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Obama's Asia-Pacific Doctrine: India's options

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President Barack Obama's address to the Australian parliament followed by his active and energetic participation in East Asia Summit (EAS) and Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings in Bali on 18-19 November, 2011, gives a clear and bold message that the United States (US) is gearing for an assertive management of the unfolding strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region. In order to prepare ground for such a message, Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, has been describing the Asia-Pacific region as the new 'pivot' of US global strategy. Obama's address in Australia defines this strategy in detail, almost in the form of a doctrine. It is not yet clear how New Delhi would respond to this new Obama doctrine. Dispelling doubts about the US role in Asia, and defining his new strategic doctrine for the region, Obama said in his Australian address²:

As the world's fastest-growing region – and home to more than half the global economy – the Asia-Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority and that is creating jobs and opportunity for the American people. With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress. As President, I have, therefore, made a deliberate and strategic decision – as

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² All references to Obama's speech here are from 'Full text of Barack Obama's speech to Australian parliament' in <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/national/full-text-of-barack-obamas-speech-to-...> Accessed on 19 November, 2011.

a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends.

In this reassertion of its role in Asia, the US is driven both by security and economic considerations. President Obama said: 'First we seek security, which is the foundation of peace and prosperity.' And for this, he assured, 'reduction in US defence spending will not – I repeat, will not – come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific. As we plan and budget for the future, we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in the region. We will preserve our unique ability to project power and deter threats to peace. We will constantly strengthen our capabilities to meet the needs of the 21st century. Our enduring interests in the region demand our enduring presence in this region'. The seriousness of these words was marked by the upgrading of US-Australian alliance that will enhance US military presence in northern Australia. US has also reinforced, during the past year, its traditional alliances with Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines and Thailand.

In his address to the Australian parliament, President Obama did not forget to mention China. He talked of 'efforts to build a cooperative relationship with China', the overall thrust of his speech, however, left no one in doubt that concerns arising out of a rising and assertive China in the Asia-Pacific will remain the main focus of US strategic role in the region. Throughout the speech, the virtues of human rights and freedoms (especially of 'the Chinese people'), democracy, free markets and freedom of navigation, upholding of international norms and maritime security, including in 'the South-China Sea' were highlighted. Without referring to China by name, Obama drew attention to the incidents where 'men of peace in saffron robes faced beatings and bullets'...where as small acts of courage 'a student posts a blog; citizen signs a charter, an activist remains unbowed, imprisoned in his home, just to have same rights we cherish here today'. Reference to China's oppression in Tibet's control of freedom in the mainland could not be concealed. He surely had China in mind while hailing the democratic systems and saying 'other models have been tried and they have failed – fascism and communism, rule by one man and rule by committee'. It is of interest to note here that just before his parliamentary address and visit to Darwin to launch the upgrading of military alliance with Australia, Secretary Clinton visited Philippines to reinforce US alliance. Standing on the deck of an American warship in Manila Bay, she said: 'We are making sure that our collective defence capabilities and communications infrastructure are operationally and materially capable of deterring provocations from the full spectrum of state and non-state actors.' Back home in Connecticut, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta at the same time was describing the threat that the US faces from 'rising powers like China...'.³

³ In making this statement, Panetta made a slip by including India along with China as a threat. Pentagon however soon made amends to say that mention of India was a mistake, *Times of India*, 19 November, 2011.

India's Place in the Doctrine:

While counting the US allies and friends in its projected role in the Asia-Pacific, Obama welcomed 'India as it "looks east" and plays a larger role as an Asian power', especially in the context of 'America's enhanced presence across South-east Asia'. This echoes what Obama had said in Indian parliament a year earlier during his visit in November, 2010. Then addressing the Indian parliament, Obama had said: 'Like your neighbours in South-east Asia, we want India to not only "look East", we want India to "engage East" because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations'.⁴ Reiterating the same theme, Secretary Clinton said in Chennai on 22 July, 2011; 'India's leadership will help to shape positively the future of the Asia-Pacific. That's why the United States supports India's Look East Policy and we encourage India not just to look east but to engage east and act east as well.'⁵ India welcomes US support for its Asian policies, but the strategic community in India has not been too comfortable with the way these US directives have been articulated. The Indian contention is that it has already for long, been engaging and acting east under its Look East policy. The second phase of this policy that was formally announced by the then-Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha in 2003 clearly projected India's enhanced role in the whole of Asia Pacific region and included not just economic but also defence and security cooperation.⁶ India has significantly expanded its economic engagement and even maritime reach with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region in the following years.

