



CISS Analysis

Indian Prime Minister at United Nations General Assembly Session

CISS Team

Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in his speech at the United Nations on October 2, 2013, deliberated on the issues pertinent to the United Nations, the global development program and vision post-2015, issues of reform at the United Nations, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and regional South Asian issues as viewed from the Indian lens.

This visit to the United States by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was most likely one of the last major diplomatic engagements of PM Singh before the Indian elections in May 2014. PM Singh met President Obama at a time when India is pre-occupied with domestic political developments and a sluggish economy. During the last quarter, Indian economy grew at the rate of only 4.4 *percent*, and questions are also being raised about the mandate of the government to take important foreign policy initiatives before 2014 Indian elections.

Signals for Pakistan

Mr. Singh' speech at the UN, his meeting with US President Obama and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, carry significance given the current state of India – Pakistan relations. These meetings have come in the backdrop of simmering tensions between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control (LOC) and the schedule of limited withdrawal of US led NATO forces from Afghanistan.

Signals from India as conveyed through Mr. Manmohan Singh's UN speech and joint declaration issued after his meeting with US President were significant in three areas. First, with regard to US – India partnership, there seems to be a realization in both US and India about its relevance despite several difficulties in certain areas. Cooperation in high-tech defense areas were reiterated from both

sides as well as US support of India's inclusion in four global export control regimes. That said, however, discussions on removing major irritants in US – India relations were the key element in Mr. Singh's discussion with Obama. There seems to be a realization within the US that its perceived strategic partnership with India is not moving at a desired pace and some push is necessary to make things move in the right direction.

Second, with regard to situation in Afghanistan, India has in recent years cautiously supported the limited withdrawal plan of US led NATO forces and political reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The apprehensions regarding the return of Taliban rule in East and South of Afghanistan through a negotiated settlement with US supported by Pakistan still exists and many in India consider it as an obstacle to India's overall regional plans in its Western neighborhood and Pakistan. In this backdrop, Mr. Singh reiterated India's support to bringing "peace" and "stability" in Afghanistan through a smooth transition with international support.

Third important issue was that of India – Pakistan relations. India has maintained at the UN forum that Pakistan was an epicenter of terrorism in the region. At the same time Mr. Singh emphasized the importance of dialogue with Pakistan, although the overall current political context figured prominently in the Indian narrative.

In the first place, there is an Indian domestic environment where the PM cannot afford to appear weak in the wake of upcoming national elections in India. Second, the apparent reconciliatory tone after "Pakistan bashing" seems to address US concerns regarding frozen peace process between India and Pakistan. US Secretary of State was reportedly actively involved behind the scene at the UN to save the meeting between premiers of India and Pakistan. Third, the signal to Pakistan was that unless and until Pakistan "moderates" its conduct based on Indian interests, there will be no significant progress on the peace process between the two neighbors.

From a Pakistani perspective, the thrust of the Indian Prime minister's speech in UN speech was to expose the policy weakness of the Nawaz regime in Pakistan. Will there be an honest assessment in Islamabad of the failure and short comings of its policy towards India and its future trajectory? This is a question which will be the subject of intense debate among foreign policy analysts and media and whose answer will be sought in coming weeks and months.

Current state of Indo-US Relations

Formal discussions between India and US focused on expanding bilateral trade, investments in energy sector, information technology etc. Today volume of trade between the two countries is nearing \$100 billion. Climate change and the need for greater cooperation on clean energy production were also part of the discussions. Meanwhile avenues for expanding defense cooperation, arms sale, joint defense ventures, weapons development programmes and joint military exercises were explored as well.

India agreed to participate in Rim of Pacific Naval exercises scheduled to be held in 2014 by US Pacific Command. Talks also underlined the need to extricate the once “celebrated” strategic partnership states from the intricate web of regulations and bureaucratic procedures that has been hindering tangible progress in the critical areas of defence, civil nuclear energy and trade.

Moreover, the recent meeting between President Obama and PM Singh also provided an opportunity to review the security issues and strategic environment of the South Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, China and Pacific region by the two leaders. Discussions on the post-2014 future of Afghanistan focused on the possible Indian role there.

Tensions across the LoC between India and Pakistan were also deliberated upon, though PM Singh hurled accusations on Pakistan, but US didn't seem to share the Indian concerns. On the other hand, the US which had envisioned its partnership with India as an important pillar of its pivot to the Pacific and rebalancing of Asia-Pacific strategy has not been successful in its endeavor because of Indian desire to maintain its “strategic autonomy”.

Of late, US policy makers and corporations have lamented cumbersome legal impediments of Indian law and Indian bureaucracy obstructing any meaningful progress in the relations. The fact that the joint statement also mentioned it means no headway has been made for addressing them. Civil nuclear deal is yet to be implemented. Meaningful defence cooperation between both the countries is yet to begin. India has already awarded huge defence contracts to the Europeans and Russians thus Obama administration has complained that Indian trade policy is discriminatory towards US companies.

In the near future, India-US relationship is likely to continue without significant advancement resulting in major strategic or economic cooperation between the two countries. Domestic politics in each country and upcoming elections in India will not bring about broadening and deepening of partnership.

Indo-US Cooperation in High tech Defense Sector

One of the main issues discussed by Mr. Obama and Mr. Singh was India-US strategic partnerships under Indo-US civil nuclear deal. According to the joint declaration issued at the end of the meeting, the two leaders reiterated the importance of their partnership for the peace and security of the world at large and South Asian and West Asian regions in particular.

Indian Prime Minister mentioned core areas on which India and US are collaborating and also pointed out the areas on which they want further engagement. The statement said "Outside the areas of trade, technology and investment, to exploring avenues of cooperation in new areas like energy, clear coal technologies, energy efficient technologies, cooperation in the field of environment, cooperation in the intelligence gathering and counter terrorism should also be focused upon"

Despite all the arrangements and engagements with India the US does not seem to be much satisfied with current progress of Indian cooperation at strategic level, as their partnership has not yet benefited the US. The main obstacle in this regard is Indian liability law which has been the hindrance in the way of US-India cooperation in the energy sector.

Both states also assured each other that they would share common security interests and place each other at the same level as their closest partners. But they also mentioned that these opportunities would be pursued in accordance with national policies, laws and procedures of the respective country.

US reiterated complete support to India's full membership in the four international export control regimes and on other hand India affirmed establishing of strong strategic relationship under which it would also facilitate US companies, Westinghouse and General Electric-Hitachi, to establish nuclear power plants in India. This commitment by both sides reaffirms their strong desire of implementation of Indo-US nuclear cooperation by resolving the issue of Indian liability law.

The signal that both sides have conveyed to each other was that they understand the need to strengthen Indo-US bilateral and strategic relationship. Despite their desire to have strong cooperation between the two states in defense, security, trade and commerce, much progress in these areas may not be possible unless India initiates some policy changes which accommodate US interest. Change of policy in India may not be easy sell to the opposition particularly because India has already made progress in nuclear energy sector as it has already signed a number of agreements with other countries like Russia, Israel, France and Britain within the parameters of existing laws and policies.

In this environment if the two states are able to implement what they have declared in the joint statement it would be a major breakthrough after 8 years of signing of the nuclear deal. This would further enhance the cooperation between the two states at co-production and co-development in various key sectors.

Despite difficulties and hurdles, progress towards greater bilateral cooperation, the two sides remain strongly committed to further augmenting their economic and strategic partnership. It is likely that India - US relations will see more progress if BJP, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, is able to form a government in India after the national elections scheduled in May 2014.

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