

## **Indian Prime Minister's Visit to U.S.**

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrived in Washington on a four-day visit to the U.S. on November 22, 2009. He was the first foreign leader to be hosted as State Guest by the 10-month-old Obama Administration. Besides discussing a wide range of regional and global issues with President Obama, the Indian prime minister met senior members of the U.S. administration, senators and congressmen.

He also attended a business event jointly hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the U.S.-India Business Council where members of the India-US CEOs Forum were also present. He also spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Woodrow Wilson Center, besides meeting members of the Indian American community who are playing an important role in fostering closer ties between the two countries.

Ahead of his departure from New Delhi, Dr Singh had attached a "high priority" to relations with the U.S. and had sought a "sustained and dynamic" partnership between the two countries to meet major global challenges like terrorism, climate change and the economic slowdown.

The visit resulted in India and the U.S. signing six agreements to chart out their ties as "one of the defining relations" in the 21st century. The India-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative, a move to expand collaboration on counter-terrorism, information sharing and capacity building, was initialled by Meera Shankar, India's Ambassador in Washington, and Timothy Roemer, U.S. Ambassador to India. It was also agreed that "resolute and credible steps must be taken to eliminate safe havens and sanctuaries that provide shelter to terrorists and their activities."<sup>1</sup>

The Singh-Obama 21st Century Knowledge Initiative was also launched which will provide U.S. \$ 10 million in combined funding to increase university linkages and support junior faculty development between U.S. and Indian universities. The two sides also initiated their "Green Partnership" to strengthen Indo-U.S. cooperation on clean energy, climate change and food security, reflecting their "commitment to taking vigorous action" to fight climate change. Both the countries also agreed on an MoU on agricultural cooperation and food security to cooperate in crop

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forecasting, management and market information; regional and global food security through the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative; science, technology, and education; nutrition; and expanding private sector investment in agriculture. Renewed bilateral cooperation in the field of intellectual property through an MoU between the Department of Commerce's United States Patent and Trademark Office and the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry was also pledged.

Although Obama was full of praise for India, describing it as a "rising and responsible global power",<sup>2</sup> "indispensable"<sup>3</sup> and; much to the pleasure of the Indians; a "nuclear power",<sup>4</sup> the visit has largely been termed as more focused on symbolism instead of substance. As compared to Manmohan Singh's visit of 2005 which resulted in the signing of the civil nuclear deal, the November 2009 visit did not see any ground breaking agreements. As a matter of fact, the main emphasis of the visit was to find out whether Obama was committed to advancing the bilateral relationship that was envisioned by President Bush. Even prior to the visit, the government in India had made it clear that it did not expect the visit to yield "big-ticket" gains as the main aim was "sizing up" the Democratic dispensation in Washington and striking the right chords with President Barack Obama.<sup>5</sup>

There had been a serious concern in India regarding Obama's foreign policy and the importance he attached to India. Most of the analysts in India point out that India has been missing from all the major policy statements Obama has been making, and the most recent example is Obama's speech in Tokyo in November, where he defined the broad contours of America's engagement with Asia but did not mention India. Furthermore, America's continuous refusal to give the Indians access to David Coleman Headley, accused of plotting attacks in India, has disappointed India. Indian concerns stem from the time Obama was campaigning for presidential elections when he made several references to Kashmir.

The visit was also meant to get a reaffirmation from the U.S. that it was committed to fully implementing the civil nuclear agreement as there were some reservations in India that Washington was viewing the nuclear deal with India as incongruous with Obama's publicly proclaimed goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world. Both the countries have been negotiating an agreement on the reprocessing of U.S.-origin spent nuclear fuel before operationalising the agreement.

However, despite their best efforts, the two sides have not been able to resolve their differences. The disagreement lies in safeguards to ensure

that low enriched uranium supplied by American companies is not reprocessed as weapon-grade fuel and rules for the handling of enriched uranium. Furthermore, India is also expected to enact a law to limit the liability of foreign firms in the event of a nuclear accident.

However, once implemented, the agreement would enable India to enhance its nuclear-weapon capability as the purchase of nuclear fuel from other countries would enable its indigenous fuel to be diverted to its weapons programme. So far, India has signed civil nuclear pacts with a number of countries, Russia being the most recent.

