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Modi's American Engagement: Discarding the Defensive Mindset

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Abstract

In two quick summits with the US President Barack Obama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken big steps to resolve the lingering nuclear dispute, revive defence cooperation, go past trade disputes, explore common ground on climate change and renew the engagement on regional security cooperation. For years now, progress on these issues has been held up principally by Delhi's reluctance to negotiate purposefully and find practical solutions. By combining strong political will with a clear focus on practical outcomes, Modi has altered the bilateral narrative on India-US relations and created the basis for deepening India's strategic partnership with America.

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Modi's Inheritance

Despite shared political values and expanding connections between the two societies over the last century, Delhi and Washington found it hard to build a sustainable partnership. Repeated efforts at constructing a consequential partnership have stuttered in the past. Many, therefore, are sceptical in assessing the consequences of the unexpected political warmth between India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US President Barack Obama. They question the claim of the two leaders that they have begun a new chapter in India-US relations. Yet this scepticism, rooted in the recognition of the past failures, might be missing the elements of significant change that have begun to envelop the ties between Delhi and Washington since Modi became Prime Minister in May 2014. To be sure, Modi's efforts to transform India's relations with the United States are not new and are in line with the attempts that Delhi has made since the early-1980s. But by encouraging a basic change in the way that India thinks about the United States and America's place in India's engagement with the world, Modi has turned out to be rather different from his predecessors in the South Block.

If India and America steadily drifted apart during the early decades of the Cold War to become 'estranged democracies', they certainly became more engaged since the 1980s.² When Indira Gandhi returned to power as Prime Minister in 1980 she corrected the tilt in India's foreign policy towards the Soviet Union during the 1970s and sought to rebalance Delhi's great-power relations by reaching out to President Ronald Reagan. Much of the deep rooted anti-Americanism that is widely presumed to be a natural attribute of the Indian political classes is the product of a tectonic political shift within India and its regional environment in the 1970s. Mrs Gandhi's shift to economic populism at home and Third World radicalism abroad was compounded by the Nixon-Kissinger empathy towards Pakistan in the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh. As Delhi drew closer to Moscow and disconnected itself from the global economy, there was little substance left in India's engagement with the United States and the West. The focus of Indian diplomacy towards the United States turned inevitably to the management of differences rather than constructing a

² For a comprehensive discussion of India-US relations during the Cold War, see Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941-1991* (Washington DC: National Defence University Press, 1992).

broad-based relationship. After Mrs Gandhi tried to change course in the early-1980s, her son and successor Rajiv Gandhi brought much greater enthusiasm to the engagement with the United States. Some of the dominant themes in India's contemporary relations with the US – from IT business connection to defence cooperation – can all be traced back to the Rajiv years.³ Yet, the political constraints of the Cold War and India's inward economic orientation limited the possibilities with the US. Repeated attempts at elevating ties with America into a genuine strategic partnership did not gain much political traction.

The end of the Cold War and Delhi's economic reorientation opened up new possibilities between India and America.⁴ Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao declared that the 'sky was the limit' to cooperation with Washington. Departing from the script about nonalignment, Atal Behari Vajpayee proclaimed that India and America were 'natural allies'. Manmohan Singh famously said how Indians 'loved' George W Bush. But the Indian leaders faced three sets of problems in Washington in the first decade after the Cold War. One was the fact that the US, as the sole superpower after the demise of the Soviet Union, appeared to have little reason for a strategic embrace of India. Second, America's strong concerns on non-proliferation put India's ability to sustain its nuclear-weapon option at risk. India's decision to conduct nuclear tests in May 1998 sharpened the nuclear divide between the two countries. Third, American diplomatic activism on Kashmir in the 1990s raised profound concerns in Delhi that was feeling the heat from the indigenously-generated unrest in Jammu & Kashmir and Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism.

