



Modi considers the US a crucial partner

‘A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US EASES INDIA’S RISE AS A POWER,’ SAYS FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY KANWAL SIBAL, ‘BUT AN ALL-OUT EMBRACE OF THE US CAN ONLY DIMINISH ITS STANDING, BESIDES DISTURBING THE BALANCE OF ITS EXTERNAL TIES.’

Prime Minister Modi will visit the United States in June for the fourth time in his two years in office. He has not visited any other country as many times. President Obama too has visited India during this two year period as the chief guest at India’s 2015 Republic Day celebrations. Such frequent exchange of visits suggests that the process of consolidation of India-US ties is being given personal attention by the two leaders.

The experience of negotiating the India-US nuclear deal, and before that the efforts made to explore the reduction of differences on nuclear issues in order to build a strategic partnership, indicated that the direct involvement of the White House was required to change the direction of the relationship mired by distrust and suspicion.

It has been India’s view that if policy on India is left to the State Department without direct oversight by the White House, removing the entrenched hurdles in the relationship would not be easy, as the State Department has been traditionally hard on India and soft on Pakistan, quite apart from its enduring prejudices against India from the Cold War years and beyond.

The Pentagon is seen as more positive towards India, but within it the separate commands dealing with India and Pakistan create some incoherence in US policies towards the sub-continent. This too requires White House attention.

For many years we were told that India did not blip on the White House radar and that supposedly explained the stagnation in ties. This seems to have occurred during the Manmohan Singh government’s second term too when the general view was that Obama had lost interest in the relationship, which had plateaued as a result.

It goes to Modi’s credit that he has galvanized the relationship. He has assiduously cultivated Obama, the US corporate sector, the IT giants and, of course, the Indian Diaspora. With the opportunity he will have during his June visit to address Congress, Modi will be filling an important void that existed in the program of his earlier visits.

India has many friends in the legislative branch as is reflected by the existence of India Caucuses in the House and Senate. The general view is that Modi has clearly moved India towards the US, but unlike in Manmohan Singh’s case when his supposed inclination towards the US invited strong criticism from sections of the political class and opinion makers, Modi’s pro-US leanings don’t invite much adverse comment.

This indicates an important shift in Indian public opinion. While US rhetoric that it considers the relationship with India as a defining one in the 21st century is not taken as face



India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets President Barack Obama before the State dinner at Rashtrapati Bhavan, January 25, 2015, as the First Lady and India’s President Pranab Mukherjee look on.

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value by Indians in general, there is consensus on the value of a strong partnership with America and the benefits India could derive from it.

While Modi has made no public pronouncement to this effect, his thinking seems to be that if he can solidify the India-US relationship on equitable terms he will be able to pursue his goal of making India stronger and more secure more effectively. It is clear that for India’s ambitious development plans he considers the US a crucial partner.

At the same time, India has to give itself enough freedom of action to differ with the US on issues that affect its national interest even as it seeks better understanding with the latter. A strong relationship with the US eases India’s rise as a power, but an all-out embrace of the US can only diminish its standing, besides disturbing the balance of its external ties. This kind of thinking is not appreciated in US circles who would prefer that India make a “choice”.

On several fronts Modi has cleared the ground for closer India-US ties.

On climate change issues on which the US has been targeting India, Modi found a way to politically collaborate with the US without yielding on some basics and diverting pressure by launching the international solar alliance at Paris. Significantly, in announcing Modi’s working visit to the US on June 7 the White House has put climate change

and clean energy on top of the list of subjects that will be discussed.

Differences over India’s nuclear liability legislation have been removed at the political level. It is likely that during Modi’s visit some announcement on civilian nuclear cooperation involving Westinghouse may be made.

The doors to defense cooperation have been opened with Modi’s emphasis on Make in India in defense manufacturing with private sector participation, apart from possibilities flowing from the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative heavily sponsored by Defense Secretary Ash Carter. India-US military exercises are expanding, with India deciding to participate in RIMPAC (naval) and Red Flag (air force) exercises, apart from making the US-India Malabar naval exercise trilateral with Japan’s inclusion.

The Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Regions signed by India and the US during Obama’s January 2015 visit to New Delhi was a bold step by India as it accepted that the security of these two maritime domains was inter-linked, a proposition that makes sense only in the context of China’s rise, its naval expansion and its actions to disturb the status quo in the western Pacific in violation of international law.



