

Event Transcript

Confidence and Nationalism in Modi's India

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Featuring:

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Event Description

In this panel report, the authors of the Stimson South Asia program's recent groundbreaking publication: "[Confidence and Nationalism in Modi's India](#)," discuss the findings and offer insights into the domestic political audience pressures and incentives that can influence national security decision-making in India.

Using results from a new survey, this research note examines public opinions in India on domestic politics and national security issues. As revealed by the survey, the paper highlights the clear public preference for Indian nuclear superiority, high confidence in Indian military capabilities, and robust support for Modi's leadership. In this panel, the authors will discuss the findings and implications of the survey and offer insights into the domestic political audience pressures and incentives that can influence national security decision-making. This publication follows a similar 2021 [survey](#) of Pakistani public opinion and strategic crises.

More information and event video available at <https://www.stimson.org/event/confidence-and-nationalism-in-modis-india/>

Event Transcript

Frank O'Donnell: Good morning to all of you joining us from the US, and good evening to all of you joining us from South Asia. I am Frank O'Donnell, deputy director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C.

India has been projected by many analysts to be one of the most consequential countries of the 21st century. According to a UN estimate, it will next year surpass China as a world's most populous country. India's perceptions of its role in the world and the decisions it takes about foreign defense and domestic policy will have increasing impacts in global affairs.

As this influence grows, India also faces profound challenges. 75 years after Partition, it remains locked in a crisis-prone rivalry with Pakistan. Strategic tensions with China are also rising. This was evidenced by Chinese incursions into Indian-administered territory in Kashmir in 2020 which led to the first fatalities between India and China in over four decades. While India's military forces faced these threats, they're also contending with equipment modernization and resource difficulties, which some experts address may soon force New Delhi to prioritize the strategic threats it can address. The scope of Indian strategic alignment with the US is also an actively debated topic in India.

Finally, as the world's largest and arguably most diverse democracy, India retains the same challenges it has had since independence. This is one of ensuring that its efforts to leverage its immense human potential on one hand, and to promote and uphold domestic pluralism on the other, are not brought into tension but instead complement each other.

So how Indians think about these issues today matter deeply and have regional and global significance. I'm pleased to be joined by all four authors of a groundbreaking new report surveying Indian public opinion on these issues and more titled Confidence and Nationalism in Modi's India, which Stimson published last week.

We have with us, Christopher Clary, assistant professor of political science at the University of Albany and non-resident fellow at the Stimson Center, Sameer Lalwani, senior fellow in Asia strategy at the Stimson Center, Niloufer Siddiqui, assistant professor of political science at the University of Albany and non-resident fellow at the Stimson Center, and Neelanjan Sircar, assistant professor at Ashoka University and senior fellow at the Center for Policy Research. We also wouldn't be here without the generosity of our funders, the research support from Julia Lodoen, and the organizational and planning support from our South Asia program and Communications teams.

In terms of format, I'll be asking questions of the panel and then dispersing questions from the audience throughout the session. Please do type your query into the Q&A box, list your name and affiliation, and I'll aim to raise it with the panel. Before that broader discussion, we'll turn first to Chris. He'll give us a brief walkthrough on the survey and its findings. So Chris, over to you.

Christopher Clary:

Great, thank you. I think there are some slides that are going up. We're really pleased as a team that we're able to do this work, and that Stimson was generous enough to fund it. And I also wanted to thank Julia Lodoen who I think might be in the audience, and who did really some great research assistance for us as we pulled this together.

As people that have been watching South Asian politics for a long time, especially in the Modi era, there's been a debate about the extent to which national security issues have domestic political resonance that's been occurring since the September 2016 surgical strikes and even more so in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack in February 2019, and the retaliatory strikes that Prime Minister Modi ordered. And the prime minister made a big deal of his responses to Pakistan on the campaign trail.

And so this issue of how Indians think about the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy choices was on the mind of even casual observers of South Asian politics. It's also an issue of academic inquiry. Here, we are quoting two of our senior colleagues, Paul Staniland and Vipin Narang who noticed in an article a few years ago that while political scientists have done a lot of work looking at how Western, US, and European audiences think about the interaction between domestic and foreign policy, that work is less done in the developing world when we need additional data. So we said, "Why don't we go out and get that data?"

So we commissioned a survey, we worked with the Center for Voting Opinion and Trends in Election Research, or CVoter, to go out and get over 7,000 respondents in a nationwide phone survey we conducted between April 13th and May 14th of this year. We translated that survey into a lot of languages so that we could get good coverage, and we got good coverage. We had respondents in all 28 Indian states, in almost every Indian territory. And the only Indian territories we missed were those with very, very small populations, and we don't think it harms any inference there.

What did we find? First off, we reaffirmed what I think a lot of surveys have shown in the last year. There were a little bit of doubt in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic about whether Prime Minister Modi's popularity, which had been quite notable for his entire tenure as prime minister, would hold up in the face of perceived missteps. But our survey along with others this year found that he remains immensely popular. Over 71% of our respondents supported the prime minister either strongly or somewhat.

