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Obama Visit to India: Role of US and India in East Asia
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On Nov. 5, President Barack Obama became the first US president in more than three decades to pay a state visit to India during his first term in office. Though rich in personal warmth and symbolism, the visit lacked the strategic substantiality of his predecessor's March 2006 visit. At the time, President George W. Bush, rolling back decades of US policy, had ushered New Delhi across the nonproliferation rubicon by bestowing a landmark implementation agreement entailing sharing of nuclear reactors, fuel and expertise to Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) nonsignatory India. More importantly, in formally affirming a US interest to cultivate India as a "major world power in the 21st century," Bush had exponentially expanded India's diplomatic space perceptually.

The Obama visit, though more modest, followed in the vein of his predecessor's. The US 'technology denial regime' that had been instituted in bits and pieces following New Delhi's nuclear test of 1974 was further attenuated. This time, decontrolling the sale of civilian, albeit sensitive, dual-use equipment to defense and space organizations affiliated with the Indian government was announced.

Further, in a gesture that thrilled his hosts, President Obama endorsed India's candidature to a permanent seat in a future expanded Security Council during an address to the Indian Parliament. Curiously, the Joint Statement issued by the two parties contains no such direct assurance by Washington. Rather, the Indian side borrows the president's phraseology to Parliament – l*ook forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member* – and thereafter proceeds to express gratitude for it as affirmation of India's candidature! That the president appeared in his address to loosely hedge New Delhi's permanent membership on adherence to the NPT, and more directly to the Iran Question, suggests that interesting times might lie ahead on this issue.

Obama's outreach to India ought not to be diminished. Personal reservations as a senator notwithstanding, his administration's follow-through on the final certifications related to his predecessor's signature civil nuclear agreement has been exemplary. His elevation of the profile of Indian-Americans to the political mainstream by way of numerous sub-Cabinet level appointments is unlikely to be matched by any near-term Republican successor. Most importantly, in a landmark statement in the National Security Strategy report, issued in May 2010, India is recognized on par with Russia and China as one of three "key centers of [geo-political] influence."

In part, the difference between Republicans and Democrats, and the slightly more favorable disposition of the former vis-à-vis India's rise in the international order, derives from narrower calculations of geo-strategy. The further rightward one moves on the US political continuum, the greater the inclination to exchange Pakistan's geo-strategic location abutting the Soviet Union's soft underbelly in the previous world order to India abutting China's underbelly in the emerging 21st century Asian order.

Asia's Emerging Security Multilateralism

A shared vision of a regional order that is *open* in its conception; *inclusive* in its mechanisms, and *balanced* and robust in its capacity to resist revision, constitutes - as per the Joint Statement – the foundational basis of the US' and India's commitment to peace, prosperity, and stability in East Asia. To this end, both countries have expressed a national interest in the stability of and access to vital public commons – air, sea, space, and cyberspace. In keeping with this principle, both parties raised objections to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi.

Facilitating the creation of a web of regional restraints and balances comports well with both US and Indian approaches in Asia. Rather than remake the continent in America's image, the US interest, since the 'Washington System' of the 1920s, has been to balance power within. For India too, a stable Asian geo-political equilibrium remains a necessary condition of its national interest, with nothing more likely to detract from the equation than the dominance of any one of its parts – particularly, a rising China. It was in keeping with this principle that Delhi's participation in the now-defunct 'Quadrilateral Initiative' – the putative maritime axis of democratic powers (Australia-India-Japan-US) – was framed.

Yet the fading away of the 'Quadrilateral Initiative' after its inaugural senior officials-level meeting on the sidelines of the ARF summit in May 2007 also cuts to the heart of the obstacles to deepening bilateral US-India cooperation within the emerging practice of Asia's 'open, balanced and inclusive' security multilateralism.

As the region enters perhaps a long interregnum between the US-inspired 'San Francisco system,' with its liberal, hub-and-spokes bilateralism, and the re-emergence of Asia's 'pre-modern hierarchical system' of international relations, and its outward radiation of power from the continent's core, the anchor of the region's security architecture is devolving to the ASEAN-centered periphery. In this context, exclusive US-Indian or selective minilateral initiatives that lack broader regional purchase and attempt to circumvent ASEAN's agenda-setting authority, are unlikely to be sustained.

