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THE “INDIA FACTOR” IN SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Abstract

As India rises as a major world power, two divergent perceptions are beginning to dominate the policy-making circles in both China and the US. According to the Chinese, India's recent behaviour clearly proves that it is joining an anti-China alliance with the United States and the Americans are recruiting the Indian tiger to hedge against the rising Chinese dragon. The US India nuclear deal and the warming strategic relationship between the two countries are in this context viewed as part of Washington's global strategic calculations. The Americans on the other hand, are worried of the recent warming of Sino-Indian relationship such as improving economic and trade ties, closer coordination on some common global issues, more frequent diplomatic exchanges and the emergence of a Russia-China-India axis that could counter the alleged US hegemony in the world. This paper examines the merits of these perceptions and explores the reasons why, contrary to common perceptions, India would continue to follow an independent foreign policy posture towards both the US and China.

Introduction

The concept of India as a rising power has become almost commonplace. Starting in 1991, the nation pursued policies of economic liberalization that opened the country to foreign direct investment and yielded rapid economic growth second only to China. India is now an important economic power, a major player in global economic decisions as part of the G-20 and on track (according to Goldman Sachs and others) to become a top-five global economy

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by 2030. Its stable democratic political system, huge middle-class, immense military clout in Asia (it is a nuclear weapon state which has the third-largest army, fourth-largest air force, and seventh-largest navy worldwide) and global ambitions such as a permanent seat in the UN Security Council are some other important factors that further add to the country's potential power profile and make it a significant player in international relations including political and security dimensions of global governance.¹

While India's growing power has increased its attractiveness across the world and injected a new dynamism into its relations with other great powers, the nation's new profile has also stimulated a debate on India's future foreign policy orientation. This paper analyses the emerging policy debate in both China and the USA whether India would become a strategic ally of the US to contain China or a strategic partner of China to counter America. It is divided into three parts: the first part analyses the Chinese perception and concern over closer India-US political and military ties, the second part discusses the American perception of the recent thaw in Sino-Indian relationship that has taken a strategic overtone in the last few years. The final section examines the merits of these perceptions and explores the reasons why, contrary to common perceptions, India would continue to follow an independent foreign policy posture towards both the USA and China.

Indo-US Strategic Partnership: The Chinese Perception and Concern

In recent years, the official Chinese media and many perceptive Chinese analysts and scholars have noted with concern the growing rapprochement between India and the USA. They are especially worried about the intensifying military ties between the two countries that might adversely affect China's interests in future. The Chinese sources point to an October 2002 Pentagon report on Indo-US military relations that indicates major shifts of US policy toward India, defining and recognizing it as a major rising power, and helping it to achieve that status in anticipation of its endorsement of key US policy objectives.² Moreover, the Indo-US defence relationship which was frozen following India's nuclear tests, has been resumed in a big way and the two countries have declared the goal of creating a comprehensive, deep and mutually beneficial defence relationship based on their shared strategic interests in Asia and beyond.

India and America have signed the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' agreement in 2005 that paves the way for Indo-US cooperation in areas that include civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs, high-technology trade, as well as dialogue on missile defence. Building on that, India and the US have inked a 10-year defence agreement in 2006 leading the way for joint weapons production, cooperation in missile defence and possible lifting of US export controls for sensitive military technologies.³ The US has also given Israel

the go ahead to sell Phalcon advance warning systems to India. Indian and the US naval ships have held a joint search and rescue exercise in the Arabian Sea and the US ships engaged in operations in Afghanistan have been using logistic and other support facilities at Indian ports.

Due to this dramatic transformation in Indo-US military and security relations, some Chinese analysts have started referring India as America's 'quasi-ally'.⁴ The Chinese question regarding why the US has undertaken to help India become a world power, why the US has elevated the Indo-US relationship as a global partnership, especially one that entails global democracy promotion, and why the US has signed a civil nuclear agreement with India after changing its domestic and international laws, thereby giving *de facto* recognition to India as a nuclear weapon state. According to Cheng Ruisheng, a former Chinese Ambassador to India, the main reason behind the growing Indo-US partnership is the 'China factor'.⁵ The Chinese consider that the US is trying to 'reset the global balance of power' through its civil nuclear deal with India by building India as a counter weight to mighty China'.⁶

The Chinese influential media and foreign policy experts are not unaware of the emerging policy debate in the US over engagement with India.⁷ The US's India debate can be broadly divided into two camps - those who advocate "engagement with rising India in its own right for a host of economic, political and other benefits" and those who prefer "engagement with India to contain the rise China". The first group wants to see India "prosper and thrive and attain its aspirations for itself" in the twenty-first century. The US believes, it should "keep in mind [its] long-term interest in the way India evolves" and "its greatness... and potential and the tremendous benefits that would come from a closer relationship with India".⁸ The proponents of containment argue that as China's power continues to grow in the coming decades, it might, at some point in the coming decades, follow the course of Germany in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1930s or of Japan in the 1910s and 1930s. Supporting the emergence of a strong India is a way of creating an Asian structure of power that will constrain a rising China, making resort to aggression less likely. The new US policies toward India are in the same category as efforts nudging Japan toward a larger political-military role in Asia or the strengthening of the US-Australian alliance. The US efforts toward all three powers (India, Japan, and Australia), help create a structure of power that will be less inviting to Chinese aggression in the decades ahead.⁹

