

## 18TH LOK SABHA ELECTION MANIFESTOS 2024: INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND PAKISTAN

By  
**Maheen Shafeeq**  
Research Associate  
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by  
**Dr. Khurram Abbas**

April 19, 2024

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction

Ahead of the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections (commencing from April 19, 2024), the manifestos of India's two major political parties are under scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> The titles of election manifestos reveal a great deal about the contents. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s manifesto, titled 'Modi ki Guarantee' (Modi's Guarantee), is attempting to develop a connection with the Indian voters based on assurances by Modi. The Indian National Congress (INC)'s manifesto, titled 'Nyay Patra' (justice document), targets revising the 'wrong-doings' of the BJP government. The manifestos deliberate on a wide spectrum of agendas and contain a myriad of pledges for the socio-economic growth and development of India. Various aspects of Indian foreign policy have garnered particular attention as the two political parties have outlined their intentions and shared their preferred policy directions on India's global engagements. The 2024 election manifestos of Indian political parties unveil a deeper understanding of how they view India in the international arena rather than how India is perceived in the world. While the BJP imagines a

1 Indian National Congress, "Naya Parta: Lok Sabha elections 2024," April 5, 2024 [https://manifesto.inc.in/assets/Congress-Manifesto-English-2024-Dyoxp\\_4E.pdf](https://manifesto.inc.in/assets/Congress-Manifesto-English-2024-Dyoxp_4E.pdf); Bharatiya Janta Party, "Modi ki Guarantee 2024," April 14, 2024, <https://www.bjp.org/pressreleases/bjps-manifesto-general-election-2024-bjp-sankalp-patra-2024>

**grandiose Indian foreign policy, which is dissimilar to its 2019 manifesto, the INC appears somewhat consistent in its foreign policy outlook, with a greater emphasis on relations with geographically proximate states. The foreign policy discourse in the two manifestos can be comprehended through the prism of global and regional politics.**

### **Global Politics**

The BJP's 2024 manifesto envisions a larger role for India in global politics. It appears so due to the BJP's keenness on two aspects. Firstly, an enhanced role among the major powers, especially in terms of participating in and influencing global decision-making and the re-making of the global order. The BJP aims to expand its network of missions and diplomats to pursue India's global interests and secure its so-called 'unprecedented rise' in the global order. The desire for an enhanced role in global decision-making is also evident from the BJP's pledge to seek permanent membership of the UN Security Council as it did in its 2019 election manifesto. The 2019 manifesto mentioned that India would 'intensify its efforts' towards this objective; however, such 'efforts' are not mentioned in the 2024 manifesto. This could be due to the reason that the BJP believes India to be in a much stronger position globally as compared to 2019. What appears to have boosted this belief is India's closer ties with major powers and its G20 presidency.

At the G20 Summit last year, India tried to take credit for the inclusion of the 54-nation African Union as a full member of G20. This initiative appears to have been a stimulus for a larger role in the 'Global South,' which is the second evident aspect of the BJP's manifesto. The BJP envisions India *leading* the 'Global South' and acting as its voice. As a self-proclaimed spokesperson, New Delhi has been persistently seeking to project itself as a 'middleman' or a reliable intermediary between the 'Global North' and 'Global South.' This is more of a recent assertion by the BJP as goals related to 'leading' the 'Global South' were neither mentioned in the 2019 nor in the 2014 manifestos.

The Congress, on the other hand, appears comparatively more consistent in its 2014, 2019 and 2024 manifestoes. The Congress has laid great emphasis on the continuation of foreign policy since independence, and it has criticised the BJP for its handling of the state position on the ongoing Gaza conflict. The Congress manifesto betrays a seeming aloofness from the great-power competition as it does not mention this salient aspect of global politics today. A continued emphasis was nevertheless evident on peaceful co-existence and bilateral and multilateral engagements in the 2019 and 2024 manifestos. Following BJP's footprints, Congress has also highlighted the significance of New Delhi's coordination with the 'Global South' on issues of vital interest. However, Congress

has publicised no intention of assuming the responsibility of acting as the voice or leader of 'Global South,' as did the BJP.

For Congress, pressures closer to home have remained the most traumatic and, in that context, China has been presumed to be a consistent threat. In the 2014 and 2019 manifestos of Congress, Beijing was mentioned primarily in the context of border security; but in the 2024 manifesto, China is added as a national security threat. This concern has apparently accentuated as the Congress believes that the BJP was naïve towards against China in the Galwan Valley crisis of 2020 and even after 21 rounds of military talks, the Indian position remains weaker as compared to that of China. Overall, Congress's foreign policy appears to give a theoretical overview with a narrow focus, unlike the BJP whose foreign policy agendas are expansive and cover broader subjects. This could be due to the reason that the Congress has focused more on the neighbourhood.

### **Regionalism**

The Congress manifesto of 2024 has covered all of India's immediate neighbours including Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Myanmar. However, unlike its previous manifestos of 2014 and 2019 where it believed in utilising the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a vehicle for regional cooperation, neither SAARC nor the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is mentioned. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP in its manifestos showed some inclination towards regional cooperation. However, the BJP too has avoided mentioning these two significant regional organisations in its 2024 manifesto.