The advent of George W Bush as the President of the United States in 2001 provided an opportunity to recast the relationship in the second decade after the Cold War. Vajpayee and his foreign policy advisers, Jaswant Singh and Brajesh Mishra, were determined to seize the moment. Unlike Clinton, Bush was ready to look at India from a strategic perspective and recognise Delhi's potential to shape the Asian balance of power. Having made that judgement, Bush was eager to explore creative solutions to the long-standing nuclear dispute with India, desist from interference in

³ Satu Limaye, *U.S.-India Relations: The Pursuit of Accommodation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993)

⁴ Sunanda Dutta-Ray, *Waiting for America: India and the U.S. in the New Millennium* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2002)

Kashmir and de-hyphenate America's relations with India and Pakistan.⁵ This new thinking in Washington began to bear fruit in the second term of the Bush Administration that coincided with the installation of Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in the middle of 2004. In two remarkable moves in mid-2005 – a new ten-year defence framework agreement and the historic civil nuclear initiative – Bush and Manmohan Singh laid the foundation for a productive strategic partnership between the two countries.⁶ In the decade that followed, the Indian government struggled to follow through on these game-changing agreements. While Prime Minister Manmohan Singh understood the enormous significance of the new strategic possibilities with the US, he could not persuade the Congress leadership that panicked at the thought of drawing close to Washington. Lack of political self-confidence among the Congress leaders and the fear of antagonising key domestic constituencies saw the government not only avoid a close partnership with the US but also deliberately introduce some distance between Delhi and Washington.

Ending the Ambivalence

That Modi has significantly altered the dynamic of the bilateral relationship within a short span of nine months is not in doubt. The sense of stasis that had enveloped the relationship towards the end of the UPA Government has yielded place to a renewed sense of optimism about the relationship, akin to that seen in the first year of Manmohan Singh's tenure. Modi's contribution was not about bringing big new ideas to the engagement with the United States. Those ideas and possibilities were well debated in the mid-2000s.⁷ Modi's success was in ending India's political ambivalence towards America and bringing clarity to India's own objectives. Observers of Indian foreign policy have often said that Delhi does not know what it wants from its main international partners. It therefore becomes reactive rather than pro-active in its external engagement. Worse still, instead of explaining India's new possibilities on the global stage, there is a strong temptation in Delhi to stick to the

⁵ For an explanation of the context and consequences of this shift in US policy, see Ashley Tellis, "The Merits of Dehyphenation: Explaining U.S. Success in Engaging India and Pakistan", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2008.

⁶ For a discussion of these initiatives and the Indian response, see C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: India, U.S. and the Global Nuclear Order* (Delhi: India Research Press, 2006).

⁷ S. Paul Kapoor and Sumit Ganguly, *The Transformation of U.S.-India Relations: An Explanation for the Rapprochement and Prospects for the Future*, *Asian Survey*, vol. 47, no. 4. 2007.

familiar and avoid any experimentation. Weak coalition governments in the last three decades have also been deeply wary of domestic political reaction to major external initiatives. Posturing to the domestic audiences, then, has tended to dominate the Indian establishment's responses to the opportunities and challenges that confronted it since the end of the Cold War.

But few in India or the United States expected Modi to break this defensive mind-set, especially towards the United States. Given his own problems with the decade-long American denial of visa,⁸ many thought he would be lukewarm at best towards Washington. On top of it, there was also little enthusiasm in his own Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for partnership with the United States. In the ten years it spent on the opposition benches during 2004 to 2014, the BJP, which boldly reached out to the US under Vajpayee, turned utterly opportunistic in attacking every move that Manmohan Singh made in response to the extraordinary openings created by Bush. Many in the strategic community insisted that Modi should not travel to the US without an apology from Washington. Through the election season, Modi tended to stay away from any pronouncements on foreign policy issues. It was only towards the end of the campaign that Modi said he was not going to let his personal problems cloud his government's foreign policy towards America.⁹ That reassurance, however, did not prepare Delhi for what would follow in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 elections that propelled Modi to power.

