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[Article 1.](#)

The Boston Globe

Obama focuses updated Cold War approach on Putin

Peter Baker

April 20, 2014 -- Even as the crisis in Ukraine continues to defy easy resolution, President Obama and his national security team are looking

beyond the immediate conflict to forge a new long-term approach to Russia that applies an updated version of the Cold War strategy of containment. Just as the United States resolved in the aftermath of World War II to counter the Soviet Union and its global ambitions, Obama is focused on isolating President Vladimir Putin's Russia by cutting off its economic and political ties to the outside world, limiting its expansionist ambitions in its own neighborhood and effectively making it a pariah state.

Obama has concluded that even if there is a resolution to the current standoff over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, he will never have a constructive relationship with Putin, aides said.

As a result, Obama will spend his final 21½ years in office trying to minimize the disruption Putin can cause, preserve whatever marginal cooperation can be saved and otherwise ignore the master of the Kremlin in favor of other foreign policy areas where progress remains possible.

"That is the strategy we ought to be pursuing," said Ivo H. Daalder, formerly Obama's ambassador to NATO and now president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. "If you just stand there, be confident and raise the cost gradually and increasingly to Russia, that doesn't solve your Crimea problem and it probably doesn't solve your eastern Ukraine problem. But it may solve your Russia problem."

The manifestation of this thinking can be seen in Obama's pending choice for the next ambassador to Moscow. While not officially final, the White House is preparing to nominate John F. Tefft, a career diplomat who previously served as ambassador to Ukraine, Georgia, and Lithuania. When the search began months ago, administration officials were leery of sending Tefft because of concern that his experience in former Soviet republics that have flouted Moscow's influence would irritate Russia. Now, officials said, there is no reluctance to offend the Kremlin.

In effect, Obama is retrofitting for a new age the approach to Moscow that was first set out by the diplomat George F. Kennan in 1947 and that dominated US strategy through the fall of the Soviet Union.

The administration's priority is to hold together an international consensus against Russia, including even China, its longtime supporter on the UN Security Council.

While Obama's long-term approach takes shape, though, a quiet debate has roiled his administration over how far to go in the short term.

So far, economic advisers and White House aides urging a measured approach have won out, prevailing upon a cautious president to take one incremental step at a time out of fear of getting too far ahead of skittish Europeans and risking damage to still-fragile economies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The White House has prepared another list of Russian figures and institutions to sanction in the next few days if Moscow does not follow through on an agreement sealed in Geneva on Thursday to defuse the crisis, as Obama aides anticipate. But the president will not extend the punitive measures to whole sectors of the Russian economy, as some administration officials prefer, absent a dramatic escalation.

The more hawkish faction in the US State and Defense departments has grown increasingly frustrated, privately worrying that Obama has come across as weak and unintentionally sent the message that he has written off Crimea after Russia's annexation.

The prevailing view in the West Wing, though, is that while Putin seems for now to be enjoying the glow of success, he will eventually discover how much economic harm he has brought on his country. Obama's aides noted the fall of the Russian stock market and the ruble, capital flight from the country and increasing reluctance of foreign investors to expand dealings in Russia.

[Article 2](#)

National Post

Vladimir Putin's Middle Eastern harvest

[Conrad Black](#)

April 19, 2014 -- For those hoping to ignore the Middle East during Easter and Passover, I am the Grinch who will steal the holiday. Approximately 140,000 people have died in the three years of the horrible imbroglio in Syria. Russia, despite its weakness and the moral bankruptcy of its foreign policy, has reaped a harvest of consistency and single-mindedness. It has entirely and unwaveringly supported the Bashar Al-Assad regime, used its status as a permanent United Nations Security Council member to veto any opposing resolution, and has provided superior weaponry to the Syrian

government in its war against the atomized majority of its countrymen. Russia ignores European and American disapproval and does what's necessary to maintain its Mediterranean naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus, and pretends to continue as a rival to the power of the United States Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.