India has not yet officially responded to the new Obama doctrine. There is a remote chance that India will formally endorse the US strategy. If an endorsement comes at all, it would be indirect and with caveats. Two of the core components of Obama doctrine do not seem to be compatible, in principle as also for practical reasons of real-politic, with India's broader strategic view in relation to the Asia-Pacific region. These are, first, the clear thrust on military alliance and, second, the strong undercurrent of China targeting. However, within the constraints of these two points, to which we shall come back later, India is not averse to cooperating with the US in shaping the strategic dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region. While rejecting the rationale of military blocks and alliances, India has traditionally leaned towards the weaker side (then, the Soviet Union), so as to contain the assertive and aggressive stance of the rising power (then the US) in its non-aligned policy during the Cold War years. Obama doctrine has the required elements in it to trigger a subtle and sophisticated new Cold War in Asia between the US and China. China is perceived in India as a rising and assertive power

⁴ For the text of the speech, see <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/full-text-of-obamas-parliament-address/134649-3.html>. Accessed on 19 November, 2011.

⁵ For the full text of the speech, see <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/07/hillary-clinton-urges-india-to-lead-in-china's-neighbourhood>. Accessed on 19 November, 2011.

⁶ For an analysis of India's Look East policy, see S.D. Muni, 'India's Look-East Policy: The Strategic Dimension', ISAS Working Paper No. 121, 1 February, 2011.

while the US decline, not absolute but in relative terms, is widely debated.⁷ Strategic cooperation with the US is seen by India's strategic community in the interest of stable Asian balance.

Areas of Convergence

The US reassertion and enhanced engagement with the Asia-Pacific region suits India's interests in some respects amicably. Within the framework of 'strategic partnership' India has always been willing to work with the US in this respect for the past nearly a decade. The experience of the Indian naval escort for US ships sailing through the Malacca Strait in 2002 may be recalled here. India's then-Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, speaking at Economic Forum in New Delhi, on 28 November, 2005 said 'India and the US can contribute to much better balance in the region'. This was further stressed by the then-Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee to the Shangri-La Dialogue community in Singapore in June 2006: 'In the Asia-Pacific region, India's growing ties with the United States and other countries in North and South America bring with it a commensurate role in the region...India's role is crucial for ensuring and maintaining long-term peace, stable balance of power, economic growth and security in Asia'.⁸

At the same forum in June 2010, Shivshankar Menon, India's National Security Adviser, said that 'the security situation in the Straits of Malacca offers a striking example of the success that results from like-minded countries working together, and most important, we need to build the habits and experience of cooperation that will enable us to deal with the unpredictable challenges that will certainly confront us'. India's Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh had discussions with President Obama in Bali after the latter's address to the Australian parliament. He is reported to have told the US president that 'there are today no irritants whatsoever in our working together in a multiplicity of areas...bilateral, regional and global issues'.⁹ The strategic communities in India and the US are increasingly reverting to the use of a new phrase 'the Indo-Pacific' in their analyses and discourses covering Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific regions. Even the Secretary Clinton used this phrase in October 2011, because according to her, 'the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics, stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas. The region spans two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian – that are increasingly linked by shipping and

⁷ India's Prime Minister had pointed out China's assertiveness as not being understandable, during his state visit to US. See CNN IBN You Tube clip on 23 November, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWEO9eQaus4&noembed=1>. Accessed on 21 November, 2011. This was reported in the Wikileaks cables also, Times of India, 4 September, 2011. In another Wikileaks documents, India's Ambassador Dr S. Jaishankar was quoted to have sought US help in dealing with an assertive and aggressive China. *Indian Express*, 5 December, 2010.

⁸ As quoted in Muni, *ibid*.

⁹ *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 19 November, 2011.

strategy'.¹⁰ Herein lies the geo-strategic rationale for growing cooperation between India and the US, especially in security matters.

