

ISAS Insights

No. 265 – 8 October 2014

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Modi's Major-Power Diplomacy

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Abstract

he flurry of summit talks that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi held with the highest-ranking leaders of Japan, China, and the United States in September 2014 is likely to determine New Delhi's place in Asia's emerging Arc of Power Politics at this moment. This arc has been conceptualised as a confluence of these four countries which have differential interests. Modi's major-power diplomacy, as evident on this occasion, turned into a balancing act of interacting with Japan and the US, often seen as China's rivals, in the context of a Sino-Indian military standoff. In the event, Modi's talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping acquired the aura of success, with the military standoff ending peacefully.

China as Asia's ascendant superpower, Japan as a power aspiring for resurgence, and the United States as the current global superpower are pivotal to India's national interest under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His sequential meetings with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo, Chinese President Xi Jinping in New Delhi, and US President Barack Obama in Washington in September 2014 have placed India in the vortex of the emerging Asian arc

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of power politics. China is at the geographical and geopolitical centre of this arc, while Japan and India find themselves on either side of China within this zone. Significantly, the external US, which continues to see itself as a permanent ‘resident power’² in the overlapping Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions, will be a central player in this arc.

The economic and military coefficients of China, Japan, India, and above all the US justify the conceptualisation of an emerging Asian arc of power politics, configured as a confluence of these four countries. Surely, Russia, with an Asia-Pacific outpost, is China’s most critical strategic partner at this time. India, too, can boast of a lingering, if not necessarily durable, “special and privileged” partnership with Russia. However, Russia’s regional interests in the Asiatic segment of the Indo-Pacific zone are not of the same intensity as those of China, Japan, India, and the US. This should explain the configuration of this arc as conceptualised here.

As of now, the emergence of this arc is being driven by four factors: (1) ascendant China’s efforts to set regional and global security-related and economic norms; (2) the persistent China-Japan tensions; (3) America’s continuing efforts to stay ahead of all other countries in Asia and everywhere; and (4) the unsettled Sino-Indian equation

From India’s standpoint, two logical aspects of Modi’s flurry of summitry in September 2014 are (1) his political comfort-level with these leaders, and (2) more importantly, the quotient of India’s ‘gains’ in respect of each of his three summit meetings under focus here.

Smiles and Subterranean Tension

As for Modi’s political comfort-level, insofar as this can be discerned from the present-day video-graphic public diplomacy, his meetings with Abe in Kyoto and Tokyo were of picture-perfect personal ‘chemistry’. The highlight surely was the traditional tea-ceremony in Tokyo, at which Abe found Modi to be very relaxed indeed.

On 17 September, Xi, dressed in non-formal attire, spent some time with Modi at the simple but serene Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, the principal abode of Mahatma Gandhi, who

² US’ status as a ‘resident power’ in the Asia-Pacific region is a standard formulation. This was particularly emphasised, on 31 May 2008, by the then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates at the 7th Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) organised in Singapore by The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The author, present at that Summit, had noted this.

had led India's non-violent struggle for freedom from Imperial Britain. The 'charkha' (a rudimentary cotton-spinning wheel), which Mahatma Gandhi had popularised as a symbol of empowerment of the poor Indian subjects under Imperial Britain, attracted Xi's interest and attention. In yet another informal event on the same day, Modi accompanied Xi and his wife, China's First Lady, for a stroll along a riverfront in Ahmedabad. There was only one message that the video-clips³ of those events conveyed – an unusually positive Sino-Indian comfort-level at the highest political echelons.

More important was the Sino-Indian official atmospherics on the following day, 18 September, when Modi and Xi met in New Delhi for their formal summit talks. In the public domain, Modi and Xi betrayed no sign of the open or subterranean tension that might have been evident during their summit. This was particularly significant, because the international media was, by then, agog with the news of summit-concurrent military standoff between the two countries at the un-demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC) along their disputed boundary. A silver lining at this time, as indeed with the past cases of military 'face-off' along the disputed Sino-Indian border in recent years, was that there was no fire-fight between the two sides. However, the point to note is that Xi and Modi went about talking, as if there was nothing amiss on the Sino-Indian front as they conferred. Surely, there was no cover-up by either side, as the news of this Sino-Indian border stand-off, at a couple of remote and climatically-inhospitable places, was public knowledge by the time the Xi-Modi summit took place.

Obviously, a substantive matter is why and how Modi and Xi managed to hold their summit talks with perfect civility in the public domain. After the summit, Modi did in fact emphasise that "[even] as we discussed how to strengthen [bilateral] cooperation, we have also exchanged views on outstanding differences in our relationship in a *spirit of candour and friendship*".⁴ By any stretch, this remark was not even a subtle reference to the then-ongoing military standoff at a couple of places along the disputed Sino-Indian boundary.

