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## **US – India Global Partnership: The Changing Balance of Power in Asia**

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AFTER decades of estrangement due to Cold War politics, the world's most powerful democracy, the United States, and its largest, India, have finally ingratiated themselves with one another. This significant development is both a result as well as a manifestation of the changing balance of power in Asia.

The United States not only accorded Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a grand welcome in Washington during his visit in July, but also the rare privilege of addressing a Joint Session of the US Congress. In a joint statement, President George W Bush and Prime Minister Singh declared their resolve “to transform the relationship between their countries and establish a global partnership”.

A fundamental shift in US foreign policy was witnessed as the two sides concluded their *Next Steps in Strategic Partnership* initiative that was launched in January 2004. Bush agreed to increase cooperation with India on civilian nuclear programmes. He also agreed to adjust US policy and laws as well as international regimes governing civilian nuclear cooperation to accommodate India. In another instance of a qualitative shift in their bilateral ties, the two countries launched the *US-India Global Democratic Initiative* to assist other societies in transition that seek such assistance.

In June 2005, the two countries also signed the *New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship* that includes collaboration in multinational operations and missile defense as well as a possible expansion in two-way defense trade. More dramatically, the Bush administration had enunciated its new grand strategy towards India on March 25, 2005 when the State Department announced that America had reached a decision “to help India become a major world-power in the twenty-first century”. Significantly, it further added that “we understand fully the implications, including military implications of that statement”.

### **Containing China?**

Interestingly, while Singh was in Washington, the Pentagon released its annual report to the US Congress on Chinese military power. The report mentions that China is modernising its military with an aim to counter third-party intervention (including a potential US intervention) in cross-Straits crises. China is said to be fielding “more survivable missiles” that will be able to target most countries in the Asia-Pacific theater including India and the US.

The past few months may have witnessed dramatic improvements in US-India relations. But they also saw the worsening of US relations with China on a range of issues – trade deficit, textile quotas, currency revaluation and China's bid for US energy giant UNOCAL. Many analysts have concluded that the US has 'enlisted' India to contain the rise of China.

These analysts cite that just like the US, India is worried about the rise of its northern neighbour. After all, India and China fought a brief but bloody border war in 1962. Most of their 4,000 km-long border remains disputed. India has also been extremely concerned over the military and strategic links between China and Pakistan. Then there is a possibility of the interests of Asia's rising giants clashing as they search for sources of energy to fuel their large and growing economies. China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean through its close and growing relations with India's immediate neighbours – Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh – is also a major source of concern for New Delhi.

But contrary to America and India's troublesome ties with China, there is an extremely strong congruence of interests between Washington and New Delhi. India and the US are partners in the war against terrorism. They share an interest in curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The US and India are also committed to protecting freedom of navigation and protecting trade and energy SLOCs in the greater Indian Ocean Region. Additionally, they have been trying to coordinate their efforts to stabilise the regional strategic environment in southern Asia. At the same time India and America cherish the same liberal democratic values and wish to maintain a stable balance of power in Asia.

#### **Not an alliance**

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that their growing strategic partnership is tantamount to an alliance, and worse still, one targeted against China. The US is pursuing a classic buck-passing strategy – advancing the growth of India's power without seeking a strategic alliance with it to contain China. The latter strategy would be far more costly and would actually make an enemy out of China. Moreover, India is unlikely to sign up for a deal with any country that infringes on its sovereign right to take independent actions in the international system.

The US is hopeful that given their congruent national interests, advancing the growth of India's power would only further its own strategic interests. The US believes that this would be a relatively low cost strategy to stabilise the balance of power in Asia. Moreover, such a strategy may even benefit its own economy and military in the long-run. On their part the Indians look towards the US as a major trading partner and a source of foreign investment and high-technology – factors that will facilitate and accelerate India's ascent as a great power.

A rising India would be most comfortable with dealing with a rising China, not as a frontline state of an alliance structure led by the Americans, but from a position of power and self-confidence. When the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India earlier in April, the two countries signed numerous accords, including one to resolve their border dispute amicably. China is all set to displace the US as India's largest trading partner over the next couple of years. China has also implicitly recognised that Sikkim is a state of the Indian federation. After decades of distrust, a modest level of military interaction has also begun between India and China in the form of small military/naval exercises.

India is pursuing a broader and independent relationship with China. The Indian and Chinese foreign ministers met their Russian counterpart for the fourth time earlier this year in Vladivostok to discuss economic development and regional security. And last month, India was granted observer status to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – a regional Central Asian forum led by China and Russia.

### **India's policy of "strategic autonomy"**

One of the core features of India's foreign policy is strategic autonomy – which we are now seeing in action.

Some prominent Indian thinkers have already started questioning the premises of India's new partnership with America. One such critic is Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a leading political philosopher and the President and Chief Executive of Centre for Policy Research, an influential New Delhi-based think-tank. According to him, "the scepticism about the US does not come from, as critics allege, an old mindset, paranoiac about the US. It comes instead, from confidence in our strength, and a sense that we overestimate US power".

India has an extremely independent mindset and will chart its own course of action. There will be no alliance between India and the US to contain China. A rising India will engage with both China and the US on the basis of its own national interests.

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