THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: SUMMITRY AND CHINA’S CHALLENGING RELATIONS WITH GREAT POWERS IN ASIA

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REACHING THE SUMMIT?

A top Chinese leader arrives in the capital of Country X for his first visit in five years. The relationship between the countries is routinely described as one of the world’s most important bilateral relationships and is so characterized by the visiting leader, who declares it to be a defining relationship for the twenty-first century world. Although little of substance is expected from the meetings between the visitor and his host-nation counterpart, the trip is widely seen as important for the symbolism and atmospherics of a long-standing, complex and recently—and especially in the last year or more—troubled relationship. On the eve of the visit, a senior Chinese foreign policy official notably called bilateral relations “very fragile.” Commentators on all sides point to a worrisome lack of mutual trust in the relationship, which the visit seeks to begin to repair.

The Chinese side wants to focus on economic issues and stresses the importance of trade openness. Beijing’s delegation includes an entourage of businesses on a shopping spree, promises increased investment in the host country and agrees to reduce barriers in key service sectors. Those moves are understood partly as palliatives for Country X’s concerns about a large bilateral trade deficit that many local assessments blame on China’s manipulated, artificially low exchange rate and Chinese barriers to Country X’s exports. The Chinese visitor’s agenda of further liberalization faces resistance based on such currency concerns, fears that greater economic openness will expose local industry (especially in lower tech sectors) to ruinous Chinese competition, and complaints that China has not adequately opened its markets to imports and foreign competition despite Beijing’s WTO-related pledges to do so. Underlying such concerns are Country X’s worries about its own economic situation, prospects and policies (especially in the wake of the 2008 international economic crisis), and a mixture of envy and concern toward China’s having seemingly escaped the global crisis relatively unscathed and, more broadly, having maintained for many years eye-popping growth rates that have often dwarfed Country X’s. Mirroring such insecurities in Country X, relatively nationalist voices in the Chinese media use the trip as an occasion to express near-contempt toward Country X’s economic performance and, more fundamentally, its economic model.

For Country X, a long list of political and security issues are on the agenda as well. They include complaints that China has been insufficiently cooperative on the anti-terrorism agenda that is a top priority for the host, and that Beijing has done too little to rein in a troublesome ally with nuclear arms that the host regards as a significant source of security threats, proliferation risks and terrorist threats. On some views, the legacy of military conflict, occurring decades ago and involving China and Country X on opposite sides, still casts a shadow over bilateral relations.

Country X’s policymakers and pundits also worry about China’s military modernization (especially of naval forces), and its cultivation of access to possible bases along the Indian Ocean and the threat this poses to the host state’s interests in maritime Asia. Also among the sources of unease is the prospect that China’s rising martial capacity and the leverage that comes from China’s burgeoning economic relations (especially with Southeast Asia) may pose problems for the host state’s often-strained but recently recovering ties with regional states. That concern is mitigated by these states’ pursuit of hedging strategies toward China through enhanced security cooperation with Country X. Recent Chinese assertiveness on long-running territorial disputes along its periphery reinforces such hedging strategies, as well as the concerns about China’s rise and aims that underlie them. Further complicating matters is China’s very different take on the evolving regional security landscape: what others may describe as hedging against a more powerful China is a more threatening development according to Beijing, allegedly serving (or at least potentially serving) a Washington-led agenda to encircle China and check China’s ascent as a
great power. These issues all loom during the Chinese leader’s meetings with his counterpart in Country X.

Familiar frictions related to differences in the two states’ political systems and ideologies hang over the visit as well. Media commentaries in Country X point out the contrast between its own democratic system and China’s authoritarian one. Although China is clearly unhappy with Country X’s policies toward Tibet and the stature Country X accords the Dalai Lama, the host government accepts, and Country X’s free media stress, the right of the local Tibetan community and its supporters to hold public protests during the Chinese leader’s visit. The Chinese side responds to the political jabs coming from Country X with editorial blows at the arrogance of the host’s claims to democratic superiority, official displeasure at what it sees as Country X’s meddling on Tibet issues, and pointed resentment of Country X’s refusal to heed Beijing’s call not to attend the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony honoring Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. Even though both states face international criticism for being laggards on global warming issues and impediments to climate change negotiations, complaints about Chinese actions that threaten significant environmental consequences are also on Country X’s list of issues.

