

# It Has Been Pax Modiana all the Way Over Past 6 months

The Needle's Eye



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To be truly remembered in history books, Narendra Modi will have to parlay his interpersonal skills to work his way through his bucket list

I don't know how many people noticed this tweet from the Prime Minister's Office on November 19: "External Affairs Minister @SushmaSwarajji is present at Delhi airport to receive PM @narendramodi" on his return from his ten-day "eastward travels". It is encouraging that India's profile has never been higher in the international community than at any time in the past two decades. When not acting as foreign minister himself, Manmohan Singh turned to a series of factotums, from the domestically-focused Pranab Mukherjee to the Karnataka pork-barrel politician SM Krishna to Salman Khurshid, the Farrukhabad Fauntleroy. Modi named Swaraj to the foreign ministry post, but it has been Pax Modiana all the way these past six months. Barely had he touched down in India, with a couple of campaign speeches in Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand, than he was off again to the SAARC summit in Nepal. In between he found time to tweet an invitation to President Barack Obama to attend next year's Republic Day parade; the White House promptly tweeted acceptance. The air was full of birdsong.

Modi and Obama are interesting studies in the use of presidential

power. Obama used his executive power to announce major changes in US immigration policy this past week. On Monday his Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel resigned in the wake of an inchoate US policy on the Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and ISIS crises. Over in India, Modi named his National Security Adviser Ajit Doval as India's chief interlocutor with the Chinese in border talks. That, and Manohar Parrikar's recent appointment as India's defence minister, drew my eye to this New York Times editorial on Hagel's exit: "Mr Hagel (substitute with Ms Swaraj or Mr Parrikar) has not been well served by the fact that national security policy is tightly controlled by the White House (substitute with PMO), with Mr Obama (substitute with Mr Modi) relying on a small group of aides, including... the national security adviser, for counsel". This column will appear just after the sixth anniversary of the Mumbai terror attacks, and it is worth noting that India's collaboration on counterterrorism with other countries is quietly on the rise. This is especially so with Israel, whose former president Shimon Peres paid a low-key visit to New Delhi in early November, just after New Delhi chose to buy the Israeli anti-tank

Spike missiles in preference to America's Javelins. Peres met Modi and hailed our 'third revolution' after Gandhi and Nehru. It remains to be seen how much common cause the hardline Israeli government will find with India.

**Hope Floats**  
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Modi has often been labelled a polarising force. It is useful to look around us and see how much of the world he woos is also polarised. Just two days past the 51st anniversary of President John F Kennedy's assassination, a grand jury ruled in favour of a white policeman who shot dead an unarmed black teenager in the small town of Ferguson in Missouri in August, triggering a night of rioting and arson—a reprise of the violence that erupted after the shooting. The use of "deadly force" in Ferguson has one more time ripped away the paper over the cracks in America's so-called racial equality a full half-century after the passage of

the Civil Rights Act. The fact that the country's first African-American president is a lame duck does not help matters any. At the same time, America's staunch ally Israel is not a haven of tolerance either. Last weekend Israeli cabinet approved a controversial amendment to the constitution that, if passed, will declare the country a nation-state for Jewish people, reserving full citizenship rights only for Jews and firmly pushing the country's 20% Arab minority into a dark corner. Israel is only a year younger than India; the Modi government should watch developments in US and Israel and learn where to draw the line in a secular India.

It is good that we are nearly done with the spate of anniversaries and remembrances over the past several weeks and it is time to get down to creating newly memorable milestones. Parliament's Winter Session has got off to a better start than the utter chaos we saw during much of UPA II. It looks as if the Insurance Bill might just make it by a whisker before this session ends, despite the Trinamool Congress's shenanigans on Tuesday. Did Mamata Banerjee really think she was starting a new Umbrella Revolution à la Hong Kong by asking her MPs to pull their brolly stunt? Economic reform has to be

gin to roll out in the statute books, not ooze out via executive fiat. Opening the insurance sector to 49 per cent foreign investment appears to have bipartisan support and will be a good test of the BJP's floor-management skills. The world is starting to get itchy about the slow pace of the BJP government's NextGen reforms. To be truly remembered in history books, Modi will have to parlay his interpersonal skills to work his way through his bucket list. More than once, the courts have come to Modi's and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's rescue. In September they cut the Gordian knot of the crooked coal licenses. Then, the judges have twice struck blows against the "tax terrorism" that the BJP had vowed to end but done naught about, by ruling in favour of Vodafone in October and Shell India a week ago. For better or for worse, we will very likely have to wait three months until Jaitley presents his 2015/16 budget to really feel the rubber hitting the road. Until then, we will be wafted along on shockingly low oil prices and the cumulative energy of our small businesses. Until then, hope floats.

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