

India: Ties With China Sour as Alliance With US Grows

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India's 'strategic partnership' with the US is having the predictable consequence of worsening its relationship with China.

NEW DELHI, Jul 6 (IPS) - Indian decision-makers are coming under growing pressure to narrow their foreign policy options as New Delhi deepens its "strategic partnership" with Washington. Of particular importance here are India's complex relations with its giant neighbour, China.

Days before the United States sent its aircraft carrier USS Nimitz to southern Chennai port on a high-profile controversial visit meant to underline its strategic proximity with India, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice taunted India on its long-standing policy of non-alignment.

Rice told a meeting of the U.S.-India Business Council in Washington: Non-alignment may have "made sense during the Cold War when the world really was divided into rival camps", but has now "lost its meaning"; the time has come for India to "move past old ways of thinking".

"Underlying the message was a broader hint", says Srikanth Kondapalli, from the Centre for East Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. "The hint is that India must pursue the logic of its growing strategic closeness with the U.S. and severely reorder its entire general foreign policy orientation in line with Washington's priorities."

"Rice's speech was an attempt to ideologically wean India away from China and their combined past of Afro-Asian solidarity. Coupled with recent U.S. actions, it could drive a wedge in Sino-Indian relations," Kondapalli said.

India's foreign ministry reacted to Rice's statement by asserting that as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, India is still committed to it; non-alignment remains relevant "in promoting South-South cooperation and the democratisation of the international system."

However, the deeper implications of Rice's statement were not lost on New Delhi as it struggles to manage its relationship with China, which is souring thanks to India's growing proximity with the U.S.

"In recent years, China has felt increasingly upset at India's growing closeness to the U.S. and its staunchest Asia-Oceanic allies, Japan and Australia", says Kondapalli. "This resentment, coupled with certain domestic factors, have taken the form of Beijing laying a claim to Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state bordering Tibet, with an area of 84,000 sq km."

The most dramatic recent consequence of this assertion was the cancellation of a confidence-building visit to China by Indian civil servants undergoing a training programme. Beijing refused to issue a visa to one of the 107 members of the group because he is from Arunachal, which Beijing says belongs to China.

Although this crisis was relatively minor, it revived tensions between India and China over their rival territorial claims, which were thought to have been on the way to a settlement after a quarter-century of talks.

India and China fought a war in 1962 over claims on Arunachal Pradesh in India's northeast, and Aksai Chin, a high-altitude desert near Jammu and Kashmir. The war resulted in a humiliating defeat for India, which is still recalled with rancour.

But relations have since improved. The two governments signed a number of agreements in the 1990s, including one on peace and tranquillity along the border and on demilitarisation of parts of it. In 2005, they also agreed to "guiding principles" for a border settlement.

India-China trade has grown at an impressive annual rate of 45 percent since 2000 and clocked 26 billion US dollars last year.

"However, there is a growing danger that these recent gains will be undone", says Achin Vanaik, professor of international relations and global politics at Delhi University. "That will be a huge setback and raise the price that India pays for courting the U.S."

Things began to go wrong after Rice in March 2005 publicly offered U.S. help to make India "a major world power in the 21st century." U.S. officials said they understood the full strategic implications of this offer.

This offer, and the India-U.S. strategic collaboration that followed, has been compared to "the strategic turn" towards Beijing executed by former U.S. President Richard Nixon to create a decisive rupture between the Soviet Union and China.

A month after Rice's offer was made, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India, partly to ask India not to sign a long-term military cooperation agreement with the U.S.

Yet, two months later, Indian foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee went to Washington and signed a 10-year framework defence agreement.

Chinese leaders feel upset on account of this agreement, and the India-U.S. nuclear deal which followed. India is planning to purchase top-of-the-range U.S. weaponry worth several billions, and has conducted joint exercise of increasing frequency and magnitude with the U.S.

This past May, India participated in exercises with the U.S. and Japan, not far from China's eastern coast. To reassure China that India's participation was not a sign of hostility, New Delhi also conducted a one-day exercise with the Chinese Navy. But this was a token gesture.

In an important new initiative, the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia met in May on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila to set up a new "quadrilateral" grouping. On its agenda were contingency plans vis-à-vis North Korea and possibly Taiwan.

These "quadrilateral" consultations really drew Chinese ire. Beijing issued protest demarches (formal diplomatic communications) to each of the four states.

Since then, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said India is not "ganging up" against China and that the "quadrilateral" group is "not a military alliance". But that is unlikely to satisfy Beijing, which fears that the U.S. is fashioning a "China containment" strategy involving India, Japan and Australia.

The Indian government is reluctant to be seen to be part of such a strategy, which will impose huge military and economic costs on India, which has a 3,500 km-long border with China. India is also loath to court any kind of trouble in Arunachal Pradesh, which it upgraded from a federally administered region to a full-fledged state 25 years ago.

“China especially eyes one segment of Arunachal”, says Kondapalli. “This is the Tawang Tract.. Although it is small, this region is rich in minerals, forests and fisheries, and can sustain Tibet’s economic development. This is the internal reason why China has been pressing its claim to Arunachal.”

The claim was dramatically re-stated last November by the Chinese ambassador to India on the eve of President Hu Jintao’s first visit to India. This took New Delhi by surprise.

India and China are also competing for influence in Burma and Nepal, as well as Southeast Asia. China has a close relationship with India’s traditional adversary, Pakistan, and is building a new port at Gwadar on the Baluchistan coast.

They are both in search of oil and gas in Africa and making joint bids to secure supplies. But cooperation could lead to rivalry.

China also feels uncomfortable at India’s enthusiastic participation in and co-sponsorship of a U.S.-led initiative, the Community of Democracies, consisting of 100-plus nations, started at Warsaw in 2000. Beijing believes this is meant to target North Korea and China.

“Indian policy-makers will have to be particularly deft in the way they handle relations with China”, says Vanaik. “But the high price to be paid for the ‘strategic partnership’ with the U.S. is beginning to sink in.”

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