prominently on display is the issue of the Kashmiri Pandits. Pandit is another term for Brahman, the traditional priest in the Hindu community. When the internal situation of Kashmir worsened at the end of 1980s and the beginnings of 1990s – partially due to the influx of foreign Muslim fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan – the Kashmiri Pandits started to be targeted by radical Muslims. Thousands of Pandits were thus forced to flee the Valley of Kashmir and settle elsewhere in India.

The current BJP government is promising that it will facilitate the return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley.¹⁸ Prime Minister Modi introduced a special package that would guarantee a section of government jobs in Jammu and Kashmir for that community.¹⁹ The attempts at resettlement were facilitated by the fact that after 2014 the BJP came to power in the state, having formed a coalition with the regional People's Democratic Party. The state government chose 100 acres of land that could have been given for the use of the Pandits.²⁰ The promise of resettlement, however, has not been fulfilled by the time of writing (September 2018). The process could have been slowed by the fact that in that the state assembly coalition government fell apart after the BJP withdrew from it June 2018, but in the longer perspective, the

¹⁸ E.g. No author, ‘BJP passes resolution on return of Kashmiri Pandits to Valley’, *Indian Express*, 16 September 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/bjp-passes-resolution-on-return-of-kashmiri-pandits-to-valley-3029859/> (accessed 6.10.2017). Bharatiya Janata Party, ‘Ek Bharat, Shresthra Bharat. Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas. Election Manifesto 2014’, New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014, p. 8.

¹⁹ No author, ‘J&K govt tells Kashmiri Pandit employees to join work within 15 days or face termination’, *FirstPost*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/jk-govt-tells-kashmiri-pandit-employees-to-join-work-within-15-days-or-face-termination-3879499.html> (accessed 19.07.2018).

²⁰ No author, ‘Jammu and Kashmir government identifies 100 acres for resettlement’, *Times of India*, 23 January 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jammu-and-kashmir-government-identifies-100-acres-for-resettling-kashmiri-pandits/articleshow/56740755.cms> (accessed 17.09.2018).

party was not able to finalise the resettlement also through its earlier periods of rule.

While being a domestic issue, the return of Kashmiri Pandits – or even a promise of its facilitation – will have international importance as well. The radical section of the Kashmiri Muslims will certainly be opposed to the resettlement of the Pandits. The government of Pakistan usually uses all aspects of unrest that takes place in the Indian part of Kashmir to use them against India and to try to weaken India's legitimacy to rule over Kashmir. In 2015, when a lot was heard about Indian government plans to resettle the Pandits, the spokesperson of the Pakistani government Tasneem Aslam claimed that any such attempt would be a “violation of the U.N. Security council resolutions”.²¹ In that case it would be correct to judge that the ideology of Hindu nationalism played a role in striving for settlement, even if the resettlement issue is unlikely to substantially change the already tense situation.

Relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar

It should be added, however, that when it comes to the issue of the influx of foreign Muslims the ideology probably influences some elements of foreign policy. The BJP's 2014 election manifesto promised that ‘India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here.’²² The document, therefore, clearly focused on Hindus, not representatives of all religions.²³

When in mid-2017 a military crackdown on the Rohingyas in Myanmar forced many of them to flee to Bangladesh and India, the New Delhi government took an unfriendly position towards the refugees. The Interior Ministry claimed that the Rohingyas would be expelled and Narendra Modi did not bring this issue up publicly while visiting

²¹ Robert Birsal, ‘Pakistan says Hindu settlements in Kashmir violate U.N. resolutions’, *Reuters*, <http://in.reuters.com/article/pakistan-india/pakistan-says-hindu-settlements-in-kashmir-violate-u-n-resolutions-idINKBN0NL1IK20150430> (accessed 6.10.2017).

²² Bharatiya Janata Party, ‘Ek Bharat, Shresthra Bharat. Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas. Election Manifesto 2014’, New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014, p. 40.

²³ On the margins of these musings it would be interesting to note was that the BJP was not strongly defending the Hindu monarchy in Nepal – the last Hindu monarchy on the globe – was being abolished in 2007-8. When the constitution of the nascent Republic of Nepal was being prepared, *Organiser*, the RSS mouthpiece, published a piece penned by the general secretary of the Nepal Buddhist Federation, which claimed that Nepal should not stick to “to the outdated philosophy of theocratic Brahmanism dominance in the name of Hinduism.”