And then like other researchers in this area, we found that was mediated by religious or caste affiliations of the respondents. So the prime minister has enormous levels of popularity among Hindus of all different sort of castes, and he has less for some other minority groups, and then is viewed with some skepticism by India's Muslim population, and we found that as well.

We also, I think, consistent with Modi's messaging at home and abroad, we found extraordinary levels of nationalism in our respondents. So 90% of the respondents that we surveyed when we asked them, "Do you think that India is a better country than most other countries?" 90% of those respondents either agreed with that statement strongly or somewhat strongly. And when we compare that to answers that other surveys have found in India and in other countries, that means both today, India could be more nationalist than it was in the past when we look at prior waves of surveys that have been done, but also that India is probably one of the most nationalistic polities on the planet today, that it's really right up there with any other society that we have cross-national evidence for.

So it's what that finding of 90% agreeing that India's a better country than most is large in both absolute and relative terms. And there were negative opinions of India's troublesome neighbors. So we asked about Pakistan and China specifically, about two-thirds of respondents said that they disliked Pakistan and China to a great extent.

And it wasn't just some distaste for Pakistan or China, also we asked the respondents to consider the possibility of conflict with Pakistan or China, and how they thought India would do in those scenarios, and the respondents were quite optimistic about how India would fare, another indicator of the nationalism that we found in the survey overall. So about two-thirds of the respondents, a little bit more than that, depending on how you cut it, thought that India could defeat China in the event of a conflict between China and India. And a very large majority, almost 90% of respondents, thought that India could defeat Pakistan in the event of an India-Pakistan war.

What you can see in the bar graph is that Modi supporters tend to be a little bit more optimistic about how India would fare in a fight than those respondents we had that were less strongly supportive of the prime minister. So when we think about how states deal with threats abroad, the traditional political science answer is that they either try to get friends that help them out, they balance externally, or they develop capabilities internally. So we asked questions about both of those things.

There's been a long-running debate about whether the United States is a reliable partner for India, and that debate is going on at kind of high levels in the elite sphere, especially if you're on social media. But a notable majority – though not a super majority – of our respondents said that they thought the United States would definitely or probably help India defend itself in the event that India had a war with China or Pakistan. And despite the belief that India would have external allies that would come to its help in the event of a conflict, we did find that respondents said that India should have a sizable nuclear weapons arsenal and that its own internal capabilities are able to deal with those problems.

So we asked respondents to think about a variety of different views they might have on nuclear weapons and the overwhelming majority, by far the largest number, said that they thought India should have more nuclear weapons than its enemies. And then the next most popular answer, only 13% of respondents, said that India should have about as many nuclear weapons as its enemies. And then very, very few respondents, only a single digit number, thought that India should have fewer nuclear weapons than its adversaries. It is likely the case that India does not have more nuclear weapons than its adversaries. So there's a mismatch between India's current capabilities and India's public preferences for them.

Disturbingly though, we also found signs of widespread anti-Muslim sentiment among our respondents. Fewer than 60% of our non-Muslim respondents said that they'd be willing to have a Muslim neighbor, that's quite high by global standards, when you think about other minority groups. And an overwhelming majority of the non-Muslim respondents, 78% thought that India's Muslim population was growing too rapidly.

And we got the survey data at the end of May. And as we were reading it, that was happening at the same time as news stories about the very controversial comments by the BJP spokespersons. And it's an interesting snapshot that it's not just elite messaging on this issue, that there is a popular reservoir of concern about India's Muslim population. And so the elites may be responding to this popular pool as well as cuing the population as a whole. So that's something that

disturbed us as survey finders, but also a challenge that India's partners will have to deal with.

And India has lots of partners in Muslim-majority countries, and in the aftermath of those comments, India's diplomats have a lot of work cut out for them. I think that's the last slide. So I'll turn it back over to Frank.

Frank O'Donnell: Thank you. There's a lot of interesting results here, which we'll dig into. However, to start off with, what did you each think was a particularly striking finding and why is it significant? I'd like to hear from all of you, but we'll start off with Neelanjan.

Neelanjan Sircar: Thanks, Frank. And thanks for all of you joining us, I guess, early in the morning over there, and well into the evening over here in India.

I think one of the most interesting findings here is that despite widespread anti-Muslim sentiment, despite shared histories, the amount of dislike we find for Pakistan and China are nearly equivalent. So we can actually break it down a bit further, things that didn't quite make it into the report, I'm just going to report on the unweighted results. 57% of our respondents disliked both China and India to a great extent, 16% disliked Pakistan more than China, 13% disliked China more than Pakistan. So not really a huge amount of differentiation when it came to dislike.

But when we look at assessments of whether India would defeat China or Pakistan, again, we're always worried that people might be a little bit too exuberant in answering in surveys, conditional on people believing that India would definitely defeat Pakistan, 19% believed that India would do less well against China. The conditional believing that Indians would definitely beat China, only 3% believe that they would do worse against Pakistan.

