

MANMOHON'S US VISIT

Obama tries to allay Indian fears

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to the United States was the first such visit by a Head of State/Government under the Obama administration. The hosts used this point in the media to single out the visit as a special one. Likewise, the state banquet given to the Indian Prime Minister, where over 300 guests were invited, was also mentioned in the media in great details to underscore the care and the attention that the hosts have taken to make the visit remarkable. The President's choice of words to praise India and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made it obvious that he was also trying to underscore the visit as more than an important one. He referred to the usual pitch that marks such visits between the two countries; theirs being the two largest democracies in the world. This time, the fact that both Obama and Manmohan Singh have only recently assumed office (Manmohan Singh for a new term) and would have a long time to implement agreements reached between the two countries was added to the usual pitch to underscore the visit's importance.

The official talks between the two leaders lasted two hours. A Joint Statement was issued following the talks and the two leaders also addressed a joint press conference. Obama acknowledged India as a "rising and responsible global power" and welcomed it for "rise of a stable, prosperous and rising Asia". Obama said the US considered its strategic partnership with India "as one of the redefining partnerships of 21st century" and added that the necessity to broaden and strengthen US-India cooperation would be a matter of priority for his administration. Obama underscored India's fantastic rate of economic development and stressed upon the need to strengthen trade and investment in each other's country for mutual benefit. In the context of the agreements reached at the Pittsburgh G20 Summit, President Obama

underscored the need for India to "have a greater voice in shaping the international financial structure." Obama also said at the press conference about an agreement to interact closely on the issue of climate leading to the UN sponsored Copenhagen Summit next month.

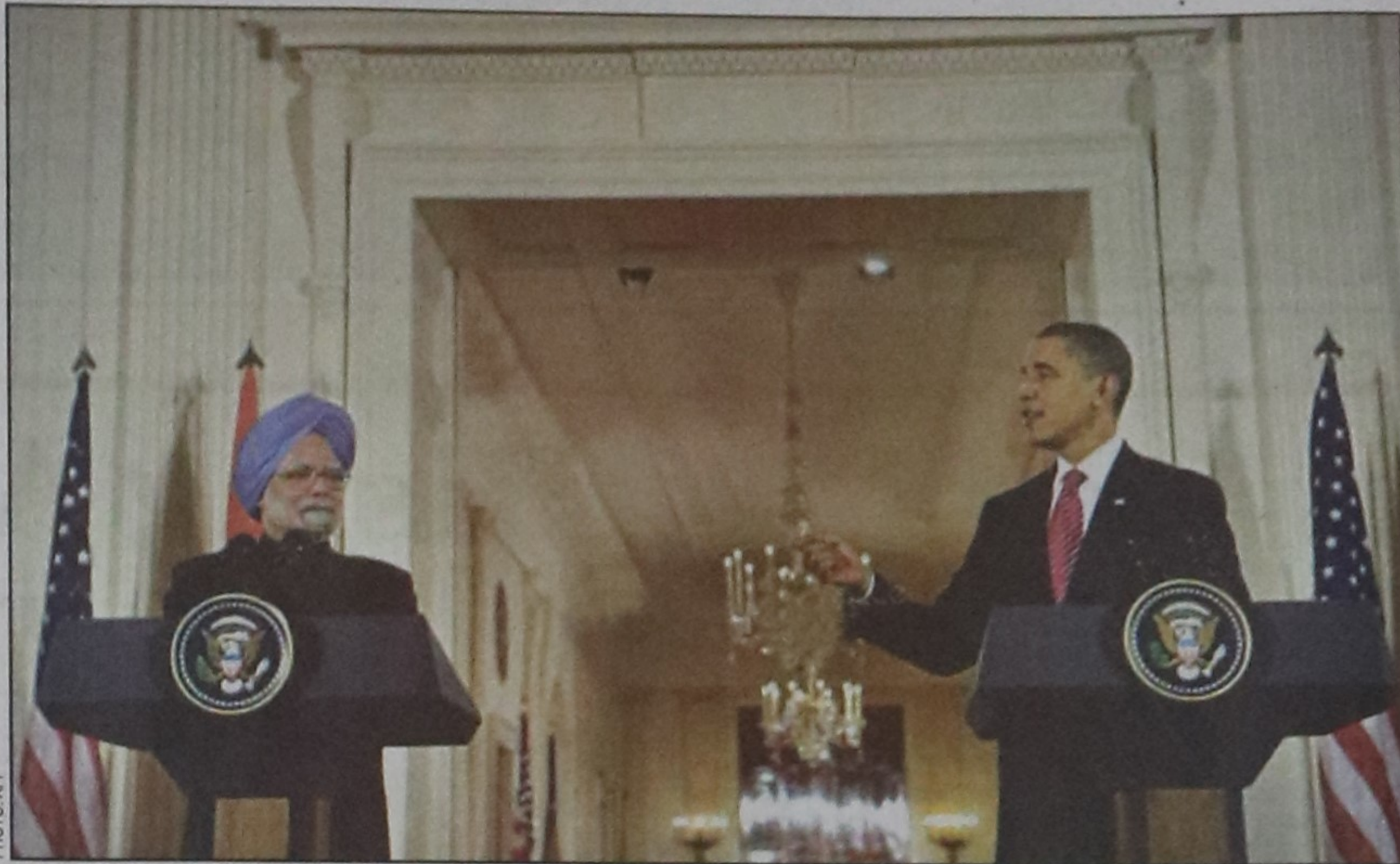
President Obama also said that the two countries agreed to deepen cooperation on "transnational threats". To prevent future attacks like the one Mumbai witnessed a year ago, they agreed that "our law enforcing and intelligence agencies will work closer, including sharing information." President Obama assured India that the Civil Nuclear Agreement reached in October 2008 would be implemented soon and welcomed India's participation in the nuclear summit next year "in a shared vision of a world without nuclear weapons." President Obama also spoke of US-Indian cooperation in education, disease control, and food security. Manmohan Singh expressed satisfaction at the agreement of the two sides to strengthen their strategic partnership and to cooperate closely on trade and investment relations. He expressed pleasure at the assurance on implementing the Civil Nuclear Agreement. He also echoed the sentiments of Obama on the agreement to work on climate, economic issues, education and food security. The visit was also significant because of the 8 MoUs signed on a wide range of areas highlighting deeper cooperation between the private sectors of the two countries.

