

India's relations with the USA

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Introduction

In 2000 US President William (Bill) Clinton stood up in the Indian parliament and extolled the ideational values, in this case 'democracy', which united India and the USA.¹ India was the world's biggest democracy in population terms, and the USA was the world's biggest democracy in power terms. In their subsequent Joint Statement, *India-US Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century* (2000), both countries stressed these values shared in common, and looked forward to 'a day of new beginnings' in relations between the two countries.² The irony is that from the 1950s through to the 1990s India and the USA were rather estranged, yet a decade later India was indeed 'crossing the Rubicon' in establishing close defence-military-strategic links with the USA, with the People's Republic of China as a third-party (unstated) consideration.³ The Indian-US relationship now looks set to be a central one for the emerging international system of the 21st century. This chapter looks at their estrangement and then their convergence.

Cold War estrangement

Ironies abound in their relationship. Take, for example, the last days of British colonialism. Winston Churchill may have famously said that he had not become Prime Minister in order to preside over the death of the British Empire, yet it was US pressure, by Franklin D. Roosevelt, that played its part in pushing Britain to retreat from India, its 'jewel in the crown'.⁴ The USA should have been in pole position as India took its place as an independent state, proudly proclaiming the virtues of democracy, yet instead it was a situation of 'estranged democracies' for the following decades.⁵

Divergent alignments

Even as an independent democratic India emerged, external politics were pulling apart the otherwise natural convergence that their internal politics (democracy) would have suggested. By 1947 the world was sliding into the Cold War. On the one hand stood the USA, looking for

allies and commitment and swiftly engaged in building up alliances (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—NATO, the Central Treaty Organization—CENTO, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization—SEATO), which would encircle and contain the USSR. Its logic was that if states were not with it then they were against it. On the other hand, India refused to align itself with either the US (or Soviet) camp. For the USA there was no third way, however, and Nehru's advocacy of non-alignment was viewed at best as weak and hypocritical, and at worst as giving the advantage to the USSR.

Even whilst India resolutely proclaimed the virtues of non-alignment, its adversary Pakistan was quick to align with the USA and its alignment systems, joining CENTO and SEATO on either side of India, as it were. US military supplies to Pakistan in the 1950s may have been seen as strengthening Pakistan as an anti-communist bulwark, but for India it was an enabling device for Pakistan to try and maintain strategic parity with India. As Nehru put it in 1954, 'this granting of military aid by the United States to Pakistan creates a grave situation for us in India [...] it adds to our tensions'.⁶ Such logic continues down to the present.

Some of the rhetoric could still be invoked. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' visit to India in 1962 saw the spell of Camelot cast over India, and Jawaharlal Nehru suitably entranced. However, whilst Nehru did, in effect, tear-up his non-alignment distance and ask for US military aid amidst the military debacle against China, the reluctance of the USA to commit itself to any significant assistance meant a continuation of the rather cool nature of US-Indian relations. Conversely, US relations with Pakistan worried India, with ongoing concerns expressed by India: 'the Government of India regrets the decision of the United States Government to undertake supplies of spare parts of lethal weapons to Pakistan [...] the reactivation of Pakistan's military machine, which the US decision will necessarily bring about, will pose a threat again to India'.⁷ Such coolness in relations between India and the USA were compounded by India's tilt towards the USSR that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the reasons for the Sino-Soviet split had been Moscow's support of India's position in the lead up to war, with Soviet military supplies being a significant factor in the rebuilding of India's military strength after 1962. Nehru's advocacy of centrally planned economies saw him closer to Soviet-style economics than to US-style deregulated capitalism.

Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, continued this tilt toward the USSR, signified in the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation that they signed in 1971. From India's point of view, the USSR was the major power giving it support, whilst for Pakistan it was the USA (and China). Such entanglements were on show in 1971 when the USA supported Pakistan, not wishing to see India's power advantages further strengthened in South Asia at the expense of Pakistan. India's sense of US hostility was palpable: 'the United States Government is still side-stepping the central issue [Pakistani domestic suppression] and is responding with flagrant injustice in attempting to pin the major responsibility for the present conflict on India'.⁸ Indira Gandhi felt that, 'our relationship as a whole has been uneasy over a long period of time. To our grave concern, U.S. policy as it developed impinged seriously on our vital interests [...] in regard to Bangladesh and during the December war, the United States openly backed Pakistan'.⁹ The US position was that, 'this has been a full-scale invasion in East Pakistan, and it must stop' (George Bush), and that, 'it is the US view that India's recourse to military action was unjustified' (Henry Kissinger).¹⁰ Consequently, elements of the US 7th Fleet were sent into the Bay of Bengal, complete with aircraft carrier, to put pressure on India. Such pressure was, though, countered by firm diplomatic support and signs of Soviet readiness to deploy its own military muscle to block such US moves.