The conduct of the United States has been much harder to follow and justify. It started with Hillary Clinton infamously referring to Assad as "a reformer." It then morally supported the dissidents because they were clearly the majority, and because the overthrow of Assad would assure the end of the Iranian pipeline of assistance to Hezbollah and even, up to a point, of Hamas, curtailing the terrible mischief they have inflicted on Lebanon and Israel. But the United States declined to arm the Syrian rebels with the anti-aircraft capability they needed, though such weapons were entirely defensive, for three reasons: The U.S. government was afraid that these weapons would fall into the hands of Sunni extremists; was mesmerized by what it considered to be the more important relationship with Russia (a relationship that has proven to be entirely antagonistic and based on Russian leader Vladimir Putin's correct calculation that American appeasement could be secured at no cost); and, because the American public, after 10 years, \$2-trillion, and more than 50,000 casualties, was averse to any involvement in another Middle Eastern war.

The only provocation that could apparently motivate the United States to intervene was Assad using poison gas on his own citizens. When this was done, President Barack Obama announced that he would punish Assad, deployed American warships in a position to fire cruise missiles at the Syrians, and then abdicated the constitutionally assigned position of commander-in-chief to the Congress. And when the legislators appeared likely to deny any authority to attack Syria, despite Secretary of State John Kerry's assurance that such action would be "unbelievably small" (and therefore probably not too onerous a deterrent or punishment), Obama grasped pathetically at Putin's offered straw of supervision of Syrian surrender of the poison gas stocks to Russia.

The U.S. is checkmated — Assad continues as a Soviet and Iranian puppet and his principal opponents are jihadists and terrorist-supporting organizations, and over 2.5 million Syrians (more than 10% of the country's population), are refugees in a pitiful condition. The United States

is complicit, though only through passivity and negligence, in all that has gone wrong, but has no dog in the hunt for advantage.

Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have all sponsored rebel factions in the Syrian civil war. Saudi Arabia is in a regional struggle for influence with Iran, which is in part a Sunni-Shiite intra-Muslim conflict, and does not forget the efforts of the fundamentalist groups in the region to overthrow the Saudi royal family in the 1980s. (The Saudi government is essentially a joint venture between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi establishment, lubricated by vast amounts of Danegeld paid to the propagation of Wahhabi fundamentalist views around the Muslim world). Turkey and Qatar have been less discriminating and the Turks have supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar the local Salafist militias. Both countries are committed to Assad's downfall but have maintained their relations with Iran. The scheming and conspiring is endless and constant, in all directions and by all sides, as can only happen in the Middle East. Syria has earned Iran's loyal support because it has continued through thick and thin to be a conduit to Hezbollah. The Iranians have been steady suppliers of weapons, artificially low-price oil, and extensive military training for Assad's para-militaries and even regular forces.

With the United States having done a U-turn retreat, Russia and Iran appear strong enough to keep Assad in office and with authority over more of Syria than anyone else. In general, Assad benefits from greater assistance and a severely divided opposition. The attempts to unite the various Syrian opposition groups have failed, and it is all terribly confused because of murky or obscure differences and terminological subtleties, as in the withdrawal, three months ago, of the Syrian National Council from the Syrian National Coalition. Many of the more moderate forces (great caution should be used in applying that word anywhere in the Middle East), are now awaiting events, fatigued by ineffective internecine combat. It is hard to figure out who is in the Free Syrian Army, Supreme Military Council, and the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front and where each ends and the other begins. The Islamic Front, with around 50,000 part-time fighters, seems one of the stronger and more coherent entities and seeks an Islamic state with shariah law. Al-Qaeda's local affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, is a more disciplined but smaller organization, and has been more careful than most about collateral damage.

In regional terms, the reduction of Syria to chaos and the quick defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, where it had been the 900-pound gorilla in the room for 60 years, makes life easier for Israel, a lightening of the horizon mitigated only by the American and international feebleness in response to the Iranian nuclear program. But the takeaway message on Syria is that in all of the circumstances, awful though the Assads were and disreputable and unacceptably motivated though their Iranian and Russian sponsors are, it is not clear that an objectively preferable alternative with a practical chance of success really exists.

This seems to be the message of much of the Arab world. There has been little democratic or civic tradition, mainly only despotic regimes relying on military and police force to prevent disintegration promoted by subsets of radical Islam. While it makes a complete mockery of most of George W. Bush's crusade for democracy and of most of the joyous ululations in the early phases of the Arab Spring, the incapacitation of the Arab powers has reduced the level of exported political mischief in the world, and, one would hope that civil conflict on this scale will eventually cause more sophisticated standards of civic governance to become a widespread ambition.

