

In Panetta's Wake

Written by Sumit Ganguly

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SUMIT GANGULY, JUN 11 2012

The US Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, recently concluded a sweeping trip across much of Asia stopping in Vietnam, Singapore, India and Afghanistan. His stint in New Delhi, in particular, deserves comment. The usual diplomatic pleasantries aside he made clear the Obama administration's interest in and commitment to forging a wide-ranging defense partnership with India. Specifically, he addressed a long-standing Indian concern, namely the lifting of a host of export controls over a range of dual-use, high technology items. He also underscored that the US and India were now in an entirely new era and should not remain hobbled with the weight of past disagreements and suspicions. In a striking departure from the extraordinary circumspection that had long characterized any official American statements on Pakistan, especially when on Indian soil, he explicitly alluded to Pakistan's recalcitrance on the critical issue of terrorism.

Panetta's pitch to his Indian interlocutors was nothing short of remarkable. It marked a dramatic departure from the past when the US had mostly equivocated on any issue involving Pakistan and had been hesitant about high-technology defense cooperation with India. His courting of India is obviously a critical element of the US rebalancing strategy in Asia as the administration seeks to extricate itself from its West Asian entanglements and focus its attention on the Asia-Pacific region. Amongst other matters, Panetta recently indicated that 60 percent of US naval assets will now be devoted to the Asian theater, a ten percent increase. As is widely known, this pivot to the Asian arena stems in considerable part from US misgivings about China's growing economic prowess and military assertiveness.

Panetta's explicit nod toward India's concerns should be welcomed in its defense and foreign policy circles. However, will they respond favorably and seize the initiative to forge a more robust security partnership with the United States? The answer to this question is far from obvious and for a number of compelling reasons. At the outset, the shadow of the past — to reverse Robert Axelrod's proposition about "the shadow of the future" and how it may facilitate cooperation, looms large in India. The history of Indo-US discord on a host of issues, harking back to the Cold War era and beyond still rankle significant segments of India's strategic community. Admittedly, the reflexive distrust of the United States is ebbing. However, it has yet to wholly disappear. Consequently, despite the unambiguous signs from Panetta of a US desire to work closely with India, elements of this community will remain cautious at best, and unconvinced at worst. Accordingly, their members, both within and outside government, will do little to adopt a more accommodating stance.

The continued reservations of portions of the strategic community apart there are other reasons to believe that any progress on security cooperation will be fitful. The two sides, despite attempts to narrow their differences, have not been able to bridge the gulf that separates them on the critical question of Iran's likely pursuit of nuclear weapons. Though most Indian analysts look askance on the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, they also remain unconvinced about the wisdom of using force to terminate the country's quest to acquire a nuclear weapons option. Such reservations stem from energy-deficient India's reliance on Iran for petroleum and natural gas, the absence of easy substitutability of such supplies and the country's substantial Shia population.

Even in areas where American and Indian interests converge, many Indian policymakers remain ill at ease about throwing in their lot with the US. For example, both states have significant apprehensions about a possibly revanchist People's Republic of China (PRC). Nevertheless, Indian foreign policy elites remain reluctant about joining any US

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led enterprise that seeks to contain the PRC. Two factors explain this disinclination to make common cause with the US. At one level, Indian policymakers remain obsessed with what they describe as “strategic autonomy” — namely, a desire to avoid strategic dependence. At another, they fear that an overt alignment with the US might incur the wrath of the PRC and thereby place India in a more vulnerable position.

These anxieties alone are sufficient to sandbag the prospects of a more robust defense and security relationship. Sadly, they are burdened further with other elements of the Indian domestic political landscape. The Congress Party led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime, though not lacking in talent, is in near complete political disarray. Its leadership seems congenitally incapable of managing the demands of a coalition regime, prone to making political gaffes at every turn and suffering from a lack of spirited leadership. Worse still, allegations of corruption continue to dog the regime, further sapping its limited energies for much-needed economic reforms and bold foreign policy choices.

Despite a range of domestic woes, as well as the distractions of a presidential campaign, the Obama administration has demonstrated a capacity to forge a new strategy for strategic engagement in Asia. Despite initial missteps, when it followed a “China first” policy and also sought to assuage Pakistan’s concerns, both real and fictitious, it now seeks to work with India as the linchpin of its Asian security strategy. Sadly, it is attempting to move forward with this endeavor without adequately addressing the ballast of past neglect, distrust and suspicion. Consequently, despite Panetta’s studied attempt to signal a new phase in the Indo-US strategic partnership it may find that its Indian partner is not quite in a position to respond with the requisite readiness and vigor.

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