



Is the Gujarat villain of 2002 now a global hero?

Narendra Modi has captured a major chunk of the Indian political landscape using innovative sales pitches and savvy branding skills.

THE OLD SAYING THAT A week is a long time in politics doesn't seem to apply to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who finds his first year in office a short time. He has become a record holder as the first Indian prime minister to spend the maximum number of days travelling abroad to over 16 countries during his first year in office. Modi's itinerary has been carefully planned and his mission is clear: connect with neighbours and do business with affluent nations. Barring Russia, Modi has visited most of the countries that influence international business.

When he wasn't on board Air India One, Modi was rolling out the red carpet for visiting heads of state, including Russia's President Putin. It is also a matter of record that most heads of state or foreign dignitaries have made India their destination of choice in the first year of Modi's tenure. Over 100 of them have met him so far, with the same purpose, to win his heart. Is the Gujarat villain of 2002 now a global hero?

The prime minister is a world-beater on the diplomacy front, from his rock star popularity among the Indian diaspora and well-received public speeches in New York and Sydney, to hosting Barack Obama as the Republic Day chief guest and addressing the US president by his first name. A walk in the park with the Japanese premier Shinzo Abe and dinner with the Chinese president Xi Jinping



▲ Friends in high places Modi and President Barack Obama.

on the Sabarmati waterfront, also make it into an impressive list of high-profile 'Kodak moments' from his first year in office.

By comparison, Modi's predecessors tended to visit other nations mostly for multi-lateral talks and not to settle bilateral issues. The prime minister has taken the latter approach, focusing on engaging global leaders for business, as well as India's neighbours on the benefits of peaceful coexistence. Modi is also the first Indian prime minister to invite all the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) heads of state for his swearing-in ceremony, thus neatly demonstrating his desire to strengthen bonds and promote business with his closest neighbours. In addition, he must also take full credit for the recent large-scale evacuation of expatriates from Yemen and ongoing assistance for victims of the earthquake in Nepal.

Known for his market-

ing mantras and economic diplomacy, Modi has captured a major chunk of the Indian political landscape using innovative sales pitches and savvy branding skills. He is using similar innovations to market India to the world's powerful nations. The prime minister's strong emphasis on economic diplomacy – a concept that lies at the heart of his statecraft – is obvious from the content of his speeches and the nature of his interactions during his meetings with international leaders. His many meetings with the corporate aristocracy of the countries he visits have become an essential feature of his travel diaries.

Previously, trade and commerce were not top priorities of Indian foreign policy. Nowadays, however, multinationals are finding it much easier to do business with a country whose premier is not weighed down by administrative protocol and antiquated business baggage. In the sequence of priorities, trade

now comes first on India's new economic diplomatic agenda. Modi has also made civil nuclear energy and indigenisation of the defence equipment manufacturing sector two of the premier pillars of his economic programme.

Since he has converted "Make in India" into his messianic mission, he seems to be working according to a plan. No foreign company would like to "Make in India" what it makes at home without irresistible inducements. For example, the deal for the supply of Rafale aircraft had remained enmeshed in the bureaucratic web for over a decade. Allegations and counter-allegations of arms lobby adventurism were flying around like pilotless aircraft. Modi simply canned the prodigious pile of files and became the first Indian prime minister to announce a deal during his visit to France without holding formal consultations with domestic stakeholders.

He has invented a new mechanism of signing government-to-government defence deals to prevent middlemen walking away with huge commissions. With a stroke of his pen, Modi has given plenty of encouragement to both the French government and French industry, showing his resolve to facilitate the entry of their companies into a sensitive sector. No-one before him has possessed the flair to sign an on-the-spot order for 36 Rafale fighter aircraft worth over \$4bn.

Earlier, Modi had changed policy to allow foreign direct investment (FDI) in the defence industry with an aim to prop up the Indian economy, generate employment and reduce spending on arms imports. But it is not the number of companies that flock to his meetings that matters. What matters for Modi is the kinetic gush of dollars which flood India to propel his favourite projects. Through his networking style and bold posturing, Modi wants to go down in history as the hero who defied the golden rule of conventional global diplomacy, which dictates that in the world of international engagement, some things are better left unsaid. But Modi, by his tone, tenor and tendency says it all.

He has reignited the push for India seeking a UN Security Council permanent seat, terming it as India's right. In Berlin, Modi said India would "set the agenda" for the climate change talks as the country has always followed the principle of "reuse" and "recycle". The prime minister stated that India's secularism was based on strong foundations and it could not be shaken. This was to put at rest some concerns in the minds of the international community relating to the role of the Hindu nationalist organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), in this government.

To Modi's credit, so far he has stuck to his theme after his stunning victory and does not appear to waver in his determination to keep contentious issues out of his framework of governance.

In terms of the economy, the tailwinds have so far been with Modi. Global oil prices



▲ **Top table** Russia's President Vladimir Putin is a close defence partner.

have crashed and pulled down inflation, finally allowing the Reserve Bank of India to cut interest rates. Markets and investor sentiment have generally remained high, pushing the stock market indices to new peaks and the 2015-16 budget - albeit cautious - has given little room for complaint.

"Make in India" is the new manufacturing mantra hoping to achieve lift off and the government has succeeded in getting parliamentary approval for higher FDI in insurance and defence, and transparency in the auction of spectrum, coal and mineral mining. Modi has initiated social, judicial and financial reforms, including scrapping outdated and obsolete laws, devolution of financial powers to the states, launching a 'clean India' campaign, building toilets, developing smart cities, preventing female foeticide, reviving All India Radio, launching the opening of bank accounts for families to connect all Indians with the economy, major amendments to anti-corruption laws and pushing afforestation.

But is the honeymoon over? A resurgent Rahul Gandhi,

reinvigorated opposition, parliamentary logjams, a united Janata Parivar (created by a merger of six political parties), and deadlock with the opposition on the crucial land acquisition bill, all suggest that it is.

Rahul Gandhi finds Modi insensitive towards the miserable plight of the farmers who are suffering due to unseasonal rains. The prime minister is yet to respond to questions asked by the Indian National Congress boss, about why the local farmers who make food in India to feed all Indians are not a part of Modi's "Make in India" mission?


Modi will be hoping that his prayers to the rain gods are accepted as India is expected to experience below normal monsoon this year too, which will adversely affect agricultural production, resulting in a rise in food inflation that will further cause challenges for the prime minister.

Politics is more about perception than performance. Despite Modi taking several meaningful steps in the right direction, there is a sense of disappointment because of sky-high expectations on the

part of most of the Indian electorate. His critics, who range from opposition parties to corporate leaders and even a smattering of his own BJP party members, have started to suggest that he needs to back his big ideas with action.

Congress often accuses him of repackaging its policies and presenting the same old Congress wine in a new BJP bottle. The BJP, on the other hand, says that the opposition has not understood the might and mind of Modi, who rarely takes such attacks lying down, and who is regarded as a ruthless political opponent. It is in India's interest to have an effective opposition to measure the performance of the Modi government and strongly oppose anything that might derail progress.

During my recent conversation with an important minister in the Modi government, I was informed that during the first year it has been successful in clearing the legacy logjams inherited from the last Congress-led government, and it should be able to deliver on its promises during its remaining time in power.

Modi, the darling of 2014, is walking a tightrope as he continues to try and maintain his popularity among India's masses and classes in 2015 and beyond, while at the same time pushing an ambitious economic agenda. India doesn't want Modi to fail because it still sees in him a decisive leader. But, will India remain patient with him until 2019 when he presents his final report card before the electorate? 

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