



CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM: THE INDIAN PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

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The impending visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States (US), to attend the United Nations assembly in New York and thereafter meet US President Barak Obama in Washington D.C. (29-30 October), is being seen by many as an opportunity to deepen the engagement between the two countries. While there is a sense of optimism in Washington on improving relations, there is a parallel undercurrent of caution as well.

The optimism stems from the actions of the new government of India. The invitation to the neighbouring heads of States and governments to attend the swearing in ceremony of the new government was viewed positively. The stress on strengthening India's ties within the neighbourhood was further visible in the ensuing visits by senior government officials and ministers including the Prime Minister. The United States is aware of the goodwill India has in the region and wants to leverage India's relations to help stabilise it. This is especially given the fact that, South Asia is witnessing a visible rise in the radical religious school of thought, increasing presence of China and a relatively low influence of the United States.

Nonetheless, there is also a certain degree of realism that has seeped into the thinking, as a result of the diplomatic tensions from the previous year and the overturns of the government. The United States took keen interest in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) talks held in Fortaleza, Brazil in which Prime Minister Modi negotiated for India the presidency of the National Development Bank. It also took note of his recent visit to Japan for improved economic ties and increased defence and security cooperation. The positive response received by the Prime Minister on his visit to Nepal was unprecedented. The visits by government officials to other

countries of the region have also been followed with interest. The statements expressed in these meetings have all pointed to India's renewed engagement policy; with the clear understanding of it augmenting its security and economic development. Neutrality on what the 'West' terms Russia's '*annexation and aggression*' against Ukraine has further shown that India will support its oldest partner, at least for the time being. The two countries already have divergent views on Iran. Further, the visit to the United States will be preceded by Chinese Premier Li Jinping's visit to India, which analysts believe is likely to have an impact. The view being expressed in policy circles in Washington is that India will be *assertive* in its foreign policy decisions as the government enjoys political majority and popular support.

The United States wants to take advantage of the good relations it had with the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was during this period that India and the United States laid the foundation of the relationship that continues to grow today. Aware of the new government's stress on development, the United States is keen to be part of India's future economic agenda and hopes to increase defence and security cooperation with it. This was perhaps, the primary reason for Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker and Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel visiting India within the first 100 days of the new government assuming office. It is indicative of the desire in Washington to '*re-energise*' the relationship and "...build a truly strategic India-US partnership... (that would be)... a significant contributor to regional peace, stability and prosperity in the South Asian region, Asia, and globally."ⁱ Officials from both the US State Department and Defence Department concur there is a natural convergence of India's "Look East Policy" and the "Asia Pacific Re-balance" of the US.ⁱⁱ

The visit by the Indian Prime Minister is significant as it brings renewed focus and sense of purpose into the relations between the world's two largest democracies. "The two leaders will discuss a range of issues of mutual interest in order to expand and deepen the US-India strategic partnership. They will discuss ways to accelerate economic growth, bolster security cooperation, and collaborate in activities that bring long-term benefits to both countries and the world. They will also focus on regional issues, including current developments in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, where India and the United States can work together with partners towards a positive outcome."ⁱⁱⁱ It is hoped that the continuing differences on trade, taxation, nuclear and security issues and US immigration laws would also be on the table.

The United States is vying for a share in the large defence procurements announced by India. There is renewed confidence within the Defence Department and Pentagon on military and defence cooperation with India, particularly on issues of co-production and co-development. They are also optimistic that their past bids for equipment and hardware, for the Indian military on which no decision was taken by the previous government, might be looked at more favourably. The Pentagon is looking for expanded military cooperation especially in the South Asia region and thus stronger defence ties with India, which is beneficial for the United States. The Indian Minister for Defence Mr Arun Jaitley will be visiting the US defence headquarters in October when he will visit Washington to attend the annual meeting of the IMF and the World Bank. The United States hopes for some positive results from this visit as well.

For the moment, however, the focus is on Prime Minister Modi's visit and its outcome. It is unusual for a foreign leader, especially one who is not making a state visit, to go to the White House on two separate days. It is an indication of the importance that India has attained in the policy making agenda of the United States. Washington views India as a democratic counterweight to Asia's emerging powers, nonetheless it is aware that India will always be an independent actor in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS))

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ⁱ US Department of State, "Joint Statement on the Fifth India-U.S. Strategic Dialogue", Accessed on 12 September 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/07/230046.htm>

ⁱⁱ NDTV, "Stronger India is Beneficial For World Peace: US", Accessed on 12 September 2014, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/stronger-india-is-beneficial-for-world-peace-us-585519>

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Visit of Prime Minister Modi of India", Accessed on 12 September 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/08/statement-press-secretary-visit-prime-minister-modi-india>