



The Indian Prime Minister's visit to the United States

*Dr. Stuti Banerjee **

The impending visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US, to attend the United Nations General Assembly in New York and thereafter meet US President Barak Obama in Washington D.C. (29-30 October), is being viewed by many as an opportunity to bring renewed focus on the India-US relationship. The two countries are re-aligning their foreign policy keeping in mind the changing international environment. India has decided to pursue relationships with all major powers to maximise its strategic options and build a multi-polar international order by improving its bi-lateral and through the various multi-lateral organisations. The US Department of State and Department of Defence hold the view that India can play a substantial role in sharing the regional security burden. This safeguards US interests, while allowing it to take a few steps back from active engagement. The US is conscious of the anti-US sentiments widespread in the region, with India perhaps, being the only exception. It wants to leverage India's good relations and influence to help stabilise a region which is witnessing a rise in radical politics, growing influence of non-State actors and terrorist organisations, and a relatively declining influence of the US.

The visit by the Indian Prime Minister could not have come at a more opportune moment for the US. It is in the process of re-thinking its Middle East policy. The crisis in Ukraine has further ensured that the US provide its western alliance partners the promised 'security umbrella'. It is implementing plans for its gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan. In such a situation, the US is looking towards India as a partner to help maintain a secure and stable

environment in South Asia region. The US is aware of the importance that the new government of India has laid on improving ties with the countries of the neighbourhood. The invitation to the neighbouring heads of States and governments to attend the swearing in ceremony of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government was followed by the visits by senior government officials and ministers including the Prime Minister to neighbouring countries. This has helped India garner goodwill amongst its neighbours.

Prime Minister Modi's first visit after assuming office was to Bhutan, which signalled to the Bhutanese leadership the importance and value of Thimphu's partnership to New Delhi. The positive response his visit received from not just the political establishment but also the people of Nepal was extraordinary. The US has followed Prime Minister Modi's outreach to the leaders of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) during the talks held in Fortaleza, Brazil. The US also notes with keen interest his recent visit to Japan for improved economic ties and increased defence and security cooperation. The statements made during these meetings are indicative of India's policy of engagement with a view to strengthening its security and expanding its economic ties. This has created a perception in Washington is that India will be *assertive* in its foreign policy decisions as the government enjoys political majority and popular support.

The impending US visit by Prime Minister Modi has brought with it a sense of purpose into the relations between the world's two largest democracies. The two leaders are expected to "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." It is expected that the continuing differences on trade, taxation, nuclear and security issues and US immigration laws would also be discussed. There is also anticipation that the visit would generate the momentum required to attract US business to invest in India. The Indian diaspora, which plays a significant role in US politics, is eagerly waiting to hear the Prime Minister speak on its role in helping achieve this aim.

The Indian concerns on terrorism emanating out of Pakistan will be the other major issue, along with the situation in Afghanistan, especially with the recent announcement by the al-Qaeda to focus its activities towards India would be raised during the discussion. Consular issues, such as providing more visas for Indian professionals, ensuring a level playing field for Indian companies in the US are some of the other matters that might be discussed between Prime Minister Modi and the US President.

The US is aware of the significance given to economic development by the new government and is keen to be part of India's future economic agenda. It also hopes to increase its presence in the defence and security sector as well. This was perhaps, one of the reasons 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 of the US administration 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." While the White House and the US State Department are trying to improve relations with India in the political sphere, the Pentagon is exploring the possibility of expanded military cooperation especially in the South Asia region. The understanding within the US strategic community is that stronger defence ties with India would be beneficial for the US. India is also aware of the advantages of defence cooperation with US, the leading country in defence research and development.

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 US hopes for some positive results from this visit as well.

**Dr. Stuti Banerjee is a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
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