Iran is obviously close to a nuclear capability and if it so arms itself, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will do the same, and it will probably then be only a matter of time before at least a small nuclear weapon gets into the hands of terrorists and is detonated, when the perpetrators have a reasonable comfort level that they can maintain anonymity. Attacks by another country on Israel are unlikely, as the retaliation would be overwhelming and Israel's anti-missile defences are so sophisticated, the extent of first-strike damage could not be assumed. What is needed is a general agreement between major countries to keep nuclear weapons out of completely irresponsible hands, as the existing Non-Proliferation Agreement is a Swiss cheese of hypocrisy; and for identification of failed states and intervention in them by international organizations to prevent them turning into breeding grounds for terrorism as Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan did.

Given Russia's domestic terror problems, amply publicized at the recent winter Olympics, it should be possible to deal with the Kremlin on this issue, but it hasn't been so far. Largely lost sight of are the facts that there

has been some progress in the Muslim world. Iraq, Tunisia, and Libya may be better off than they were before their upheavals. Morocco, Jordan, Turkey, the Emirates, and even in an odd way, Saudi Arabia, some of the other Gulf states, and the eastern Muslims, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, have shown some aptitude for self-governance and economic growth. But for better or worse, almost none of the Muslim world seems susceptible to useful outside intervention, and none of the traditional great or even regional powers seem to have any aptitude to intervene effectively. It does not come naturally to the West to put on the airs of good government given how most countries have been mismanaged recently, but waiting for the Muslim world even to achieve our unsatisfactory levels of responsible public policy could be a very protracted and frustrating process.

[Article 3.](#)

NYT

America's Last Task in Kabul

[Vali R. Nasr](#)

April 18, 2014 -- Until now, fighting the Afghan war has been an American project, and Americans have feared most that their withdrawal will be followed by chaos. That's why they have focused on handing over the fighting to Afghanistan's military.

But the first round of the presidential election on April 5 opened a new prospect. Just by turning out in large numbers in defiance of Taliban denunciations, Afghans showed that they craved a stable future — and would need friends in the neighborhood to help broker their differences. That creates an incentive for every nearby country to collaborate on holding Afghanistan together after the Americans leave.

With that in mind, it might be best for the United States to focus first on handing over the peacemaking to Afghanistan's neighbors, as the most credible strategy for ending the war quickly. Ever since 9/11, Washington demanded that the region's powers support its strategy in Afghanistan. But the region was split: India and Russia were content to see America seek outright victory over the Taliban and pursue the war to its end; Pakistan

and Iran, which share ethnic roots with groups in Afghanistan, have long wanted America to end the fighting by negotiating its way out.

Because the neighbors' interests never coincided in clear support of America's view, the region watched America experiment — with mixed results — at counterinsurgency and state-building, and later at peacemaking with the Taliban.

Now it will be up to the neighbors, who — despite all their differences — share an interest in seeing Afghanistan avoid a new bloodletting. They question the Afghan Army's ability to defeat the Taliban in battle; the force is still largely made up of ethnic Tajiks and Hazaras from Afghanistan's north and west, leaving it likely to provoke resistance among the Pashtuns of the embattled south and east, from whom the Taliban spring. The neighbors remember the collapse of an earlier Afghan army soon after the Soviets who had trained it left, as well as the decade of civil war that followed in the 1990s. No neighbor wants that experience repeated, and a regionally supported peace deal would be the surest way to dissuade outsiders from supporting any Afghans who did.

So how does the United States proceed?

It should keep reminding everyone that it is about to leave, and that it is in their own best interest to build a regional consensus for an Afghan peace. That means joining hands with the Americans to ensure that a strong president emerges from the messy election process.

On Election Day, the first reaction was relief at the turnout. But now there is concern that the final ballot count will prompt claims that the margin of fraud exceeds the margin of victory. The early first-round results point to a tight runoff race between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, and a need for America to help broker a fair outcome, since a disputed outcome could divide the country.

America should call on Afghanistan's neighbors to assist. Any political wrangling would draw in Iran as well as America, since the two nations have had the most influence on Afghan politics. They should take a page from their quiet cooperation in 2001, when they supported a conference of Afghan leaders in Bonn, Germany, that prepared Afghanistan for its transition to a constitution and elected government.

