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Challenging Times in Indo-US Ties

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By affirming “the indispensable U.S.-India partnership”, US Secretary of State John Kerry is signalling that the recent turbulence in the atmospherics of this equation has quietened now. Such a signal of return to normality was the hallmark of the top American diplomat’s message² to mark the 64th anniversary of India’s Republic Day on 26 January 2014. India’s External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, too, has, on 23 January, risen above the recently vitiated bilateral atmosphere. These positive signals followed a meeting between Mr Kerry and Mr Khurshid on the sidelines of the Geneva-2 Conference on Syria at Montreux on 22 January.

The US-India ties, which entered a mutually acceptable phase of re-balancing by mid-2012, are now in a phase of atmospherics-tune-up, with the two sides not wanting a collapse. In June 2012, the then US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta emphasised that “the United States is firmly committed to providing the best defense technology possible to India”.³ Mr Panetta

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² U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State John Kerry’s Press Statement titled ‘India Republic Day’ and dated January 25, 2014; www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220624.htm; accessed on 30 January 2014

³ Mr Leon Panetta’s address to the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi on 6 June 2012, www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/...; accessed on 9 June 2012

was simply widening America's India-vision which US President Barack Obama had first projected in 2010. Unsurprisingly in early-2014, Mr Kerry's message has camouflaged the latest crisis in the atmospherics of bilateral relations over US violation of human rights of an Indian diplomat.

The lady-diplomat, Devyani Khobragade, returned to India in early-January 2014, courtesy United Nations, after she was arrested in New York on 12 December 2013. On being arrested on the basis of a private complaint, she was strip-searched, and humiliated, regardless of her "diplomatic immunity", it was reported. And, New Delhi withdrew some "diplomatic privileges" which the US was enjoying in India without extending similar privileges to Indian diplomats in America, it was further reported. No less important was the onset of a pervasive anti-US mood in India that forced Washington to postpone the planned visit of some high-level American officials to New Delhi.

New Shadow over Atmospherics

Outwardly unrelated to these chain-reactions, the US State Department announced, on 31 January 2014, that America had now downgraded India's civil aviation sector. A US spokesperson asserted that "this absolutely had nothing to do with the ongoing case of Dr. [Devyani] Khobragade".⁴ The "regulatory" down-rating from Category 1 to Category 2 was said to be the result of India's non-compliance with international safety standards. The veracity, tenability, and the timeline of this US claim fall outside the scope of this paper. But the timing of this measure did cast another shadow over the atmospherics of Indo-US ties when the turbulence over the Devyani episode and India's reaction had not blown over. Instructive, in this evolving context, are the latest comments by Mr Kerry and Mr Khurshid.

First, Mr Kerry had, on 18 December 2013, expressed "regret",⁵ not a formal apology, over some unspecified aspects of the arrest and treatment of Dr Devyani almost a week earlier. Mr Kerry voiced "regret" when he spoke to India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, as Mr Khurshid could not be contacted at that time. Much was read into Mr Khurshid's not being around to take the call from Mr Kerry. Some Indian circles interpreted

⁴ U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/01/221118.htm#INDIA; accessed on 1 February 2014

⁵ U.S. State Department's Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf disclosed this at a regular press briefing on 18 December 2013; www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/12/218895.htm#INDIA; accessed on 2 January 2014

this as a distinct signal of India's deep distress and moral outrage over treatment meted out to Dr Devyani. However, this aspect gradually faded, as US State Department officials, in response to persistent questions from the global media, re-emphasised Mr Kerry's "regret". Eventually, India's sense of outrage did not overwhelm Mr Kerry and Mr Khurshid when they met on 22 January 2014 on the margin of a conference on a different issue. Their meeting actually reflected considerable maturity in Indo-US relations.

Exuding much maturity indeed, Mr Khurshid sought to place the Devyani episode in perspective. In an interview to All India Radio FM Gold on 23 January, Mr Khurshid was asked how India-US relations were poised in the backdrop of the Devyani case. Making no reference to his meeting with Mr Kerry, Mr Khurshid said: "[The question arising from the Devyani case] is like asking how a road accident, no matter how bad it is, reflects upon traffic patterns of a particular city. I think you learn from any experience that is unwholesome or unpleasant or unbecoming of two very good friends. You learn, I think both sides learn. And I hope that both of us appreciate how important our relationship is, and that it cannot be allowed to be derailed by any event no matter why it has happened".⁶

'India is a US Partner'

Relevant still, as this is written, is Mr Khurshid's view of the US as communicated by him to this author in an interview in Singapore on 24 October 2013 – before the Devyani episode. Mr Khurshid was asked to identify the factors galvanising relations between India and the US and also between China and India in this globalised world which sees a lot of *realpolitik*. He had this to say: "We [the Indians] will never be allies of the US; we will be friends, strategic partners, not allies. And similarly we will be strategic partners with China; hopefully, we will become friends with China when all our issues are resolved; we have a very good working relationship with them, but we have things to resolve with them".⁷

