



# Obama's landmark visit to India

There are seven concrete reasons why the US would like to enhance its ties with India, and there is little reason to downplay President Barack Obama's forthcoming visit, says Tarun Das

**I**T'S NOT often that Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar is wrong. But, his 'Small expectations' (ET, Oct 20) on President Obama's priorities, strategies and vision are way off.

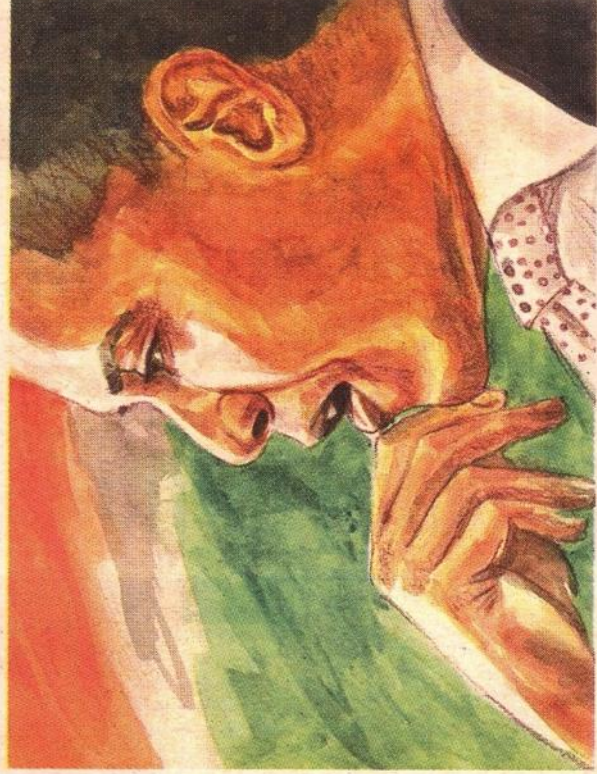
There are two different aspects that Swamy puts forward — that the current US President's priorities are the US economy and Afghanistan, that 'the strategic vision' of the US on India 'has clearly been diminished' and that expectations from his coming visit to India should be small.

Let's deal with the US strategic vision towards India. There are, at least, seven reasons why 'diminished' is wrong.

First, China. It's new assertiveness, self-centred approach, opaqueness, trade policy, currency policy and possible future challenge to the US. These have led to serious thinking in US policy circles about the limits to US-China partnership. The challenge for the US is to manage the China relationship as best as possible. It's not about warmth and friendship. All this has made the current US look at India through different lens.

Second, in contrast to China, India is very transparent (the media role), and 'non-threatening'. India and the US may not have a great track record of voting together in the UN, but there is more uniting the two countries on major global issues ('global commons') than dividing. The US has learnt that India is not, and will not be, an 'ally'. India is a partner with areas of both agreement and difference. This is a huge turnaround in the US psyche and places India in an unique relationship with the US.

Third, as Condi Rice put it in a recent meeting, there is a 'balance of values' which binds India and the US together. Democracy, judiciary, economy, media, etc — 'values' which are common to both. These have taken a long time to be mutually accepted but, today, this is a done-deal. And, these are, key binding glue between India and the US at a time when the world has become more complex, uncertain and challenging.



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Fourth, the 2.5-million Indian Americans in the US live with a track record of being good citizens. They are doing well in their careers. They are in a large number — without precedent — in the Obama Administration. In fact, several hold key positions in the White House, working, often, directly with the President. Indian Americans are not only playing a key role in the US but also in India — Sam Pitroda, Raghuram Rajan are examples. This human bridge of quality people between the two countries is driving each to the other, closer and closer.

Fifth, yes, the US economy is in deep pain. Yes, the foremost priority is an early economic recovery. But where in the world is there a country with near-9% annual GDP growth (to continue for the next 10 years) and whose domestic demand will explode as 600 million people join the mainstream of the economy in a steady procession? It's India. And, for the US, this is the country with the most promising partnership as our economy continues its process of steady opening.

Sixth, it's not just one-way traffic of US business opportunity in India. India is investing in the US; Indian companies are turning around US corporations and generating jobs in the US. In the last few years, Indian investment in the US has passed \$10 billion and, each year, this is growing. This is a story which is still unfolding as the Indian private sector finds that the US is a relatively hassle-free country. It is the first choice, globally, since it also offers a great base for Canada, Mexico and Latin America. A new glue where the central role is played by the Indian private sector, with some of the world's finest entrepreneurs and business leaders.

SEVENTH, and, finally, technology. The most-sensitive issue because the technology developer/owner does not want to share this key asset. And, India, of course, has been on the US list for technology export controls for decades — a scenario about to change. Research and development, and science and technology are not only about ideas and machines. It is also about

trust. India and the US will shortly embark on joint R&D initiatives which will change the future, especially in the area of clean energy. It is also about people. Indians and Americans are working side by side in the R&D area in US labs as well as corporate R&D centres in India and elsewhere. This technology partnership will be further strengthened with the Obama visit.

For all these seven reasons, the importance of India to the US has not 'diminished'. It has grown under President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Currently, there are 28 different streams of dialogue between the two, covering every aspect of possible cooperation. Swamy, therefore, is not on track when he says "in due course, the relationship will assume strategic importance". The relationship already has that, driven by the two heads of government, quietly and without fanfare, even while both focus on numerous immediate priorities, be it economic recovery and Af-Pak for the US or internal security and inflation for India. Both the short-term and the long-term are getting attention. It's not either-or.

It's quite another issue to discuss 'expectations' from the visit. These should always be kept modest to avoid disappointment. This is only realistic, as Swamy says. But the reality is that the presidential visit will mark a milestone in terms of the range, depth and content of agreements and understandings, both at the G-to-G level as well as business.

The most significant strategic partnership of the 21st century between India and the US has arrived, but, hopefully, Swamy will be proved wrong on another count and Obama will not say "India is a coming superpower". Because, we are not. India has every problem in the world to deal with and is trying to deal with. India has to focus on meeting these challenges successfully. Superpower status can wait — for a very long time.

(The author is former chief mentor, Confederation of Indian Industry)