

## China's Impact on India's Security Policy

Thursday, May 26, 2010

In a discussion hosted jointly by CSIS' South Asia Program and the Asia Foundation, Indrani Bagchi a leading foreign policy journalist and the Diplomatic Editor at The Times of India, India's largest English daily newspaper, presented her views on the impact of Chinese relations on Indian policy.

### **India and China in 2010: Sharing a "Copenhagen Spirit"**

Ms. Bagchi opened her remarks by borrowing a phrase coined by India's Environment Minister describing the current relationship between India and China as embodying a "Copenhagen Spirit." In other words it is "useful, unlikely and temporary." 2010, in large part due to the Copenhagen meeting, has brought in some relief to this typically strained relationship. Driven more by self-interest than altruism- China and India maintained a relatively united front during the climate talks as neither wanted to be bound by an emissions regime. Moreover, China's approval of India as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council and the Indian President's productive visit to China in May 2010, have fostered hopes for a promising year ahead.

### **Setting the Context: A Tumultuous Past**

Ms. Bagchi pointed out that discomfort between India and China set in as far back as the 1950s. The "bhai-bhai" or brother-brother era of co-operation and assistance formally ended with a border conflict in 1962. Closer ties with the US, through greater political, economic and military alignment automatically meant that India was distancing itself from China. In 2008, China's storming out of the Nuclear Suppliers Group meeting in Vienna, opposing India's waiver, came as a shock to India-given China's previously ambivalent stance. Another blow was dealt when China blocked an Asian Development Bank water project in Arunachal Pradesh, a disputed territory. Furthermore, complications surrounding the Tibetan protests during the Beijing Olympics, re-ignited tensions over the Dalai Lama's presence in India.

### **The "China Factor" in Indian Domestic and Foreign Policy**

Ms. Bagchi commented that for a country that has dedicated much of its strategic thinking to Pakistan, it is surprising that several Indian policy shifts have at least indirectly, been instigated by China. While in the past Chinese influence on policy decisions were barely acknowledged, today India is consciously refashioning its policies to take account of the "China factor." To fuel economic development within India, Bagchi argues that China is effectively being used as a benchmark, infusing a spirit of "if China can do it, so can India!"

However, on the border front Ms. Bagchi feels that India has displayed weak judgment. A delayed response has enabled China to significantly increase its footprint in India's neighborhood. China's road and rail construction in the inhospitable border terrain, made India's 40 year old policy of deliberately keeping the shared border areas undeveloped, completely redundant. This vulnerability demanded a new Indian border strategy, involving comprehensive infrastructure development along the Sino-Indian border. Further, disputed areas in the state of Arunachal Pradesh also continue to remain a major source of contention which she believes, will not disappear easily.

### **India and China: Attitudes towards their Immediate Neighbors**

Turning to their other neighbors, Ms. Bagchi remarked that both countries were, generally speaking doing well diplomatically. It appeared to her, that a common fear of encirclement by hostile neighbors was primarily guiding these moves. India demonstrated diplomatic astuteness in its recent

dealings with the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. China was also performing equally well, by making efforts to strengthen relations and ending old disputes in the region. However, despite progress with the smaller neighbor countries, Ms Bagchi views the close China-Pak relationship as a “serious and unrelenting security threat” for India. China’s promise to supply Pakistan with nuclear reactors is a clear indication of China’s broader strategic goals in the region. Ms. Bagchi also predicts that the passing on of the Dalai Lama is something that both nations should be concerned about, given its potential to escalate into conflict.

### **Relations with the Far-East, Africa and Europe**

With respect to the North Eastern Asia, Ms. Bagchi argued that China’s foreign policy was on balance far more “evolved and efficient” than India’s more “benign presence.” Nonetheless she gave credit to recent initiatives by the Indian government to increase engagement in the region. For example, the Free Trade Agreement with South Korea in January 2010 has been extremely successful, yielding high returns to both countries. While it would take some time for India to fully develop its “outreach” program in the East, she noted that Japan-India relations were strong, as always. Maritime security co-operation was enhanced with Japan in 2008, and she is optimistic about a future Japan-India nuclear deal. At the same time Ms. Bagchi made clear that she didn’t think close ties with Japan were interfering with Chinese aspirations, because China was not competing with India for Japanese attention.

Ms. Bagchi remarked that although Indian interest in Africa has been rekindled by the attention it was receiving from China, the nature of their interactions varied fundamentally. She described China’s relationship as “state led natural resource gathering.” While in the case of India it is a “private sector profit driven venture,” less interested in natural resources and more amenable to developing local African resources. This distinction, she notes is often misconstrued by the media who typically project it as a “race for natural resources between India and China.” With respect to trade with Europe, she argued that China’s export advantage in manufacturing has made agreements relatively easy to conclude. India on the other hand, specialized in exporting services has faced language barriers, especially with respect to France and Germany.

### **India and China: The Way Forward**

Ms. Bagchi eloquently summarized the evolving Indo-China relationship as “competition on some levels and co-operation on others,” wherein some discomfort, ambivalence and hedging will always remain, despite the level of engagement. She reminded us of the impediments that would prevent India from formulating a cogent policy towards China. Disputes and uncertainties around Arunachal Pradesh, the Dalai Lama, the Brahmaputra Dam and Sino-Pak ties, would always ensure some amount of tension between the two. She also made the critical point that the chaos surrounding India’s coalition-based politics, would itself add elements of unpredictability to Indian policy.

Looking ahead, Ms. Bagchi expressed the need to use “engagement, engagement, engagement” as the foundation for the future Indo-China relationship. She deems present understanding of China’s political and social structures in India as highly lacking and suggests that serious efforts be made to “learn China.” For example, India has always under-appreciated the strategic significance of the Dalai Lama’s presence. Further it has not given enough regard to the internal challenges facing China. From China’s point of view, India is still not perceived as “peer competition” and is considered an “inferior power in both a conventional and unconventional sense.” She speculates that in the future, as China too moves beyond its “stereotypical perception” of India and obtains a better understanding, this attitude is likely to change.