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## **A Critical View of Indo-US Relations Under Obama Administration**

### **Abstract:**

*US foreign policy towards India under Obama administrations was the continuity of his predecessors G.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In Indian circle policy of Obama was considered in good manners. President Obama wrote his personal letter to Indian prime minister Manmohan Sing that Indo-US relations will grow across the board as both states have common shared interests. Obama even before his presidential elections described that Indo- US relations has been strengthened across board. Economic ties between the two partners flourished well under Obama administration. Obama view Indo-US nuclear deal a good start in developing close relations with India. Indian analysts were feared that new president may put nuclear deal on the backburner. Diplomatic ties between both states have been strengthened with summit diplomacy. President Obama and prime ministers of India visited each other that resulted in several significant bilateral agreements. The research tried to have critical view of Indo-US relations under Bush administration. It is an effort to dig out the common and shared interests on the basis of which both states came closer to each other.*

**Key Words:** Bilateral relations, Counterterrorism, Diplomatic ties, Obama Administration, Unilateralism.

### **Introduction**

US foreign policy towards India under Obama administrations was the continuity of his predecessors G.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In Indian circle policy of Obama was considered in good manners (Ramakanta, 2015). President Obama wrote his personal letter to Indian prime minister Manmohan Sing that Indo-US relations will grow across the board as both states have common shared interests (Baru, 2008). Mr. Sing found President Obama more persistent listener than Bush. Both the leader agreed on the potential to work jointly in economic sector and to resolve some international economic managerial problems. Kronstadt (2009) reported that Obama even before his presidential elections described that Indo- US relations has been strengthened across board. Economic ties between the two partners flourished well under Obama administration. US remained committed on the issue of security of the South Asian region. As both India and US were the direct victim of Terrorism, so they thought it the need of the time to cooperate in counterterrorism strategy. One of the major pillars of Obama foreign policy was to reengage US with the outer world and to end isolation that was the result of Bush unilateralism (McCromick, 2011). Such unilateral concept, as mentioned by Guha (2011), was to maintain American hegemonic primacy at global level. Obama view Indo-US nuclear deal a good start in developing close relations with India. Indian analysts were feared that new president may put nuclear deal on the backburner (Kumar, 2010), but this assessment proved wrong and Obama followed the agenda of the deal. Beig (2017) is true in saying that relationship between India and US has become deeper in the fields of science and technology, defense and counterterrorism measures. Diplomatic ties between both states have been strengthened with summit diplomacy. President Obama and prime ministers of India visited each other that resulted in several significant bilateral agreements.

### **Diplomatic Ties During Obama Administration**

Diplomatic ties between India and US strengthened during Obama administration. The confusions of strained relations (O'Boyle, 2019) between the two partners have been defused. Indian lobby has huge place in US political spheres. Indian lobby is considered one of the strongest lobbies and is successful in promoting national interests (Newhouse, 2009). The Cold War Indian approach when India was not in favor of US to intervene in South Asian affairs has been totally reversed. Now India is hoped to further US interests in the region and beyond. Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh went US during Obama administration in 2009, that was his first state visit. Andersen (2010) commented that there was a challenge for Obama and Singh administration to go forward with new idea to invest in political capital to reset their bilateral relations. Mr. Singh succeeded to get several bold statements from US administration. President Obama promised to support India for its permanent membership in Security Council. In addition it is said that US will also try to incorporate India into other non-proliferation regimes (Gunasekaran, 2013). During this visit both sides announced several new programs that included, security, defense,

counterterrorism, climate change, education, agriculture, economy, trade, investment, energy, space and health care. Interaction in such wide sectors has reflected the expanding of bilateral ties between the two allies (Tallis, 2009).

Indians were expecting something extra from Modi to whom Pant (2014) claimed one of the expert and talented political leader of India. First meeting of Narendra Modi with his US counterpart in 2014 was of great importance. It was an opportunity to tackle the roadblocks in the way of Indo-US bilateral relations (Misha, 2014). On the other side as mentioned by Tourangban (2014) this visit was a major move by Obama administration to deal with newly elected government in India. During this visit both heads discussed various issues of common interests that included, defense, security, technology and economic etc. After sitting for more than two hours both leaders issued a joint statement. They stated their partnership enduring, robust and reliable (Nandy, 2014). Obama-Modi summit proved as a surprise to many of observers as both leaders looked to establish personal contacts with each other. The doubt in the minds of Indian about US attitude towards India were also washed away.

