Obama continues Washington's aggressive courting of India

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US President Barack Obama begins a three day visit to India today, kicking off a ten day, four nation Asian tour. In addition to India, Obama will visit Indonesia, then South Korea, where he will attend the G-20 heads of government meeting, and finally Japan.

The key US strategic objective that underlies the trip—containing a rising China—is exemplified by the US press' and Obama administration's dubbing of the quartet of countries that the president will visit as Asia's leading "democracies."

"It's not a coincidence necessarily that we're going to four Asian democracies on this trip," Ben Rhodes, who serves on Obama's National Security Council, told reporters Thursday. "We want to underscore the success of democracy in Asia and around the world and we're going to speak specifically to human rights and democracy-related issues … at every stop."

Stretching back to the US's annexation of the Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War, Washington and Wall Street have used rhetoric about democracy as a cover for the ruthless pursuit of their imperialist interests in Asia. Today the US political and military-strategic establishments routinely refer to the US and India as "natural allies" because of their shared "democratic valves." But during much of the Cold War, the two states were estranged, as the US partnered with New Delhi's arch-rival Pakistan, arming and sustaining a succession of rightwing military dictatorships in Islamabad.

What the US and Indian ruling elites do share is apprehension about China's rapidly expanding economic power and geo-political reach.

Obama's Asian tour comes on the heels of a 13-nation Asian tour by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which she asserted US dominance in the region and demonstratively inserted the US into longstanding border disputes between China and other East Asian states over islands in the South China and East China Seas, lining up behind Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines against Beijing.

Washington has been aggressively courting India since Bill Clinton went to India in 2000, the first visit by a sitting US president to India in more than two decades. Under George W. Bush, the US proclaimed a "global, strategic partnership" with India and to demonstrate Washington's readiness to help India become a world power led a successful campaign for the lifting of a more than three decade-old international embargo on civilian nuclear trade with India. Thanks to Washington, India now enjoys a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime as a state that developed nuclear weapons in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but is allowed to trade in nuclear fuel and civilian nuclear technology.

The US has repeatedly voiced support for India's ambitions to become a major force in the Indian Ocean and in recent years the US military has reportedly staged more bilateral exercises with India's armed forces than any other country's. A key US objective is to transform India into a major purchaser of US weapons systems, on the calculation that this will not only facilitate joint military operations, but much more importantly bind New Delhi closer to Washington.

In the run-up to Obama's India visit, several of those who led the Bush administration's push to make an Indo-US partnership a pivot of the US's world strategy urged the current administration to do more to secure India's allegiance to Washington, including supporting India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and giving India rights akin to those of the five "recognized" nuclear-weapons states.

"India's rise to global power is … in America's strategic interest … ensuring a stable Asian and global balance or power," declared a report written by Richard Armitage, Nicholas Burns and Richard Fontaine and published last month by CNAS—The Centre for a New American Security.

Obama, at his press conference Wednesday, emphasized the importance of the Indo-US relationship, declaring "India's rise to be in the best interests of both countries, of the region and the world."

"I welcome and support India's rise as a global power," affirmed Obama. Later he added, "My vision is a partnership in which [India and the US] work together to shape a more secure, stable, and just world."

The US President, however, made other comments at his post-election press conference that immediately raised hackles in India.

He refused to commit the US to supporting India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and termed the removal of "dual-use" curbs on certain US high-technology goods "very difficult and complicated." Much more significantly, Obama indicated that he intends to ratchet up pressure on India to remove its few remaining barriers to US exports and to make large purchases of US military equipment.

He said the "whole focus" for planning for his trip "is on how we are going to open up markets so that American businesses can prosper, and we can sell more goods and create more jobs here in the United States."

The Indian elite is angered and petrified by US efforts to export its crisis through protectionist measures, including threats to limit IT and business-processing outsourcing, and by driving down the value of the US dollar. "Even the heads of major Indian corporations who had long been strong boosters of a robust Indo-US relationship are now openly asking if the United States remains genuinely committed to free trade or if it merely mouths the principle as a slogan of convenience," reports Sumit Ganguly, a US-based academic who has long promoted closer ties between Washington and New Delhi.

