



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Abe and Modi: Nationalist Leaders versus Nationalist Leadership

The issue of nationalism in Asia has gained attention in recent years as two new nationalist leaders—Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi—came into office with aspirations to play a greater role in shaping the regional economic and security order. How does nationalism affect the foreign policies of the world’s third-largest economy and its largest democracy?

This question was addressed by Richard Samuels, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Deepa M. Ollapally, Associate Director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and Associate Research Professor of International Affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University (GWU), at a Rising Powers Initiative conference on “Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: A Resurgence of Nationalism?” held on November 18 at GWU. The conference reconvened authors to update their findings in the book *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Nationalist Turn in Japan’s Grand Strategy?

Recently, observers have noted Japan’s increased nationalism in the context of rising diplomatic tensions in the region due to history issues, including Prime Minister Abe’s [visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine](#) in December last year. Despite such a perceived trend, nationalism does not dominate the strategic calculations of Japanese policymakers. The future of Tokyo’s grand strategy will

ultimately depend on the relative power of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific and the balance of power among competing foreign policy worldviews in Japan.

Four worldviews exist in Japan's strategic thinking—bandwagon (economic hedge), integrate (dual hedge), balance (military hedge), and autonomy (self-hedge)—each of which views the country's relations with the U.S. and China differently. The first worldview, bandwagon, takes seriously the shifting balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, “hugging” China

to maintain good economic relationships while somewhat distancing Japan from the U.S. The failure of this approach under the short-lived Yukio Hatoyama administration gave a rise to the second and third worldviews: integrate and balance. Hatoyama's successor, Naoto Kan, adopted the second approach based on dual hedging: aiming to maintain cordial relations with both superpowers by integrating China into existing regional order while strengthening security cooperation with the U.S. The increasingly deteriorating Sino-Japanese relationship in recent years, however, shifted the center of gravity to the third worldview, balance, that emphasizes the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance to militarily hedge against China's rise. This line of strategic thinking dominates Abe's foreign policy, which positions Japan much closer to the U.S. than China and aims to expand the country's regional and global security role via the reinterpretation of the Peace Constitution and increased military budget. However assertive, Abe's strategic thinking still remains distant from the fourth worldview, autonomy, which seeks to achieve Japan's military self-reliance. This vision, supported by right-wing nationalists such as former Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, advocate for a Japan that can say no to the U.S. and take an independent course of foreign policy by “using the alliance to transcend the alliance.” This worldview, however, has been on the margin in Japanese society, and Abe, despite his reputation as a nationalist, has not embraced it as a centerpiece of his foreign policy.

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worldviews in the country's foreign policy debate. It will also depend on the relative power of the U.S. vis-à-vis China. Faced with Beijing's military expansion and assertiveness, especially in the East China Sea, Tokyo is reassessing the security commitment of Washington, whose defense cuts will likely undermine its military capabilities and power projection in the Asia-Pacific, and whose leadership appears to be increasingly inward-looking under the Obama administration. The U.S. involvement in history issues also play a role, as its criticism against Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine created a sense of dissatisfaction with the ally among Japanese nationalists, who have become more outspoken in the recent foreign policy discourse. It is therefore the interaction of these internal and external dynamics that will shape the contour of Japan's grand strategy in the coming years.

New Foreign Policy Orientation under Modi?

Scholars and commentators have discussed the kind of foreign policy Prime Minister Modi will pursue for India, where six different worldviews—realist, globalist, and four variants of nationalist—have the potential of shaping its strategic thinking. Embracing standard nationalism and Hindu nationalism with a strong realist tendency, Modi seeks to establish India as a global player with an emphasis on strategic autonomy in the traditions of Nehruvianism and Hindutva (paradoxical at first glance). In formulating his foreign policy, however, Modi faces a challenge of managing conflicting demands from competing worldviews. The details of the six worldviews are summarized below:

- *Standard nationalists* emerged from post-colonial nationalism following India's independence from Great Britain in 1947. They aim to establish India as a developed, self-reliant country in the tradition of Nehruvianism while viewing both status and power as important for the country's standing.
- *Soft nationalists*, inspired by post-colonial nationalism, Nehruvianism, and socialism, eschew any great power ambitions, emphasize self-reliance in the short- and long-term, and prioritize status over power. They became salient after the 1991 economic liberalization.
- *Hard nationalists* base their worldview on post-colonial nationalism and offensive realist theory, seeing military power as an end in itself and advocating for India as a global military power. This group gained popularity after the country's second nuclear test in 1998.

- *Hindu nationalists*, drawing inspiration from post-colonial nationalism and Hindutva, seek military power and emphasize a martial spirit and self-reliance in foreign policy debates. They became politically salient after the establishment of Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in 1980.
- *Realists* view the world through the lens of post-colonial nationalism and defensive realist theory and argue for India to be a global player. Unlike hard nationalists, however, they see military power as means to an end, not as an end in itself, and remain attentive to negative consequences such as the security dilemma. This group emerged after the country's second nuclear test in 1998.
- *Globalists*, becoming prominent after the 1991 economic liberalization, draw on post-colonial nationalism and liberal economic theory and seek global economic power and further regional economic integration.

Traditionally, nationalists and their focus on strategic autonomy dominated Indian foreign policy, as manifested in the Non-Alignment Movement during the cold war. In recent years, realists and globalists have become more prominent

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while nationalists have been increasingly on the defensive. Realists and nationalists are now on a more equal footing as their focus on strategic autonomy and no hard alliance transcend the ideological divide. They have also come to share the globalist idea of economic integration; they now see economic growth as a critical vehicle for India to achieve its power ambitions.

This trend is evident in Modi's foreign policy, which takes a pro-U.S. realist approach in expanding the bilateral free trade and security cooperation while adopting a nationalist stance in protecting sovereignty and strategic autonomy. He sees America as a "first among equals," maintaining good relations not only with Washington but also other regional players including

Beijing. He has also eschewed military means in dealing with China, emphasizing a peaceful and early resolution of the border dispute while signing a Chinese \$20 billion infrastructure investment in India during the bilateral summit with President Xi Jinping in September this year.

Meanwhile, Modi faces a difficult task of managing competing pulls of other worldviews, especially over the issues of U.S.-India relations and military vs. economic means in foreign policymaking. A pro-U.S. stance faces criticisms from both hard and soft nationalists, who view any dependence on the U.S. as a threat to India's self-reliance and autonomy. His economic-based diplomacy is met by strong demands for a more militant approach against China and Pakistan from hard nationalists and Hindu nationalists. Therefore, Modi's foreign policy cannot simply be explained in terms of nationalism. It is rather an amalgamation of competing worldviews ranging from realism to globalism to different strains of nationalism.

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About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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