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India, US in East Asia: Emerging Strategic Partnership

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Synopsis

India and the United States are gradually emerging as strategic partners in Asia. What are the prospects of this strategic partnership for the region?

Commentary

AS INDIA tries to position itself as a major power in Asia in tandem with its rapid economic growth, New Delhi has found encouragement for its geostrategic quest from the United States, the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region. Tellingly, the November 2010 joint statement between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted that the two leaders had a “shared vision for peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and the Pacific region”.

More importantly, the statement specifically mentioned that the US welcomed “India’s leadership in expanding prosperity and security” across this region. Just recently, a senior US State Department official mentioned that India was now playing an increasingly “critical” role in US strategy in Asia. So what are the prospects -- and limitations -- of the growing India-US strategic partnership in East Asia?

Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region

Indian and American views largely overlap on the issues of strategic salience to the Asia-Pacific region. Firstly, the two countries -- along with the countries of this region -- want to ensure that China rises peacefully. Both New Delhi and Washington remain wary of the phenomenal rise of China. This wariness has only increased as a result of China’s assertive behaviour over the past few years. The just released Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of Defence specifically mentions that India remains concerned with “the implications of China’s evolving military profile” in the region.

Similarly, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence mentioned in March this year that the US remained attentive to “assertive Chinese behaviour” that could fuel the “potential for unintended conflict between China and its neighbours”.

To be fair, both India and the US have officially downplayed the China factor in their growing strategic convergence. But this has not stopped Chinese analysts from viewing India as America’s “quasi-ally”. However, in the absence of a militarily aggressive China, India and the US are unlikely to overtly balance China’s power in the region. India remains cautious of any such alignment given its geographic contiguity with

China and its quest for an independent foreign policy. On its part, the US does not (yet) see any wisdom in containing China given the level of economic interdependence between the two countries. Washington also increasingly needs Beijing's support in managing a growing number of international challenges from nuclear proliferation to climate change.

Moreover, the countries of Southeast Asia, while largely welcoming of India's increased engagement with the region, do not wish to see the emergence of an overt alliance aimed against China, especially one that is anchored on this region. However, it is not lost on any of these parties that close defence cooperation between India and the US constitutes a viable hedging strategy against any Chinese belligerence in the future.

Strategic Sea Lanes

Secondly, the two countries have identified the protection of the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean region -- including the Strait of Malacca -- as one of the strongest areas of strategic convergence. India also remains deeply concerned about the security of the sea lanes in the South China Sea given that it ships oil from Sakhalin to Mangalore in southern India through this region. At the same time, India and the US want to prevent the eastern Indian Ocean region and the western Pacific region from falling under Chinese naval domination. In recent years, India and the US have been engaging in regular naval exercises in the region. These exercises have extended to where their operations span the entire maritime domain from humanitarian relief missions to anti-submarine warfare.

While the 2005 defence agreement between the two countries had already included provisions for collaboration in multinational operations, they have been making steady progress along this direction in the maritime domain. For example, the 2009 updates to India's maritime doctrine specifically added that India may undertake counterterrorism missions independently or in cooperation with "friendly" naval and coast guard forces. Similarly, the 2011 National Military Strategy of the US explicitly mentions that Washington will seek expanded military cooperation with India on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and safeguarding the global commons (the last of which includes maritime security).

Finally, in addition to military-strategic cooperation in East Asia, India and the US are also cooperating to shape the emerging institutional and economic architecture of the region. Both countries want to ensure that the regional institutional architecture is open, balanced, and inclusive. In this regard, India is very supportive of the inclusion of the US in the East Asia Summit (EAS) of which India is a founding member. The US will be formally joining the EAS later this year. The US is also keen to increase India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia. Just a month ago, an American business delegation led by the US Ambassador to Singapore visited India to explore business opportunities for major American corporations based in Singapore.

Not Just a South Asian Player

India and the US are in the process of institutionalising their cooperation on East Asian affairs. Since last year, the two countries have started a high-level dialogue on East Asia to exchange views and to coordinate their approaches to East Asian issues. The US has also welcomed India's growing economic and security links with its regional partners and allies in Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea. Indeed, India and the US have already engaged in a trilateral naval exercise off the coast of Okinawa -- a cooperative trend that is likely to continue once Japan recovers from the destruction caused by the recent earthquake and tsunami.

A senior US State Department official mentioned in March that the US not only supported "an improvement in dialogue" between India and China, but that the US sought to take steps to facilitate that. India has discovered the benefits of a close partnership with the US in East Asia at a time when the US has itself begun to view India as an Asian power -- as opposed to a mere South Asian player.

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