Myanmar in the same period. Modi's joint declaration with Suu Kyi spoke of concerns about "extremist violence" (which most possibly was a reference to radical Muslims amongst Rohingyas) while other Hindu nationalist sources were more outspoken, pointing to the fact that most of Rohingyas profess Islam (while ignoring that some of them are Hindus). In short, the New Delhi government has acted very sternly when it came to the Rohingya crisis, wanting to stop their influx, announcing its plan to deport them, but also sending relief material to Rohingyas in Bangladesh,²⁴ apparently in the hope that it would stop them from coming to India. Thus, it could be assumed – though this cannot be proved – that Hindu nationalist ideology played a role in inflaming fear of Muslim radicalism among Rohingyas.²⁵

This issue has also become a part of a larger debate on the new citizenship bill. In 2016, the current government tabled the the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, which, if turned into an act, would alter the ways of obtaining Indian citizenship. The bill mentions illegal migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian religions coming from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan as eligible for the citizenship.²⁶ In other words, it omits Muslim migrants and ignores migrants from Myanmar (regardless of their religion) altogether. If the bill becomes a law, it would be an indication of Hindu nationalism's more concrete influence, albeit even here the primary concern is the internal situation, while the law could have some international consequences. It must be noted, however, that the bill has not been passed yet and has already sparked a lot of controversies in India.²⁷

²⁴ No author, India Sends Relief Material To Bangladesh For Rohingya Refugees, *NDTV*, 18 September 2018,

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-sends-relief-material-to-bangladesh-for-rohingya-refugees-for-third-time-1918283> (accessed 20.09.2018).

²⁵ The Organiser has published a number of articles that spoke against the presence of Rohingyas in India. The most radical texts referred to the issue of Rohingyas settling in Jammu. E.g. Nishant Kr. Azad, Rohingya Muslims: Agenda to disturb Peace of Jammu, *The Organiser*, 6.08.2018,

<http://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2018/8/6/Rohingya-Muslims-Agenda-to-disturb-Peace-of-Jammu.html> (accessed 21.08.2018).

²⁶ Wamika Kapur, *The Trouble with India's New Citizenship Bill*, *The Diplomat*, 11 March 2017.

<https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/the-trouble-with-indias-new-citizenship-bill/>, (accessed 20.09.2018).

²⁷ Debasree Purkayastha, *What is the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016?*, *The Hindu*, 26 May 2018,

Otherwise, when it comes to Bangladesh, Modi's government has strived to make the ties with the eastern neighbour warmer. While the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis (chiefly Muslims) and the involvement of fringe elements amongst them in terrorist activities in India are a cause of concern, and have often been brought up by Hindu nationalists (and not only them), the ideology of Hindu nationalism does not seem to be an element influencing New Delhi-Dhaka parleys. One of the most important breakthroughs in the two states' relations under Modi's tenure was the decision to swap enclaves on the border of India and Bangladesh, finally approved by the Indian parliament in 2016. There is no indication that ideology played any role here, and it may be noted that the BJP performed a U-turn, as it had voted against the swap when it was in opposition.

It is worth adding, however, that the Hindu nationalists of the RSS are building influence among the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Some Hindu nationalist leaders (such as the recently departed Ashok Singhal, the leader of RSS' religious platform, Vishwa Hindu Parishad) have been in touch with Bangladesh Jatiya Hindu Mohajote, an organisation that aims at representing the Hindu minority of that country and voicing its concerns. According to some sources, the RSS has been also involved politically in Bangladesh, standing behind some of the Hindu minority candidates in elections.²⁸ This is perhaps the only case of such direct political involvement of the RSS outside of India. This still seems to be a minor issue, however, and if it did leave an impact on Dhaka-New Delhi relations, such effects were not revealed to the general public.

Relations with Israel and Arab states

The Hindu nationalists' perspective on the Jewish nation has seemingly evolved. In the late colonial period, Savarkar warned against settling Jews in India, while Golwalkar, the RSS leader, justified Nazi Germany's behaviour towards the Jews. On the other hand, in the same text, published in 1923, Savarkar stated that "if Palestine becomes a

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/what-is-the-citizenship-amendment-bill-2016/article23999348.ece>, (accessed 20.09.2018).

