

Indian Prime Minister Modi's Visit to the US: The Takeaways

Written by Monish Tourangbam

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MONISH TOURANGBAM, OCT 30 2014

Since India elected Narendra Modi as its Prime Minister with an unprecedented mandate, an unmistakable all-around confidence seems to have engulfed the country. The newfound dynamism and can-do attitude has been reflected in India's foreign policy as well. Foreign governments want to know the vision of the new leader who now shoulders the responsibility of meeting such high expectations from the Indian people. And reciprocally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has long been the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, has used his foreign visits to showcase his emerging identity as both the leader of India and a global statesman. The trip to the United States in September 2014 was no different in its attention to the atmospherics, besides the substance of the strategic partnership between India and the US.

The larger strategic logic of the India-US partnership that intends to work towards a favorable balance of power in Asia is very much in place. However, in recent times, policy paralysis from both sides has definitely impacted the trajectory of the relationship. Lack of prioritization on foreign policy issues and domestic entanglements on both sides had the relationship resemble a rudderless ship. In that sense, the change of guard in New Delhi and its emphasis on the economic revitalization of India have certainly lent a new lease of life to the relationship that was criticized for having plateaued without bold initiatives.

Strong spadework was done at the top diplomatic level for the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the US. The US Secretary of State John Kerry came along with the Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker for the 5th India-US Strategic Dialogue in July 2014 [1]. Besides building on the many aspects of the relationship as it happens during the annual dialogue, the visit was seen as a major effort from the US government to connect with the new Indian government. This was followed-up on by the visit of the US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel that emphasized the continuity in the trajectory of India-US defense relations regardless of the new political dispensation in New Delhi [2].

One factor that would pull ahead the emerging strategic partnership between the two countries is the support among both Republicans and the Democrats in the US, and the priority that the biggest national parties in India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), attach to it. Hence, no matter who comes to both power either in Washington or New Delhi, the relationship has reached a stage at which it cannot be derailed. In fact, Modi's successful visit to the US needs to be assessed on the understanding that two strategic partnerships need not agree or be comfortable with each other all the time.

Modi's visit included ways and means to not only reach out to the American government, but also to the India diaspora, as seen during his speech at the iconic Madison Square Garden in New York. There is no gainsaying that the Indian-American community has in recent times emerged not only as an economically efficient group, but also a group with increasing political aspirations [3]. It is now certainly seen by both the parties in the US as a major political asset and, as such, the Indian government needs to tap on this significant link between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi, also speaking at the influential Council on Foreign Relations, emphasized the image of a new India that was prepared to take the potential of the demographic dividend of India to fruition [4]. The major focus of the Prime Minister's visit was definitely to inject new dynamism into the economic dimension of the relationship, something that the US Secretary of State John Kerry also alluded to during his India visit, envisioning it to touch the

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figure of \$500 billion.

In writing a joint op-ed with President Obama for the Washington Post titled 'A renewed U.S.-India Partnership for the 21st Century' [5] that outlines the shared values and the shared interests between the two countries – and makes a bid for India as an investment destination and the next manufacturing giant through the 'Make in India' [6] campaign, as well as meetings with top American entrepreneurs – the Indian Prime Minister has touched all the right chords in envisaging the future of the relationship. Committing to a new mantra for the relationship, 'Chalein Saath Saath: Forward Together We Go' [7], both sides reiterated calls for a partnership that envisions not only bilateral benefits, but also assumes tangible responsibilities for global peace and stability.

Through the India-US Joint Statement, both leaders called for cooperation in infrastructure development, specifically mentioning future projects like developing smart cities in Ajmer (Rajasthan), Vishakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh), and Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh) [8]. Both sides have committed to hold public-private discussions in early 2015 under the Commercial Dialogue on new areas of cooperation, including innovation in advanced manufacturing. The working relationship towards developing renewable energy has seen an upward trend in recent years under the umbrella of the India-US Energy Dialogue. A significant initiation during Modi's visit was the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Export-Import Bank and the Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency, which would make up to \$1 billion in financing available to bolster India's efforts to transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient energy economy, while boosting the US renewable energy exports to India.

There is increasing acknowledgement from both sides of the new geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific, wherein both India and the US are critical stakeholders, and which needs proactive cooperation to secure some of the busiest trade corridors, instrumental for the sustenance of America's economy and the continued growth and development of India. This also entails greater defense cooperation, quantitative as well as qualitative, clearly reflected in the decision to renew the 2005 Framework for the India-US Defense Relationship for ten more years. The India-US defense relationship, whether in increasing defense trade or the unprecedented regularity with which the Indian and US militaries engage with each other in exercises to increase interoperability, has seen a major leap forward. Being two large democracies, with a host of external and internal challenges to deal with, India and the US might often face an attention deficit syndrome. However, with increasing habits of cooperation and greater recognition of a shared strategic future, the two countries can tide over a lot of tactical issues. There is no denying that the relationship needs constant servicing, and that both sides need to work towards maintaining a synergy between strategic interests and strategic autonomy.

[1] See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/07/230046.htm>

[2] See: <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1874>

[3] See: <http://orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=42457&mmacmaid=42458>

[4] See: <http://www.cfr.org/india/indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi-indias-economy-us-india-relations/p33535>

[5] See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/narendra-modi-and-barack-obama-a-us-india-partnership-for-the-21st-century/2014/09/29/dac66812-4824-11e4-891d-713f052086a0_story.html

[6] See: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/narendra-modi-an-invitation-to-make-in-india-1411687511>

[7] See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/29/vision-statement-us-india-strategic-partnership-chalein-saath-saath-forw>

[8] See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>

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