Preparing the ground for Hillary or Trump

WHAT MODI WILL DO THIS TIME IS PREPARE THE GROUND FOR WHAT COMES WITH THE NEXT LEADERSHIP, STRENGTHENING THE SUPPORT FOR INDIA AMONG ALL SHADES OF POLITICAL OPINION IN CONGRESS, SAYS **B S PRAKASH**.

Were we to use baseball metaphors for our discussions instead of the familiar cricket, we could think of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States as an effort at 'covering all the bases.'

It is a reflection of our polarized political discourse that like everything else, this visit too evokes a divisive debate. Are Modi's travels too frequent, his approach more towards the spectacle than substance, the results overblown in contrast to actual accomplishments? So, ask the skeptics. Specifically on the forthcoming tour, the questions are:

Four visits to America in two years; isn't it a bit too much?

Are we too fervent in our ardour or seen from the American end, are they proposing too tight an embrace?

Are we in danger of becoming a client State?

We can talk in such overarching terms or alternatively look at the specifics. I propose to follow the latter approach.

But before attempting that, let us note that as it happens, the visit comes soon after a mid-term evaluation of the Modi Sarkar by the commentariat. It must be acknowledged that on the foreign policy front, most experts see him as engaged, energetic and innovative. Criticism is focussed, understandably, on the intractable issues of Pakistan, China, (and Nepal), but overall the government and the prime minister score well with regard to external affairs.

Turning to the US, what are the bases that Modi has already touched and what may be salient during the June visit, even as it occurs in the midst of the American electoral season and the dwindling months of Obama's Presidency?

One way of clustering the crowded agenda of these visits is to see the four 'bases' as a. global and strategic issues; b. bilaterals between the governments; c. the economic interests; and d. people to people goodwill.

Under such a rubric, what Modi will do this time is to consolidate the bilateral relationship, take it to new heights as reflected in a formal visit, widen the constituency by the address to a joint session of Congress, and to prepare the ground for what comes with the next leadership, by strengthening the support for India among all shades of political opinion in Congress.

Let us briefly recall the ground covered already.

Modi's visit in 2014 had a dramatic background. Here was someone, who had been explicitly prevented from visiting the US; he was also an unacceptable figure for a section of the influential Indian-American community. How was that controversial legacy to be overcome? Very easily, as it turned out. The Americans merely did the right thing in coming to terms with the reality, and extending an invitation to a leader with a massive mandate. Modi did more than the right thing



in not uttering a sound or casting a glance at the past, but in word and deed showing consciousness of the criticality of America and Indian Americans for his ambitions.

The first visit in 2014 did all the essentials well: the obligatory address to the United Nations General Assembly, the projection of the image of a different kind of leader to the young crowds at Central Park, the 'wow' inducing community event at Madison Square Garden, the messaging of 'we mean business' to the Wall Street and major banks, and after all this in New York, the warm and personable 'get to know' meetings in Washington.

There was a good mix of everything: Global issues as in Sustainable Development Goals at the UN, a bit of a breather for us with the WTO requirements, a beginning of the meeting of minds on climate change — another issue where the views were dissimilar, selfies and photo-ops with the crowds in the parks and stadiums, and a forward looking joint statement to capture the underlying theme of 'common values and common interests'.

As it turns out, after two years, the enduring impact is the creation of a personal equation between Obama and Modi and the recognition of a role for the Indian communities abroad in building the image of India and yes, of Modi too.

Could the second visit in 2015 stand the test of comparison

with the first and of the Obama visit to India?

It should be noted that this visit to the UN was almost obligatory for an Indian prime minister. Not to take part in a summit meeting convened by President Obama on UN peacekeeping operations, when India is one of the oldest and largest of the troop contributors wasn't an option. Modi had to mark attendance.

Again, in a debate in the 70th year of the UN, an Indian leader had to say our piece, unproductive as it may be, on the subject of the expansion of the UN Security Council and assert our claim to be a member of an expanded Security Council. This may not be an outcome generating activity, but in diplomacy an essential one, keeping the larger and the longer imperatives in view.

As if to compensate for the lack of real substance at the UN, a visit to Silicon Valley was added. The West Coast has a magic and meaning different from New York, and the synergies between the IT habitat and Indian entrepreneurship came through.

Modi's meetings with the world's greatest nerds — be it Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk or our own Satya Nadella — certainly created an image of India that reverberates well.