An assertive and expanded US presence in the Asia-Pacific region may be harnessed by India in three specific ways. One, this presence ensures that China will not be able to dominate East Asia and there may be no emergence of G2 (US-China duopoly) in Asia. There is a view shared by many that it was the US retreat from Asia that emboldened a rising China to be assertive. Therefore the US re-engagement in the Asia-Pacific will moderate China in its dealings with the Asian countries. In coping with the US assertive and active engagement in the region, China will have less time, effort, and energy to spare, but more caution to observe in its own assertion in the region. China, on its part, suspects that through its renewed activism, US is pursuing a strategy of containing China in the region and India is gradually being enlisted as a partner in this strategy. To a certain extent, this Chinese concern, whether real or perceived, provides India with a 'US card' in its relations with China. The fear of Indo-US collaboration, that is frequently voiced in the officially sponsored Chinese media, may keep China soft and, hopefully accommodative, towards India on some of the critical and sensitive bilateral issues so as to avoid creating any reason that could drive India closer to the US. Both the US and India are careful in saying or doing anything to suggest that their mutual cooperation is directed against China or any other country, but the two together decisively tilt the Asian balance in their favour, to the detriment of China.

Secondly, repeated US references endorsing India's aspirations for playing its larger and legitimate role in Asian and world affairs has been taken note of in New Delhi for the past decade. India would carefully assess as to what extent the new Obama doctrine will provide a concrete boost to India's aspirations in the region. On its own, India has been increasing its economic and strategic engagement with various countries of the region. India looks towards cooperation with the US in the Asia-Pacific region as a facilitating factor in expanding and consolidating this engagement with the key regional players like Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea and members of ASEAN. This will give India greater confidence and initiative in extending its strategic reach to and strengthening its trade and investment regimes with the countries of the region. India's growing strategic partnership in the recent years with the strong US allies like Japan, Australia and South Korea could not have been possible without strategic synergy between India and the US. One wonders if there is any invisible US factor in instances like Australia's latest decision to favourably review and revise its policy of uranium exports to India.¹¹ Following on the coordinated tsunami relief operations in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 with the US, Japan and Australia, India has

¹⁰ See, Shyam Saran, 'Mapping the Indo-Pacific', *The Indian Express*, 29 October, 2011.

¹¹ Disapproving of the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announcement on the review of uranium export policy to India, Gavin Marshall wrote 'Blindly following bad US policy is neither in our best interest nor the world's'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 21 November, 2011.

been willing to undertake more of such coordinated actions for peace and stability in the region. There have been some reservations, which may be melting away in due course of time, on the part of Japan and the Australia, as they do not want to abet Chinese suspicions of joining any grand US strategy to contain China. All these countries, along with Singapore, however, participate in the bilateral Indo-US Malabar naval exercises since 2007 that is being closely monitored by China. There is also a new US move to institutionalise a trilateral meeting of US-Japan-India to discuss regional issues. The first meeting is expected to be held before the end of 2011.

Thirdly, new opportunities for India and the US to collaborate in the Asia-Pacific region will also reinforce India's broader bilateral cooperation with the US in the areas of technology transfers, military modernisation and economic development. India also looks towards greater support from the US in the areas like its permanent membership of the UN Security Council, joining the strategic global decision making groups like the Nuclear Suppliers Group and participation in G20. Greater Indo-US partnership in the Asia-Pacific region will also ensure, as India may like to expect, greater US support for India's concerns and priorities in other Asian regions like South and Central Asia.

India's Concerns

Whatever be the opportunities that arise from the new Obama doctrine for strengthening Indo-US strategic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, they come wrapped in concerns, anxieties and challenges for India. To begin with, India has to guard against any compromise in its foreign policy autonomy while working together with the US in maintaining Asian balance. It also has to ensure that the countries of the region do not view India as playing just a second fiddle role to the US. In spelling out his Asia-Pacific doctrine, President Obama has clearly underlined the continuing leadership role for the US in the region. In this leadership role, the prospects of the US intervention and encroachment cannot be ruled out, though US leadership seems to be cautious of the fact that such moves driven by the habit of unilateralism have not served the US interests best in the past. It also remains to be seen as to what extent, the US role will go in support of its military alliances in the region and the ideological agenda of the doctrine. In the unlikely situation of China taking any offensive action against the countries of the region, like Philippines or Vietnam, under the pressure of its nationalist and hardline constituencies, as also post-2012 new leadership, what would be the US reaction?

