

AfPak War and geo-political tensions cast long shadow over Indo-US summit

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The Obama administration's plans to expand the AfPak war and mounting world geo-political tensions—tensions between India and Pakistan, India and China, the US and India, and, last but not least, the US and China—cast a very long shadow over Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's four day visit to the US this week.

The head of India's Congress Party-led coalition government, Singh was the first foreign head of government since Barack Obama became US President to be accorded an official state visit with all the requisite trappings. On Tuesday evening Obama hosted a lavish state dinner in heated tents set up on the White House lawn. The 300 guests included top Obama administration officials, leading Democratic and Republican politicians, business leaders, Hollywood celebrities, and prominent Indo-Americans.

The pomp and ceremony were in part an attempt to placate an Indian government and elite that fear Washington under Obama has significantly downgraded Indo-US ties.

With a view to countering a rising China, George W. Bush's Republican administration forged a "global strategic partnership" with India and declared the US ready to help India become a "world power." As proof, the Bush administration negotiated a unique exemption for India from the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows India to trade for civilian nuclear technology and fuel, although it developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Since assuming office last January the Obama administration has focused, however, not on the Indo-US partnership, but rather on the US's relations with India's two principal rivals, Pakistan and China.

Pakistan's support is crucial for the US war to subjugate Afghanistan. As part of its attempt to bully and bribe Islamabad into suppressing any support for the Afghan insurgency in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking borderlands, Washington has increased both economic and military aid to Islamabad.

As for China, whose treasury bill purchases finance the US's spiraling national debt, the Obama administration has had to solicit its support in seeking to deal with the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Repeatedly the Indian establishment has expressed concerns and fears that in its rush to please Islamabad and Beijing the Obama administration is giving India's interests short shrift.

A passage in the report that the US's Afghan commander, General Stanley McChrystal, submitted to Obama at the end of August in which he

observed that the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan could "exacerbate regional tensions" and encourage "countermeasures" by Pakistan was much commented on in the Indian press.

Obama's trip to East Asia earlier this month served to crystallize the view in Indian political and geo-strategic circles that Washington has forsaken New Delhi.

First, in a major speech in Japan on the US's view of the evolution of the geo-political order in Asia, Obama failed to make any mention of India. Then, at the conclusion of his summit with Chinese president Hu Jintao, the US president signed on to a communiqué that suggested Beijing has a role to play, along with Washington, in working to "promote peace, stability and development" in South Asia.

India, which fought a brief border war with China in 1962 and resents Beijing's decades' long "all-weather" alliance with Islamabad, would at any time have found such a suggestion objectionable. But, adding insult to injury, it was made at a time when relations between New Delhi and Beijing are fraught with tension. In recent months, India and China have been involved in a series of diplomatic spats, with the Indian press trumpeting charges that Chinese troops have repeatedly crossed into Indian territory.

India's Foreign Ministry quickly issued a statement angrily rejecting any "third party" involvement in Indo-Pakistani relations.

Indian press commentary was uniformly critical if not outright antagonistic to Obama and his administration.

"In the end," declared *Deccan Chronicle* columnist S. Raghotham, "all America can think of is its own national interest. India's interests be damned. Perhaps it is the price India has to pay for letting the Americans decide our security policy in general and our Pakistan policy in particular over the last decade. "And to think that our Prime Minister will be skipping the Winter Session of Parliament to go to meet this man [Obama] who cares two hoots for India's self-respect and security."

In a column entitled "Obama just doesn't get it," B. Raman a former government and intelligence official, declared, "At a time when concerns in India over the increasing Chinese strategic presence and influence in India's neighbourhood have been increasing, it is an amazingly shocking act of insensitivity on the part of Obama and his policy advisers to project China as a benign power with a benevolent role in South Asia ..."

Lalit Mansingh, a former Indian ambassador to the US and former foreign secretary told the *New York Times*, Obama's "bowing before the emperor of Japan was an act of courtesy, but his bending over backwards

before the Chinese was an act of appeasement.”

During Singh’s visit this week, Obama and his aides tried to repair the damage by propounding loudly and often on the importance of the US’s relations with India, by championing India’s leading role in Asia, affirming support for India’s involvement in Afghanistan, echoing New Delhi’s demands for Pakistan to suppress anti-Indian insurgents, and matter-of-factly describing India as a nuclear-weapons state.

The joint statement issued by Obama and Singh at the conclusion of their talks Tuesday “reaffirmed the global strategic partnership between India and the United States,” proclaimed it “indispensable for global peace and security,” and urged further expansion of the burgeoning Indo-US military ties, including through joint “security, peacekeeping [and] humanitarian” missions and operations to police the seas.

At a joint press conference Obama said the US “welcomes and encourages India’s leadership role” in shaping Asia and spoke of India playing a leading role in the “Asian-Pacific.” India lies many, many miles to the west of the Pacific and is not a member of the Asian Pacific Economic Forum (APEC). But it certainly aspires to a leading role in East Asia, currently the world’s most dynamic economic region. The US, for its part, is anxious to prevent China and/or Japan creating any East Asian trade bloc from which it is excluded and sees India as an ally in this.

The joint statement issued by Obama and Manmohan Singh also affirmed “a shared interest” in Afghanistan and declared that the US president “appreciated India’s role in reconstruction and rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.”