Obama quickly reached out to Modi and invited him to come for an early meeting at the White House. Modi was more than ready and took the opportunity of his first appearance at the United Nations to reconnect with America. Barring one speech at the UN General Assembly and a few meetings on the margins of the world forum, Modi spent most of his time in reaching out to the American businessmen, the Indian diaspora and the American political class. Obama, often criticised for his aloofness towards foreign leaders, showed surprising warmth towards Modi. As they reviewed the state of bilateral relations, the two leaders decided to make a big push at resolving many outstanding issues between the two countries that had accumulated thanks to

⁸ The visa denial was based on Modi's alleged role in the communal riots in Gujarat during 2002.

⁹ See the full interview to the Asian News Agency on April 16, 2014 at <<http://deshgujarat.com/2014/04/16/narendra-modis-interview-with-anivia-youtube/>>

the indecisiveness of the UPA Government.¹⁰ Modi in contrast was ready to confront the problems head on if Washington showed some flexibility. The proposition that the two leaders could do business with each other was confirmed by their ability to negotiate a solution, within weeks after the September 2014 meeting, to end the spat between the two countries at the World Trade Organization (WTO) on trade facilitation and food security.¹¹ At another equally important level, Modi reached out to the American corporates with the proposition that India is open for business with America once again.

Soon after, Modi had a bigger surprise in store. He broke Delhi's diplomatic tradition by inviting Obama to be the main guest at India's annual Republic Day celebrations in January 2015. This was the first time that Delhi chose to extend such an invitation. Sensing the new possibilities with India, Obama postponed his annual state of the union address to the US Congress and decided to show up in Delhi for nearly 48 hours. Obama's acceptance set the stage for an intensive round of negotiations on a range of issues, including the lingering dispute over the implementation of the civil nuclear initiative. The outlines of a mutual understanding on implementing the civil nuclear initiative emerged in the months after the September summit, as Delhi opened purposeful negotiations with the US on three issues – American concerns about India's Nuclear Liability Act, India's demand for a quick closure on the terms of international safeguards, and Washington's support for Delhi's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The two sides found innovative ways to close the gap between their positions, allowing the leaders to proclaim a 'breakthrough understanding' on the nuclear issues.¹² While many have questioned the lack of sufficient detail, the two leaders have concluded that the two governments have done their work on finding a way out of the impasse on nuclear liability and that it is up to the commercial entities to negotiate the specific nuclear contracts.¹³

¹⁰ The White House, *U.S.-India Joint Statement*, September 30, 2014, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>>

¹¹ Teresita C. Schaffer, *India and the WTO – A Reprieve*, (Brookings, November 2014), available at <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/11/14-india-and-the-wto-schaffer>>

¹² The White House, *Statements by President Obama and Prime Minister Modi of the Republic of India*, January 25, 2015, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/statements-president-obvama-and-prime-minister-modi-republic-india>>

¹³ Ministry of External Affairs, *Frequently Asked Questions and Answers on Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act 2010 and related issues*, February 8, 2015, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/press->

If a nuclear deal that satisfied the two governments was on the cards in the run-up to Obama's visit in January, few observers in Delhi anticipated the developments on climate change, which has long been a site of confrontation between India and the United States. In a nation where the virtuousness of India's international policies is measured by their political distance from those of Washington, Modi promised to 'cooperate closely' with America to conclude an ambitious global climate agreement at the end of 2015 in Paris. With Obama standing next to him in Delhi, Modi said India's problem was not about resisting pressure from America on climate change. Sovereign India was confident enough to handle it, Modi suggested. India's real pressures today, Modi said, were about protecting the environment for future generations of Indians from the threats of climate change and global warming.¹⁴ The PM's new approach to climate change is centred around deepening bilateral cooperation with the US on expanding the share of renewable energy in India's total energy consumption and developing cooperation with Washington in multilateral forums. With his bold departure on climate change, Modi is signalling that Delhi's entrenched 'Third Worldism' is yielding place to the idea of India as a responsible power.