However, it appears that both leaders knew that the military stand-off, which was not allowed to punctuate or derail their summit talks, had indeed begun around 1 September. Modi was then in Tokyo, enjoying the hospitality of the Japanese leader whom Official China loves to

³ The video-clips of these events on 17 September 2014 were posted on the website of the Prime Minister of India, www.pm.nic.in

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Press Statement by Prime Minister during the visit of President Xi Jinping of China to India (September 18, 2014), www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24014/Press+Statement+by+Prim... (Accessed on 22 September 2014)

hate.⁵ On that day, Modi castigated China, indirectly but significantly, for its alleged “ideology of expansionism”⁶ (*Vistaarvad* in Modi’s Hindi) in the current 21st Century which, in his view, must be dominated by the “ideology of progress” (*Vikasvaad*). In the context of those remarks by Modi, a Chinese official spokesman saw no reason why he should criticise the Indian leader for a comment that did not cite China by name. As a result, Modi’s comment was seen to have blown over as just a storm in a teacup.

A Calculated ‘Risk’

New Delhi’s statement on 30 September about the China-India “disengagement” shows that their bloodless military stand-off, in public focus during the timeframe of the Modi-Xi summit on 18 September, had indeed begun on the first day of that month itself.⁷ It is, therefore, clear that Modi had taken a calculated ‘risk’ of holding summit talks with Xi in the face of Chinese military “incursion” at two places, Chumar and Demchok in Ladakh in the western sector of the disputed border areas. The significance of Modi’s move of this magnitude is evident from the outcome of his talks with Xi (discussed elsewhere in this paper).

As for the atmospherics of Modi’s summit with Obama at the White House on 29 and 30 September, the American leader took care to make his Indian guest feel at home during the summit at the Oval Office and also at the summit-eve dinner. There was no overhang of the fact that Modi had earlier been denied a US visa for a number of years because of his alleged but unproven hostility towards a minority community in India. Nor did a US Court summons in that regard impede his free movement in Washington as also New York, where he addressed the United Nations and the Indian-Americans. Responding to a question on these issues on 30 September, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said: “The Indian people [have] elected Mr. Modi as their Prime Minister, and he has publicly spoken about his desire

⁵ This is obvious from the tone and tenor of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s comments on Shinzo Abe’s words and actions.

⁶ See, P S Suryanarayana, *Beyond the Japan-India Symphony of Sentiments*, ISAS Brief No. 344, 5 September 2014, http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_No__344_-_Beyond_the_Japan-India_Symphony_of_Sentiments_05092014144659.pdf

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Press Release on developments in India-China border areas in Eastern Ladakh, September 30, 2014, www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/24050/Press+Release+on+developments+in+IndiaChina+border+areas+in+Eastern+Ladakh (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

to be the leader of all Indians and to focus on inclusive governance and development for all. Those are obviously aspirations that the United States would strongly support”.⁸

Economic ‘Gains’ for India

The cumulative ‘gains’ for India from these three summit meetings obviously relate to the fact that Modi will now be in a better position to recalibrate India’s foreign-policy calculus with reference to the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions, in particular. India’s ‘gains’ from each of these three summits can be assessed in terms of economics, defence ties, and strategic affairs.

On the economics side of the ledger, the US is currently India’s largest trading partner, with the annual two-way trade being of the order of US\$ 100-billion. Modi and Obama explored an Indo-US Investment Initiative, assessed the prospects of US developing at least three smart cities in India, and discussed global trade issues in the context of India wanting its food security concerns to be addressed.⁹ There was no official estimate of how much US firms might invest in India over any specific timeframe in the context of this Obama-Modi summit.

By comparison, Modi’s talks with Abe resulted in a cumulative estimate of about US\$ 35-billion worth of Japanese investments and Official Development Assistance over a period of five years from now.¹⁰ Japan’s participation in projects relating to the prospective Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor has often been in focus for several years now. While Abe did speak of catalysing a “dramatic”¹¹ flow of Japanese investments into India, Japan’s track-record is known to be one of careful calibration.

China’s pledge of industrial-and-infrastructure investments of the order of US\$ 20-billion¹² in India over the next five years is a part-answer to rectifying New Delhi’s huge trade imbalance

⁸ The White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/30/2014, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9302014 (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

⁹ The White House, U.S.-India Joint Statement, September 30,2014, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, Tokyo Declaration for Japan-India Special Strategic and global Partnership, www.mofa.go.jp/files/000050532.pdf (Accessed on 2 September 2014)

¹¹ Abe’s comments [through interpreter], as monitored during his televised media availability with Modi in Tokyo on 1 September 2014.

