

## ***Shifting Geopolitics and Anatomy of India-US Relations***

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The Ukraine crisis, more than any other development in recent times, has exposed the opportunities and vulnerabilities inherent in the India-US relationship. While the positive arc in the India-US relationship has stood largely stable amid China's assertive rise in the Indo-Pacific, India's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine raised eyebrows in the United States and among its allies. Many questioned the limits of engagement between India and its western partners, in the face of India's refusal to condemn Russia's aggression besides calling for a cessation of violence and hostilities. However, subsequent meeting involving the Indian and American leadership through the Quad meetings and the India-US '2+2' dialogue have shown the structural convergence between the two democracies are strong enough not to be derailed because of differences over the response to a crisis in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. The India-US bilateral relationship has become multifaceted, and the webs of linkages are too dense to be overtaken by a single issue. The heart of this relationship has been shifting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and the inherent uncertainties. The growing great power of competition between the US and China, and the geopolitical rivalry between India and a proximate power like China deeply influence the trajectory of the India-US partnership. While the idea of democratic convergence is propagated as the glue that binds the two countries, and with other like-minded countries such as in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a more realpolitik and hard-nosed assessment of the relationship reveals that the seesaw of Asian geopolitics has indeed been the pivot of the convergence or divergence.

### **Asian Balance of Power**

The relationship between the two most significant democracies of the world has been an intriguing one since the very beginning. At the beginning of the

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new world order post-World War II, the United States emerged as a global power of immense material wealth, producing almost half of the global goods and services. On the other hand, India became independent from the British yoke, as a country with significant ideational power, but hardly any material wealth. As India charted a new path of non-alignment, it did not cross a friendly country of the United States, which saw the world in more binary terms amidst the growing bipolar competition with the Soviet Union. India's foreign policy path, at a time, when it hardly had any leverage and choice, was indeed a pragmatic one, to have the best of both worlds, and cooperate with Moscow as well as Washington, when it served India's interest. Therefore, practising strategic autonomy even then was at the heart of India's non-alignment policy, and its engagement with the outside world. Washington's approach to Delhi, at the beginning of the Cold War, as a democratic counterweight to Communist China in Asia, was largely guided by America's containment strategy, not by lofty ideals of building democratic links.

With a young India showing deep held inhibitions to shed its independent agency in foreign policy and join America's almost evangelical attitude to fighting the spread of communism, Washington turned its eyes to Pakistan, signing the US-Pakistan mutual defence agreement in 1954 bringing Cold War geopolitics right to the doors of South Asia. Pakistan, which was looking for external allies, to close the power asymmetry with Delhi, was ready to latch on to the American offer that was too hard to refuse. On the other hand, for the United States, Pakistan occupied a crucial geostrategic location in the region. However, Cold War geopolitics was hardly linear, and very soon enough, the growing tensions between India and China over disputed borders, and Washington's initiation to wean away India from any potential lineage towards the communist camp, created a new but short-lived opportunity for India and the US. The reverses that Delhi suffered during the 1962 Sino-Indian war left it with no choice but to turn to America for military assistance. The important take-away from this historical footnote is that the United States did not come to India's assistance because India was a democracy. It did so because, in the conflict between two Asian giants, Washington saw an opportunity to pull a non-aligned India closer to the US-led bloc, or at least keep it away from the communist bloc.<sup>1</sup>

This short period of a potential breakthrough in the India-US partnership did not live long owing to the gap between what both Delhi and Washington expected from the relationship. The Pakistan factor also played the spoilsport, given America's inability to extract itself from the partnership it had built with

the military rulers there and Pakistan's overt demands from Washington, to keep India at arm's length, or either pressure Delhi to make concessions on the Kashmir issue.<sup>2</sup> In the early part of the decade of 1960s and more prominently after Pakistan's displeasure with the US approach to the India-Pakistan war in 1965, the Pakistani establishment became more inclined toward reaching out to Communist China. In the latter part of the 1960s, with growing tension developing between the Soviet Union and the PRC, Washington saw another opportunity to disrupt the Asian balance of power in its favour, which deeply affected the course of the India-US relationship taking to what is often termed as the "nadir".<sup>3</sup> Given the current debate on the growing great power competition between the US and China, a bit of historical linkage is important to draw. These words in the Shanghai Communiqué, also called the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC), signed in 1972 that led to the U.S.-China rapprochement come across as particularly pertinent. It said,

Neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony ... China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power politics of any kind.<sup>4</sup>