The construction of well-equipped and integrated border outposts to provide good working and living conditions for the forces was part of the Congress manifesto of 2019, but this has not attracted focus in the 2024 manifesto. Rather, Congress has claimed that it will support border trade. There appears to be a lack of will in the BJP's manifesto towards forging better relations with India's immediate neighbourhood. The manifesto mentioned that the BJP would accelerate the development of robust infrastructure along the Indo-Pakistan, Indo-China and Indo-Myanmar border. In particular, the BJP's 2024 manifesto highlighted the underway construction of roads, rails, railways, telecom towers, optical fibre cables and electricity networks, and the additional development of technological smart fencing. The BJP's focus on borders development does not necessarily amount to a desire for promoting a conducive environment for regional cooperation but essentially means preparing for better mobility in case of any escalation with Pakistan or China.

To address the national security threats, the BJP manifesto also mentioned establishing military theatre commands for improvement of operational efficacy of the Indian armed forces. India, under

the BJP government, has been working on developing all-domain joint operations, and the establishment of command theatres could operationalise this concept. The Congress has also stressed revising the 2009 war-fighting doctrine titled 'Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive' to meet the challenge of a 'two-front war' with China and Pakistan. The presentation of aggressive postures by both parties in their manifestos is a vivid reflection of the war-mongering nature of the Indian political elite, which seems to portend a bleak picture for regional peace and stability. This demonstrates a lack of goodwill by both the parties towards regional states, and instead showcases India's designs to impose its will and hegemony upon regional states.

The BJP's manifest interests lie in the Indian Ocean and the 'Indo-Pacific' region, on which the party's manifesto has repeatedly stressed India's policy of 'Security and Growth for all in the Region' (SAGAR). This highlights a shift from the pivot to the South Asian states towards the pivot to the 'Indo-Pacific' region. It appears that the BJP glossed over the need for forging cooperative relations with the South Asian region altogether and has rather focused on all other regions of the world. The BJP's manifesto also highlights strengthening its position and presence in the Indian Ocean region as well as enhancing its connectivity to Europe via the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). This is primarily driven by the BJP's desire to play a prominent role in the global supply chain as it aspires to make India the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest economy and a manufacturing hub of the world. However, no such objectives have been mentioned by the Congress in its 2024 manifesto.

## **Pakistan**

While the BJP does not mention any prospects of engagement with Pakistan, the Congress places the onus of engagement on Pakistan. The BJP's manifesto has mentioned Pakistan in the context of developing infrastructure along the Indo-Pakistan border, while the Congress manifesto directly correlates Pakistan with alleged 'cross-border terrorism.' However, the BJP manifesto mentions cross-border terrorism without explicitly citing any country.

On terrorism, the BJP's election manifesto of 2024 stressed a zero-tolerance policy. A similar approach was also mentioned in the BJP's manifestos of 2014 and 2019. The BJP's 2024 election manifesto mentions terrorism as an internal security matter and highlights measures taken by the BJP's government to counter terrorism such as the 2016 'surgical strike' and the 2019 Air Strikes - without mentioning Pakistan. Both the Congress and the BJP have stressed countering terrorism through global cooperation rather than regional or bilateral efforts.

The BJP's proclaimed commitment to defend India's citizens at home and abroad from all threats of terrorism is telling. This reflected the strong likelihood that the BJP could continue aggressive and

illegal hostile campaigns to carry out state-sponsored terrorism and extrajudicial killings on foreign soil, of which Pakistan, Canada and the U.S. have been the targets so far. In Pakistan, these killings have mostly been linked to people fighting for their right of self-determination in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). In August 2019, the BJP government revoked the Article 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution, converting the status of the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir into its union territory and enhancing the centre's control. The BJP manifesto claims that this move reduced violence in the disputed region. To downplay the existing situation on the ground, no further actions regarding the disputed region were mentioned in its manifesto. The Congress, however, stated that it would restore the 'statehood' of Jammu and Kashmir, a subject that has been lingering for a long time under the BJP government.

Overall, no specific intent for improving relations with Pakistan has been evinced in the manifestos of the two Indian political parties. Though the Congress manifesto mentioned trade with neighbours, it did not refer to trade with Pakistan particularly. The political class in India evidently views engagement with Islamabad as a low-rewarding matter. The manifestos of both parties fail to register that without addressing long-outstanding India-Pakistan disputes, the region would remain mired in deep instability, which also has the potential to spiral out of control.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the BJP's manifesto aims for a larger global role for India with extensive and long-term strategies for growth and development. On the contrary, Congress has remained focused on the immediate neighbourhood and short-term goals. Both political parties have varying goals when it comes to their approaches towards foreign policy. Regionalism and cooperation have found little traction in the 2024 manifestos of the two political parties, which does not augur well either for the future of India-Pakistan relations or for regional peace and prosperity. Overall, the manifestos contain humongous promises to the Indian people. It remains to be seen how they will be able to fulfil those promises.