Once in office, Afghanistan's next president will face myriad problems, not least that the Afghan economy will shrink as American funding for the war

ends. Meanwhile, the most important task will remain keeping the Taliban at bay. If Afghan forces are not up to the job, Afghanistan will need a strong president with American and regional backing all the more. His job will be to negotiate a reconciliation with the Taliban. Which raises the question of how his disparate neighbors might find common ground to help. They should, because chaos in Afghanistan would threaten all of them.

Moscow still sees extremism in Afghanistan as a threat to Muslim regions of Russia like Chechnya, and to the Muslim-populated former Soviet republics of Central Asia. China similarly worries that upheaval in Afghanistan could exacerbate Islamic extremism in Xinjiang; India thinks the same could happen in Kashmir. And Shiite Iran almost went to war with the Taliban, an extremist Sunni movement, in 1997; its leaders do not want a repeat of that crisis. Iran is already home to over two million Afghan refugees, and to a huge number of addicts dependent on heroin trafficked from Afghanistan. War next door would aggravate the first problem, and lawlessness would compound the second.

Pakistan may be the most problematic — and important — neighbor. It has long looked to the Taliban to protect its interests in Afghanistan, but lately its government has been challenged by its own violent Islamist groups, including the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistanis have opposed Indian influence in Afghanistan on the ground that India might turn Pashtun nationalism against Pakistan. But that hypothetical fear has to be balanced with the tangible threat that, in the absence of American troops, Pakistan's own ascendant Taliban could feel free to join hands with Afghanistan's Taliban. In other words, these days even Islamabad is interested in putting the Taliban in a cage — or a peace agreement. In fact, Islamabad has favored a negotiated reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban all along, if Kabul would agree to include a role for Pakistan and its interests.

The United States is now talking to Iran. Its relations with Pakistan have stabilized. Its withdrawal from Afghanistan is in the works. All of this could make possible the kind of regional dialogue that could give Afghanistan a chance for a future.

Afghanistan had a good election, but the war is not over. America will not be fighting that war, but it can help bring about a peace.

Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, is the author of “The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat.”

[Article 4.](#)

Asharq Al-Awsat

Opinion: Palestinian “Pessoptimism”

Bakir Oweida

18 Apr, 2014 -- There is nothing new in saying it is the fate of those who hope for the best for all those around them to face the consequences of these dreams and the pains that accompany them. While reminding ourselves of this maxim may not bring any benefit, it does us no harm to repeat it.

Palestinian–Israeli peace is an expensive dream. If the doors of pessimism were thrown open and all windows of optimism nailed shut, I would say that realizing this dream is an impossibility. This is why I immediately turn to the great novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* by the Palestinian writer Emile Habibi to stoke the embers of hope, particularly as without hope impatience takes over and restlessness prevails.

In less than one month’s time, on May 6, the State of Israel will celebrate its 66th anniversary. In terms of the age of a state, that is not a long time, but the reality is that what Israel has achieved in the fields of agriculture, industry and technology places it alongside countries that are hundreds of years older. Israel has also moved beyond states that historically possess vast empires, such as Turkey and Iran. As for Israel’s military superiority—which is the most important thing in terms of its relations with neighboring Arab states—there is no debate. Is it possible then for a country with so much power to fear peace?

The logical answer would be no. However, since the start of the Palestinian–Israeli peace efforts, successive Israeli governments have given the impression that they really do fear taking the final step towards peace with the Palestinians, along with all the consequences of this.

There is a question that may at first glance appear naïve, but it is one that I will chance asking: Do Israel's politicians even know who the Palestinians they are trying to make peace with are? Is it the negotiating delegation of the Palestinian Authority? Or do the Israelis look beyond the negotiation room? I do not doubt for a moment that Israeli politicians and their advisers and analysts know very well that it is the millions of Palestinians in refugee camps inside Palestine and neighboring countries that they should be making peace with.

