

MODI'S DIPLOMATIC MANOEUVRES

Jayantha Dhanapala analyses recent developments in India's foreign affairs

Within two months, the newly elected Prime Minister of India has had summit meetings with the Japanese PM, and the Presidents of China and the US. India, Japan and China are the Asian giants that impinge on Sri Lanka's foreign policy, while the US remains the sole global superpower.

Thus, the evolving relationships amongst them have a special significance for us. It has become a cliché today, to describe friendly bilateral relations as 'strategic partnerships.' But, obviously, some relations are more strategic than others.

In the halcyon days of Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership of Indian foreign policy, good relations with China was a cornerstone governed by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, or Panchsheel, embodied in the Sino-Indian Treaty of 29 April 1954. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 blighted that relationship; and although some normalcy has been restored, especially in trade and other economic ties, bilateral relations have never been the same.

India's dramatic economic development, and the election of a strong leader in Narendra Modi, has created a new climate for reaching out to Asia and the world, after the symbolic first steps towards South Asian neighbours were taken with the problem of Pakistan being shelved for the moment.



ROCK STAR MODI A crowd of US-based supporters await the arrival of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for a community reception on 28 September, at NYC's Madison Square Garden. Modi received a rock star reception, as thousands cheered on the new leader in a packed arena.

SELF-CONFIDENCE Sandwiching Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India between Modi's trips to Japan and the US sent a signal that here was a self-confident leader with many options open to him. Modi had already visited Japan as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. The decision to embark on a five-day visit to Japan – as his first foreign visit – was deliberate.

Relations between China and Japan have been cool, with the election of Shinzō Abe as Japanese Prime Minister and the controversy over the islands in the East China Sea.

Conservative commentators in India rejoiced, and analyst Brahma Chellaney wrote in the *Hindustan Times* that Modi "has already bared a twofold focus to build a pragmatic,

dynamic policy that ends the era of belated, reactive diplomacy: proactively regain India's clout in its own strategic backyard, and build closer but differentially calibrated collaboration with major powers."

He continued, a trifle too enthusiastically: "The India-Japan partnership holds the potential to shape Asian

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THE ASIAN CENTURY Modi has said that “the whole world accepts that the 21st century will belong to Asia. But I have a question. How should the 21st century be? We have to give an answer to this. It will depend on how deep and progressive our relationship [with Japan] is.”

Prior to Xi’s 17-19 September India tour, the Chinese Consul-General in Mumbai sought to set the stage for a visit that would outshine the Modi visit to Japan, and predicted investments of over US\$ 100 billion. In fact, a much lower sum (30 billion dollars) was committed by the Chinese delegation.

Twenty billion dollars of public money would go to a fast train corridor and new strategic road; an allocation of US\$ 6.8 billion to industrial parks in Gujarat and Maharashtra; and 24 Chinese companies would buy products (pharmaceuticals, farming, etc.) for 3.6 billion dollars. The attempt to outdo the Japanese investment value of over US\$ 33.5 billion had failed, despite the bonhomie and Modi’s personal touch.

Indian cynics pointed to the deficit in bilateral trade, which would not be bridged by this investment. More importantly, there was the badly timed Chinese

incursion over the disputed border. On 18 September, 1,000 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers in Southern Ladakh – one of the two contested regions along the Sino-Indian border – made an incursion into territory claimed by India. The troops were bringing heavy equipment, claiming to build a provisional road.

This was known just an hour before the banquet that Modi was to host. While 1,500 Indian

geopolitics in much the same way as China’s rise or [President] Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia. This win-win partnership can help to drive India’s infrastructure development and great power aspirations, while catalysing Japan’s revival as a world power.” Another Indian newspaper described the visit as India’s and Japan’s attempt to “balance the rising weight of China across Asia.”

At the end of the visit, Japan

announced a doubling of its private and public investment in India, to about US\$ 35 billion, over the next five years. The 3.5 trillion yen (US\$ 34 billion) investment from Japan to India – including Official Development Assistance (ODA) during a five-year period – will come under the aegis of the India-Japan Investment Promotion Partnership, for development of projects (including infrastructure and smart cities).

