

BOOSTING INDIA-US TIES: A REGIONAL IMPERATIVE?

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President Obama's India visit: Why is it important for bilateral ties?

G Parthasarathy: The visit of President Obama to India to join us in our Republic Day celebrations sends a clear message internationally. It demonstrates that the two largest democracies in the world are not only celebrating their commitment to democratic freedoms, but also strengthening their mutual cooperation, for the promotion of regional and global peace, security and cooperation.

S K Lambah: The US President's visit is significant because it comes soon after his meeting with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington DC. Such high-level interactions are good for the relationship to grow. The visit is symbolic- it shows that our relationship is strong and growing—and also full of content to make it meaningful. The content here can include doing something on the civil nuclear agreement. Some progress is being made on issues such as liability and international export regimes, and it would be wonderful if a mutually-viable deal could come through.

Jayadeva Ranade: The visit is important not only for its symbolic value, which is important, but for the tangible results that it can be expected to yield. It signals quite clearly that Prime Minister Modi's government, which took the initiative to invite Obama, wants to re-energise the relationship. It underscores too that India and the US both view the relationship as strategically important, that neither will like it to plateau, and that both – especially the US – are willing to invest the time and effort required to raise the bilateral relationship to a higher level. It is an implicit green light from the US Administration to US business to come to India.

Stabilizing South Asia: The Way Forward

S K Lambah: On South Asia, the US must accept and understand that India has important stakes in this region and it should try to align its policy with that of India. The two countries need to cooperate more on counter terrorism, because many countries in the region are affected by extremist forces in some way or another. Specific areas of cooperation include intelligence sharing and cyber space. The other important opportunity to stabilize the region is to strengthen bilateral economic collaboration and trade.

G Parthasarathy: I think it is in the common interest of India and the US to ensure a stable balance of power in Asia, so that no single power can exercise hegemony in any form across the Continent. The relationship, should, however, not be seen as being an attempt to contain the legitimate interests, or aspirations of any country. The US and India share a common commitment to strengthening democratic institutions and combating terrorism in South Asia, and indeed across the world. We are now witnessing increasing cooperation between India and the US in dealing with terrorism. We are also strengthening maritime cooperation to guarantee the security of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific Regions, both bilaterally and together with partners like Japan, Vietnam and Australia. There are immense opportunities in 2015 for India and the US to work together and with like-minded regional partners, for the promotion of peace, security and cooperation across Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Forums like the East Asia Summit provide us opportunities to demonstrate how this cooperation is contributing to regional peace and security.

Jayadeva Ranade: The unfolding geopolitical situation offers potential for coordinating policy in international affairs and increasing cooperation in the strategic, security and economic fields. There is scope, albeit limited, for cooperation in Afghanistan post the US withdrawal. Cooperation in the defence and economic arenas would boost India's efforts to indigenise defence manufacturing, including in the defence-related high-technology and advanced electronics sectors. US investment in Indian industry and technology-intensive manufacturing industries will strengthen India and, additionally, constrain China's efforts to ingress and potentially dominate the Indian economy. As far as Pakistan is concerned, the scope for meaningful India-US cooperation is realistically limited. US strategic interests will inhibit Washington from applying pressure on Pakistan on sponsoring and abetting terrorism or changing its policy towards India. Indian and US interests do not clash in South Asia and the two can coordinate policies and cooperate in South Asia. Sri Lanka is an example. Promotion of economic development, stamping out extremist/terrorist elements and encouraging democratic regimes are some of the areas which will be in the interest of both nations. The Indian Ocean is another 'commons' where the two countries have shared interests.

Scaling-up strategic and defence ties: Key areas of engagement

Jayadeva Ranade: There are a number of ways in which the US can help India. To name a few, these include the sale by the US of advanced security technologies and counter-terrorism equipment, technologies for electronic interception and monitoring as well as cyber monitoring and intelligence sharing including sharing of real-time intelligence on the activities and movements of terrorists. Realistically though, such cooperation from the US will be restricted because of its interests in Pakistan. But a positive step will be if the US can independently lean on Pakistan to rein in and root out these elements and coordinate with India to staunch the flow of funds to these organizations and share information regarding their movements and activities outside Pakistan.

