

India may see slight in Hu tour

By Jo Johnson in New Delhi, Richard McGregor in Beijing and Farhan Bokhari in Karachi

By hopping straight on from India to Pakistan, Hu Jintao, China's president, will commit one of the cardinal errors of south Asian diplomacy Thursday.

New Delhi has long discouraged world leaders from bundling visits to India and Pakistan into a single trip to the region. As a country with a keen sense of its rightful place in world affairs, India believes it is worth a special trip in its own right.

"A lot of people have been saying that President Hu should have made a special visit," says General Ashok K. Mehta, an Indian security analyst. "In spite of what he may have said publicly about India being a rising power, China still wants to contain it within the region and to treat both India and Pakistan, with which they have a longstanding strategic relationship, as equals."

In Islamabad, few fear the emergence of a Sino-centric Asia. Officials have prepared a warm welcome for the leader of a country seen as Pakistan's "all-weather" ally, decking roadsides with posters hailing a friendship "taller than the Himalayas, deeper than the oceans". Top Pakistani diplomats say they are hopeful that Mr Hu will announce a significant expansion of the two countries' extensive nuclear collaboration.

Finding itself unable to secure the same exemption from US laws banning nuclear co-operation with non-signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, Pakistan is looking to Beijing to fill the gap. Pakistan plans to generate about 8,800MW of electricity from nuclear reactors by 2030, more than 10 times the 770MW yielded by its two existing Chinese reactors and a smaller Canadian one.

Any deal will be controversial in the light of the activities of Abdul Qadeer Khan, Pakistan's top nuclear scientist, who three years ago was found to have sold nuclear knowhow and technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea. In March, explaining his refusal to extend nuclear co-operation to Pakistan, George W. Bush said that India and Pakistan were "different countries, with different histories and different needs".

"There are aspects of the nuclear relationship between Pakistan and China that do cause concern to most Indians," says Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, Indian ambassador to China between 1993 and 1996. "The rise of China and India is inevitable and it would be a futile exercise on the part of either to try to contain the other. It can't be done and would not be conducive to neighbourly relations."

The former ambassador said Mr Hu's visit to India, although it yielded no breakthroughs on the border dispute, had helped "incrementally" to improve relations:

"There's steady progress. India has made it clear that it has no intention of joining any other power in any attempt to contain China. The Chinese reciprocally will have to understand that it's futile to try to block India's rise as a major player on the international scene," he said.

Mutual suspicions, however, are proving difficult to dispel. The fact that China is now creating economic de-pendencies among India's immediate neighbours, through trade and aid, and is building a port at Gwadar in southern Pakistan, part of a "string of pearls" across the Indian Ocean that includes similar projects in Burma and Sri Lanka, has alarmed many members of the Indian strategic community.

While in Pakistan, Mr Hu will be careful to avoid provoking India. Beijing is now more disciplined in how it manages ties with Pakistan, monitoring arms manufacturers and companies with the ability to transfer technology, even as private investment flourishes. It is also careful not to take sides in Indo-Pakistani disputes.

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