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United States-India Strategic Dialogue: Still Waiting for Obama?

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Abstract

The recently concluded inaugural United States-India Strategic Dialogue held in Washington from 1 to 4 June 2010 has been hailed by the United States (US) administration as a symbol of deepening ties between the two countries. However, there are several questions being raised in policy circles about the dearth of any concrete 'deliverables' from this much publicised event. Such voices have once again revived the debate about the Obama administration's sincerity and ability to raise the US-India relationship to the heady heights forged during the previous Bush administration.

In the run-up to the US-India Strategic Dialogue, the Obama administration released its *National Security Strategy* (NSS) report in which it saw India, together with China and Russia, as 'key centres of influence' with which the US will work 'to build deeper and more effective partnerships'. It goes further to add that 'working together through our Strategic Dialogue and high-level visits, we seek a broad-based relationship in which India contributes to global counter-terrorism efforts, non-proliferation, and helps promote poverty-reduction, education, health and sustainable agriculture'.² The Strategic Dialogue had a wide range of issue areas on its agenda, stretching from energy, agriculture, science and technology, health and education, defence and counter-terrorism.³ The language and tone of the joint statement

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² *National Security Strategy* (May 2010), www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

³ Narayan Lakshman, 'US-India Strategic Dialogue to cover entire gamut of ties', *The Hindu* (30 May 2010), www.thehindu.com/2010/05/30/stories/2010053056541000.htm. Accessed on 11 June 2010.

released at the end of the Strategic Dialogue broadly echoed references to India in the NSS report. It saw India and the US pursuing a 'global strategic partnership' on the basis of 'common ideals as well as security and economic interests'.⁴

Despite the rhetoric (and the fact that President Obama broke protocol in attending a US State Department reception for India's External Affairs Minister, S.M. Krishna), there is hesitation in several quarters in attaching too much significance to the rhetoric emanating from this particular meeting. Such hesitation is grounded in the realisation that in several key issue areas, there is still significant distance between the two countries – distance which this particular set of meetings did not seemingly address in any significant manner.

The first of these issue areas is Afghanistan. The joint statement 'reiterated their shared interest and commitment to a stable, sovereign, democratic and pluralistic Afghanistan' as well as emphasising that 'India and the US committed to regularly consult with each other on Afghanistan'.⁵ Beyond these broad proclamations, the main bone of contention between the two sides is Pakistan and India's role in Afghanistan. With regards the former, any kind of political solution in Afghanistan which provides for the Taliban's involvement (an idea the US administration seems resigned to) will offer Pakistan the kind of role it seeks in Afghanistan and would be objectionable to India.⁶ With regards to India, senior US officials have been somewhat wary of India expanding its role from developmental assistance to providing training to the Afghan army, largely to assuage Pakistani objections.⁷ In a priority policy issue area for both countries, the distance is significant. The US has said it sees Pakistan as 'indispensable' and India as 'very important' in the context of its policy on Afghanistan.⁸ From the Indian perspective, this approach does not afford due consideration for Indian interests in Afghanistan vis-à-vis Pakistan. It remains to be seen if both sides can push their strategic interaction to the next level without meaningfully negotiating this gap over Afghanistan in the near future.

⁴ Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State, *US-India Joint Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement* (4 June 2010), www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/06/142645.htm. Accessed on 12 June 2010.

⁵ *US-India Joint Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement*.

⁶ For details of this India-Pakistan 'struggle' over Afghanistan vis-à-vis US policy, see Simon Tisdall, 'India and Pakistan's proxy war puts Afghanistan exit at risk', *The Guardian* (7 May 2010), www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/06/india-pakistan-afghanistan-exit. Accessed on 8 June 2010.

⁷ On the eve the Strategic Dialogue, in a session with reporters, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Robert Blake, when asked about public Pakistani misgivings on India providing training to the Afghan army, sought to downplay the amount of training India provided. Instead, he sought to highlight the 'very important role with the \$1.3 billion in assistance they (India) provided to date, mostly in infrastructure and other kinds of reconstruction projects, but also capacity building and training and so forth'. See United States Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, *Assistant Secretary Robert Blake on US-India Strategic Dialogue: Blake answers questions on India, Afghanistan and Pakistan* (28 May 2010), www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/June/20100601143045SBlebahC0.2188793.html. Accessed on 8 June 2010.

⁸ 'US says Pakistan indispensable in Afghanistan', *Dawn* (4 June 2010), www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/us-says-pakistan-indispensable-for-success-in-afghanistan-460. Accessed on 9 June 2010.

The second issue concerns Iran and its nuclear programme. India's vote for an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution censuring Iran in November last year at Vienna led many to suggest that the former had hitched itself onto the bandwagon of the US' Iran policy. However, Indian foreign policy very recently seemed to have taken a step back on this issue, by way of welcoming the recently announced Turkey-Brazil nuclear fuel swap deal.⁹ The Iranian government-run press also reported on Minister Krishna's visit to Tehran in May 2010 (to attend the G-15 summit) in highly positive terms, quoting him as saying that 'India praises Iran for fighting for its rights', a statement which would have made for difficult reading in Washington.¹⁰ Most recently, the US has confirmed publicly that both countries had divergent views on the subject of Iran's nuclear programme.¹¹ As India attempts to straddle between demonstrating its credentials as a responsible nuclear weapons power and maintaining an independent course towards Iran, both the US and India will have to revisit potential points of convergence on this issue sometime in the near future. Their inaugural Strategic Dialogue does not seem to have made significant headway on this count. Practising meaningful 'global partnership' on global issues will however require exactly such a convergence.