G Parthasarathy: I think that with India opening its doors for private sector participation and foreign investment in defence production, the doors for defence technology cooperation are now open. One hopes that measures will be taken by us to expeditiously approve foreign investment in key areas of high technology and defence related industries, at levels even higher than the present ceiling of 49%. It is also important to expand the scope of existing defence cooperation in areas like military training and joint exercises.

S K Lambah: US can help India in its manufacturing base for defence equipment in India.

The China factor: Walking the tightrope?

S K Lambah: I think there is enough space for India and China to grow together and carry on with their goals and objectives. Our cooperation with the US is not directed against China.

Jayadeva Ranade: China is a major and growing concern for most countries including the US. It is the single major consideration shaping all bilateral relationships in the region. China has an increasing voice in international institutions, including financial ones. Its comprehensive national strength and economic and military might already inhibit US moves in the Asia-Pacific region – which China considers its backyard – and have kept India under military pressure on the borders and on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The question really is what path China's leaders will opt to take in the next few years and, so far, there is little indication that the path will be benign. Beijing's objective is clear: to alter the existing international rules and global norms to serve China's interests and 'recover' all 'lost territories'.

G Parthasarathy: One has to bear in mind that the relationship between China and the US is very complex. The two are tied together in their trade and investment relationship, which both regard as mutually beneficial. China cooperates with the US on many issues, like Iran's nuclear programme, in the UN, and does not in any way undermine US relations in West Asia. Even in Afghanistan, the US seeks, somewhat unrealistically in my view, China's cooperation and assistance. The US claims to be a champion of nuclear non-proliferation, but turns a blind eye to missile and nuclear knowhow transfers by China to Pakistan. The real differences between the US and China arise over China's maritime boundary claims on key American allies like Japan and Philippines. The US realizes that it needs major Asian powers like India to balance Chinese ambitions in Asia. To assume that the US will back our positions on differences with China would be a serious mistake. One has to be realistic, not only about opportunities, but also the limitations in the India-US relationship.

Withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan: A strategic assessment?

SKLambah: Afghanistan is a complex issue. As the US leaves, the threat from extremist forces is an area of concern for India. As the US troops leave Afghanistan, they must ensure that forces that were a cause of trouble before they came do not take advantage of their departure. They must also ensure that Afghan forces are well-equipped to tackle any contingency. I think the new Afghan government has just taken over, so we must not be in hurry to comment on them right now, they have tremendous problems in front of them. As regards to the US withdrawal, it is for the Americans to decide whether they want to stay. But, my personal view is that they should stay on till the objective for which they came is achieved.

G Parthasarathy: It would not be realistic for anyone to expect an indefinite extension of the US combat role by ground forces in Afghanistan, I, however, think that it is crucial that the US continues to provide combat air support and air transportation assets to the Afghan armed forces.

Jayadeva Ranade: The end date of 2016 is still a couple of years away and the situation on ground can alter considerably in that period. Whether Afghanistan will have a stable government is quite uncertain. Much depends on the capacity of its Army and Police force which today lack the capacity to sustain themselves in a conflict with the Taliban. Whether the US entirely withdraws its troops or decides to retain a small but effective presence, therefore, remains to be seen. As regards the new Afghan government, Pakistan will support the Taliban materially and otherwise. It will encourage and assist the Taliban to take on and try to replace the installed Afghan government. Afghanistan will consequently witness a period of considerable civil strife. Many former warlords, in response, are likely to summon their troops to safeguard their interests, power-base and turf which will, in turn, further weaken the new Afghan government in Kabul.

Pakistan and India-US ties: Defusing the nuclear threat...

SKLambah: India will be able to handle Pakistan on its own through discussions. I don't think we need a third country to intervene in India-Pakistan issues. But the US, as a friend of Pakistan and as a country which has interest in Pakistan, must take concrete measures to ensure that tensions are not allowed to take place.

