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Re-Balancing of India-US Equation

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Abstract

United States Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to New Delhi and India's diplomatic activism in June 2012 have given rise to some clear signs of a possible re-balancing of India-US equation in the military and political domains. The paper tracks these signs and draws attention to a fine diplomatic nuance. India and China are still engaged in *defence and strategic dialogue* while New Delhi and Washington are raising the possibility of military and strategic cooperation. Both India and the US are, nonetheless, seeking to hedge against China – without challenging it – in the present state of flux in global affairs.

Introduction: A US Strategic Tilt

The overarching trend-line in the flurry of India's diplomacy in June 2012 signifies the beginning of a new and uncharted process. Conspicuous are the signs that India and the United States (US) are seeking to re-balance their equation in the military and political domains. Equally noticeable is the current fact that the new US tilt towards India is not explicitly directed against China. India, too, is signalling that its rising comfort-level in the company of the US is not part of any grand global-strategy aimed at containment of China.

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As of June 2012, both India and the US are, at best, trying to hedge against the possibility that China may rise above the extraordinary state of flux in global affairs and may even reach the top of the world-order. Such a hedging against China is evident from the public diplomacy of the relevant countries at play. Moreover, there is no discernible action behind the scenes to indicate a coordinated US-India move against China. Indeed, the current international context militates against a potential anti-China move by two or more countries.

The context, favourable to China, consists of the vagaries of US presidential poll process, persistent signs of political and economic stasis in India, the Euro-zone crisis, and the finessing of an imminent but settled leadership change in China itself. Viewed in this panoramic setting, the India-US diplomatic concert in June 2012 has brought into sharp focus the compulsions of the two countries to hedge against China without challenging it.

Speaking at the Singapore Shangri-La Dialogue, organised by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) on 2 June 2012, India's Defence Minister A K Antony said: "Regarding whether China is a threat to India or not, I don't think it's a relevant issue. The Chinese' growing military expenditure is a matter of concern to us. At the same time, even though we don't believe in arms race, since China is increasing their capabilities and spending more on defence, in our own way, to protect our national interest, we are also strengthening our capabilities in our borders. At the same time, even though we have our still-unresolved border disputes between India and China, we [believe] both India and China has an interest in maintaining peace and stability in not only Asia [but] beyond Asia [as well]".²

Taking note of the present and future scenarios, Antony said: "Both India and China has an interest in maintaining peace and stability. That's why, of late, we have started establishing a contact [at] our military-to-military [level]. With the Indian Navy also, now we have started [cooperation with] Chinese Navy. At the moment, it exists mainly in the area of anti-piracy. [It's] a beginning. In the area of anti-piracy, we are sharing information. And in coming years, wherever possible, in the area of anti-piracy and also maintaining maritime security, we'll try to have close relations with China. It's only a beginning. It has to evolve in the coming years. But between India and China, [at the] military-to-military [level] also, of late, we have started dialogue, joint exercises and relations".³

² Transcript of the actual recording of Mr Antony's answers to questions at Shangri-La Dialogue 2012 on 2 June 2012.

³ <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2012/speeches/second-plenary-session/qa/>

India's Confidence in US Overture

Three aspects of India's long-term perspective on China, as currently outlined by Antony, stand out. One, New Delhi's concern today over Beijing's rising military expenditure does not necessarily translate into an immediate or imminent threat to India's security. A political nuance to be noted here is that Antony voiced India's concern over China's "growing military expenditure" and not over Beijing's "exponential military growth". It has been inaccurately recorded in some quarters that Antony was concerned over China's "exponential military growth". He did not utter these politically loaded words at all during his interventions at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2012. So, the nuanced meaning of his actual observations is that India is not as much concerned over China's growing military capabilities as over its greater defence spending. Some observers may in a hurry see this subtle distinction as meaningless.

In this writer's way of thinking, a truly new insight is that New Delhi feels confident about its own rising military capabilities in the emerging context of US overtures towards India in the defence domain. *The US overtures may help add value to India's indigenous efforts at scaling up its own military capabilities. Such a line of thought can be inferred from the substance of US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to New Delhi on 5 and 6 June 2012.*

The second aspect of Antony's observations at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2012 is, in effect, a political argument. As outlined by him, India's current perception of China is shaped by, among other factors, the empirical evidence that both these countries seek peace and stability in Asia as also beyond this continent. Peace and stability of this order are easily portrayed as pre-requisites for the continued economic growth of not only China but also India.

