



NEW US ADMINISTRATION AND INDO-US RELATIONS

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US President Barack Obama's ascendancy to the presidency has sparked off a new debate in India especially over the prospects of India-US relations. The Obama administration is being accused of ignoring India and focusing more on China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. India's strategic community believes that no other US President is likely to match Bush's personal commitment to strengthening Indo-US ties, but they certainly worry that Barack Obama's lack of interest could do real harm to the relationship¹. The debate started off during Obama's campaign itself that continues even today. During his campaign speeches Obama made various remarks on his prospective policies on Afghanistan crisis, nuclear non-proliferation, and mediation on Kashmir. All his pronouncements and subsequent actions have generated considerable disquiet in India which has led to the speculation that India-US relations are not going to be the same as they were under Bush administration.

Obama's Stand on Various issues and India's Reactions

The manner in which the current US administration is dealing with the crises at hand, e.g. the ongoing economic downturn, war on terror and Pakistan's role in it, and very importantly Obama's stand on non-proliferation and disarmament, has sent mixed signals to the Indian strategic community about Obama's commitment to the India-US relations.

Obama's Approach towards Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament

Former US President George W. Bush helped India end its 30 years old nuclear isolation by signing the India-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement and accepted India as a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology. But President Obama, even before taking over as the President of the United States made his intentions very clear that strengthening the nuclear non-

proliferation regime would be high on his agenda and CTBT, NPT and FMCT are going to be the primary focus of his administration. As far as the FMCT is considered, India has already agreed to take part in the FMCT negotiations but it is believed that India's stand on CTBT is likely to be altered because once the US Senate ratifies the CTBT, India will be under pressure to sign it. During the presidential campaign, Obama pledged to "reach out to the Senate to secure the ratification of the CTBT at the earliest practical date and...Then launch a diplomatic effort to bring onboard other states whose ratifications are required for the treaty to enter into force."² The fact that Obama is trying hard to strengthen the non-proliferation regime cannot be contested. It is evident that at the G8 summit at La'Aquila, Italy, Obama is believed to

persuade other G8 members to impose a ban on the sale of enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) technologies to non-NPT countries which led some sections of the Indian strategic community to believe that the Obama administration would not implement the Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement in its totality.

Obama's Af-Pak Strategy and India

De-hyphenating India and Pakistan and treating them on their merit was one of the important steps taken by the Bush administration which built trust between India and the US and led towards the strong foundation of the relations between the two. But Obama administration, by appointing Richard Holbrooke as his special envoy and trying to link the Kashmir problem with Af-Pak crisis is believed to try to shake this very foundation on which the India-US relations have been built. Finally, Kashmir was not included in his scope of operations following India's strong lobbying against this move.

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Indian strategic community. On the other hand, the US is also accused of putting inappropriate pressure on India to resume bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. Good India-Pakistan relations are desirable by the US in order to get full support of Pakistan in the fight against Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. Like his predecessors, President Obama is convinced that the road to solution to Afghanistan goes through Pakistan³ and both cannot be seen in isolation. President Obama very distinctly stated "I will encourage dialogue between Pakistan and India to work towards resolving their dispute over Kashmir and between Afghanistan and Pakistan to resolve their differences and develop the Pashtun border region. If Pakistan can look towards the east (India) with confidence, it will be less likely to believe its interests are best advanced through cooperation with the Taliban."⁴

Growing US-China Relations and Indian Concerns

The US' relations with China, which is considered to be another constrain on India-US relations, has made India feel a little insecure. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the US-China relationship as G-2 which potentially can be interpreted that India stands nowhere as compared to China in the strategic and economic calculus of the US. In fact, India was not included in Hillary Clinton's itinerary to Asia after becoming the Secretary of State. Her four leg trip included Japan, South Korea, China and Indonesia.

Are India's Concerns Baseless?

It is true that President Obama seems to be committed to strengthening the non-proliferation regime but it is also true that Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement will remain unaffected by it. As it is an international agreement between the US and India and it has been a tradition in the US that the successive governments respect the deals and agreements reached by the previous administrations. Moreover, President Obama himself and his team comprising Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voted in favour of the deal in the Senate.