Prospects for progress are further clouded by political leadership questions. The Chinese leader is nearing the end of his term and China’s characteristically long transition to his—and his fellow top leaders’—designated successors already looms. Perhaps more acute is the problem of Country X’s leader’s questionable political clout. Having secured an impressive electoral mandate for a term in office that began in 2009, his standing at home has waned amid a struggling economy and attacks—largely from a conservative opposition party but also from the left—in a polarized political setting. As if to underscore these difficulties, when the Chinese leader leaves town, revelations from Wikileaks create yet another mini-crisis for the major party that has backed the host’s leader.

In the end, the meeting of top leaders produces the requisite joint statement on the strength and importance of the relationship, the areas of bilateral accord, and the commitments and ostensible progress made. Among observers, there is much agreement that the session did not exceed relatively low expectations for addressing the difficult and important issues in the bilateral relationship.

“Country X” could be the U.S., but it is India. The foregoing is not a foretelling of Chinese President Hu Jintao’s mid-January 2011 state visit to Washington. It is, rather, an account of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s mid-December 2010 trip to New Delhi. To be a follower of U.S.-China relations and to be in New Delhi among Indian foreign policy and China specialists during Wen’s visit is to experience a bit of déja vu or, more precisely, something like déjà-prévu—a sense that one is witnessing a pre-enactment of events that one expects will recur soon.

FINDING THE RIGHT TRIANGLES?

The parallels between the late 2010 Sino-Indian meeting of premiers and the early 2011 U.S.-China presidential summit—and the broader contexts of the two bilateral relationships—are striking and significant. As the background, agenda and no-better-than-modest accomplishments from Wen’s India trip show, China has—and knows that it has—an India problem, much as China has—and knows that it has—a U.S. problem. For the lone superpower that China is rising to challenge in Asia and for the other great rising power in Asia, China’s rapidly growing prowess has become a major source of concern. In both New Delhi and Washington, an ever-more-formidable PRC has become the biggest traditional security contingency for which their defense establishments must prepare (albeit in an era when terrorism and other nonconventional security threats make very large claims on attention and resources).

Moreover, in the U.S. and India (and many other places as well), concern about the implications of China’s fast-developing capacities has been compounded recently by rapidly deepening suspicions about Beijing’s intent. Increasingly, the PRC has been willing to sacrifice the “soft power” that it seemingly had so assiduously cultivated through much of the last decade and to sideline the “charm offensive” it appeared to have so ardently pursued in its own region, much of the developing world and beyond. Beijing has downgraded those once-central elements of its foreign policy in favor of more assertive, even aggressive, stances. Although far from a full reversal of what had long been a mixed practice, the center of gravity in Chinese statements and actions has shifted toward less accommodation and cooperation on issues ranging from North Korea (including the Six Party Talks and the response to the sinking of the South Korean naval ship Cheonan), to disputed islands and waters in the South China Sea and East China Sea (including the incident over the Japanese seizure of a Chinese fishing boat and renewed tensions over the Diaoyu / Senkaku Islands), to U.S. military and naval reconnaissance operations in China’s EEZ, to Washington’s arms sales to Taiwan, to China’s test of a stealth fighter during what had been cast as a breach-patching pre-summit visit to Beijing by the U.S. Secretary of Defense.

This pattern in China’s handling of issues of great concern to the U.S. extends to issues of special importance to India. In the months and days before Wen’s visit, China had become more assertive in its claims to Arunachal Pradesh (the Indian-governed territory that Beijing labels Southern Tibet), shifted to a more pro-Pakistan position on Jammu and Kashmir (by stepping up China’s presence in what India describes as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, denying a visa to the Indian general in charge of forces in the Indian-governed part of the disputed region, stapling—rather than following the ordinary practice of permanently affixing—Chinese visas to the passports of Indian nationals from the Indian-ruled contested area, and shortening
the customarily referenced unsettled boundary between India and China so as to imply that the disputed territory could not be India’s), and completing a major, militarily useful transportation link between the Chinese heartland and the portion of the PRC’s Tibetan Autonomous Region abutting India (and doing so against the backdrop of a modest resurgence in Chinese sources of long-muted positive references to the 1962 Sino-Indian border war).

