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Sino-Indian Rivalry and Asian Stability

By **Sreeram Chaulia**

The lowered priority that the Obama Administration has accorded to India compared to China is causing deep unease in Indian strategic circles. As Sreeram Chaulia explains, the conceptualization of wide-ranging geostrategic cooperation between Washington and Beijing is a rude awakening to New Delhi's dream of being a strategic partner of the United States to counterbalance China.

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The lowered priority that the Obama Administration has accorded to India compared to China in its first few months in office is causing deep unease in Indian strategic circles. It raises the spectre of a U.S.-China entente to erect barriers to Indian ambitions of climbing up the totem pole of the international system.

Just as Sino-Japanese relations have been described as "hot economics, cold politics," Sino-Indian political ties are headed for showdowns and skirmishes

Underlying the Indian discomfort is the harbouring of designs by some Washington policy gurus of a "G2" (Group of Two) between the United States and China to cope with global problems, including mediation in South Asia to solve the India-Pakistan dispute. India considers South Asia to be its equivalent of Russia's "near abroad" or sphere of influence and is loath to any Chinese or American interference there.

The conceptualization of wide-ranging geostrategic cooperation between Washington and Beijing is a rude awakening to New Delhi's dream of being a strategic partner of the United States to counterbalance China. China and the United States becoming joint arbiters of South Asia is an even bitterer pill to swallow for India.

Adding to India's wariness are revelations by its naval chief, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, that a top Chinese Navy official offered to divide the Pacific Ocean between China and the United States once Beijing launches its own fleet of aircraft carriers.

The breadth of this grand bargain was spelt out by the Chinese officer to the chief of the U.S. Pacific Command as follows: "You, the United States, take Hawaii East and we, China, will take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean. Then you will not need to come to the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean and we will not need to go to the Eastern Pacific. If anything happens there, you can let us know and if something happens here, we will let you know."

Obvious in this scheme is the allocation of an ocean named after the pre-eminent power along its waters, India, to China. The context of this daring thought from Chinese military planners is their ongoing aircraft carrier building program. Unlike India, China does not yet have aircraft carriers. But it is well on its way to constructing multiple naval carriers that can be operational by 2020.

China's goal of ruling not only the East and South China Seas but also the Indian Ocean can only succeed if it manages to secure a "deal" with the United States on the lines disclosed by Admiral Mehta.

Assuming that Chinese economic growth and military modernization will remain ahead of India in the coming decade, Beijing has only one obstacle to prevent it from becoming the prime littoral power on Asian waves — the U.S. Navy.

The Chinese Navy's breathtaking future planning is in line with its mantra of "peaceful rise," wherein it will not engage the U.S. Navy in worldwide competition, provided the latter allows it to flex its muscles in the Indian Ocean and tie down India in its backyard. China's rise would be "peaceful" only insofar as it would avoid confrontation with the U.S. Navy, while being gunboat-like when it comes to dealing with the Indian Navy or navies of Southeast Asian countries.

The Chinese plan of striking an agreement with the United States on their respective portions of the Pacific Ocean is reminiscent of the Tordesillas Accord of 1494 between Spain and Portugal, the pre-eminent seafaring superpowers of that time.

In this understanding, areas to the west of a demarcation line in the Atlantic Ocean (South America) belonged to Spain, while areas to its east (Africa) were to be the exclusive preserve of Portugal. The history of European colonization in subsequent centuries got its specific characteristics by virtue of this G2-like bargain to carve out the world without the imperial powers having to clash directly.

The chances of a Sino-U.S. condominium appear brighter in the context of a long global economic crisis. Washington's dependence on what economist Paul Krugman labels the "T-Bills Republic," China, is so absolute for preserving the reserve currency status of the dollar and financing huge budgetary deficits that the Obama Administration cannot afford to displease its largest creditor. In this scenario, Delhi's misplaced faith in an India-U.S. strategic partnership to enable India's rise as an equal of China could undergo a quick burial.

**A nexus
between the**

Apparently, the U.S. Pacific Command chief politely turned down the Chinese offer of dividing the oceans. But continued economic decline is likely to lead to a drawdown of American naval and overall military

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presence around the world in coming years. In the medium run, a coexistence covenant with China on the high seas of Asia may get the American nod due to exhaustion of Washington's capacity to project power globally.

India will then have to contend with a rapidly expanding Chinese navy with no one but itself to fall back upon.

Russia has its own anxieties about Chinese naval expansion, but its fleet is far too distant from the Indian Ocean to enter into alliance with the Indian navy.

The only option for India to prevent the Chinese navy from taking over the Indian Ocean and possibly renaming it the "South West China Sea" is to ramp up its own naval capabilities and ensure that friendly navies in Southeast and East Asia do not get overshadowed by their Chinese counterpart.

However healthy the economic relations are between India and China at present, armed conflict between the two cannot be ruled out in the future due to the expansionist naval maneuverings of the latter and the unresolved territorial dispute between the two. If one adds to this mix the gap in economic growth rates, wherein China could continue to surge ahead of India, an arms race and perpetual tension are guaranteed.

Just as Sino-Japanese relations have been described as "hot economics, cold politics," Sino-Indian political ties are headed for showdowns and skirmishes. In the event of a U.S.-China pact, Delhi will have no one to rely on if it is attacked by a belligerent Chinese navy and/or army.

This proposition is not far-fetched if one follows Chinese military journals and communist party mouthpieces. A recent editorial in the party-run *People's Daily* warned India not to live in "false anticipation that China will cave in" and chided India for "not yet realizing that India can't actually compete with China in a number of areas, like international influence, overall national power and economic scale."

A nexus between the United States and China is a formula for managed chaos in Asia under the Chinese thumb. It sows the seeds for a hurtling collision between power-drunk China and anxious India.

Wars during economic depressions are not uncommon, even between countries with hitherto booming bilateral trade. Unless the Obama Administration consciously discards policies which embolden China to escalate its aggressive designs against India, Asia cannot achieve elusive continental strategic stability.

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