²⁸ Chandan Nandy, *RSS gets 'involved' in pushing more Hindus as candidates for upcoming Bangladesh parliamentary polls*, South Asian Monitor, 30 August 2018, <https://southasianmonitor.com/2018/08/30/rss-gets-involved-in-pushing-more-hindus-as-candidates-for-upcoming-bangladesh-parliamentary-polls/>, (accessed 21.09.2018).

Jewish State [...] it will gladden us almost as much as our Jewish friends”.²⁹ Moreover when the state of Israel did come into existence, Golwalkar supported this development. As early as 1962 the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* called for establishing ties with Israel³⁰. Savarkar supported the same solution already in late 1950s.³¹ According to Dhooria A.B. Vajpayee’s suggestion to support the Arab states had been silenced within the Hindu nationalist milieu.³² Thus, in the area of Middle East policy, Hindu nationalists differed from the socialist Indian National Congress that dominated Indian politics from the 1940s to the 1980s. Throughout this period New Delhi supported the Arab states. India and Israel established formal diplomatic ties as late as 1992.

Closer to contemporary times the BJP claimed that the rationale of the effort to deepen cooperation with Israel was that it was a modern state which could offer interesting technologies. The party has been sending delegations to Israel even when in opposition. Yet, I assume that the Hindu nationalists’ position on Israel was also ideologically driven. The Jewish nation was perceived by them as a role model of a community that retains its religious traditions and homogeneity. When the Jews were stateless, their diaspora in many countries was a religious minority and hence for the Hindu nationalists in the colonial era the Jewish minority in a country like Germany could have been comparable to the Muslim minority in India. At the same time, however, the Jewish state – once it was reborn - was a positive example of homogeneity from the perspective of Hindu nationalists. Savarkar claimed that “no people in the world can more justly claim to get recognised as a racial unit than the Hindus and perhaps the Jews”.³³ When Israel was created, Golwalkar wrote that “The reconstruction of the Hebrew Nation in Palestine is just an affirmation of the fact that Country, Race, Religion, Culture and Language must exist unavoidably together to form a full Nation idea”³⁴. It can be also assumed that for Hindu nationalists, with their siege

²⁹ Savarkar, *Hindutva...* p. 53.

³⁰ No author, ‘The RSS: Turning over a new leaf?’, *India Today*, 7 July 2014, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rss-reportedly-considering-admitting-non-hindu-in-its-fold/1/435500.html>, (accessed 9.04. 2016).

³¹ Dhananjay Kheer, *Veer Savarkar*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966, p. 499.

³² Ram Lal Dhooria, *I was a Swayamsevak (An inside view of the RSS)*, New Delhi, Samprayikta Virodhi Committee, New Delhi, n.d., p. 28.

³³ Savarkar, *Hindutva...* p. 33.

³⁴ Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *We, Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1993, p. 79.

mentality, Israel was and is a role model as a country boldly dealing with hostile Muslim neighbours and a Muslim minority.

Still, as in other cases, the post-2014 government of Narendra Modi did not substantially change India's earlier Middle East policy though it did strengthen its ties with Israel. In 2014 it was rumoured that New Delhi will cease to support Palestine in the UN but that had not happened at the time of writing.³⁵ So far, the conclusion is that India is gradually marginalising the Palestine issue³⁶ and more often abstaining from voting against Israel at the UN. On the other hand, however, New Delhi supported the UN vote against Washington's proposal to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017³⁷. On a visit to Palestine in 2018 Modi reiterated Indian government's support for the two-state solution and for an 'independent' and 'sovereign' Palestine, though he did not use the words 'united' and 'viable'.³⁸ Modi was also India's first Prime Minister to visit Israel (in 2017). These are noteworthy developments but it should once again be pointed out that the policy of strengthening ties with Israel was started by earlier, centre-left governments in New Delhi. Moreover, Modi's government is not foregoing its ties with Arabic states of the Middle East. India's Prime Minister also visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

³⁵ This rumour caused some marginal protests of Muslims in India. At least one party rival to the BJP and attempting to win over the Muslim electorate – the Aam Aadmi Party – supported the Palestinian cause while criticising BJP's position. Adam Burakowski, Krzysztof Iwanek, 'India's Aam Aadmi (the Common Man's) Party. Are the Newcomers Rocking National Politics?', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 57, No. 3, p. 541. This reminds us that the BJP's position on Palestine is partially conditioned by the fact that the party is usually not vying for Muslim votes, contrary to many of its rival parties.