Jayadeva Ranade: There is serious concern in Washington, New Delhi and other capitals about the stability of Pakistan's nuclear programme and safe custody of its weapons. There is a feeling that so long as they are in the custody of the Pakistan Army, which by all accounts is a professional army, there is little to worry about. India has other concerns including that a Pakistan Army under pressure could resort to adventurism against India. This can include increased terrorist attacks. What should cause serious concern, however, is the growing fundamentalisation of the Pakistan Army, where Islamic fundamentalists are now beginning to occupy the higher ranks of Brigadier/Major General and above. The prospect of these elements controlling Pakistan's nuclear weapons arsenal raises the possibility of non-state extremist/terrorist groups gaining access to them, and this must be extremely worrisome to all nations. It is to counter such a possibility that the US, India and other countries need to coordinate plans.

G Parthasarathy: The US had earlier cooperated with Pakistan in ensuring that its nuclear arsenal was safe from falling into the wrong hands. I think it will be necessary for the US to tie its economic assistance to transparent measures by Pakistan, to ensure that there is no inadvertent, or deliberate misuse of its tactical weapons. It should warn Pakistan not only of a massive Indian response, but also of international condemnation and isolation, if it rashly resorts to use of tactical nuclear weapons. It would also be useful if the US could persuade Pakistan of the need for it to accede to an International Fissile Material Control Treaty.

The rise of ISIS: Tackling the danger of extremism

G Parthasarathy: This is a new challenge. The problems we face domestically on terrorism are different. The US faces internal problems from the fact that a fair number of its Muslim immigrants have serious misgivings about American policies towards the Islamic world. On the other hand, very few Indian nationals have been enamoured by the ISIS through internet and other exchanges. We have noted recently that misguided Indian youths are often cautioned against doing anything foolish, by their elders.

SKLambah: ISIS is a problem, but as far as India is concerned, there have been only some cases of Indians taking interest in ISIS and we will be able to deal with them. On the larger issue of terrorism, India and the US must work together to end this scourge.

Jayadeva Ranade: India and the US need to jointly confront and tackle the challenge posed by ISIS and all other terrorist groups. This needs to translate into joint plans and actions in addition to shared intelligence.

Helming the relationship: Accelerating the momentum

SKLambah: Well, now, with our economic relationship touching the \$100 billion figure, we need to take it further because a strong economic partnership is important to take ties forward. However, I firmly believe that no relationship should be dependent on only the purchase of arms. There is a lobby in the US that tries to identify relations with India with purchase of arms from India. That should not be the centre piece or main focus of our relations. Our relationship should be more broad-based in the area of trade.

Jayadeva Ranade: The slow momentum can be attributed to history, residual mutual suspicions and the lethargic bureaucracy in both countries. At the same time, no relationship can be on a continual high. A positive beginning has been made by the Modi government and Obama Administration by giving a momentum to the relationship through summits and official-level bilateral meetings. This should send a signal to the respective bureaucracies. What will provide substantive ballast to Indo-US relations is new activity in business ties, trade and investment. Easing of travel and stay restrictions will be an additional boost.

G Parthasarathy: Shared values alone are not enough to be on the same page on international developments. Diplomacy should focus on shared interests.

The India-US relationship: Emerging opportunities...

SKLambah: Clean Energy is one. There is plenty of scope in clean energy. India is already attaching great importance to it. 17% is hydro, 12% is non-conventional and 2 is nuclear, so we are doing a lot on clean energy. You will observe that in all our high-level meetings since 2000, projects dealing with clean energy have been up on most in discussions. We should build on these and try to have new initiatives, which meet rural needs and are based in micro or offgrid renewable systems. Agriculture is the other sector. And cooperation in counter-terrorism.

G Parthasarathy: I do not think the US India-US relationship should be merely transactional, or based on the belief that we will not have areas of disagreement. What is important is to build on commonalities of views and manage differences, while seeking to overcome these differences, in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

Jayadeva Ranade: There can be little doubt that paving the way for US investment in India and for US business to set up units in India would be a major and enduring achievements. The other key area is in defence, where India has urgent need for all kinds of modern military hardware to meet its requirements on the northern and western borders. ❖

(Excerpts from interview taken by Samarth Pathak, Program Officer, Ananta Aspen Centre)