

India Eyed for US Great Wall Plan?

Neoconservatives have urged Barack Obama to boost US defence ties with India to counter China. But the last thing the US needs is a polarized Asia, writes Robert Dreyfuss.

By **Robert Dreyfuss**

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In advance of US President Barack Obama's three-day visit to India this month, a panoply of Republican, conservative and neoconservative strategists in Washington urged him to use his trip to persuade New Delhi to join the United States in a political-military alliance. India, they argued, could serve as the lynchpin of efforts to cement the United States' role as a superpower in Asia and the Indian Ocean—an anchor in an American scheme to surround and contain a China.

It's a tempting proposition for a superpower. Over the decades, the United States has gotten used to viewing other nations as pawns and minor pieces on a sweeping chessboard, and for many conservative analysts India was seen not as a great nation in its own right, but as a bulwark against Beijing—just as in an earlier era, Beijing was viewed as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

For the most part, and to his credit, Obama declined to reduce India to the status of a chess piece. Though he called India 'the defining partner of the 21st century,' throughout his visit Obama kept the focus on trade, economics and jobs. 'During my first visit to India, I'll be joined by hundreds of American business leaders and their Indian counterparts to announce concrete progress toward our export goal—billions of dollars in contracts that will support tens of thousands of American jobs,' Obama declared.

But back home, the president's emphasis on economics disappointed the armchair strategists of the American right. Ever since the inauguration of the US-India strategic dialogue earlier this year, right-wing think tanks in Washington had salivated over the concept of



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an alliance between the two great nations against China. Ignoring India's longstanding commitment to a nonaligned stance and neuralgic opposition to entangling alliances, and papering over the very real and significant differences between US and Indian interests, analysts at the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institute and the Heritage Foundation—the leading bastions of neoconservative thought in Washington—envisioned a kind of super-NATO linking the United States and India.

The neoconservatives, who have few channels into the Obama administration, must have been nostalgic for the days of the George W. Bush administration. Back in 2005, Tom Donnelly, a neoconservative military expert at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote that 'successfully wooing India is key to preserving the liberal, American-led international order.'

On the eve of Obama's visit, Tim Sullivan and Michael Mazza, Asia hands at AEI, waxed eloquent about India's 'growing anxieties about China's increasing military power and regional assertiveness,' and proposed a vast effort to build up India's military capabilities with US arms exports and technology, including efforts to help India project its naval power into 'East Asian waters.' Expressing unhappiness with India's continuing reliance on Russian-made weaponry for 70 percent of its armaments—a 'vestige of India's Cold War strategic alignment'—they proposed an influx of advanced US arms for India, even suggesting that India take part in the controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme. The buzzword at AEI and other think tanks was 'interoperability,' that is, integration of US and Indian weapons systems in the event that a coming conflict led the two nations to be open military allies.

Interoperability, too, was a key point for John McCain, the ever-belligerent senator from Arizona. Speaking to another think tank, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, McCain called for a 'joint US-Indian concept for both the Indian and Pacific oceans' and greater involvement of Indian military officers at US Central Command—which runs the war in Afghanistan—and at the US Pacific Command. Obama, said McCain, should 'facilitate India's deployment of advanced defence capabilities, such as nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, missile defence architecture, as well as India's inclusion in the development of the Joint Strike Fighter.'

McCain and the neoconservatives imagined an India arrayed against both China to the north and east and Pakistan and 'Islamic fundamentalism' to the west, and they happily endorsed the development by India of mobile 'integrated battle groups' that could engage in a simultaneous 'two-front war,' according to Dan Blumenthal, an AEI analyst.

A commissioner on the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Blumenthal worked for Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith at the Pentagon between 2002 and 2004. Writing last spring, Blumenthal penned a blistering critique of Obama's measured policy in Asia: 'President Obama's accommodating stance toward China and his apparent lack of interest in cementing partnership with Delhi have focused Indian minds, as has his failure to invest in resources his Pacific commanders need.'

Meanwhile, neoconservatives, along with McCain, have blasted Obama's promise to begin pulling US forces out of Afghanistan next July, saying that the idea has signalled weakness to India.

For the most part, Obama ignored their advice—just as he should have. While in India, he won applause for backing India's elevation to the status of permanent member of the UN Security Council and he lifted some controls on the export of sensitive technology to India. He also won praise for demanding that Pakistan shut down terrorist 'safe havens,' such as the organization that sponsored the bloody attack on Mumbai. But ever conscious that Americans are overwhelmingly concerned about jobs and the economic impact of US-Indian trade, Obama properly kept the focus where it belonged.

That's not to say that the Obama administration hasn't taken other steps that certainly make it look like the administration is toying with the notion of building a 'Great Wall of Containment' around China. Over the past year, the United States has inked a \$6.4 billion arms deal with Taiwan, sided with Vietnam and other South-east Asian countries in their dispute with China in the South China Sea, conducted provocative naval manoeuvres with South Korea near the Yellow Sea and restarted ties with Kopassus, Indonesia's disreputable special forces. In August, the Pentagon released an alarmist report about China's military growth, including worries over its development of an antiship ballistic missile that could strike US warships in the Pacific.

Still, Obama has tried to balance India and China and to deal with each as an independent, emerging major power. Last summer, William Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, set the tone by emphasizing that the United States wants to see 'a healthy relationship between India and China.' And the White House seems exquisitely conscious of the fact that the last thing the United States needs is a polarized Asia in which its two giant powers are arrayed against each other, with the United States choosing sides.

But there's one remaining puzzle from Obama's trip to India: Did the president engage his Indian hosts on the efforts to develop an exit strategy for the war in Afghanistan? Though the Republicans and neoconservatives demand that Obama pursue victory in Afghanistan at all costs, the president remains committed to the July 2011 deadline to begin the drawdown of US troops, and to a negotiated political settlement that will necessarily involve major parts of the Taliban-led insurgency being integrated into a rebalanced Afghan government.

As a major player in Afghan politics—especially as the chief backer of the old, anti-Taliban Northern Alliance—India has a critical role in that rebalancing. Getting both India and Pakistan, which supports the Taliban and its allies, to agree on a reshaped government in Afghanistan is absolutely essential to a US exit from the nine-year-old conflict. Yet, as President Hamid Karzai inches toward a deal with the Taliban, there are worrying signs that the Northern Alliance is rearming, fearing a renewed civil war, and that India and some Central Asian countries are assisting them.

To secure an accord in Afghanistan, Obama must persuade India to get involved. But judging from the results reported so far from Obama's visit to New Delhi, there's no sign that he made any progress on that score.