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Obama in India, a power that has already emerged

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ABSTRACT

- **Obama has supported India's ambitions to sit as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, but China holds the key**
 - **The US will deepen its strategic alliance with India, even if this irritates Pakistan.**
 - **India and the US share the desire to check the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean**
 - **In India, Obama delivered two quotes to remember: "India has succeeded not in spite of democracy; India has succeeded because of democracy" and "India is not simply emerging; India has already emerged"**
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OBAMA IN INDIA, A POWER THAT HAS ALREADY EMERGED

For Barack Obama's second visit to Asia, China was not included in the schedule. His Asian tour, from 6 to 14 November, took in India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. All four countries are democracies, and major economies. In Seoul and Yokohama he attended the G20 and APEC summits.

This was Obama's first official visit to India, the world's largest democracy. Unlike China, it has a multiparty system and a framework of public liberties that allow for alternation in political power. It is a great power, destined to become the world's third largest economy. It will have the largest population, overtaking the Chinese giant. By the end of 2010, 27 million new Indians will have been born.

Jimmy Carter visited the country in 1978, but no one remembers that. It was Bill Clinton who promoted bilateral relations in 2000, and George Bush strengthened them in 2006. Washington is keen to have a strategic ally on a

regional and global level, to offset China. Bush positioned himself clearly by signing a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with New Delhi in 2007, thus enabling nuclear technology transfer, in spite of the thin line that separates civil from military use. However, Obama's arrival in the White House was met with scepticism in New Delhi. Hillary Clinton's failure to visit India in her first Asian tour in February 2009 was unpopular. Nor did Obama go there in November that year. He gave priority to reaching an understanding with China. But he immediately received Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Washington. Since then, the two men have been on good terms. One year on, Obama has supported India's ambitions to sit as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, despite China's reticence and the outright opposition of Pakistan. The aim of his visit to India was twofold: both political and economic.

a) Before flying to Asia, Obama was dealt a serious electoral blow on 2 November. The Democratic Party no longer has full control of Congress. The Republicans achieved a majority in the House of Representatives, although not in the Senate, which remains under a Democrat majority. Public opinion questions Obama's ability to lead the economic recovery of the country, and powerful lobbies with vested interests assail him mercilessly. The loss of support in Congress will also condition his initiatives in foreign policy. This explains why Obama organised his Asian tour from the perspective of domestic policy, lending priority to economic and trade objectives. He was accompanied by a delegation of more than 200 senior business executives. He took part in business meetings, and juicy contracts were signed that could help to create employment in the US.

India is a country with a huge commercial and investment appeal. Indian society enjoys a dynamic business sector with major multinational companies. Whereas Chinese development is led by public enterprises, the Indian variety is led by the private sector. India is a nuclear power and a leader in information technology. But, unlike China, it suffers from an acute lack of infrastructure, and has opened up too little to foreign investment. It can boast a great and very young human capital, with a workforce of 630 million people, a figure that will rise to 825 million in a decade. And a growing consumer market. It also has the

second largest Asian diaspora, after that of the Chinese, with particular influence in the US and the UK. Another advantage is that English is the lingua franca of the Indian subcontinent.

Obama announced the signing of 20 commercial contracts to the value of \$10,000 million (€7,200 million), capable of creating around 50,000 jobs in the US. Among them, the purchase of 30 Boeing 737 aircraft by the private airline SpiceJet stands out. US exports to India reached \$14,600 million in the first half of 2010, 14% more than in the same period the year before. For its part, the US will review the strict controls hindering exports of technologies that are liable for both civil and military use.

b) Obama held a question time event with students at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai. There was no comparison with the event he had held a year earlier in Shanghai with a few hundred Chinese university students, where he defended freedom of speech and worship and access to information as universal rights that should be available to all, including ethnic and religious minorities, in the US, China or anywhere else in the world. Nevertheless, his words remained unheard in China. The media, controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, only reproduced his references to China's great economic achievements. However, in Mumbai the Indian students had total freedom to talk to Obama. He upheld democracy as the best system to ensure economic development. And he repeated it in Jakarta. Another political dart aimed at Beijing. He also expressed his fascination and identification with Gandhi. But India today has very little to do with Gandhi's legacy.