So that suggests to me that, first, domestic preferences don't easily map the foreign policy preferences, even with anti-Muslim sentiment within India, and many, many wars between India and Pakistan, you don't see that kind of distinction in terms of dislike between Pakistan and China among Indians. At the same time, despite very low levels of information, people do have somewhat sophisticated foreign policy preferences. They are able to tell you that India, even when they're highly nationalistic, even when they're overly exuberant, perhaps, about India in a military conflict, that there is a distinction between a military conflict with Pakistan and a military conflict with China. So I think these are surprising findings, but they do also tell us a lot about what complicated foreign policy preferences.

Christopher Clary: I think from my perspective, just as someone that used to work in the US government and has done a lot of Track IIs, I was interested in this finding that the majority of Indians thought the US would come to its assistance in the event of conflict with both Pakistan and China. And what was notable there is that I actually think the US is more likely to come to India's assistance with China than in Pakistan. The legacy, we have four India-Pakistan wars, the US has normally put a lot of pressure on Pakistan, except for in 1971, to calm down.

But we only have one India-China war, and the US provided an enormous amount of aid to India in 1962. In fact, we're kind of still learning about the extent of that aid. And so I think this is a messaging opportunity the US should think about in terms of the India-China relationship, about its reliability in the event of a conflict there. But there's also a challenge for the US government there because in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict, the Indian public may be surprised that the US wants to retain a role as crisis manager and not necessarily come down on one side or the other. And so that may be a little tricky for the US to navigate going forward.

Frank O'Donnell: Thanks, Chris. Yes, around the 2 + 2 in April, this question about the extent of what India can expect from the US in crises, I think is definitely an active topic that was being discussed. Let's go to Niloufer next.

Niloufer Siddiqui: Sure. So firstly, thanks, Frank, for having us, I'm really happy to be here partaking in this important conversation. So for me, I don't know if this was the most striking finding, or it's just maybe one that reinforced what we've been hearing about the news of treatment of the Muslim minority in India, especially under the Modi regime. But I do think it was quite, maybe depressing, the levels of intolerance, and these stood out to me. And one thing that in particular stood out to me was that supporters of Modi and the BJP were more likely to exhibit these intolerant attitudes in particular say that they did not want to have a Muslim as a neighbor.

And so coupled with the overwhelming support for Modi that we find also in the survey, I do think this raises cause for concern. And our survey isn't able to disentangle whether the political parties or the political leadership are merely reflecting public opinion or whether they're molding public opinion, but it does create, I think, this possibility of other, as we know it in our report, of other political leaders and political parties also adapting or adopting particular stances vis-à-vis domestic minority groups.

Frank O'Donnell: Yes, that is a concerning development in terms of, as I said at the top, the domestic pluralism and what the findings here suggest in terms of public attitudes. We will go over now to Sameer.

Sameer Lalwani: I think there are a lot of surprising findings in this survey. Maybe the one I'll add is the sense of optimism in the Indian public about its ability to defeat both China and Pakistan in a war, especially given that there's a high expectation, I think, over a majority of expectation that China and Pakistan would fight together, and so implicitly suggesting that India has the ability to defeat both simultaneously.

I think it's pretty striking, probably inconsistent with a lot of the strategic community's assessment, but nevertheless in line with a poll from August 2020 that was done by the same polling firm, but for India Today in their Mood of the Nation survey. And in that poll, they found that 72% of the respondents believe that India could defeat China. And at that time 59% were saying that India should actually go to war with China. So it was both sort of the belligerency as well as a sense of overconfidence.

And that I think if you interact with expectations of external support from the United States or other Western powers could lead to a pretty precarious situation. But it's not clear necessarily that this is shared by the strategic leadership community, but the public attitude is still nevertheless worth noting.

Frank O'Donnell: Thank you. Yes, that's something that also that we'll get to, but I think is interesting against the legacy of the 2020 Ladakh crisis about just the way it was perhaps reported and just the public understanding of India's military capabilities versus what a lot of experts say.

So the next question I'll go to is the survey does show very high levels of nationalism. How is this measured, and what can we expect to be the ramifications of such a nationalistic Indian public? How does this also compare to other countries?

We'll go to Niloufer first, but this is also a good opportunity to interspace a good related audience question, which is "In general, did you find any differences in these responses between states, even if it's South, West, East and North states which have BJP versus non-BJP governments?" So over to you, Niloufer.

Niloufer Siddiqui: Great. Yeah, that's a great question. So certainly this was, I think, one of the other intriguing findings from this survey was this very high level of nationalism. And as Chris mentioned in his overview, 90% of respondents expressed nationalist views, which we measured with a fairly straightforward measure, but one that is used across different contexts. And so we asked respondents their level of agreement with the statement, "Generally speaking, India is a better country than most other countries." And 90% said somewhat or strongly. And in fact, 80% said strongly, which was measured on a 1-5 scale, so very high levels.

