

Khobragade affair exposes deep-rooted Indo-US tensions

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A dispute between Washington and New Delhi triggered by the mid-December arrest and intrusive body search of a senior Indian diplomat appears to have reached an uneasy and incomplete resolution with Devyani Khobragade's effective expulsion from the US.

The Indian government reacted to this outcome with a tit-for-tat expulsion of an unnamed US diplomat of comparable rank to Khobragade, who was the deputy consul general at India's New York consulate. India is also refusing to restore the many special privileges it previously granted US diplomatic personnel stationed to India and their families—privileges that were withdrawn to demonstrate Indian displeasure at Khobragade's treatment.

Speaking shortly after Khobragade's return to India, the country's Foreign Minister, Salman Khurshid, repeated Indian complaints over Washington's handling of the affair, saying the US actions had led to a "mini-crisis." He also underlined that New Delhi is far from viewing the matter as settled, declaring, "Immediate concerns have been addressed, but there's a lot more still to do."

The exact US motivations for arresting Khobragade on charges of visa fraud, arising from her alleged failure to pay a maid the US minimum wage, remain unclear. But the arrest was months in the making and American officials ignored and brushed aside Indian attempts to resolve it through diplomatic channels. Instead, they chose to stage a demonstrative arrest of Khobragade on the streets of New York.

The brazen disregard of diplomatic protocol and humiliation of Khobragade, the representative of a government the US claims is a "strategic partner," rattled the Indian elite and became the occasion for the venting of deep-rooted resentments and tensions in Indo-US relations.

As Khurshid's remarks indicate, India remains deeply dissatisfied with both the US treatment of Khobragade

and the official explanations for it. Moreover, in both Indian and American elite circles, there is concern that the row could continue to strain Indo-US ties for months, even years, to come.

The Khobragade affair has caused much anger in India—within the elite, but also the wider public—because it confirms that the US continues to view India as a subordinate, to be bullied and bossed about, despite public professions that the two countries are partners.

The claim that in arresting Khobragade US officials were acting out of a genuine concern for the well-being of a defenseless maid reeks of rank hypocrisy given the numerous cases where US diplomats abroad have abused, underpaid and raped their maids or killed local people only to be protected by Washington.

One of the most notorious cases of criminality by US government officials or employees abroad was that of CIA contractor Raymond Davis, who shot two Pakistani youth to death in cold blood in January 2011. The United States tried to shield Davis by claiming that he was a "diplomat" at the US embassy.

In August 2013 a US diplomat in Kenya, who according to Kenyan police was driving at a high speed, rammed his SUV into a crowded minibus killing a young father of two children. The deceased was the sole-bread winner for his family. The response of the US government was to whisk the diplomat and his family out of Kenya, leaving the victim's pregnant wife and two children without so much as an apology, let alone any financial compensation.

New Delhi and Washington bombastically claim that over the past decade they have forged a global partnership, rooted in "shared values." In reality, the relationship is a predatory alliance based upon asymmetric expectations.

For US imperialism the goal of making Indo-US relations a "defining partnership of the 21st century" has been two-fold. One is to pry open the large Indian market

for unhindered exploitation of Indian workers and the country's economy by American corporations.

The second—even more important goal—has been to harness India to the US's global strategic interests, building it up as a military-strategic counterweight to China. Ultimately, Washington wants to make India the southwestern pillar of a military alliance directed against China and uniting the US, Japan, Australia and India.

The Indian elite has been eager to forge closer ties with the US—including military ties—and viewed the 2008 Indo-US civilian nuclear accord, which effectively recognized India as a nuclear weapons state, as a major step toward long-coveted world-power status. However, even as it leans toward the US, New Delhi has tried to execute a balancing act, maintaining close ties with Moscow and seeking to broaden relations with Beijing.

Washington, however, is determined to leverage each new concession it extracts from India. New Delhi has faced constant pressure from Washington to ever more completely fall into line with American geostrategic interests, including in the Middle East.

The Bush administration bullied India into supporting US efforts to use the nuclear issue to target Iran, although Iran is a significant source of India's oil imports and India's prospective pathway to the energy resources of Central Asia.

India views US aggression in the Middle East as detrimental to its economic interests and regional stability. As a country that was a victim of British colonialism and a target of US wrath during the Cold War because it sought to balance between the USSR and the West, India views the US's assertion of a right to violate national sovereignty at will with apprehension. However, for fear of riling Washington, New Delhi has largely kept its opposition to the US wars for regime change in Libya and Syria to itself.

The Indian elite also remains perpetually nervous about US relations with its arch-rival Pakistan, and about any concession made to Pakistan vis-à-vis limiting Indian influence in Afghanistan. To the Obama administration's chagrin, India has urged Washington to take into account the interests of both India and Iran when hammering out a "Bilateral Security Arrangement" (BSA) with Hamid Karzai's puppet regime in Kabul.

India's reluctance to wholly follow the US's agenda has led to increasing complaints from Washington.

The Obama administration has also expressed great irritation towards the Indian elite for not pursuing "economic reforms" with sufficient vigor. They are

especially miffed because several sectors of the Indian economy, such as banking, retail and insurance, are still not open for untrammelled exploitation by American corporations.

The much anticipated boom in nuclear trade has also not materialized. US firms lay the blame for this on India's "harsh" nuclear liability regime, a regime, in fact, that restricts financial liability in the case of nuclear accidents to only \$230 million.

The revelation by Edward Snowden that India is one of the top targets of NSA spying and that the US spied on the Indian government and diplomatic missions has added further frictions to the US-India "strategic partnership."

These deep-rooted disagreements—disagreements the Indian elite, in particular, has shied away from raising or, at least, pursuing—have fueled the controversy surrounding the Khobragade affair. In recent days, important mouthpieces of the US and Anglo-US elite have voiced alarm that the tensions could undermine Indo-US ties, thereby undermining the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia."

The *New York Times*, in a January 14 editorial headlined "India-America Relations on Edge," defended the claim that in arresting Khobragade US officials had been motivated by concern for protecting "powerless domestic workers." But it went on to argue it would have been "better" had this matter been resolved without resort to criminal charges. "The two governments," continued the *Times*, "are trying to turn the page by resuming high-level meetings. But it will take more than that to achieve the 'global strategic partnership' with India that President Obama has boasted about."

The *Economist* said the spat over Khobragade "has uncovered a deep rift in the two countries' perceptions of one another. From the Indian perspective, America remains unwilling to afford it the respect a true partner deserves. And from the American, the Indian response reveals ... a brittle anxiety about its own status ... Rather than partners, the two countries look like strangers."



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