If Modi's approach to climate change was a surprise, many eyebrows were raised by Modi's plans to deepen the strategic partnership with America in shaping the future of the vast Indo-Pacific region that stretches from East Africa to East Asia. For one, Modi agreed to renew the ten-year defence framework that the UPA Government had signed with the US in 2005. But once A K Antony replaced Pranab Mukherjee as the Defence Minister, Delhi slowly but certainly walked away from the spirit of the agreement. Few in Washington were willing to bet that the agreement would be renewed if the UPA had returned to power in 2014. Modi was determined to give a big push to defence cooperation with America especially in the modernisation and expansion of India's defence industrial base. But the greatest surprise from the Obama visit was the joint vision statement that he signed with Modi on the Indian Ocean and

releases.htm?dtl/24766/Frequently_Asked_Questions_and_Answers_on_Civil_Liability_for_Nuclear_Damage_Act_2010_and_related_issues>

¹⁴ The full text of *PM Narendra Modi's statement at press interaction with US President Barack Obama*, January 2015 is available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24725/Prime_Ministers_Media_Statement_during_Joint_Press_Interaction_with_President_of_United_States_of_America>

the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁵ To be sure, promoting Asian balance of power was at the heart of the transformation of the India-US relations in the first term of the UPA Government. In the second term, though, the government deliberately began to distance itself from Washington in the name of ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘nonalignment’. In his joint statement with Obama on the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean, Modi decisively repudiated that ambivalence towards the United States.

Beyond Strategic Autonomy

The decision to expand the engagement with the United States on regional security in the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean generated some concerns at home about the potential Chinese reaction and the implications for India’s policy of nonalignment.¹⁶ These fears were more about the lack of self-assurance in the Congress leadership and the security establishment rather than a credible assessment of China’s foreign policy record or its current geopolitical calculus or the nature of Asia’s international relations today. Consider for example the fact that China had been closer over extended periods of time to Washington than India has ever been to America in the last seven decades. Even today, China’s economic and commercial relationship is much thicker than Delhi’s ties with either Washington or Beijing. As Obama himself pointed out, the US annual trade with China stands at around US\$ 560 billion while that with India is US\$ 100 billion.¹⁷ India’s own trade with China is at US\$ 70 billion. Even America’s Asian allies, including Japan, South Korea and Australia, have greater economic interdependence with China.

Instead of viewing Delhi’s relations with Washington and Beijing in binary terms, Modi appears to have recognised that India’s relations with both America and China are way below potential and can be significantly expanded. China, of course, does not limit its partnership with America by citing concerns of its large neighbours like Russia, Japan and India. Beijing, in fact, is urging the United States to agree to a “new

¹⁵ The White House, *U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, January 25, 2015, Available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>>

¹⁶ Siddharth Varadarajan, “China or US: India must have a master strategy in the poker game”, *Hindustan Times*, January 29, 2015; available at <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/china-or-us-india-must-have-a-master-strategy-in-this-poker-game/article1-1311933.aspx>>

¹⁷ President Obama’s remarks at the India-U.S. CEO’s Forum, New Delhi, January 26, 2015, available at < <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/26/remarks-president-obama-us-india-business-council-summit>>

type of great power relations” with China that could generate a shared leadership between the two giants.¹⁸ Beijing uses its relationship with America to secure its own national interests, shape the global balance of power and reshape its regional environment. Unlike the UPA Government, the NDA governments of Vajpayee and Modi have not been paralysed in their engagement with great powers by the ideology of nonalignment.

