



President Obama's Republic Day Visit

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Introduction

President Barak Obama, in accepting the invite of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to be the Chief Guest at the 66th Republic Day celebrations of India, became the first US president to be the Guest of Honour at the celebrations and signalled the close relations the US wants to pursue with India. The unusual public acceptance of the invite on Twitter is also an indication of the ease that the two leaders have with each other. They have established a good working relationship, which was evident from the very successful visit of Prime Minister Modi to the US in September 2014. The twitter exchange is a show of the bond that they have been able to establish which surpasses the need to stay within official protocol.

This would be the second visit of President Obama, setting a record that, for the first time, a sitting US President would be visiting India twice while in office. His first visit was in 2010, when he had the opportunity to address a joint session of the Parliament. What has come as a surprise is that President Obama accepted the invitation for a time when he is generally expected to be in Washington, for the 'State of the Union Address'. The Address is an annual feature in which the President of the United States tables the administrative reports on various departments of the executive branch and the budget and economic message. This is a requirement under the Constitution, which states that The President "shall from time to time

give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.”(Article II, Section 3, Clause 1).¹ To be away at this juncture is another indication of the importance that is being attached by the White House to its relations with India.

Regional Security

The visit is worthy of note as India has been able to show to the regional countries that while it has laid importance on the development of its relations in the neighbourhood it is not without powerful partners on the international arena. The Government of India has made it a policy initiative to improve relations with the States in the neighbourhood. Prime Minister Modi, Minister for External Affairs Mrs. Sushma Swaraj and high ranking officials of the government have been visiting the neighbouring States to reassess India’s relations and to deepen it further.

Pakistan

President Obama’s visit is heavy on the symbolic gestures that it will portray. The very fact that India has been able to get President Obama to accept this invitation would not be lost on India’s friends like Japan and neighbours like Pakistan. This is, no doubt, disappointing for Pakistan, that it would be bypassed by President Obama again despite claiming to be the frontline ally of the US in its war against terror. With the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the importance of Pakistan as a State through which to channel supplies has gone down, but it still plays an important role in any future Afghan peace initiative. Keeping this in mind it should not be a surprise if Pakistan is able to lobby and ensure that President Obama visits Islamabad as well, like his predecessors, if only for a few hours. Such a short stopover is unlikely to achieve much in terms of any significant developments in US-Pakistan ties.

Pakistan remains a common area of concern for both India and the US. The nuclear armed State has proven to be support terrorism; the worst effect of which have been borne by India, but now, it would seem that the US also fears its consequences. The fact that Osama Bin Laden was found in Abbottabad, living not very far from the elite military institution of

Pakistan, allegedly without the knowledge of the Pakistani government or its various intelligence agencies, has underscored the support that terrorist organisations have in Pakistan. The recent leniency shown in the case of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, the mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, in which American nationals were also killed, has outraged India and is being viewed as proof of Pakistan government's inability to stem the growth of terrorist organisations. In such an environment, close India-US relations would be an important factor in strengthening peace and stability in the region. It would help in building open, balanced, and inclusive security architecture in Asia and the world would be a goal that is in the common interest of both nations.².

Afghanistan

Afghanistan would continue to be a challenge for India-US relations. It provides a strategic convergence of interest for both nations in their bid to counter terrorism in the region and arrest the resurgence of the Taliban. The US troop withdrawal and the successful transition of power through the Afghan Presidential elections have been two significant developments in the country. However, despite common interests, cooperation between India and the US in Afghanistan has been far below potential. India has transformed itself to a credible bilateral partner in Afghanistan's development. India and Pakistan's interests clash in Afghanistan. India has invested considerably in Afghanistan with an aim to minimise Pakistan's influence and enhance the security partnership in India's fight against terrorist organisations in Kashmir. New Delhi's active engagement has meant that, today, it shares a very close relationship with Kabul. Islamabad, on the other hand, still considers the Taliban to be an important factor and its strategy has been to minimise India's influence. The visit provides the leaders of the two nations with an opportunity to build a policy of peaceful transition of power in Afghanistan and the need for both countries to work together in the region could be discussed.