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The document foresees that over the next five years India and the US will strengthen their regional dialogues and make trilateral consultations with third countries in the region more robust and so on. The reference in it to freedom of navigation and overflights, especially in the South China Sea, is clearly pointed at China.

If India-US relations are being strengthened, the expectations of both sides will not be fully met. The US would want India to support its policies in areas most important for it in terms of maintaining its global dominance. In other words, see how India can be optimally fitted into the jigsaw of its global responsibilities.

India, on the other hand, with a narrower geo-political horizon as a fledgling power seeks US support on regional issues, which it may not be able to extend as that may disturb its efforts to maintain regional balances as part of its global agenda.

Which is why the US will not support India on India-Pakistan issues, it will not sanction Pakistan on India-related terrorism issues and will continue to supply arms and military assistance to our neighbor.

The US will counter China where it presents a challenge to US power, but as part of managing a financially and economically intertwined relationship with China, it will cooperate with the latter in areas where its own power stakes are limited.

In other words, it will treat China as potential adversary in the western Pacific, but as a partner in our region, as its willingness to promote a Chinese role in Afghanistan in collaboration with Pakistan shows. The US does not consider the Taliban as a terrorist organization and is willing to accommodate it politically in a Pakistani brokered deal, disregarding Indian security concerns. How can then the counter-terrorism cooperation between India and the US be a defining one for the 21st century?

The US is not taking a position on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor or Gwadar. Which is why, as US officialdom acknowledges, India and the US have 95 percent convergence in the east and 5 percent convergence in the west.

Such realities, in turn, explain India's reluctance to sign the three foundational agreements that the US seeks before advanced technologies can be released to us. A tighter US defense embrace when we do not have common enemies then becomes impolitic, apart from India wanting to maintain its strategic autonomy.

On WTO issues India and the US continue to have differences. The US decision to drag India to the WTO on the issue of local manufacturing requirements in solar energy projects for central government procurement sacrifices India-US cooperation on climate change issues to US corporate interests. India is now threatening to file several complaints against the US in the WTO.

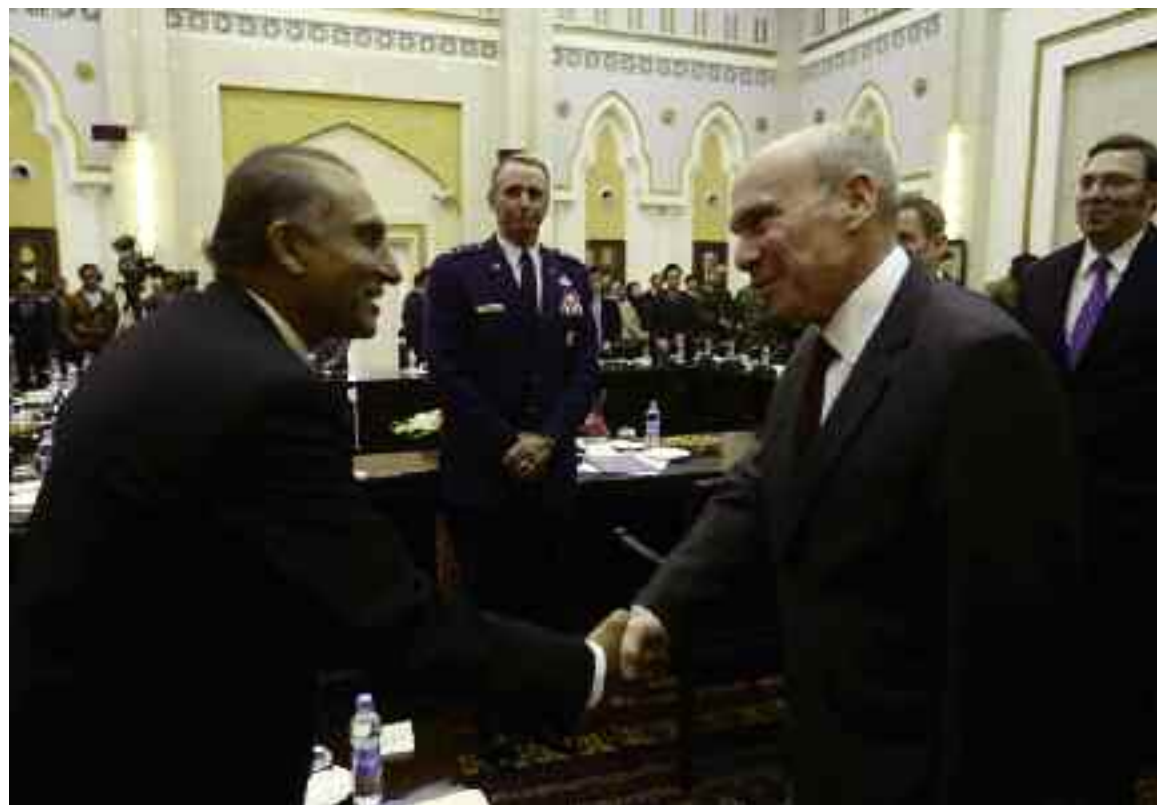
These kind of trade and IPR-related problems will continue to plague the bilateral relationship as corporate interests often drive US policies. The US has not delivered on India's

