

Indian elites: Uneasy about Obama victory

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NEW DELHI, Nov 15 (IPS) - Unlike the rest of the world, which has welcomed the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, Indian policymakers have misgivings, rooted in his campaign statements on Kashmir, nuclear non-proliferation and business process outsourcing from the U.S. to India.

However, according to independent commentators, these misgivings may be misplaced, not least because Obama is unlikely to translate his campaign remarks into actual policies, and because they underestimate the positive contribution that his presidency is likely to make at the global level.

Yet, some of these misgivings and apprehensions persist despite a long-awaited telephone call from the president-elect to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which materialised Thursday.

Soon after his election, Obama had called the leaders of nine nations, including Pakistan, but did not make contact with Singh. Indian officials say Obama had tried to reach Singh earlier, but no call could be put through because Singh was on a visit to West Asia.

"Whatever the truth about difficulties in completing a telephone call in this age of communication and mobile telephone proliferation, the fact is that Indian policymakers have been loath to give up their preoccupation with George W. Bush," says Kamal Mitra Chenoy, a professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

"That probably was a factor in the lack of enthusiasm that they feel about welcoming the next president of the U.S.," Chenoy said.

Chenoy added: "This is unfortunate given the historic character of Obama's victory, the tectonic shift in the balance of forces that it represents in the globe's most influential nation, and the hope it has kindled the world over in the possibility of major and radical change towards inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity and pluralism."

The debate in the corridors of power in New Delhi is focused not so much on whether Obama will pursue a less arrogant, aggressive and unilateralist foreign policy, as on whether he will restore the 'even-handed' treatment of India and Pakistan that existed before the Bush administration came into power.

Similarly, Indian business leaders, especially in information technology-related companies, are more concerned with warding off pressures for restrictions on outsourcing from the U.S. to India than on exploring new opportunities and avenues of cooperation.

The most worried lot in India are the foreign policy mandarins, who have for three years invested heavily in negotiating and completing the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation deal, itself part of Washington's effort to draw India into a close strategic relationship with itself.

As Kanwal Sibal, a former foreign secretary (chief of diplomatic service), puts it: "India's view of the U.S. has been heavily coloured by the nuclear deal. Politically and professionally, an excessive public show of gratitude to Bush, however appropriate in private for his staunch support for India, was

inadvisable and needlessly made the U.S.-India relationship personality-driven rather than interest-driven.”

Sibal here refers to Singh telling Bush in September: “The people of India love you deeply...” This was widely criticised by the political opposition in this country and by many foreign policy and strategic experts.

So obsessed were Indian policymakers with portraying the nuclear deal as a great achievement, and as amounting to Bush’s acceptance of India as a nuclear weapons state, that they did not publicise — as they would normally have done — a letter that Obama wrote to Singh on Sep. 23.

In the letter, Obama regretted that he could not meet Singh during his September visit to the United States, and said he very much looked forward “to doing so in the near future”. He also expressed his “great admiration for the courage you showed in shepherding the civil nuclear cooperation agreement through your Parliament, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Suppliers Group.”

Obama added: “But I see this agreement only as a beginning of a much closer relationship between our two great countries. I would like to see U.S.-India relations grow across the board to reflect our shared interests, shared values, shared sense of threats, and ever burgeoning ties between our two economies and societies.”

However, Obama also wrote: “I will work with the U.S. Senate to secure ratification of the international treaty [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty] banning nuclear weapons testing at the earliest practical day, and then launch a major diplomatic initiative to ensure its entry into force.”

He also promised to “pursue negotiation on a verifiable, multilateral treaty to end production of fissile material for nuclear weapons,” known as the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).

This raised hackles in New Delhi because it is reluctant to sign either of these treaties and would like to build a substantial stockpile of bomb fuel and nuclear weapons before doing so.

Obama’s stated positions on many issues are progressive, favour a more balanced and peaceful world, and deserve to be welcomed. These include Iran, Russia, and Son-of-Star-Wars-style ballistic missile defence (BMD).

If he begins a dialogue with Iran, stops NATO expansion, builds friendly relations with Russia, delays BMD deployment, and renews the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty due to expire next year, while de-alerting and disarming a substantial number of nuclear weapons, he will have made a major contribution to defusing rivalries aggravated by the Republicans.

Obama also holds that unless the U.S. and Russia radically reduce their nuclear arsenals, they won’t be able to persuade smaller nations like Iran and North Korea to forgo their nuclear programmes.

But Indian policymakers have been lukewarm towards these positions because they view them through the narrow prisms of India-Pakistan relations, his remarks about mediating on the Kashmir issue with the possible involvement of former president Bill Clinton, and outsourcing.

In practice, Obama is unlikely to want to undermine the competitiveness of U.S. industry by halting outsourcing. Many Indian IT industry leaders think so too.

His campaign statements on the Kashmir question are unlikely to translate into policy since they will have to take into account India’s reservations on the issue. As his transition team recently clarified,

the U.S. remains committed to supporting the bilateral India-Pakistan dialogue process to resolve Kashmir and other contentious issues.

As for the CTBT, even Atal Behari Vajpayee was all prepared to sign it in 1999, after declaring a unilateral moratorium on nuclear test explosions, based on a careful strategic assessment that further testing is not necessary for an adequate minimum nuclear deterrent.

“If India is truly committed to global, universal nuclear disarmament, as it says it is, it must recognise that the CTBT and FMCT are indispensable steps in that process, says Achin Vanaik, professor of international relations and global politics at Delhi University.” India must stop being defensive about these treaties and actively help bring them into force.

Vanaik said it was unlikely that “Obama will risk damaging Washington’s relations with India by aggressively pushing agendas, especially regional ones that New Delhi is uncomfortable with. It is a sign of Indian policymakers’ diffidence and their lack of appreciation of India’s growing economic, political and strategic weight in today’s world that they think otherwise”.

Vanaik argues that India can positively engage Obama by seeking his cooperation in an initiative for reform of the global governance system, including a more democratic United Nations, restructuring of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation, by promoting a more equitable international economic order, and by demanding a non-confrontational cooperative security system.

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* From Inter Press Service.

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