China

The centre of power is shifting from the Atlantic and Europe to the Asia and Pacific region. The rise of China in both economic and political terms has been phenomenal. With its rise, it

has expanded its sphere of influence and is now challenging the US in the region in particular and the world stage in general. For India, which has an ambivalent relationship with China, this growing influence is a cause for concern. Both India and the US want to check the growth of China and while India has made it amply clear that it would not be part of any China containment policy of the US, India would not be opposed to US ensuring that the balance of power in Asia does not tilt in favour of China. India needs to continue to develop its relations with China and resolve their outstanding issues while at the same time balance its relations with the US.

The fact that President Obama would be reviewing the military might of India, which is traditionally showcased to the nation during this parade, would be of significance and its importance would not be lost on the nations of the region, such as China. This is especially true in view of the fact that India and the US are now conducting the largest number of joint military exercises with each other; India is looking to the US to provide it with cutting edge military technology, while the US wants to be part of the Indian military's modernisation process. The Indian Air Force flies the Lockheed C-130J and the Boeing C-17 as transport aircrafts and the Indian Navy has P-8i Poseidon maritime patrol aircrafts for monitoring the Arabian Sea for hostile activities. Soon, Apache and Seahawk helicopters will be part of India's military arsenal.³ The US is now India's largest defence supplier and it is possible that President Obama might see some of these military wares on display.

For the US, this visit shows the importance that India has been able to achieve in US policy thinking and the role that the US wants India to play in the region, especially in view of the 'pivot' that the US has announced in its policies towards Asia and the Asia Pacific. The US needs partners to balance a rising China. Japan, Korea and the Philippines have been the US allies in the region, but they are not enough. Pakistan, despite being the recipient of a large amount of US aid and assistance, cannot be counted on by the US to be a trustworthy partner. Pakistan's close ties with China, while helpful to the US at a certain point in history, have also meant that the US is unwilling to depend on Pakistan for its long term goals of checking the growing influence of China in the region. India and the US share many cultural values: democracy, free markets, multi-ethnic society and a tolerance for diversity.⁴

Defence Relationship

In an interview to a news channel, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar stated that there is a possibility that India and the US may sign a new ten year Defence Framework agreement during the visit of President Obama, if the agreement is cleared by the Prime Minister's Office. The first such agreement was signed between Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in 2005. The agreement has laid strong foundations leading to mutually beneficial defence cooperation activities through security dialogue, service-level exchanges, defence exercises and defence trade and technology collaboration.⁵ India is bidding for technology transfer initiatives under the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) and trade to be important areas of cooperation that would be highlighted in the new agreement. India is looking beyond procurement and buyer seller relationship to technology transfer and joint development of technology relationship. The new agreement is likely to address the issues of defence partnerships, military exercises, enhanced intelligence sharing and also issues of maritime security. However, the US reluctance to share high end technology raise questions about US partnership with India.

The Indian Ocean region has become an area of strategic interest in the 21st century. One reason for this has been the growth in the Asian economies and, as a result, the increase in traffic passing through this region in terms of raw materials including energy supplies. The US has maintained its strategic umbrella over this area, but over the past few years, the US wants to consolidate its influence with the help of other naval forces. The US is laying special emphasis on India's role in the Indian Ocean region. For India, its economy as well as progress and prosperity depend on international trade, which is carried overwhelmingly by sea; as is energy, the lifeblood of its industry. These factors, coupled with the prospects of harvesting oceanic resources and India's growing international profile, have helped awaken an overdue realisation of its dependence on the seas. The seas around India are rife with hazards and uncertainties; whether it is rampant piracy, maritime terrorism, and proliferation or inter-state tensions. Natural disasters and the impact of climate change, too, present a severe threat to India's coastal regions. Against this backdrop, the Indian Ocean has acquired salience in India's national security matrix.⁶

The January visit by the President comes close on the heels of the September 2014 visit by the Prime Minister. This is more than symbolism and propels the bureaucracy to continue to build on substantial relations beyond just rhetoric. Breakthroughs in joint defence manufacturing, civilian nuclear commerce and trade carry the most promise. While both sides have not acknowledged that any new agreements would be signed during this visit, it is hoped that progress on the ongoing agreements would be made and President Obama would be able to renew fresh interest of American entrepreneurs to invest in India.