During his meeting with President Obama, Manmohan Singh appraised the president regarding Sino-India relations and expressed his views on an “assertive” China. He also explained how that was being reflected increasingly along the disputed Sino-Indian border. He also brought out the subject of the role China could play in the improvement of India- Pakistan relations in the joint statement issued after Obama’s visit to China. India was upset over the reference to Indo-Pak relations made in a joint statement after Obama’s talks with his Chinese counterpart President Hu Jintao, and rejected the role for any third country. However, at the same time, both India and U.S. agreed that the world has to deal with a rising China and highlighted the need to ensure that the rise is “peaceful”. Their conclusion was that the way forward is through engagement.

It is generally perceived in India that Obama’s reconciliatory policy towards China would facilitate its growing influence throughout Asia-Pacific and South Asia, including India’s “traditional sphere of influence” like Nepal, Sri Lanka or Maldives. Obama’s refusal to meet the Dalai Lama before his visit to China and his lack of attention to human rights issue has intensified Indian concerns.

Although the U.S. has assured India that the U.S.-China joint statement does not give a supervisory role to China to resolve issues between India and Pakistan and both the countries are supposed to resolve their problems bilaterally, it is unrealistic to expect that Obama would continue with the policies of his predecessor. Bush had a different worldview where he wanted to use India’s economic and military strength in order to contain China. Unlike Bush, Obama is more determined to engage China due America’s political and economic interests. In this time of recession, China can play a vital role in not only pulling the world out from the economic crisis but can also strengthen American economy. China is America’s creditor and realising this, Obama is willing to give China strategic space. Therefore, despite praising India’s leadership role in Asia, Obama restrained from equating India with China.

India, on the other hand, does not fully endorse this idea as it argues that rivalries between many Asian countries would ultimately lead to the failure of collective security. According to the Indian view, in order to ensure peace and security in the region, American power, supported by a strong local partnership, would have to take effect, and for that, the U.S. would have to empower its allies both symbolically and materially.

With regard to Pakistan, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh conveyed his reservations to the United States over diversion of military and other kind of aid by Pakistan. He also highlighted India's concerns regarding the "continued threat of terrorism coming out of Pakistan" and emphasised that the U.S. and the international community should put more pressure on Pakistan to crack down on anti-India groups and punish those responsible for the Mumbai terror attacks.

The Indians have been wary of America's engagement with Pakistan on the Afghanistan issue and increase in economic and military aid to Pakistan to fight against the local Taliban. Even prior to his visit, with the motive of maligning Pakistan, Manmohan Singh repeatedly accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorist groups and called on to the U.S. to reassess its policy of granting aid to Pakistan. However, Obama avoided giving any substantial answer on how the U.S. would deal with Indian concerns, and instead said that progress had been seen in Pakistan's fight against terrorism as is indicated by Pakistan military action in the Waziristan region.

India also feels that the U.S. is not consulting it enough and is not appreciating the role it is playing in the development of Afghanistan as is apparent by Indian government's disappointment that India's role in Afghanistan was not even mentioned in Obama's speech on December 2, 2009, when he laid out his new strategy on Afghanistan. It is interesting to note that in order to resolve its internal issues; India has always encouraged dissident groups to come to the negotiating table but vehemently opposes any such effort by the international community to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The fact that Taliban are a part of Afghan society cannot be denied and any solution without taking them on board would never work.

India's growing economy, a huge knowledge-base and its nuclear and defence markets may be attractive to the U.S. However, America's domestic problems, issues like war in Afghanistan, Iran nuclear programme, the Middle East conflict and Obama's efforts to reengage China and Russia, have all led to the loss of geopolitical priority for India.

India aspires to be counted as a regional and global power but fails to realise that this carries responsibilities, and an ability to live at peace with neighbours. The status of regional and global power also demands that India should be more sensitive to the problems of its neighbours. The absence of any appreciation of the efforts and huge sacrifices Pakistan has made in the war on terror would only help strengthen the hands of terrorists and elements that do not wish to see normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan, thereby jeopardising peace and security in South Asia.

## Notes & References

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- <sup>1</sup> "India, U.S. call for credible steps to eliminate safe havens for terrorists", *The Hindu*, November 26, 2009.
  - <sup>2</sup> "India-U.S. sign six MoUs on counter-terrorism", *Indian Express*, November 26, 2009.
  - <sup>3</sup> "India indispensable to the future we want to build: Obama", *The Hindu*, November 5, 2009.
  - <sup>4</sup> "India, U.S calls for credible steps ...", op. cit.
  - <sup>5</sup> "Govt doesn't expect any big-ticket gains from PM's visit to US", *Times of India*, November 21, 2009.