

President Obama charms India

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

PRESIDENT Obama's three day visit with his wife Michelle from 7th November has gone down very well, according to the media. There has been a positive public response to the visit which has been covered extensively on the country's many cable TV news channels. "Delhi feels Obama's first words in India hit the right notes," read a front-page headline in the newspaper TheHindu.

The first day in Mumbai of the President was concentrated on jobs and trade, besides his visit to the memorial to the victims of a 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai and to a museum in a former home of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of Indian independence. Obama wrote in the guest book that Gandhi "is a hero not just to India, but to the world".

The US President has impressed India by dancing Bollywood-style with his wife Michelle with children during celebrations for the Indian festival, Diwali, at a Mumbai school on 7th November and declaring that there is "limitless potential" for the Indo-American partnership to improve lives. The President said democratic India could become an "anchor for stability" in its region.

During his landmark visit, Mr Obama met with the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and other Indian leaders in New Delhi on November 8 in a bid to enhance strategic ties between the world's two biggest democracies. Pakistan and Afghanistan figured in discussions between the two leaders.

Later that day, the President addresses the Indian Parliament announcing that the US would support India's bid as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The stance is seen as a major policy-shift of the US as it opposed in 2005.

Mr Obama faced questions on regional security including US policy towards Pakistan and Afghanistan during a town hall-style meeting with Indian college students in Mumbai. There is concern in India over US military aid for its nuclear-armed rival and neighbour Pakistan.



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Mr Obama said Pakistan needs to do more to fight violent extremism within its borders but urged the estranged neighbours to co-operate. At the same he defended the

US policy toward Pakistan which is to "eradicate the extremism that we consider a cancer within the country, that can potentially engulf the country."

On meaning of jihad, asked by a student, the President answered with characteristic diplomacy "The phrase has a lot of meanings within Islam...all of us recognize that this great religion in the hands of a few extremists has been distorted to justify violence towards innocent people that is never justified."

Mr Obama also assured his Indian audience that there would not be a hasty retreat from Afghanistan. "I have said that starting July of 2011, we will begin draw-

ing down our [troop] levels. But we will not be removing all our troops," he said.

Why is the US interested in India?

First, Mr Obama's Democratic party lost control in the House of Representatives in congressional elections on 2nd November amid high unemployment of 9.6% national average. In some states including California, the rate of unemployment hovers between 15% to 30%.

Mr Obama framed his visit to India in economic terms soon after arriving in Mumbai with the announcement of more than 20 business deals worth almost \$US10 billion that would create 50,000 American jobs.

India has an urbanising consumer-driven economy and a growing middle class more than 300 million that indulges

itself in cars, apartments, and other sophisticated goods. It is the purchasing power of the middle class that attracts the US to export its goods to India.

He told an audience of US and Indian business leaders: "The sheer size and pace of India's progress in just two decades is one of the most stunning achievements in human history. It is a dynamic, two-way relationship that has created jobs and growth and higher living standards in both our countries and that is the truth".

Second, wealth and fear of terrorism has prompted India to become one of the biggest arms buying country in the world. India's defence budget expands by 7 to 8% per cent annually, and thus could spend \$50 to 80 billion in the next five years on defence equipment.

In the past several years, its appetite

for more sophisticated weapons has grown. India has reduced its traditional reliance on Russian planes, ships and missiles and is turning to the US for military hardware to secure its border. At a cost of \$11 billion, India wants to upgrade the defence capabilities of its airforce. The White House is backing sales like the C-17s which India would use transport its rapid response forces.

Third, the US companies want to provide nuclear technology to Indian civil plants under a deal between the US and India. This has a huge commercial potential for the US companies. Mr Obama said export restrictions would be eased to allow more trade in high tech equipment. This includes an end to curbs on the sale of nuclear technology to previously blacklisted Indian organisations.

Fourth, the US wants Indian companies to invest in the US to create jobs. Meanwhile, Indian companies already bought 143 US companies in the last two years. Tata Group has invested more than US\$ 3 billion in the US economy. It has bought 'Eight O'Clock Coffee' for US\$ 220 million. The Tata Group operates 16 businesses and employs 19,000 in America.

Fifth, the US considers that India is the only country in Asia that is likely to be able to contain China's increasing diplomatic, military and economic influence in the region. Another comparable Asian power in the region which is ally to the US is in the strategic interest for the US.

While the US has been engaged in war in Iraq and Afghanistan, it appears it has neglected Asia Pacific region. Meanwhile, China has already won the hearts and minds of ASEAN and extends its naval power in the Indian Ocean establishing ports in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Finally and sixth, the Indian Ocean region suffers from a high level of international and internal conflict and is a key venue for international piracy. The Indian Ocean also is home to the world's two nuclear weapons states, India and Pakistan, Iran, which Western nations suspect has a robust program to acquire nuclear weap-

ons, although Iran denies it strongly.