President Obama visited India in 2015 as chief guest for Republic Day celebrations. The momentum that was started with Indian prime minister Modi's US visit got more acceleration with this visit. It was accepted that India and US has some shared interests that include promotion of security, regional stability, and economic development by taking steps in the field of investment trade and connectivity (Tallis, 2010). Following issues remained the focus of this visit of Obama;

- i) Indo-US maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region and Asia Pacific
- ii) Cooperation for production of defense tools
- iii) Advancement in nuclear deal
- iv) Focus on renewable energy
- v) Investment for trade and infrastructure
- vi) Removing of business hindrances and restrictions
- vii) Immigration policy
- viii) Signing of MoU for smart cities
- ix) Totalization agreement
- x) Religious Tolerance

### **Strategic Cooperation**

Indo-US strategic relations reached at its apex under Obama presidency (Singh, 2017). Both India and US have their shared strategic interest in the region. As Mishra (2019) elaborated that Indo-US strategic ties revolves around multiple issues. India intends to secure its strategic interests in Indian Ocean Region while on the other side US needs a strong India as a counter weigh of China in the region and a staunch opponent in South China Sea (Mishra V. , 2017). It is expected that in future Indian Ocean may be divided into two sub-regions and each sub-region under influence of each opposite power axis. Chaudhury and Moorthy (2018) mentioned that the presence of India, China and US has transformed Indian Ocean into Strategic maritime triangle. Other than different common interests, maritime politics gained huge place in bilateral ties of the two partners. So there is convergence of interest where the Indian navy intend to extend its security capabilities and US want to have hegemonic position in Indian Ocean Region. US policy makers planned to rebalance Asian maritime that has actually turned into Chinese favor in last three decades.

Indo-US strategic alliance gain huge significance under Obama administration. Mutual visits of high officials from both sides on frequent intervals proved effective in this direction. Indian official emphasized time and again that India remained engaged in joint military exercises with US than any other state. Joint military exercises prove helpful for making better understanding of military capabilities of each other. Actually Chinese involvement in the sea ports of Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri-Lanka and Bangladesh has great security concerns for strategic interests of both India and US. A strategic agreement known as 'US-India Joint Strategic Vision' for IOR and Asia Pacific was also signed in between the two partners. Ejaz (2012) elaborated that US foreign policy makers concentrated the Asia Pacific region to accentuate the following;

- i) To develop strategic ties with US allies through diplomatic means and joint military exercises
- ii) To build strong security structure to reduce intra-regional threat perceptions
- iii) To enhance trade relations with US partners to favor an open global trade system
- iv) To work for free and fair trade to benefit both sides (US and regional states)
- v) To promote democratic norms in the region

- vi) To work for maintenance of regional political stability

It was also a clear message to China that China is not the only player in this region especially when talking about the future of the region. Lobo (2021) commented that Asia Pacific is being considered significant by several states and they are making security and foreign policies around it. Furthermore, US under Obama administration signed Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Understanding with India when Indian defense minister Manohar Parrikar visited US in 2016 (Jackson, 2017). Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement was reached between the two partners during presidency of Obama. It was aimed at to provide India with justification to issue data related to computer intelligence, command, control, communication, surveillance and reconnaissance to foreign state (Mallick P. K., 2018). This memorandum guarantees the maritime cooperation between the two states. Last but not least president Obama provided India the status of Major Defense Partner (MDP). US policies under Obama has actually transformed the focus of US strategic priorities towards the region of Asia Pacific. One of the major reason for this shift is to encourage its partners in the region to put energies together to balance rising China. So the best way for this is to develop close military and strategic ties with US allies in the region (Feigenbaum, 2010).

### **US Arms sale to India**

India is spending huge budget for importing foreign weapons since last two decades. India is expected to become third largest arms buyer in the coming years by surpassing United Kingdom. Despite from states India is also buying weapons from private defense corporations. Indian army received advance weapons and technology during two terms of Obama presidency. The items that India purchased during that time included ten (10) C-17 transport jets, eight P 8Is, C-I30 JS Super Hercules, twenty-four (24) Harpoon Block II missiles and Apache Gunship Helicopters (Ganguly C. K., 2020). Washington under Obama administration commenced Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) in 2012. The DTTI has shifted the US and India defense relationship from simple trade to co-production and co-development. It was left on the working of administrations of both side to make it more strengthened and progressive in defense cooperation. This agreement also covers the defense trade between the two states. Although it helped India to magnify its defense capacity but it may give a kick to arm race in the region. DTTI focuses the six major projects i-e, Development of a chemical-biological protective ensemble for troops; Development of mobile electric hybrid power stations; A next-generation small unmanned aircraft; Intelligence and surveillance module for transport aircraft; Digital helmet-mounted displays and The joint biological tactical detection system, along with two joint working groups one on aircraft carrier technology development and the other on jet engine technology (Khan M. , 2017).

