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Title	Growing India-US engagement: time for a sober review
Author(s)	Ashraf, Sajjad
Citation	Ashraf, S. (2015). Growing India-US engagement: time for a sober review. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 041). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2015
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/39770
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Growing India–US Engagement: Time for a Sober Review

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

How will the growing US-India rapprochement, marked by their joint strategic vision, impact on Sino-American rivalry in the Asia-Pacific? As both China and India emerge as drivers of the global economy in the foreseeable future, will their military competition jeopardise the stability of the region?

Commentary

MEDIA euphoria on India-United States bonhomie following President Barack Obama's visit to India in late January has given way to some sober analysis of its effect on Sino-US rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region. Murmurings of a new 'cold war' heard within India should also give Asia cause for concern.

For the US, constantly in search of local sheriffs to maintain its predominance worldwide, none fits the chessboard better than India. A Western-style democracy, as big as China, the two are poised to be the leading economies of the world by mid-century. Both are vying for political and economic space amongst the developing world. Indian insecurities and regional ambitions converge with the US agenda, though at a cost - ie friction with China - which is reclaiming economic, political and military space from the US, especially in the Asia-Pacific.

Joint strategic vision

Sharing a disputed boundary in the Himalayas, India wants to erase the memories of its drubbing during the short India-China war in 1962. Occasional skirmishes between the two on the disputed border continue to inflame that scar.

The "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region," which India and US signed during Obama's visit, accords prominence to India in the area between Africa and East Asia. Not enough, the 'strategic vision' in a China-specific clause draws India into partnership with the US in policing maritime security, "navigation and over flights throughout the region especially in the South China Sea." As China claims the area, its officials are not amused.

The Chinese are convinced, and so are many others, that the US is enlisting India as a partner in its 'pivot to Asia' strategy, but are typically guarded in reaction. State-controlled Chinese media have cautioned India against Western prodding towards a trap. But China also needs to understand New Delhi's concerns over intrusions in India's sphere of influence.

The 'strategic vision' declaration also needs to be read against the backdrop of rising Japanese nationalism and several years of US military approaches to Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam and other states of the region. The US also plans to redeploy its naval capabilities on a 60:40 basis in favour of the Pacific against the Atlantic and have committed to a US\$6.4 billion sale of advanced weaponry to Taiwan in 2010.

China's insecurities

Just like Russia's fear of an encroaching NATO, China's insecurities will increase if it feels hemmed in by a constellation of US allies or strategic commitments like the one India has made. Consequently, none suffers more than Southeast Asia that wants to gain from China's rise and hopes to profit from the mutual rise of the two countries.

Referring to Southeast Asia Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently said in an interview with a German newspaper, "we do not want to choose between China and the US [also read India]." He added: "Everyone in the region wants to make friends with China and gain from the opportunities from its rise. Yet the world is large enough to accommodate the interests of most powerful players."

By antagonising Beijing, India would only facilitate a de-facto understanding between China, Pakistan and Russia, claims Praful Bidwai, a respected Indian journalist and a peace activist. Former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal bluntly warned against moving too close to the US, whose policies, he claims, India will be expected to endorse. "We are on the edge of becoming America's Pakistan at the brink of Cold War II. History must serve as our guide as (PM) Modi takes the plunge," cautioned Mani Shankar Aiyar a former diplomat and cabinet minister.

Pitting one against the other, while diverting focus from economic growth, provides the US, now the biggest arms supplier to India, with an opportunity to sell huge quantities of arms in a potentially volatile region. In a joint statement on a visit to Islamabad Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that China wants to maintain the strategic balance in South Asia – meaning another arms race.

Jeopardising South Asia's strategic balance

Both India and the US seek each other as an equaliser to an ascendant China. Yet, facilitating the presence of extra-regional powers in Asia undermines the very basis of Indian foreign policy for which it historically earned so much respect in the developing world.

China and India have a lot at stake. Together, they are the drivers of the global economy in the foreseeable future. Their complementary rise will benefit the region and the world at large. Their military competition, however, jeopardises growth and development chances of the two and the region. South and Southeast Asia should be particularly worried at the long term consequences of an arrangement that China thinks is meant to contain its peaceful rise.

Sajjad Ashraf is an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He was Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore, 2004-2008. He contributed this article specially to RSIS Commentary.