It was always unclear why ASEAN – in allowing the 'Quad' countries to situate, and selectively expand thereafter, their exclusive forum as a subsidiary body within the ARF framework – would invite its self-marginalization. It is equally unclear why currently-voguish minilateral initiatives to police the 'maritime commons' that involve the US, its treaty allies, and other selective partners (including India), *but demote or strip ASEAN states and their agenda-setting powers*, will fare any better. It is instructive that the Malacca chokepoint is the jealously guarded prerogative of its littoral states, and no amount of selective minilateralism or cooperation on functional competencies around this reality will dislodge it.

Rather, the essence of conception here is to frame tightly knit US-India security arrangements that are linked to the broader regional architecture. And to the extent that these bilateral arrangements are selectively pluralized – be it with Japan, Australia, or others, they ought to hew closely to the 'spirit of openness' and be situated *within* the emerging practice of Asian security multilateralism.

In this regard, the nascent ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) framework, and its five Expert Workings Groups (EWGs) which pair an ASEAN member state and a non-member state as co-chairs, provides a rare and innovative institutional format for deepening such cooperation. [Editor's note: the Track Two Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) has followed this shared leadership approach since its inception in 1993 but ASEAN has yet to emulate it.] With Vietnam and China having expressed interest in co-chairing the humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief working group, and Malaysia and Australia the maritime security one, India and the US, working with ASEAN co-chairs and separately coordinating policy positions across working groups, could vertically deepen and horizontally broaden bilateral security cooperation. That this institutional format is predominantly led by defense ministries, as opposed to foreign ministries, should also result in more expeditious implementation of agreed outcomes on the ground and at sea.

Between *Partner* and *Ally*: Constraints to Cooperation

India's obsession with strategic autonomy is not new. Even when the country came closest to treaty alignment with an extra-regional superpower (to facilitate a unilateral military intervention in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), New Delhi was mindful in demanding that the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 explicitly safeguard its policy of non-alignment. No provision for a Soviet military presence in India was provided nor was Soviet mediation admitted after the victorious war effort.

Indian strategic autonomy apart, an obstacle of equally formidable character to deepening the US-India defense and strategic relationship is the inability of the US national security apparatus to define and operationalize "the concept of a '[strategic] partner' as a mid-way point between a traditional 'ally'… and a friendly, non-hostile state." Since India's security is neither defended nor guaranteed by Washington, and it is in a sub-region whose peninsular geography in the midst of open ocean does not lend itself to realistic joint contingency planning and crisis action procedures, the consequences of this shortcoming are not trivial.

Further, with India increasingly bearing a larger share of the region's security burden, the imperative, going forward, to *simultaneously* tighten the "jointness" of roles and missions with US forces in the region – short of Chinese military recklessness – is not wholly apparent. Indeed, an expression of this groping for 'jointness' *in lieu of strategic convergence* can be detected in the joint exercise-upon-joint-exercise conducted by the two militaries – on mountain, forest, snow, and sea, such that New Delhi has become the US' most active exercise partner, allied or non-allied, over the past decade!

The inability to conceptualize India's status between a 'friendly strategic partner' and 'treaty ally' has also stymied the development of one of the most promising areas of US-India strategic cooperation – US defense hardware and software exports to a country that still relies on imports for 70 percent of its equipment requirements. The Pentagon's demand for formulaic adherence to its templates imposed on its innumerable defense partners, including exclusive after-sales reliance on US original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), is matched only in equal inflexibility by New Delhi to its tried-and-tested 'fix-dependent' procurement model that has, for example, seen its Russian fighters retrofitted with French, Israeli, and local weaponry and sub-systems. No wonder, US defense sales to India have been episodic and few.

While two such formulaic US templates that have been on hold for the past half-decade – the *Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA)* and the *Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA)* – and are expected to be signed in the fullness of time, it is equally predictable that weapons purchased under their aegis by New Delhi will be stand-alone platforms of modest strategic import. Russia's lock on the most of India's defense purchases, be it ballistic missile defense technologies or nuclear submarine-based launch capability – and tied as they are with looser technology sharing standards and even looser policy ends - is unlikely to be challenged anytime soon.

Bearing in mind the potential of India to emerge as one of the US' foremost non-treaty allied, strategic partners, the US must innovatively draft cooperative and interoperable defense frameworks with New Delhi that are unfettered by standard legalisms and templates. The obligation at the Indian end, correspondingly, is to draft a native version of an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)-compliant template, to accelerate logistics and enhanced coordination with US forces in the region - as called for in the February 2006 Indo-US Framework for Maritime Security Cooperation.

Both countries' defense bureaucracies remain some distance apart on this point. Getting there will be an important marker of forward progress in US-India defense and strategic ties, both, bilaterally and in the East Asian region.