



Indo-US Relations: Retrospect and Prospect

India's foreign policy has been guided by non-interference, non-alignment and non-aggression. In the post-Cold War era, India and the United States have learnt to deal with their differences with sensitivity, patience and understanding as the recent developments suggest. The destinies of the two great countries are interlinked and the strategic partnership between them is likely to be one of the defining features of the 21st century. However, it is often said that the interests of an emerging power, i.e., India and that of a hegemonic power, i.e., US have remained incompatible for a long time.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States was accused by India of practicing double standards. While the US condemned India for practicing human rights abuses, of pursuing an unethical non-alignment and engaging in nuclear proliferation, none of the same issues seemed to matter in America's approach towards Pakistan. Washington turned a blind eye as Pakistan developed a nuclear weapon programme and proceeded to export its technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran. The objective of the two countries to advance regional security is impeded by the continuation of US military aid to Pakistan. This is done through presidential waivers to overcome the provisions of the Kerry-Lugar legislation, which requires Pakistan to act responsibly against terrorist groups on its soil before US aid can be released. Washington's current policy of equidistance with Pakistan still smacks of double standards and does not inspire trust in India.

Ever since 9/11, both India and the US have embarked on security cooperation like never before. The cooperation that began with the "war against terror" has only grown, with divergent threats facing both the countries. The US has recently hinted that it would provide an exhortative ground for new security cooperation with India. While in the past, the United States had virtually no defence ties with India, the former today has overtaken Russia as the largest arms supplier to India in the last few years. In addition, India has the largest number of joint military exercises with the United States today.

Today, India has not only joined the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), but is also likely to be accepted as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) with US backing.

An understanding between the two countries on national tracking and liability issues has already removed political roadblocks in the way of civilian nuclear cooperation. With India ratifying the Convention on Supplementary Compensation, an international nuclear liability regime, the decks have been cleared for supplying US nuclear reactors to India.

With rising security threats posed by state and non-state actors, India needs strong strategic partnership with the US to bolster its military capabilities. Border disputes with two immediate neighbours – China and Pakistan – combined with asymmetric security threats posed by jihadist terrorism, the expansion of al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) in the subcontinent, drive India's push for a deeper strategic partnership with the US. The recent India-US Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) is a move in this direction. In the post-withdrawal period in Kabul, a more intense New Delhi-Washington cooperation will be required to preserve and secure the shared long-term commitment to help build a secure, stable, and democratic Afghanistan.

With regard to the strategic partnership with the US, it is important to note that the strategic dimensions of the bilateral relationship have moved from its politico-strategic attributes to taking on economic-strategic ramifications. It will be more of a challenge to India than to the US because in the effort to stick to 'strategic autonomy' and non-alignment, India tends to separate the strategic from the economic, particularly in relation to China. India has been rankled of late by the increasing Chinese presence in the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. It is after long that India has shown signs of building its own strategic deterrence against threats from maritime aggression.

The shift in Washington's policy in India's favour has much to do with its need to shift focus on other regions – the Asia-Pacific and West Asia. The US views India as a regional net security provider for at least two basic reasons: first, it considers India as a responsible emerging power committed to established international laws and norms. It also views India's democracy and political set-up as a model for the subcontinent in addition to being a regional economic powerhouse. Second, Washington seems to consider New Delhi as a potential ally for positive engagement with Beijing with a mandate to keep the sea lines of communications (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean free and safe for international trade and navigation.

The development of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands Command (ANC) as a strategic outpost is part of this strategy. There has not been much strategic cooperation between the US and India in the maritime domain, something which has been changing lately. Protection of SLOC has been treated as a priority area of cooperation, especially due to the rise of sea piracy and international terrorism. Greater trade engagement with the countries of the region along with a vanguard security role for the protection of trade through it should form the economic priority. Indo-US ties are closer than ever as America's re-balance policy in the strategic Asia Pacific region is complimenting India's Act East policy.

Many US and Indian interests converge when it comes to the Indo-Pacific corridor. Both have enormous trade passing through this area and both are keen on seeing a rule-based maritime order and safe sea lanes for trade. For this, the Indian Navy could work with the US Pacific Command fleet in maritime patrol, search, rescue and surveillance in the Indo-Pacific corridor.

Both India and the US can focus on the security and safe passage of maritime trade that passes through this area. Drawing from the South China Sea experience and the problems that have arisen between China and its neighbours, India along with the US could push for a universal 'code of conduct' for the Indo-Pacific area and the larger Pacific Ocean.

