

# Crouching Dragon, Ambling Elephant, and the Hawkish Eagle

Written by Divya Srikanth

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DIVYA SRIKANTH, APR 12 2014

### Introduction: Brief Significance of Indo-US and Sino-Indian Relations

Since 2001, there has been an upswing in US-India relations, greatly facilitated by the Bush Administration's reversal of the decades-long US policy of indifference towards India. The signing of the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) between the Bush Administration and the Manmohan Singh government heralded a new beginning to Indo-US relations and cemented India's growing rising power status. The 2005 civilian nuclear deal, which facilitated US technology assistance to India's civilian nuclear program and allowed the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to trade with India, a non-signatory to the NPT treaty, was unprecedented in the lengths to which the US and Indian governments co-operated to ensure the successful completion of the deal. Indo-US relations since the 2000s have been built largely on public harping on shared values of both states, such as democracy, but more importantly, on the unspoken shared threat, i.e. the rise of China. In 2008, the Obama Administration's "Pivot toward Asia" policy, as described by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,[1] included India as an important part of its strategy. Although the Indo-US relationship cannot be described as ultra-smooth, it can be argued that it has dramatically changed compared to the Cold War era.

The rise of China has been touted by many scholars as one of the defining events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.[2] The explosive and sustained economic growth by China for the past 25 years has resulted in the lifting of millions of its citizens from poverty and established the country as a major global power. However, unlike the Indo-US ties, which have progressively improved since the end of the Cold War despite minor hiccups, the Sino-Indian relations have been weighed down by a history of conflict and mutual suspicion over the border issue, with frequent "incursions" reported by both sides across the Line of Actual Control (LAC); China's close relationship with Pakistan; the 1998 Indian nuclear tests; and the recent India-US strategic relationship and the resulting civilian nuclear deal. While the Sino-Indian relations have witnessed rapid strides in the economic realm, with burgeoning trade between the two countries, the advantage is on China's side, as India has a huge trade deficit *vis-à-vis* China.[3] China's attempts to form a "string of pearls" (which India perceives more as a choker necklace) in the Indian Ocean Region by forming close economic ties with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Mauritius, Maldives and Pakistan have been ignored by India. In this context of deepening but lopsided economic partnership on one hand, and unresolved strategic issues on the other, the Sino-Indian relations have been made more complex by the US strategic pivot toward India. India needs US' strategic partnership, which promises to "assist India in becoming a major world power,"[4] by strengthening the Indian military through arms sales, transfer of advanced technology, joint military exercises and intelligence sharing. At the same time, Indo-US strategic proximity could have the potential to stoke deep insecurity in the Chinese establishment over fears of containment and lead to a security dilemma, which could upset the fragile geopolitical stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

### US-India-China Sandwich: A Palatable Option?

This section places the US-India and Sino-Indian relations in the context of international relations theories, namely, "balance of power" and "hegemon-rising power" theory. It also touches upon India's reaction to US overtures for strategic alliance.

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US overtures toward India in the last decade are classic examples of a balancing act aimed at deterring a newly assertive China that is buoyed by its economic success and wants to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region, where the US has cemented its status as a non-resident great power for over half a century. Both India and the US are wary of China's future hegemonic ambitions, and thus the strategic partnership can be seen as a natural act of external balancing by the two states directed at China. Moreover, some scholars have stated that US hegemony is on the decline while China's power and influence is on the rise, and offensive realists like John Mearsheimer do not buy the view that China's rise will be peaceful<sup>[5]</sup> and will resemble the 20th century Great Britain-US peaceful transfer of hegemony. India views China as an aggressive neighboring power with territorial ambitions<sup>[6]</sup> while the US perceives China to be the only potential challenger to its unipolar status.<sup>[7]</sup> China, on the other hand, views the ultimate goal of the US-India pairing up as the containment of its influence and power.

The Obama Administration has termed India as the "lynchpin" for the Asia pivot,<sup>[8]</sup> thereby cementing its importance. However, India has reiterated that the US-India strategic partnership was not and never will be an "alliance" and has allegedly dismissed US offers of a strategic alliance.<sup>[9]</sup> The reasons behind the steadfastness of Indian foreign policy makers in rejecting alliance formation with the US may range from post-colonial reservations and adherence to a non-aligned foreign policy to simply not wanting to fall into entrapment or upset its hostile neighbors and create an accidental crisis.

The US is frustrated by the perceived lack of proactive interest from India's side in taking forward the bilateral relationship. India wants to hold hands (with reservations, of course) with the US in order to steady its strategic position but is absolutely averse to embracing the US. While the US views India's aloofness to be exasperating, India has wisely adopted a pragmatic approach in conducting its foreign policy. After all, it was only a few decades back that the US embraced China, and now, it wants India to side *against* China? India would rather be an ambling elephant and take its time to evaluate and, if necessary, pace its relationships with the superpower and the potential challenger, rather than trample upon the fragile stability that prevails in its neighborhood.