The third but not the least aspect of Antony's profiling of India is that both New Delhi and Beijing are indeed making "a beginning" in military-to-military cooperation for the anti-piracy and maritime security purposes. An implicit message in this profiling is that India and China, as of now, are not on a collision course in the military domain.

In a significant sense, Antony's overall argument about India's current military posture in regard to China has been amply supported by Panetta, in some detail, during his recent visit to New Delhi. On the evidence, discernible behind the scenes at the present moment, that the US and India are not seeking to confront China, Panetta, speaking at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi, said: "As the United States and India deepen our defence partnership with each other, both of us will also seek to strengthen our relations with China.

[Because] We recognise that China has a critical role to play [in] advancing security and prosperity in this [Asia-Pacific] region”.⁴

Panetta’s political narrative about China’s potential role in advancing Asia-Pacific security reinforces Antony’s arguments that both India and China are in search of peace and stability in Asia and beyond. More relevant to the wider international community, though, is Panetta’s virtual confirmation of Antony’s primary argument that India does not (or rather, need not) see China as an immediate or imminent military threat.

US Stake in India’s Capabilities

Panetta’s virtual confirmation of Antony’s primary argument is evident from the reality of America’s stake in enhancing New Delhi’s military capabilities. Panetta told IDSA on 6 June 2012 that “defence cooperation with India is a linchpin in this [US] strategy ... of ... rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific region”. The punch-line followed. Panetta said: *“I want to stress that the United States is firmly committed to providing the best defence technology possible to India. We are both leaders in technology development, and we can do incredible work together. Indeed, I think, a close partnership with America will be [the] key to meeting India’s own stated aims of a modern and effective defence force”*.⁵

At the same time, Panetta did not miss the counter-reality which he portrayed as the challenge of helping India raise its military profile. “In terms of regional security, our [US] vision is a peaceful Indian Ocean region supported by growing Indian capabilities. But the fundamental challenge here is to develop India’s capabilities so that it can respond to security challenges in this region”. On a more optimistic note, however, Panetta acknowledged that “at a strategic level, we [the US and India] have worked together to counter piracy, to counter terrorism”. Expanding the theme, Panetta said: “Now, we should join forces to tackle new and even more complex threats. We can do more to drive the creation of a rules-based [international] order that protects our common interests in new areas like cyber-security and [outer] space”.⁶

China’s quantum leaps in the scientific and experimental exploration of outer space can be viewed by the US or India through the telescopic lens of military theory and practice. Both India and China, unlike the US, have repeatedly called for the non-militarisation of space. However, the Pentagon chief’s reference to the possibility of cooperation with India in the domains of

⁴ <http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/...> Accessed on 9 June 2012

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

cyber-security and space cannot be devoid of the potential military dimension of outer space. A fact that both the US and India are acutely aware of is China's demonstrated success in using an anti-satellite weapon to destroy an object in space.

In this broad-spectrum context of America's stated political will to enhance New Delhi's military capabilities, questions have arisen in some quarters about the US-India aims towards not only China but also Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Speculation is rife about Washington wanting New Delhi to play a military role in the post-2014 or perhaps, a 'post-American Afghanistan', a possible political label for that country after the promised withdrawal of US troops from there by the end of 2014. But such speculation has already been scotched, for now at least, by Panetta himself during the course of his speech and question-answer session at IDSA in New Delhi in early June 2012.

Panetta categorically said: "What I asked of the leaders here [India's leadership] is that they continue to provide the training that they are providing now. My understanding is that the training [of Afghan military personnel] takes place here in India for those that are brought here. What I urged [the Indian leaders] is that they continue to do that, if possible expand that training in order to improve the efficiency of the Afghan Army. There was nothing said about [India] doing anything in terms of additional military efforts in Afghanistan itself".⁷

The Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan, held on 28 June 2012, reinforces the Pentagon narrative that India has not been asked to take any military initiative inside 'a post-American (post-2014?) Afghanistan; India is generally seen to be averse to getting involved militarily in Afghanistan in the present and prospective scenarios there.

