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When Obama Meets Modi: The Superpower and the Global Swing States

BY DANIEL TWINING

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As U.S. President Barack Obama prepares to meet Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in late September, in the wake of Chinese President Xi Jinping's grand tour of South Asia, the world will be watching for clues about the future strategic triangle between its three biggest nations.

A China-India axis would tilt the balance of power against the United States, calling into question the future of its alliances with nations like Japan, and the ability of the U.S. to lead globally. By contrast, a U.S.-India partnership would make it more difficult for China to challenge American leadership in Asia and the world. An international order anchored by strong democracies would be fundamentally different from one led by an authoritarian superpower.

Both Obama and Xi will therefore cultivate Modi's India as the key global "swing state" -- just as prime ministers Shinzo Abe of Japan and Tony Abbott of Australia have recently done. When Modi visited Tokyo in early September, Abe announced a "special" strategic partnership and an impressive \$35 billion in new Japanese investments in India. Abbott, on an official visit to New Delhi, announced that Australia would strengthen military ties and supply India with uranium for its civil nuclear reactors.

Not to be outdone, Xi committed to \$20 billion in new investments during his visit to India from Sept. 17 to Sept. 19, clearly attempting to reverse the momentum of New Delhi's growing

strategic ties to Tokyo, Washington, and Canberra. As one Chinese observer put it: "China is eager to win India over and ensure that it will not gravitate rapidly to the emerging anti-China coalition" led by the U.S. and Japan.

Fortunately, while Modi wants to import Chinese economic dynamism into India, he has also made clear that India will push back against what he calls China's "18th century expansionist mindset." On the day that Modi welcomed Xi to India, reports surfaced of a major Chinese border incursion into Indian-controlled territory. The summit was overshadowed by this military standoff.

On his recent trip to Tokyo, Modi compared China's *vistarvad*, or expansionism, to his hope for *vikasvad*, or development. He followed up during Xi's visit to New Delhi with the sternest warning by any Indian leader in decades that China should back off from its armed revisionism along their disputed frontier and settle the issue peacefully. India's new government has ordered its forces to "interdict" Chinese troops in disputed areas along the border.

Balance-of-power logic alone cannot explain recent India-China frictions, in part because each country is implicated in the other's domestic politics. New Delhi is complicit in China's domestic insecurity by virtue of India's strong support for Tibet, including hosting its government-in-exile. In India, Xi was met by waves of pro-Tibetan protestors angry about China's crackdown there. For its part, China has stepped up claims to what it calls southern Tibet -- otherwise known as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. China also supports a Pakistani "deep state" that has produced waves of terrorism against India, and endorses Pakistan's claim to Indian-controlled Kashmir.

There was a period in 2009 to 2012, as Indian leaders grew disillusioned with Obama's foreign policy, when senior officials in New Delhi spoke internally of maintaining "equidistance" between Washington and Beijing. Diplomatically, India hedged its bets against both China and America during this period. But the policy did not work. China stepped up its hostile behavior against India even as it pursued gunboat diplomacy against Japan and Southeast Asian nations.

By 2013, a former senior Indian official who had served during the period of the Delhi-Beijing rapprochement was clear: "Equidistance is dead; of course India will tilt towards the United States." With an eye on the threat posed by India's northern neighbor, Modi has increased defense spending by 15 percent. He has signaled his determination to revitalize India's economic growth not only to advance domestic welfare, but to provide the resources to propel the country's military modernization.

New Delhi's approach to China will be influenced by America's approach. Modi has indicated his openness to a strategic alliance between the world's largest democracies. But if U.S. policy towards China is too accommodating -- or if America is simply less present as Obama backs away from his "pivot to Asia" -- Indian calculations naturally will be affected. By contrast, if U.S. power and purpose appear resurgent, Washington will be a more attractive partner to New Delhi, reinforcing common interests in defeating terrorism, stabilizing Asia, and growing the world economy.

As one Indian strategist put it: "We didn't seek a strategic partnership with America because we thought you'd go into decline but because we expected you to remain strong -- and to lead." President Obama should heed this message when he meets India's prime minister.