

## Is India the Latest Component of A U.S.-Led Encirclement Strategy Against China?

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Two news reports in late January suggested that India was becoming a more active participant in regional security issues—and might be doing so in a way that could foster tensions with China. The first report featured a new study, “Reorienting U.S Pakistan Strategy: From Af-Pak to Asia,” from the Council on Foreign Relations, a prestigious think tank based in New York and Washington D.C. Among the study’s recommendations was the suggestion that the United States approach India about basing American military and intelligence units in the country to combat threats that terrorist groups in Pakistan posed to Indian and U.S. interests. That proposal immediately generated considerable press comment in India and elsewhere in the region, which included speculation that discussions were already underway between Delhi and the Obama administration regarding that possibility.

At approximately the same time, reports circulated in Reuters and other outlets that the Indian government was close to finalizing a \$1.65 billion deal with Japan to purchase a variety of sophisticated military aircraft. If approved, that measure would make India the first country since the end of World War II to buy military aircraft from Japan. An agreement also would continue the advance of a cautious, but very real, strategic rapprochement between Delhi and Tokyo in recent years.

Both of those news stories are likely to cause uneasiness in Beijing. Although the rationale for basing U.S. military and intelligence assets in India would be to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist operatives more effectively following the possible complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Chinese officials could find the move objectionable for two reasons. First, Pakistan is Beijing’s most important ally in the region, and any U.S. action that strengthens Islamabad’s longtime rival, India, will be seen as a direct menace to Pakistan and an indirect threat to China.

Second, Chinese leaders tend to see various manifestations of a U.S.-orchestrated containment strategy directed against China. Washington's so-called pivot to Asia, especially the emphasis on strengthening strategic ties with traditional allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, has already aroused Chinese suspicions. So, too, has the Obama administration's none-too-subtle tilt toward countries that dispute China's territorial claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea. In addition to Washington's support for Tokyo and Manila, the administration has openly cultivated an informal strategic partnership with Hanoi, yet another rival claimant.

Indications of meaningful security ties between the United States and India are, therefore, not likely to be seen merely as motivated by mutual concerns about Pakistan-based terrorism. Instead, the latest move looks suspiciously like an attempt by Washington to forge another link in a chain meant to hem-in China. The growth of military cooperation between India and Japan, America's leading ally in East Asia, could be viewed as yet another link in such a chain.

Even if such suspicions are unfounded, U.S. leaders need to proceed cautiously. In a post-Afghanistan setting, Washington's search for new locales to monitor and counter radical Islamic terrorist forces is not irrational, but officials must be alert to unintended perceptions and consequences. Likewise, the emergence of credible security cooperation between Japan and India can serve as a strategic counterweight to China—a development that indirectly serves U.S. interests. But it is imperative that Washington allow that process to evolve on its own, without adopting measures that put U.S. fingerprints on an anti-China containment policy.

Beijing's own assertive—if not abrasive—actions, especially regarding the territorial disputes in the East China and South China seas, have unsettled India, Japan, and other neighbors. Given the traditional dynamics of international politics, such behavior by a revisionist power tends to cause other nations to band together to limit that power's ambitions. We may well be seeing that process playing out now in the Asian theater. Washington is obviously a major player in the region as well, but it is crucial for U.S. officials not to take actions that foster paranoia in Beijing. The Obama administration must be wary of proceeding too far or too quickly on security cooperation, even actions that are narrowly tailored to countering the terrorist threat. Equally important, U.S. policy makers should avoid creating any perception of actively encouraging the growing

strategic ties between Delhi and Tokyo. The overriding goal ought to be to maintain good U.S. relations with all three capitals.

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