APEC membership. After repeatedly declaring in joint statements that India is ready for membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the US has so far not done the heavy lifting required to fulfill its commitment.

Despite the nuclear deal, the US establishment seeks opportunities to put pressure on India on nuclear issues as was the case when on the occasion of the Nuclear Security Summit in March Obama expressed concern about the situation in South Asia, implicitly linking India and Pakistan on their nuclear conduct.

On religious freedom issues, the US is the only country that reproaches India — with Obama himself giving unnecessary lectures to India on tolerance on two occasions.

We need a resolution of issues in the IT/ITES sector (outsourcing services). More work need to be done in the area of agricultural technology, exporting synergies in the bio-tech



The heads of a US delegation, right, and Pakistani delegation, left, before a meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 18. The meeting was aimed at laying the ground for a negotiated end to almost 15 years of war in the region against the Taliban.

The question of how India views the lack of US empathy on issues like Pakistan's support to terrorism, Taliban hostility in Afghanistan, and the China-Pakistan collusion has dogged Washington, DC's ties with New Delhi.

and pharmaceutical sectors, enhanced education and skill partnership, life-sciences, infrastructure financing, green financing, coal gasification technologies, access to US fossil fuel reserves including a waiver on non-FTA countries, and so on.

The India-US relationship is being increasingly consolidated but between countries with such power disparities and at such different stages of development seeking convergence of policies will always pose challenges. But the two countries are headed in the right direction.

Ambassador Kanwal Sibal, India's former foreign secretary, served as deputy chief of mission at India's embassy in Washington, DC between August 1992 and September 1995.

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The third visit in March, again, should be seen as virtually inescapable for an Indian leader. Any international conference with the words 'nuclear' or 'terrorism' has to be respected by India and attended by its leader, if held at the summit level. On top of that, this was the Nuclear Security Summit being chaired by Obama and therefore a 'must attend event' even with a busy calendar.

A visit to the European Union headquarters before, and to Saudi Arabia on the way back, served as the book ends for this visit to Washington, perhaps more important than the book in between!

We, thus, arrive at the current visit, a strictly bilateral and with an elevated protocol status, as noted. If we think of all

the different constituencies that Modi has interacted with, it is an impressive list from media moguls, to CEOs and investors, innovators, and rock stars. Scores of influential Congressmen and Senators can be added to it after the visit. 'All the bases' will have been covered before the emergence of either Hillary or Trump at the helm.

Does all of this really answer the more fundamental queries about the nature of the US-India relationship, its limitations or potential pitfalls, its strategic orientation?

Then there is a list of critical, though familiar, questions.

What about the tardy implementation of agreements signed, investments promised, deals struck but not yet delivered?

How should we look at the lack of US empathy on issues of concern to us — Pakistan's support to terrorism, Taliban hostility in Afghanistan, China-Pakistan collusion?

What about the fear that our cozying up to the Americans may create misunderstandings or worse with the Chinese or Russians, or both,

will make us dependent on American defense supplies, entangle us in unnecessary alliances, distort our world view and.... and...?

Ah! These are a different order of concerns, admittedly legitimate. They need to be addressed, but do not detract from the utility of the visits. Every leader has to operate in a given geo-strategic setting and with an institutional capacity that he inherits. For now, let us admit that a robust engagement is a positive in itself and the energy and enthusiasm that Modi brings to it is welcome. We should wish him well.

B S Prakash is a former Indian Ambassador to Brazil and India's Consul General in San Francisco.