A uniform international law in this area would serve the Indian and the US interests to implement a coherent maritime security paradigm. Both countries hold compatible views on a variety of issues including maritime security, combating nuclear proliferation, and expanding regional trade opportunities in the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor and beyond. This approach is backed by the realisation that India has emerged as a dominant actor in the region and can be counted as the only credible counter-balance to China. The 2015 US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region specifically addresses maritime territorial disputes involving China and, among other things, affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation throughout the region, especially in South China Sea.

Both sides expect the larger bilateral relationship to hinge on economic and commercial relations. Both India and the US have recently pledged to deepen economic cooperation by setting a five-fold jump in Indo-US trade to US\$500 billion. In the wake of an increase in FDI in the Indian defence sector up to 49 per cent, more US companies would be interested to enter the Indian defence sector. The US through its 'Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999' floated the concept of the 'New Silk Route' to make Afghanistan a transcontinental trade and transit hub by linking it with the West and the Far East. The strong presence of India in Afghanistan together with its domestic support can prove to be a lynchpin for the US to realise its 'New Silk Route' dream.

When it comes to deepening bilateral economic relations between the two countries, progress has been mixed. The US businesses remain reluctant to invest in India because of their beliefs that the Indian government has not yet delivered on promises to ease doing business in India including taxation issues, and implement general economic reforms in the country. Nevertheless, the IT sector has brought the knowledge economies of India and the United States closer and it constitutes the strongest link Washington has with India. However, the United States is unfortunately targeting this sector with higher visa costs and increased restrictions.

Among other things, the India–US collaborative economic agenda include co-production and co-development of defence products under the 'Make in India' programme, coal gasification technologies, and the issuance of a non-FTA country waiver in order to gain access to US fossil fuel reserves. The bilateral economic agenda should also extend to partnerships in the area of agricultural technology, the civil aviation, life sciences, infrastructure financing, and green financing, among others. Bilateral dialogues should also address visa issues in the IT/ITES (i.e. outsourcing services) sectors, focus on exporting synergies in the biotech and pharmaceutical sectors besides skill development exchanges.

Energy and climate change will remain important areas of cooperation and contestation. Both are also working towards a solar energy alternative to power telecom towers with clean energy. In particular, Indo-US cooperation will focus on areas like the US–India Energy Dialogue, US–India Climate Change Dialogue and the US–India Civil Nuclear Energy. Despite the convergences, there are prominent challenges that might prove to be potential obstacles

that could derail the bilateral relations. Protection of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) in India remains a concern with US pharma companies.

Against a strong US–China trade relations, India too seeks stable and economically productive ties with China. India has the difficult task ahead of managing the China threat by both engaging closely with the United States and reaching out to China. As part of closer India–US understandings in the Indo-Pacific region, India and the United States have decided to include Japan in the bilateral India–US Malabar naval exercises. The trilateral India-US-Japan political dialogue has also been raised from the official to Ministerial level. However, India's problems with China are principally related to ongoing border disputes arising from a boundary disagreement and Beijing's deepening relationship with Islamabad. In both cases, India cannot count on the United State to take a position supportive of India. This points to the limits of the strategic partnership between the two countries.

US President Barack Obama's affirmation in 2010 that "the United States looks forward to a reformed UN Security Council that includes India as a permanent member" has been viewed as a major evolution in the US position. Yet, the United States has not clearly defined its position on the expansion of the United Nations Security Council, due to the fact that US openness to India's hope for permanent membership of the Council remains at a declaratory stage. Like in any such relationship, especially between the world's foremost political, military, economic and technological power and a large developing country advanced in certain sectors of the knowledge economy, but beset with serious problems of poverty as well as at unequal stages of development internally — differences are normal. The challenge lies in mutual appreciation of each other's strategic constraints while getting over the same in the interest of building a mutually beneficial relationship in the interest of a stable global order.

Salient Points

- In the post-Cold War era, India and the United States have learnt to deal with their differences with sensitivity, patience and understanding.
- the interests of an emerging power, i.e., India and that of a hegemonic power, i.e., US have remained incompatible for a long time.
- Ever since 9/11, both India and the US have embarked on security cooperation like never before.
- With rising security threats posed by state and non-state actors, India needs strong strategic partnership with the US to bolster its military capabilities.
- Greater trade engagement with the countries of the region along with a vanguard security role for the protection of trade through it should form the economic priority.
- The challenge lies in mutual appreciation of each other's strategic constraints while getting over the same in the interest of building a mutually beneficial relationship in the interest of a stable global order.

Glossary

Non-alignment: the condition of being non-aligned

Asymmetric: on-symmetric

Convergence: the act of moving towards union or uniformity

Divergent: growing further apart

Hegemony: domination, influence or authority over another