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Rebalancing-Obama 2.0: India's Democratic Differential

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US President Barack Obama renewed his dedication to the 'Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy' during his successful re-election campaign. The contours of this strategy have started getting into shape with his first post-election foreign visit to the East Asia Summit in Cambodia on 19 November 2012 and his visits to Myanmar and Thailand days earlier. An emerging aspect of this strategy is the deference for democratic partnerships. This deference was visibly and loudly projected during the first-ever US presidential visit to Myanmar where President Obama acknowledged the ongoing democratic reforms there and added that "this remarkable journey has just begun and has much further to go". This deference for democracy has also been significantly underlined on a relatively quieter but confident note in the declared US "full embrace of the rise of India". At the Cambodian summit, President Obama, responding to 'congratulations in person' from India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, said: "India is a big part of my plans".²

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² The Times of India (New Delhi) 21 November 2012.

India Focus

Addressing a Washington-based US think-tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, on the US “rebalancing strategy” during Obama’s second term and his post-election first foreign visit to the Asia-Pacific region, National Security Adviser Thomas E Donilon identified India as an important emerging nation with which the US was committed to deepen its partnership. He was asked a pointed question, by the US-based Indonesian Ambassador Dino Patti Djalal on the ‘qualitative difference’ between India and China “so that you describe India as a strategic partnership, but China as something else”. In his response, Donilon said: “The relationship with India is obviously rooted in history and...in a shared system of democracy. And it’s a unique relationship that we are building out...it has different aspects to it...With respect to India, we have given a full embrace of India’s rise. The President went to India on a three-day trip...and called for India’s membership in a reformed Security Council. It’s a full embrace of India’s rise as a partner. And again, as two of the most important democracies in the world, it’s an important strategic thrust for us as well”.³

As for China, he said “we’re trying to build a relationship -- and a complicated relationship, multidimensional relationship that is profoundly important to both nations and to the world, between two systems that are very different”. He further added: “We’re trying to build a relationship between China and the United States against a backdrop of theoreticians who say that this is not possible to do; that history would point you to the inevitability of conflict between a rising power and a status-quo power. We don’t believe that...But there are challenges, obviously. And one of the key things is to be very direct about confronting those conceptual and practical challenges”.⁴

This was not an isolated or a lonely observation from one of the highest US policy makers. Only a couple of days before this observation, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during her visit to Australia, highlighted India “as an important player in the Indo-Pacific region”. She said: “We’ve made it a strategic priority to support India’s Look East policy and encourage Delhi to play a larger role in Asian institutions and affairs. It’s exciting to see the developments as the world’s largest democracy and a dynamic emerging economy begins to contribute more broadly to the region”. As for China, her comments were: “We look for ways to support the peaceful rise of China, to support China becoming a responsible stakeholder in the international community and hope to see a gradual but consistent opening up of a Chinese society and political system that

³ The quotations are based on the transcript of Honourable Thomas E. Donilon’s address on 15 November 2012, at the CSIS Statesmen’s Forum. http://csis.org/files/attachments/121511_Donilon_Statesmens_Forum_TS_pdf. (Accessed on 18 November 2012).

⁴ Ibid.

will more closely give the Chinese people the opportunities that we in the United States and Australia are lucky to take for granted”.⁵

The ground for greater strategic proximity with India in the face of complex and challenging engagement with a rising China has been in preparation since President Obama’s landmark visit to India in 2010. At that time, perhaps the work in the Obama administration had just begun on conceptualising the “rebalancing strategy”. But it was significant that President Obama, during his visit, described relations with India as the “defining partnership of the 21st century and urged India not only to “Look East” but also to act and engage “East”.⁶ As the “rebalancing strategy” started unfolding a year back, India was portrayed as a “linchpin” in this strategy by the Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta during his visit to India in June 2012.⁷ In the evolving strategic vision of the US for the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific (the latter term is being increasingly used by the top US policy makers) region, a democratic India fits in not only because of its political system but also because of its anchoring location in the Indian Ocean and its “most capable military”.⁸ The US had a firsthand experience of India’s naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean when its ships were escorted by the Indian Navy through the Malacca Strait to ward off piracy threats in 2002. This was followed by the US and India joining hands with Japan and Australia in responding to the Asian tsunami in December 2004.

Democratic Differential

The initiatives to cultivate the democratic differential of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region like India and Myanmar are immensely compatible with the overall objectives of the “rebalancing strategy”. There is a strong and asserted ideological component in the “rebalancing strategy” relating to democracy and human rights. This component is hopefully aimed, besides strategic mobilisation of the like-minded regional countries, to generate internal pressures within China in favour of opening the society, polity and economy. The values of democracy, freedom and human rights are underlined by US diplomats in almost every interaction they have with China. No wonder China is so uneasy and opposed to the “rebalancing strategy”. In the US approach towards a democratic strategic partner like India, two important aspects may be taken note of. One is to reinforce US’ strategic partnership with India bilaterally, including in the field of defence and security. The steps taken in this respect by the Obama administration include

⁵ Text of the remarks of Hillary Clinton at the launch of the Perth USAsia Centre at the University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, on 13 November 2012. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/11/200455.htm>. (Accessed on 19 November 2012).

⁶ Details of this visit may be found in “President Obama’s India visit: Substance in Symbolism”, ISAS Brief No. 176. 16 November 2010.

