



The Fine Art of Delicate Balancing: Observations on President Obama's India Visit

Hina Pandey

Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

On the last day of his India visit (27th January 2015), President Obama managed to convey a subtle message of American power. His Delhi town-hall speech reflected a carefully crafted balance of ideas and interests that forms the basis of influence in the American foreign policy. He not only brought greetings and friendship from the United States, but also brought forward expectations from the United States for India to consider in the structural design of growing US-India ties. The President's speech indeed charmed the audience.

In a way the frequent applause by the crowd reflected an echo of the public acknowledgement of the President's world view; one that consisted of the ideals of freedom; especially, freedom of religion, equality, education and women empowerment. One must recognize that these narratives are not Obama's own but those of America. In-fact, these adjectives are descriptive of the characteristics that appear closer to the democratic states and institutions. Conveying the world view at the heart and capital of the world's largest democracy is indeed symbolic; nevertheless the message is clear. Obama's town hall speech is significant as it clearly sketched

the contours of American foreign policy expectations and objectives towards India.

At the very outset in his speech he expressed the possibility of US-India partnership becoming the defining relationship of the 21st century. He laid out a strategic canvas of the role that India can, or might play as a rising power. By mentioning that the US and India can work closely on the Asia Pacific or Indo Pacific, President Obama expressed the US' acknowledgment of India's role in containing China, but, towards the end left a 'fill in the blank' for India to figure out its own role by mentioning that *India can only decide its own role in the world*.

President Obama also touched upon the similarities of values and historical experience between the US and India, such as fighting colonialism. He recalled Martin Luther King Junior's appreciation for Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of peace and non-violence to emphasise that India and the US are connected not only because of interests, but also because of their respective historical experience of having overcome colonialism.

In discussing the future potential of the US-India

relations, President Obama transparently expressed the possibility for more robust collaboration when he stated, that *US is not only India's natural partner but can become its best partner*. In short President Obama's Delhi town hall speech was a summation of his three day visit. He intelligently signaled to New Delhi a forthcoming possibility of two democracies transforming their engagement into more than just political partners. Albeit no labels of 'friends' and 'close allies' were put forward; as this would have compelled China to take a more careful note of US-India bonhomie. Yet US' recognition of India's growing national power and its probable impact on international relations too was conveyed. The town hall address could be understood as a tacit American gesture of politics on three issue areas a) US-India relations b) US balancing of China and Pakistan relations and c) American Multilateralism

US-India Relations: A New Moment?: President Obama's referring of a *new moment* in the US-India relations persuades one to ponder over the current status of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. While this rhetoric is assuring of a steady continuity in the relationship between the two countries, an astute assessment is needed. This visit has offered the promise of range of high end military and sensitive technology to India. The US has also proposed for a joint development and production of the Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV). 17 advanced technologies have been offered under the Defence Technology Trade Initiative (DTTI). One such technology includes the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) representing the latest in American research of the US Navy. However, India has agreed for producing RAVEN. Reports suggest that New

Delhi is responding with traditional caution to these offers.¹

The US offer to India of a range of fresh military technology is representative of a slight amend in the US thinking. India too has reciprocated the gesture subtly. India had asked refiners to slash oil buys from Iran in the next two months (February- March 2015), to keep the oil imports in line with previous year's fiscal level. India is the second-largest buyers of Iranian oil, in the current fiscal year oil imports to India have reached 40 per cent over, in the first nine months. This was the time when sanctions were eased

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on Iran.² A steady buy of Iranian oil has the potential to influence the P-5-Iran negotiations as this would provide Iran with some economic relief. One must recognize that both the P-5 and Iran are supposed to finish the political

negotiations by the end of March 2015 such that the next round of technical negotiations could begin to conclude the comprehensive agreement by June 2015. Indian role appears significant in this context. On the Indian side, this represents a consideration of the P-5+1's effort in the nuclear negotiation, in which the US has the highest stakes. Of course, this is not a *new moment* as India had already voted against Iran's nuclear programme at the IAEA, but it is clear that it is a gesture of continuity. A continued effort to remove the irritants in the US-India relations could also be seen in the US acceptance of India's stand on its nuclear liability law. A seven year logjam on the law has reported to have been broken. President Obama's meeting with PM Modi has also been seen as conveying of personal warmth between the two. It was said that, *Feelings based proximity of leaders acts as talisman to channelize hard bargaining between states....Obama-Modi friendship would act as a balm to soothe divergence on concrete issues....*³

The personal chemistry between the two leaders is indeed emblematic of the current state of US-India bilateral ties. Both the countries have come to an understanding that both have to dilute their differences in order to forge a continued partnership. The *new moment* in the US-India ties could be attributed to the fact that both countries are now, *ready to talk to, not at each other*.⁴

China- Pakistan Balancing by the US: It was said that the first 45 minutes of the Obama-Modi meeting were dedicated to the discussions of balancing of China. President Modi's assessment of China's rise and its strategic impact in the East Asian region surprisingly resembles President Obama's.⁵ On the other hand, China reacted sharply to this India-US joint statement on the disputes in the South China Sea, by declaring that only the involved countries should work together to resolve the problems.⁶ The view gets accentuated as immediate reactions of the Modi-Obama meet was viewed as *India Non-Aligned No More*.⁷ As expected, Pakistan's opposition to the Indian bid of NSG membership and US support to India's inclusion in the UNSC came immediately. Pakistan PM's advisor on national security even stated that the, *move towards political and economic expediencies would have a detrimental impact on the deterrence and stability in South Asia*.⁸ India watchers in Pakistan acknowledge the visit by the head of states; not just America, but China, Russia in the recent months as a measure of *growing strategic importance of India for the three great powers*.⁹

