

CHINA US Focus

Persistent Suitor: Washington Wants India as an Ally to Contain China

Ted Galen Carpenter

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The overall relationship between the United States and India has been improving gradually over the past quarter century. Although resentment still remains in some senior American security circles about Delhi's extremely cozy relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, those memories have been fading. Indeed, a growing number of policymakers and pundits see India not only as an increasingly important economic and military player generally, but as a crucial potential strategic counterweight to a rising China. Indeed, had it not been for the intrusion of the war on terror centered in the greater Middle East and Southwest Asia, and the conclusion of U.S. officials that India's arch-rival Pakistan was a vital partner to curb that threat, the bilateral relationship between Washington and Delhi might have improved faster than it has.

Even with that handicap, strategic ties have gradually and substantially deepened. President Barack Obama has characterized the relationship between the United States and India as "a defining partnership of the 21st century, and India Prime Minister Narendra Modi has termed it "a natural alliance." Perhaps more significant, India has contracted to receive some \$14 billion in supposedly defensive military items from the United States in less than a decade. Washington has now edged out Moscow as India's principal arms supplier.

Bilateral strategic ties received an additional boost in mid-April 2016 with the visit of U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to Delhi. That trip generated considerable uneasiness in China, where opinion leaders noted not only was it Carter's second trip to India during his relatively brief tenure as Pentagon chief, but that he cancelled a previously scheduled trip to Beijing so that he could make this latest journey. That move, they feared, suggested a rather unsubtle tilt against China in favor of one of its potential regional geostrategic competitors.

The agreement that came from Carter's visit would do nothing to reassure the Chinese. Carter and his Indian counterpart, Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar, pledged to increase bilateral logistical cooperation in the military arena, especially maritime cooperation. Although that agreement is still a considerable distance away from constituting a full-fledged military alliance between the two nations, it continues a trend that has developed over the past decade. And mutual concerns about China's ambitions appear to be the principal driving force in the bilateral relationship.

But there is likely to be a limit to Delhi's receptivity to Washington's courtship. Despite its own concerns about Beijing's ambitions, India is wary about succumbing to an excessively close U.S. embrace. Delhi has much to lose and little to gain by becoming a cat's paw ally of the United States against China. That is especially true if Washington is not willing to sever its close ties

with India's arch-enemy, Pakistan. Yet as long as U.S. leaders insist on waging a "war on terror" with a major Central Asia/South Asia component, centered in Afghanistan, they will not cut Washington's supposed Pakistani ally loose. And as long as that is the case, Indian leaders and the Indian public will view professions of U.S. concern about their country's vital interests with justifiable skepticism.

Moreover, India maintains an important economic relationship of its own with China. Indeed, according to most calculations, China has now emerged as India's largest trading partner. Trade between the two Asian giants topped \$80 billion in 2015. In addition to the economic stakes, there are bilateral security issues, primarily unresolved border disputes, as well as security issues throughout Central Asia of concern to Delhi that could be exacerbated if relations with Beijing deteriorated.

Shrewd Indian policymakers may well conclude that the best position for their country is one of prudent neutrality (perhaps with a slight pro-American tilt) in the growing tensions between the United States and China. Whatever side India would take once it abandoned neutrality, it would anger one of those major powers, lose potential benefits, and increase its risk exposure. Such a realization increases the incentive for cautious incrementalism. For example, India has rejected trial balloon proposals to conduct joint naval patrols with the United States in the South China Sea—at least for now. But that option remains open, if there are more unsettling naval incidents involving Chinese forces. Another small, but revealing, sign of an Indian hedging strategy emerged barely a week after Carter's visit when Chinese and Indian officials highlighted progress toward establishing a military hotline between their two countries to reduce the danger of miscalculation during a crisis.

Only if China truly adopted a policy of rogue expansionism would Delhi's sober calculation of wary neutrality likely change. Indian officials view current Chinese actions in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and elsewhere as worrisome, but they have not yet reached such a dire level of alarm. Unless and until that occurs, Ashton Carter and other American suitors may press their courtship of India as a potential military ally against China, but they are likely to come away disappointed.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of ten books and more than 600 articles on international issues. His latest book, coauthored with Malou Innocent, is Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes (September 2015).