The issue is clear. The Palestinians who stayed in their homes in 1948 have become Israeli citizens. Israel has already achieved peace with them, even if there are grievances and demands; these can be resolved through the law. The real problem for Israel is achieving peace with the more than 5 million Palestinian refugees spread across refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank. Israeli politicians are well aware that any concessions granted to the Palestinian negotiating delegation will not necessarily persuade the Palestinian refugees of the merits of peace, particularly if this is a peace that does not guarantee them the right of return. This is a right the Palestinian delegation does not have the power to concede. As long as the situation remains as is, what's the rush? It is as if the Israeli politicians are saying, "Let's drag out the negotiations as long as we can."

So, what is the solution?

There can be no solution if there is no will. What we mean here is will on the part of the stronger side, namely Israel. As the saying goes: Where there's a will, there's a way.

Only when Israeli politicians overcome the fear of peace with the 5 million Palestinian refugees will they be able to find more than one way to deal with the issue of the right of return in a humanitarian and civilized way that is acceptable in this era of globalization and the global village.

In politics, nothing is impossible unless there is an absence of political will. Would it not be possible, for example, to hold a referendum asking Israeli citizens about their vision for peace with the Palestinian people, including how to deal with the right of return? The Palestinians, for their part, could and should contribute to the debate by putting forward practical visions for dealing with this contentious issue. Here again, a referendum in the Palestinian camps could be considered an initial practical step.

Earlier this year I wrote about the Jewish identity of Israel, in which I called on Palestinians to meet Israel's call to recognize the state's Jewish identity. I was talking from a personal belief that such recognition would ultimately have no effect; it would not offer the state of Israel anything that it did not already possess on the ground and it would not take anything away from the Palestinian identity. This is a historic identity that goes back to Palestine as a land where the followers of the three Abrahamic faiths can live in peace. However, the Palestinian Authority refused to proffer this recognition, and the Arab summit in Kuwait supported the Palestinian rejection. What surprised me about the entire episode were the attempts made by some websites to portray what I had written as one side delivering a message to the other. This interpretation is so wild it is beyond belief. Despite all this, I do not find anything in my original call embarrassing, and so let me say against that Palestinian recognition of the Jewish identity of the Israeli state will not cause the sky to fall or the earth to shake. Instead, it will show that the Palestinians do not fear taking whatever steps are necessary to achieve peace, as long as they are taken in response to the rights of everybody without discrimination.

So we remain hopeful in the spirit of the “pessoptimism” of Habibi, the anniversary of whose death, on May 2, is fast approaching. I recall meeting the writer, who was a member of the Knesset for several years, struggling for peace—even calling his son “Salam,” or peace. He was waiting for me at the airport just five days after the signing of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993. An Israeli security officer asked me if it was my first visit to Israel. I answered in the affirmative. She went away and returned with a colleague and asked the same question; I gave her the same answer. They both went away only to return with a third colleague and ask the same question. I smiled, having realized that they were bringing witnesses, and answered explicitly: “Yes, this is my first visit to the State of Israel.” As I expected, the security officer objected, saying: “Your papers say you were born in Beersheba.” I responded, “Yes, but I left with my parents as a child of six months and never returned, and this is my first visit back. So what's the problem?” The fact is, the problem started then, but that is a long story. As for Habibi, his tombstone is famously inscribed with the words: “Emile Habibi—Remaining in Haifa.”

Bakir Oweida is a journalist who has worked as Managing Editor, and written for several Arab publications based in London.

[Article 5](#)

The Washington Post

How to navigate the East China Sea dispute between Japan and China

Joseph Nye and Kevin Rudd

April 19 -- While the world focuses on [Ukraine](#), ships and planes from Japan and China [challenge each other](#) almost every day near a few square miles of barren islets in the East China Sea that Japan calls the Senkaku and China calls the Diaoyu islands. This [dangerous rivalry](#) dates to the late 19th century, but the flare-up that led to widespread [anti-Japan demonstrations in China in September 2012](#) began when the Japanese government purchased three of the tiny islets from their private Japanese owner. The issue is bound to arise during [President Obama's upcoming visit to Japan](#).

When the [United States returned Okinawa to Japan in May 1972](#), the transfer included the disputed islets that the United States had administered after 1945. A few months later, when [China and Japan normalized their relations](#) in the aftermath of World War II, Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka asked Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai about the islands. Zhou replied that rather than let the dispute delay normalization, the issue should be left for later generations. Both countries maintained their claims to sovereignty over the islands.

