

China worried over US-India military cooperation

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D S Rajan, director, Chennai Centre for China Studies, analyses the Chinese reaction over closer India-US political and military ties.

A signed Chinese language article in the Chinese Communist Party's theoretical organ, Qiu Shi (September 14), entitled 'The strengthening of US-India military cooperation will change the strategic situation in South Asia', is noteworthy for its assessment of the situation arising out of the US-India agreements on expanding cooperation in the fields of military, space and civil nuclear power generation, reached in New Delhi [Images] during US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's [Images] visit (July 19-21).

The article by Chinese analyst Li Qiulin has stated that although the agreements did not mean the birth of an 'alliance' between the two nations, it is clear that both will seek long-term cooperation in military and political spheres.

Noting that India's military had been dependent on Russian arms and later on Israel, it has pointed out that the US has now become the most important source for India's military procurement and that mechanisms to manage the same are gradually emerging.

Highlighting in this connection the involvement of the US Boeing company in India, it has revealed that in the first half of 2009, Washington allowed it to sell to India eight Boeing P-8I long-range maritime surveillance and anti-submarine patrol aircraft for \$2.1 billion (about Rs 10,500 crore) — cost-wise the biggest US military sale to India.

Feeling that the agreements would also lead to more US-India joint military exercises in future, the article has stated that in 2007, during the 'Malabar' exercise, India adopted NATO's operational procedures and that the US permitted the Indian Navy access to its satellite system centre.

Viewing that not only commercial interests, but also those relating to military and politics, would influence arms trade both now and in future, it has argued that the US, enjoying a superior and leading position, will exploit military cooperation for roping in India for the purpose of realising its global and regional strategic objectives.

The US will draw India into its strategic orbit and use it for 'restricting' third countries. Noting that India had a robust economic growth in recent years and has emerged as a new and important rising power in Asia, the analysis has alleged that the US is increasingly focusing on India's big power status and geo-political role and considering the latter a 'strategic partner for changing the Asian power balance'.

Touching on India's military modernisation programme, the article has found that the same

is being intensified and the country's expenditure towards arms imports is continuously increasing.

In 2007, India's arms purchase was worth \$10.5 billion (about 52,500 crore), 44% of the nation's defence budget. In the next 20 years, India will become one of the biggest arms importers in the world, it has added.

As the Qiu Shi article sees it, the US hopes are for India's playing a partnership role in the regional and international security arena. As Washington realises that it can no longer rely on its own strength to guide the world order, it has come to depend on the strengths of its allies and partners like India.

The US seeks to utilise India's bases, ports and military training facilities for facilitating its activities in Middle East and other regions. Also, through having military cooperation with India, the US will be in a position to master the technology relating to Russian-made weapons and develop remedies to deal with it.

Turning to India, the article has said that New Delhi wants to introduce US advanced military technology to its military and diversify arms supply sources. In this regard, it has mentioned that a beginning to the replacement of Russian equipment by American equipment is already taking place.

Another Indian aim is to use US support for its attaining big power status and maintaining hegemony over the Indian Ocean and South Asia. It has further mentioned that US-India cooperation can lead to their 'unified strategy' on all major regional issues, which can change the strategic situation in South Asia.

Analysis

The fact that the party's top theoretical mouthpiece has found the article suitable for its publication is itself significant, notwithstanding the disclaimer given that the opinions do not reflect Qiu Shi's views and are those of the writer.

The following are important to note:

#The Qiu Shi article has mostly concentrated its attack on the US, accusing it of using India to restrict 'third countries'. The People's Republic of China was not specifically named, but the term 'third countries' may allude to China also.

There has been no direct criticism of New Delhi in the write-up, indicating a cautious line towards India. A careful reader could however discern the underlying deep Chinese suspicions in the analysis over India's attitude vis-a-vis China.

In 2007-08, the topic of US-India collusion as part of Washington's regional strategy, had prominently figured in Chinese media comments, particularly targetted against the 'Alliance of Democracies' concept, the India-US-Japan joint military exercise and the India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement.

After some lull, the theme appears to be surfacing again now, for example following the article in question, a People's Daily signed analysis (September 15) has charged that 'the US is tipping the balance between China and India, wooing India away from Russia [Images]

and China and feeding India's ambition to match China force for force by its ever burgeoning arms sales to India'. More such comments may follow.

A probable explanation to the Chinese media's harping again on the topic can be that despite a visible improvement in China's ties with the US and India in a contemporary sense, fears in strategic terms, to be more precise on containment of China by the US with the help of allies like Japan [Images] and a partner like India, seems to continue unabated in China.

The same appears to be getting reflected in some of the current media comments in China.

Chinese media pronouncements can be understood better, if a close look is given at China's relations with the US as well as India in the framework of two contexts — contemporary and strategic.

Regarding the first, it can be noticed that the character of Washington-Beijing [Images] ties has undoubtedly changed now especially due to the former's financial dependence on China, brought out by the global crisis; symbolising the same are activation of mechanisms like bilateral strategic and economic dialogues and a softening of US posture towards China on key irritants, for example the US now considers that issues like the economy and climate change will take precedence over points of friction like human rights and Tibet [Images] (US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Beijing, February).

On its part, China is making suitable responses, for example it has expressed its willingness 'to work with the United States from a strategic and long-term perspective, to enhance dialogue and exchanges, build up mutual trust and cooperation, respect and accommodate each other's core interests and properly handle differences and sensitive issues' (Hu Jintao-Obama talks, London [Images], April 1).

Positive changes have occurred in Sino-Indian relations also; the two nations are now looking at the same beyond the border dispute, recognising the global character of their ties and witnessing a big momentum in economic and trade links.

On the other hand, the corresponding picture from a strategic point of view remains complex and less promising. China continues to be wary of US intentions in the Asia-Pacific region including in South Asia; demonstrating the same are the authoritative Chinese statements, for example, Beijing's latest Defence White Paper has described the 'increasing US military presence in Asia-Pacific' as China's 'security concern'.

On emerging US-India ties, Beijing may have been irked by the assertion made by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates at a conclave in Singapore that there is a genuine convergence of US-India interests and that his country would look towards India as a partner for providing security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

The Qiu Shi article appears to be more categorical than other Chinese media comments in conveying a message: The US-India 'unified strategy' on all major regional issues is possible and that may change the strategic situation in South Asia. This shifts the focus on indications to China's possible counter moves in the future.

Mention of India's ambition to maintain its hegemony over the Indian Ocean and South Asia no doubt has precedence. However, the fact that the party journal has carried the same necessitates an examination of it from the point of view of policy perspectives emerging in China to deal with such ambition.

Overall, Chinese media comments had been saying that India as a sovereign nation with a nationalistic population, will not succumb to American pressures on it to join the US camp against China and instead will continue its friendship with China; but such views do not find a place in the write-up of the party organ. Is it an inadvertent omission or indications of China's doubts on this account?

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