The ambience created around the visit by the hosts was in contrast to the build up to the visit from the Indian side. The US President's state visit to China just days before Manmohan Singh's trip to Washington did not make the Indians particularly happy. Former Indian Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to Washington Lalit Mansingh said that although it is easy to explain Obama's bow to the Emperor of Japan as a matter of protocol, his bending over backwards to please the Chinese was nothing but "appeasement". The Indians are unhappy

that the Obama administration has been paying too much attention to China and not enough to the Indians. The warmth of relations that was there under President Bush who brought US-India relations out from the cold storage after decades of antagonism during the Cold War was missing going into the visit. The Indians were getting apprehensive because of the Obama administration's silence to activate the Civil Nuclear Agreement. The US had to use its influence with the 43 nations Nuclear Suppliers' Group to get its clearance to sign the deal.

The task of making the visit successful thus lay more on the lap of the US than on the Indians. In fact, the US had to walk the tight rope on this account. It had to keep Pakistan happy by not giving too much to the Indians as the Obama administration has already pinned that country as a strategic partner in the war against terror. China is the emerging world giant set to overtake Japan soon as the second strongest economy in the world and eventually beat the US to the number one position. China is also US's most important trading partner. These are just a few of the imperatives that make relations with China extremely important for the US. In fact, Lalit Mansingh was correct when he said that Obama's overtures towards China during his recent trip was "appeasement" because given China's ever growing influence in world affairs, and US's dependence on China for economic reasons, it is in US' national interest to keep China happy.

Thus, the US cannot lean towards India without considering the reactions of Pakistan and China. By reiterating commitment to work with India on issues of climate; terrorism in South Asia; global trading arrangements; the US has assured the Indians about India's importance to the US as a strategic partner without upsetting Pakistan and China. The importance of US-India Strategic Dialogue established at the level of Secretary of State/Minister of External Affairs as underscored by Obama has also made the



Indians happy. These facts notwithstanding, no agreement has been signed nor any commitment made by the US with India which may upset either China or Pakistan. Nevertheless, the assurance given by the US to implement the Civil Nuclear Agreement has been a major outcome of the visit. A visibly relieved Indian Prime Minister said at the joint press conference that it would take at most a couple of months before the deal is implemented.

