

STRATEGIC SNAPSHOTS

SNAPSHOT 8

India, China and the United States: Asia's Emerging Strategic Triangle

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India's intensive round of great-power diplomacy at the end of 2010 was marked by two seemingly contradictory features. It was the culmination of India's post-Cold War diplomacy of 'multi-alignment' that replaced its earlier emphasis on non-alignment. But it also underlined the unmistakable emergence of a triangular dynamic with Washington and Beijing. This Strategic Snapshot examines the prospects of the emerging strategic triangle between India, China and the United States.

In the second half of 2010, leaders from each of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council traveled to India. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also visited Seoul, Tokyo and Brussels for high-level summits, as well as meeting German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This sequence of consultations reflected the new level of great-power interest in India and revealed some broad common themes.¹

India's quick recovery from the 2008-09 global recession provided new leverage in pursuit of long-standing political objectives. These included garnering support for India's claims to a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, promoting India's integration into non-proliferation regimes, endorsing a larger role for India in building Asia's security order and increasing pressure on Pakistan to wind down the terror machine on its soil. While most powers offered enthusiastic support for these objectives, China struck a distinctly ambivalent tone. This was in part a reflection of the new bonhomie between Delhi and Washington and the emergence of new tensions between India and China. These two trend lines are part of a broader triangular dynamic among the three powers.

ORIGINS OF THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

Barring a brief period in the early 1960s, when the United States tilted towards India during the Sino-Indian conflict, there was until

recently little basis for imagining a triangular dynamic between the three nations. Indeed, for much of the Cold War, it was the triangular dynamic between Moscow, Beijing and Delhi that had a greater salience for the balance of power in South Asia.² It was only under the Administration of George W. Bush, especially in its second term from 2005-09, that Washington seemed to factor India into its calculus about China.

Bush and his Indian interlocutors were careful not to define their relations in terms of opposition to China. Bush's surprising warmth to India, his willingness to invest huge political capital in transforming the bilateral relationship, and his controversial decision to facilitate nuclear energy trade with India were widely interpreted as driven by a desire to make India a counterweight to a rising China. While there were no official proclamations to this effect, a key architect of Bush's India policy, Robert Blackwill, would later reveal the centrality of the China factor. 'President George W. Bush based his transformation of US-India Relations on the core strategic principle of democratic India as a key factor in balancing the rise of Chinese power', he noted. He made it clear that this was not based on the concept of 'containing' China. Nonetheless, Blackwill added, without this China factor at the fore 'the Bush Administration would not have negotiated the Civil Nuclear Agreement and the Congress would not have approved it.'³

If many in Washington, especially within the foreign policy establishment of the Democratic Party, saw Bush's fascination with India as ill-advised, there was deep concern in Delhi that Obama might reverse the gains.⁴ India's worst fears seemed confirmed in November 2009, when in a joint statement with President Hu Jintao, Obama talked of the United States and China working together to stabilise South Asia. The issue was at the top of the agenda when Singh visited Washington a couple of weeks after Obama returned from Beijing. Sensitive to Indian

concerns about being relegated to a secondary position vis-à-vis Beijing, Obama was quick to call India an 'indispensable power' and a 'leader in Asia'.⁵

If Obama's unsuccessful Beijing visit triggered a rethink on China policy in Washington, subsequent tensions between the two countries reinforced it. In June 2010, the United States launched a strategic dialogue with India, at which Obama reaffirmed his administration's commitment to a strategic partnership with India and sought to dispel any residual Indian apprehensions about backsliding on the advances forged under Bush. Less visible but equally important, Washington also launched a new dialogue with India on East Asia, in effect institutionalising formal bilateral consultations on China.

In Delhi, too, events in 2010 compelled a sharp recognition of the implications of China's rise for Indian security. China signaled its determination to match the India-US civil nuclear initiative with a deal to sell additional reactors to Pakistan. Delhi viewed China's issuance of stapled visas to Indian citizens from the state of Jammu and Kashmir as a deviation from China's neutrality in the dispute between India and Pakistan and a questioning of Indian sovereignty. India demanded that China respect India's 'core national interests' in relation to its territorial integrity, in much the same way that Delhi defers to Beijing on Tibet and Taiwan. This new equivalence between Tibet and Kashmir marks a new moment in the long-running territorial disputes between India and China.⁶ It is in this context that the visits of President Obama and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Delhi played out in November and December 2010.

OBAMA, WEN AND INDIA

On the face of it, Wen's visit to India in the middle of December did not seem too different from those of Obama and the European leaders. Wen brought a large business delegation and concluded more business deals than any of the other leaders. India, however, made the growing trade deficit with China – nearly \$20 billion in two-way trade of \$60 billion during 2010 – a central question during Wen's visit. The Chinese premier promised to address India's demand for greater market access. On the political side, the differences between the two sides were much stronger. Wen promised to address the question of stapled visas in the near future.