So on the one hand, what does this mean, really? What can we conclude from someone believing that India is a better country than most other countries? Well, I will say that the literature on nationalism in political science and international affairs has found that nationalism does affect a range of preferences, and these include, for example, propensity for conflict, hawkish preferences, other foreign policy preferences, and then, also disturbingly, attitudes towards ethnic minorities.

And so we find in this survey as well, that more nationalistic individuals were more likely to believe that India could defeat China and Pakistan militarily. So I think that holds up with findings more broadly as well. And then in my work on Pakistan with Asfandiyar Mir, we find that nationalism or nationalist sentiment is also linked to greater beliefs in conspiracy theories about right-seeking minority groups. And I raised this in this context because in the Indian context, it possibly suggests that nationalism may limit the room that is available to domestic or international human rights groups who raise concerns about the treatment of Muslims in their country.

So especially if we have this finding, albeit in other contexts, but if it were to travel, then it would suggest that people would be maybe less likely to believe stories of the ways in which Muslims or other minority groups are treated in the country. And so that I think also raises possible concerns. I'll maybe let

Neelanjan address the question about differences across states within India. So I'll just stop here.

Neelanjan Sircar: I think maybe I can hand that over Chris to discuss a bit more the regional variation from the data.

Christopher Clary: Yeah, we looked at several of the variables because this is actually kind of an established finding in the field. And one that comes to mind that I'm familiar with our findings is that when we tried to figure out about this question of people's dislike of Pakistan and China, we thought maybe the states that were closer to Pakistan and China might have different sentiments than those that were further away. And that's something that we see actually in survey data, we have going back to the 1960s.

But we don't see much evidence of that, I think there's been a little bit more homogenization of views on that in the last few decades, I don't want to go too far on that, but I think that's an active area of inquiry to try to figure out. And views toward Pakistan were pretty homogenous across the states. Views toward China are marginally better in the south is what we found, but it's not a night and day difference. It's notable, it's statistically significant, but I wouldn't want to lean too heavily on that.

So I think when we add our data and we go back and actually maybe try to get some respondent-level data from other polls in the past, I think that's something we can see whether there's been some move and some kind of nationalization of some of these views because that was an historic finding that we don't see so much in our data.

Neelanjan Sircar: I think I'll just quickly add that with changing media environment, I think, we wonder whether we are getting this kind of homogenization across states. People watching are pretty much watching the same kind of channels, getting access to the same sorts of social media sources and that, I think, just consists of the findings that are in the survey.

Frank O'Donnell: Okay, thank you. Sameer, do you have anything to add on that nationalism point?

Sameer Lalwani: No, nothing for me.

Frank O'Donnell: Okay. Thank you. So moving on to foreign policy, as we spoke about a little bit earlier, one of the survey's findings that struck me most is that there is this majority expectation in India that it would receive US military support in wars against both China and Pakistan. And so on China first, does this expectation of US support against China suggest that India would actually welcome a bolder US-India alignment and defense partnership than the more cautious approach which Indian government has shown to date? I'd like to hear from all of you on that, but especially we'll start off with Sameer.

Sameer Lalwani: Yeah, this is an interesting finding. I just started to think within the last couple of hours that maybe this could have been conditioned in part by the backdrop of what was going on in the war in Ukraine, where there was this tremendous amount of US and Western support flowing into Ukraine, given the timing of the

survey between mid-April to mid-May. But what's striking about is that it is really at odds with India's public line that have also heard privately about India needs to prepare for its own fight.

And this is something that I think you've seen military leaders, defense officials, analysts all repeat as one of the key lessons of the Ukraine war, is that India can't count on anyone or any state to come to its defense. So the puzzle then is like, why are there such high expectations of the US coming to India's defense without any formal architecture commitments or joint planning for it?

And as Chris alluded to, I think US officials have been trying to advance that they have encountered resistance from the Indian side. And so what we have, at least in the public attitude, is sort of an expectation of an insurance payout without a desire to pay the premium. I'm not sure if that's going to hold up or if they'll lead to changes in state attitudes. But I think when you add in the nationalism findings, it's pretty clear that it's not good politics for any political leader to try to convince the public that Indian needs help with its defenses. It's pretty inconsistent with our nationalism findings.

So I think it's possible, an alternative explanation for this is that political leaders might be trying to convince their constituents that India is such an important player, such a critical node in the global system that major powers like the United States will have no choice but to rush to their defenses in a crisis. That's sort of an alternative that I've been thinking about lately.

Christopher Clary: Yeah, I think the other thing I would just note is we have a lot of evidence from, we have literature on public opinion and the elites have a lot of ability to move this around, and the elites obviously think that as a messaging goal, that they need to talk about how India can go alone. And at a question like this, I'm not personally maybe as worried about how this constrains India's elites, but in other areas, if you think 90% of your respondent pool think that you can defeat Pakistan in the event of a fight and Indian leaders end up having to back down in the event of some sort of crisis, then you really do get an incongruity between what the public thinks and what the leaders do. And that I think puts you in some danger because the political incentives might put you in a place that are contrary to your military incentives.