Before the Indian Parliament, Obama stated something it was eager to hear: US support for India's aspirations to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. He stressed that a just and sustainable international order demands an effective, credible and legitimate United Nations. This is why he looked forward to a reformed Security Council that includes India as a permanent member. Satisfying for the Indians; but the decision does not depend on the will of the US alone.

The reform of the UN Charter is difficult to bring about in practice. It requires the votes of two-thirds of the members of the General Assembly and must avoid being vetoed by the five permanent members of the Security Council as it now stands (USA, Russia, China, UK and France). The latter have little desire to give up their right of veto, still less to grant it to others. India, Japan, Germany, Brazil and South Africa are all strong candidates. Yet disparate strategic interests stand in the way of a consensus agreement and maintain a stagnant status quo that does not reflect international reality. Beijing sits on the fence. It might give the nod to India, but is unlikely to do so to Japan. Brazil's aspirations are viewed with misgivings by other Latin-American countries. Nigeria and Egypt present their credentials in Africa. And there is doubt as to whether the EU should occupy, through Germany, yet another seat in addition to those already enjoyed by France and the UK. All told, a very tricky fit.

Obama stressed the importance of India's role in the 21st century, calling for the shared responsibility of "the world's two largest democracies" to promote worldwide peace, stability and prosperity. Manmohan Singh received these allusions with pleasure, stating that the two countries must cooperate as partners on an equal footing. But Obama criticised India's attitude to the issue of human rights in Burma. New Delhi does not conceal its concern over China's growing influence in several South and Southeast Asian countries, and for years has been moving closer to the Burmese military junta. Too often, economic and energy diplomacy takes precedence over democratic criteria.

However, Obama preferred to tiptoe round the Kashmir conflict. He limited his comments to another call for dialogue towards a negotiated solution between India and Pakistan. The US is still bogged down in Afghanistan, and wants to make a painless exit. It is also trying – unsuccessfully – to curb the Iranian nuclear programme. One of the keys is held by Pakistan, a nuclear power with a fragile political and economical situation and the hideout of the terrorist groups that committed the attack in Bombay on 26 November 2008, with 166 dead and 600 wounded. Another key is held by China.

Obama needs to cooperate with India but at the same time ensure the stability of Pakistan. A failed Pakistan in the hands of the Taliban would spread like wildfire over the whole region, from the Caspian Sea through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean. The US was unsuccessful in its attempt to promote a regional solution, including dialogue with Iran, to win the war against Islamic terrorism. They insist that fundamentalism is a threat for all the states in the region. But the Iranians take no notice. And the Indians fear that the curbing of Islamic fundamentalism might be linked to the solution of the Kashmir conflict, which has already caused three armed confrontations between India and Pakistan, in 1947, 1965 and 1999. India opposes an international negotiation, considering that the issue is a strictly bilateral one. Dialogue between India and Pakistan was resumed at premier level in February 2010. Meanwhile, Washington sells arms to both countries.

India keeps a watchful eye on the evolution of its complex relations with China, Kashmir being the thorniest problem in that regard. The two countries have shared a common border since Mao annexed Tibet in 1951. There are as yet unresolved territorial conflicts. China claims 90,000 square kilometres of territory that currently forms part of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In turn, India claims 38,000 square kilometres of land in the Kashmiri region of Aksai Chin, occupied by the Chinese army since 1962. Nor does it recognise Chinese sovereignty over a further 5,180 square kilometres ceded by Pakistan in 1963. The Himalayan border provides the setting for the disputes that poison the political relations between the two Asian heavyweights. The presence of the Dalai Lama, exiled in Dharamsala since 1959, is another source of tension. Water constitutes a political weapon in Chinese hands and a strong potential for bilateral conflict, as the main rivers of India rise on the Tibetan plateau.

China has cleared the hurdle of the Himalayas and is increasing its regional sphere of influence in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri Lanka. It even competes with the Indians in some African and Indian Ocean countries such as Mauritius and the Maldives. China continues to encircle India with a "pearl necklace", a network of economic and maritime ties in a space that the Indians had historically come to think of as their own "*mare nostrum*". The main

international energy supply routes from the Middle East pass through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca on their way to China, Japan and South Korea. The US and India need to control these routes, and cooperate militarily to this end. And they will deepen their strategic relations, even if this irritates Pakistan and worries China.

In India Barack Obama delivered two quotes to remember: “India has succeeded not in spite of democracy; India has succeeded because of democracy” and “India is not simply emerging; India has already emerged”.

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