

POTUS Comes to Lotus Land in Search of a BAM Moment

The Needle's Eye



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Just as I sat down to write this column came news that those Indians who can afford them are going to be paying a lot more this summer for Alphonso mangoes. The European Union has lifted its ban on Indian mango imports, and upwards of 16 million mangoes will flood British supermarkets alone. The Indians have apparently been taught to control pests that threatened Europe's salad crops like tomatoes and lettuce. Presumably, the Europeans haven't found traces of calcium carbide, a carcinogenic chemical used liberally in every Indian mandi to artificially ripen fruit. Perhaps only Indians blithely ingest the poison as we work our way through half the world's mango production.

The mango story throws up several interesting questions. Will India ever fulfill Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of a \$20 trillion economy by becoming an export powerhouse, which means not just fruits, flowers and software, but also flooding America's malls and hardware stores with made-in-India labels? In its relationship with America, the world's biggest consumer, will India get to the high standards that not only get rid of the pests in its mangoes but also elevate it above the disdain reserved for

a nation of sweat shops that churn out cheap sneakers and tacky plastic toys? Can India graduate from a nation that talks too much to a juggernaut that works too much?

These questions are pertinent for next week's visit by President Barack Obama: can India produce the sure-footedness, technical smarts and adroit negotiating skills that will place it firmly as a key ally of the United States and not as a tentative friend forever feeling its way around?

You can choose your friends, not your neighbours. China will deploy all the sweet talk it can summon on the banks of the Sabarmati, but its self-interest is cold and hard-nosed. The Sri Lankan election was a rude shock for Beijing, which has been cozying up with Colombo for a couple of decades. A Serendip firmly in India's orbit is not to the liking of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese dragon only had to breathe a few fiery blasts after Japan's foreign minister stepped out of line by declaring that Arunachal Pradesh was indisputably Indian territory, and Tokyo hastily backed off. The logical next step for China, which has been stamping its authority on the South China Sea, is to signal its hegemony over the Bay of Bengal. India needs America's military-industrial muscle on its side in this pas de trois – the three-cornered dance.

Indeed, China will be the elephant in the room when Modi meets Obama at 7 Race Course. The speechwriter who crafted Obama's State of the Union (SOTU) address on Tuesday seemed to be prepping Modi in several passages. Let's start with China: "China wants to write the rules for the world's fastest-growing region. That would put our workers and businesses at a disadvantage.

Why would we let that happen?" Obama asked, saying U.S. manufacturers wanted to bring jobs back from China.

In what sounded eerily like a blueprint for India, Obama said: "21st century businesses need 21st century infrastructure – modern ports, stronger bridges, faster trains and the fastest internet." And in words that might have been written specifically for Modi's ears: "[America leads] best when we combine military power with strong diplomacy; when we leverage our power with coalition building; when we don't let our fears blind us to the opportunities that this new century presents." Despite joint naval exercises and growing collaboration, India has been too coy in forging military-technology pacts with the US. It is not enough to promise to raise the foreign investment ceiling in defence production to 49% – we have to get projects off the ground.

But it is on climate change that Modi will have to hew to a different set of priorities when Obama comes calling. Fresh from an agreement with Beijing that commits the world's two biggest economies to specific carbon-emission targets by 2030, Obama would like nothing more than to clinch a deal with India. But India, already one of the world's lowest emitters per capita but one of the biggest in gross terms, cannot afford to agree to low target numbers if it meets predictions that it will be the world's fastest-growing economy over the next two decades. That kind of growth can only come on the back of the fossil-fuel fired industrialisation and modernisation that we badly need in this country. Experts I spoke with say Obama may content himself with a softer deal where India pledges

its best effort to control carbon emissions and intensity. "India is likely to seek a peaking year of 2050 or even 2060 for its emissions," Sunita Narain, director-general of the Centre for Science and Environment told me. "But that is not good enough for the world." How Modi balances his ambitions for a 'Make in India' surge in manufacturing and exports with Obama's desire to leave office as a good guy on climate change will become clear before POTUS and FLOTUS (President and First Lady of the US) fly off to the Taj Mahal after watching India parade its military and space prowess on Republic Day.

Soon after I wrote (on January 8) about the dismal state of academic research in Indian universities and China's drive to woo the best brains to teach at its campuses, Human Resources Development Minister Smriti Irani announced that Fields Medal winner Manjul Bhargava, a professor of mathematics at Princeton University, will be the 'face' of GIAN – Global Initiative for Academic Networks. As usual, the idea seems very ambitious – to draw up to a thousand of the world's best professors to do short teaching stints at Indian universities. But at least Modi will have made a start on something he had discussed with Obama when they met last October.

Modi will have to be as nimble in talks with Obama as he has been politically at home where he has shown that he is prepared to co-opt even those who didn't start off in his corner. Although sceptics expect more form than substance in the last visit Obama will make to India in his presidency, we could still have a BAM (Barack and Modi) moment.

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