### **Irritant in Arms Trade**

There are also some irritants in US India arms trade. The biggest irritant is Indian defense ties with Russia. Russia was the largest weapon supplying partner of India. From 2012 to 2016 India has imported sixty-eight (68) percent of its foreign weapons from Russia. While US stood second with only fourteen (14) percent of India weapon purchase during that period. So India is at the top in purchasing Russian defense equipment with thirty-eight (38) percent of total Russian weapon exports (Weitz, 2017). Indian leader remained defending arms trade with Russia. Following points have been highlighted in the defense of Indian arms trade with Russia;

- i) India needs spare parts and maintenance of large stock of Russian arms.
- ii) Indians have focused joint arms reproduction in collaboration with Russia.
- iii) India needs Russian support at international forums like United Nations Organizations (UNO) to secure wide national interests.
- iv) India intends to slow down Sino-Russian ties in defense technology and potentially causing wedge between them.

### **Counterterrorism Cooperation**

President Obama inherited catastrophic situation in Afghanistan. The president talked to apply different strategy from that of his predecessor. This time Obama administration came forward with denial of unilateral policy. Moreover, Obama was aware that wars do not get targeted results when fought cheap. After his first term election, Obama sent his vice president Joe Biden to Afghanistan for fact finding about war situation. The deteriorated war situation can be judged by the fact that no official among from US and NATO military official could reply same about the simple questions of vice president. US official report mentioned that terrorist activities in South Asia has become more intensive than Middle East (Riedel, 2010). US made India its ally in the counterterrorism strategy in

the region. Terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought US closer to India (Kacker, 2013). US developed strong military ties with India under Obama administration. This initiative has been considered as a major pillar to counter China in the region. There are several moments when US officials admitted that India has significant role in Afghanistan especially in trade, investment, reconstruction and provision of assistance to Afghan security forces. It was the need of time when Indian policy maker focused diplomatic approach (Paliwal, 2017) to support Afghanistan. Indian leadership offered military facilities to US and NATO forces during US war in Afghanistan. Such offer was not much attractive to fight Afghan war as India does not have any land connection with Afghanistan. Indian support to escort US vessels carrying supplies for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan remained valuable. So regional approach in counterterrorism strategy by Obama required to engage India in Afghan issue. Indian analysts found Obama counterterrorism strategy more close to Indian ambitions. India itself wanted more focused global attention towards deteriorated Afghan problem. Hence new counterterrorism strategy of Obama was welcomed by Indian policy makers. Working on an agreed agenda could bring better result as both India and US share complementary security, strategic and economic interests (Javed, 2018).

### **Cooperation in Cyber and Intelligence Sharing**

Obama administration worked for cyber and intelligence sharing with India government. Cyber Security Forum that was established in 2001 between India and US to provide opportunities for dialogue in this specific field. A decade later both partners signed memorandum of understanding to progress further in exchange of expertise and cyber information. This important memorandum opened new ways of cooperation on security issues for both states. It also widened the scope of cyber information sharing. The law enforcement agencies of both sides started to work together to deal with issues related to cyber and theft. Strategic Cyber Policy Dialogue and The Framework for the US-India Cyber Relationship provided the opportunity of facilitation in the field of public private partnership, international law and the principles of state cyber conduct. Another commitment for cyber security cooperation was also made in September 2016 (Weitz, 2017).

### **Obama on Indo-US Nuclear Deal**

Indo-US nuclear deal reached in 2008 with which India enabled itself to have access to civil nuclear technology (Hosur, 2010). President Obama did not only support and continue Indo-US deal but even went forward in it. It was a diplomatic achievement of Indian prime minister Modi that he succeeded to convince Obama administration to withdraw the clause of the deal. This clause was a hindrance in the way of operationalizing the deal. Earlier US was not ready to leave the nuclear material unattended that was to supply to Indian Nuclear sector. Obama showed his reservations over this deal in 2008 that such deal may trigger arms race in South Asia and may have some non-proliferation consequences (Walker, 2010). India was claiming the clause intrusive particularly in the presence of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. President Obama also showed his willingness to support India in its efforts to get membership of Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), Australian Group, Missile Technology Control Regime and Wassenaar Arrangements, all of which are central to supply conventional defense and nuclear technology across the globe. At first attitude of some of members of NSG showed reluctance and demanded few conditions to such waiver, but ultimately US pressure caused to win unconditional support (Muller, 2009). Such huge support for India was no doubt assured the high status of India in US foreign policy. Indian strategic significance and economic growth have the potential to maintain regional balance particularly in the view of China as rising regional and global power (Muni, 2010). US has the target to hinder China that may have the ability to challenge US hegemony in the region. So US made it clear that it has its allies in neighboring China that shares US interests in the region (Perkovich, 2010). Analysts counted several benefits of this deal to India.