Beijing’s forceful, even strident, stands in these relatively specific contexts have accompanied a more assertive and less clearly status quo-accepting element in Chinese foreign policy more broadly. In security affairs, this has entailed emphasis on force-projection and access-denial capabilities, more far-flung foreign naval base access (especially along the Indian Ocean) and countering (and denouncing) perceived U.S.-led (and India-abetted) encirclement strategies that threaten a possibly expanding sphere of China’s self-defined “core interests.” On economic issues, it has included pointed criticisms of U.S. failures as causes of the global economic crisis, Wen-visit-linked barbs noting the great challenges of development still facing India (before it can hope to be China’s peer), slow and limited Chinese responses to criticism from New Delhi, Washington and elsewhere of China’s currency and trade practices, and claiming a central role in the G20 process for China, and thus for China’s interests and agendas, alongside those of the U.S., India and other major economies.

These developments have spawned distrust and ill-will toward China. In many affected states, the response has been to rethink tendencies to accommodate or even bandwagon with Beijing. For almost all of them, the alternative has been to consider hedging or balancing strategies through increased alignment with the United States. Faced with a rising and worrisome China, small and medium powers in Asia lack other choices. The options are greater for regional great powers, specifically Japan and India. Japan, however, is behaving more like a lesser power amid: a widespread sense that Japan is in protracted relative decline; a half-century of a formal and formidable security alliance in which Japan has been junior partner to the United States; a lingering postwar discomfort in Asia of robust security roles for Japan; and a lack of domestic consensus on Japan’s foreign policy roles that has become more pronounced with the switch in ruling parties, the return of short-lived premierships and the increased prominence of views that Japan should not or cannot aspire to play the roles expected of a great power.

India does not have many—or arguably any—of these features and thus is positioned, with its growing material resources and its ongoing reassessment of its foreign policy interests, to act as a more conventional great power in the region. This makes China’s India problem more akin to China’s America problem. Recent moves in Indian foreign policy parallel the U.S.’s regional policy. Evocative of the Obama administration’s declarations that the U.S. is “back” in Asia and accompanying diplomatic and security efforts, India has pursued a “look East” policy (including prime ministerial visits to regional democracies Japan and South Korea), explored security cooperation with Vietnam, cultivated closer ties with other regional states, and paid special attention to U.S.-India ties, while continuing to insist that relations with China remain nearly uniquely important (and, indeed, are of global strategic significance).

Both the U.S. problem and the India problem are, in their current forms, relatively new challenges for Reform-Era China’s foreign policy. For the first decades of the post-Mao period, China could not—and, following Deng Xiaoping’s anciently rooted imperative of taoguang yanghui (literally, hide brightness and nourish obscurity or, as commonly rendered, bide time while building capacity), should not—aspire to be a regional rival to the United States or a challenger to a largely U.S.-created status quo. According to a view in recent Chinese commentaries, the Global Economic Crisis accelerated the timetable for China’s ascension, shortening it from five or ten years to one or two.

On the other hand, India was not until recently a state that Chinese foreign policy planners had to—or appeared to—take seriously as a regional great power. India’s China-like growth rates and, more recently, efforts to leverage its strength through improved ties with other Asian states and the United States have altered the regional environment facing Beijing. That simultaneously troubled relations with India and the U.S. are new and serious worries for Beijing is suggested by characterizations of Wen Jiabao’s pomp-laden and fence-mending trip to New Delhi as a highly important venture and a bid to secure a foreign policy legacy for Wen. Much the same is true for the soon-following state visit by Hu Jintao to Washington. The U.S. summit is no less a legacy issue for Hu (whose term in office coincides with Wen’s). Chinese media accounts and analysts’ assessments have cast this as an especially important summit, calling it a “bridge” to future relations, stressing the importance of the issues to be addressed and noting the significance of the flurry of reciprocal high-level visits preceding the summit. Given the limited prospects for progress on the many issues vexing bilateral relations, such expansive and expectation-raising language is not without risk and thus further suggests a relatively high level of concern in Beijing.