Civil Nuclear Deal

One such agreement that needs to be brought back into focus is the civil nuclear deal. There have been indications from the US State Department that the deal would figure in the discussions between the two leaders. The deal has been hailed as the turning point in the relationship between the two nations. However, progress on it has been at a standstill since it was signed. India and the US are yet to complete the administrative arrangements that are needed to operationalise the deal. Currently, Westinghouse and GE are in the process of negotiating initial agreements with the Nuclear Power Corporation of India. The US has claimed that India's domestic nuclear liability laws are an area of concern for them. On the other hand, India has pointed out that the demand for fresh bi-lateral verifications on tracking nuclear fuel is unnecessary. India has voluntarily separated its civilian and strategic nuclear assets and also agreed to the additional protocols of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is to ensure accountability of nuclear material and waste. In such a situation, bi-lateral verifications are being viewed as a delaying tactics by the US administration. It is hoped that during the Presidential visit, some progress would be made to implement this landmark deal. This would also be in concurrence with the stress that the US administration is laying on developing green technology and sustainable development with a view to addressing the issue of climate change. Along with nuclear power, solar power is likely to be discussed.

Economic Relationship

For India the visit is significant, as it comes at the end of a diplomatic outreach undertaken by

the Prime Minister in which he has met some very powerful world leaders from President Putin to Prime Minister Abe. It has reflected that the current government is very actively involved in foreign policy. Most of the visits abroad by Prime Minister Modi have focused on economic relations and attracting FDI to India. He has been encouraging the Indian Diaspora to explore economic opportunities in India. With his slogan of 'Make in India', Prime Minister Modi has assured investors that the government would facilitate new enterprises and cut down on bureaucratic red tape as much as possible to ensure smooth operations. Prime Minister Modi's successful trip to the US, in which he was able to not only establish a close personal rapport with President Obama but also announced certain measures such as visa on arrival for the Indian Diaspora.

With both Europe and China facing an economic slowdown, it is an opportune moment for India to make a significant contribution to the global economy. The Secretary of State, Mr John Kerry, announced at the Vibrant Gujarat Summit 2015, that the US is looking for opportunities to increase the India-US trade to US \$500 billion a year. This would be a significant growth from the US \$ 97 billion, it was reported to be at in 2013. The US is not viewing the economic relationship as a 'zero sum competition' but as an opportunity to expand commercial ties and change the way businesses talk with one another so (that their) relationship can achieve new heights envisioned by the leaders of the two countries.⁷

India is likely to press on the visiting US President the issue of the provisions of the country's Border Security Act – which almost doubled the H1B and L1 visa fees – to be extended beyond 2015. The US Border Security Act, which was enacted in 2010, was to lapse on September 30, 2014, but was extended till 2015. It increased the visa fees to \$4,500 for firms employing more than 50 per cent foreigners as workforce, making it expensive for the Indian IT companies to send their employees to the US for on-site jobs.

Conclusion

There have been opponents who have stated that calling President Obama is not a significant achievement. They point to his low domestic popularity ratings, his constant duels with the

Republican dominated Congress and the large number of foreign policy goals that have not met their mark. They question the validity of any promises that he makes to India. These are all valid points of concern, but it has to be understood that despite his receding popularity, he is still in charge of the most powerful office in the world. He still has two years of his term left and this is a significant time for India to build even closer ties with the US, such that the future president, irrespective of party affiliations, has no option to ignore or bypass India in building the US' Asia policy. A resurgent, Republican-controlled Congress notwithstanding, President Obama retains considerable power over shaping the US foreign policy in his remaining two years in office. Any agreements signed or promised by him would be respected by the Congress irrespective of their ideological differences.

There are a large number of issues that need to be addressed in this relationship between the world's largest democracy and the oldest. However, the visit and the significance it entails shows that the two nations have come out from the ideological differences that plagued the relationship during the Cold War years. Today, they share a special partnership, one that has been said to be the 'defining partnership of the 21st century'. The two nations still have differences between them that find them at the opposite ends of the table on issues such as Ukraine, but they also have interests that find them negotiating from the same platform, such as on terrorism. President Obama's trip to India is happening in the background of the diplomatic progress that China is making on the geo-political front. Last year, Moscow and Beijing signed two gas deals. China is reviving the old 'Silk Road,' one of the most important historical trade routes, both on land and at sea. Thus, the visit is much more than merely symbolic it is a logical step in deepening of ties between the two very powerful nations.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

Endnotes:

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