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Kerry in India: Setting the Tone on Security Issues

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's current visit to India will set the tone for cooperation between the two countries over the next few years, especially in key areas of shared interest, such as managing the security risks associated with China's rise and the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Focusing on the long-term potential of a strong U.S. relationship with India, Secretary Kerry should seek to forge common ground with Indian leaders on pressing regional security issues and signal U.S. support for India's growing role in Asia.

China. Kerry's visit to India marks the first high-level U.S. visit since the Chinese border incursion in Ladakh in mid-April. Chinese forces had crossed six miles into Indian territory in the eastern Ladakh region and set up tents there for nearly three weeks. The incident angered the Indian public, and New Delhi signaled Beijing that it was prepared to call off a visit by its foreign minister to China in the absence of a resolution to the standoff.

Beijing eventually agreed to pull back its troops, and both sides pledged to restore the status quo ante along the disputed border shortly before Chinese Premier Li Keqiang landed in India for his first overseas visit on May 19.

It is unclear why the Chinese chose to ratchet up tensions along the border weeks before the premier's planned visit to New Delhi. The incident may have been aimed at pressuring India to pull back on patrolling in the area. Some media reports claimed that the agreement to defuse the border flare-up involved India agreeing to remove temporary bunkers that had been used to shelter patrolling troops. Regardless of specific Chinese motives, the assertive behavior reinforces Indian suspicions of China's strategic intentions and dredges up memories of Beijing's surprise invasion across the Indian border in 1962 that led to a brief war between the two Asian powers.

India and China have engaged in border talks for the past 15 years, but there is little hope of resolution in the near term. China claims about 35,000 square miles of India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, while India says China is occupying 15,000 square miles of its territory in the Aksai Chin plateau of Jammu and Kashmir.

India has recently put some breaks on developing defense and security ties with the U.S. in part to avoid the appearance that it is working with America to contain China. Indian officials were also initially cautious in their response to the U.S. policy of rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific for similar reasons. The Ladakh incursion may bring greater Indian openness to the idea of a robust U.S. role in the region and could even prompt India to expedite purchases of U.S. defense items.

Earlier this year, the Indian ambassador to the U.S., Nirupama Rao, acknowledged that China's military modernization had brought a new security calculus to the region. This week's U.S.–India strategic

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dialogue talks provide an opportunity to discuss this new calculus and how it should impact U.S.–India defense and security cooperation and policy coordination.

Afghanistan. Another major issue that Secretary Kerry will need to address in his talks in India is the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan in light of the drawdown of U.S. and coalition troops.

India has significant stakes in Afghanistan and is watching with wariness U.S. attempts to negotiate with the Taliban. Indian officials worry that the U.S., desperate to strike a peace deal before its troops depart, will allow Pakistan to play a driving role in the talks. Pakistan has long relied on the Taliban to serve as its proxy for maintaining influence in the country. If the Taliban regains influence in Afghanistan without agreeing to participate in a normal political process or relinquishing violence, Afghanistan will again become a haven for international terrorists, and support for Islamist extremist ideologies will flourish throughout the region.

The Indian foreign ministry spokesperson on Friday indirectly criticized the U.S. approach to engaging with the Taliban when he said the reconciliation process should not confer legitimacy to insurgent groups or create equivalence between the government and the insurgents. Earlier in the week, the Taliban raised an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan flag on its new office in Doha, Qatar, and the U.S. proposed to send a team to negotiate with the Taliban directly without the participation of Afghan officials. Both moves irritated Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who responded by cutting off crucial talks on reaching a bilateral security agreement with the U.S. Secretary Kerry has his work cut out for him in explaining to the Indians what the U.S. had hoped to gain by handling the Taliban talks in this manner.

India and Afghanistan have developed close ties in recent years and signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011 that called for Indian training of Afghan forces. Karzai expanded on this agreement during his most recent trip to New Delhi last month when he brought a wish list of military equipment for India's consideration.

U.S. Policy Recommendations. In this week's strategic dialogue talks, the U.S. should:

- **Offer support for India's position on its territorial disputes with China.** Washington should

take a more proactive stance in backing India in its territorial disputes with China in order to discourage Beijing from seeking to change the territorial status quo and to encourage eventual overall settlement. The goal with such a U.S. policy shift is to help deter China from further aggressive actions along the border but without contributing to a hardening of India's position.

- **Upgrade U.S.–India–Japan trilateral talks.** Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a historic four-day visit to Tokyo last month in which the two sides signed a joint statement pledging nuclear cooperation and expanded joint naval exercises. The time is ripe to upgrade and deepen the trilateral talks among Washington, Tokyo, and New Delhi that were started in late 2011. Washington should also explore the idea of trilateral engagement with India and Australia, which could lay the groundwork for a potential quadrilateral dialogue in the event that circumstances in the region call for a cohesive response among the major democratic powers in Asia.
- **Encourage India to play a larger role in the Afghan transition process.** India and the U.S. share similar objectives with regard to stabilizing Afghanistan and ensuring that it never again serves as a safe haven for terrorism. Thus they should closely coordinate political and security strategies as well as plans for encouraging free and fair elections in 2014. Kerry will have to reassure the Indians that the U.S. is engaging with the Taliban with eyes wide open and that it will not compromise in its demands that the Taliban participate in a normal political process and break ties to international terrorism.

On Solid Footing. How the U.S. manages its ties to India over the next couple of years will have a direct impact on the overall success of its policy of rebalancing toward Asia. Secretary Kerry has an opportunity this week to put Indo–U.S. relations on a solid footing that will serve U.S. security interests over the longer term.

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