But on three other major issues of interest to India, the contrast between the Obama and Wen visits was stark.⁷ On the question of India's permanent membership of the UNSC, Obama ended US reluctance to support India. Wen limited himself to saying that China understood India's aspiration to play a larger UN role. On India's integration with the global non-proliferation order,

Obama supported India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar arrangement in a phased manner. Obama also addressed Delhi's long-standing demand to treat it as a strategic partner in terms of US domestic controls on high technology exports. Obama's actions and promises underline the new US commitment to accept India as a full partner in non-proliferation, acknowledge India as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state and remove all burdens placed on India as a non-signatory to the NPT. China, by contrast, remains reluctant to recognise the reality of India's nuclear weapon status.⁸ Above all, China continues to see India and Pakistan differently when it comes to nuclear issues, preferring 'nuclear parity' between Delhi and Islamabad.

On the broader question of maintaining a subcontinental balance, Wen deepened Beijing's traditional tilt towards Pakistan, at a time when other leaders were acting neutrally or moving closer towards India. In contrast to Obama and other leaders, who went to Mumbai in remembrance of the victims of the 2008 terrorist attack, Wen was notably hesitant even to refer to this atrocity that had been planned in Pakistan. While no other leader traveled to Pakistan in conjunction with the trip to India, Wen was determined to demonstrate an enduring Chinese commitment by adding an Islamabad leg to his Delhi visit. Whereas Obama and other Western leaders made public calls for Pakistan to shut down safe havens for terrorists on its soil and bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack to early justice, Wen limited himself to general formulations on terrorism.

India's policy-makers and strategic community are increasingly attuned to the fact that the United States supports India's core national security interests. China, on the other hand, remains ambivalent about India, and is reluctant to offend Pakistan in the pursuit of a stronger relationship with Delhi. The now largely parallel nature of Washington's and Delhi's security interests, together with the widening strategic divergence between Delhi and Beijing, marks an important departure from the traditional dynamic of India's relations with the United States and China. In the past, the US and Chinese positions tended to be similar on many issues of core concern to India, and there was some logic in Delhi's maintaining a measure of equidistance on issues that divided Washington and Beijing. While Delhi and Washington still disagree on a number of issues, and despite areas of common ground between Delhi and Beijing, there is no denying the strategic warmth that has begun to shape India's engagement with the United States and the deepening concerns about sovereignty and wider security that are defining India's approach to China.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE TRIANGLE

India's new triangular dynamic with the United States and China plays out most clearly in the Asia-Pacific.⁹ As Asia and its maritime spaces emerge as a major arena of contest between Washington and Beijing, the United States and India are drawing closer in their respective policies to the region. In his address to the Indian Parliament, Obama not only endorsed India's 'Look East Policy' of engaging Asia, he urged India to become even more 'engaged' in the region. Obama's trip to India was part of a visit to four Asian democracies – India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. It was billed as signaling America's 'return to Asia': an end to perceived neglect of the region, and the reclamation of a primacy that had been threatened by a rising China.

China's rise has also animated India's Asian policies. In its joint statements with Obama and Russian President Medvedev, Delhi welcomed the expansion of the East Asia Summit process to include the United States and Russia and underlined the importance of maintaining an 'open and inclusive' architecture for the region. While India and the United States have differences over the 'Af-Pak' region and the Middle East, the evolving situation in Asia could well provide the basis for a new bonding. As National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon has remarked: 'Traditionally, India and the USA have viewed each other across the Eurasian landmass and the Atlantic Ocean. We get a different perspective if we look across the Pacific, across a space that we share and that is vital to the security and prosperity of our two countries.'¹⁰ Besides expanding defence and security cooperation with the United States, Delhi has embarked on parallel (if currently less advanced) cooperation with Japan, Australia, and a number of ASEAN countries. Delhi has often organised multilateral naval exercises involving its partners and has sometimes proved willing to be part of ad hoc groups brought together in the name of democracy.

As Delhi and Washington inch towards each other, there remains scepticism about the durability of their triangular dynamic involving China. While the rise of Chinese power threatens both Delhi and Washington, neither is in a rush to declare an explicit policy of balancing China, much less containing it. The difficulty of disentangling the US and Chinese economies, along with India's growing economic interdependence with China, pose significant limits on Indo-US strategic manoeuvres against Beijing. In both countries, there are political divisions on how to deal with China's rise and how far to go in strengthening bilateral defence cooperation to constrain Beijing's potential dominance in Asia. Prudence in both establishments propels Delhi and Washington to find ways to manage and even improve relations with Beijing. After an acrimonious year, the Obama Administration hosted

Chinese President Hu Jintao in Washington in January 2011 – a visit that was seen by both sides as reasonably successful. There remain prominent voices who see cooperative relations with Beijing as the highest national priority for the United States.¹¹ For its part, India's desire in receiving Wen Jiabao on short notice was to arrest the recent downturn in bilateral relations. Delhi is acutely aware that as the weakest of the three powers, it is vulnerable to shifts in the relations between Washington and Beijing and that a declining United States might be tempted to make room for China in Asia in order to avoid the burdens of balancing China.