The northern reaches of the ocean hum with the traffic of half the world's container ships, just under three quarters of global petroleum products and increasingly with immense tonnages of raw materials ripped from the ground of Australia, Africa and South East Asia, bound for China, India, Japan and South Korea. Through the sea lines of the Ocean passes 40% of the world's seaborne oil, including a third of China's supply, 70% of Japan's and 90% of India's.

Non-military threats to maritime security are also increasing. These include gun-running, smuggling, container security, drug trafficking and oil-related environmental disasters.

The sea lines must be protected even during the armed conflicts. Therefore the strategic interests of both India and the US converge. America's strategically placed military base at Diego Garcia will become more important than ever.

Conclusion

The visit of President Obama in India demonstrates that both countries look forward for comprehensive partnership and seek greater cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, services, nuclear energy, science, technology and defence.

At a time when China is getting assertive in claiming the disputed islands of the South China Sea, causing tensions among its neighbours, many interpret that by neighbouring relationship to a higher gear and establishing global partnership with India, the US will continue to maintain its strategic presence in Asia-Pacific for defence of its allies.

Meanwhile, it is noted on 8th November that Australia and the United States signed an agreement paving the way for greater cooperation in the surveillance of space after annual defence and security talks at the level of Defence Ministers. US Defence Secretary Gates said the two nations would look set up a group to begin developing options for enhanced joint defence cooperation on Australian soil.

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Pitfalls in the political structure of Russia

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NO country is free from political obstructions in the world. Likewise though outwardly today's Russia seems to be a tower of strength but in reality the political scenario is little bit different. The existence of some political realities can slow down the future development of Russia from becoming a super power. Though the realities are not so apparent but the impact of those realities can be very sturdy. The following points can draw a brief outline of the political tensions in today's Russia.

Problem of centralized power structure and weaken democracy

So far, we have seen that Russian political structure is much more centralized to the president of the country. All the decisions are dictated by the president. But for practicing the true democracy, there must be the presence of decentralization of power. The active participation of the civil society can lead to a stable and developed political structure, which is not present in Russian political atmosphere. Another force that will pull in the direction of greater decentralization of political power is the pressure from the federal components.

Because the current state system of Russia can be described neither as Federal nor as Unitarian. Beside these, several incidents have proved that the democracy in Russia is biased and it will be better to call the system as autocracy. There have been a number of autocratic tendencies in decision making process in the parliament. There have been accusations of a growing number of human rights violations, and freedom of speech also has been threatened. The civilian sector is relatively weak and is not strong opponent to the existing power structures. Russia can only develop into a true democracy if it manages to build a valid federation, which solves the main conflicts between Center and Periphery.

Stand of the opposition party

It is quite usual that the views of the opposition party towards the government in any country are most of the time negative. Russia is not exceptional in this regard. But there really exist some points, which we can't ignore at all. Such as, recently the Duma has adopted new regulations requiring deputies to attend sessions. But many deputies believe that it will make no difference to a legislature so dominated by the Kremlin and the current speaker, Boris Gryzlov, has become criticized

because of his statement where he said to another deputy that parliament is "not a place for discussion." The opposition party has no faith upon the decision of the government, which is not a good sign. Communist Victor Ilyukhin, a member of the only opposition party in parliament thinks that the Duma will no longer function as an independent branch of power. He thinks that legislation is not made in the Duma, but by the Kremlin and the government. The Duma's recent decision to extend the president's term from four to six years has also been criticized and it is expressed that all Russian legislation is corrupt and it is thought that there's little hope that anything will change soon. Some think that the Duma is no longer a parliament, not even a forum for lobbying and according to some politicians of the opposition party the Duma has only one major function, which is to demonstrate to the West that Russia has a parliament.

A new agreement has been signed by Four Russian opposition leaders - Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Vladimir Milov to form named "For Russia without Lawlessness and Corruption." Though it is not possible to tell much about the agreement within two or three lines but it can be said that it however defines two major immediate goals, mainly to nominate a single candidate for the 2012 presidential election and to form a "united democratic" political party (with the name yet to be chosen) to take part in the 2011 Duma election. But it cannot be said that this coalition will work well as the previous coalitions were not successful at all. Because in the past other similar coalitions appeared and then rapidly disappeared, loosely following Russia's election cycles: Committee 2008 (2004), The Other Russia (2006), National Assembly (2008), and Solidarity (2008). So it has become clear that the opposition parties in Russia are not given free space to express their in a well manner. It is the sign of a true democracy.

Political disaffection among the common people

There is another point of tension in Russian politics is that the population is discouraged from political activity there. The limited freedom of speech and the persecutions from the opposition politicians keep many Russians from participating actively in public affairs. Politics is marked by cronyism and has become a remote issue for the average citizen. The citizens are lethargic and distanced from the political establishment. Politics is regarded as something insincere, corrupt and vicious. The weakly organized civil-

ian sector cannot organize much opposition to the central government. So it is a matter of tension because if the general people are not concerned about the political participation then the country will face a vacuum of human resources in politics in near future.

