

China seeks to woo India's new right-wing government

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a two-day visit to India this week as part of a concerted campaign by Beijing to woo India's new rightwing government.

This campaign is all the more remarkable given that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) repeatedly attacked the previous Congress Party-led government for being "soft" on China. Moreover, since coming to power late last month, Modi and his BJP have taken a series of actions aimed at demonstrating that India intends to aggressively push back against China's growing influence in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

To underline the significance of Wang's visit, Chinese President Xi Jinping dubbed him his "special envoy."

The first foreign minister to visit New Delhi since the BJP took the reins of power, Wang met with his Indian counterpart, Sushma Swaraj, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Modi and his National Security Adviser, Ajit Kumar Doval.

At the conclusion of the visit, Wang declared India and China "natural partners." He said that China is prepared to reach a "final settlement" of its border dispute with India, which led to a brief border war a half-century ago. China, declared Wang, is also ready to greatly increase investment in India if New Delhi removes restrictions on foreign ownership, including some that are China specific.

"Through years of negotiation, we have come to an agreement on the basics of a boundary agreement," said China's Foreign Minister. "And we are prepared to reach a final settlement."

Wang lauded Modi, who is notorious for his role in instigating the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom. He called him an "old friend" of China whose election had injected "new vitality into an ancient civilization."

The Chinese press has similarly lavished praise on Modi, who travelled to China to drum up investment

when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. Several commentators with close ties to the Stalinist regime have suggested that Modi could play a role in Sino-Indian relations similar to that Richard Nixon played in Sino-US relations. An anti-communist hardliner, Nixon forged a Sino-American strategic alliance directed against the USSR in the early 1970s when he was US President.

As a result of this week's talks, it has been agreed that Modi and Chinese President Xi will pay visits to one another's countries this year, but dates have not been finalized.

Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin said that Wang's visit had provided an opportunity to discuss all bilateral issues, from countering terrorism to increasing Chinese investment in Indian industrial parks.

While New Delhi expressed satisfaction with Wang's visit, a Chinese government spokesman was much more effusive, saying it had been of "great significance."

Beijing is clearly anxious to counter US and Japanese attempts to draw India more tightly into their joint campaign to isolate and militarily encircle China.

As part of its "Pivot to Asia," Washington has incited China's neighbours, including Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, to press their territorial claims against Beijing, leading to a series of explosive confrontations in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Japan has in addition announced that it will throw off the constitutional limits on the deployment of its military might overseas and provide arms and other support to allies in south-east Asia that are at loggerheads with China.

While claiming that it wants to expand India's relations with China, especially trade and investment, India's Modi-led BJP government has signaled its eagerness to strengthen its military-strategic ties with both Tokyo and Washington.

Moreover, it has already taken several actions

indicating a more assertive policy against China.

The most provocative of these was the invitation of the head of the “Tibetan government-in-exile,” Lobsang Sangay, to Modi’s swearing-in ceremony on May 26. While Sangay, his “government,” and the Dalai Lama are based in the Indian hill town of Dharmasala, India has never previously granted Sangay any official recognition. By so doing, it has indicated that New Delhi may be prepared to abandon its support for Chinese sovereignty over Tibet or at least that it is toying with using the issue as a bargaining chip.

Significantly, Beijing chose not to respond to this provocation. Instead, after many days of silence, it issued a general statement attacking Sangay as a “100 percent splittist” who “has never done anything good on the Tibet issue.”

While less overtly directed against China, Modi’s decision to invite the heads of government of all the member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in was also clearly meant as a message to Beijing. For years, powerful sections of India’s national-security establishment have been complaining about Beijing’s growing economic and geo-political influence in what they consider to be by right India’s area of strategic dominance.

In another significant move, Modi has appointed former Indian Army Chief V.K. Singh as a Minister of State with independent charge for the Northeast and External Affairs. In an article titled “What you may have missed: Narendra Modi’s message to China,” *Live Mint* columnist Sandipan Deb exulted over Modi’s decision to put “a former army chief in charge of the [northeast] region,” which is central to India’s border dispute with China. It is, said Deb, “absolutely the perfect stratagem” and “should give the Chinese some pause.” “And [Singh’s] additional responsibility in the External Affairs Ministry is a brilliant piece of thinking,” continued Deb. “In effect, Modi has made a committed Indian soldier our man for China.”

India’s new government has also made it known that it intends to dramatically increase military spending and that it will eliminate many of the remaining restrictions on foreign investment in the defence sector. The latter has long been a major demand of Washington, which views Indian arms sales and the offer of the transfer of military technology to India as key stratagems in harnessing New Delhi to US strategic aims in Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Modi and his advisors have close ties to sections of

India’s corporate elite and military-security establishment that criticized the previous Congress Party-led government for not doing enough to counter the growing “strategic gap” between India and China. In particular they have pressed for India to dramatically increase its military spending and tilt still more toward the US and Japan, including joining the US and Japanese militaries in trilateral exercises.

In a recent article for the *Indian Express*, strategic policy specialist C. Raja Mohan argued for India’s new government to pursue a dual-track policy vis a vis China. This policy would consist of rapidly expanding India’s economic ties with China while entering into a closer strategic embrace of the major powers determined to counter and thwart China rise.

The previous Congress-led government, complained Mohan, “resisted the imperative for economic cooperation with China by citing security considerations and fudged the security challenges by pretending there was political convergence with Beijing on a range of issues.”

“Modi,” he continued, “must now” significantly expand “economic cooperation with Beijing at the bilateral and regional levels”—so as to boost India’s flagging economy—while bridging “the growing strategic gap with China through both internal and external balancing,” i.e. by boosting military spending and turning closer to US and Japan.

Mohan admitted such a two-track policy was fraught with complexities and dangers, saying it would be akin to three-dimensional chess.

The reality is India’s new government is playing a most dangerous game. It is providing the US and Japan with encouragement and support in a provocative and reckless campaign of threats and bullying against Beijing aimed at securing their continued imperialist domination over the Indo-Pacific region.

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