For decades, this formula worked. Although Japan had administrative control, Chinese ships would occasionally enter Japanese waters to assert their legal position. When incidents occurred, Japan sometimes would detain the Chinese crew members but would soon release them.

Exaggerated reports of undersea oil and gas reserves sometimes raised concerns, but as recently as 2008, the two countries agreed on a framework for joint development of [disputed gas fields in the East China Sea](#).

In 2009, relations between China and Japan were improving, and a large delegation of Diet members from the Democratic Party of Japan visited

Beijing. Then on Sept. 7, 2010, a [Chinese trawler near the islands twice bashed](#) Japanese patrol boats, and Japanese authorities took the trawler to Japan. After several days of Chinese protests, [Japan released the crew](#) but brought charges against the captain. China abruptly halted its exports of rare earths to Japan; Japan soon [released the captain](#), but [China did not restore these exports for almost two months](#). When asked why China had reacted that way, Chinese officials said that they had no choice because once Japan brought charges against the captain, it implied acceptance of Japanese law and sovereignty.

To Chinese eyes, Japan destroyed the Zhou-Tanaka status quo with the 2010 arrest and then the 2012 purchase. China also believes that Japan is entering a period of right-wing militarist nationalism and that the purchase of the islands was a deliberate effort by Japan to begin a process of eroding the settlement of World War II. Since 2012, Chinese ships have continued to operate regularly in what Japan claims as its territorial waters. Ironically, these Chinese operations are inflaming Japanese nationalism. And so the spiral of action and reaction continues, with no opportunity in sight for both sides to hit the reset button.

Fast-forward to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's December [visit to the Yasukuni Shrine](#), which in part honors Class A Japanese war criminals. Fresh fuel was thrown onto a fire that needed little encouragement. Having watched Sino-Japanese relations closely over many decades, we think it is fair to say things have not been this bad for nearly half a century. Japanese and Chinese leaders have said repeatedly that they do not want war. And there is no reason not to believe them. They recognize that disruption of the economic interdependence between [the world's second- and third-largest economies](#) would radically disrupt their development plans and internal stability. The real dangers are not in the intentions of the countries' leaders but in the potential for miscalculation at lower levels, limited experience in "incident management" and escalation in a climate of competitive nationalism.

In this situation, the best we can aim for is to revive the wisdom of the original Zhou-Tanaka formula. One way of doing this, as some have suggested, might be to declare the islands a maritime ecological preserve dedicated to the larger good of the region. There would be no habitation and no military use of the islands or the surrounding seas. Ideally, China

and Japan would agree, but that may be unlikely in the current climate. Other mechanisms could be explored to produce the same end. Both sides might commit to revisit their 2008 agreement on joint gas exploitation. This proposal would not resolve the issue, but it could move it from the front of the stove, where it threatens to boil over, to a back burner, where it can quietly simmer for another half-century.

Joseph Nye is a professor at Harvard and former dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Kevin Rudd was prime minister of Australia from 2007 to 2010 and again in 2013.

[Article 6.](#)

East Asia Forum

Modi in pole position: but what would his government look like?

Arun R. Swamy

20 April 2014 -- As India goes to the ballot boxes, it seems clear that the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition will be decimated by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The suspense centres entirely on how close the NDA will get to the 272 seats required for a parliamentary majority. The answer will determine whether the NDA will form the government and how dependent it will be on regional parties not affiliated with either alliance.

Two major opinion polls released in March suggest that the BJP will win between 220 and 240 seats and the NDA between [240](#) and [260](#) seats. By contrast, the INC and UPA are predicted to fall to around 100 and 120 seats respectively. Moreover, polls indicate that the trend is in the NDA's favour. By contrast, in 2004, when polls wrongly predicted a BJP victory, the trends had been moving in the direction of the INC.

The BJP's apparent gains in the last month reflect both a robust campaign by its controversial leader, Narendra Modi, and its success in forging alliances with regional parties compared to the INC, a situation that is the reverse of 2004, when the BJP was last in power. If these numbers hold up,

Modi will almost certainly become prime minister, but may be dependent on one or two of the larger unaffiliated regional parties.