In case of Af-Pak strategy, the US wants Pakistan to solely focus on the Af-Pak problem rather than to worry about the India-threat. It was quite evident from the fact that it was only after the assurances from the US that India would not pose any security threat; Pakistan agreed to

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withdraw its 6000 troops from its eastern border to redeploy to the western border. Obama administration very categorically acknowledged that fact that Pakistan has been misusing the American aid against India and pledged to make Pakistan accountable for each penny given to it in the fight against terrorism. He

authorized continuation of drone attacks on Afghanistan-Pakistan border despite Pakistan's solid protests against such attacks. Although, Obama is continuing with the policy of providing Pakistan with lavish military and economic aid to fight the war against Al-Qaeda but, unlike in the past the US has ensured that significant portion of these funds are for non-military purposes and are not to be used for anti-India activities. Under the Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement (PEACE) Act 2009 passed by the US Congress, Pakistan will get \$ 9.1 billion of civil and military assistance over next five years (2009-2013). The Obama administration was forced to remove a condition attached with this massive aid as Pakistan had refused to accept it. This referred to replacing the word India with 'neighbouring countries' with regard to Pakistan not allowing its soil to be used to launch terror attacks.⁵ President Obama was at least candid in accepting and criticizing Pakistan for misusing the funds unlike President Bush who had taken Indo-US relations to new heights but was not vocal about this aspect.

When it comes to growing US-China relations, it is not true that only President Obama has recognized China's importance. In fact, it was former President Bush who is considered to be responsible for the transformation US' relations with India and China. However, in the current ongoing financial crisis India has a very limited role to play and if the US was to tackle the global recession in any meaningful way, it needed to bring China on board more than any other country. Therefore, it is quite natural for the current US administration to approach China to help it come out of this crisis. The priorities for Obama Administration are to defeat the Al-Qaeda and Taliban and make an honorable exit from Afghanistan and bring the American economy back on track. As Obama himself has described the Afghanistan war as the nation's foremost military priority.

India's concerns regarding Obama's intentions and his commitment to

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India-US relations are not totally baseless. But the situation is not as grim as it is being perceived in some quarters of the Indian strategic community. **Obama administration is just ten months old and it would be premature and unfair to come to any conclusion about the prospects of Indo-US relations under the current administration.** We had a great amount of, realistic or unrealistic, expectations from the new US administration because India-US relations experienced the unprecedented growth during the Bush administration.

It should not be forgotten that after winning the elections Obama made it very clear that "building strategic partnership with India will be his top priority as the 44th President of the US. He also described India as "a natural strategic partner." On January 26, 2009, India Republic Day, President Obama issued a statement of commemoration asserting that, "Our rapidly growing and deepening friendship with India offers benefits to all the world's citizens" and that the people of India should know they have no better friend and partner than the people of the United States."⁶

Defense Cooperation

Defense relations between India and the US are one of the most important aspects of the bilateral relations and are growing at good pace. **The India-US defense relations are much more than just a buyer and seller relationship. Joint exercises between their armies, navies and air forces have become a regular feature of the defense cooperation between the two countries. Military to military cooperation is already one of the strongest areas of the relationship.** India conducts more military exercises with the US than with any other country which is expected to continue during the Obama administration as well.⁷ In the wake of Mumbai terrorist attack on 26 November 2008, counter-terrorism cooperation between India and the US is also becoming more robust, which includes, defense personnel training, intelligence sharing and technology transfer etc. Top defense official of both the countries are meeting their counterparts more frequently.