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India's ruling elite has been resisting Washington's increasingly aggressive campaign for access to the country's agricultural sector—which was one of the factors in the stalling of the Doha trade liberalization talks—because it fears the impact of a flood of US agribusiness exports under conditions where a majority of the Indian population continues to eke out a meager living from agriculture. But under US pressure, India's government has signaled that it is ready to open the doors to multi-brand retailers like Wal-Mart.

Under the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government, India has sought to leverage Washington's push for a "global strategic partnership," while pursuing closer relations with Russia, Japan, the European Union and, last but not least, China itself.

Last week after meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of a conference in Hanoi and inviting him to visit India before the year is out, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh repeated his oft-stated claim that there is enough space for India and China to rise simultaneously. However, he also told Wen that India expects China to be sensitive to its "core issues."

While Indian officials refused to spell out what are India's "core issues," this has been widely interpreted to be at least in part a reference to India's claim to the disputed Kashmir region.

New Delhi recently suspended high-level military exchanges with China after Beijing refused to allow India's Northern Area Commander, whose responsibilities include suppressing the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir, to visit China. India has also protested China's recent decision to issue visas for those from Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir traveling to China on a separate piece of paper rather than in their Indian passports. India has asserted that these actions suggest that China is challenging India's claim to Kashmir. China denies this, saying that its position remains that the Kashmir question must be resolved through bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan.

Even while bilateral trade between India and China has mushroomed, there have been repeated diplomatic spats and mutual accusations of aggression between Delhi and Beijing in recent years. India has accused China of staging an eleventh-hour attempt to scuttle the agreement under which the international embargo on civilian nuclear trade with India was lifted and of building up its military capabilities on the two countries' disputed border. In January, the outgoing head of India's armed forced boasted that his country is strong enough to fight a two-front war, i.e. to simultaneously defeat China and Pakistan.

The Indian press has been full of alarmed and frequently alarmist reports about China's rapidly expanding influence in South Asia, including its development of a series of Indian Ocean ports, dubbed the "string of pearls."

Seeking to exploit and fan Indian fears of China, Washington has been pressing for the creation of a security alliance uniting the US, Japan, Australia and India.

New Delhi has refused to commit to such an alliance, knowing full well that India's participation would be viewed by Beijing as a major step toward India accepting a subordinate role in a US-led anti-China bloc.

But there are sections of India's military-geo-political establishment that are more and more openly calling on India to cast its lot with the US, believing that this is the quickest and best route for India to realize its ambition to be a world power.

At the same time, in a development that speaks to both India's vulnerability and the extent to which the US is destabilizing geopolitical relations throughout Asia, New Delhi has a host of differences with, and complaints over, US policy.

New Delhi is most anxious over the Obama administration's AfPak War strategy, which has seen the US strengthen its ties with Islamabad—including agreeing last month to give Pakistan's military a further $2.3 billion in military aid—while simultaneously announcing its readiness to negotiate with the Taliban, whom New Delhi views as little more than a proxy for Pakistan's interests.

India's elite is especially angered that Washington has pressured New Delhi to lower tensions with Islamabad, when in India's view Islamabad has done little to satisfy its demand that Pakistan halt support for "anti-Indian terrorism" including in Kashmir. "Do we ask [the Americans] to kiss and make up with Osama bin Laden?" exclaimed one well-known newspaper columnist.

India, which is massively dependent on energy imports, is also upset over US attempts to block it from tapping Iran's energy reserves. New Delhi buckled under US pressure and voted against Iran at crucial International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meetings in 2006-7 as the Indo-US nuclear accord was being finalized. But Iran could yet emerge as a serious point of dispute between Washington and New Delhi, especially if the US moves toward military action against Teheran.

At the very least, such a development would be a defining moment in Indo-US relations.

To please his hosts Obama will begin his India trip in Mumbai and will stay at, and speak from, the Taj Hotel, one of the targets of the November 2008 terrorist attack. India seized on the Mumbai outrage as a means of preemptively pushing back at suggestions from the incoming Obama administration that it might try to get Islamabad to more completely do its bidding in respect to the Afghan War by offering to prod India into negotiating with Pakistan over Kashmir.

Similarly, by having Obama begin his trip in Mumbai, the Indian government calculates it will be able to make Pakistani "terrorism" a major focus of the visit.

But even over this issue there are significant frictions between New Delhi and Washington. Indian authorities are angered that they have not been given ready access to David Headley, a US government agent who reputedly went "rogue" and is now in prison in the US for his active involvement in the Mumbai terrorist attack.

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