

After Indian elections, US to press for greater support for “pivot to Asia”

By Keith Jones
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No sooner had the polls in the last stage of India’s general election closed this past Monday, than US President Barack Obama and the US State Department made statements lauding India as the world’s most populous “democracy” and emphasizing Washington’s desire to work closely with India’s new government.

Monday’s choreographed statements are part of a US push to “reset” relations with India and harness it more tightly to its “Asia Pivot”—the drive to isolate, surround, and, if need be, assault China.

Neither statement directly referred to Narendra Modi, who has led his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance to power in New Delhi, according to exit poll results. However, a State Department spokesman later said that were Modi to become India’s prime minister, he would be welcome in Washington.

In 2005, the US revoked Modi’s visa because of his role in instigating the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom. For the next eight years, its diplomats shunned the Gujarat Chief Minister. In early 2014, however, US Ambassador to India Nancy Powell made a very public trip to Gujarat to meet with Modi, signaling that the United States is ready to work with him.

Not long after, Powell, a career diplomat, announced that she was retiring—a move widely interpreted in the Indian and US press as allowing Washington to “reset” relations not only with Modi, but with India more generally.

The Obama administration has yet to name a successor to Powell, but it is significant that among the rumored candidates is Ashton Carter. A career US national security operative, Carter served as the US Deputy Secretary of Defense for two years ending in December 2013. He played an important role in developing and implementing the Obama

administration’s “pivot to Asia.”

On leaving his Pentagon job, Carter published an article in the online journal *Foreign Policy*, “Super Hercules in the Himalayas: How the United States is strengthening defense ties with India,” boasting of burgeoning Indo-US military ties and their importance to the Asia “pivot.”

“From the conception of our new strategy,” wrote Carter, “the United States has seen India as integral to a rebalance not just to the Asia-Pacific region, but also within the region”—from Northeast Asia to the ASEAN countries, south Asia and the Indian Ocean, the pathway through which the oil and other key resources that fuel China’s economy flow.

Carter’s article was meant to highlight the significance of India to the US “pivot to Asia”—a strategic shift the Obama administration and Pentagon now prefer to call the “rebalance”—and the “below the radar” progress that Washington has made in tying India to its strategic objectives. “While the deepening of US-India defense cooperation may not be as visible as some of our other efforts in the Asia-Pacific,” Carter wrote, “it is a key example of how the Department of Defense under Secretary Chuck Hagel is executing our role in the rebalance.”

Carter is a specialist in military procurement, having served as the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics. In both this and his subsequent Deputy Defense Secretary job, he helped negotiate changes in US policy allowing for the transfer to India of advanced weapons technologies, and in developing proposals for Indo-US co-production and ultimately co-development of weapons systems.

It remains to be seen whether Carter will in fact be named the US ambassador to India. But in both Washington and New Delhi, it is considered a given

that the Obama administration will make a high-level appointment to grab the attention of India's new government.

Powell had found herself at the center of a diplomatic spat this past December and January, when India reduced security outside US diplomatic installations and withdrew special privileges for US diplomatic personnel and their families. This was in protest over US authorities' arrest and humiliation of an Indian diplomat in New York, Devyani Khobragade, who had been accused of violating US minimum wage laws.

From the US side, there is frustration and anger that India has not more explicitly aligned itself with Washington. India, to Washington's dismay, has balked at joining in quadrilateral military exercises and planning with the US, Japan and Australia.

US think-tanks' policy papers are full of denunciations of India's outgoing Congress Party-led government for lacking "strategic thinking" and clinging to outmoded conceptions like "non-alignment" and "strategic autonomy."

Meanwhile, US big business has soured on India, complaining about its drug-patent laws and limits on foreign investment. The 2008 Indo-US nuclear accord was meant not only to underpin the Indo-US "strategic partnership;" it was also meant to blaze the trail for the US nuclear industry securing lucrative contracts. But to the chagrin of the US nuclear industry, India—after protests driven by the memory of how Union Carbide's US owners escaped providing any compensation for the 1984 Bhopal disaster—refused to tailor a liability law to US stipulations.

India's ruling elite for its part has been chastened by the US' refusal to heed India's counsels unless they accord with its own, including in the US sanctions and threats of war against nearby Iran. It also remains wary of US' relations with Pakistan, which the US supported against India during the Cold War, and upon which it continues to rely to support its war in Afghanistan.

India has, however, tilted toward the US since the beginning of the century. Despite much-ballyhooed misgivings on the Indian side and the complaints from Washington that India is not delivering, that tilt has grown ever sharper—even as the US has moved evermore aggressively and recklessly to assert its hegemony in the Middle East and Asia.

In 2013, India was the world's largest purchase of

US arms, and for several years running, no country's armed forces has conducted more exercises with the Pentagon. While India may not be formally allied with the US, New Delhi has massively expanded military and strategic ties with the US, knowing full well that Washington aims to use it as a strategic counterweight to China.

In the recent period, New Delhi has echoed US complaints against China in the South China Sea and dramatically increased its ties with Japan. Japanese imperialism has its own ambitions to use India to develop an alternative cheap labour supply network to that now centered on China.

In the current geo political context, where Japan is the key US ally in the "pivot to Asia" and is rearming with Washington's blessing, India's partnership with Japan is a de facto strengthening of its alliance with Washington.

In a recent article arguing that Washington has made decisive gains through its India policy, a US policy advisor argued, "Has the partnership hurt American interests in Asia? Quite the opposite: India has taken an interest in opposing Chinese expansionism in the region and promoting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. It has been a strong political and financial supporter of the Afghan government and has begun integrating itself into the US security architecture of the Indo-Pacific."

In seeking to bring India more tightly into the US orbit, the Obama administration aims to rally support from powerful factions of the Indian ruling class. Shaken by the collapse in India's economic growth and its vulnerability to global financial flows, exemplified by last year's rupee crisis, much of India's corporate elite is pressing for closer ties with the US and Japan, on the mercenary calculation it will lead to increased access to capital.

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