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President Obama's India Visit: Substance in Symbolism

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Abstract

President Obama's visit to India will go down in the history of the India-United States relations as a major step towards consolidating the strategic partnership between the two countries. The outcome of this visit, while helping the US economically, has enhanced India's power profile in Asia and encouraged it to play a greater role in world affairs.

Strong on symbolism, the United States (US) President Obama's visit to India from 6-8 November 2010 was not without substance. While the visuals of Obama and the first lady Michelle dancing on Bollywood and folk tunes thrilled Indian hearts, the scenes of the members of Indian Parliament thunderously applauding President Obama's address and falling over one another to shake hands with him convinced the American guests that the right chord had been struck. There was considerable give and take between the two sides during the visit to provide a much-needed momentum to the strategic partnership between India and the US.

This visit being the first leg of the US President's visit to other Asian countries reflected the new policy thrust in Washington that US would remain actively engaged in Asia. It is a part of evolving US responses to China's growing assertiveness in Asia to indicate that notwithstanding its economic slide, the US will not compromise on its leadership in the world. The visit also

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took place in the context of President Obama's declining popularity at home, exposed by the poor showing of the Democrats in the US House and Senate elections, just days before the visit was undertaken. Having slipped on domestic political and economic fronts, President Obama had a compulsion to succeed on the foreign policy front. Specifically with regard to India, he had to match his predecessor, George W. Bush, who had gained immense popularity for initiating and completing the process of 'civil nuclear cooperation' between the two countries. He also had to undo the burden of his earlier perceptions and preferences. President Obama's preoccupation with 'outsourcing' and American job losses, as well as non-proliferation, was anathema to Indians. His early policy announcements on Kashmir as a component in the US Af-Pak policy, invitation to China (during his visit to China a year back) to join the US for 'bringing about more stable, peaceful relations in all of South Asia' stirred strong concerns and anxieties in India. On all these issues the US President's position was significantly redefined during the visit.

If one were to look at the substantive aspects of the visit, there was give and take on both sides. While the US 'takes' were concrete, those for India were important but intangible. President Obama made no secret of his principal commercial objective of expanding the market for US goods in India. He came in search of jobs, to placate his disturbed home constituencies and wrapped up deals worth more than US\$10 billion that would create more than 50,000 jobs in the US. There was also 'preliminary agreement' on India buying ten C-17 military transport aircrafts from the US worth another US\$10 billion, which would yield an additional 22,000 jobs for the US. Then there was also the Indian promise of 'early commencement of commercial cooperation in the civil nuclear energy sector in India which will stimulate economic growth and sustainable development and generate employment in both countries'.² President Obama acknowledged in his press conference on 8 November 2010 that he will advertise the securing of these jobs to the American people for justifying the longest presidential stay in India. The Indo-US Joint Statement issued at the end of the visit also underlined the link between India's defence modernisation and US job creation. It said, 'President Obama welcomed India's decision to purchase US high-technology defense items, which reflect our strengthening bilateral defence relations and would contribute to creating jobs in the United States.'³

India's 'takes' were more in the area of intangibles, though expansion of bilateral trade and relaxation of US technology controls will energise the Indian economy. Three of India's public sector establishments namely Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Bharat Dynamics Limited were taken off the restricted 'entities-list'. Among the intangibles, President Obama elevated India's global status

² Text of the Indo-US Joint Statement, <http://news.rediff.com/report/2010/nov/08/obama-visit-joint-indo-us-statement-full-text.htm>. Accessed on 13 November 2010.

³ Ibid.

from an 'emergent' to an 'arrived' 'great power' and in doing so he went beyond rhetoric to commit US support for India at the high table(s) of critical global decision making. He promised US support for India's permanent membership of a 'reformed' United Nations (UN) Security Council. By doing so he not only reflected the bipartisan consensus within the US but also acknowledged the ground reality in the UN where only a month back, India had received support of 187 of 192 members to win its Security Council membership. He also assured support for India's membership of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangements that play critical roles in transfers of nuclear and conventional defence technologies in the world.

The US push for India towards the global high table was no doubt in recognition of India's impressive economic growth and strategic potential. It was also in search of a greater global balance in view of a 'rising' China. This came out indirectly in President Obama's repeated praise for the Indian democracy and emphasis on 'human rights', in contrast to those countries that were 'lured by the false notion that progress must come at the expense of freedom'.⁴ It also came out sufficiently clearly when he called upon India to 'partner' with the US in Asia by doing more than 'looking east' to 'engage east'. Neither India, nor the US was interested in focusing much attention on China directly during the visit as there were a lot many bilateral and regional issues on the table.

India's positive role in Afghanistan was acknowledged and encouraged by the US President and he assured Indian Parliamentarians that – 'The United States will not abandon the people of Afghanistan or the region to violent extremists who threaten us all'.⁵ India and the US not only 'committed to intensify consultation, cooperation and coordination to promote a stable, democratic, prosperous and independent Afghanistan' but also 'resolved to pursue joint development projects with the Afghan government in capacity building, agriculture and women's empowerment'.⁶ This would open greater prospects for joint Indo-US action in Afghanistan, though India is surely not on board with the US military and political strategy, including that of co-opting the so-called 'moderate Taliban'.

On the most critical question of Pakistan, there obviously was no clarity in the US position. President Obama, despite provocative questions, refused to endorse the Indian view that the Pakistani state, or at least sections of it, including the army and the intelligence (ISI), was conniving with extremists and terrorists operating across the Pakistani borders. But he strongly called for greater Indo-US cooperation in counter-terrorism. The Joint Statement endorsed the

⁴ President Obama's address to the Indian parliament on 8 November 2010.
<http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530116636>. Accessed on 13 November 2010.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ As in 2 earlier.

Indian position that ‘success in Afghanistan and regional and global security require elimination of safe heavens and infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan...that all networks, including Lashkar-e-Taiba must be defeated and called for Pakistan to bring to justice the perpetrators of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks’. President Obama’s decision to stay at the Taj Hotel in Mumbai, which was the principal target of terrorists on 26 November 2008, and his Memorial service for the victims of those attacks was a loud and clear message to Pakistan in this respect. To sooth Pakistani sensitivities, he also called upon India to start dialogue and confidence building process with Pakistan, including on the Kashmir question. A ‘stable and secure Pakistan was in India’s own interest’, he urged. He however could not succeed in changing the Indian position that Pakistan must first stop its ‘terror-machine’ for any meaningful dialogue to start, as mentioned by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the press conference. Obama also voiced his differences with India on the issues of Iran and Myanmar. In a rather sharp attack on the military regime in Myanmar, Obama poked the Indian leaders for shying away from facing the issues like ‘violation of human rights’ by the ‘regime in Burma’.⁷

Notwithstanding these differences, President Obama’s India visit is a major step towards consolidating the Indo-US strategic partnership. The Obama administration seems to have rediscovered the strategic value of India in Asia and the world and India has welcomed the US support for its aspirations. The event has been carefully watched in Islamabad and Beijing with degrees of unease. It is hoped that its policy implications will be welcomed by all those who are looking forward to a stable, secure and prosperous Asia.

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⁷ As in 4 earlier.