Divergent perceptions of the president and the PM

There exists different type of perceptions between the president and the prime minister of Russia. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is quite conservative whereas the president Medvedev is in favor of liberalization and modernization. The recent visit of Medvedev to California, USA and the next visit to France and Germany can show the sign of the liberal vision of the Russian president. The British government is also on the way to cooperation with Russia. She has good relation with the European countries and also with the Asian countries as well. In terms of the relations with the international organizations it seems that NATO and WTO cooperate closely with Russia. Russia is thus playing as a global player and match for another global and regional actor. And all these are the result of the efforts of the president. But it is thought that if Putin comes again as president then the wave of these relationships will be hanged. So there must be the existence of the similarities between the views of the President and the Prime Minister. Otherwise it will create problems in maintaining the international relations in the long run.

Lack of the alternatives

Though Putin is a high rating Prime Minister in Russia but it doesn't mean that he is supported by all. Rather it's because of a lack of alternatives and a general indifference. At present, Russia has a one party system and it is difficult to imagine any powerful opposition in the near future. Paradoxically, Putin's obsession with stability and his tight control of Russia may have created a blind pathway from which the country cannot easily escape. Putin is the ultimate authority and the whole system depends on him. It cannot function properly without him and that is a major risk in the long term.

The above mentioned points may not affect the political stability of Russia promptly but in the long run these can work as the pitfalls toward the political strength of the country. So, the political structure of Russia must be redefined and it must be decided that whether the country will follow political centralization or decentralization and also whether will follow democracy in true sense or autocracy.

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Violent protests in Germany slow nuclear waste train



DANNENBERG, Germany: Protests against a train carrying nuclear waste from France to Germany erupted in violence Sunday as police wielding batons charged activists trying to halt the cargo's progress.

Around 1,000 activists attacked police on the tracks near Dannenberg, the final destination for the train before the waste is loaded onto trucks and taken to a storage facility, a police spokeswoman told AFP.

"Police responded with batons and water cannon," she said. "I can confirm there were arrests and people injured but I am not able to say how many," another police spokesman said.

He added the activists appeared to be "members of the anarchist scene, who threw flares and fired tear gas at police."

Both protesters and police were wounded in the clashes, another police spokesman said in the northwestern German town Lueneburg.

"There were wounded on the side of the protesters as well as among the police but I cannot say how many," the spokesman said.

A female protester was evacuated by helicopter to hospital after being wounded in nearby Harlingen by the horse of a mounted police officer and apparently suffering from a broken shoulder, he added.

The new clashes followed earlier altercations between police and protesters during which authorities deployed pepper spray, tear gas and water cannon to disperse some 250 anti-nuclear activists trying to sabotage the tracks.

Christoph Kleine of the activist group "Aktion Castor" said the woods around the train tracks were "completely clouded with tear gas." Police helicopters were circling overhead.

Head of the German Police Union, Konrad Freiberg, told a regional newspaper the protests had reached "a new level of violence."

The train carrying the 123 tonnes of nuclear waste, dubbed by activists "the most radioactive ever", is loaded onto lorries at Dannenberg for transfer to the nearby storage facility of Gorleben, in central Germany.

The train is returning German nuclear waste that was treated in France by the Areva group but activists say the Gorleben facility is not fit for storage.

At 1900 GMT the train was blocked at Dumstorf, about 30 kilometres (19 miles) from Dannenberg, by 70 protesters massed on the train tracks, a police spokesman said.

More than 2,000 protesters -- anti-nuclear activists place their numbers at 50,000 -- were assembled in Harlingen, just 15 kilometres from Dannenberg. Police who used teargas to disperse some in Harlingen, used teargas under the rail ties, he said.

Up to 1,500 more protesters are also thronged at the entrance of Gorleben, a police spokesman said. The train is not expected there before Monday morning.

Activists were doing everything in their power to slow the progress of the train, which environmental group Greenpeace has called to be halted immediately "in the interests of public safety."

The head of one group of protesters called for calm while placing the blame for the escalating violence squarely on authorities.

"We do not want a debate about violence. We want a debate about nuclear power, yes or no," said Wolfgang Ehmke from the group "citizens' initiative Luechow-Dannenberg."

Stefanie Koenig, protesting at Harlingen, between Lueneburg and Dannenberg, brought along her two sons, aged three and eight.

"We thought about leaving the children with their grandparents, because with them, we cannot take part in some of the more radical protests. Otherwise, we would have done it."

Germany's anti-nuclear campaigners have been outraged by a vote in parliament to extend the life of the country's 17 nuclear reactors which previously were meant to come offline in 2020.

Opinion polls show that most Germans oppose parliament's decision.

The last time the convoy took place, in 2008, the waste shipment was halted for around 14 hours amid a violent struggle between police and protesters.

Source: defencetalk.com



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