India continued to show worries over the US naval presence in the region. In 1974 it was a question that 'we are deeply concerned at the continuing presence of the US naval task force in

the Indian Ocean which is confirmed by the arrival of the aircraft carrier “Kitty Hawk”.¹¹ India also felt that it was not being taken seriously by the USA.¹² In the world of the 1980s, the Cold War II period, India saw threats from extra-regional superpowers as particularly posed by the USA, with New Delhi decrying US military moves in the Indian Ocean, including the setting up of military base facilities on Diego Garcia.

India noted with increasing concern that an area in which the two countries appeared to be following divergent policies was the continuing military build-up by the United States in the Indian Ocean area [...] The build-up included the expansion of the Diego Garcia base and the reported decision that it would be built up as a major air, naval and perhaps nuclear facility [...] and the plans of the USA for the creation of a rapid deployment force of 110,000 personnel for use primarily in the Indian Ocean. Reports about [US] seeking of fuelling, re-stocking and rest and recreation facilities at littoral ports and attempts to acquire base facilities have caused serious concern to the Government of India and other non-aligned states.¹³

The USA saw India as providing assistance to the Soviet deployment from Vladivostok to Viet Nam and into the Indian Ocean, the so-called ‘Arc of Crisis’. The unwillingness of India to denounce the Soviet move into Afghanistan in 1979 was seen as further grounds of difference between the two states.

In contrast, of course, Pakistan’s firmly anti-Soviet position over Afghanistan brought it support, and military supplies, from the USA. India’s position was clear, it was unhappy, just as Nehru had been back in 1954. Its attempts in 1982 to block US sales to Pakistan were unsuccessful:

The US decision to supply sophisticated arms to Pakistan ostensibly as a reaction to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, aroused apprehensions in India. In the past, India had more than once been a victim of Pakistani aggression. The possibility of the introduction of a new generation of armaments into the sub-continent, heightened the fears based on past experience. The concern of the Government of India about the US decision was, therefore, conveyed adequately to the United States at various levels but unfortunately without result [...] The passage of the proposals on the security assistance to Pakistan through the US Congress which confirmed the Administration’s decision, cast a shadow over bilateral relations which showed no signs of lifting at the year end.¹⁴

India continued to be concerned about US (and Chinese) military aid to Pakistan. As for the USA, it viewed India with coolness at best. In 1992 the US position was that, ‘we should discourage Indian hegemonic aspirations over the other States in South Asia and on the Indian Ocean’.¹⁵ The following year, US officials were stressing, ‘let me make it very clear. We are not seeking a strategic relationship with India’.¹⁶ The irony there is that that was precisely the trajectory of US-Indian links.

Post-Cold War convergence

The post-Cold War period posed new challenges to India and the USA. For India, the break-up of the USSR in effect removed its previous close ally with which it had a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, but also removed the ideological battleground that had seen India tilting towards a USSR with which the USA was in competition. The collapse of the USSR also left India potentially more isolated within the international system. For the USA, the

collapse of the USSR had indeed removed their Cold War foe, against which it had constructed alliances and judged other countries like India. However, whilst the Cold War period had seen a strategic logic bringing the USA and China together against a common Soviet threat, the removal of the USSR removed that logic and left China as the emerging rival power to the USA. India's own problems with China (territorial disputes and so forth) remained as keen as ever. India's own rise in Asia was bringing it increasingly up against an equally (or even more strongly) rising China. Classic International Relations (IR) *balance of power* (Kenneth Waltz) factors would have suggested a China-India balance against the USA. Instead, Stephen Walt-style *balance of threat* factors of aggregate power, offensive capabilities, perceived offensive intentions and geographical proximity seemed more important for India, particularly on account of the last two (perceived offensive intentions, geographical proximity), to balance instead with the USA against China.

