

Modi's 'new symphony'

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The strategic community in India is divided while explaining the recent US visit of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Unfortunately, the divide is more ideological – in terms of those who support Modi and those who oppose him, than based on hard calculations. His US visit is either eulogised or criticised depending on how they see Modi, rather than what his visit achieved or failed to achieve. Besides, there is another ideological divide between those who see US as a strategic opportunity for India, and those who are inherently anti-US. Both the political parties and the strategic community, to a large extent, are influenced by the above divide. Perhaps the truth of India-US relations and Modi's influence/impact lies in between.

Even the harshest critics of Narendra Modi will agree that his charm offensive not only in the US, but also in other parts of the world, has been the way better than his predecessor Manmohan Singh. Never in the recent history had India had a prime minister as charming as Modi, who could win the hearts and minds of people and media of the world, along with the Indian diaspora. And there lies his problem as well – he is able to perform better in the streets and legislative institutions on the foreign soil. But has he been able to convert them into concrete partnership at the state level? Have these visits, meetings and agreements got something in real numbers?

And of course, the huge Indian diaspora, from Australia to the US, play a substantial role in projecting a positive and at times even an exaggerating perception of Narendra Modi's visit to these countries. Perhaps the diaspora, especially the young generation, identify with this prime minister more than they have with any other in the last two decades. Narendra Modi and his team understand this new phenomenon and its utility, hence going the extra mile.

While critics would argue that there is more theatrics than substance, his supporters would argue that this is just a beginning, and a significant break from the past.

| *China perceives the growing India-US partnership as anti-Beijing*

The New Symphony

Much of what is being witnessed in Indo-US relations was not started by Narendra Modi. The previous government led by the Congress and more importantly Manmohan Singh started the new phase in Delhi-Washington ties. The dialogue about a nuclear deal for India (starting from July 2005 with George Bush as the US President) and its ultimate culmination in October 2008, including the waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in September 2008, was a part of the US initiative to reach out to India. Enough has been written already about the American objectives in getting India into the high table.

For India, it is just not about the nuclear deal. In fact, even after seven years, much needs to be done within India on the agreement if it has to have any meaningful implications. But the nuclear deal is just an expression of what India would want to do vis-a-vis the US. In this context, Modi is following the script that has been already written by Manmohan Singh, George Bush and his successor Obama.

But Modi certainly brings a new zeal into the bilateral relationship. This is where it becomes a "new symphony" in the India-US relations, as it has been commented – even if the orchestra remains the same. Unlike his predecessor Manmohan Singh, who is known for his one-step-forward-two-steps-back approach, Modi is perseverant – both at foreign policy level and within India – in terms of getting things done. Whether it is his "Make in India" initiative or "Swachh Bharat", he is making a serious initiative to follow them through within. True, there are still obstacles in foreign investments, mainly due to the stubborn bureaucracy riddled with corruption and slow progress in

infrastructural growth; however, investors from South Korea and Japan do agree that things are getting simplified. The railway platforms are far from the European standards, but certainly are cleaner today. It is a work in progress.

To an extent, his critics are correct. He has become the visible face of India's foreign policy, rather than Sushma Swaraj and the Ministry of External Affairs. The purists would always argue that institutions and not individuals should lead. But in the South Asian case, the foreign and domestic policies from Nehru and Jinnah to Modi and Sharif (which Sharif is not the question) have always been led by charismatic leadership – political or military. In Modi's case, the Foreign Ministry led by an able Secretary Dr Jaishankar prefers to pursue a quiet yet strong diplomacy. India's success stories in the recent years – Japan, South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka etc – are a result of strong behind-the-scenes homework done by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Modi's visit is more of a culmination of these successful homeworks.

The India-US bilateral movement is neither a “new” development as his supporters would argue, nor a chimera as his opponents would want to believe. India has its own objectives and so does the US. Unlike yesteryears, those anti-Indian Ayotollahs in the US – individuals and institutions both within and outside the Congress, State Department, White House, Pentagon and even the media – have come a long way. While there are still doubters in the Washington, Modi has been successful in consolidating the pro-Indian section while winning more and more of those fence sitters. As this process continues, the India-US relationship is likely to strengthen further.

The above process also coincides with the American interests in the Indo-Pacific and mainland Asia, and their own search for strategic partners. India fits the bill and Modi is making use of it.

The Great Wall

The above mentioned process, however is not unilinear and without fallouts for India. The biggest challenge for India will be the Chinese response. While this was not anticipated by India, when New Delhi was attempting to strengthen its relationship with the US since 2005, it should understand the realpolitik better now. China perceives the growing Indo-US strategic partnership as anti-Beijing. As a result, ties between the two countries have been like a roller-coaster ride. The last decade (2006-2016) witnessed contradictory movement between the two countries when compared to the steady unilinear one during the previous decade (1996-2006). While there have been numerous achievements in the bilateral relationship – trade, visits at the highest levels etc – it also saw recurring border clashes and the much talked about Chinese reservations on the NSG seat for India.

As India moves closer towards the US, its relationship with China is likely to be bumpy. This will have larger implications for India's own objectives in its immediate neighbourhood (South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia) and also on the maritime domain, especially the Indian Ocean. However, this is unlikely to be a one sided movement – either cooperative or conflictual.

India's relationship with the US is not likely to be unilinear either. Though on the upward trajectory, it is bound to be roller-coaster as well. Besides the strong domestic opposition and inherent anti-American sentiment amongst a section cutting across media, strategic community and political parties, larger Indian interests elsewhere will make New Delhi to pursue a cautious foreign policy vis-a-vis the US interests. For example, is India likely to go along with the US completely on the Indo-Pacific and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)? Unlikely. Besides those who believe in the “strategic autonomy” rhetoric, there are serious differences between the two countries.

The Road Ahead

For India and Narendra Modi, there are enough opportunities in foreign policy and equally challenging constraints in pursuing them. While the Modi team insist on the first, his critics emphasise on the second. Perhaps, it is too early to conclude.

However, what is encouraging is the strong drive and energy behind Narendra Modi, and the silent but efficient Ministry of External Affairs under the leadership of Dr Jaishankar. The changes within the ministry – in terms of its

approach and new initiatives to reach out various constituencies within India and outside – have been phenomenal. It is a different story altogether, which most in the rest of the world and even within India do not give them credit for. Perhaps Narendra Modi's exaggerated charm offensive is keeping the good work of the institutions under its shadow. And perhaps, it is a calibrated strategy.

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