



The China-Pakistan Factor

In the days I was the Political Counselor in our embassy in Washington (1978 to 1982) and thereafter, as Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's spokesman, prime ministerial visits to Washington were generally few and far between. India's relationship with the United States at that time could best be described as 'cordial and correct.'

The end of the Cold War, the advent of economic liberalization and the 'IT Revolution' in India, together with the vibrant and talented Indian community in the US, have contributed to a radical transformation in the US-India relationship, which both countries characterize as a 'strategic partnership.'

Narendra Modi is now heading for his fourth visit to Washington in his first two years in office! This does not mean that India and the US are military allies. But it does indicate that both democracies are committed to expanding areas of cooperation and narrowing differences.

This transformation commenced during George W Bush's Presidency with the signing of an agreement, which soon ended three decades of US-led nuclear, space and technology sanctions against India. President Obama built on these initiatives. But old leftist habits in India and a disinclination to think afresh on key issues like climate change, remained inhibiting factors in opening the doors more fully, for increased cooperation.

The relationship is, however, seeing transformational changes after Modi was elected to office as India's first genuinely 'rightist' prime minister. He is personally committed to discarding socialist sloganeering, ending centralized planning and building a vibrant, market oriented economy.

This transformation was evident during the Paris environment summit, where India agreed it had a serious responsibility to take measures to address issues of pollution, in a responsible and transparent manner.

While differences remain on issues concerning relations with Russia, the two countries are cooperating increasingly in a 'strategic partnership' to deal with a wide range of regional and global issues, including growing Chinese 'assertiveness' across the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

India has serious concerns about growing Chinese military power on its borders, at a time when China is seeking to 'contain' India. Beijing is stepping up assistance to Pakistan, to strengthen Rawalpindi's nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, together with significant supplies of military hardware including new fighter aircraft, frigates and submarines.

This has been coupled with China's policies of tacitly supporting Pakistan-based terrorist groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Moreover, the Chinese land and maritime Silk Road projects linking China through Pakistan to the port of Gwadar, located astride India's vital sea-lanes to the Persian Gulf, are seen as an integral part of China's policies of 'containment' of India.

China is also involved in assisting separatist groups in India's northeast, while blocking India's admission to international groupings like the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It is in dealing with these developments that the policies of India

MANY IN NEW DELHI BELIEVE SECRETARY OF STATE JOHN KERRY SHOWS REMARKABLE INDULGENCE OF PAKISTANI TRANSGRESSIONS ON ISSUES OF TERRORISM AGAINST INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN, SAYS G PARTHASARTHY.



Chinese President Xi Jinping, President Barack Obama and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a working dinner during the Nuclear Security Summit in the East Room of the White House, March 31.

and the US appear to diverge.

Like Washington, New Delhi has embarked on a process of wide-ranging diplomatic engagement with Beijing, to devise modalities for maintaining peace and tranquility along their common borders. A series of military confidence building measures have been agreed upon to facilitate this.

India and China have a growing trade and investment partnership, with Chinese investment in key sectors in India steadily expanding. But where India and the US differ is on how to deal with Chinese support for Pakistan-backed terrorist outfits like the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and the Lashkar-e-Tayiba.

Washington has also never publicly criticized Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missile program, which are in violation of international norms. In New Delhi's perception, the Obama administration made a serious mistake in joining China to back a Pakistan-sponsored initiative, for 'reconciliation' between the Taliban and the constitutionally elected Afghan government.

The Chinese have maintained covert contacts with the Taliban and Haqqani leadership, facilitated by the ISI in Pakistan, even as US soldiers were being killed by Taliban terrorists operating from safe havens in Pakistan.

The Chinese brokered 'peace process' with the Taliban has drawn a blank, with the Haqqani Network going on a killing spree across Afghanistan. Was this just a case of American naiveté, or political misjudgment? Did the US not know that China and Pakistan share a common interest in ensuring that the government in Kabul is one acceptable to the ISI and not necessarily to Washington?

There are many in New Delhi who believe Secretary of State John Kerry shows remarkable indulgence of Pakistani transgressions on issues of terrorism directed at India and Afghanistan!

The State Department allows Pakistan to get away lightly, even after high-profile terrorist attacks like those on Mumbai and Pathankot. There is an inclination to bend backwards in Washington, to avoid acknowledging that it was impossible for Osama bin Laden and his family to have spent over a decade in the cantonment town of Abbotabad, without the Pakistan military providing him facilities to do so.

One hopes the US will review its policies on Afghanistan, after its targeted killing of Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor.

Following the terrorist attack on Kabul by the Haqqani Network in April, in which 64 Afghans were killed, tensions have escalated across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Afghan and Pakistani border forces have exchanged fire in Nangarhar province past month.

This led to an unprecedented face-off, with both sides deploying heavy weaponry, including tanks. There is little doubt that with continuing border tensions, the likelihood of terrorist strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan, across the Durand Line will continue. People, who play with fire, should be prepared to get their fingers burnt!

Sponsoring terrorism in both Afghanistan and India could be made costly for Pakistan should India choose to do so. Washington knows there are

options for India to make the cost of sponsoring terrorism high, if New Delhi so decides.

While military-to-military and other defense ties with Washington are expanding, especially after Ashton Carter became Secretary of Defense, the US seems to turn a blind eye to the Pakistan-China axis across India's western maritime borders, in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf.

The US knows that India is one of the very few powers, which enjoys excellent relations with all the major players in the Middle East-Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab partners, Iran, Israel and Egypt.

India also has vast interests in this region, where 7 million Indian nationals live and from where India gets 70 percent of its oil supplies. Yet, the US fights shy of exercises involving its Fifth Fleet, with India's Western fleet, in the Arabian Sea, or the Persian Gulf region, despite knowing well that in the next few years the Indian Navy will not only have more modern warships, but also two aircraft carriers and three nuclear submarines. One wonders whether this is also a development flowing from US 'sensitivities', in its relations with the China-Pakistan nexus.

These developments have, however, to be seen in the context of the close cooperation that India and the US have developed, on relations not only with India's other South Asian neighbors, but also on developments across the 'Indo-Pacific' region, extending through the Bay of Bengal, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.

This growing cooperation between India the US is clearly manifested in the Annual 'East Asia Summits' and the India-US-Japan trilateral exchanges.

In a broader context, the world's most powerful and the world's most populous democracies have a partnership, which can and will blossom, even in the face of some differences, which both countries can and should address.

Ambassador Gopalaswami Parthasarthy served in the Indian Army and fought the 1965 War before joining the Indian Foreign Service. One of India's most outspoken diplomats, his last posting was as India's high commissioner to Pakistan.