The Indian prime minister, speaking before the US-India Business Council Monday, declared full support for the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, warning against any “premature exit.” India views the Taliban as little more than Pakistani proxies and is eager to scupper any suggestion that Washington or Kabul try to negotiate or reconcile with any section of the Afghan insurgency.

The joint statement also spoke to another Indian concern. While the US has been unrelenting in its demands that Islamabad strike against elements in Pakistan who are supporting the Taliban insurgency, it has not, to New Delhi’s chagrin, pressed with anything like the same urgency for Islamabad to choke off support from Pakistan for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

“The two leaders,” declared the statement, “agreed that resolute and credible steps must be taken to eliminate safe havens and sanctuaries that provide shelter to terrorists and their activities.”

Earlier this month, Indian home minister P. Chidambaram effectively threatened a cross-border strike on Kashmiri insurgent bases in Pakistan in the event of another major terrorist attack in India. “I have been warning Pakistan,” said Chidambaram, “not to play games with us. The last game should be the [Nov 2008] Mumbai attacks. Stop it there.... If terrorists from Pakistan try to carry out any attacks in India, they will not only be defeated but will be retaliated against.”

As the *Hindu* observed in an editorial, such action by India “could snowball into a conflict that would bring misery to all of the peoples of South Asia.”

While the Obama administration clearly was anxious to reassure Singh that the US wants to deepen economic and military-security ties with

India, many commentators noted that it proved impossible at the summit to announce the successful conclusion of longstanding negotiations on agreements to “operationalize” the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord and allow for sales of advanced US military equipment.

Singh dismissed the significance of the failure to finalize the nuclear deal, saying it was only a matter of dotting “i’s and crossing “t’s.” But it is well known that the Obama’s administration’s calls for India to sign on to the Comprehensive Ban on Nuclear Tests, lend support for a treaty outlawing the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons, and accept aggressive international inspections of its civilian nuclear sites are vehemently opposed by India’s geo-political and military establishments, which view them as unacceptable impediments to the development of India’s nuclear weapons program. (Confident of its vast nuclear superiority, the US favors such measures as a means of safeguarding its nuclear advantage and providing a legal and “progressive” disarmament political cover for its campaign against Iran.)

New Delhi and Washington are also at odds on a host of other issues, including the economic burdens and costs of limiting climate change and the stalled Doha trade negotiations.

In the run-up to Singh’s visit, several former members of the Bush administration urged Obama to revitalize the Indo-US partnership, arguing that it is critical to any US effort to contain and, if necessary staunch, China’s ambitions. Writing in the *Boston Globe*, Nicolas Burns, one of the architects of the Indo-US nuclear accord, declared, “[A]s America looks to a future where China’s growing power will be a central challenge, building this new US-India partnership is fundamental to all we seek to accomplish in Asia. Stronger Indian political and military bonds with the United States, Japan and Australia are the best way to ensure these democratic powers can balance and limit the potentially dangerous aspects of China’s rise in the decades ahead.”

Singh, for his part, spoke about India’s frictions with China both publicly and privately in his meeting with Obama. “In remarks before the Council on Foreign Relations on Monday night,” reported the *Washington Post*, “Singh took a few not-so-subtle swipes at China that sent titters through the crowd. He noted ‘a certain amount of assertiveness on the part of the Chinese over longtime border disputes between the two countries and said that although China’s development has been faster than India’s, ‘I’ve always believed that there are other values which are [more] important than the growth of the gross domestic product.’”

Singh claimed not to “fully understand the reasons” for China’s “greater assertiveness.” In fact they are very much bound up with India’s burgeoning ties with the US. For obvious reasons, Beijing is much less apprehensive about pushing back against India, than it is against Washington.

One further point needs to be made. As the previously quoted Indian commentary demonstrates, the Indian establishment has done at least as much as Beijing to ratchet up tensions. India’s geo-political and military establishments are angered by China’s growing economic and political influence in South Asia—in what they view to be by right India’s region of dominance—and Indian business is riled by the success Chinese-based companies have enjoyed in penetrating the Indian domestic market.

On Tuesday, just hours before Singh met Obama, Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, made a speech in which he said that “no one in Pakistan should see” the attention lavished on India’s prime minister “as a diminution of the importance we attach to

them.”

The reality is that Pakistan is angered and agitated that Washington is consulting with India on its plans for the AfPak war, while largely leaving Islamabad in the dark and, more fundamentally, pursuing a strategic partnership with India that can only be to its disadvantage.

Indeed as Singh and Obama met in Washington, Indo-Pakistani tensions were on a boil.

This week, India’s Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor charged that Pakistan is poised to send 2,500 militants into Kashmir before winter sets in, adding that “a limited war under a nuclear overhang is still very much a reality at least in the Indian sub-continent.” Pakistan’s Foreign Office responded by charging that India was actively preparing for a limited war against Pakistan and Pakistani prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said Islamabad would soon present evidence showing that India has been supporting insurgents in Pakistani Balochistan and using Afghanistan to do so.

US imperialism’s ever-growing thrust into South and Central Asia—in an effort to secure control over the oil resources of Central Asia and contain China—is sowing the seeds of even more ruinous conflagrations.



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