



A woman in the queue to vote in India's recent elections. Though foreign policy figured little during the election campaign, the Congress manifesto emphasised the need to be particularly engaged and connected with Asia, beginning with the country's most immediate neighbours. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

## POST-ELECTION INDIA

# How neighbours see the elephant

By IFTKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY  
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

**T**HE Indians have spoken electorally. In what was the largest election the world has ever witnessed, they have returned to power one of the world's oldest political parties, the Indian National Congress.

They have displayed their willingness to contin-

ue to be led by a wise man, Dr Manmohan Singh, and an experienced woman, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, till such time as change and youth come - no doubt, inexorably, in the form of Mr Rahul Gandhi. In the same breath, therefore, this vast electorate has opted for continuity and change. The Indians have demonstrated that democracy is the most effective form of human organisation.

India is the sub-continent's "pre-eminent" power - politically, economically and militarily. The Indians eschew the term "pre-dominant" as it smacks of hegemonism. French philosopher Raymond Aron defined power as the capacity of a political unit to impose its will over others. More recently, Harvard University's Joseph Nye propounded the concept of "soft" or "smart" power.

It is hoped that the Indian leadership will choose the latter. The signs so far are that it will. Though foreign policy figured little during the election campaign, the Congress manifesto emphasised the need to be particularly engaged and connected with Asia, beginning with the country's most immediate neighbours.

International relations theorist Hedley Bull once wrote: "The deepest fears of smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours." So how does the rest of South Asia behave towards India, the "elephant" in the region? There are three possible ways.

The first would be to act like a "pilot-fish", an expression used by Scandinavian Erling Bjol to describe Finland's post-World War II attitude to the former Soviet Union. It implies keeping close to the shark to avoid being eaten.

Bhutan and the Maldives probably fit this bill. According to the 1949 Treaty of Friendship between Bhutan and India, the former's foreign policy would be "guided" by India. In 2007, Bhutan managed to renegotiate the treaty, particularly this requirement.

The second way would be to make it as difficult as possible to be overcome militarily by India. Pakistan has chosen to follow this route by acquiring a nuclear deterrence.

Analysts have argued that this situation creates a state of equilibrium. But for India, non-state players in Pakistan such as the Taliban and other Islamists remain a source of anxiety. Recent positive action on the part of Islamabad in this area will factor in how New Delhi approaches this relationship.

The third way is to live "in concord with but distinct from" India. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal appear to have chosen this path.

Bangladesh's new Awami League-led government of Sheikh Hasina Wajed shares some values with Congress on secularism, modernisation and market orientation. Yet there persists in Bangladesh, including among its vibrant civil society, deep-rooted suspicion of India. This arises from such issues as water-sharing, transit, non-trade barriers on the part of India and unresolved maritime boundaries. These must be addressed.

In Sri Lanka, a civil war has just ended, with the government crushing the Tamil Tigers. India had turned a blind eye to President Mahinda Rajapakse's actions, despite the sizeable pro-Tigers sentiments in its own state of Tamil Nadu.

The new Indian coalition government will be obliged to seek a role in the resolution of Sri Lanka's minority problems. If Colombo is uncooperative, New Delhi will perhaps exert some firmness but not such as to cause Colombo to veer towards Beijing.

China will also be a factor in India's relations with Nepal, which is in chaos. Maoist leader Prachanda, who has just resigned, has accused India of aiding his rivals. The Maoists will remain a force in Nepal in the foreseeable future, and they are likely to view India with suspicion.

All these challenges will test India's diplomatic and policy-making capabilities. However, if India is to play the global role it aspires to, it must carry the region with it. It must be the elder, not the big brother, with a special responsibility. It must not only be the largest country in the heart of South Asia, but also the country with the largest heart.

It is as simple - or as difficult - as that.

The writer, a former foreign minister of Bangladesh, was a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS. This is the fourth in a series ISAS will be producing for this newspaper on the Indian elections.