In the context of big power international politics, the visit will not give India any new importance than what it already enjoys. In the context of regional politics in South Asia, the visit has clearly under-

scored that India will be, to the United States, the regional leader where Pakistan would be the exception. Bangladesh may have less of the US attention on regional matters such as those related to security and terrorism, sharing of water of common rivers or on maritime boundary and US may be inclined to take the Indian view on such matters to decide its policy.

The two big issues upon which the US media reported extensively are the state banquet where the First Lady wore an elegant dress designed by an Indian designer; the Indian cuisine served on the occasion; and the galaxy of elites who were invited to it. The other big issue is the gate crashing event of Tareq Salahi.

Neither issue is of substance but still they dominated media attention. This does not suggest that important issues were not discussed. It nevertheless suggests that the issues discussed did not make any breakthrough which might have taken US-India strategic relations to the next level as was predicted by Assistant Secretary for South Asia Robert Blake in his pre-visit assessment. Rather, the visit of Manmohan Singh will maintain the current US policy in Asia, that of not choosing a favorite among India, Pakistan and China.

The author is a former Ambassador to Japan and Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.

US pressure grows on Iran

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IRAN has ignored the UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions over its refusal to suspend enrichment in exchange for trade benefits, or grant unfettered IAEA inspections meant to verify it has no clandestine nuclear arms programme.

Last October, the West came up with a new proposal that Iran should ship the low-enriched uranium (about 1,200 kilograms) out of the country to the West or Russia for additional processing and eventual return in Iran as fuel rods for a civilian reactor. The Director General of the UN watchdog IAEA on 2nd November urged Iran to accept the proposal, which he said was "aimed to engage Iran in a series of measures that could build confidence and trust."

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband emerged from a meeting in Moscow on 2nd November with his counterpart Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, to declare

"we both want to see a prompt response" from Iran.

On 14th November, both President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia, on the sidelines of APEC summit in Singapore, expressed dissatisfaction with Iran's response to a nuclear offer made by world powers, raising the prospect that sanctions might be the next step in the West's ongoing efforts to rein in Tehran's nuclear ambition.

Both the Presidents discussed a time-table for imposing sanctions if Tehran and the West did not agree soon on the proposal. President Obama, sitting next to the Russian President, reportedly said: "Unfortunately so far at least, Iran appears to have been unable to say yes to what everyone acknowledges is a creative and constructive approach. We are running out of time with respect to that approach."

Russian President Medvedev also alluded to running out of patience. He said that while a dialogue was continuing, "we are not completely happy about its pace. If something does not work, there are other means to move the process further."

In a report on 15th November, the UN nuclear watchdog IAEA said that Iran's acknowledgement of the nuclear plant near Qum was long overdue and "reduced confidence" that Tehran was not concealing other sites. Iran's Ambassador to IAEA Ali Ashghar Soltanieh in response to IAEA's concern dismissed it as an unfair political judgment.

Iran's rejection

On 18th November, Iran rejected the West's proposal on the nuclear issue and sug-

gested simultaneous exchange of Iran's low-enriched uranium for fuel rods. The deal would have resulted in Iran shipping about 70 percent of its low-enriched uranium stockpile to Russia and France by the end of the year, where it would be further processed into a form usable in a Tehran research reactor. The bottom line of rejection seems to be that Iran does not trust the world powers and thinks that if Iran delivers enriched uranium, it may not receive the fuel rods from them for its nuclear reactor.

To put pressure on Iran to accept the new deal, it is also reported on 16th November that Russia will not be able to launch the opening of the new nuclear reactor it is building at Bushehr in southern Iran by

resolve the issue of nuclear issue with the West.

From the moment Ahmadinejad was first elected as President four years ago, he denounced the reform movement for having cooperated with the West, in particular, charging that President Khatami undermined Iran's security, pride and national rights by agreeing to suspend enrichment for two years.

Although President Ahmadinejad said that Iran should accept the deal proposed by the West, the President's deeply alienated reformist and conservative political leaders alike do not agree with this view after the disputed presidential election. Some analysts say Ahmadinejad and his disputed election is the centre of Iran's

On 14th November Speaker Ali Larijani reportedly said that the US steps to renew sanctions showed that President Obama was no better than his predecessor, former President Bush. Larijani's statement was followed by chants of "Death to America" among lawmakers in the parliament, according Reuters. A political scientist at Syracuse University Mehrazad Broujerdi, reportedly said: "Since the 1979 Revolution it is rare for the political elite to disagree so openly with an issue of this significance."

