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Reluctant India, Rising China and Alliance Politics in the Asia-Pacific

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US President Barack Obama used his 2012 State of the Union speech to explain that evolving geopolitical realities continue to make the United States indispensable in global politics. In the Asia-Pacific this indispensability emanates, in part, from the waves caused by the rise of China. Consequently, demands for an increased US presence echo around the region. In response, the United States has renewed its commitments to Japan, South Korea and Australia, stepped up its relations with Southeast Asia, and reasserted itself as an important player in multilateral institutions including the East Asia Summit, APEC, and ASEAN. Clearly, in the 21st century, US strategic focus has shifted from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Yogesh Joshi, Ph.D Candidate in International Politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, explains that “Balance of power politics through military alliances neither fit India’s style of foreign policy nor do they help India realize her goals vis-à-vis China.”

This new strategic focus from Washington warrants new strategic allies. One country that has increasingly figured in the US calculus is India. US-India realignment began in earnest during the presidency of George W. Bush, when the United States offered India a civil nuclear deal, in defiance to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The strategic goal was to strengthen India’s stature in the region as an effective US aligned counterweight to China. India’s rapid economic transformation and its shared political and democratic values with the United States made this proposition extremely attractive. Since then India has reserved a special place in the US plan of action throughout the Asia-Pacific.

Two recent developments further verify this tendency. First is the US-Japan-India strategic dialogue which was initiated last December, and second is the importance attached to India in a new Pentagon report: Sustaining US Global Leadership - Priorities for 21st Century Defense. The report states that “The United States is also investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region.”

A closer military and strategic relationship with the United States and other like-minded nations would be in India’s interests. Given India’s long-running boundary dispute with China, it is highly concerned with China’s rapid military modernization and increasing force projection capabilities, along with its military infrastructure build-up in Tibet. Furthermore, China’s unflinching support to Pakistan including the proliferation of nuclear and missile technology continues to imperil India’s security. In addition, India’s granting of refuge to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile is seen as a hostile act by China. For these reasons it would be prudent for India to seek active military alliances with the United States and other like-minded countries. Moreover, India’s standing as the world’s largest democracy with its values and respect for the rule of law makes it a natural ally for other democracies including the United States, Japan, Australia, and others.

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However, India’s actual behavior and actions suggest otherwise. Even though there is a lot of expectation in Washington for India to assume a more active role as a regional balancer vis-à-vis China, New Delhi is far less eager to pursue this position against its northern neighbor. India has consistently tried to avoid getting trapped into alliance politics and military blocs targeting China initiated by the United States and others in the Asia-Pacific region.

Back in 2007, when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe mooted the idea of an arc of democracies involving the United States, Australia, India and Japan, New Delhi was the first to retract from any such formation lest it became the target of Chinese ire. India has also been a reluctant participant in the recently concluded trilateral strategic dialogue with the United States and Japan. Furthermore, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s statement on maintaining equidistant from the United States and China during his recent visit to South Korea underlines India’s reluctance to engage strategically with the United States and its allies. Surprisingly, when India is itself on the cusp of being a major power in the international system, it is again embracing non-alignment as a viable foreign policy strategy: Non-Alignment Part Two. Three factors shed some light on this matter.

First is the cardinal principle of complete autonomy in guiding India’s foreign policy decisions. US alliance politics works through a “hub-and-spoke” system with the United States at the center and other allies and partners the extended arms. Consequently, this format impinges heavily on the foreign policy autonomy of those states. India, given its domestic political culture and national consciousness of colonial subjugation, has always strived to maintain its strategic autonomy and freedom in foreign policy decision-making.

Second, India’s worldview suffers from an inflated ego of its importance and presence in international relations. Under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, this ego was caressed by India’s civilization legacies, the uniqueness of its colonial independence movement and the promise of its democratic revolution. Of late, India’s economic growth and growing international recognition has added to this exaggerated sense of self-importance. In any alliance with the United States, given US preponderance in power resources and its own sense of exceptionalism, India can at best play a role of a junior partner; a proposition with zero political value in India’s domestic politics.

Lastly, until and unless China poses a direct threat to India’s territorial integrity, India will avoid getting boxed into alliances. Historically, alliances have always been a medium of last resort for India. This was evident in Nehru’s inclination to improve relations with the United States after the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, and later with Indira Gandhi’s Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in 1971 when India felt threatened by perceived hostile collusion between the United States and China against India’s intervention in the Bangladesh crisis. Given the current pattern of economic interaction between India and China, such a possibility now seems highly improbable. There is no motivation on the Indian side to alter the current status of mutual Sino-Indian accommodation and cooperation. A case in point is the resumption of bilateral talks on the boundary dispute after China cancelled negotiations scheduled for November last year, protesting the Dalai Lama’s speech at a major Buddhist conclave in New Delhi.

India’s relations with the United States, Japan and Australia have improved remarkably since the end of the Cold War. The rise of China is one of the crucial factors behind this dynamic. However, it is far-fetched to think that India will actively balance China by aligning itself militarily with other states in the Asia-Pacific region. Balance of power politics through military alliances neither fit India’s style of foreign policy nor do they help India realize her goals vis-à-vis China. Attempts by states such as the United States, Japan and Australia to draw India nearer militarily will therefore be met with stiff resistance from New Delhi.