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## China, India and Indonesia—Building Trust Amidst Hostility

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Amidst the prevailing atmospherics of aggression, hostility and uncertainty, rising powers of the Indo-Pacific are also making efforts towards building trust and exhibiting their willingness to come to terms with each other's rise. Three such efforts were made in October 2013 by China, India and Indonesia during the high-level visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Jakarta, October 3; Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Jakarta, October 10-12; and again by Prime Minister Singh to Beijing, October 22-24. The significance of these visits lies in the introduction of a somewhat calibrated approach towards dealing with each other's rise, strengthening relations as major powers, and opening up of new channels of communication in their troubled areas of relations. No matter how small these efforts for collaboration are, their significance should not be lost amidst the cacophony of doom and gloom that some reports claim are prevalent throughout the region.

The official statements from these visits offer a glimpse into how these three states are acknowledging the significance of each other in the evolving regional order. Though the United States remains the paramount power in the region, mutual acknowledgement of each other's interests and stakes between these three second-tier rising powers could create conditions for stability in an otherwise unstable multipolar Indo-Pacific. The visits produced commitments in three major areas of diplomacy: assertion of strategic partnerships including defense cooperation, deepening of cooperation in economic and other softer areas of relations, and introduction of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) to diffuse tension. First, while consolidating their relations, these Asian powers laid out road maps for cementing ties, and acknowledged each other's role and importance in the region. The first signal came from Jakarta where Indonesia and China decided to elevate their bilateral cooperation to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. While Beijing acknowledged Jakarta as an emerging market with global and regional influence, the latter characterized their partnership as an epochal moment in the history of their bilateral relations. Defense and security cooperation—specifically in the areas of maritime security, military exercises, defense industry—figured prominently in their joint statement.

India and Indonesia, bereft of any major sore point in their relations in comparison to either Sino-Indian or Sino-Indonesian relations, attempted to add more substance and speed to their otherwise thin and slow-paced strategic partnership. The two countries identified five focus areas to strengthen their bilateral ties: strategic engagement, defense and security cooperation, comprehensive economic partnership, cultural and people-to-people linkages, and cooperation in responding to common challenges. The content of their joint statement highlighted the intent of the two rising powers to go beyond the bilateral context of cooperation towards a pan-Indo-Pacific orientation. Both the Indian Ocean and the G-20 were added as important regional and global agendas for bilateral cooperation.

**Vibhanshu Shekhar, Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, explains that “The predominant culture of strategic autonomy in India and Indonesia seems to be dictating their economically beneficial and tension-reducing exercises of cooperation with China.”**

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**“Nevertheless, it is yet to be seen whether these three powers are able to shoulder the responsibility of building a stable regional order or if they will inevitably push the region towards greater instability as their individual power and ambitions grow.”**

On the other hand, the Sino-Indian joint statement, entitled “A Vision for Future Development of India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” aimed to project broad-based consensus between the two powers over issues of regional and global concern. The two countries signed nine agreements/Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with the two-pronged focus of developing confidence-building measures to address areas of bilateral dispute and deepening cooperation in areas of mutual benefit.

Second, these visits reflected an infusion of substantive economic cooperation into their partnerships and an emphasis on strengthening cooperation in other less contentious areas, such as education and culture. In addition to the signing of a currency swap agreement worth \$16 billion, China and Indonesia agreed to implement the commitments of the China-Indonesia Five Year Development Program for Trade and Economic Cooperation to reach a bilateral trade target of \$80 billion by 2015. The Chinese leadership tried to allay Indonesian misgivings in the economic sector by agreeing to enhance direct investment in the infrastructure and development sectors and to promote balanced trade. At the 2013 Bali summit of APEC, both China and Indonesia pushed for greater economic integration, better connectivity and greater market access within the region.

India and Indonesia signed six MoUs, which entailed greater collaboration between institutions of the two countries in the areas of health, natural disasters, drug-trafficking, intelligence training, and research. In a similar fashion, the Sino-Indian joint statement focused on linkages in the softer areas of cooperation. They signed an MoU on reviving the ancient Nalanda University and also agreed to celebrate the six decades of the Nehruvian doctrine of Panchsheel—Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—as a symbol of post-colonial Sino-Indian friendship. The ASEAN Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership initiative figured for the first time as a potential agenda of bilateral economic cooperation. Both India and China are not part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations. These agendas of cooperation reflect on decisions of the two countries to widen the audience and stakeholders of their relationship by strengthening people-to-people relations.

Experts on Sino-Indian relations would have found it unpalatable to imagine a few years ago that Myanmar, which has remained a source of Sino-Indian rivalries, would figure as a connecting link in their efforts towards building ties. This welcome trend was evident from the joint statement of India and China that mentioned Myanmar as a likely participant in their celebration of six decades of Panchsheel.

Finally, these visits saw attempts to build confidence over long-standing bilateral disputes by introducing these sensitive issues into the official agenda of negotiation. Major strides came from the most troubled equation of this strategic triangle—Sino-Indian relations. New Delhi and Beijing signed a border defense cooperation agreement that underscored the necessity of maintaining peace along the border through information sharing and laid out elaborate mechanisms for both periodic meetings as well as emergency communications. Moreover, India and China, for the first time, brought trans-border river management into the official agenda of negotiation with the signing of an MoU on strengthening cooperation on trans-border rivers and the Chinese consent for data sharing.

The predominant culture of strategic autonomy in India and Indonesia seems to be dictating their economically beneficial and tension-reducing exercises of cooperation with China. Jakarta as an autonomous actor, once again, holds the key in this new-evolving triangle of relationships. Nevertheless, it is yet to be seen whether these three powers are able to shoulder the responsibility of building a stable regional order or if they will inevitably push the region towards greater instability as their individual power and ambitions grow.

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