Will India become a strategic ally of the US to contain China? Many Chinese scholars and foreign policy experts think in affirmative. They argue that India, by virtue of its geo-political situation, naval capabilities, unresolved bilateral disputes and history of hostility with China, is an ideal country for the US to counter China. Susan L. Craig, for instance, argues that India has significant ideological, historical, or territorial disagreements with China and possesses the

military, economic, and diplomatic means to go to battle over such disagreements. She, therefore, argues that cooperation between India and the US in an effort to contain China militarily, economically, or diplomatically is not unrealistic.¹⁰

Other Chinese scholars argue that India's recent behaviour clearly proves that it is joining an anti-China alliance with the US. For the first time, India has declared the US as a strategic partner and is expanding economic, military and civil nuclear cooperation with it. It has also engaged the US on a host of issues – from non-proliferation and arms control, trade, and cultural exchanges to military-technical cooperation. New Delhi has openly endorsed the US missile defence position.¹¹ In short, many Chinese scholars and analysts consider China as a significant factor in the emergence of the new Indo-US relationship and India has a clear interest to remain in the American side to contain China.

Sino-Indian Strategic Partnership: The US Perception and Concern

It is not just the Chinese who are concerned about the growing rapprochement between India and the US. The Americans are equally worried about the prospect of a Sino-Indian strategic partnership that may constrain the US options in Asia. Although the possibility of a China-India bloc is not explicitly mentioned in any of the statements of US strategy, it is clear that the formation of such a bloc would clearly be antithetical to "maintaining a stable balance" in the East Asian littoral.¹²

Some American think-tanks, foreign policy analysts and media commentators have also started arguing that the growing India-China relationship would shift the balance of power in Asia. In a recent report, Asia Society-Woodrow Wilson Centre for instance, suggests that the US should maintain and expand ties with both China and India, so that "chances of Sino-Indian ties leading to an opposing force against the United States remain remote".¹³ Similarly, the Washington-based Centre for Advanced Defence Studies in its 2006 report argues that "the US interests lies in developing a balanced position between India and China. A possible challenge to US influence in the region is if China and India reach a consensus to exclude the US from Asian affairs. The growing Asian regionalism may greatly reduce American influence and thus affect American interests".¹⁴

Kenneth Waltz has cautioned that 'wrong' US policies towards Russia and China are moving these two states closer to each other and might even lead to the formation of a new balance of power against the US¹⁵ (read 'Strategic Triangle between China, India and Russia). John Garver has similarly stated that "a Sino-Indian strategic partnership could provide China with resolution to its biggest contradiction: US hegemony".¹⁶ He thinks the recent thaw between China and India is the first step in establishing this strategic alliance. Howard French in his

New York Times article has written “The rise of China has already been felt far and wide... The addition of India, already a major force in services, could pull the globe’s economic and political centre of gravity decidedly toward Asia, and away from an aging Europe and a United States already stretched by security threats and swelling deficits”.¹⁷

Moreover, what America fears the most is the possibility of China and India forming an alliance with Russia based on their common understanding and interests of a new international political and economical order and a multi-polar world. Growing concern with the American power has already resulted in the Russian Premier Yevgeny Primakov proposing a strategic partnership between the three countries as a way of making the world more balanced. The increasing bilateral interactions between Russia, China and India in the last few years have provided a major boost to the idea of a ‘strategic triangle’ and discussed in popular media and political circles in the three countries.¹⁸

India’s Emerging Policy Posture

The above discussion shows that while the Chinese interpret the American interest in deepening its ties with India as a way for creating it as a counterweight to China in Asia, the Americans fear that the two countries may join hands to counter the US power in Asia. Taken together these differing perceptions raise two important questions. Is India actually willing to go in partnering the United States against China? Is India really interested for an alliance-like relationship with China to counter American hegemony in Asia?

To argue that, India has little option other than to align with the US to contain China or build a partnership with Beijing to counter Washington is to demonstrate poor knowledge about not just the history of India’s foreign policy but also the role of strategic culture that shapes the nation’s thought and behaviour. Such thinking also blithely ignores the limitations of the Indo-US and Sino-Indian relationship arising from the vicissitudes and compulsions of their respective foreign policies.

India’s long colonial history and its leadership at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) have built a strong domestic consensus to retain its strategic autonomy.¹⁹ The perception of independence has factored into its United Nations (UN) vote on Iran, the decision regarding troop deployment in Iraq, the vigorous domestic debate on the Indo-US nuclear deal and its diplomatic posture at the international trade negotiations at Doha and climate change summit at Copenhagen. In all these cases, the domestic political dialogue revolved around the primacy of India’s sovereignty and ensuring that decisions were made to promote the nation’s interests. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated during the parliamentary debate on the nuclear deal, “[N]othing will be done that will

compromise, dilute, or cast a shadow on India's full autonomy in the management of its security and national interests."²⁰

Strategic culture also plays a significant role in the formulation and implementation of India's foreign and security policy. The nation's strategic culture – the idea that each political community has a particular and individual approach to security policy – has evolved over the country's millennial history with myriad influences dating back to periods of great triumph as well as distress.²¹ The key strands of India's strategic culture include: strategic autonomy, military force as one of the many components of power; non-time bound goals and a nuanced approach to resolution of problems. These traits which may be considered as the core or skeleton of India's strategic culture, have not changed essentially despite shifts in India's strategic foreign and security policies during and after the Cold War and would continue to influence and guide the nation's foreign and security policy in future.

