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US and India: New Partners in Building Asian Security^(*)

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US President Barack Obama's 10-day Asian tour, starting with India, helped put the spotlight on Asia's challenges at a time when tensions between an increasingly ambitious China and its neighbors have spread all over the regional geopolitical landscape. The tour underscored India's growing importance in the US strategy on Asia, with Obama calling India the «cornerstone of America's engagement in Asia».

The US-India relationship actually has picked up momentum that is independent of the two governments. Obama's visit did little more than symbolically strengthen an already-warming relationship with India – a relationship that is largely being driven by the business community and by the large number of Americans of Indian origin. His predecessor, George W. Bush, had declared in his valedictory speech that, «We opened a new historic and strategic partnership with India».

Obama significantly restricted his tour to Asia's leading democracies – India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea – that circle China and are central to managing China's rise. Yet he spent the whole of last year assiduously courting Beijing in the hope that he could make China a global partner on global issues ranging from climate change to trade and financial issues. The catchphrase coined by Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg in relation to China, «strategic reassurance», actually signalled a US intent to be more accommodative of China's ambitions – a message reinforced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she went out of her way to downgrade human rights during a visit to Beijing. Obama, for his part, had declared that America's «most important bilateral relationship in the world» is with China.

Now, with his China strategy falling apart, Obama is seeking to do exactly what his predecessor attempted – to line up partners and thereby build an insurance policy in case China's rising power slides into arrogance. Other players on the grand chessboard of Asian geopolitics also are seeking to build new equations, as they concurrently pursue hedging, balancing and bandwagoning.

A fast-rising Asia has become the defining fulcrum of global geopolitical change. Asian policies and challenges now help shape the international security and economic environments. Yet, major power shifts within Asia are challenging the continent's own peace and stability. With the spectre of power disequilibrium looming large in Asia, investments to help build strategic power stability has become imperative. A number of Asian countries have started building security cooperation on a bilateral basis, thereby laying the groundwork for a potential web of interlocking strategic partnerships.

But building genuine partnerships is a slow process because it demands major accommodation and adjustment on both sides. The US – a «resident power» in Asia, in the words of its Defense Secretary – has worked hard in recent years to co-opt India in a «soft alliance» shorn of treaty obli-

(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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gations. Yet, despite a rapidly warming rapport between the two, conflicting US-India expectations and interests often surface, even as the two countries get closer.

Through his visit, Obama, however, has ensured greater bilateral collaboration. While it is too much to expect a congruence of US and Indian national-security objectives in all spheres, the two countries are likely to deepen their cooperation in areas where their interests converge. Having been nonaligned, India is set to become multi-aligned, while tilting more towards Washington, even as it preserves the core element of nonalignment – strategic autonomy. Obama, for his part, will be remembered for using his power of oratory to recast himself as India's friend in the same class as Bush. He came with very little to deliver and more to take, yet cast a spell on India.

Obama enthralled Indians by declaring that «in the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member». He comforted them by saying he will «continue to insist to Pakistan's leaders that terrorist safe-havens within their borders are unacceptable and that the terrorists behind the Mumbai attacks be brought to justice». He flattered them by recalling India's «treasured past», its invention of the digit “zero” and its civilization that «has been shaping the world for thousands of years». And he delighted them by labelling the US-India relationship «the defining partnership of the 21st century». Mahatma Gandhi found mention in almost all his speeches, to the extent that he linked his rise as president to «Gandhi and the message he shared with America and the world».

Obama actually came as a salesman for his country, bagging multi-billion-dollar deals and laying the ground for more big contracts. Yet the visit will be remembered for his public diplomacy in seeking to elevate his host nation to «its rightful place in the world». He dangled the prospect of India's admission – «in a phased manner» – to four US-led, technology-control cartels: the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement. The capstone of his outreach, however, came when he dangled another carrot – helping India to secure a permanent place on the UN Security Council.

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