- i) This deal was actually recognition of India by US as a major player in strategic framework of Asia (Rajagopalan, 2008).
- ii) This deal fulfilled energy requirements of India for its growing economy. So India will be able to meet its challenges of sustainable development (Weiss, 2007).
- iii) Through the deal India received de-facto recognition of its nuclear program by United States (Siddiqi, 2010)
- iv) India enabled itself to free its domestic uranium reserves for military uses. India has separated its civil nuclear reactors from that of military reactors, so civil reactors are not under safeguards of IAEA (Balaji, 2011).

- v) Khan (2013) pointed out that India succeeded to gain its longstanding geo-strategic interests in the region. Moreover, such move is to make India a regional power and to enabling it to play role at regional and international level.

The deal was not welcomed or appreciated by everyone neither in India nor in US. As Jacob (2006) declared that US in doing so is in defiance of international obligations. This US move proved that neither the efforts of US for non-proliferations nor it is a true guard of Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Paul (2007) mentioned that this deal discourages the confidence in non-proliferation regime. This initiative will encourage some other states to work on their nuclear programs (Nautiyal, 2008). After engaging itself with India at this level, US hinders to play its role in resolving Kashmir issue between Pakistan and India. With the help of US India is able to improve its technological and operational abilities. Thus this deal has the capacity to disturb balance of power in South Asia. The security environment of South Asia always depends on long standing rivalry between Pakistan and India. Unbalancing the region (that is expected after the deal) can question security of the region. At the same time, China did not remain silent on Indo-US Nuclear Deal. At one side it criticized the deal from different aspect on the other started to build two more civil nuclear power plants in Pakistan. This decision of China to continue supply of peaceful technology to Pakistan must not be a surprise (Squassoni, 2012).

### **Economic Cooperation**

Economic relation between India and US under Obama administration got new acceleration. Both states established their bilateral relation not only in strategic but in economic sector as well. Hasan (2012) explored Indo-US strategic ties includes security as well as economic sectors. Indian huge market has attracted the attention of US policy makers and business class in early 21st century. Since last few years Indian has been added up among the fastest growing economy (Kohli, 2006). Some of the economic analysts have of the opinion that economic indicators of India are better than China. Same has been quoted by Panagariya (2008) that Indian economy is relying on domestic entrepreneurship, so it has the capacity to compete or even to overtake China. At the same time scholars like Ganguly and Thompson (2018) commented that while India is successful in dealing its external challenges and internal insurgencies, the real challenge today is whether Indian economy has capacity to mobilize its resources to make rapid development.

Indo-US relations are based on six pillars over the years and trade is significant among them. Strengthening of trade relations is on priorities of both India and US. Same is highlighted in Congressional Report (2007) the leaders of both states are seemed to focus trade relations. US is attracted towards India in terms of trade, as India has a large export market. A consistent rise in Indo-US trade has been noticed in last few years. Bilateral trade between these two partners has raised around six times during 2001 to 2015. Following irritants are mentioned in Congressional report (2020) in India US trade during Obama era;

- i) Sanitary and phytosanitary hindrances in Indo-US agriculture trade
- ii) Intellectual property issue between two sides
- iii) US concerns for Indian restricted localization rules
- iv) US concerns over investment barriers in India
- v) US demands for reforms in defense offset policies of India
- vi) Tariff issues, where India has relatively high tariff rates
- vii) Services issue in different sectors
- viii) Issue related market access.

### **Conclusion**

India gained special attention of Obama administration same as done by his predecessors, president Clinton and Bush. This relationship is actually based on common values. While analyzing US-India relations one must not ignore the basic and common values shared by both states (Kaul, 1974). There is hardly any sector of states life that was ignored by the two partners. The diplomatic ties got even more strengthened under Obama presidency. Indian premiers Manmohan Sing and his successor Modi visited US and in turn president Obama also visited India to go further in diplomatic relations. During these visits several agreements were signed between the two partners. Among these agreements Indo-US Nuclear Deal is of great significance. Obama administration also took this deal serious while interacting with India. US has been attracted by huge Indian market to export its goods. On the other hand, the

changing world dynamics in 21<sup>st</sup> century provided India with opportunity to develop close relations with US. Understanding the sensitivity of the situation both states started their bilateral relation with new vision (Pramanik, 2015). Moreover, president Obama gave proper attention to India as its ally in the region to counter Chinese influence. Indian leaders during this era offered every kind of strategic support to US in its war in Afghanistan and to counter terrorism in the region. To conclude it can be said that there may remained some irritants between the two allies during Obama administration, but overall assessment reveals that both sides remained satisfied to secure their interests. Ganguly (2003) argues that unlike past the Indo-US relations now seems more balanced.

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