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East Asian Security: US Wants Bigger Indian Role

By C. Raja Mohan

Synopsis

As the United States and East Asia scramble to cope with the rapidly shifting balance of power in the region, Washington is expanding consultations with Delhi on Asian security and is extending strong support to India's own 'Look East' policy.

Commentary

THE UNITED States is intensifying its engagement with East Asia amidst the rise of China, Beijing's new tensions with Japan and the Southeast Asian nations, and the search for stronger regional institutions. As it does so, the Obama administration is encouraging India to play a larger role in Asia and the Pacific. This new emphasis will be underscored in President Barack Obama's coming visit to India in a few week's time.

In a series of conversations with this writer in Washington recently ahead of the visit, senior administration officials saw Asia emerging at the top of the bilateral agenda between the US and India. Issues relating to Asian security and economic architecture are expected to figure prominently during President Obama's first visit to India in early November. Under-Secretary of State William Burns stressed that the US places "special emphasis on the role India plays in Asia in ensuring order, balance and security". Contrary to the earlier fears in Delhi that Obama might look at India through the narrow prism of South Asia, his administration sees cooperation with India as important for the future of East Asia.

"I think it is fair to say that the US does not characterise the engagement with India as confined to either South Asia or East Asia," Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia told this writer. "Our discussion with India now covers the full range of issues relating to South Asia, Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, and global issues as well," Campbell emphasised.

East and South Asia: A Blurring distinction

India too believes that the distinctions between East and South Asia can no longer be sustained. Its top officials argue that if a larger role for a rising China is inevitable in the subcontinent, so too is a bigger Indian footprint in the Western Pacific. "We have global interests, the Chinese have global interests. All the major powers are not only interdependent on each other, but also are dealing with each other across a whole range of issues, none of which recognises some artificial geographical construct like South Asia or East Asia," India's National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon told an audience in Washington at the end of September.

The Obama administration would like to see India step up the pace and scope of its engagement in Asia. Campbell also stressed that the US fully supports India's Look East strategy. "We would like to see India's role in Asia manifest itself in terms that go beyond declarations of intent", Campbell added. While India has expanded its economic, political and security ties with East Asia in recent years, the region wants India to raise its game.

At the United Nations last month, the US intensified its engagement with East Asia by reaffirming its commitment to the alliance with Japan as Tokyo and Beijing sparred over their maritime disputes. Obama also met the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), who are increasingly concerned about Beijing's assertion of its expansive territorial claims over the South China Sea.

Core of a new map of Asia?

While China looms large over the new geopolitics of Asia, Washington would not want to define US engagement with the region in terms of a zero-sum game. The US emphasis, instead, is on deepening old alliances, building new partnerships, engaging China, and creating an enduring Asian security order. Similarly, India too wants to strengthen its cooperation with China while elevating its own position in the construction of a new Asian order. Campbell sees multilateralism in Asia during the 1990s as being essentially trans-Pacific. Over the last decade, however, it has become centred on pan-Asian integration. "In the new phase, India, along with the US, must have a much larger role in shaping the Asian economic institutions and its security architecture," he said.

ASEAN's recent decision to include the US and Russia in the East Asia Summit, the Obama administration believes, will create the "core of a new map" in Asia that might frame the international relations of the region in the future. The entry of Washington and Moscow makes the EAS inclusive and brings all the actors relevant to the security of the region under a single umbrella.

On its part, India is welcoming the US entry into the EAS and is eager to engage the US in the Asia Pacific. As Menon, the Indian National Security Adviser, sees it: "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."

The Obama administration has already had two rounds of consultation with India on East Asian security issues. Both Washington and Delhi are pleased with the tenor and substance of their dialogue on East Asia and hope to institutionalise it. From India in early November, Obama will head to Indonesia, where he spent his childhood. He will then travel to South Korea and Japan, its long-standing allies in Asia. In Seoul he will join the leaders of the G-20, who are gathering for the first time in Asia since the forum was created in 2008 to manage the global financial crisis.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will also travel to the G-20 meeting in Seoul and will have a chance to meet Obama. Prior to that, PM Singh will also participate in the EAS summit in Hanoi. In what is expected to be a consequential bilateral visit to Japan this month, PM Singh is expected to announce a bilateral trade liberalisation agreement with Tokyo and reaffirm India's commitment to deepen its strategic partnership with Japan.

A changing Asia, then, will be very much on the minds of President Obama and PM Singh when they meet in Delhi in a few weeks from now.

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