Vietnam may not be the formal US ally, but Philippines is. It is not clear if the US-Philippines mutual defence commitments entered under the 1951 treaty would apply to any conflict involving the Philippines in South China Sea. India may be expected to take the US side if such conflicts or even tensions are precipitated, but will India find it possible and prudent to do so? It's not only India but other regional countries like Malaysia and Indonesia

have also expressed reservations that the Obama doctrine, as it is defined with emphasis on military alliances, will generate tensions in the region. Indonesian military is acutely concerned that frequent naval movements and military exercises by the estimated 2,500 US marines, based close to Indonesian shores in northern Australia, may make them uncomfortable. Likewise, India has to take into account that increased US activities in the region may not impinge adversely on its own strategic space.

India shares with the US, values of democracy, freedom and human rights. But it does not approve of the US methods to protect and promote these values through intervention and regime change. India has not endorsed the use of force, though sanctioned by the UN under the 'responsibility to protect' in situations like Libya. It has had serious differences with the US on forcing Myanmar on the path of democracy through sanctions and diplomatic pressures. In Southeast Asia, the understandings and practices of the values of democracy, freedom and human rights are vastly different from those of the US and Europe. Any aggressive moves by the US in the Asia-Pacific region in support of these moves will not go well for India. Like many other countries in East Asia, India is also concerned if any intensification of US-China tensions in the region result in adversely affecting the evolution and growth of institutions like the EAS or the ASEAN architecture, which may become the main playground of competition between these two major powers.

The challenge that the new US strategy of Asia-Pacific assertion poses before India is that its support for this strategy should not lead to increase tensions and hostilities from China. As already mentioned, China views the prospects of any Indo-US collaboration in Asian affairs as detrimental to its own core interests in the region. Any perception of such collaboration may harden China's already un-accommodative instance on critical bilateral issues like the unsettled border in the Himalayas and lead China to intensify its competition and containment of India in its sensitive South Asian neighbourhood. This may also adversely affect Sino-Indian cooperation in various other areas like trade and economic engagement, climate change issues and search for multi-polar world. India would be very keen to avoid such developments.

After meeting the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in Bali, Dr Singh remarked: 'We are committed to developing the best of relations with China...strategic and formulated relationship. We are neighbours and also to large extent great economies of Asia. We should cooperate on the issues regional, bilateral and global.' In these discussions, India reiterated its position on energy cooperation with Vietnam, and explained the raising of defence forces in Arunachal Pradesh as China entertains reservations on both these issues.¹²

¹² Report by CNN IBN TV network. <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/start-ntrade-but-within-our-laws-pm-to-obama/203568-3.html>. Accessed on 21 November, 2011. Also see 'assertive India'.

Lastly, the US policy of ‘drawdown’ in Afghanistan and assertive presence in the Asia-Pacific has opened new areas of active engagement and initiatives in India’s Asia policy. This was evident in the conclusion of India-Afghanistan strategic partnership Agreement concluded in October 2011, and this will be evident in the US expectations out of India in the Asia-Pacific. In this entire Asian arc, India’s competition is directly with China which has far more resources and focused plan of action than any other country including India. India’s democratic decision making, where diverse interests and stakeholders have to be kept on board on every significant policy initiatives and move, constitutes considerable constraints. There are also constraints of economic resources, bureaucratic manpower and institutional resilience that are required to be invested in pursuance of foreign policy aspirations and strategic outreach. Besides its own resource constraints, India is also not unaware of the economic burden that Obama’s doctrine will have to carry for its effective execution. An American scholar Robert Kelly has argued:

The US is now borrowing 40 cents of every dollar it spends; the deficit is US\$1.5 trillion (160% of South Korea’s entire GDP); the debt is almost US\$10 trillion, the IMF predicts. America’s debt-to-GDP ratio will exceed 100% by the end of the decade and integrated US national security spending tops US\$1.2 trillion, 25% of the budget and 7% of the GDP. These are mind boggling figures that all but mandate some manner of US retrenchment from its current global footprint. ¹³

In view of these constraints, India’s response to the US expectations in the Asia-Pacific will be cautious, careful and issue based. That may not be necessarily damaging to the Indo-US strategic partnership, as the US seldom expects a complete compliance of its strategic priorities by India. The Indo-US strategic partnership has evolved along with their mutual differences on a range of issues including Iran, those related to the Arab Spring, Pakistan and the nuclear liability provisions. It will accordingly continue to evolve even when differences crop up between India and the US on critical and sensitive strategic issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

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¹³ As quoted in M.K. Bhadrakumar, ‘Hindu art of double hedging against China’, <http://atimes.com/atimes/printN.html>. Accessed on 19 November, 2011.