

Obama in India: Many High Notes, Much Work Ahead



By Teresita C. Schaffer

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As President Barack Obama's plane headed eastward from New Delhi, he left India on a high. The India-U.S. partnership had been lifted out of the apparent slowdown of the past two years. The marquee announcement that the United States supported India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council had the headline-grabbing quality for which India's policy watchers hungered.

Obama's three-day visit produced some real accomplishments that will put more substance into the increasingly important partnership between India and the United States. It also left the two countries with a lot of work to do to realize that potential.

On the bilateral side, the presidential spotlight provided recognition and a few important decisions. The business deals that were announced gave Obama some concrete reasons to call this a "jobs mission." They were important—equal to over half a year's exports—but they also underlined that the U.S.-India economic relationship is fundamentally carried out by the private sector. Businesses are increasing their trade and investment in both directions. This will keep the U.S.-India relationship growing no matter what the governments do.

The decisions unveiled have both economic importance and larger policy importance. The joint statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that three of India's premier military and space organizations will be removed from the U.S. "Entities List," thus making them eligible to import from the United States for the first time since India's nuclear tests: an action that helps both them and their U.S. suppliers. The United States will also "realign" India in U.S. export control regulations, putting it into a more favorable category. This comes on top of major reductions in the burden of U.S. export controls on India over the past five years and removes most of the technology denial regime that had impeded trade and created ill will.

In addition, the United States announced that it intends to support India's full membership in the four multilateral export control regimes: the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group (which regulates chemical weapons material), and the Wassenaar Arrangement (which governs armaments trade). In deciding it wanted to join these groups, India opted to become a participant in those parts of the nonproliferation system that are open to it, rather than standing aloof as it has done for years. The U.S. decision to work toward full Indian membership similarly represents a change in the U.S. perspective, recognizing that control of trade in weapons of mass destruction will be strengthened by having India inside the system, helping to craft and enforce its rules.

Looking beyond the bilateral, President Obama and Prime Minister Singh addressed some of the most difficult problems in India's region. In the immediate South Asian neighborhood, Obama expressed strong U.S. support for India-Pakistan peace efforts, while stating that the United States would not get involved unless asked by both sides. He made clear U.S. solidarity with India's goal of ridding the region of terrorism, and his host was equally forthright in stating that India seeks a peaceful and prosperous Pakistan. Realistically, U.S.-Pakistan relations will remain a sore subject between India and the United States, and India will remain concerned about the possibility of a hasty U.S. exit from Afghanistan. India acknowledges, but it is uncomfortable about, the U.S. perception that it needs to work through Pakistan in Afghanistan.

The regional success story, however, is President Obama's new definition of what India's "region" is. For the past year, senior officials in his administration have lost no opportunity to emphasize that India needs to be seen in a wider Asian context and that the U.S. dialogue with India is based on both countries' desire to see Asia develop as a region with several major players engaging

one another peacefully. The whole structure of Obama's trip was built around Asian democracies. He made a point of mentioning the growing involvement of both India and the United States in East Asia-centered institutions. India and the United States share vital security interests in this larger swath of Asia—peace and secure transit through the Indian Ocean, the continuing peace and prosperity of East Asia, and the desire to see a balance among China, Japan, the United States, India, and other Asian players rather than a single dominant power. The Obama administration has built on what its predecessors left behind to make this shared interest one of the foundations of the U.S.-India relationship.

Finally, at the global level, Obama's endorsement of India's goal of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council was an act of faith. The United States and India have historically had trouble working together multilaterally, especially in the United Nations. This is an arena where the U.S. expectation that its partners will support similar goals runs smack into India's commitment to "strategic autonomy" and its unwillingness to let its foreign policy appear too close to that of any other country. Obama's decision expressed the hope that India and the United States would find a way to collaborate for the good of the world, in spite of this history. Their relatively harmonious experience as members of the G-20—where the two leaders will meet again a few days after the end of Obama's visit to India—may be a hopeful sign. Dealing with the agenda of contentious issues that comes before the Security Council will be a lot of work, and that will begin in January when India assumes a nonpermanent seat.

A growing array of common interests will keep pushing India and the United States together. The two leaders' commitment to extend their consultations to new regions, such as Central and West Asia, will deepen the relationship. So too will the growing dialogue on defense and strategic matters.

But to realize the potential of this partnership, both governments will need to overcome two obstacles. The first is inertia. For the United States, India is not a country in crisis; its neighbors Pakistan and Afghanistan are. The presidential visit lifted India beyond the routine, but such moments in the spotlight don't happen every month. Both countries will need to keep focused on moving forward.

The second challenge comes from the different foreign policy styles the two countries bring to the table—the U.S. history of unequal partnerships and India's commitment to strategic autonomy. These can be reconciled, changed, or overcome, but once again, it will demand a steady hand on the tiller and consistent focus. This may not be the stuff that stirs hearts and generates headlines, but it's essential all the same.

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