On Pakistan as a factor in the US-India relations of the future, Panetta said: "Just as India views the relationship with Pakistan as complicated, so do we [Americans]. And it is. It's a complicated relationship, oftentimes frustrating, oftentimes difficult. But at the same time, it is a necessary relationship. ... They [Pakistanis] also happen to be a nuclear power, and it's extremely important that we [Americans] maintain the [necessary] relationship with them".⁸

Nothing patently new has been disclosed about Pakistan as a factor in the India-US equation into the future. So, Washington's "necessary relationship" with Islamabad is to be seen against America's "indispensable partnership" with India, a catch-phrase US President Barack Obama had uttered with due deliberation in New Delhi in 2010.

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

Hillary-Krishna Meet

Some aspects of an “indispensable partnership” were evident during India’s External Affairs Minister S M Krishna’s talks with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington on 13 June 2012. Speaking of “something new”, Hillary Clinton said: “The strategic fundamentals of our [US-India] relationship are pushing our two countries’ interests into closer convergence. By strategic fundamentals, I mean not just our shared democratic values but also our economic imperatives and our diplomatic and security priorities. ... What does this mean for our partnership? Well, today there is less need for dramatic breakthroughs that marked earlier phases in our relationship, but more need for steady, focussed cooperation aimed at working through our differences and advancing the interests and values we share. This kind of daily, weekly, monthly collaboration may not always be glamorous, but it is strategically significant”.⁹

True to this non-glamorous punch-line that overshadowed the terminology about the sound US-India “strategic fundamentals”, no major announcements were made. But, the Hillary-Krishna meeting itself was preceded by tangible progress towards the implementation of the US-India civil nuclear pact. Such progress, too, is reflective of some momentum towards the re-balancing of India-US ties in the civil domain.

This was duly taken note of by Krishna in Washington on 13 June 2012. He said the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd and America’s Westinghouse “should put at rest ... some of the confusion” that clouded the US-India civil nuclear pact until recently. “Nuclear commerce is now beginning to expand”,¹⁰ Krishna emphasised.

The re-balancing of India-US equation in both the civil and military domains should also be viewed in the light of New Delhi’s diplomatic activism towards China and in the wider Group of Twenty (G20) forum in June 2012. To maintain the continuity of cordial contacts with China, Krishna represented India at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Beijing on 7 June 2012. India has Observer status in the SCO, in which China and Russia are the lead-players.

India-China Dialogue

On a different diplomatic track, India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao at the time of the G20 Summit at Rio de Janeiro on 21 June 2012. After

⁹ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/06/192269.htm> Accessed on 23 June 2012

¹⁰ *ibid*

the meeting, India's Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai said the two Prime Ministers saw as "a very positive step" the first-ever round of talks held recently under the banner of the new Working Mechanism on border affairs. The panel was in fact constituted at Wen's initiative. Mathai also quoted the two Prime Ministers as saying that the Defence and Strategic Dialogue between India and China should be continued at the present level and stepped up.¹¹

Evident from the latest India-China interactions at the highest political levels is the fact that *New Delhi and Beijing are still at the stage of engaging each other in defence and strategic dialogue. In significant contrast, India and the US have indicated that they are beginning to engage each other at the far higher plane of defence and strategic cooperation.*

In this evolving context, the inevitable China factor in New Delhi's global diplomacy will have an impact on the current signs of a new re-balancing of India's equation with Washington in the military and political fields. New Delhi will need to do a fine balancing act in its interactions with China and other major powers in order to get the new re-balancing of the India-US equation right. China will take note of India's moves.

Worth noting is the analysis by scholars like Jonathan Holslag. In his 2010 book, *China and India Prospects for Peace*, Holslag has noted that "the [civil] nuclear deal between India and the United States is widely perceived in Beijing as a stepping stone to future rallying against China".¹² This may, in his view, impel China to "lay more emphasis on military deterrence and diplomatic counter-balancing" with reference to India.

Significantly, New Delhi and Washington have now dropped signs of re-balancing their equation in the military and political domains after beginning to place the US-India civil nuclear pact on a course of practical action. This aspect will surely be noticed by the other major powers.

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¹¹ <http://www.mea.gov.in> Press Briefings June 21, 2012

¹² Jonathan Holslag, *China and India Prospects for Peace*, p 171, Columbia University Press/New York, 2010