Alireza Nader, an Iran expert with the Washington office of RAND Corporation, a research organisation, reportedly stated: "Even a potential deal that serves Iran's overall interests can be scuttled due to Iran's highly factionalized political environment."

Analysts said that the Supreme Leader Khamenei would not be willing to risk undermining his already damaged credibility with reformists and conservatives by accepting a deal that many argue would undermine Iran's interests.

Meanwhile it is reported that Tehran has held aerial defence war games for five days from 22nd November, covering an area of some 600,000 square kilometres in north, south-western Iran and parts of south and central Iran to protect its nuclear sites.

Iran's power structure

Under the 1979 Constitution, Iran is ruled by a system known as "Velayat e-Faqih" (The Rule of the Supreme Jurists). But the Constitution also stipulates that the people are the sources of power and every four years Presidential and Parliamentary elections are held. In power structure, the apex is Supreme leader. The Leader is chosen by the clerics who make up the Assembly of Experts.

The Supreme Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, appoints the head of the judiciary, six of the members of the powerful Guardian Council, the commanders of all the armed forces, Friday prayer leaders and the head of radio and TV. He also confirms the president's election. And the Supreme leader has the final say on national issues.

Then there is the parliament, the Majlis, with its powerful speaker Ali Larijani. And former President Hashemi Rafsanjani continues to be influential partly through his chairmanship of two important institutions, the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Will Afghanistan witness stability in Karzai's second term?

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

AFGHANISTAN president Hamid Karzai is faced with a great challenge in tackling the myriad problems of his country after he was sworn in as the president for the second term following a controversial election. He has come under mounting pressure from the Western nations and the United Nations to free his administration from massive corruption and other vice in one hand and bring stability in the war-torn nation on the other. Hamid Karzai wants more troops to fight the Taliban, who are now more active in some parts of the country. And President Obama has complied by promising an additional 30,000 troops. The crucial question is will Karzai be able to deliver what is expected from him?

Hamid Karzai was declared president of Afghanistan for the second term following scrapping of the run-off elections by the election commission. This set at rest all speculations about the presidential polls in a country, which is already in tatters by war and other internal strife. The run-off election for a new president was scheduled for November 7, but the challenger former foreign minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah withdrew from the second round of voting fearing repeat of "massive malpractices" that marred the elections on August 2. This left the election without any significance since the run-off polls was between only two top candidates. The election commission said it was scrapping the balloting after the challenger had withdrawn and declared Karzai as the automatic winner, apart from the reason that he had secured maximum votes in the elections. The curtain has now fallen on a tumultuous chapter in Afghanistan surrounding the presidential elections that raised a lot of dust because of a variety of reasons mainly allegations of massive fraud in the voting in favour of the incumbent president Karzai. But questions will obviously be raised whether this denouement of the much-awaited and much-talked Afghan presidential election will help strengthen democratic edifice in one hand and attain stability for the trouble-torn nation.

A run-off election in Afghanistan had been agreed by President Hamid Karzai, whose administration was accused by his rivals of August 20 presidential elections of massive malpractice and vote rigging. The United Nations and Western allies of Kabul were also convinced that the polls were not free and fair even though Hamid Karzai was insisting otherwise. Because of intense pressures at home and abroad, the president had announced that the embattled nation would have second round of polls on November 7 to determine who would be the president of the country. Indeed, the decision was welcomed since the August 20 voting was largely seen as influenced by the administration and supporters of the incumbent president. His main rival Dr. Abdullah has been clamouring for the run-off polls charging the president of large-scale irregularities in the balloting. Initially, Dr. Abdullah also expressed readiness for contesting the run-off polls, but later he backed out citing fears of "same experience" of August 20 polling. Thus, the decision from him came somewhat as a surprise as Western nations and the United Nations were keen for the second round of balloting. Dr. Abdullah might

have smelled that the run-off polls were unlikely to give a verdict in his favour. Besides, the visit to Kabul by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon might have also given him the signal that the world was in the favour of Karzai despite allegations against him of corruption and maladministration. The message was probably that Karzai has steered the country through difficult time since the drastic change of the Afghan scenario and he is need for coming years as the country is still grappling with various problems and it is necessary that he remain in the scene.