The rapprochement between the US and China brought together a very unlikely alliance including Pakistan. This created a difficult situation for India with developments in East Pakistan, leading to the India-Pakistan war of 1971. Almost fighting a multiple-front military and diplomatic assault, Delhi had little choice but to work on creating deterrence through its friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. America's decision to deploy the USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal, the Nixon administration's cold attitude towards India, and bonhomie with the military regime in Pakistan, created a deep fissure in the India-US relationship. Moreover, India's peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) in 1974 created more unease in the terms of engagement between the two countries. In the late 1970s, when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, and the US had to fight a proxy war, Pakistan became a frontline state and geopolitical interest mandated Washington overlook Pakistan's quest for nuclear weapons. Pakistan became a conduit for the United States to create the Mujahedeen forces. This, however, did not amount to the complete breaking of the bridge between Delhi and Washington as new understandings were developed between the two, on matters like science and technology.

### **Structural Shift and India-US Engagements**

The end of the Cold War brought a paradigmatic shift in the international system as the US rose as a sole superpower with the demise of the Soviet Union. However, debates arose soon as to how the rise of new power centres will herald the beginning of multipolar world order.<sup>5</sup> In the midst, India took the path of economic liberalisation and took a new look at its engagement with the West in general, and the United States in particular.<sup>6</sup> Washington's outlook towards India also underwent a significant shift, as India began to be viewed as an emerging economy that could take a substantial role in shaping the future world order.<sup>7</sup> India's quest for an overt nuclear weapon power status created some roadblocks in the relationship but it did not take long for both sides to take mutual steps to reach out to each other, for confidence-building measures through bilateral engagements dubbed the "Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott" talks.<sup>8</sup> When the India-Pakistan Kargil War broke out, the Clinton administration was quick to come to India's side, calling out Pakistan's behaviour. This was an overt diplomatic move to herald a new beginning in India-US relations. That these cooperative moves from the American side came close on the heels of India's nuclear test meant that India's rise as an economic power and its importance in the American scheme of things was too substantial to be ignored. Towards the end of his second term, President Bill Clinton paid a monumental visit in March 2000, engaged in extremely successful diplomacy, and became a star speaker at the Indian parliament. The stage was set for a strategic understanding of India-US relations in the new century.

At the very beginning of the new century, as George W Bush took over as the President of the United States, China was yet to become the kind of threat to US global supremacy that is perceived today. Even while campaigning for the presidential elections, foreign policy advisers who would occupy major positions in the Bush administration wrote about the China factor in US foreign policy, and why India should be counted in as a probable partner in the times to come.<sup>9</sup> However, the devastating 9/11 attacks, led the United States to launch Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. This perhaps distracted the US from its grand strategy to deal with a rising China, and by opening another war front with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States diverted resources and attention. With the US engaged in very costly military ventures that had no end in sight, and came to be termed "forever wars", the international system had a vacuum wherein China could grow more strategic footprints in Asia and beyond. At a time when the Bush administration was becoming

increasingly unpopular at home and across the world, the India-US relationship saw an upward trend and a better mutual understanding of the strategic ramifications of China's rise.

This period saw the initiation of the negotiations towards the next steps in strategic partnership (NSSP) and the monumental India-US civil nuclear agreement that paved way for greater understanding between the political leadership and the bureaucracies of the two countries. A significant joint statement on July 15, 2005, between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Bush, called India "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology". In the joint statement, President Bush assured Prime Minister Singh that "he will work to achieve full civil nuclear energy cooperation with India as it realizes its goals of promoting nuclear power and achieving energy security". "The President would also seek agreement from Congress to adjust U.S. laws and policies, and the United States will work with friends and allies to adjust international regimes to enable full civil nuclear energy cooperation and trade with India, including but not limited to expeditious consideration of fuel supplies for safeguarded nuclear reactors at Tarapur", the statement said.<sup>10</sup>

The road to signing the nuclear deal required great efforts to bring together different political spectrums on the same page in both countries and this entailed detailed hitherto unseen attempts on both ends. The level at which negotiations took place between the two countries also for the granting of the India-specific waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) required bureaucracies in both the countries to create habits of cooperation like never before and produced a conducive environment for greater understanding in many areas, most prominently in the defence sector.<sup>11</sup> While the India-US relationship was growing rapidly, Pakistan too occupied, even if reluctant, a central position in the US global war on terrorism. Pakistan's links with the Taliban made Pakistan's assistance crucial in terms of fighting the war on terrorism. Although Pakistan's duplicity, of playing a double game in Afghanistan, raised many questions in Washington relating to Pakistan's status as a non-NATO ally, the United States never really found a clear way to extricate itself from the quagmire. The Bush administration embarked on a policy popularly dubbed "de-hyphenation", wherein the United States intended to deal with India and Pakistan on their own merits.<sup>12</sup>