Here, the public, I don't think is going to punish Indian leaders if they seek US help in the same way, it's just an expectation. But it does put the US in a little bit... It's something we flag where the US maybe has an expectations game it has to manage.

Frank O'Donnell: Thank you, Chris. I agree. Neelanjan and Niloufer is there anything you'd like to add on this China point?

Sameer Lalwani: No, I think that's fine, I agree.

Frank O'Donnell: Yeah. I especially find it fascinating on the expectations game. And then again, going back to 2020 in Ladakh, where the US did support India militarily with intelligence support, but it was done very quietly at India's request. And so I wonder if there is political room in India for a bolder, more open approach of US

assistance toward India. I'm also kind of struck by what Sameer said about, perhaps, the assumption that there could be a belief that India is such a big country and so important, and also if it is a partner of the US, it is owed certain things from the US that might lead to these kinds of expectations of natural US support in crises against China and Pakistan.

And on Pakistan, I'm interested if the same kind of thinking the same kind of answers present themselves to the findings. So on Pakistan, this expectation of US support for India does seem to run against a preexisting belief in India that we've seen for many years, that the US has always backed Pakistan. It also belies the track record of the US in playing a neutral mediatory role in previous India-Pakistan crises. Does this mark shift in public opinion on the US vis-à-vis Pakistan? And I'll ask Chris to begin with.

Christopher Clary: Part of the reason we wanted to do the survey is because one reason you do the survey is because, first off, Twitter isn't real life. So you get views on social media that are really, I think, bamboozle a lot of American experts that go into Twitter and have lots of interactions with hundreds, thousands evens of Indians. And those views are just from a weird subset of Indian populace. And I think what this survey shows, which is present in lots of surveys is most Indians have very kind of positive, effective considerations toward the United States.

And so a lot of survey takers, when they get a question about the US, "Will the US come and help you?" They'll be like, "Hey, what do I think about the US? I think pretty good things about the US. Yeah, they'll come help me. The US is a good place, they'll come do good things for me." And so that is partially what's showing up here, but it can lead to an incongruity when the behavior is distinct.

I think, like you, I suspect in the event of an India-Pakistan crisis, the US is going to try to preserve channels to the Pakistani leadership. So it's not going to take a big overt side, it might do something like it did in Kargil, and really tell the world that Pakistan's in the wrong, but it's going to try to maintain those channels, and that means it's probably not going to provide military assistance to India in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict. And that may be something that doesn't play well in the Indian public. But it is, I think, a surprise, if you were to take a survey of Twitter users, or even if you were to take a survey of the people that show up at the India International Center or that show up at ORF or any of these other places, it's going to be a very different answer.

And I think part of the reason we want to talk about the public is that's giving you something realer. And frankly, I think a lot of Americans, even a lot of American elite that work on foreign policy, never go to India. It's amazing how many conversations you can have in DC, even about Asia, where people don't have India expertise. And then if they do go to India, they sit in the same five-star hotels and think tank conference rooms all day, and maybe talk a little bit to their taxi driver or their Uber or Careem driver or whoever on the way over to the meeting.

So part of the reason we wanted this is, "What does an average Indian think about some of these issues?" And I think this is one of those incongruities that I think we're happy to highlight.

Frank O'Donnell: So looking now at military nuclear capabilities. Yeah. One of the things that struck me most was this finding that 90% of respondents believe that India would probably, or assuredly defeat Pakistan in a war, and 72% felt the same for China. And as the report, and you have observed today, these sentiments are not in line with the assessments of many Indian international experts. Could these popular assumptions generate certain domestic audience pressures on the Indian government to escalate in a crisis with India or Pakistan, including potentially taking risks beyond what their military capabilities can deliver because this is what the popular demand is? I'd like to have Niloufer respond first.

Niloufer Siddiqui: So the concern with a hawkish public is this potential fear that an escalatory preference might lead governments to act either in response to escalation from an adversary or to stoke conflict prior to some big domestic political events such as elections. And this would particularly be the case if there is a belief that the leader may benefit from, what's called a rally around the flag effect. And I think that this can be the case, even when there isn't a coherent cohesive or coercive strategy that is being pursued by political leaders and that owes to short-term political incentives caused by a hawkish public.

And so I do think that this does open up a potential area of concern because much of the literature focuses on the nature of first strike advantage and other such things. But this creates another potential mechanism whereby nuclear brinkmanship is not controllable in the same way. And in our work, and I see a few questions about the comparability of the findings in this survey to what we have found in our previous work on Pakistan, and we are interested in this question that has been raised already a few times about the link between how much voters care about foreign policy and how much escalatory preference among the public can affect political leaders.