Apart from historical and cultural reasons, India would follow an independent foreign policy because such a posture also best suits its national interests. The main objective of India's political, military and economic leadership is to make the country a "major global player" and the leadership is fully aware that, without the active technological, economic and military support from other great powers, the nation simply cannot hope to achieve its goals fully. To meet these needs, India has pursued a multifaceted foreign policy and increased its engagement with the US, China, European Union, Russia and other major powers of the world in recent years. It has signed strategic partnership agreements with the US, China, Japan and South Korea to rapidly obtain economic, technological and military power. Thus, contrary to contemporary beliefs, India's policy of courting all the major powers simultaneously is not haphazard. Instead, "it is a sophisticated policy whose endeavour is to create the necessary balance of power in its geo-strategic environment in order to concentrate on economic, technological and military matters indispensable to its emergence as a true great power."²²

Moreover, any alliance relationship encompassing all security and defence issues necessarily depends on the broad convergence of interests between the two partners. This is clearly lacking between India and America or India and China given both partners' different international status in the global power hierarchy and diverse perceptions of security. For instance, undoubtedly, India's surging economy, stable democratic institutions and growing military muscle have made the US look toward India to preserve its pre-eminence in Asia by balancing out China's growing influence in the region with a deepening Indian partnership. This strategic thinking partly explains America's recent decisions to regard India as a "major world power" and tout the "natural alliance" between the world's oldest and largest democracies. But, despite America's new-found interest in India, New Delhi has its own calculations towards Beijing. To some extent, India

may want to resist China's rise to predominance in the region with America's help, in whatever guise, but the Indian leadership is clearly convinced that there is much to be lost and nothing to be gained in confronting Beijing since India lags far behind China in most, if not all, key indices of comprehensive national power. Indeed, from New Delhi perspective, an anti-China alliance with Washington would not only gravely hurt the Sino-India detente but also deepen Beijing's incentive to encourage and support Pakistani adventure against India. One Indian analyst has in fact recently argued that the recent muscular Chinese stance against India is clearly tied to the new US-India strategic partnership, symbolized by the nuclear deal and deepening military cooperation between Washington and New Delhi.²³

Moreover, there are a number of vital issues that keep India and the US apart. These include: the American and Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, arms control, climate change, trade issues, high-technology cooperation and reform of the international institutions including the UN. Unless Washington and New Delhi move their disagreements toward compromise, a stable bilateral relations, let alone strategic partnership between the two countries is difficult to materialize.

Similarly, although there is a significant improvement in Sino-Indian relationship in recent years and the two countries share common interests and similar views on many major international and regional issues and often cooperate at the international groupings and venues, among them G-20, Doha, Copenhagen and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India & China), yet China's all-weather friendship with Pakistan, its attempts to increase its influence in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Burma, its persistent refusal to recognize parts of India such as Arunachal Pradesh, its lack of support for India's membership to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and other regional and global organizations, have resulted in many Indian analysts describing Chinese actions as an effort to contain India and undermine its security.

Finally, Sino-US relations remain broader and deeper than those between New Delhi and Washington or Beijing and New Delhi. The US needs Chinese capital inflows as much as China needs the US consumers—an economic interdependence of such import that snapping it would amount to the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Even politically, China, with its international leverage, counts for more in US policy than New Delhi or Tokyo.

To conclude, neither the US-India partnership nor the India-China relationship is likely to turn into any kind of formal alliance in coming years. Such an alliance is not in the interests of India. Moreover, due to historical and cultural reasons, India would never join any one power against the other. Also, both the US and China have substantive interests from each other which they would not like to jeopardize for the sake of their partnership with India.

However, three propositions must be kept in mind while assessing India's future relationship with the US and China. First, India's main objective is to emerge as a major world power. Second, India's emphasis will be on simultaneous expansion of political and economic relations with all the great powers and avoid choosing sides between them. India is quite pleased that it is under no compulsion at the moment from either the US or China to choose one of them. Three, it is reasonable to expect that there will be greater military and strategic content to Indo-US relationship than the Sino-Indian ties. For example, the US decision to help modernize India's armed forces while maintaining an arms embargo against Beijing clearly works in India's favour.²⁴ This does not necessarily mean that India has to become a junior partner of the US. The US is aware that a stronger India, even outside the U.S. alliance system, will inevitably contribute to political stability in Asia. India's principal objective, in turn, is to ensure a peaceful neighbourhood and to rapidly develop its comprehensive national power. Thus, India would maintain an independent and all-round diplomatic posture to gain its own maximum state interest. And "it will not easily board any ship because India itself is a large ship."²⁵

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