Afghan presidential elections, second since a sea-change has taken place in the political landscape following the toppling of the "Taliban" regime in 2001, was billed as a development that was expected to strengthen the democratic edifice of a country whose history of recent decades is replete with violent developments spilling blood all round. The country witnessed presence of foreign troops in large number in contrasting circumstances in one hand and internal infighting among various groups in a typical milieu of the Afghan scene on the other. The presence of foreign troops is nothing new in the country in changing circumstances and this seems to be a fait accompli for the nation.

The troops of the former communist giant Soviet Union remained in the country in the eighties to support their leftist Kabul government against their Islamic opponents aided by the United States and other Western countries. The Soviet troops left the embattled Afghanistan after ten long years without succeeding in their task and later the Soviet Union itself incidentally and rather unfortunately disintegrated. "Unfortunately" because its collapse had removed the bi-polar world character turning the United States into the only super power. The balance of power in the global scale now squarely rests with the United States often dubbed as the "Mega power". It is the United States that threw its entire weight behind the Islamic forces against the Soviet-backed Kabul governments. Paradoxically it sent troops to Afghanistan several years later to fight broadly the same Islamic forces albeit more radical in nature. Certainly, the dispatch of American and other western soldiers to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 incidents in the United States was largely seen as justified and the soldiers still remain in the trouble-torn country. More than one hundred thousand soldiers are now fighting the opponents of the Karzai government as peace and stability still eludes the nation.

Definitely, Karzai is the key figure in the Afghan imbroglio for the past several years and has spared no efforts in leading the country through extremely tough phase. But his presidency has also seen countrymen getting disenchanted with him on variety of matters like rise of corruption in the higher echelons of the administration. Besides, violence and resistance to the government and its supporters also seem to be not slackening causing frustration among the people.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah is an experienced person familiar with the nitty gritty of Afghan politics and characteristics as he was involved in different crucial phases. He was active during the Soviet-influenced period being close to

legendary guerrilla commander Shah Ahmad Mosoud, who later fought the radical "Talibans". Dr. Abdullah is also a widely renowned figure being the foreign minister and is seen as largely successful in his job. He is Tajik and from the south while Karzai is from north with influence on the Pashtuns. Their rivalry centering the elections has also opened the undesirable tensions between the south and the north among the ruling circles. A run-off election would have further widened this rift and increased acrimony further. The supporters of Afghanistan were clearly worried about such a development and now must be heaving sigh of relief over the "dignified back-out" of the challenger.

The United States and its allies have great stakes in Afghanistan and they have tried to reduce the differences and acrimony among the anti-Taliban base centering the presidential elections. President Barack Obama, who is under pressure from military commanders and opposition Republicans to dispatch more troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban insurgents, has congratulated Karzai for a second five-year term in the office, but has called for curbing on corruption and work for a healthier society in Afghanistan, which has received billions of assistance in the last few years. French president Nicolas Sarkozy has echoed the same thoughts as the Western leaders, cautioning Karzai for a better performance in the future.

Karzai is now faced with a greater challenge to deliver the goods and can ill-afford failures particularly in two fronts corruption and effective fight against the Taliban. In his first speech after being announced as the president for the new term, he has vowed to eradicate corruption and also offered an olive branch to the Taliban, who, however, are unlikely to respond to his gestures. The severity and complexities of the Afghan tangle is such that Karzai is entering a more crucial and difficult phase. Certainly, under him social and economic progress is discernible, but a weakening and corrupt administration, non-cooperation from Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and his supporters, and combating the ever increasing threats of the insurgents pose bigger challenge for him despite enjoying the support of his Western backers, who are not fully convinced by the way he has been elected as president. US foreign secretary Hillary Clinton and British foreign secretary David Miliband were present among others at the swearing-in ceremony of Karzai in Kabul's presidential palace, but both made it clear that they expected better governance from him in the second term.

Meanwhile, differences exist within his Democratic Party over the need and justification of more soldiers there. House of representative Speaker Nancy Pelosi had questioned the wisdom of sending more troops as she finds the entire Afghan exercise not much worthwhile for the interest of the American people. Considering all these factors, it can be safely concluded that Hamid Karzai is faced with bigger challenge in the second tenure and he can ill-afford to fail much although the difficulties are quite gigantic.

The author is a freelancer.