## Does the Eagle Bring Forth Instability?

Now that the dynamics of India-US strategic partnership and India-China relations have been laid out, this paper's central question arises: is the former a source of stability or instability to the latter? There have been a number of arguments on how the US strategic pivot to India is a source of instability to India-China relationship. The main argument is that the Indo-US strategic partnership may increase Chinese fears of a containment strategy and, thereby, fuel a security dilemma. This could result in a potential arms race between India and China, and induce China to partner with Pakistan to form a counter-containment alliance against India.<sup>[10]</sup> Another argument is that India-US strategic relationship formed to "contain" China could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy<sup>[11]</sup>: i.e. China could use the containment argument in order to bolster its own military forces and engage in provocative behavior against India, especially with regard to the border issue. Or, the US partnership could embolden India to behave in a more hawkish manner in dealing with China. A third argument could be that US does not really matter in the overall Sino-Indian equations, i.e. the strategic "pivot" toward India that was championed by the Bush Administration has cooled considerably, especially in the present Obama Administration.<sup>[12]</sup> After all, one can argue that the US strategic partnership did not serve as a deterrent for the Chinese from occupying disputed Indian Territory at the Daulat Beg Oldi/ Tiannan River Valley sector in April 2013.

However, considering the measured way in which India has responded to the US strategic pivot, showing neither extreme disinclination nor an overt lean toward the US, it has managed to assuage, if not dispel, Chinese fears of containment. India's conduct of its bilateral relationship with regard to the US has been tempered and pragmatic, mindful of China's sensitiveness about the relationship. For example, India cancelled a joint naval exercise with US and Japan in the Indian Ocean in May 2013, after the Chinese expressed their reservations.<sup>[13]</sup> Thus, both China and India are highly sensitive and attuned to each other's views in order to prevent accidental escalation of tensions or an arms race scenario in the region. The Dempsang incursion has been termed by both sides as a "localised" and an "isolated" incident and was resolved through frantic working of the diplomatic channels on both sides.<sup>[14]</sup> It can also be argued that the alleged Chinese incursion into Indian territory was a trigger for the signing of the comprehensive Border Defence Cooperation Agreement by the two sides in Beijing in October 2013, which

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stipulated that both states would never use force to resolve the border issue, a confidence-building measure that has stabilized the India-China relations to some extent.[15] Critics who argue that US-India relations have cooled since 2009 are, however, partially correct. It is obvious that Obama has chosen to make Afghanistan and the Middle East as his priorities and is not as ecstatic as Bush was about India. However, the US-India strategic partnership is still “hot”, as evidenced by the fact that US is now the largest arms supplier to India, overtaking Russia.[16] In September 2012, India bought six C-130J Super Hercules multi-purpose aircraft from the US and is poised to obtain more long-range maritime patrol aircraft and other combat vehicles in deals worth billions of dollars. Therefore, while the political relations between India and the US may have hit a speed breaker according to some scholars, the strategic aspect is still moving forward at a rapid pace. And it is this strategic aspect that apparently worries the Chinese.

## **Why the Dragon Need Not Crouch**

This section argues why the US strategic pivot toward India and Sino-Indian relations is not necessarily a zero-sum game. India can walk the proverbial tightrope between US and China while simultaneously furthering its own interests. This section bases its arguments on economic cooperation and capability-versus-intent arguments.

Sino-Indian relations have been beset with feelings of mutual suspicion and distrust, lingering after-effects of the 1962 border war in which India was comprehensively defeated. As a result, any and every foreign policy initiative taken by both sides would obviously be taken apart and scrutinized minutely to check if either side was indulging in an one-upmanship game. Thus, it was only logical, according to advocates of instability, that the India-US relations would adversely affect the Sino-Indian relationship. However, this need not be the case, i.e. a zero-sum game might not necessarily be the accurate analogy to describe the complex relationships that India pursues with both US and China. Sino-Indian economic trade (\$59.24 billion as of November 2013[17]) is eclipsed by that between US and China (which totaled \$421.3 billion as of December 2013[18]), and China is the largest trading partner of both countries. Therefore, the US strategic pivot to India and the latter’s response would always take cognizance of the China factor. An intimate strategic partnership between India and the US cannot be at the expense of alienating the Chinese, and it is important here to note that both India and the US run huge trade deficits with China. To put it more bluntly, US and India need China more than China needs them. Thus, it is in the interests of both US and India to have cordial and stable relations with the Chinese and not embark on a foreign policy adventures that antagonizes or alienates China.