And so in Pakistan, when we did, not identical, but a similar survey, we found that the public did have a preference for escalation over de-escalation, and this was the case even if it resulted in the death of Pakistani soldiers in the process. And so these are, I think, concerning findings, especially in this context of two nuclear-armed rivals in the region. I don't know if anybody else wants to add to that.

Neelanjan Sircar: Sort of a random thought that I had hearing the question, hearing Niloufer's response, is that one of the incentives, I think, that we're starting to see for the Indian state is to kind of scramble the information that comes from an international conflict. So for instance, if you're sitting in India when there was a standoff with China in Ladakh, it was very hard to figure out what was going on and what was not going on, there was a lot of false information.

And I wonder the extent to which that becomes a strategy for the state precisely to sort of get some of the domestic audience pressure off because if there's very, very clear information about what's happening in a conflict, then the state might become susceptible to certain kinds of political pressure that they are trying to avoid.

Sameer Lalwani: I could add to that because I think that's a really good point, Neelanjan. I think one of the things we could think about is that whether the successive optimism

about the balance of power between India and its neighbors or adversaries are combined with this tremendous leader popularity, might give the leader a lot of freedom of maneuver, might give Modi the opportunity to exercise restraints to back down or to stand up at his choice without incurring significant costs.

It's striking to me that in the span of nine months, between April 2020 and February 2021, you have Indian policy lurching in multiple directions. First, they kind of get punched in the mouth with this surprise attack by the Chinese, which in some ways could have been described as a major intelligence failure, but as Neelanjan pointed out, the scrambling of information, sort of mitigated that. Then India executes the counter offensive, which is actually quite impressive in late August. And then they negotiated a de-escalation in February 2021 with China. And all this period of time, at least in the other surveys that are being done again by CVoter, the sliver of the population that's critical of the Modi administration's policy on this is almost constant and small, around 15%.

And so there's not a lot of movements, despite a lot of changes in policy that make me think that either the public is not as attentive to this or they trust the leader, and then leaders can make choices that can lurch from one direction or the other and will remain largely satisfied if not popular.

Niloufer Siddiqui:

And just to quickly add onto that point, Sameer, your point made me think of how in the [Pakistan survey](#), when we looked at preferences for escalation versus de-escalation, we did find that there was variation according to partisan support. So the leader was supported for his policy more if the person was a partisan. And as you point out, when Modi has overwhelming support as he does in India, then we did find in our survey that support for Modi's acts was greater regardless of whether he took an escalatory or de-escalatory step. So I do think that's an important difference that you highlight, and certainly the case that Modi's support affects the way the public views foreign policy as well.

Christopher Clary:

And can I just say several of the questions sort of understandably say, "Well, why aren't you asking these questions in Pakistan?" And in a way I think as we've shared in the chat, we did. We actually asked a lot of similar questions in Pakistan that we published now in an academic article because we're interested in how these pressures differ in India as well as Pakistan. And some people always say, "Well, why don't you ask about minority sentiments in Pakistan in different sects?" Obviously, Pakistan has a much smaller non-Muslim population than India, so the minority statuses are different.

And I just want to highlight that Niloufer has done great work on attitudes toward the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan as well. So as researchers, what we're trying to do is look at some themes that we've looked at in other context, and also take them to India where it's actually quite expensive (and thanks to Stimson for their support here) to do this sort of research because India's a big diverse place. And so you need to do really big polls that are expensive for us as researchers to try to get a handle on the community. And so we take that point that we want to compare India in other contexts, and that it expressly motivates some of the research we're doing here.

Frank O'Donnell: Thanks, Chris. And yes, you can see that article in the chat. And I recommend you look at that as well, it's an excellent piece of research that in many ways is similar to what we're talking about today. I just like to briefly touch on the nuclear point before we go on to domestic pluralism as the last topic.

And this report and the survey result was the first time that I've seen such broad-based support, compared to existing Indian policy, as seemingly much more aggressive policy of nuclear superiority over India's rivals that is having a force that numerically outmatches them and which to catch up with China alone might require more than a thousand nuclear weapons by 2030.

And so the question I have is, to what extent is there a divergence between public attitudes and public opinion about what the kind of nuclear force and doctrine India should have, and the policy at least to actually decide these issues, or is this indicative of a broader shift in how India thinks about nuclear weapons? And I'll go to Sameer first.

Sameer Lalwani: So this might be a little bit of a cop-out answer, but I think the truth is that we have only scratched the surface of this and we need to do a lot more survey work to understand actual public attitudes of the Indian population on nuclear weapons. I think my first reaction to seeing this data was that this may not be pressure for nuclear superiority, but there also doesn't seem to be any pacifist resistance to a nuclear buildup. And that may not be surprising to anyone who studies South Asia, but I think for scholars who are looking at European electorates or Japanese electorates and bake in almost sort of a pacifist assumption or a belligerent cost, will be surprised that the public on average prefers more arms racing rather than less.