The third issue is enabling the functioning of the US-India civilian nuclear deal and facilitating high technology exports from India to the US. Minister Krishna, in striking a reassuring note, 'said his government is committed to implementing a 2008 civilian nuclear deal with the US'.¹² However, for that to happen, India's parliament needs to pass a domestic Nuclear Liability Bill, which provides for caps on financial liabilities for nuclear reactor manufacturing companies in the event of a nuclear mishap. This has become the most difficult enterprise for the current Indian government, with fierce criticism springing from both opposition parties and certain sections of India's civil society.¹³ The failure to pass this domestic legislation and activate the 2008 US-India civilian nuclear deal will be a huge knock to one of the most historically significant milestones of the US-India relationship.

⁹ For an insightful analysis on India's position on this issue see M. Bhadrakumar, 'India's course correction on Iran', *Asia Times Online* (22 May 2010), www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LE22Df02.html. Accessed on 11 June 2010.

¹⁰ 'India hails Iran's fight for right', *Press TV* (18 May 2010), www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=126884§ionid=351020101. Accessed on 9 June 2010.

¹¹ 'No uniform view with India on Iran: US', *Hindustan Times* (8 June 2010), www.hindustantimes.com/No-uniform-view-with-India-on-Iran-US/Article1-551956.aspx. Accessed on 12 June 2010.

¹² Ashish Kumar Sen, 'India assures US on 2008 nuclear deal', *Washington Times* (2 June 2010), www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/jun/2/india-assures-us-on-2008-nuclear-deal/. Accessed on 7 June 2010.

¹³ This criticism has gathered even more pace with the recent verdict by an Indian court on the criminal trial of several people accused in the Bhopal gas tragedy. See 'Bhopal verdict fallout: Focus back on nuclear bill', *Hindustan Times* (9 June 2010), www.hindustantimes.com/Bhopal-verdict-fallout-Focus-back-on-nuclear-bill/Article1-555170.aspx. Accessed on 13 June 2010.

On the issue of high technology transfer, there seemed to be little progress on the slow pace of liberalising high technology exports from the US to India, at the conclusion of the Strategic Dialogue. In their joint statement, in reference to the issue of ‘high technology’, both sides were ‘committed to approach the issue of export controls in the spirit of the strategic partnership between the two countries’, indicating no immediate tangible advancement in this area.¹⁴ India’s frustration in this regard relate to both general restrictions as well as the specific sanctions against such leading Indian establishments as the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). Despite sounding upbeat, Minister Krishna’s frustration was apparent when he told a business forum in Washington that ‘we have given a number of written assurances that US technology will enjoy the level of security stipulated by the relevant US laws and... (that) these controls are not only anomalous but also a hindrance to furthering trade and investment in this particularly significant sector of our economies’.¹⁵ Once again, it remains to be seen if some variety of progress can be achieved in this crucial area in the months ahead.

President Obama is expected to visit India in November this year and many see this particular Strategic Dialogue as a preparatory meeting for this important visit. There is thus a sentiment in certain quarters that the success of this inaugural Strategic Dialogue should be not gauged prematurely but rather at the end of Obama’s trip in November.¹⁶ This section of opinion feels that this high-level meeting should be recognised as significant particularly because it demonstrates the continuing dedication on both sides to publicly stress the importance the bilateral relationship.¹⁷ However, not everyone shares this optimism, especially within India. There are many in India who do not seem particularly enthused about the US proclamations about India being its global partner and the US stress on building a long-term ‘strategic’ relationship. For some, like seasoned Indian defence analyst K. Subrahmanyam, the bilateral dialogue now needs also to deliver on tactical aspects after all the talk about ‘strategic goals’, which framed the tenor of the Indo-US joint communiqué back in November 2009.¹⁸ Tangible deliverables are a key part of such tactical goals. India will now await Obama’s visit in November 2010. In terms of concrete progress in crucial areas, India will hope it does not have to keep waiting too long beyond that.

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¹⁴ *US-India Joint Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement*.

¹⁵ C. Raja Mohan, ‘India expects early liberalisation of US technology exports’, *Indian Express* (4 June 2010), www.indianexpress.com/news/india-expects-early-liberalisation-of-us-high-technology-exports/629354/. Accessed on 9 June 2010.

¹⁶ ‘Obama looking for “ambitious results” from India visit’, *The Economic Times* (8 June 2010), <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/Politics/Nation//articleshow/6022640.cms>. Accessed on 13 June 2010.

¹⁷ K. P. Nayar, ‘S.M Krishna’s visit to Washington will bolster Indo-US ties’, *The Telegraph* (Kolkata) (9 June 2010), www.telegraphindia.com/1100609/jsp/opinion/story_12542234.jsp. Accessed on 12 June 2010.

¹⁸ K. Subrahmanyam, ‘Partners, not allies’, *Indian Express* (31 May 2010). Accessed on 7 June 2010.