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India-US Relations: Modi and Obama Begin a New Chapter

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There have been many false dawns before in the uncertain evolution of the relationship between India and the United States. If India and America were estranged democracies during the Cold War, they certainly became more engaged republics since the 1990s. Yet, repeated attempts at elevating it into a genuine strategic partnership seemed to end up nowhere.

But India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Barack Obama ended their second summit meeting in less than four months by proclaiming that a new chapter has begun in bilateral relations. This time around there is good reason to be a lot less sceptical about the ambitions of the two leaders to change the nature and direction of India-US relations.

The principal reason for optimism has been the change of Indian attitude towards America under Modi. While both Obama and his predecessor George W Bush were eager to transform

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the partnership with India, the United Progressive Alliance government in Delhi (2004-14) was ambivalent.

While Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh presided over some path-breaking initiatives in the nuclear and defence domains with the US during 2005, the leadership of his party, Congress, appeared reluctant to embrace America.

Modi, despite his personal problem with America's decade-long denial of a visa when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, put the United States at the centre of his domestic and foreign policy strategies. Obama, too, was quick to see the opportunity to advance the partnership, and invited Modi to the White House immediately after India's general election last year. When Modi surprised him with an invitation to be the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations this year, Obama readily agreed.

If the first summit between the two leaders last September arrested the drift in the bilateral relationship, the second one has set the stage for building a more expansive partnership in the coming years.

The new personal rapport with Obama has helped Modi to find a decisive resolution to some of the outstanding issues with America. Modi also set new strategic goals, including more effective cooperation with America in securing the balance of power in Asia and defeating terrorism in the South Asian subcontinent and beyond.

If wrapping up the unfinished business of civil nuclear cooperation showcased Modi as the problem-solver, his quest for common ground with Obama on climate change suggested Delhi was no longer shackled by sterile slogans of the past.

The outlines of a mutual understanding on implementing the civil nuclear initiative emerged in the last few weeks, as Delhi opened purposeful negotiations with the US on resolving three issues at hand—American concerns about India's Nuclear Liability Act, India's demand for a quick closure on the terms of international safeguards, and Washington's support for India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Although a nuclear deal that satisfied both sides was on the cards, few observers in Delhi were prepared for the developments on climate change, which has long been a site of confrontation between India and the United States. If the virtuousness of India's international policies has been measured in the past by their political distance from the United States, Modi promised to "cooperate closely" with America to conclude an ambitious global climate agreement at the end of this year in Paris.

With Obama standing next to him at the joint press appearance, Modi said India's problem was not about resisting pressure from America on climate change. Sovereign India was confident enough to handle it, Modi suggested. India's real pressures today, Modi said, were about protecting the environment for future generations of Indians from the threats of climate change and global warming. His new approach to climate change is centred on deepening bilateral cooperation with the US on renewable energy and developing cooperation with Washington in multilateral forums. Under Modi, Delhi's entrenched 'Third World-ism' is yielding place to the idea of India as a responsible power.

Besides choosing to upturn India's extended posturing on climate change, Modi outlined his plans for a potentially significant partnership with America in shaping the future of the vast Indo-Pacific region that stretches from East Africa to East Asia. To be sure, promoting Asian balance of power was at the heart of the transformation of the India-US relations in the first term of the UPA government. In the second term, though, the UPA government deliberately began to distance itself from Washington in the name of 'strategic autonomy' and 'nonalignment'. In its second incarnation, the UPA government was also reluctant to deepen maritime security cooperation with the United States in the Indian Ocean.

In his statement with Obama on the joint vision for Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean, Modi decisively repudiated that ambivalence towards the United States. The two leaders also agreed to "develop a roadmap that leverages our respective efforts to increase ties among Asian powers, enabling both our nations to better respond" to the emerging diplomatic, economic and security challenges in the region.

Unlike the UPA that was reluctant to embark on trilateral and quadrilateral partnerships with the United States, Modi and Obama have put the idea of building Asian coalitions at the centre of their regional strategy.

The UPA government justified its ambivalence towards America by citing Chinese concerns. Modi, instead, appears a lot more self-assured in navigating the great power rivalries in Asia and unafraid of building India's comprehensive national power in collaboration with America.

Modi's bet on a more intensive strategic partnership with America has been reinforced by a revised and more ambitious framework for defence cooperation that the two leaders approved. They also identified a number of weapons projects for co-development and co-production.

Equally important is the determination of the two leaders to expand bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism and homeland security. Of particular interest was their emphasis on "joint and concerted efforts to disrupt entities such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, D Company and the Haqqani Network". Modi's India is no longer whining about Pakistan to America; instead it is seeking to strengthen its internal capacities to counter terrorism in partnership with the United States.

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