The idea that Beijing will react violently to India’s engagement with America is also not borne out by the history of Sino-Pak relations. After all, Pakistan has been a strong military partner for both America and China. Pakistan joined the US military alliance system in the 1950s, including the Central Treaty Organization and the South East Asia Treaty Organization, at a time when America was determined to combat communism in Asia and did not recognise the People’s Republic of China. The military alliance with America did not prevent Pakistan from warming up to China in the 1950s. Unlike India where the hot air about nonalignment began to inject ideological rigidity and strategic incoherence into India’s foreign policy, Pakistan thought more creatively about the possibilities with America and China. Navigating the complex dynamic between Washington and Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s, Pakistan became a valuable bridge between America and China when the two sides wanted to normalise relations at the turn of the 1970s. China did not object to intense military partnership between America and Pakistan in the 1980s or when Washington declared that Islamabad-Rawalpindi was a ‘major non-NATO ally’ in the 2000s.

If Delhi thinks that strategic autonomy is some kind of a unique attribute of Indian diplomacy, Pakistan is only one example of how all countries big and small seek flexibility in foreign policy and seize opportunities that present themselves. India’s problem lies in the infusion of ideology into the concepts of strategic autonomy and nonalignment. From a practical perspective, ‘strategic autonomy’ is about expanding one’s room for manoeuvre by engaging all potential partners. In India, though, the idea of ‘strategic autonomy’ has been viewed through an ‘anti-Western’ lens over the

¹⁸ For a discussion, see David M. Lampton, *A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Asia Policy 16, July 2013, available at <<http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=650>>

decades.¹⁹ Signing a security treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971 was not seen as undermining India's strategic autonomy, but doing anything with America was denounced as a departure from nonalignment. In India's foreign policy discourse, sitting together with China and Russia in a room was welcome, but building a joint platform with the US and Japan was not. Modi is saying India can no longer afford this kind of ideological self-indulgence. As one of the world's largest economies and as a rising power, Modi is suggesting, India needs more intensive partnerships with all great powers, including America and China. Modi is also signalling that, given India's expanding interdependence with the rest of the world, what Delhi needs is not 'strategic autonomy' as much as 'strategic influence' in regional and global affairs.

Towards Strategic Influence

A stronger partnership with America opens up immense possibilities for expanding India's strategic influence in the South Asian Subcontinent and the broader Indo-Pacific Region. Since India's independence in the middle of the 20th century, one of the enduring problems in the relationship between India and the United States has been their divergent positions on regional issues. The US decision to draft Pakistan into the Cold War alliances in the 1950s and the US-Pakistan security treaty of 1954 set the stage for a prolonged regional contestation between Delhi and Washington.²⁰ The two sides have differed in their reading of China in different phases. While their approaches to China changed dramatically over the last 70 years, Delhi and Washington were never on the same page.²¹

The end of the Cold War did not immediately reduce this divergence. The Clinton Administration's questioning of Kashmir's accession to India, and its eagerness to mediate between India and Pakistan in the early-1990s sharpened the political tensions. It was only with the advent of the Bush Administration that the doors for regional security cooperation opened. The de-hyphenation of US relations with India and Pakistan, and Washington's strict neutrality on the Kashmir dispute, helped build

¹⁹ For a discussion on the evolution of the concept of 'strategic autonomy' see Guillem Monsonis, "India's Strategic Autonomy and the Rapprochement with the U.S.," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, No. 4, July 2010.

²⁰ For a comprehensive account, see Robert McMahon, *Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

²¹ For a discussion, see Alyssa Ayres and C. Raja Mohan, eds., *Power Realignment in Asia: China, India and the United States* (Delhi: Sage publishers, 2009).

new level of trust on regional issues with Delhi. While differences remained on how best to deal with Pakistan, India and the US learnt to live with those. In another first, the Bush Administration also decided to defer to Indian interests elsewhere in the Subcontinent. Above all, the sub-text of the Bush Administration's warmth towards Delhi was the belief that a strong India will help contribute to a stable balance of power in Asia and limit the Chinese ability to dominate the region.²²

If Bush transformed the basis for American engagement with India, initial missteps of the Obama Administration tended to revive old suspicions of US policy in Delhi. Obama's public musings on mediation between India and Pakistan and the presumed link between the Kashmir dispute and Afghanistan renewed many Indian suspicions of US policy. In the East, the US emphasis on a China-first policy raised questions about continuity in Washington's approach to India. To his credit, Obama held back from diplomatic activism on Kashmir, and the failure of his outreach to Beijing resulted in the articulation of the pivot to Asia. Meanwhile on the Indian side, Delhi under the UPA Government seemed increasingly hesitant to engage Washington on regional issues and let many of the initiatives launched during the Vajpayee years languish.

