

Opponent of My Opponent

China flexes its muscles, pegs its currency, and practices mercantilism. Indians want Americans to know that they're not the only ones complaining. By Bruce Stokes

NEW DELHI—Last year, mutual frustration with China's increasingly irascible behavior—coupled with deepening concern about Pakistan—led to a reboot of the Indian-American relationship. Indians, who watched Chinese President Hu Jintao's trip to Washington this week with a special fascination, worry about China's growing presence in and around the Indian Ocean, its territorial intentions along India's northeastern border, and its ties with Islamabad, Pakistan. Most of all, they worry about the competitive threat that Chinese companies pose to India's economic ambitions. Sound familiar?

Indian officials believe that the White House kept relations with India on the back burner for more than a year out of fear that any perception of a U.S. tilt toward New Delhi might jeopardize delicate negotiations with Beijing over Iran and North Korea. But now, Washington and New Delhi are on the same page. Indian officials say that when President Obama visited last November, China figured in nearly every official discussion with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his government. "There are few people in Indian politics who are sanguine about China's rise," said B.J. Panda, a member of the Indian Parliament, who represents the state of Orissa. "A vast majority of Indian politicians are uneasy."

That uneasiness is widely shared. Half of Indians hold an unfavorable opinion of China, up from just 20 percent five years ago, according to the Pew Global Attitudes survey. Although Pakistan remains a neuralgic, existential challenge, it is a threat they believe is manageable. These days, China is what keeps officials here awake at night.

Yet, it's still not yet clear what a common U.S.-India approach to China might look like. New Delhi does not want a formal U.S.-India link modeled on the NATO pact that the West crafted in response to the Soviet threat. Both Indian and American foreign-policy experts are wary of appearing to gang up on Beijing. "India has no interest in being part of a coalition against China," said K.S. Bajpai, chairman of the Delhi Policy Group, a think tank. "But we cannot ignore steps being taken by China that are extremely dangerous to our future."

For that reason, "containment" is out of the official American and Indian lexicons.



Agreement: Obama and Singh see eye to eye over China.

The word of the day is "hedging"—hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. Just how much preparation is the subtext of the strategic dialogue on China that Washington and New Delhi have launched.

Topic No. 1 will be China's assertiveness in its neighborhood. Indians see the Chinese slowly encircling them in South Asia. They complain about China's naval operations in the Indian Ocean (including the building of civilian port facilities in a number of countries) and Beijing's close strategic relationship with Pakistan, citing arms sales to Islamabad and support of its nuclear-energy program. Moreover, Indian diplomats worry that China now supports Pakistan's claim to the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Nevertheless, New Delhi is wary of a direct confrontation with Beijing. It deployed fighter aircraft and two infantry divisions to its Himalayan border area when tensions flared last year, but other responses have been less militaristic. In 2009, India revoked 25,000 Chinese visas. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in December, government leaders declined to reiterate support for Beijing's claim to Taiwan.

In the end, Washington doesn't have many avenues for advancing China-centric cooperation with New Delhi. The United States has already stepped up joint naval exercises in the region. Some Indian diplomats

support Tokyo's proposal for a U.S.-Japan-India defense dialogue, which would certainly get China's attention. President George W. Bush inked a landmark civilian nuclear agreement with India, and Obama is the first American president to support a permanent seat for India on the U.N. Security Council. Washington has to be wary, however, of alienating Islamabad, whose support America needs for the Afghan war. For its part, New Delhi has refused to join Washington in pressuring Beijing to appreciate its currency.

Given India's growing assertiveness on trade, Washington and New Delhi may be able to coordinate action against the Chinese, taking joint cases to the World Trade Organization, for example. India has already filed a slew of domestic antidumping cases against Chinese imports. And it recently kept a Chinese firm from competing for a road-building contract by demanding, at the last minute, a Hindi translation of its bid. "We are telling China we can play dirty games with you," said Prमित Pal Chaudhuri, foreign editor of the *Hindustan Times*.

"India and the United States have a common interest in making sure that the rise of China is peaceful," said Joseph Nye, a professor at Harvard University and the author of the forthcoming book *The Future of Power*. But they also share a common interest in hampering China's rise.