To the extent that China’s India problem and China’s America problem go beyond coexistence to coalescence, the challenges for PRC foreign policy intensify. Given the parallels in New Delhi’s and Washington’s concerns about Beijing’s agenda and actions, it is tempting to foresee ongoing, qualitative increases in India-U.S. cooperation. A more sweeping analogy has begun to seem plausible to some: a U.S.-China-India triangle might come to resemble the U.S.-Soviet Union-China triangle from the later decades of the Cold War. In some respects, a U.S.-India coalition to check China would seem to be more promising than did the U.S.-China collaboration to counter the USSR on the eve of its emergence. After all, independent India and the PRC have never had the ideological or strategic alliance that China’s communist leaders and the Soviet Union maintained (despite strains) from before the Chinese Revolution through the first years of the People’s Republic. Unlike the U.S. and China in the 1970s (and since), the U.S. and India share fundamental political values and many specific aims and issues in their
relationships with the third member of the triangle. Power inequalities among the members (and especially the relative weakness of the third party) did not preclude the U.S.-USSR-PRC triangle and are not obviously qualitatively worse in a U.S.-China-India structure.

Intriguing—even enticing—as the idea of a new strategic triangle for Asia might be, several significant differences warn against pressing the analogy very far. To be sure, India worries about China’s military buildup, its cultivation (and construction) of Indian Ocean naval facilities for possible use by the PRC’s navy, its construction of infrastructure that will make it easier for troops to reach the China-India border, and its long-standing, staunch and recently reaffirmed and expanded backing of India’s congenital nemesis and China’s “all weather friend,” Pakistan. Beijing’s shift to a less neutral or open-ended position on questions of sovereignty over territory concurrently claimed by China and India and by Pakistan and India rankles in New Delhi and recalls more bellicose times in bilateral relations. India’s pointed dropping of the previously routine reference to a “one China” policy in the joint statement during Wen’s visit was a tit-for-tat response. China’s refusal in the joint statement to call clearly for swift justice, and point a finger at Pakistan, concerning 26/11 (as the November 26, 2008, terrorist attacks in Mumbai are known in India) confirmed for Indian critics that China did not, or would not, take sufficiently seriously India’s fundamental concerns about Pakistan-based terrorism. Still, despite these areas of significant discord, China does not pose—and is not seen as posing—the direct, severe threat to India’s national security, or regime survival, that China’s leaders perceived from the Soviet Union in the years preceding—and following—U.S.-China rapprochement. Few things can match the efficacy of a sense of mortal peril as motivation to seek cooperation with a threatening state’s archrival.

So too, U.S. relations with China do not entail the kind of Manichean struggle over the future of a divided world that defined much of Washington’s and Moscow’s approaches to one another during the Cold War. To be sure, there are sources of concern and potential conflict in: Beijing’s support for North Korea and other problematic regimes; its renewed assertiveness on territorial disputes along China’s periphery; its rapidly growing capacity—and emerging determination—to impede or deter U.S. military and reconnaissance activities in its neighborhood and to project force further afield; and its accretion of economic influence that could be used to political and strategic ends (albeit not without considerable cost to China’s interests). It would take much exaggeration—or grand projections from recent trends—to suggest that the security-related issues in U.S.-China relations resemble those in U.S.-Soviet relations during much of the postwar era.

A U.S.-India alignment is not as promising as it may initially seem. True, a U.S.-India entente would not need to bridge the cavernous ideological gap that divided the U.S. and China in the early 1970s, or even the smaller one that persists between the U.S. and the PRC today. But common commitments to liberalism, democracy and human rights do not mean an easy alignment of perspectives between Washington and New Delhi. Once-defining principles of nonalignment still linger in Indian foreign policy thinking, supplemented by the ideal—often compelling for great or rising powers—of an independent foreign policy. On some environment, trade, finance and other issues, India’s positions more closely track those of fellow developing countries (including, on some questions, China) than they do those of the United States. Washington has not quickly or easily overcome its former coolness toward India, with its roots in India’s former long-term closeness to the Soviet Union and India’s Nehruist/socialist ideology (which resonated to some extent with ties to Moscow). Indian wariness toward the U.S. has been sustained by long-standing and ongoing U.S. support for Pakistan.