While the momentum of India-US regional cooperation has faltered in the second term of the UPA Government (2009-14), the need for security cooperation in Asia between Delhi and Washington has never been as critical as it is today. A weakened United States needs credible partners in the region to cope with the new challenges in Asia. India faces great uncertainty on its western and eastern flanks and needs US cooperation more than ever before. India has had a tradition of dealing with its regional security challenges on its own terms, rather than through cooperation with other major powers. Delhi, under Modi, appears to be putting aside this reluctance and taking a more realistic approach. After all, despite the significant expansion of its own capabilities in the last two decades, India is not in a position to unilaterally contain Pakistan, reclaim regional primacy, and balance China. Any Indian strategy that focuses on producing these outcomes, rather than a rhetorical emphasis on

²² For a discussion of the possibilities generated by the rapprochement initiated by Bush and Vajpayee, see Stephen J. Blank, *Natural Allies: Regional Security in Asia and Prospects for Indo-American Strategic Cooperation* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005).

ideological virtues, would strengthen India's position by pooling its resources with that of another power that shares these interests.

During the Cold War, Soviet Russia played that role to a large extent. While Russia remains an important strategic partner for India, it is not in a position to mitigate India's problems with Pakistan and China. While a partnership with the US makes sense for India, would Washington be interested in deepening regional security cooperation with India, as it prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan and recast its Asia policy? Two possible scenarios can be considered. A weaker and isolationist America might turn its back on Afghanistan and Pakistan and feel tempted to compromise with China rather than confront it in Asia. An America rejuvenated in the next few years might be strong enough to re-establish its primacy in Asia. In the real world, though, the US is likely to find itself somewhere in between and has reasons to value India's role as a stabilising force in the region.

While the question of stabilising Pakistan and Afghanistan may not be easily amenable to effective coordination between Delhi and Washington, Modi and Obama appear to have begun a valuable conversation. They underlined the shared interests in countering the sources of terrorism in the region and turning the north-west of the Subcontinent into a bridge between South and Central Asia.²³ The policy challenge in Delhi and Washington in the near-term is to sustain a political dialogue on regional issues, expand intelligence-sharing, and deepen military cooperation. That would allow the two sides to seize opportunities that might present themselves for wider regional coalitions in Asia. In fact Obama's visit to India in January 2015 has begun to move the two countries in that direction.

The Joint Vision statement on the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean issued by Modi and Obama suggests a conscious effort by the two sides to deepen regional security and economic cooperation. The two leaders declared that "a closer partnership between the United States and India is indispensable to promoting peace, prosperity

²³ See the *U.S.-India Joint Statement*, January 25, 2015, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/24726/Joint_Statement_during_the_visit_of_President_of_USA_to_India_Shared_Effort_Progress_for_All>.

and stability” in the Indian Ocean and the Asia Pacific regions.²⁴ They added, “From Africa to East Asia, we will build on our partnership to support sustainable, inclusive development, and increased regional connectivity by collaborating with other interested partners to address poverty and support broad-based prosperity”. Complementing the economic dimension was the recognition that “regional prosperity depends on security. We affirm the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea”. The two leaders also agreed to “develop a roadmap that leverages our respective efforts to increase ties among Asian powers, enabling both our nations to better respond” to the emerging diplomatic and security challenges in the region. They also affirmed that “we will strengthen our regional dialogues, invest in making trilateral consultations with third countries in the region more robust, deepen regional integration, strengthen regional forums, explore additional multilateral opportunities for engagement, and pursue areas where we can build capacity in the region that bolster long-term peace and prosperity for all”. Never before has India agreed to such expansive regional cooperation with the United States. In fact, this is also the first time that India has agreed to undertake such a venture on a large scale with any great power. If the UPA was reluctant to embark on substantive regional cooperation with the United States, Modi appears to have discarded many inherited inhibitions.

