

US, China rivalry spurs debate in India Analysts differ on best ally for New Delhi

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By Jehangir S. Pocha, Globe Correspondent | September 17, 2006

NEW DELHI -- With its burgeoning economy and muscular military, India is becoming a valued prize in the growing rivalry between the United States and China.

A struggle has developed among India's power elite over which path to follow, toward Beijing or Washington. Some analysts and politicians in India say the country should take advantage of the situation and play today's superpower against tomorrow's. Others are calling for India to embrace one of the suitors.

"There's now a chasm across Delhi," said Madhav Nalapat, professor of geopolitics at Manipal University in southern India. "On one side there's the pro-US lot led by their hero, [Indian Prime Minister] Manmohan Singh, and on the other they're the old leftists, people trained to be instinctively anti-American."

At stake are vital geopolitical issues, including access to and control of ports, oil fields, and sea lanes, as well as billions in commercial deals.

India would like to expand its economy, establish supremacy over South Asia, gain access to Central Asia's energy supplies, and enhance its ability to project its military might. And both the United States and China would like to harness India's power for their own purposes.

To entice India into a strategic relationship with the United States, President Bush has offered New Delhi a major civilian nuclear power agreement. The deal, which needs congressional approval, implicitly recognizes India's nuclear power status and would give New Delhi critical dual-use technology in exchange for limited oversight over its civilian nuclear facilities and a commitment to refrain from further nuclear testing.

"The US knows it needs India," said Rahul Bedi, a correspondent in New Delhi for Jane's Defence Weekly. "China is an obvious reason, but beyond that the one lesson the US has learned in Iraq is it needs allies who can put boots on the ground. India was that close to sending troops to Iraq, and if it had, it'd already be a top ally."

The Communist Party of India, which is part of the coalition ruling New Delhi and has close ties with Beijing, restrained Singh from sending troops.

Nalapat said that was emblematic of how China is leveraging its influence in Indian politics to further its own goals.

"China really wants to keep India from getting too close to the US," said Nalapat, who was the first analyst to suggest a Russia-China-India alliance in 1983 but who has since been calling for closer Indian ties with the United States. "China does not want a military alliance with India. It just wants India submissive enough not to interfere with the games it's playing with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma."

China has close ties with India's rival, Pakistan, and Beijing is supporting Burma's military dictatorship because it would like to access the country's oil fields. Chinese diplomats are also wooing Bangladesh

in hopes of using its ports to ship goods out of China's landlocked western provinces.

Nalapat said Washington and Beijing have established strong intelligence operations in the region to influence policy makers and politicians.

“The CIA has always had a major presence in India, and since 1998 [when India conducted its nuclear tests] the Chinese have been making a play, as well,” he said.

K. Natwar Singh, who was forced to resign as India's foreign minister in December after being implicated in the Iraqi oil-for-food scandal, is becoming a leading figure in India's anti-US lobby. Singh is critical of the nuclear deal with the United States, saying it could open all of India's nuclear plants to international inspections.

“When I met President Bush in April [2005], I told him I was committed to deepening, widening, and broadening Indo-US ties, but not as a junior partner,” Singh said in a recent interview. “Now, the government is giving away our sovereignty, our hard-fought nuclear independence, for peanuts.”

But India's new brand of Western-oriented politicians see the United States as a “natural partner” and are working determinedly for the nuclear deal.

“We signed a bilateral framework agreement on defense cooperation nearly a year ago and we intend to fulfill it,” Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee of India said at a conference in Singapore. India-US “cooperation in all sectors will go on smoothly regardless of some differing voices.”

Given India's huge untapped market and decaying infrastructure, the US and Chinese interests are also trying to outdo each other in the competition for a share of the billions that India's government, corporations, and consumers are spending.

When China's Huawei Technologies, a telecom equipment manufacturer, entered India with the intention of competing with such major US companies as Lucent Technologies for India's large telecom projects, the Indian government barred it. Indian media reports citing the country's intelligence agency -- which allegedly used information provided by the CIA -- said the company was suspected of spying for the Chinese government.

The Chinese have been fighting back. Indian nonprofit groups have launched a series of public actions against US companies, such as Enron, Coke, and PepsiCo, and Nalapat, the politics professor, said Chinese money was bankrolling quite a few of the Indian organizations.

Resolution of India and China's complex boundary dispute also looks remote. Last month, Vineet Kumar Joshi, director general of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police that patrols India's 2,200-mile border with China, told reporters that Chinese soldiers had made 265 incursions into India since January 2005, a charge Beijing denied.

Nalapat said this, and other cultural affinities, are pushing India almost irrevocably toward a strategic relationship with the United States.

“India and America share so much, language, values, economic complementarity, that we are bound to ally,” he said. “The concern is that we should not give away too much to the Americans. India must retain its sovereignty, because don't forget, ultimately we have our own ambitions.” ■