China on Mind: India US Head Towards Stronger Partnership

Tilak Jha*

Twenty-five years after India conducted its most significant assertion of military power and technology in Pokhran, New Delhi's claim to a key global role came full circle with Washington announcing an all-round bilateral partnership spanning "the seas to stars".The musical words were carved into history in the joint statement issued during PM Narendra Modi's second State Visit to the US on June 22, 2023. There was another unheralded history made this June: the two top leaders of India and the US were clearly in agreement on China.None of them used the C-word explicitly. However, the references in the joint statement, from critical minerals to supply chains, and the emphasis on "empowering Quad…for global good", among multiple others, left no doubt that the China challenge is a serious, shared concern.The importance of the consensus can be gauged from the fact that, 25 years ago, after then-PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee mentioned the threat from China in his confidential missive to President Bill Clinton, the White House leaked it to the media within hours. To make matters worse, Clinton issued a stand-alone joint statement with his Chinese counterpart, Jiang Zemin, on June 27, 1998, as if giving China a central role in maintaining peace and stability in South Asia.Four foundational agreements on defence and military exchanges, three American presidents, two Indian PMs, and an Indo-US nuclear deal apart, Washington brought New Delhi on board the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET). A wide-ranging high-technology exchange framework in six core areas such as defence, space, and semiconductor technologies, with the promise of access and joint-development privileges reserved for America's allies.And, by inviting Modi as the first Indian PM to speak to the US Congress on a State visit and recommitting to build a strategic technology partnership, Washington has come the closest to recognising that the Indian century is here. It would be fair to say that in its scope and substance, this joint statement is the most crucial tech-driven promise of bilateral diplomacy, which could potentially shape the direction of geopolitics along the lines of the Marshal Plan and China-US rapprochement.The statement left no doubt about its substantiveness by promising to build a partnership that left "no corner of human enterprise" untouched between India and America. The two democracies are willing to come together as "trusted partners" to "contribute towards a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific."With or without China or the US, India never had any doubt about its role in shaping an inclusive world. However, New Delhi was unwilling to play ally or enemy to any power or power bloc, a nuance that took Washington decades to accept and espouse. Reasonably, if there was one country that should have understood India better than any Western power, it was China. A fellow civilisational state with a shared past from colonialism to Buddhism, Beijing had insurmountable advantages in embracing India.However, while the US evolved its understanding of the nuances involved in engaging India, China stuck to the myopic policy of curb, contain, and control. It is another testimony that, while keeping the border issue alive, taking India for granted in the name of autonomy or non-alignment is over.

***Dr. Tilak Jha is Associate Professor at Bennett University, Greater Noida. The views and**

opinion expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CSIR.