Now I think the other possible explanation of doing some work here is that we didn't introduce any costs into this equation. So if you ask somebody, "Do you want to have a bigger house than your neighbor?" And you're like, "Sure, yeah. Who wouldn't?" The answer is going to be generally, yes. But when you introduce costs, what the trade-offs are, what trade and development, and in conventional buildups, in inducing arms racing and security dilemmas then you can start to get the public to have to make some hard choices in trade-offs. But in our first cut at this, we weren't able to get at that.

So I think that the answer basically is stay tuned, but I think that more work for other scholars should be done in this area to understand public attitudes on nuclear weapons. But I think, for the most part, this work has been confined to the United States, Europe, Japan. It's really not explored attitudes outside of that region.

Christopher Clary: Okay. I'll just jump in with, maybe, two separate points. One is I think we have gone through a period of time in which we've had pretty relaxed arms competition since the 1998 nuclear tests. It has been clear, it's definitely occurred. But I am worried that we are in a tricky spot and I think that is both for structural reasons because of a Chinese buildup. It seems like Chinese attitudes about nuclear sufficiency have changed in a way that's starting to change force posture, at least according to the US government estimates. And there are

satellite imagery that seems pretty convincing to me. So it's not just taking the US government at its word for it.

And so if China has numbers that are much larger than India, just for structural material reasons, that's going to put some pressure on what India needs to do. And then what we're saying is, at least from our first cut, it's not like there's some big reservoir of a public hesitation about that from Indian side. There's not some big pacifist constituency that think these things are a bad idea. And this finding, again, I think Sameer's right, you don't want to put too much evidence on what we think is early work, it needs to be followed up with other work.

Both Prime Minister Vajpayee when he tested in '98, talked about how these nuclear tests gave India "Shakti," they gave India strength and this energy. And it's, I think, no surprise that in the run up to the 2019 election, when Prime Minister Modi authorized an anti-satellite weapons test, he said, this is "Operation Shakti" as well. That this is something that is emblematic of India's desire to have a newfound energy, a newfound strength that wasn't there before. And I think our findings, very modest as they are, are consistent with the fact that this is kind of popular to be stronger than your adversaries.

And Sameer's right, that when you start putting a rupee symbol in front of these things people may then have different views. But just as a first cut, I think we could be in for a tricky period in terms of the arms competition in Asia, especially once we get out of this period of austerity that we're in right now.

Frank O'Donnell: Thanks. Yeah, that's an interesting point compared to the 1998 Indian tests, there is not in this survey that kind of constituency of Gandhian pacifists that are very clearly against nuclear weapons, nuclearization. That was a very prominent voice in the debate around the 1998 nuclear tests and the lead up to that.

To move on to, I think, the last topic on pluralism. So Neelanjan's previous scholarship, in particular, has documented how Modi consolidated support among Indian Hindus in the 2019 general election, including through persistent policy efforts in BJP messaging to foreground perceived challenges to Hindu religious and cultural hegemony, as these being really the central political issues of the day.

And so this report finds that 70% of non-Muslim survey respondents believe India's Muslim population is growing too fast. And that data point will reinforce the growing perceptions of long-term trends of India here in DC about rising intolerance in Indian politics and society. And so what are the implications of these trends for India's internal cohesion, regional diplomacy, and relations with the US? And I'd like to hear from Neelanjan first.

Neelanjan Sircar: So a very good question, obviously it is one of the major social changes that is taking place within India today. Now, I finished a book on Delhi recently, and one of the major findings in that book is that first of all, there's of course, a lot of spatial segregation across the board between Hindus and Muslims. But even when Hindus and Muslims are living side by side, they're living separate lives. Very few Hindus have Muslim friends, they certainly don't have each other over, they certainly don't eat with each other.

And so as we sort see the kind of social isolation that is taking root and that is growing for the Muslim community, I think there is no doubt that we are going into a period in which ethnonationalism is not just rallying around the BJP, but increasingly even other political actors are starting to replicate some of the political strategies of the BJP.

We mentioned some of that, I think, in our report, but it's happening to a much greater extent and breadth than even mentioned in the report. So I think there is no doubt that, at least, domestically we are in for a particularly ugly period when it comes to minority relations. And when it comes to foreign policy, I think foreign relations with India are much secure. If we were to just sort of think a little bit about how India's relations have been with its partners, a very prominent politician, perhaps the second most important politician in the country, called Bangladeshi termites, but it doesn't seem to have affected India-Bangladesh relations.

And I think for people outside of the region, when they're looking and thinking about calculations within South Asia, questions of minority rights as being critical to how you judge the region are very different because it's not there that minority rights are not respected much across the region. I think the most important implication that we've seen, Chris mentioned Nupur Sharma, is that to the extent that domestic pressures bubble up in some other countries that might be allies of India, we have to very quickly come up with low cost off-ramps for the Indian state.

So Nupur Sharma is not politically relevant, it's a very easy off-brand the BJP just threw her out of the party and that's enough. And so I think the most obvious implication of growing anti-Muslim sentiment in India is that to the extent that domestic politics are frustrated by growing intolerance within India, countries have to find low cost off-ramps for India in order to maintain their relations.