By the second term of the Bush administration, the India-US relationship was moving into a stable realm branching out into multifaceted areas, but the fundamental base was defence cooperation. The signing of the India-US Defence Framework Agreement in 2005 substantially laid the groundwork

for the upward trend that was to be seen in the years to come, when American-made military equipment would find its way into the Indian Armed Forces' military hardware. The developments of cooperation in the defence sector were to be increasingly seen in the form of "successful joint exercises, expanded defence cooperation and information sharing, and greater opportunities to jointly develop technologies and address security and humanitarian issues." India-US maritime cooperation was turning out to be one of the major areas of convergence in terms of "commitment to the protection of the free flow of commerce and the safety of navigation". In a joint statement between India and the United States in 2006, both sides, "... agreed to the conclusion of a Maritime Cooperation Framework to enhance security in the maritime domain, to prevent piracy and other transnational crimes at sea, carry out search and rescue operations, combat marine pollution, respond to natural disasters, address emergent threats and enhance cooperative capabilities, including through logistics support".<sup>13</sup>

It was deemed to be in the mutual interest of both sides given the changing strategic environment in Asia with the rise of China, one that threatened America's primacy and regional stability to the detriment of India's interest. Over the years, the sophistication in the type of military-to-military exercises and the defence purchases between the two countries will sign the seriousness of purpose in the relationship. The US National Security Strategy of 2006 contended,

We have made great strides in transforming America's relationship with India, a major power that shares our commitment to freedom, democracy, and rule of law. In July 2005, we signed a bold agreement – a roadmap to realize the meaningful cooperation that had eluded our two nations for decades. India now is poised to shoulder global obligations in cooperation with the United States in a way befitting a major power.<sup>14</sup>

Highlighting the policy of de-hyphenation, which aimed to maintain good relations with India and Pakistan simultaneously, the strategy mentioned that "progress with India has been achieved even as the United States has improved its strategic relationship with Pakistan". "For decades, outsiders acted as if good relations with India and Pakistan were mutually exclusive. This Administration has shown that improved relations with each are possible and can help India and Pakistan make strides toward a lasting peace between themselves. America's relationship with Pakistan will not be a mirror image of our relationship with India," it said.<sup>15</sup> Some sort of bipartisan support was developing towards the India-US partnership that was to be seen in how both

the Republicans and Democrats in the US were favouring a positive trend in the relationship, and the major national parties in India, the BJP as well as the Congress favoured worked in pushing the partnership ahead. Despite facing flak for his Afghanistan policy and the debacle in Iraq, the trends in the India-US relationship were perhaps an unappreciated high point of the otherwise controversial Bush presidency. The primary legacy of this period would always be the efforts that both sides made and the extra mile that they walked in terms of realising the India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement. This also saw the re-invention of the Indian lobby in the United States that showed hitherto unseen energy and initiative in working with both parties in the US political scene to improve appreciation of India-US convergence and the significance of the nuclear agreement. The India-US nuclear deal was much more than the commercial aspect of the sale of American nuclear reactors and the objective of India's energy security had a much larger purpose of engineering a strategic unison between the two countries. The Bush administration had invested a lot of energy into pushing ahead the India-US ties to a higher level, with India featuring more prominently in the US grand strategy of counteracting China's rise. Given India's challenge of handling the ramifications of China's rise in its vicinity, it served India's objective as well as protecting and promoting India's interests.

### **America's Pivot and India's Role**

With the growth in India's material capabilities and expressions to become a power of global consequences becoming more overt, the United States began reorienting towards its strategy to accommodate India's concerns and aspirations. While a strict military alliance remains a foreign policy taboo for India, the strategic convergence between the two countries has been unmistakable. Both sides have invested time and energy towards managing mutual expectations and pursuing more strategic clarity in the relationship over the years. In the early days of the Obama administration after a hugely appreciated Bush administration, there were concerns in Delhi of a probable lull in the relationship. The concerns in India were relating to how the Democrats under Obama's presidency would respond to US-China relations, proposed US activism on the Kashmir issue, non-proliferation issues, and presumably reduced zeal for implementing the Indo-US nuclear deal. But efforts made to dispel the misunderstandings yielded quick results, and this came in the form of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to India in July 2009. The 2010 National Security Strategy of the United States pointed out

that the two countries were “building a strategic partnership that is underpinned by our shared interests, our shared values as the world’s two largest democracies, and close connections among our people”. “Working together through our Strategic Dialogue and high-level visits, we seek a broad-based relationship in which India contributes to global counterterrorism efforts, non-proliferation, and helps promote poverty-reduction, education, health, and sustainable agriculture”, it said.<sup>16</sup> President Obama’s visit in November 2010 during his first term in office helped augment the importance of the Indo-US partnership. President Barack Obama during his address to the Joint House of the Indian Parliament said that the United States not only welcomed India as a rising global power but also fervently supported it. Besides, he identified India not as an “emerging” country but one that has “emerged”. The joint statement between President Obama and Prime Minister Singh commented,