A swing of 20 seats in either direction, however, could make a significant difference in how dependent he is, while a BJP plurality of less than 200 seats could prevent Modi from winning support from enough parties to become prime minister at all. In this unlikely event the BJP may well choose to forego forming the government and hope for early elections. The breakdown of voting preferences by states and different demographic groups as published by the major polls suggest two sources of uncertainty in projecting the seat count.

First, slight shifts in voting patterns could play havoc with seat projections, especially in two large northern states — Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar — which account for 120 seats. In these states most seats will see a three- or four-way contest between the NDA, UPA and important regional parties. Much of the BJP's expected gains come from these states. Conversely, the INC could be vulnerable to slight shifts toward the BJP in other states, notably Karnataka in the south, where the two are in a close battle.

Second, polls may be underestimating how persistent the BJP's historic difficulties with poor and minority voters are. While polls show the BJP winning support across all classes, even rivalling the INC's support among the poor, attempts to capture the voting intentions of the poor are more subject to error than for other groups and the polls may, therefore, overestimate BJP strength. Conversely, while polls continue to show BJP weakness among minority voters, polling organisations themselves note the under-representation of minority voters in their samples, especially in UP and Bihar, where Muslim voters may vote tactically for the strongest non-BJP candidate in their district. With early voting rounds suggesting high turnout, these factors could reduce the NDA's seat total in ways that may affect post-election government formation.

Nonetheless, it is still likely that the NDA will be so far ahead that Modi will be asked to form a government. If he succeeds, what can we expect? Several observers have noted that the BJP campaign has downplayed the party's traditional cultural nationalist agenda in favour of a technocratic emphasis on efficiency and implementation. The principal charge levied against the UPA by the [BJP manifesto](#) concerns weak leadership and slow

implementation — not, as in the past, ‘appeasement’ of minorities or playing caste politics.

The technocratic emphasis reflects both a genuine area of advantage for the BJP and a pragmatic concern not to alienate moderate voters. Modi — in contrast to the UPA, whose major legislative accomplishments have yet to be fully implemented — is perceived as a decisive leader who, as chief minister of Gujarat, attracted investment and promoted growth by rapidly implementing infrastructure projects and pro-business regulations. A Modi government would be the most business-friendly in Indian history, although it is unlikely to undertake measures that threaten its base among small business, such as opening the retail sector to foreign investment. It is too soon to suggest, [as Ashustosh Varshney does](#), that Modi has become ‘moderate’ or non-ideological. The BJP manifesto was released surprisingly late — on the first day of voting. Most likely this tardiness was an attempt to downplay the references to the traditional Hindu nationalist agenda which, although less prominent, remain in the manifesto. More generally, there is no contradiction between a technocratic vision of development and militant right-wing nationalism. Indeed, they go together frequently.

Modi’s own record illustrates this: during a sectarian pogrom in [Gujarat in 2002](#) Hindu activists killed hundreds, and perhaps thousands of Muslims in retaliation for the burning to death of a train compartment filled with Hindu nationalist activists returning from attempts to build a temple at a disputed site in UP. While he has denied complicity in the events and none has ever been proven, it is widely believed that the riots were part of a strategy to polarise the electorate along religious lines ahead of an election, and that the state government was consequently slow to respond. The killings lasted three days and left a permanent stain on his technocratic reputation.

The major threat in this regard, therefore, is not what Modi will do in government, but provocative actions that might be taken by activists associated with the BJP or other organisations in the larger Hindu Nationalist movement. These actions could occur as part of an independent effort to further some aspect of the Hindu Nationalist agenda, then presenting Modi with a difficult choice as to how to respond, or as a conscious tactic to mobilise votes in the event of another election. Even in

the current campaign, BJP leaders campaigning in western UP, a state that is crucial to Modi's hopes, have been [accused of playing on tensions](#) arising from a series of [communal clashes](#) in 2013 to appeal to local Hindus.

There can be little doubt that the BJP will end up with the largest share of seats in the Lok Sabha. It is also likely, though not certain that Narendra Modi will become Prime Minister. But the longevity of his government and its record will depend on how much he is forced to rely on outside parties, and how much control he has over party activists. If the government is short-lived, then the INC — whose vote share remains largely intact — will have a stronger hand in forming alliances with many regional parties at whose expense the BJP is growing.

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