

ISAS Brief

No. 183 – 28 December 2010

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World Powers Beeline to Delhi

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Abstract

The world's five nuclear and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) veto wielding powers came calling on India in a short period of six months in the latter half of this year. They were essentially driven by their respective economic and strategic interests, but the message that these visits emit is loud and clear, namely that India has emerged as a major strategic player in the Asian and world affairs. One hopes that India will use its economic and strategic clout for not only augmenting its own status and capabilities, but also in contributing towards prosperity, stability and security in the region and the world.

It is unusual for a country to host four heads of state/government in a short span of six weeks. India has had this experience between the first week of November and the third week of December 2010 when the United States (US) President Barack H. Obama (6-8 November 2010), French President Nicolas Sarkozy (4-7 December 2010), the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (15-17 December 2010) and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (20-21 December 2010) visited. If the new British Prime Minister David Cameron's visit on 27 to 29 July 2010 is included in this list, it would be all the five nuclear and UNSC veto wielding powers (P-5) visiting India in less than six months. Each of these visits was significant in its own right, but India received President Obama with much gusto and enthusiasm. He was the only dignitary accorded the privilege of addressing a joint session of the Indian parliament. President Obama in turn boasted that his was the longest 'Presidential stay in India' from the US.

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What drove these visits? The competition among the leading powers for a share in India's burgeoning market and the growing strategic significance of India. The world leaders came with huge business delegations. They succeeded in concluding impressive trading and investment deals and identified prospective new business proposals. These deals were to create thousands of badly needed jobs back home in the declining economies of the US and Europe. To institutionalise and sustain the flow of business between India and the visiting countries, bilateral CEOs Forums were energised. Such forums were constituted where they did not exist, like with Britain and China.

India's market size has become especially lucrative for the American and European economies with the opening of its civil-nuclear and defence sectors. However, technical glitches persist in the proper harnessing of these sectors. India's nuclear liability bill, for instance, is not seen as being fully compatible with the interests of the major suppliers. As a result, expected deals could not be finally clinched with the US, Russia and France. It is hoped that India will address their concerns soon. However, during President Sarkozy's visit, agreements for collaboration in research and setting up of joint nuclear power projects between Indian and French companies/agencies were inked.² Prime Minister Cameron assured that traditional British condition of not supplying civil-nuclear technology to non-NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) states will not be allowed to come in the way of India-United Kingdom (UK) cooperation in this field. India placed billions of dollars worth of orders for defence purchases with the Russian, US, UK and French companies during these visits. The issues of conditionality, transfer of technologies, prices and dependability of supplies continue to weigh on India, hindering further cooperation between India and these countries in defence purchases. Russia, which continues to be the major defence supplier to India, is also not free from these issues.

It is however interesting to note that China, even without having a cooperative engagement with India either in the field of civil nuclear energy or defence, emerges as its strongest bilateral trading partner among all visitors. A new target of doubling the India-China trade to US\$100 billion by 2015 was set during Premier Wen's visit. China has promised India to address India's concern regarding the growing negative trade balance which presently stands at nearly US\$20 billion. It was India's reservations on China's unfair trading practices like dumping and the links of some of the major Chinese companies with its defence establishment that has withheld India from accepting the proposal of Free Trade Agreement with China.

India has become acutely aware of its market potential for the world's major economies. Big Indian entrepreneurs like the Tata group, Mittals, Ambanis are becoming important economic players, providing thousands of jobs and creating valuable assets in the US, UK, and France. Indian investments are also increasing in Russia and China. During these high profile visits,

² Ministry of External Affairs, India, Press Release, 'India-France: Partnership For the Future' (6 December 2010).

India seemed willing and well prepared to deploy this newfound economic clout for extracting long-term economic and strategic gains. Economically, India sought access to high-technology and energy sources, as well as mobilising investments for its infrastructure projects, which in the coming decade may need US\$750 billion of expenditure. Strategically, India sought endorsement of its aspirations for a permanent seat in the UNSC, which was explicitly and categorically accorded by all the visitors with the exception of Chinese Premier. Premier Wen stuck to the usual Chinese formulation, ‘China...understands and supports India’s aspiration to play a greater role in the United Nations, including in the Security Council’.³ The US has so far been wavering on this issue, but in order to make his visit a landmark event like that of his predecessor George W. Bush, President Obama enthusiastically committed his country to supporting the process of reforms in the UNSC and India’s seat in it as a permanent member.

India also secured firm commitment from its hosts in fighting terrorism and cooperating in all aspects of counter-terrorism. With the exception of China, all the visitors, addressing Pakistan, asked for bringing the perpetrators of the Mumbai terrorist attack (26 November 2008) to the book. The British Prime Minister rather bluntly asked Pakistan to stop ‘exporting terrorism to India’, which was obviously resented strongly in Islamabad.⁴ The Chinese Premier refused either to mention the Mumbai terror attacks or Pakistan’s role in it. He was lucky for not being exposed to the media or public questioning on this issue unlike the US President who was equally resistant to blaming the Pakistani state for involvement in the Mumbai attacks. Both Obama and Wen had their own respective compulsions. President Obama needs Pakistan for his war on terror in Afghanistan and China is an all weather friend of Pakistan bordering its turbulent sensitive regions and serving its regional interests. It is to keep Pakistan in good humour that China shies away from accepting its border with Kashmir as a part of the Sino-Indian border.⁵

The western powers and Russia are not only massaging India’s aspirations for a global power status, but acknowledge it as such particularly in the context of anxiety and instability stirred in Asia and the world by a rising and increasingly assertive China. President Obama’s remarks that ‘India has risen’ and his proposal, endorsed by the French, Russian and British leaders, to support India’s participation in the global strategic decision-making bodies, ranging from Nuclear Suppliers Group to Missile Technology Control Regime to G20, underline this acknowledgement. President Obama’s prodding to India to play a greater role in East Asian and Pacific affairs and President Medvedev’s support for India to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are surely China specific indications. It remains to be seen how India would use its economic clout and strategic

³ Paragraph 17, India-China Joint Communiqué (16 December 2010), Ministry of External Affairs, India.

⁴ *The Guardian* (28 July 2010). He said this while addressing Indian business leaders in Bangalore. He prefaced his remarks by saying that he had discussed Pakistan with the US President before coming to India.

⁵ ‘Chinese media has different border claim’, *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi (20 December 2010).

significance, highlighted during these visits, in promoting security and stability in Asia and the world.

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