India-US defense relations, during the Obama administration, have seen an upward trajectory which is evident from the fact that in recent months, the Director of the FBI, the Director of the CIA, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and National Security Advisor James Jones, visited India to underline and strengthen that cooperation. Under Secretary of State Bill Burns, Assistant secretary of State Bob Blake also visited India before the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her five days visit to India in July this year. Before making her visit to India, Hillary Clinton spoke at the US-India Business Council

about taking the bilateral relationship to the next 3.0 level. The defense trade between the two countries is also on the rise. In 2004, the US State Department authorized Israel to sell jointly developed AWACS to India. In 2006, India bought USS Trenton, a decommissioned American amphibious transport dock from the US. In January 2008, India finalized a deal to purchase C-130 J Super Hercules military transport aircraft worth \$ 962 million. In January this year India signed a deal to purchase eight P8 I Maritime Surveillance Aircraft worth \$2.1 billion. The US government, in September, put forward a proposal for yet another high technology system for India, the "futuristic" shipboard Hawkeye E-2D aircraft for Airborne Early Warning (AEW) and battle management. The Hawkeye E-2D is the very latest and is yet to be delivered to the US Navy. The proposal for such an advanced aircraft system has been described as fallout of the "successful" visit of secretary of state Hillary Clinton and the signing of the End User Monitoring Agreement (EUMA) between the two countries. The latter two deals have been reached during the Obama administration and one of them is the largest ever India signed with any country. The EUMA is expected to pave the way for further transfer of US sophisticated and high tech weapons to India. It is quite possible that if the Indo-US defense trade continues to grow at this speed it would soon replace Israel and Russia as India's largest defense suppliers.

Conclusion

Different countries have different foreign policy objectives to achieve and they cooperate with other countries where their interests converge. The same is true with India-US relations as well. The United States' relations with India are based on multiple common objectives which ranges from stabilizing the South Asian region, fighting terrorism, protection of Indian Ocean Sea Lanes, preventing the nuclear and WMD proliferation, promoting democracy and human rights, cooperation on civil nuclear technology, civil space technology, cooperation on agriculture and education and improving bilateral trade. Cooperation between India and the US on the Sea Lane protection has become the most promising aspect of the relationship. It includes anti-piracy, counter-drug, counter-arms, and search and rescue operations.

Pakistan has emerged as the biggest challenge for the US. It is the breeding ground for jihadism, raging insurgency with an anti-state and anti-American objective. What makes Pakistan most dangerous is its possession of nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear weapons falling in the hands of the jihadi elements. On the other hand, US-China trade relations might be growing leaps

and bounds and China has become the most important partner for the US in the context of the ongoing economic crisis. But there is a limit to how much the US can depend on a nation whose core values are at variance with its liberal democratic tenets⁸.

The US has recognized the fact that in this turbulent and instable region, India is the only country which is stable and can play a role of a stabilizer. Especially, when an overstretched US leaves the region, there needs to be an Asian power to promote stability and peace in the region.⁹ India-US relations have acquired bi-partisan support in both the countries. Both need each other greater than ever in the increasingly deteriorating security environment. Therefore, India-US relations have reached to a point, where no matter which government is in power, the relations would continue to grow. It may be recalled that India was the first choice of the US after 1947 as a cooperative partner. However, the Cold War intruded and since India stood on its non-alignment strategy, US performance relied on an alliance

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relationship with Pakistan. Over the years it has found its friendship with Pakistan to be very costly in many ways; and turning back to India is a natural outcome.

Notes

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² Daryl G. Kimball, "CTBT: Now More Than Ever," *Arms Control Today*, December 2008.

³ Chintamani Mahapatra, "Debate: New Obama Administration," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 4(2) April-June, 2009, p. 19.

⁴ C. Rajamohan, "How Obama Can Get South Asia Right," *The Washington Quarterly*, April 2009, p. 174.

⁵ Pravin Sawhney and Ghazala Wahab, "Uneasy Ties: Walking The Tight Rope," *Force*, July 2009.

⁶ "India-US Relations," *Congressional Research Service Report*, January 30, 2009, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33529.pdf>

⁷ Bethany Danyluk, "New Momentum: Myriad Areas of Strategic Convergence," *Force*, July 2009.

⁸ Thomas Mathew, "Saving India-US Partnership," at [http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/Thomas Mathew190709.htm](http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/Thomas%20Mathew190709.htm)

⁹ *Ibid.*



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