Such considerations were already affecting how India and the USA regarded each other. The US Administration of Bill Clinton (1993–2001) was quick enough to move towards India, with Clinton's 'Community of Democracies' providing some of the ideological underpinnings for this. Some initial steps were signalled in the Agreed Minute on Defense Cooperation, which was signed in January 1995, a 'first important step' with its talk of 'gradually increasing cooperation in defense research and production', which 'begins the process for deepening and strengthening the security relations between India and the United States of America [...] significant and really historic because we have now been more than four decades absent that kind of security relationship'.¹⁷ However, the pace was slow. As the US Secretary of Defense, William Perry, put it, 'in India, I stressed that arms sales were simply not on the agenda. I did say that we would look for ways of gradually increasing cooperation in defense research and production, but I emphasized that this will not be an area for immediate or bold steps'.¹⁸ US supplies to Pakistan continued, as they still do, to complicate relations with India: 'the Government of India deeply regrets [...] the US decision to take no action on the clandestine acquisition by Pakistan of 5,000 ring magnets for its nuclear weapons programme, and indeed to continue uninterruptedly with its transfer of sophisticated US arms to Pakistan'.¹⁹

An important turning point was the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998. Their first decision of substance was to press ahead with nuclear testing, Pokhran-II. The US response was quick: 'this week I want to speak to you about a matter of grave concern to the United States and the international community, India's nuclear test explosion. These tests were unjustified and threaten to spark a dangerous nuclear arms race in Asia. As a result, and in accordance with our laws, I have imposed serious sanctions against India, including an end to our economic assistance, military financing', albeit lifted by November 1998.²⁰

By then, Atal Bihari Vajpayee had been quick to make a play for stronger Indian-US relations in September 1998. In his speech, 'India, USA and the World' to the Asia Society he argued that they were 'estranged democracies', in which US preference for relations with Pakistan and China had blinded it to the role that India could play. His vision was one where, 'Indo-US ties based on equality and mutuality of interests is going to be the mainstay of tomorrow's stable, democratic world order'. The stress on a democratic world order is an interesting slant pointing not just to US-Indian domestic politics of democratic pluralism, but also to a more democratic international system, where US unipolarity was giving way to multipolarity (what some would call the 'democratization of international relations'). He went on, 'India and the US are natural allies in the quest for a better future for the world in the 21st century'. Raja Mohan sees it as 'simple in its conception but a breathtaking departure from India's traditional foreign policy of non-alignment and anti-American and anti-Western orientation', a 'brazen pitch for an alliance with Washington'.²¹

Clinton's own trip to India in 2000, at the end of his presidency, gave further momentum to this rapprochement. His comments to a Joint Session of the Indian parliament soothed Indian sensibilities, especially his comments that, 'we welcome India's leadership in the region', and 'we want to take our partnership to a new level'.²² Amidst the emphasis of democracy and human rights inspiration of Gandhi in the USA, the economic take-off of India was also a feature noted by him:

You liberated your markets, and now have one of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world [...] Americans have applauded your efforts to open your economy, your commitment to a new wave of economic reform[; such that] we are proud to support India's growth as your largest partner in trade and investment. And we want to see more Indians and more Americans benefit from our economic ties, especially in the cutting fields of information technology, biotechnology, and clean energy. The private sector will drive this progress.²³

What was significant in this late Clinton setting was that their relationship still seemed to be a matter of *soft power* values (democracy, pluralism) and *hard power* (economics), but with *hard power* military-security issues much less evident. A sense of 'estranged democracies' was giving way to 'engaged democracies'.²⁴

Anti-terrorism

One element pulling them closer together was not the state-level challenge of China, but the transnational threat of terrorism. India for some time had been warning about the dangers of *jihadist* acts of violence, erupting across Kashmir during the 1980s but also targeting the rest of India, as with the Mumbai bombings of 1993 which saw 250 people die. The hijacking of Indian Airlines IC 814 brought discussion and the setting-up of an Indo-US Joint Working Group on terrorism in February 2000, wherein the two countries agreed to share experiences, exchange information and co-ordinate approaches and action.²⁵ As part of its assistance to India, the USA offered to give anti-terrorism training for inter-departmental co-ordination, crisis response and consequence management.