Regardless of the need for an exact label for India-US relations, Mr Khurshid had clarified, at that time, New Delhi was not looking for political or military alliance with Washington. This

⁶ India's Ministry of External Affairs, Mr Khurshid's interview to AIR FM Gold, www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/22783/External+Affairs+Ministers+intervi...; accessed on 1 February 2014

⁷ South Asia, A Publication of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), Singapore, Issue No. 19B, December 2013, p. 24

aspect, valid to this day, is rooted in the quest for “strategic autonomy”⁸ which India began soon after its independence in 1947 and has sustained through the following decades. On the American side, Mr Kerry’s latest act of re-emphasising “the indispensable US-India partnership” can be traced to US President Barack Obama’s vision of this magnitude. Mr Obama had articulated this vision during his visit to India in November 2010. Addressing India’s parliamentarians, Mr Obama said: “... as two global leaders, the United States and India can partner for global security ... In the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed United Nations Security Council that includes India as a permanent member ... India and America are indispensable partners in meeting the challenges of our time”.⁹

A Swing-State ‘Shaping’ Sino-US Ties

Mr Obama’s India visit in 2010 was a sequel to his explorations of a viable equation with China, India’s mega-state neighbour in Asia, arguably the next big theatre in global affairs. China being a formidable nuclear-armed space-power, Mr Obama’s India-vision stirred much speculation. Soon gaining currency was the hypothesis that the US would like to have the Indians on its side in the event of a Sino-American tussle for global or regional supremacy.

*Relevant to this day is the view that, by November 2010, the US had come to consider the possibility of India becoming a **swing-state** that could help ‘shape’ the Sino-US equation.*

The thesis here is that India, which successfully tested nuclear explosive devices in 1974 and 1998, could, depending on its choice, join forces with either the US or China. In the wake of the Devyani episode, an interesting issue, in early-February 2014, is not whether India can or will become a swing-state ‘shaping’ the Sino-American equation.

Actually, the fundamental question now is whether the US and India, both nuclear-armed space-powers, can and will place their own equation back on a stable futurist trajectory.

Whoever the US’ master-mind behind the Devyani episode and whatever the guiding factors, it is clear that America’s “indispensable partnership” with India did not impress that mind.

⁸ See P S Suryanarayana, India’s Strategic Autonomy *Mantra*, ISAS Special Report No. 13, 5 July 2013

⁹ The White House in Washington, Remarks by the President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, India, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/remarks-president-joint-session-indian-parliament-new-delhi-india; accessed 5 February 2014

Unsurprisingly, US State Department spokespersons have had a challenging time in fielding media queries on the Devyani episode until she departed for India in early-January 2014.

Dr Devyani departed from the US, where she faced some private charges, after she duly got accredited to the United Nations on 8 January. She left for India after being asked by US to leave its shores, upon New Delhi's refusal to waive her new UN-work-related immunity and let her face charges in a US court. Her exit from America also coincided with India's expulsion of a US diplomat. To be noted, overall, is that the US action against Dr Devyani, which certainly vitiated the India-US ambience, is not germane to the big picture of an evolving bilateral equation.

New Delhi wants Washington to clear the fallout of the American action against Dr Devyani so that the big picture of US-India relations could be brightened, atmospheric and beyond. This is amply evident from India's official statement on Mr Khurshid's January-22 meeting with Mr Kerry – “In view of the recent episode involving the arrest of an Indian diplomat in New York, [India's] External Affairs Minister and the [US] Secretary of State recognized the need to put in place institutional arrangements to look at all outstanding issues relating to the privileges and immunities of diplomats of both countries ...”¹⁰

A New Litmus Test

For the US, as evident from Mr Kerry's 'India Republic Day' message,¹¹ the Devyani episode is not even a blip on the radar that captures trends in Indo-American relations into the future. Important as a value-addition in this context is a snippet in India's version of the talking points during the January-22 Khurshid-Kerry meeting. The snippet is that “mention was also made of ongoing defence cooperation between India and the US”.¹²

It is worth noting here that the 'U.S.-India Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation', issued on 27 September 2013, has placed the two countries in a unique category. The Declaration stipulates that “the United States and India share common security interests and place each

¹⁰ India's Ministry of External Affairs, www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/22766/External+Affairs+Minister+meets...; accessed on 24 January 2014

¹¹ Same as in Note 2 above

¹² Same as in Note 10 above

other at the same level as their closest partners”.¹³ Such an ambiguous terminology, not necessarily ambivalent, is open to several different interpretations about the exact US-India equation in their bilateral military matrix. However, their pledge of co-research, co-development, and co-production of state-of-the-art and futurist weapon-systems is the stuff that could make India a swing-state in Asia. A true translation of this pledge into reality will be a litmus test of “the US-India indispensable partnership”.

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¹³ The White House in Washington, U.S.-India Declaration on Defense Cooperation, 27 September 2013, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/27/us-india-joint-declaration-defense-cooperation