China, in turn, has watched closely the Obama Administration's policy of return to Asia. It has noted Obama's celebration of shared political values with India and cautioned Delhi against building an alliance in the name of democracy, a point emphasised by Chinese editorialists in colourful terms.¹² At the same time, some Chinese analysts remain confident that Obama's strategic power play with India is not yet strong enough to undermine the centrality of China in the American calculus.¹³

Such Chinese analysts might at this stage be realistic in their assessment of the triangular dynamic between Delhi, Washington and Beijing. What is far from certain, however, is whether China is capable of preventing further divergence of interests with the United States and with India, or indeed whether it has a chance of reversing or bridging such divergences. Either way, there is no denying that India, from being largely irrelevant to Sino-US relations just a few years ago, is now emerging as a major factor. Its importance will depend on the degree of Chinese assertiveness in Asia.

As they hedge against the rise of China, Delhi and Washington have surprised many observers by moving closer than ever before. From being an abstract proposition under George W. Bush, India-as-partner has acquired a new salience in the U.S. strategy towards Asia. And as China's rise affects India's core interests, Delhi has begun to incline ever so slightly towards the United States in the articulation of its Asian policy. While Delhi and Washington are not likely to be allies in the traditional sense, the pressures on them to coordinate their Asian strategies are bound to mount amidst China's assertive rise.

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NOTES

- ¹ For a detailed analysis, see C. Raja Mohan, Themes from India's Big Power Diplomacy, *ISAS Brief*, No. 117 (Singapore, Institute for South Asian Studies, January 2011).
- ² The Sino-Soviet split, India's border clashes with China, and Delhi's tilt towards Moscow were indeed deeply interrelated. By contrast, the Sino-American normalisation in the 1970s, the political cooperation between Washington and Beijing against Moscow in the final years of the Cold War, and the deepening economic and financial interdependence between the United States and China after the Cold War – each of these meant that India was entirely marginal to the Sino-Indian relationship.
- ³ Robert Blackwill, The Future of US-India Relations, Address to the Confederation of Indian Industry, New Delhi, May 5, 2009, available at <http://www.stratpost.com/the-future-of-us-india-relations-blackwill> accessed on January 9, 2011.
- ⁴ Obama's scepticism about the India-US civil nuclear initiative as a senator, the opposition within Washington's non-proliferation community to the nuclear deal, the liberal democratic itch to resolve the Kashmir dispute, and signs that a Democratic Administration might privilege relations with China above India – all fed into Delhi's concerns.
- ⁵ See Obama's remarks welcoming PM Singh at the White House, November 24, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-singh-india-during-arrival-ceremony> accessed on January 11, 2009.
- ⁶ Pranab Dhal Samanta, India equates Jammu & Kashmir with Tibet, *The Indian Express*, November 15, 2010, available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-equates-jammu-&-kashmir-with-tibet/711151/> accessed on January 11, 2011.
- ⁷ For a difference in the substance, tone and tenor, see the joint statements issued by Prime Minister Singh with President Obama and Premier Wen. Joint Statement of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Barack Obama, New Delhi, November 8, 2009 available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530516632> accessed on January 9, 2011; Joint communiqué of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China, New Delhi, December 16, 2009, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530516879> accessed on January 9, 2011.
- ⁸ Siddharth Varadarajan, In statements, gradual recognition of India's nuclear status, *The Hindu*, December 23, p 12.
- ⁹ This point is explored also in Malcolm Cook, Raoul Heinrichs, Rory Medcalf and Andrew Shearer, *Power and Choice: Asian Security Futures*, Sydney, Lowy Institute, 2010, p 31.
- ¹⁰ Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, September 30, 2010, available at http://carneгиеendowment.org/files/Ambassador_Menon's_Speech.pdf accessed on January 10, 2011.
- ¹¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, How to Stay Friends with China, *New York Times*, January 2, 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/03/opinion/03brzezinski.html> accessed on January 10, 2011.
- ¹² 'The title of "the biggest democratic nation" looks like a glass of red wine enjoyed together by India and the West. But it doesn't generate anything substantial that is of India's national interests. With a huge population and much work left to be done in developing the economy, perhaps India won't get too drunk to act superior in front of China, because such superiority will delight India much less than it delights the West.' See Who wins the Dragon-elephant contention, *Global Times*, December 16, 2010, available at <http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/editorial/2010-12/602061.html> accessed on January 10, 2011.
- ¹³ Li Hongmei, Obama greets India with more than a lip service?, *People's Daily Online*, November 9, 2010, available at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90002/96417/7193497.html> accessed on January 10, 2011.

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