Under the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–09), the USA faced its own outrages, notably the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 at the hands of al-Qa'ida. India was quick to give full support, including transit facilities, as the USA moved against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had hosted al-Qa'ida. Manmohan Singh's visit to the USA in November 2001 gave him the opportunity to express the fullest and strongest support for the USA. The joint Indian-US statement noted that, 'since September 11, the people of the United States and India have been united as never before in the fight against terrorism. In so doing, they have together reaffirmed [...] the importance of further transforming the US-India relationship [...] they noted that both countries are targets of terrorism, as seen in the barbaric attacks on 11th September in the United States and on 1st October in Kashmir'.²⁶ The importance for India was the linking of Kashmiri 'terrorism' to terrorism elsewhere.

On 20 December 2001, following the attack on the Indian parliament, the USA placed the *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* on all three US terrorist lists: the Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list, the Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT) list, and the Terrorist Exclusion List. In addition, it called upon Pakistan to take steps to crack down on terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and to take decisive action against *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and other terrorist organizations, their leaders, finances and activities.

India could continue to express concern over US unwillingness to name Pakistan as a 'state sponsor of terrorism'.²⁷ On the one hand, Pakistan's previous support of the Taliban Government had left uncertainties over Pakistan's position after the terrorist attacks on the USA. Nevertheless, Pakistan's position as the immediate front-line state for operations in Pakistan gave it leverage over the USA, which continued to need Pakistan's assistance more than it needed India's in the immediate efforts to curb Taliban and al-Qa'ida operatives in Pakistan. Potentially, it also enabled Pakistan to try to trade its assistance to the USA over taking action against Taliban/al-Qa'ida forces in Pakistan for the USA taking a more pro-Pakistan position over Kashmir.

Nevertheless, India could project itself as standing shoulder to shoulder with the USA in the global 'war on terrorism'.²⁸ Such a line-up was helped by a reference by Osama bin Laden in an audio message on *Al Jazeera* on 23 April 2006, wherein he spoke of a 'Crusader-Zionist-Hindu' conspiracy.²⁹ The bombings carried out across Mumbai in November 2008 strengthened their common anti-*jihadist* concerns. The fact that the Mumbai bombers had entered India from Pakistan strengthened India's attempts to get the USA to distance itself more from Pakistan.

Defence convergence

The most significant development in recent years has been the convergence between India and the USA in security-military areas. This has taken India far from the days of Nehru and Indira Gandhi with their campaigns for non-alignment and for getting the USA out of the Indian Ocean.

Even as the Clinton Administration was coming to an end, the incoming Republican Administration under George W. Bush was dreaming of recasting the international system. His prospective National Security Council (and later Secretary of State) adviser, Condoleezza Rice, was already talking of constraining China: 'China is not a "status quo" power but one that would like to alter Asia's balance of power in its own favor. That alone makes it a strategic competitor' for the USA, but also for India.³⁰ Her take was to note that the USA, 'should pay closer attention to India's role in the regional balance. There is a strong tendency conceptually to connect India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one', and one able to join the USA in balancing China.³¹

Such strategic logic dominated US-Indian relations during the Bush presidency and was reciprocated by both BJP- and Congress-led governments in India. By the time of Vajpayee's visit to the USA, in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks, India and the USA were talking of creating a 'strategic partnership' between the two countries. Indian commentators like Ganguly could talk of 'the start of a beautiful friendship' in 2003, with January 2004 seeing the US-Indian Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative being launched.³² The following year saw the launching of the Indian-US Global Democracy Initiative (GDI). Such a strategic convergence was seen by hard-headed Indian commentators as 'inevitable', driven by common geopolitical imperatives and common *balance of threat* analyses directed at China.³³ Neither India nor the USA wished to pursue hard containment antagonistic rejection of China; both were trying to engage with China where possible. However, as part of their mutual hedging strategies towards China both were ready to strengthen their own security relationship, to engage in elements of unstated but apparent balancing as well towards China. The terminology being used by 2002 was of, 'a more robust military partnership'.³⁴ This involved their talk, and substance, by 2002, 'of the impressive growth in military cooperation between India and the

United States [...] But the long-term goal is much more ambitious, and is based on strategic, diplomatic and political cooperation'.³⁵ From India's point of view, geopolitical extension of power was indicated in the agreement in 2002 for Indian ships *INS Sharda* and *Sukanya* to take over from the USA in escorting ships through the Straits of Malacca.