Moreover, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, U.S. President Barack Obama and their foreign policy aides (and likely their successors) are not Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger or Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. For reasons of political skill, inclination or circumstances at home and abroad, they will not so set aside issues of ideology, values and the like in favor of balance of power and realpolitik. Indian foreign policy analysts question India’s capacity to manage successfully the complex diplomacy of a prospective new strategic triangle. They variously point to: signs of poor preparation and inadequate priority-setting for India’s agenda during Wen’s visit; a tendency for shrill, simplistic and often hard-line voices to dominate the public debate—important for foreign policymaking in democratic India—on China policy; a relative dearth of China expertise in policy circles; and risks of failure due to Indian foreign policymakers’ overconfidence in their own skills and their country’s clout.

But the most decisive disanalogies between U.S.-China-India relations today and the Cold War strategic triangle stem from the positive and dense ties between the U.S. and China and between China and India that had no parallel in the thin and hostile relations between the U.S. and the USSR and between China and the Soviet Union. During an era of high international economic interdependence, U.S.-PRC trade and investment relations are among the very largest globally—with China ranking as the U.S.’s second largest, and the U.S. ranking as China’s largest, trading partner in goods, and the U.S. being among China’s top sources of foreign investment and China among the U.S.’s largest creditors. China-India economic connections have been developing rapidly from low baselines, with trade having grown from less than $2 billion at the beginning of the decade to over $60 billion now and with China having become India’s biggest trading partner. Their expansion and deepening was a focus of Wen’s visit, including announcements of a goal of $100 billion in bilateral trade by 2015 (a figure consistent with recent trends), $16 billion in business deals, and plans to expand Chinese investment and economic activity in India, particularly in the fast-growing area of infrastructure construction. Such patterns contrast sharply with the low and often near-zero levels of economic engagement between the U.S. and USSR and between the USSR and the PRC during an earlier
era. Although they also spawn conflicts, the large and growing economic linkages between the U.S. and China and between India and China have created national interests and powerful domestic political constituencies that favor good relations and weigh against strongly adversarial stances toward China in Washington and New Delhi. Such economic considerations are likely all the more central at this moment, when India has an economist prime minister and the U.S. has a president whose political fortunes hinge on improvement in a recently dismal national economy.

In the bilateral relationship more broadly, the U.S. policy sometimes described as “engagement” includes a large dose of engagement alongside the modest if growing and more Cold War-reminiscent elements of containment. Through building economic ties, supporting China’s integration into international organizations and the international order, and forging myriad channels of influence through educational, business, NGO and social connections, the U.S. has sought to further China’s transformation into a more benign and liberal system. Although Beijing chafes at such U.S. aims and endeavors as “peaceful evolution,” Reform-Era China has moved notably (although far from fully) in the direction envisaged by proponents of engagement. Despite its complaints about American plots and their nefarious effects, the Chinese regime has found it worthwhile to tolerate, and even welcome, many of the activities that create entry points for ideas and ideals from the U.S. and other parts of the liberal-democratic and rule-of-law world.

Although differences in, and over, contrasting political system types are sharp in Sino-Indian relations, they are more muted than in contemporary U.S.-China relations and they pale in intensity and impact when compared to Sino-Soviet clashes. Indian sources take understandable pride in their country’s recently successful pursuit of economic development with democracy, and they pointedly note China’s failure to match India’s achievements on the latter front. Unsurprisingly, Chinese sources take umbrage at what they see as India’s democratic arrogance and condescend toward the modesty—when measured by contemporary Chinese standards—of India’s economic accomplishments. Thus, a nationalist commentary in the PRC media cautioned India not to “get drunk” on the “red wine” of democracy that it shares with the West and to tend instead to the onerous work still to be done on economic development. Beijing resented and called, futilely, for the muzzling of critical Indian media coverage on China (and especially on Tibet issues) in connection with Wen’s trip to New Delhi. India, predictably, had little patience with these Chinese views. In the words of India’s foreign secretary, China simply would have to get used to the “noisy” nature of Indian democracy.