⁷ Panetta’s address at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi on 6 June 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

upgrading defence relationship with India from the pattern of a buyer-seller to that of a close partnership that includes transfer of technologies and joint-production of equipment. There has also been a qualitative upgrading in the military exercises undertaken by India and the US bilaterally as also in association with other regional countries. A study report authored by Ambassador Karl F Inderfurth and S Amer Latif on “US-India Military Engagement: Steady as They Go” clearly brings out the fact that this partnership is being shaped by the US “rebalancing strategy”. The range of bilateral strategic partnership between India and the US goes far beyond defence cooperation to cover close consultations and possible co-ordination on the questions of Iran’s nuclear proliferation, post-2014 stability and peace in Afghanistan and South Asia, stability and security in the Indian Ocean region and the emerging hot-spots in East and South China Sea.

The second dimension of the US strategic initiatives towards India relates to encouraging US in forging closer strategic cooperation with India. Their response to the Asian tsunami was mentioned earlier in this respect. Now a trilateral consultation between the US, Japan and India has been institutionalised. The third round of this trilateral discussion took place in New Delhi in the last week of October 2012 where issues related to maritime security in the Indian Ocean and territorial disputes in South China Sea figured prominently.⁹ India is also keen to institutionalise another trilateral dialogue with Japan and the Republic of Korea. There was earlier a proposal to have dialogue among the four tsunami-response partners i.e. US, Japan, India and Australia, but the Australian reluctance did not let it materialise. The US is again trying to persuade Australia to have closer strategic partnership with India. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s visit to India for three days starting 15 October 2012 identified vast areas of strategic and economic cooperation between the two countries that included the sale of Australian uranium to India. During her recent visit to Australia in November 2012, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly urged Australia to have closer strategic cooperation with India including naval exercises.¹⁰

Obama 2.0 and India

Are there signs of greater warmth in Obama 2.0 period towards India? There obviously are. Obama administration has travelled a long distance in its strategic approach towards the two Asian giants: China and India. Soon after assuming office in 2008 President Obama urged China to join the US in fixing security issues in South Asia. His administration also called upon India to engage with Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir question so as to facilitate the non-NATO ally’s

⁹ See report on the subject by Sandeep Dixit in The Hindu (New Delhi) 1 November 2012.

¹⁰ Sydney Morning Herald 13 November 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/action/printArticle?id=3793257>. (Accessed on 20 November 2012).

contribution in the “global war on terror”. Both these propositions highly offended New Delhi’s sense of regional security in South Asia. From this initial position, the US policy has come to giving “a full embrace of India’s rise” as a global power and looking upon India as a “linchpin” of its “rebalancing strategy”. In contrast, the US alliance relationship with Pakistan stands completely vitiated by a huge trust deficit, and the US is finding it increasingly challenging to navigate its “complex” and “complicated” economic and strategic engagement with China.

The shift in the US “rebalancing strategy” in favour of India is likely to gather momentum in Obama 2.0 period, and reasons are not far to seek. Gradually sharpening ideological, economic and strategic divide between the US and an assertively rising China will drive the Obama administration towards firm and dependable support from allies and strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific region. Particularly so as the Chinese challenge to the US leadership and dominance in the region becomes stronger. The main driving force of the “rebalancing strategy” in the Asia-Pacific region is to sustain America’s global and regional leadership in times of internal economic drift and external strategic challenges. India’s appeal as a partner for the US will rise due to the former’s ideological synergy with and strategic value for the latter. Even apart from ideological and strategic considerations, a sluggish US economy and its uneasy job market will also continue to nudge Obama 2.0 administration towards India which hopefully will remain attractive for its openness and growth potential as against China’s highly regulated currency and market mechanisms. In India, the Manmohan Singh government’s recently taken bold decisions to go ahead with Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the retail and aviation sectors, even in the face of stiff political resistance from the aggregated opposition parties, have not gone without appreciation in Washington’s highest political circles.

A note may also be taken of the fact that the small but well-placed Indo-American community has emerged as a strong Obama supporter. A substantial majority of Indo-Americans voted for Obama in the recently held presidential elections in the US particularly in the swing states, enabling him to have a decisive victory. This was despite Obama’s campaign strategy that emphasised against BPO and a stricter immigration regime (raising visa fee for Indian immigrants). The members of Indo-American community also contributed much more to the electoral fund-raising campaigns of Obama than those of his Republican rival.¹¹ There are reports that a large number of Indo-Americans are expected to join the Obama 2.0 team in key positions in White House, State, Treasury, Defence, and Commerce departments.¹²

India will continue to be more cautious and less effusive in identifying itself with the “rebalancing strategy” while continuing to put value on its strategic partnership with the US.

¹¹ “Indian-Americans open up wallets for Obama; little for Romney”, Business Line, 3 September 2012.

¹² “Obama Inducts record Number of India-Americans into his Administration”, Indolink, 19 November 2012, <http://www.indolink.com/printArticle.php?scid=147id=111912084143>. (Accessed on 20 November 2012).

However, India has been and will continue to be cooperative on substantial aspects of the “rebalancing strategy” where its perceived interests converge with those of the US. After all, a US estranged from its former ally Pakistan and distanced from a rising global power China provides India with a huge strategic space to play upon in the Asia-Pacific region; more so as an increasing number of regional countries look forward to India’s enhanced role. Growing strategic proximity with the US without any alliance commitments does not also come in the way of India’s refurbished non-alignment and penchant for retaining its ‘strategic autonomy’. If seen through a realist power perspective, India’s non-alignment has always been a nuanced and sophisticated balance of power strategy. During the Cold War years, it mobilised the power of the numbers by enlisting newly independent Afro-Asian countries. It then made an immense pragmatic sense in leaning towards a comparatively (with regard to US and Europe) weaker and strategically supportive superpower, the Soviet Union. Now in the post-Cold War world, it makes an equally pragmatic sense to calculatedly side with the supportive, though weakening, US hegemony which is confronting a fast-rising and assertive China.

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