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Obama's India Visit: In Search of a New Equilibrium

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Synopsis

Obama's India visit was highly significant. It will not only elevate the bilateral relationship between the United States and India but could also lead to a balancing of China's preponderance in Asia.

Commentary

THE RECENT visit by President Obama to India will undoubtedly take the India-America relationship to an unprecedented level of cooperation and interdependence. Whereas the magnitude of American stake in India's future is high with India as a rising global power, New Delhi finds in the US more than a circumstantial ally. Convergence of interests and values make these two democracies as natural allies. While China will not find this comfortable, it will help bring about an equilibrium in power politics in the Asia-Pacific, bringing peace and stability.

Washington-Delhi-Beijing Triangle

President Obama during his visit above all made it public about backing India for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Whereas India's final membership will involve a complex process, the American declaration will encourage China to be more explicit in its stance towards India's aspiration for the Security Council seat. But accommodating rising India into the global governance structure will not only help America bilaterally in building partnership, it will also bring capacity and stability to the international order.

President Obama committed to work with India "to intensify consultation, cooperation and coordination to promote a stable, democratic, prosperous, and independent Afghanistan", which would require "elimination of safe havens and infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan". The two countries also jointly stated that they will pursue "joint development projects with the Afghan Government in capacity building, agriculture and women's empowerment". President Obama also declared some important steps to increase counter-terrorism cooperation with India. A jihadi epicentre in a nuclear Pakistan is not in the interest of India and US. Statist China may still find Pakistan as an ally. Thus, America finds in India a natural partner to fight against the common foe — jihadi Islamists.

Further, President Obama called on India to engage the East Asian region by welcoming “India’s leadership in expanding prosperity and security across the region”. He affirmed “to deepen existing regular strategic consultations on developments in East Asia” with India. Both the countries he said “have a shared vision for peace, stability and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific region”. This will certainly ease some Indian tension at the moment from the fear of Chinese power. These announcements followed Indian PM Manmohan Singh’s recent visit to Japan, Vietnam and Malaysia. They are seen as moves to strengthen bilateral partnerships not to encircle or contain China but to balance any future Chinese preponderance..

In an effort to elevate the bilateral relationship, President Obama not only freed Indian organisations from the US Department of Commerce’s “Entity List”, a move which would end India’s nuclear isolation; he also expressed American willingness to support India’s full membership in the multilateral export control regimes including the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The bilateral agreements signed between the two countries on trade, defence, energy, technology, innovation and education will certainly take the relationship to a new level which is based on India’s willingness to play a responsible role towards many multilateral challenges the world faces today: nuclear proliferation, climate change, international trade and finance, managing global commons, Iranian nuclear issue, dangers to democracy and other emerging issues.

Whereas India and America increasingly share similar interests and values, the hope to elevate the bilateral relations between China and the US through G-2 has waned.

Enmity towards None

President Obama’s four-nation Asian tour was surely a consequence of the rise of China. Not only geography, but also the advancement of modern technology has brought India and China today much closer than before. Thus they arouse natural envy and suspicion of each other’s rising power and prosperity despite being each other’s largest trading partners. Whereas India’s “democratic developmental state” attracts American friendship, fear of a rising China make them undeclared ally to balance it.

Alliance is a source of strength, especially for the weakest in the triangle, yet India should aim at friendship with all and enmity with none. Independent India’s internationalism in the 1950s and 1960s was largely devoid of power politics. As a result India was neither successful (except in some circumstances) in maintaining moral equivalence of the two Cold War superpowers nor could secure for Asia its rightful voice and weight.

Today it is relatively more powerful, but it should not reject the necessity of balance of power. in the name of “strategic autonomy”.

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