

'U.S. IS NOW MORE CLEAR IN SUPPORT FOR INDIA ON CHINA BORDER ISSUES'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Amid heightened tensions on the India-China border, the outgoing top U.S. diplomat for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, on May 20 hit out at China, saying the tensions reminded the world of the "threat" posed by Beijing. China slammed the remarks as "nonsense". Jeff Smith, Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, explains why her comments are significant, with the U.S. in the past not forthcoming about expressing support on the boundary issue. Excerpts:

Ambassador Alice Wells has said the border incidents have reflected a pattern of China's behaviour, also seen in the South China Sea. Do you think both are linked?

Ambassador Wells made a series of fairly robust assertions in her remarks, including underscoring U.S. recognition of the McMahon Line and Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh. These are in fact long-standing positions of the U.S. government, but positions it has not always been forthcoming about. In 2012, I recall asking State Department officials, when was the last time the U.S. government reiterated support for the McMahon Line and Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh? They replied they couldn't find any comments on the matter in a search of archives stretching back to 2000. Having Ambassador Wells reiterate the position during a time of crisis is noteworthy. I'm hesitant to draw connections among the different fronts, because I do think China calibrates each policy individually.

Do you expect to see a different approach from the U.S. towards the region as concerns about China rise?

I think the U.S. government wants to ensure that we're in a position to facilitate stronger security ties with any of these countries that are interested. I think that, frankly, we've done a good job in the last few years with the Quad [U.S.-India-Japan-Australia], with not only reviving it, but with upgrading it to the ministerial level and adding new aspects to the quad like counterterrorism exercises. There hasn't been a wave of regional balancing activity the way some realist theorists might have predicted, in part because China has done a very effective job winning over elites in neighbouring capitals, and convincing them of the economic benefits of engagement with China.

Is the China factor driving the deepening security cooperation between India and the U.S.?

The amount of progress the [Narendra] Modi and [Donald] Trump administrations have made over the last three years or so is remarkable. If you just look at the revival and upgrading of the Quad, the establishment of a 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministers dialogue, the signing of COMCASA [Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement], the likely signing of the BECA [Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement] this year, the stationing of an Indian officer at CENTCOM [Central Command], our first tri-service military exercise. We had a joint sail through the South China Sea that was joined by Japan and the Philippines. If I had a wish list of items to strengthen the U.S.-India strategic partnership before the Trump administration, I'd say they've already accomplished 90% of them.

In the past, U.S. administrations have been sensitive to India's own considerations vis-à-vis China. Has that changed? Is the Trump administration pushing countries to choose?

I don't think that has changed. It's been 15 years since the civil nuclear deal was announced.

In that time I think Washington has developed an understanding of India's unique disposition, its sensitivities, and its complex relationship with China. And if you look at the record, to my knowledge the Trump administration has not really pushed for India to assume any positions on China it is uncomfortable with.

It's certainly been encouraged when India has supported things like upgrading the Quad or engaging in a joint sail through the South China Sea. Where there has been some friction, it has been over sanctions related to Iran and Russia. On China, the Trump administration hasn't made any attempt to force India to choose.

Is the U.S. approach to China here to stay regardless of the outcome of November's elections?

I believe so. For a long time, I think China was given a free pass with the promise of expected future benefits, including economic and political liberalisation. Those days are over.

I think that bipartisan consensus has not only held but sharpened over the past few years. The competition is here to stay and is likely to intensify. The contours of that competition and points of emphasis might change under different administrations but there is clearly a change under way that I think will be lasting and will endure, regardless of who is in the White House.

Over the years, the U.S. has developed an understanding of India's complex ties with China

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