¹² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Joint Statement between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China on Building a Closer Developmental Partnership, September 19, 2014, www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24022/Joint+Statement+between+t... (Accessed on 19 September 2014)

with Beijing. However, the reputation that China has for fast-tracking its commitments should cheer India, subject to the state of political-security climate on the Sino-Indian front, going forward. Encouraging to both sides is the fact that the Sino-Indian border stand-off, which coincided with the Xi-Modi summit in September 2014, was defused without bloodshed. In such a comparative perspective, the Chinese economic commitments to India may be a net 'gain' for India.

As for defence-cooperation aspects of Modi's summitry in focus here, India's engagement with China is of far lesser salience than New Delhi's dialogue with Washington. Not being far to seek is the reason that India and China have a huge border dispute to resolve. By contrast, the US is exploring the possibility of a genuine strategic accord with New Delhi to meet or manage Beijing's ascendance in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. One tell-tale sign of such a US' move is the 2005 Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship. Obama and Modi have now agreed to renew this Framework for 10 years with effect from 2015.¹³ Why? For Modi, it makes sense to keep China guessing whether India might eventually become a US-friendly swing-state in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. The US is also keen that India should become "partner and a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond".¹⁴

In line with these US' moves, Obama and Modi have now "endorsed" a decision taken by the two countries under the framework of their Defence Trade and Technology Initiative to set up a specialist Task Force. The Task Force has been mandated to "expeditiously evaluate and decide on *unique projects and technologies which would have a transformative impact on bilateral defence relations and enhance India's defence industry and military capabilities*".¹⁵ (Emphasis is added).

'Transformative' Indo-US Defence Ties

The specifics of a "transformative" US-India defence ties have not yet been spelt out in the public domain. It stands to reason, though, that New Delhi will be looking for the transfers of high-tech US knowhow as well as a chance for co-development and co-production of state-

¹³ Same source as in Note 9 above

¹⁴ This formulation was, for the first time, expounded, on 30 May 2009, by the then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates at the 8th Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) organised in Singapore by The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The author, present at the Summit, had noted this.

¹⁵ Same source as in Note 9 above

of-the-art equipment in India. An unspoken but possible theatre for future US-India cooperation is the outer space for defensive purposes, if the extra-terrestrial domain is 'militarised' by a country or countries of concern to both Washington and New Delhi.

For now, the naval zone has come into the prime focus of both Obama and Modi. They have "agreed to intensify cooperation in maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and unimpeded movement of lawful shipping and commercial activity, in accordance with accepted principles of international law".¹⁶ Given the current international discourse on maritime security, this phraseology lends itself to the interpretation that the US and India have now zeroed in on China and the South China Sea as the unstated but obvious objects of concern. The perceived assertiveness of the Chinese leaders towards their neighbours in the South China Sea domain is the relevant factor here. More important, from New Delhi's perspective, is the fact that the US has, in this context, "considered enhancing technology partnerships for India's Navy including assessing possible areas of technology cooperation".¹⁷ Surely, this formulation does not amount to a firm US commitment to India. However, the phraseology is pregnant with positive possibilities for the Indian Navy.

India's defence-related equation with Japan is obviously constrained by Tokyo's "pacifism" parameters at any given time. In televised comments, in Modi's presence, Abe had said: "We agreed to resume comprehensive security and defence cooperation; [we] agreed to initiate defence-equipment [-related] cooperation discussion, and also to further promote cooperation in maritime security".¹⁸ Implicit in this language is the fact that the India-Japan defence-related equation is a matter of future-perfect discussions between the two sides. For the present, as Abe indicated, the process of Japan selling amphibious aircraft to India for maritime security purposes is still alive – with positive prospects. The sub-text here includes the question of joint manufacture of this high-tech and dual-use aircraft that has civil-military applications.¹⁹

With Beijing, New Delhi can have meaningful defence-related cooperation only if their unsettled bilateral relationship stabilises, and only if Beijing, for whatever reasons, devalues its "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan which still sees India as an all-season adversary. Given such deep limitations, India and China have entered into a series of military-to-military

¹⁶ Same source as in Note 9 above

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Abe's comments [through interpreter], as monitored during his televised media availability with Modi in Tokyo on 1 September 2014.

¹⁹ Same source as in Note 6 above

confidence-building accords. These agreements apply to the Sino-Indian border dispute and the normal contacts between the two military establishments. These positive measures have now been reaffirmed, with no real breakthrough in the moves to resolve the basic border dispute. Right now, there has also been no new Sino-Indian accord to promote greater mil-to-mil engagements in tune with the current post-Cold-War global ethos.