Frank O'Donnell: Thank you, Neelanjan. Who else would like to jump in on this?

Neelanjan Sircar: I'll just add maybe one small thing, if the others aren't going to say anything, it's that even when we look at relations with the United States, it's not obvious that anti-Muslim sentiments have been a particularly strong factor in the US relations with India, perhaps not as strong as the way India made decisions regarding Russia and Ukraine. So it does show that we're still quite a long way from domestic intolerance vis-à-vis Muslims being a large driver of foreign policy in India.

Christopher Clary: I just would add, we have some questions about imagining a fight between Indian and Pakistan or India and China, that we are still analyzing, but we don't see a lot of... the evidence there is not as clear as you might think in terms of the attitudes about Muslims are distinct from how they think Modi should behave in this fight, etc. And then I think as, maybe, Sameer mentioned earlier, one thing that does occur that may be a benefit in terms of crisis management is people's trust in Modi means they're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt a lot on these things.

So we're kind of still exploring some of the implications for crisis diplomacy, but Modi's strong support does make him a unique leader in this case compared to prior leaders in India's recent past even. And just while we're talking about this issue of intolerance, I did go back because some people said, "How does this compare to other findings over time?" I would say it's pretty similar.

I don't want to say that these attitudes are actually dramatically different than they were in the past. We only have a snapshot in time. But we do have Pew data going back over a decade where they ask other questions about favorability, about Indians' attitudes towards Muslims, and respondents in the Pew data are very, very typically giving maybe single digit numbers of Indian respondents say they have very favorable views of Muslims, and double-digit, on the low unfavorably part of the spectrum. So we're capturing something that's been there for a long time, but I think is not discussed as much in conversations we have about Indian foreign policy, to be quite honest.

Sameer Lalwani: And maybe just to add one more thing, I think Chris is right that there hasn't been sort of maybe a huge delta in Indian attitudes on this, but I think the political-informed policy implications might start to grow over time as its more competitive landscape and countries that India is vying for influence over Bangladesh, like the Maldives, like Indonesia and Malaysia. Those are competitive landscapes where other major powers including China could exploit opportunities for influence or for relationships that are to India's detriment.

And India has sort of said as much that they're worried about China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean region. And frankly, I think the US-India relationship also depends on India's ability to play this sort of net security provider role, but if it's essentially having to fight a rear-guard action against a whole bunch of countries that are upset with it for its domestic politics, then India becomes sort of a less pivotal player in the geopolitical chess board.

Frank O'Donnell: Thank you. Yes, certainly. We have time for one quick brief last question. And this goes to a finding that there, of course, shows that Modi may be the most popular democratic leader in the world. And if he has this level of support, if he has this latitude, you can say, in the Indian political system where, as was said previously, people might give him the benefit of the doubt, how optimistic should we be with potential for him striking, for example, a long-term diplomatic settlement with Pakistan, given that he just doesn't have these astronomical levels of political support, but he's also consolidated India's foreign policymaking authority, which as Chris' new book talks about is a key precondition for any durable peace settlement? So I'll go to Chris first, and then if anybody else wants to weigh in, and then we will close.

Christopher Clary: Thanks. Well, this take is a little bit away from the survey data, but it is consistent. I think Modi is the sort of leader that I talked about in my book, *The Difficult Politics of Peace* available at Oxford University Press and at a very fine bookstore near you, that has the primacy within the system to be able to ratify cooperative actions even towards adversaries. So an argument I make in the book is that this tends be pretty unpopular to do, and so leaders are hesitant to spend that political capital.

Modi is exactly the sort of leader that has the capital to spend, but I think sadly, maybe for ideological reasons or others, or maybe because he got burned early on in 2015 and 2016, he's been very hesitant to spend that capital anymore.

I'm pretty worried about what the next year has to say for the India-Pakistan relationship for reasons that are largely beyond this survey, but Pakistan is going through an incredibly fluid period of time that I think is going to mean you have a very weak government at the top for the next several months, next six months or so. And then the new government is going to have to figure out an arrangement between the civilians and the military. And when the civilians and the military try to figure out a new arrangement, that's been a danger zone for India-Pakistan relations for the last 20 years, so I'm quite worried. And I also believe, I know a lot of people think I'm naive about this, but I actually think Bajwa is pretty pragmatic about India. And it's not at all clear to me that the next army chief will not have an ideological or other reason to be a little bit more hard line on India. So I think we're entering in a period of danger that worries me a lot personally.

Frank O'Donnell: Thanks Chris. We could discuss any of the topics we covered today for hours, and I wish we had more time, but we are at time, I have to bring things to a close. So thank you to our panelists for this groundbreaking report and the rich discussion today. And I'm grateful for you taking the time just to share your insights with us. Thanks to our audience for tuning in and the video of this event will be posted on this Stimson Center website. So thanks again and have a good morning or evening.