Modi’s Art of the Deal

Closing the file on nuclear liability, expanding defence cooperation, exploring common ground on climate change and extending the engagement to regional security cooperation with Washington would not have been possible without a bold rethink under the Modi Government on the importance of the US partnership in pursuing India’s national objectives. For years now, progress on these issues has been held up principally by the Indian reluctance to negotiate purposefully and find practical solutions. By combining strong political will with a clear focus on practical outcomes, Modi has altered the bilateral narrative on these issues, cleared the logjam and generated a positive environment for further advances in the partnership with America.

²⁴ See n. 15.

The two summits in quick succession and the many productive outcomes from them by no means suggest all will be hunky dory between Delhi and Washington. Even America's closest allies find engaging Washington and its multiple centres of decision making an extremely demanding business. As Obama's indirect criticism of the Modi Government's policies on religious freedom and the treatment of minorities shows, India's internal issues will continue to matter to the United States.²⁵ On global issues like trade and climate change, there is bound to be relentless pressure from Washington on India to adapt. What has changed under Modi is India's readiness to engage on these issues and explore the possibilities for give-and-take.

The Americans, by nature, are practical people, and their diplomatic culture has been one of finding practical solutions to problems by finding ways to work around difficult obstacles. In fact it has been quite fashionable in India to criticise the United States for being too transactional. The problem, however, was with the fact that India was not sufficiently transactional. While this has been a generic problem with India's foreign policy, it acquired an extra-edge in dealing with America.

Over the decades a culture of near-perversity, cloaked in ideological rhetoric, put India in a position where it would rather negotiate against its own interests than find common ground. Standing up against America and resisting any compromise was considered an over-riding political virtue. This in turn filtered down to the bureaucracy which turned extra-prickly in negotiating with the United States. Repeated attempts at changing this culture had failed. Brief windows of creativity often produce dramatic outcomes as in the negotiation of the historic civil nuclear initiative and defence framework agreement in 2005 between India and the United States. But translating those agreements into reality ran into the traditional problems of political ambivalence and bureaucratic resistance.

As the first prime minister in three decades with full authority over his cabinet and the

²⁵ In a reference to the controversy over the agenda of the Hindu extremist groups to convert Muslims and Christians, Obama referred to the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. More broadly he underlined the dangers that religious extremism poses for India's own future: 'India will succeed so long as it is not splintered along the lines of religious faith -- so long as it's not splintered along any lines -- and is unified as one nation'; full text of Obama's public address in Delhi on January 27, 2015 is available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/27/remarks-president-obama-address-people-india>>

bureaucracy, Modi has the means to negotiate effectively on India's interests from a practical perspective. Modi's bet on discarding the entrenched domestic defensiveness in dealing with America has begun to pay off. In imagining a bold trajectory of a comprehensive partnership with the United States, Modi is departing from the Indian self-perception as a weak Third World nation that is afraid of engaging America. Modi, in contrast, wants Delhi to see itself as an emerging power and deal with Washington with self-assurance. Much in the manner that Deng Xiaoping altered China's destiny by partnering America in the late-1970s and 1980s, Modi believes an American connection is critical for transforming India's economy and international standing.

The significance of this template goes well beyond India's engagement with America. Similar pragmatism could help India reconstitute its relations with its smaller neighbours in the Subcontinent as well as major powers like China and in making Delhi a more effective participant in multilateral forums. The record of Modi's foreign policy since the middle of 2014 promises precisely that outcome.

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