Japanese investments in Indian railway development was assured, but a civil nuclear deal remained elusive, while penalties imposed on Indian companies after the 1998 nuclear tests were lifted.

Most significantly, Modi deplored the expansionist tendency among some countries which encroach upon seas of others, in oblique comments against China (which is embroiled in a maritime dispute with Japan).

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soldiers were dispatched to the spot, Modi asked Xi to order his troops to leave, and the latter acquiesced. However, even on 19 September, the Chinese troops remained. They eventually retreated, but dispatched a small group of 35 men to pitch tents.

When this was reported in Delhi, the euphoria of the visit was deflated. Observers were perplexed. Was Xi Jinping not in control of his army, or was this a two-pronged strategy? Who might those opponents of a Sino-Chinese rapprochement be?

Some of them were obviously within the Chinese high command – victims, perhaps, of Xi’s uncompromising anti-corruption campaign. They might also be in the regime’s political circles – high-ranking cadres trying to weaken President Xi Jinping.

Since his accession to power in October 2012, Xi’s anti-corruption drive has caused thousands of casualties among cadres – dozens of them at ministerial level. Another line of speculation was that this was a shot across Indian bows, lest Modi was lured to the US camp. One journalist speculated that opposition could also have been reinforced from the Indian side. An Indian analyst suspects military traders in armament imports – India being the world’s No. 1 in this market today.

Kishore Mahbubani, the

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perceptive Dean of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, argued in a column that was published in China that “just as it is about to become the No. 1 economy in the world, China appears to have changed its strategy. Instead of continuing its successful three-decade policy of a peaceful rise, China is perceived to have changed course, and is now seen to be carrying out assertive and occasionally reckless actions.”

“If China continues on this course, it will seize defeat from the jaws of victory... it is important for the Western media to understand that China is not monolithic. Like other large complex societies, there is a vigorous debate going on in China about the strategy it should adopt in the world. There are both hawks and doves in the Chinese establishment,” he added.

So were the Chinese hawks at work to thwart Xi’s historic fence-mending visit to India?

If so, they could not have chosen a worse time – just when the conservatives in the Indian establishment are pushing Modi to ally firmly with the US and Japan, in an Asian Cold War against China. And just as Russia is being isolated further from Europe, over Ukraine.

ROCK STAR WELCOME From the qualified success of the Chinese President’s visit to India, the rapturous welcome accorded to Modi in the US (which had refused him a visa, in the past) was a dramatic contrast. Though the visit was an unusual add-on to his trip to address the UN General Assembly, it achieved the stature of a state visit.

The influential Indian expatriate community accorded Modi a hero’s welcome, including a packed Madison Square Garden gathering. An outstanding feature, apart from the White House lunch in honour of the Indian PM, was the unprecedented joint op-ed published in the Washington Post by Obama and Modi.

Since former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh’s controversial breakthrough with Indo-US nuclear cooperation, a welter of problems had plagued Indo-US relations, including the humiliating treatment of Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade, in New York.

The op-ed began: “As nations committed to democracy, liberty, diversity and enterprise, India

and the United States are bound by common values and mutual interests. We have each shaped the positive trajectory of human history, and through our joint efforts, our natural and unique partnership can help shape international security and peace for years to come.”

It ended with the agenda for the Washington talks, with special reference to the unusual theme of sanitation from Modi’s Independence Day address from the Red Fort: “We will discuss ways in which we can boost manufacturing and expand affordable renewable energy, while sustainably securing the future of our common environment. We will discuss ways in which our businesses, scientists and governments can partner, as India works to improve the quality, reliability and availability of basic services, especially for the poorest of citizens. In this, the United States stands ready to assist...”

There was also the bold announcement to open India’s US\$ 250 billion defence sector to private participation, and US contractors can be expected to rush in. One commentator has written: “Modi’s foreign policy is likely to be a mix of nationalist-led geopolitics and expedient geoeconomics.”

After these series of high-level meetings, Modi certainly appears to be following that direction.