The Strategic Calculus

In broad strategic terms, India and China have now sought to reinforce their ties by expressing a desire to build “a closer developmental partnership”. The outer space and civil nuclear energy have been identified as potential areas for futurist Sino-Indian cooperation. Understandably, this exercise is widely seen as a pious dream as of now, although these two mega-state Asian neighbours can perhaps surprise each other pleasantly if they do manage to cooperate in these two domains.

On a different plane, India and Japan have, as a result of the Modi-Abe talks, added a “special” dimension to their several-years-old “strategic and global partnership”. However, Indo-Japanese cooperation in the civil-nuclear and outer-space domains is still a matter of just serious intent, given Tokyo’s unique perspectives about the nature of these two areas. Moreover, for historical reasons, the US rather than India is a more attractive partner for Japan in these two domains.

India, which has a truly unique civil-nuclear agreement with the US, has now agreed to move ahead in this sensitive sphere. Following the Modi-Obama summit, India and the US have “established a Contact Group”²⁰ to speed up the delivery of American-origin nuclear reactors to India for electricity generation. The objective is to overcome what the US firms see as irritants in the relevant Indian laws. As for the outer space, it was a happy coincidence that India’s maiden Mars Mission and an American Mars Expedition were both successful on the eve of Modi’s talks with Obama on 29 and 30 September 2014. This prompted Modi to remark that he was now meeting Obama on Earth after the two countries had already held a “summit” on Mars (i.e., in the Martian environment).²¹ Beyond such wit, it is possible to

²⁰ Same source as in Note 9 above

²¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Remarks by Prime Minister at the Joint Press Briefing with US President Barack Obama (Washington D.C., September 30, 2014), October 01, 2014, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches->

envision US-India cooperation in the outer space, going forward, at a pace consistent with terrestrial geopolitical realities. Indeed, India and the US have, at this time, issued a first-ever “Vision Statement”²² to give a future-oriented thrust to their existing “Strategic Partnership”.

Overarching all these dense details of Modi’s diplomacy with reference to China and its two rivals, the US and Japan, is his real “gain” of having ensured a peaceful, even if slow, defusing of the Sino-Indian border standoff which had coincided with his summit with Xi. It is significant that the standoff began on or around 1 September 2014, when Modi was talking to Abe, and concluded on or around 30 September, when Modi was meeting Obama. Such a coincidence, complete with a peaceful resolution of the Sino-Indian military standoff, may even imply that Modi’s diplomacy has paid off, at least for now.

In essence, his diplomacy, customised with reference to Japan as well as China and the US, has been one of allowing each of these three countries to see some, even if different, value in courting India at this time. It is easy to discern this aspect in the cases of Japan and the US – both see India as their potential ‘sympathiser’ or ‘friend’, if not necessarily as partner or ally, in their scenarios of a major crisis with China. As for China itself, an autonomous India will be the best bet in such scenarios. From the Chinese perspective, one way of keeping India autonomous is to test India’s resolve.

Given the circumstances of the Xi-Modi summit on 17 and 18 September 2014, it stands to reason that China wanted to test India’s resolve, as the military standoff had begun at the beginning of that month itself. Modi, for his part, did nothing in the public domain that could have derailed the summit itself. This, in turn, put pressure on China to defuse the border crisis and also do so in a manner that could be projected as a successful visit to India by Xi. In the event, the Chinese Defence Ministry announced on 30 September 2014 that China and India (mentioned in that order) had completed the withdrawal of their troops on that day, following a standoff at the border.²³

Significantly, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying had earlier emphasised, on 26 September, that China saw Xi’s visit to India at this time as “historic”. She

Statements.htm?dtl/24052/Remarks+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+Joint+Press+Briefing+with+US+President +Barack+Obama+Washington+DC+September+30+2014 (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

²² The White House, Vision Statement for the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership – “Chalen Saath Saath: Forward Together We Go”, September 29, 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/29/vision-statement-us-india-strategic-partnership-chalen-saath-saath-forw (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

²³ Ministry of National Defence, People’s Republic of China, *Chinese, Indian troops withdraw from border standoff*, 2014-September-30, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2014-09/30/content_4541247.htm (Accessed on 3 October 2014)

quoted Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as having told his Indian counterpart, Sushma Swaraj, in New York that “China-India relations are ushering in an important period of opportunity for development”.²⁴

Read in the perspective of how Modi interacted with the top leaders of two countries that China tends to see as its rivals – namely, Japan, and the US – on either side of a summit with Xi, the new Indian leader appears to have done a reasonably successful balancing act, at least for the time being now.

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²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic Of China, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1195557.shtml (Accessed on 3 October 2014)