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Rivals and Partners

By Stanley A. Weiss

BANGKOK — Last fall, a rare opinion poll was conducted across China. It asked a simple question: What do you perceive as the greatest threat facing China? The range of answers was interesting — but even more interesting was the way the survey was reported in India.

Among Indian newspapers, the thrust of the stories said that 40 percent of the Chinese polled think India presents the greatest security threat after the United States. Yet Indian business journals emphasized that 60 percent of Chinese saw no threat from India. The Indian Business Standard explained that while India was seen in China as the second-biggest threat, 6 in 10 Chinese citizens didn't mention India at all — a reflection of the broader concerns of a wealthier populace.

The contradictions come as no surprise — India is a kaleidoscope of competing realities. But as China and India begin preparations to mark 60 years of diplomatic ties, that same schizophrenia has come to characterize their bilateral relations.

Where does the heart of the relationship between the dragon and the elephant lie?

Is it in their increasingly public bickering over disputed land on the Himalayan border, where Indian officials have accused China of 270 line-of-control violations and 2,285 instances of aggressive border patrol last year?

Or is it in a burgeoning economic relationship that has seen China become India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade leaping from \$15 billion to \$40 billion in the past five years — and is expected to grow to as much as \$60 billion in 2010?

Does it rest in China's aggressive support of India's arch-rival, Pakistan; Beijing's strategy of building roads and ports in countries around the Indian Ocean as a "string of pearls" designed to choke India; and its efforts to block a \$2.9 billion Asian Development Bank loan to India?

Or is it anchored in the remarkably united front India and China presented in Copenhagen, where they stood together to ensure that developed countries did not extract unilateral concessions on climate change from developing ones?

Right now, the answer seems to be both. "Indians generally agree that we must have excellent economic and diplomatic relations with China, but we must also keep our powder dry," Vice Adm. A.K. Singh, the former chief of India's Eastern Naval Command, told me. "We feel our foreign policy must be backed by sufficient power — a steel fist in a velvet glove."

Whether the future of this relationship is fashioned in velvet or forged in steel, three truths are emerging.

First, China seems committed to a vision of a multipolar world, but a unipolar Asia. It is no accident that China's posture toward India hardened in 2006. Just days after the United States and India unveiled a defense framework and then a nuclear agreement, China's ambassador to New Delhi began referring to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as "Southern Tibet," a provocation not heard since the two nations fought a 32-day war over the territory in 1962.

"China has always believed that India lacks the will to resist a sharp-pointed thrust," says Brahma Chellaney, one of India's leading strategic thinkers. "But a U.S.-India military alliance has always been a nightmare for China because it fears India becoming a new Japan to America." China's regional brinkmanship seems designed to distract India and box it in, allowing China to emerge as the voice of Asia.

Second, India seems determined not to be pushed around by China. Since 2006, India has beefed up its border security, reiterated its border claims, and deported thousands of unskilled Chinese workers. It also has deepened support for the Dalai Lama, welcoming him to an historic Buddhist monastery in Tawang last fall, despite Beijing's protests. Rather than weakening India's resolve, Chinese intransigence may be strengthening it.

Third, it is in America's interests to maintain good relations with both nations. After President Obama's travels to China and subsequent Indian state visit, the joke in New Delhi was that "China gets an agreement, Pakistan gets funding, and India gets a nice dinner." With China acting as America's banker, it would seem, as a prominent Indian diplomat said to me, that "for the foreseeable future, the U.S. is unlikely to act as a countervailing power to China, and India will have to look after its interests the best it can. But there is also a sense that the U.S. will recover, and its passivity toward China will be temporary."

"The truth is," a high-ranking U.S. State Department official told me, "both India and China have important roles to play in the emerging global architecture."

"We are concerned about the border," he added, "but in the next decade, the U.S. will likely be involved in a different issue on the Himalayan border — which is the dire shortage of water in both nations, and the role Tibetan waters can play in addressing it."

Which brings us back to that opinion poll: When asked what most threatened them, the majority of Chinese cited non-traditional threats, like climate change, water and food shortages.

China and India might yet end up in the same boat.