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A Tale of Two Visits: The India-US-China Relationship

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Abstract

In November 2009, United States' President Barack Obama visited China, and Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh went on a state visit to the United States (US). Many in India closely followed President Obama's visit to Beijing, while Dr Singh's trip to Washington was intimately charted in China. Presently, there are three significant issue areas in this triangular relationship that resonate deeply in both New Delhi and Beijing. These are: (1) carbon emission caps; (2) Afghanistan-Pakistan; and (3) the India-US civilian nuclear deal and global non-proliferation regimes.

Introduction

The month of November 2009 witnessed President Barack Obama working to further develop US' bilateral relationship with two of Asia's 'giants' – China and India. In mid-November, President Obama was in Beijing for his first state visit to China and shortly after, he hosted Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in Washington for a state visit - the first state visit hosted by the Obama presidency. Although technically both visits concentrated largely on bilateral issues and concerns, it was difficult to ignore the wider implications of both bilateral interactions on the growing trilateral relationship between India, the US and China. It is not surprising therefore, many in India closely followed President Obama's visit to Beijing, while Dr Singh's trip to Washington was intimately charted in China. Presently, there are three significant issue areas in this triangular relationship that resonate deeply in both New Delhi and Beijing. These are: (1) carbon emission caps in the context of global climate change negotiations; (2) the Afghanistan-Pakistan concerns of the Obama administration; and (3) the India-US civilian nuclear deal and non-proliferation regimes.

Carbon Emission Caps and Climate Change

A dramatic turn emerged in discussions on climate change during President Obama's visit to Beijing. Before his arrival in Beijing, President Obama downplayed expectations that the Copenhagen summit in December 2009 would yield a definitive global agreement on climate

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change and carbon emission targets. However, by the end of his trip, President Obama and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao, rather unexpectedly, announced both countries' determination to work towards a pact at Copenhagen that was "not a partial accord or a political declaration, but rather an accord that covers all the issues in the negotiations and one that has immediate operational effect". Soon after his return home from this trip, President Obama announced US intentions to declare at Copenhagen that it was ready to commit to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions "in the range of" 17 percent below 2005 by 2020, and 83 per cent by 2050. This prompted China to announce, the next day, its own emission targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions per unit of its gross domestic product (its carbon intensity) in 2020 by 40 to 45 percent as compared with 2005 levels.

For India, China's announcement was somewhat unexpected. The two had earlier agreed on a joint position for the Copenhagen summit, wherein they would argue that developed economies bear historic responsibility for climate change and that developing nations should not be pressured to commit to targets on carbon emission cuts. China's announcement, though a proportional and not an absolute emission cut like that of the US, initially put India on the back foot, especially since it was announced a day before that China, India, South Africa and Brazil were due to hold a dialogue session together with Sudan (the current head of the G77), to chart a coordinated position amongst them at Copenhagen. India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh acknowledged that India could not simply "sweep aside the fact" that China had announced emission targets while Dr Singh, speaking at the Commonwealth Summit, accepted that India was willing to commit to "ambitious" carbon emission reduction targets provided it was a part of an "equitable" burden sharing plan. The Chinese response to US' commitment to emission cuts, and consequently the effect of this on India's position for Copenhagen, has not gone unnoticed. At the time of writing, there were reported leaks of India being ready now to table a voluntary quantitative commitment – curbing the carbon emitted relative to the growth of its economy – its carbon intensity – by 24 percent by 2020 relative to its 2005 levels.

India and China have also managed to maintain presently, at least publicly, a common position vis-à-vis the Copenhagen summit. Both countries have agreed to reject – legally binding emission targets placed on developing economies; the concept of a peaking year (which would require each country to indicate on what date they will reach the highest level of pollution before beginning to come down); and any international reporting and verification of domestic environment protection measures carried out by both countries. It remains to be seen how durable such a joint India-China position will prove when negotiations begin at Copenhagen.

Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak)

Any doubts about the interlinked nature of India-US-China ties were removed for many, especially in India, by the joint statement issued at the end of President Obama's visit to China. Amongst other shared declarations, both countries "welcomed all efforts conducive to peace, stability and development in South Asia" as well as specifically pledging "support for the improvement and growth of relations between India and Pakistan". This set off alarm bells in India, with India's external affairs ministry stating the fundamental Indian position that all India-Pakistan issues must be resolved bilaterally and that "a third country role cannot be envisaged nor is it necessary". The US, and then later China, both sought subsequently to reassure Indian leaders that they were in agreement with the Indian position and were not seeking to alter it. The US especially reassured India that it was not advocating any form of

interventionist role for China in both India-Pakistan ties nor in the regional politics of South Asia.

This 'AfPak' issue continued to figure in this triangular relationship during Dr Singh's visit to the US. Dr Singh, conscious of the fact that President Obama was on the brink of outlining a new US strategy in Afghanistan, warned the US against entertaining any notion of a premature exit from Afghanistan. The Indian position was clear – the US and the rest of the international community need to remain engaged in Afghanistan. Failure to do so would result, according to Dr Singh, in “catastrophic consequences for the world – particularly for South Asia, for Central Asia and for the Middle East”.

China, meanwhile has, for the most part, adopted a publicly low key position on Afghanistan, seeing it as a strategic-military quagmire. While it is quietly investing huge sums in Afghanistan's development efforts (China's development of the Ainak Copper Mine is the largest single foreign direct investment in Afghanistan's history), it has remained reluctant to commit any military troops in Afghanistan (though it is currently offering mine-clearance and police training to Afghan security forces). However, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Daily, saw fit to comment on the 'AfPak' issue in the context of Dr Singh's visit to the US. Countering the view that the US saw India as an important strategic partner and a major global player, it opined that the “high-profile reception of the Indian prime minister by Washington DC was intended precisely to dissolve some concerns for Indian-Pakistan relations” and that the “US hinges on Pakistan and Afghanistan instead of India in counter-terrorism in South Asia”. Besides obviously downplaying representations of India as a major global partner within the US strategic thought, it also sought to hyphenate India with Pakistan, thereby equating US-India relations as a mere subset of US policy towards Pakistan.

Civilian Nuclear Deal, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

There has been a general air of uneasiness among Indian leaders for some time due to the perception that the Obama administration was not keen on following through on the India-US civilian nuclear deal agreed with the Bush administration. There was thus, a feeling in Indian circles that Dr Singh's trip should ideally lead, if not a final agreement on the operationalisation of the civilian nuclear deal, then at least to a public declaration by President Obama on his administration's pledge to honour the deal in principle. Therefore, although a deal to operationalise the deal was not completed during Dr Singh's visit, it was music to Indian ears to hear President Obama referring to India as a “nuclear power”, promising that his “administration is committed to fully implementing the US-India civil nuclear agreement”. Sounding upbeat on the prospects for operationalising the civilian nuclear deal, Dr Singh announced that he was “confident” and had “the assurance that that process can be completed without much further loss of time”.

However, located against the context of the US-China joint statement issued during President Obama's visit to China, there are potential concerns for India on the nuclear issue. Feeding on the Obama administration's stated goal of strengthening non-proliferation regimes like the CTBT and the NPT, China and the US “agreed to work together” to realise a successful Review Conference of Parties to the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* in 2010. They also agreed to “pursue ratification” of the CTBT and “work together for the early entry into force of the CTBT”. This declaration has further strengthened voices in India

which had earlier claimed of Chinese insistence, in private, to the US to push India harder on signing up to these treaties. Meanwhile India has stuck to its position of not signing both the CTBT and the NPT “in their present form”. It is not clear, for the near future at least, how far the Obama administration is willing, and is capable, of pushing India on signing up to both these treaties, especially in their current form.

Conclusion

President Obama’s trip to China and Dr Singh’s trip to the US have been declared as important events in the management of US relations with both these Asian ‘giants’. As the US goes to great lengths to assert that it values both sets of ties very highly and does not see one set of ties impinging on the other, the view from New Delhi, and even from Beijing, is not quite the same. It is no coincidence that Dr Singh chose an American audience at the US Council for Foreign Relations to remark on a “certain amount of assertiveness on the part of the Chinese” vis-à-vis India. Such stresses and pulls will continue to be part of this triangular relationship, however much this US administration might not want them to. It remains to be seen how the three countries negotiate a trilateral relationship that will have a major impact on the international politics of our near future.

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