Despite such exchanges, there is a good deal of mutual tolerance and even elements of shared Asian pride and solidarity. Chinese and, in some cases, Indian statements amid and around Wen’s trip spoke of: a new “Asian century” in which China and India would play large international roles; India and China’s common features as large developing countries that are heirs to great ancient civilizations poised for new glory; their co-membership and common interests in the BRIC or BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India and China, plus South Africa); and their history of two thousand years of mutual exchange, sixty years of diplomatic relations, and nearly six decades of joint commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence/Panchsheel in international relations. Wen’s visit also heralded an expansion of institutional frameworks for interaction and cooperation, some reminiscent of familiar features in U.S.-PRC relations. These do or will include regular meetings between foreign ministers, a prime ministerial hotline, a Strategic Economic Dialogue, and a CEO’s forum. Although Wen’s call for the “dragon and elephant to tango” overshoots and the purported quest for a “strategic consensus” with India remains elusive, contemporary India-China ties contrast sharply with Sino-Soviet relations from the era of reciprocal charges of communist apostasy and competing (if uneven) efforts to export rival versions of socialism. Tellingly, one hears little today about a “third way” derived from the Indian development experience, and despite China’s growing pride and confidence, official and orthodox Chinese sources have been notably reticent in pushing the so-called “Beijing Consensus” or an exportable “Chinese model.”

INDIA AND U.S. CHINA POLICY

A new strategic alignment among the U.S., India and China that would parallel the former triangle among the U.S., China and the USSR is likely unachievable and undesirable. It does not follow, however, that the U.S. cannot, or should not, pursue closer cooperation with India and do so partly in furtherance of U.S. policies that respond to China’s rising power and assertiveness. The U.S.’s and India’s shared liberal, democratic and rule of law values, broadly compatible foreign policy interests, and extensively overlapping agendas in relations with China provide relatively sturdy and likely enduring foundations on which to build. The George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations have taken sensible and substantial steps here, including reciprocal state visits, a defense framework agreement, a civilian nuclear cooperation accord, and support for India’s integration in international nuclear regulatory regimes and permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council.

Consolidating and extending these gains will require sustained effort and attention. Although the focus on fellow democracies in Obama’s Asia trip and his characterization of U.S.-India relations as a “defining partnership” were well-received, much of the significance of such gestures for India was their contribution to assuaging concerns that the U.S. administration regarded relations with other Asian states as secondary to the central, if troubled, U.S.-PRC relationship. Such sensitivities in New Delhi (and other Asian capitals) will remain chronic challenges for Washington so long as ideas of U.S.-China bipolarity (or the more farfetched “G2” duopoly) remain prominently in play and unfortunate incidents (such as U.S. airport security officers’
intrusive pat-down of India’s ambassador) can roil still-delicate relations.

U.S. policy also will have to contend with Chinese efforts to discourage a stronger U.S.-India side of the triangle. These tactics likely will include: complaining about U.S. efforts to enlist India as one of many followers in its attempt to impede China’s rise; stressing areas where India and China have commonalities of identity or policy interests not shared by the United States; and generally playing up the less zero-sum aspects of Sino-Indian relations (as Beijing has done with its repeated refrain that China and India are “partners not rivals” in a world where there is “enough space” for both to develop and “enough areas” where the two can cooperate). Fortunately for the U.S., such moves from Beijing face limits that flow from relatively intractable conflicts between Chinese and Indian national interests, the PRC’s worse-than-the-U.S.’s positions (from India’s perspective) on the crucial and overlapping issues of Pakistan, terrorism, territory, and Security Council membership, and China’s seeming inability to resist unleashing its newly assertive and acerbic rhetoric occasionally in India’s direction.

Finally, to counter such Chinese gambits, the U.S. also can invoke another contrast—one that China ostensibly accepts—between contemporary U.S.-China-India relations and the former U.S.-USSR-PRC relationships. The former are much less of a zero-sum game, as Beijing acknowledges in its routine invocations of interdependence and “win-win” foreign policies and in its statements around Wen’s New Delhi trip that the connection between China-India relations and U.S.-India relations is positive, or at worst neutral. Insisting on this aspect of fundamental dissimilarity to the strategic triangle of an earlier era can, ironically, help cultivate in U.S.-India ties assets to support the U.S.’s complex policies toward a difficult and rising China that are in some—but far from all—respects reminiscent of those the U.S. once derived from U.S.-China ties to support U.S. policies toward a powerful and intractable Soviet Union.