US-India bonhomie is been viewed as India's alignment with the US as not only catering to the American interests but also an assistance in helping India fulfilling its ambition of becoming a regional hegemon. It is also anticipated in one of the two scenarios that as the developments

unfold post the Modi-Obama meet, a complete tilt by India towards the US might be a reality.¹⁰

There may appear an echo of similar views between PM Modi and President Obama on China's role in the Asian region, but to label the meet as an alliance against China's political, military and economic clout would be incorrect. First, it is not only America or India that are concerned about the implications of the Chinese rise, there remains a generic apprehension overall, which emanates from China's assertive foreign policy. Second, if India-US are compelled to forge strong ties in the backdrop of rising China, they would be cautious to do so as, this might unsettle US and India's bilateral relationship. Furthermore, US-India 'open-alliance' might compel Pakistan and China to bolster their ties even further. The possibility for a more robust military relationship cannot be overlooked. This would directly impact the stability in the South Asian region. One must not forget that the maintenance of stability in the

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region is of great importance to US, China and India. Thus, all three players are likely to exercise caution in building relationships. US-India, India- China and US-China, all three share bilateral trade relations and global security

concerns, while a balancing is expected out of their interactions in international relations, a blatant opposition to one another could be referred as interpretation of a superfluous quality. The Modi-Obama meet should be viewed as an inevitable continuity of the US-India strategic partnership not as partnership against another country.

American Multilateralism: Near and immediate threats like ISIS have generated the need for the US to ally with more countries. In the mission to fight Islamic fundamentalism the obvious partner of the US, in the Asian region is India, a country with secular characteristics embedded in the

constitution itself. India too is motivated to lean in with the US as it is grappling with the same issue. Recently, India has reluctantly admitted the spread of ISIS in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Maharashtra. Officials now admit that, the numbers of people to have joined ISIS from India has crossed a four figure range.¹¹ A decade long campaign against the global war on terror has made the US realize the importance of multilateralism. The US foreign policy today will have to answer to newer realities in international politics. While the degree of American decline can be debated, the 'rise of the rest' phenomenon is widely recognized in the recent American strategic behavior as well. The US foreign policy has to function in the realm of polycentricity and with legitimacy. Military might be a determinant of victory on the ground, however, the US has realized that an absolute victory is inclusive of material and ideational win. The US has realized that if it has to sustain its pre-eminence not just militarily, but otherwise. It has to strike a correct balance between the American promotion of soft power, diplomacy and military might.

Conclusion

Various views on the Modi-Obama meeting have reduced the US-India strategic partnership to only symbolism. While the coming months will tell whether any substantive outcomes will be reaped, even symbolism has a utility in international politics. In international relations, states cannot always convey meaningful gestures without actions. The symbolism is thus a subtle mode to signal long

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The assurance of continuity of the bilateral ties through renewed defence agreements and ironing out of the nuclear differences on the nuclear liability clause not only reveals a symbolic continuity of the US-India ties but also translates much into practice. The very fact that both countries are keen on working on the nuclear question reflects a progressive maturity on both sides.

term vision on matters of consequences. President Obama's India visit was indeed symbolic in terms of the meeting of world's oldest and largest democracies. India and the US are known to be the representatives of successful working democracies under the backdrop of a diversified social fabric. These narratives of oldest and largest democracies, thus are inevitable, especially, when the 'largest democracy' invites the 'oldest democracy' for the celebration of its democratic character on its 66th Republic Day. The narratives are bound to follow because India and the US had remained estranged for years during the Cold War.

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sides. India too made visible symbolic adjustments by not showcasing the military might through the display of its missile programme. However, a peaceful projection of the atomic energy's prowess was put forward as the Department of Atomic Energy's tableau marched down the Rajpath. The US-India relations have

seen many highs and lows, from Eisenhower's apprehension to Nixon's hatred and Kennedy's appreciation. President Obama's meet represents an inevitable continuity of the US-India ties since the time of President George W. Bush, at the same time a cautious American balancing of Interest Vs Ideas.

Notes

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³Sreeram Chaulia, "Barrack and I", Foreign Pulse, *The Asian Age*, January 28, 2015.

⁴C. Raja Mohan, "India-US Ready to Talk to Not at Each Other", *Indian Express*, January 27, 2015.

⁵Peter Baker and Gardiner Harris, "US and India Share Sense of Unease over China" *New York Times*, January 26, 2015.

⁶Sutirtho Patranobis, "China Reacts Sharply to India-US Statement on South China Sea Dispute" *The Hindustan Times*, Beijing, at [http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-reacts-sharply—to-india-us-statement-on-](http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-reacts-sharply—to-india-us-statement-on-south-china-sea-dispute/article1-1310840.aspx)

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⁸"Nuclear Deal to Have a Detrimental Impact", *The Asian Age*, January 28, 2015.

⁹Majid Mehmud, "India s Global Balancing Act in the Context of Recent Developments", *Centre for International Strategic Studies Analysis*, January 27, 2015, Pakistan at http://ciss.org.pk/pages_inner.php?page_id=108, accessed on January 28, 2015.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Madhav Nalapat, "ISIS Volunteer in India Cross a Thousand", *The Sunday Guardian*, January 25, 2015



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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

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