

Hemant Krishan Singh: Evaluating Barack Obama's landmark visit

Hemant Krishan Singh

January 31, 2015 Last Updated at 21:50 IST

Beyond the hype and rhetoric which normally accompanies such high-profile events, the unprecedented second visit to India by the president of the United States, Barack Obama, delivered far more than the resounding symbolism of his presence at India's Republic Day.

By establishing a privileged India-US strategic partnership at the apex of India's foreign policy priorities, the visit essentially completed the "Modi-fied" framework to advance India's national interests which has been steadily emerging in recent months.

Guided by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision and energy, India has finally transitioned from the inertia of strategic ambiguity to embrace strategic ambition and relevance. It is no longer non-aligned or even, as some have suggested, multi-aligned. Instead, India's external engagement is now firmly rooted in its long-term economic and security interests and the indispensable partnerships which enable India's rise.

The focus must now rapidly shift towards operationalising this new strategy, for which the appointment of S Jaishankar, the dynamic new foreign secretary, augurs well.

From a domestic lens, it is evident that an Indian government with a stable majority in the Lok Sabha enjoys greater political space to move beyond constricting ideologies of the past and craft a bold new course in tune with contemporary challenges. This factor, and the restoration of India's credibility under PM Modi's decisive leadership, has also prompted the US to scale up its political investment in India's rise. For Mr Obama, who is already on the last leg of his second term, cementing a strengthened relationship with India helps build a positive foreign policy legacy.

The three documents released following the Modi-Obama summit - Joint Strategic Vision, Declaration of Friendship and the Joint Statement - codify an upgraded partnership in which natural affinity and shared universal values are complemented by convergent strategic interests and joint actions.

The Vision document outlines a shared regional security doctrine and draws India firmly within "broader Asia", bridging the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions and defining common objectives on regional norms and security architecture. The welcome extended by the US to India's interest in joining APEC marks a significant advance. Conceptually, India's Act East Policy and the US re-balance to Asia have moved closer.

The India-US Delhi Declaration of Friendship elevates the strategic partnership and proclaims a much higher level of trust and coordination among the two nations. Unlike the now-defunct Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship of 1971, the India-US Declaration does not contain the principle

of collective response to threats. Instead, the Declaration merely enunciates shared national principles and mutual commitments. There is no adverse implication for any third party.

The Joint Statement defines an extensive bilateral agenda, covering economic, defence and security, regional and global issues. The US commitment to partner with India on its development priorities is a welcome change from the contentious disputes over India's trade and investment policies which have marked the bilateral discourse in 2013-14. The operationalisation of the India-US civil nuclear deal reflects a new approach towards the resolution of complex issues. However, progress on a Bilateral Investment Treaty, or a Totalisation Agreement, or indeed constructive engagement on IPR issues, will not be easy. Nor will mutual accommodation on climate change leading up to the Paris Conference at the end of this year, despite the pragmatic stance signalled by PM Modi. India on its part has much work to do on creating an open and predictable climate for investment. Furthermore, there is insufficient recognition of the interlinkages between trade and investment. This must be remedied before India finds itself isolated and marginalised between the competing streams of high quality regional trade agreements under negotiation, RCEP and TPP.

Defence and homeland security cooperation is another component of the enhanced India-US strategic partnership. Apart from the announcement of an expanded 2015 Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship, concrete progress on the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) and a US commitment to help India establish a defence industrial base are of vital importance. If India is to effectively partner with the US (and Japan) on maritime security issues, its military capability, specifically the operational capacity of the Indian Navy, must be bolstered. In this context, the decision to explore cooperation on aircraft carrier technology sharing and design, as well as jet engine technology, is a welcome development.

Endorsement of the role of the leaders-led East Asia Summit (EAS) process in promoting open, balanced and inclusive security architecture in the region, as well as the possible upgradation of the India-US-Japan Trilateral Dialogue, are further to be welcomed. However, the absence of a road map for collaboration to address Af-Pak challenges, particularly Taliban efforts to destabilise Afghanistan, if left unaddressed, can constrain wider security cooperation.

Since September 2014, PM Modi has been successful in forging shared values and common interests driven special partnerships with the US, Japan and Australia to underpin continued regional prosperity and stability. The objective appears to be to create a strategic environment that discourages unilateral assertions, promotes balanced regional institutions for the socialisation of security issues and upholds the observance of established international norms.

The upgraded India-US strategic partnership serves the fundamental economic and security interests of both countries and has the capacity to positively impact the balance of power across the Indo-Pacific to their mutual advantage, and that of their like-minded partners. However, the importance of following through on the mutual responsibilities assumed and the reciprocal commitments undertaken by both India and the US will determine whether this rekindled "natural" partnership will blossom into a "best" partnership.

Hemant Krishan Singh, a former ambassador, is now at ICRIER, New Delhi. This piece was written with Sanjay Pulipaka, also at ICRIER