Another evidence for a US strategic pivot to India facilitating stable Sino-Indian relations can be put forth by the “intent versus capability” argument. India buying arms from the US and deploying it in the Sino-Indian border does not necessarily translate into using them against China in the first instance it can. The same can be said of China, which has always stressed on peaceful co-existence with India and a distaste for the use of force to resolve any Sino-Indian disputes, as detailed by Premier of China, Le Keqiang during his visit to India in 2013.[19] Thus, both India and China are clear on where they stand: they do not want to use force to resolve outstanding disputes and are eager to use the diplomatic route. Moreover, India and China are joining hands in many international forums such as climate change talks in resisting the US-led West’s attempts to impose curbs on greenhouse gas emissions unilaterally on all countries.[20] Thus China and India, as developing nations with billion-plus populations much in common between them than with the US in many policy aspects.

## **A Compengagement Approach**

This essay proposes that India should use the US strategic pivot to embark on competitive engagement (“compengagement”) with China, as opposed to containment-engagement (i.e. “conengagement”) which IR scholars use to describe the hawkish US strategy toward China. The conengagement approach[21] could work for the US as it does not share borders with China. However, India cannot follow the US strategy because (1) it does not possess the means to contain China, and (2) even if it did, the “containment” part of the conengagement strategy would prove detrimental to peace building in the region. Compengagement would, however, stabilize the Sino-Indian relationship because India’s goal in this case would not be to contain China by modernizing the Indian military forces with technologies sourced from the US. Rather, India should signal to China that it could now equal the latter’s strategic capability but *chooses* instead to focus on economic cooperation while continuing to compete with China in securing

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its economic and national interests (such as energy security) through peaceful means. The “compengagement” policy strategy would serve the double purpose of alleviating China’s fears of containment (thereby significantly weakening the China-Pakistan relationship directed against India) while at the same time strengthening India’s strategic position in the Asia-Pacific. This would also result in a better bargaining position for India in future diplomatic talks with China.

US would also benefit from the compengagement strategy pursued by India, as it would result in more arms sales to India, lesser threat perception from China, and greater stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Future stability in Sino-Indian relations would also depend on whether China intends to be a status-quo or revisionist state. This essay tends to believe in the former. China is obviously not looking at world dominance, at least not until it addresses pressing domestic issues such as the income inequality. Thus, the US can be confident that China would not want to usurp its status, at least in the near future. India can be a valuable and mutually beneficial economic partner, with yet-untapped natural resources that it can export to fuel Chinese economy and having a huge market with purchasing power for Chinese manufactured goods. However, it is to be noted here that compengagement should also be supported by increased diplomatic interactions between India and China. India should also be wary that too much competitiveness (e.g. extreme build-up of arms sourced from the US) supported by little constructive engagement would definitely destabilize the Sino-Indian relationship.

## Conclusion: The Elephant in the Region

This paper concludes that the US strategic pivot toward India need not necessarily destabilize Sino-Indian relations. India should use the newfound US interest in pursuing a strong bilateral strategic partnership to refine and upgrade its defense systems and military strategies while simultaneously pursuing a policy of compengagement with China, as outlined in the earlier section. Therefore, the onus is on India to: (1) strengthen its strategic position *vis-à-vis* China while intensifying high-level diplomatic interactions; (2) resist US attempts in jointly pursuing a containment policy against China and continue to pursue an autonomous foreign policy that places India’s interests first; and (3) continue to pursue mutually beneficial economic interactions with both US and China. If China perceives India as overtly leaning toward the US in the future, this might exacerbate Chinese fears of ganging up by US and India to prevent its rise. Meanwhile, China should come to terms with the fact that the US-India relationship is here to stay. The main tussle India would face in the future is increased US pressure to contain China in the Indian Ocean Region. India should resist US charm (which it has abundant past experience in doing) and recalibrate its autonomous foreign policy toward achieving greater efficiency in furthering its national interests. The first step to do so is to try and reduce the huge trade deficits that it runs up with China. A stronger India, a more secure China, and a confident US would be the best bet to ensure that Sino-Indian and Indo-US relations continue to progress from strength to strength and lead to overall peace and stability in the region.

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[2] Vivek Bharati “China’s Economic Resurgence and ‘Flexible’ Coalitions”. Chapter 3 in *Power Realignments in Asia: China, India and the United States* (eds.), Alyssa Ayres and C. Rajamohan (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), pp. 42-70.

[3] The 2013 trade deficit was estimated to be \$39 billion in 2012-2013, a \$2 billion increase from the previous year. See <http://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/widening-trade-deficit-with-china-not-sustainable/article5160816.ece>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

[4] Ashley Tellis “India as a Global Power: An Action Agenda for the US.” Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Tellis.India.Global.Power.FINAL.pdf>. Accessed 2 February 2014.

[5] John Mearsheimer “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History*, Vol. 105 (2006), p. 690.

[6] Iskander Rehman “Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India’s Counter-Containment of China in Asia,” *Asian Security*, Vol. No. 2 (2009) pp. 114-143

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- [15] See [www.ndtv.com/article/india/border-defence-cooperation-agreement-between-india-and-china-full-text-435998](http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/border-defence-cooperation-agreement-between-india-and-china-full-text-435998). Accessed 7 February 2014.
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