With regard to alignment, the key development was the Defence Agreement drawn up in 2005 between the two countries. This defence convergence had real teeth to it, amidst growing deliberate moves to foster inter-operability of forces. It has involved India in purchasing powerful and advanced weapons from the USA. At sea, India's purchase of USS Trenton (commissioned in 2007 as *INS Jalasha*, the second biggest vessel in the Indian fleet) gave India long-range, amphibious deployment capabilities for Indian Ocean operations, whilst the 2009 agreement to purchase the latest Boeing P-8 AWAC planes gave further long-range tracking capabilities. In the Indian Ocean, Indira Gandhi's 1980s strictures against US presence have given way to continued and substantive co-operation. The MALABAR exercises are but one of an extensive and varied range of bilateral exercises (e.g. COPE), with the USA in which India is now regularly involved. A particularly interesting variant was the MALABAR-1 exercises, which took place between the Indian and US Navies in the Western Pacific in 2007. MALABAR-2 was equally interesting, later that year, in which units from Japan, Australia and Singapore joined the Indian and US Navies in the Bay of Bengal, to China's disquiet. Such defence-military convergence was also echoed in the Joint Declaration in 2005 to co-operate over nuclear energy, with the USA lifting its previous restrictions on nuclear trade, with domestic and international legislation completed by 2009.

Conclusions

US-India strategic co-operation is set to run into the 21st century.³⁶ The context for this is India's rise within the international system. The Indian leadership, looking at the new Barack Obama Administration, judged that, 'the new US Administration has, indeed, focused on continuity in the bilateral relationship. In this, is the inherent recognition of India's place in the world, our regional role, and our demonstrable economic strength and potential'.³⁷ The US Quadrennial Review (2010) was equally clear about India's impact:

As the economic power, cultural reach, and political influence of India increase, it is assuming a more influential role in global affairs. This growing influence, combined with democratic values it shares with the United States, an open political system, and a commitment to global stability, will present many opportunities for cooperation. India's military capabilities are rapidly improving through increased defense acquisitions, and they now include long-range maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction and patrolling, air interdiction, and strategic airlift. India has already established its worldwide military influence through counterpiracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts. As its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.³⁸

In geopolitical terms, there seems to be an unofficial shift taking place as the USA shores up its position in the Western Pacific (e.g. Guam), but starts to stand to one side to see India assume a greater role in the Indian Ocean as, indeed, a 'net provider of security'.

A lot of this recent US-India convergence has been because of their common concerns about China. As India's Minister of External Affairs, Nirupama Rao, gently alluded to in her 2010 address, 'The United States and India: Chartering the Future Course':

The rise of China is of course observed with close attention in our region. China's demonstrable economic strength and its growing military capabilities are a matter of fact and we must incorporate such factors into our calculus of the emerging 21st century scenario in the Asia Pacific. This is where a mature and evolving dialogue between India and the United States will be of considerable relevance in clarifying approaches to the regional situation and the policy approaches of roles of our two countries in these new [China-related] circumstances.³⁹

However, both partners remain concerned not to forego engagement links with China, with which they both have bigger trading links.⁴⁰ India is concerned about the USA playing the 'India card' to gain concessions from China, before then dropping India, whilst the USA is also concerned about India playing the 'US card' in order to again concessions from China, before then dropping the USA.

At the regional (Asia and the Indian Ocean) level, the long-term logic of Walt's *balance of threat* pulls India and the USA together, though at the global level the logic of Walt's *balance of power* in the long term pulls India together with other powers like Russia, China and Brazil (the BRIC formation), to replace US unipolarity with multipolarity. The common position of India and the USA as democracies does, however, provide a substantial ideational base for long-term co-operation, whilst geopolitically their respective spheres and strategic backyards do not particularly overlap, leading Rao to not inaccurately sum up that, 'our collaboration and cooperation will be indispensable for shaping the character of the 21st century', in which 'we share common values and common strategic interests'.⁴¹

Notes

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