The transformation in India-U.S. Defence cooperation in recent years has strengthened mutual understanding on regional peace and stability, enhanced both countries’ respective capacities to meet humanitarian and other challenges such as terrorism and piracy, and contributed to the development of the strategic partnership between India and the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Both sides resolved, “to further strengthen defence cooperation, including through security dialogue, exercises, and promoting trade and collaboration in defence equipment and technology.”<sup>18</sup> The joint statement also acknowledged the growing importance of convergence of purpose of “the stability of, and access to, the air, sea, space, and cyberspace domains”.<sup>19</sup>

The future of the strategic partnership between the two countries lies in a pragmatic and nuanced understanding of why India and the USA need each other, what the USA expects India to do, what India can and is willing to do, and what India expects the USA to do, and what the USA is capable of and willing to do. The rise of India’s capabilities and aspirations in Asia, and at the global level, are in the interest of the USA; and the sustenance of US power and influence in Asia, and globally, are in the interest of India. The India-US strategic partnership was seen as a vital component in the foreign policies of both India and the United States and was poised to gain increasing importance as Washington began to fashion its Asia Pivot strategy or what began to call as the rebalancing strategy toward the Asia-Pacific. Washington saw a crucial role for India in its rebalancing strategy and in managing China’s rise. America through this strategy intended to “expand” its “military partnerships” and its “presence in the arc extending from Western Pacific and East Asia into the



Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia”. And, “defence cooperation with India” according to the U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta’ was a “linchpin in this strategy”.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. government documents released around this time also affirmed that the U.S. military, while working with traditional allies, intended new partnerships including with countries like India, which according to the U.S., could “serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region”.<sup>21</sup> The geopolitical realities that brought India and the United States together in the first place, have remained steady despite the change of administrations on both sides.

Despite initial hiccups, the bonhomie that developed between the Obama and the Modi administration led to a hugely successful visit to the United States in 2014. Prime Minister and President Obama, in an unprecedented move, wrote a joint Op-ed for the *Washington Post* outlining the main features of the “renewed U.S.-India partnership for the twenty-first century”. “Today our partnership is robust, reliable and enduring, and it is expanding. Our relationship involves more bilateral collaboration than ever before — not just at the federal level but also at the state and local levels, between our two militaries, private sectors and civil society,” it said.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the decision to invite President Barack Obama as the Chief Guest in India’s Republic Day celebrations in 2015 was a masterstroke in public diplomacy that yielded dividends in both optics and substance. It was indeed a moment of transformation in the India-US relations representing the culmination of a dramatic shift in the worldviews of both countries. The fact that India extended the invitation and that the US President accepted it, reflected a sea change in how both the countries were beginning to view each other’s roles and priorities in their respective worldviews and strategic calculations.

The visit also produced a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, emphasising several issue areas including economic integration of South, Southeast and Central Asia, maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over-flight. “Over the next five years, we will strengthen our regional dialogues, invest in making trilateral consultations with third countries in the region more robust, deepen regional integration, strengthen regional forums, explore additional multilateral opportunities for engagement, and pursue areas where we can build capacity in the region that bolster long-term peace and prosperity for all,” the document noted.<sup>23</sup> The Obama administration pushing for the refocus on the Asia-Pacific region meant increasing commonalities, for instance, with India’s Act East policy. The strategic priorities in both Washington and Delhi seem to be becoming more congruent, paving the way for a more multifaceted relationship. Several

strategic documents released during the Obama administration categorically affirmed India's growing role in how Washington was reorienting its strategic outlook and the value of new partnerships. During his visit to the US in 2016 as well, Prime Minister Modi addressing the Joint Session of the US Congress propounded the transformation in the India-US relationship. "Today, our relationship has overcome the hesitations of history. Comfort, candour and convergence define our conversations. Through the cycle of elections and transitions of Administrations the intensity of our engagements has only grown," he told the US Congress.<sup>24</sup>

### **India-US Partnership in the Indo-Pacific Era**

The coming of the Trump administration in the United States, despite the overwhelming criticism at home and abroad, saw the continuation of the positive trend in India-US relations. With India being increasingly viewed as the resident custodian of the Indian Ocean and the US seen as the security guarantor of the Pacific Ocean, the official ushering in of the Indo-Pacific era in the Trump administration was a step ahead in the partnership. The frequency and the sophistication of the military-to-military interoperability exercises between India and the US have grown over the years and the signing of the foundational agreements between the two countries has created augmented coordination. Moreover, the renaming of the Pacific Command (PACOM) as the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) has been seen as a recognition of India's central role in preserving peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region and emerging ties with the US Navy in the IOR and the larger Indo-Pacific region. The Quadrilateral Initiative also called as the Quad between India, the US, Japan and Australia has grown to a multifaceted dimension, and is not just focused on the China factor although the primary base of engagement remains the ways and means to manage China's strategic rise.