³⁶ Ankit Panda, 'India's Position on Israel and Palestine: Change or no Change?', *The Diplomat*, 6 July 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/indias-position-on-israel-and-palestine-change-or-no-change/> (accessed 7.10.2017) and Anjana Pasricha, 'With Modi's Visit to Israel, India Sheds Historical Baggage', *VOA News*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/amp/with-modi-visit-to-israel-india-sheds-historical-baggage/3932358.html> (accessed 7.10.2017).

³⁷ Yashwant Raj, 'India's Jerusalem vote consistent with its position on Palestine', *Hindustan Times*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/india-s-jerusalem-vote-marked-an-end-and-a-beginning/story-nYxmnZ5T9JvIJCsz3JXP.html> (accessed 18.09.2018).

³⁸ No author, 'In Palestine for Three Hours, Modi Drops Indian Support for 'United', 'Viable' Palestinian State', *The Wire*, 12 February 2018, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/palestine-three-hours-modi-drops-indian-support-united-viable-palestinian-state> (accessed 19.08.2018).

The RSS' official sources do not seem to be criticising these developments. For instance, in 2017 the Organiser, the RSS' English-language mouthpiece, ran an article which praised Modi's attempts to strengthen ties with the UAE.³⁹ This is despite the fact that the RSS often warns about radical forms of Islam flourishing in parts of India, allegedly partially due to the funding from foreign extremist organisations from Arab states or Pakistan. One case which could have been read as ideologically-driven was the Modi government's refusal to accept foreign aid from the UAE for the state of Kerala which had been devastated by floods in 2018 (many inhabitants of Kerala work in the UAE, and many Keralites are Muslims as well, hence some of the Hindu nationalists link this connection with radical Islam in Kerala). In reality, however, the decision was in line with New Delhi's earlier policy and, once again, was a continuation of the direction set by the earlier, non-BJP government.⁴⁰ It is clear that Hindu nationalist sentiments are not being allowed to come in the way of India's interests in the Arabic part of the Middle East, which include primarily energy imports and millions of Indians working in some of the Arab countries in the region.

Conclusions

To sum up, this article offers these conclusions: (1) There is consensus between the leading national Indian parties regarding the course of foreign policy (while the smaller regional parties do not focus on this policy at all); (2) There is consensus amongst India's political elites that New Delhi should balance its position between Moscow and Washington; (3) a common feature is that the opposition parties, nationalists or otherwise, call for a bolder position towards Beijing and Islamabad but are always more conciliatory once in power; (4) while the present government enhances its cooperation with Israel, it also understands that India's interests in the Middle East must be safeguarded even though it implies cooperation with the Arab countries;

³⁹ Kanwal Sibal, *Foreign Policy: Upswing in Indo-UAE Ties*, The Organiser, 24 January 2017,

<http://organiser.org/Encyc/2017/1/24/Foreign-Policy-Indo-UAE-Ties-Upswing-in-Indo-UAE-Ties.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=> (accessed 19.08.2018).

⁴⁰ Indrani Bagchi, *Why it's perfectly justified for India to refuse foreign aid for Kerala*, Economic Times, 23 August 2018,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/why-its-perfectly-justified-for-india-to-refuse-foreign-aid-for-natural-disasters/articleshow/65506672.cms> (accessed 20.09.2018).

and hence (5) there is no visible influence of the ideology of Hindu nationalism on the main direction of Indian foreign policy.

In my view, some of the reasons for this situation for the Hindu nationalists stem from the following factors: (1) As a ruling party, the BJP must be more flexible, realistic and moderate, and cannot allow the RSS with its rigid approach, to influence India's foreign policy; (2) with regards to international relations, the leading politicians of the BJP have so far put trust in their diplomats and professional bureaucrats (such as employees of the Ministry of External Affairs) and have not embarked on a large-scale change of these cadres; (3) ideology becomes more prominent in Indian foreign policy when domestic needs seem to dictate it – in other words, certain declarations that seem to be bold and nationalistic are more aimed at a particular electorate in India than in fulfilling goals on the international stage; and, lastly (4) there is a swadeshi faction within the ruling party and Hindu nationalist circles that calls for a protection of Indian industries and opposes various activities of multinational companies in India. This factor could have been more important for Indian foreign policy but at present the position of the current Prime Minister is so strong that the swadeshi faction cannot stop him from trying to attract foreign companies to India.

