

India: Nuclear family?

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Since he became PM, Narendra Modi has given almost obsessively high priority to foreign affairs. He's made more than one overseas visit a month, he's received a galaxy of world leaders at home, and he's put foreign minister Sushma Swaraj in the shade. He crowned his record by inviting a US president as the Republic Day chief guest—something unthinkable only a few years ago. This hyperactivism has less to do with Modi's background, acumen or a need to severely reform India's foreign relations than with winning legitimacy for himself. Modi's anxiety to overcome the pariah status he had worldwide until recently thanks to the 2002 Gujarat carnage is understandable, albeit deplorable. But we must ask, who pays the price? What's at stake today is the collapse of India's longstanding position, which survived old-styled non-alignment, that it won't sign up as a permanent ally of anyone even while maintaining friendly relations with a range of countries within a complex foreign policy agenda.

True, this stand had eroded over time, especially with the signing of the US-India defence cooperation agreement and the civilian nuclear cooperation deal in 2005. To win that deal, India twice voted, under 'coercion', as a US diplomat publicly said, against Iran's N-programme, undermining its own interest in the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. To please the US, India has also periodically compromised its own people's interests, for instance, by loosening price controls on essential medicines ahead of Modi's US visit. But now, for the first time, India is being roped into an intimate alliance with the US, based on a comprehensive strategic, political and economic collaboration. Its cornerstone is the 'Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region', which accords India strategic prominence in a swathe stretching "from Africa to East Asia", involves it in "safeguarding maritime security, freedom of navigation and overflight, especially in the South China Sea", and chides China for provoking tensions with its neighbours. Put simply, the alliance bears a heavy tilt against China, which dominated the Modi-Obama talks for the first 45 minutes, much to the Americans' pleasant surprise. Modi not only accepted the US language on the issue, but also suggested reviving the US-Japan-India-Australia security compact of 2007, which was abandoned amidst Chinese protests. The idea of punishing China for its "overreach" into the Indian Ocean, in particular "India's backyard" Sri Lanka, by asserting India's pre-eminence from the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca Straits may make our pro-US strategic hawks salivate at the mouth.

But they should know the risks of rejecting negotiations to resolve disputes with China, and opting for a 'tough' stand. Refusing to negotiate borders is precisely what led to the debacle of 1962, especially now when talks have brought the two close to a solution. More important, the US isn't just any superpower; it's a superpower that has recently contributed to making the world a much worse place—witness Iraq, Libya and Syria, and the rise of jihadi Islam in reaction. The US is also the principal author of 'Washington Consensus' policies which have visited economic devastation the world over, and are undermining the working people's greatest social gains. It's not known to have equal or symmetrical relationships even with its own allies. There's only one finger on the gun that NATO wields, and that is an American one. So the hope that India could build a relatively balanced,

semi-autonomous relationship with the US is a chimera. Worse, by closely allying with the US, India risks alienating its neighbours. India's real security lies in equal, peaceful relations with them, not with a distant, overbearing superpower. So what's the net result of Obama's visit? It bolsters Modi, pleases the US, and antagonises China. But it doesn't even break the nuclear liability logjam. The insurance pool, backed by Indian public sector companies, indemnifies US nuclear vendors and transfers liability to our public. In over-interpreting the 2010 law to please the US, it would fall foul of Parliament's intent—all for promoting a high-risk technology whose costs are skyrocketing just as renewable energy alternatives are maturing. Obama's warning about religious freedoms is probably his visit's greatest takeaway.

Praful Bidwai

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*<http://www.outlookindia.com/article/Nuclear-Family/293258>