While India needs to find ways to engage with distant powers like the US to balance against a proximate power like China, the dynamics between neighbouring powers like India and China, present major complexities in managing the duality of competition and cooperation. For instance, any signs of a U.S-China power condominium might make India uneasy, and at the same time, India might be uncomfortable being sucked into any U.S.-China confrontation. Many documents released during the Trump administration's US national security strategy or on the Indo-Pacific region, view India as a primary player and partner in the scheme of things. The Joint Statement *United States and India: Prosperity through Partnership* released after Prime

Minister Modi met President Donald Trump in June 2017 reiterated “the importance of respecting freedom of navigation, over-flight, and commerce” throughout the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>25</sup> The NSS 2017 and the National Defense Strategy of 2018 specified the relevance of the Indo-Pacific region in US foreign policy priorities and the importance accorded to the emergence of India as a “leading power” in the region.

The 2+2 dialogue between the Foreign and Defence Ministers of India and the United States has been one of the most significant platforms for discussion on critical issues between the two countries. Such initiatives survive the change of administrations, and strengthen over a period of time, showing the seriousness of strategic purpose in the relationship. Certainly, there are divergences in the relationship, as there would be, between any two countries, located in different geographies, with distinct historical experiences and differing threat perceptions. That the India-US relationship has a complicated history and an equally complex present, albeit a future filled with opportunities and vulnerabilities is to state the obvious. This relationship has always had a multifaceted agenda spanning across military and non-military dimensions, but perhaps for the first time, Delhi and Washington unambiguously share a broad strategic vision, that centres on managing China’s rise. Such a strategic unison has helped cement habits of cooperation between the two otherwise chaotic democracies and build a sustained political bonhomie and the sense of partnership in the Indo-Pacific remains firm despite some public dissonance on the Ukraine crisis. The relationship is multifaceted and the Quad The Ministers, “welcomed ongoing discussions in the Quad Working Groups on vaccines, climate change, infrastructure, space, cyber security, and critical and emerging technologies for delivering practical and tangible benefits to the region”.

### **Conclusions**

The trajectory of India-US relations and their mutual perceptions of each other has been a peculiar one, in the sense that they have neither been brother in arms nor have they been sworn, enemies. Currently, it is clear that both India and the US occupy an important place in each other’s strategies and that current geopolitics favours an India-US strategic congruence. The relationship has seen its ebbs and flows, from strategic divergence during the Cold War to a new-found strategic convergence in what is now being heralded as the time of the “Indo-Pacific”. The coldness of the Cold War years has given way to the warmth of a new strategic embrace between India and the

United States. From the final days of the Clinton administration through the Bush and the Obama years and the Trump era, there has been support for the strategic partnership cutting across political divides in both countries. There is increasing acknowledgement from both sides of the new geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific, wherein both India and the US are critical stakeholders.

The implications of China's rise and the resultant attempts of the US to manage the former are commensurate with India's strategic imperatives, which include ensuring a stable Indo-Pacific for its uninterrupted growth and development. The India-US relationship has been given several epithets, including being called "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century". However, if a formal alliance with the US remains taboo for India's foreign policy, the key question remains: what would guide the extent and limitations of mutual expectations between the two countries? The practice of India's strategic autonomy has always been about creating traction for the pursuit of India's national interests, and India's ability to do so will be tested in how it manages its great power relationship with the United States. While there is certainly strategic unison between India and the United States in terms of deterring the rise of an aggressive China capable of unilateral actions in the Indo-Pacific, India likes to chart its path that is not determined or defined in a foreign capital. In the final analysis, what is clear is that the trajectory of the India-US relationship has been primarily driven by the vagaries of geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the foreign and national security sherpas of India to stay grounded in a realistic and hard-nosed assessment of the opportunities and vulnerabilities of the India-US partnership.

#### **Notes:**

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<sup>25</sup> “Joint Statement - United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28560/Joint+Statement++United+States+and+India +Prosperity+Through+Partnership>

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